



DPW: 'You cannot qualify for benefits just because you go on strike'

By Stacy Brown | PA Independent
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HARRISBURG — When public and private union members go on strike, Pennsylvania taxpayers could be putting food on some of the strikers' tables.

Under current law, some union workers ineligible for food stamps qualify for the assistance when they go on strike and lose their income.

But the [Corbett administration](#) plans to end that practice May 1.

The state [Department of Public Welfare, or DPW](#), is tightening its requirements for people seeking food stamps through the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP](#).

In the current system, income alone is used to disqualify people from receiving food stamps. So when union workers see their incomes drop during a strike, they can qualify for food stamps.

Under the new test, DPW spokeswoman **Anne Bale** said, only workers who have qualified for SNAP before going on strike can receive benefits during a strike.

"You cannot qualify for benefits just because you go on strike," Bale said.

The asset test would prevent anyone younger than 60 with \$5,500 in savings or other assets from receiving food stamps. For seniors older than 60 and households with disabled people, the threshold is \$9,000. While houses, retirement funds and one car will be exempt, a second car worth \$4,650 or more will not.

The monthly gross income of a family of four, to qualify for SNAP benefits, must be less than \$2,981, and a family of three less than \$2,472 each month.

Members of several unions said the asset test could make union members hesitant to strike.

Strikes are the only power that workers have to push for better pay, improved conditions and a better life for their families, said **Paul Tucker**, a self-described union advocate who publishes [The Union News](#) in Scranton.

"If the legislation becomes law, striking union members will be encouraged to cross their own picket lines and return to their jobs for their families to continue to receive food stamps," Tucker said

Leah Wright is a spokeswoman for the [Pennsylvania Service Employees International Union](#), which represents more than 20,000 health-care, local and state government workers, public school employees, bus drivers, and child-care providers workers in the state. Wright said the intent of the asset test is misguided.

DPW "Secretary (**Gary**) **Alexander** has publicly acknowledged that the food stamp asset test won't save any state dollars, but rather is a policy change to improve, what he claims to be, the program's integrity. Integrity implies that equal treatment and fairness will improve; however, we do not believe that to be true of this change," Wright said.

More than 800,000 workers in Pennsylvania belong to a private or public union, according to the [U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics](#).

The DPW could not provide the number of public and private union members receiving SNAP benefits because they meet the income eligibility requirements, said Bale.

In the past year alone, more than \$3 million in fraud has occurred in this program. Food stamp expenditures in [Pennsylvania alone have climbed from \\$750 million in 2002 to \\$2.5 billion this year, a 300 percent increase, according to DPW.](#)

Reforms to the SNAP program have been pushed by many in both parties, said [House Majority Leader Mike Turzai, R-Allegheny](#).

"This is something (I've) been trying to accomplish for six, seven or eight years now and it's not about anything else except to weed out fraud and see to it that everyone who deserves SNAP receives it," Turzai said.

Those opposed to the Republican-led asset test, including some state House Republicans, question its true intent.

"If we want to cut waste, fraud and abuse and are trying to help people who really need help, this isn't the way to do it. We don't want to hurt our most vulnerable citizens," said

[state Rep. Gene DiGirolamo, R-Bucks, chairman of the Pennsylvania House Human Services Committee.](#)

Considered a moderate Republican, DiGirolamo represents a heavily populated area where he receives heavy union support.

[State Sen. Vincent Hughes, D-Philadelphia,](#) said the federal government already requires income limits for SNAP enrollment, so the asset test is a waste of time and administrative costs.

Observers continue to debate the merits of the asset test, with about a month remaining before it becomes official state policy.

"The (asset test) is wrapped up to look like it's a principled-based attempt to prevent fraud — which it does — but there is more to it," said **John Capowski**, professor of Law at [Temple University](#) in Philadelphia.

"The effort is in keeping with the attacks on unions and union members by Republican administrations in various parts of the country," he said.

Tad DeHaven, budget analyst for the [Cato Institute](#), a Washington D.C.-based libertarian think tank, said local associations, not the government, should be on the front lines of helping the poor.

"We just believe that the federal government is an improper and less effective means for assisting those who are truly in need," he said.