

Pa.'s food-stamp asset test gets prominent pushback

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Pennsylvania's plan to make people's food-stamp eligibility contingent on the assets they own has drawn the ire of U.S. Rep. Robert Brady and union officials, who describe the proposal as ill-conceived and costly.

"It just doesn't make any sense to me," Brady, the Philadelphia Democrat, said in an interview Friday. "We're trying to figure out hunger, and this drops us back to square one. I don't think they really thought this through."

Brady's voice was one of many raised last week on the Internet, radio, and in newspapers, against the Department of Public Welfare plan.

Also last week, people in the union representing county-assistance workers - who would have to implement the asset test - called it time-consuming and expensive.

The plan, first reported Tuesday by The Inquirer, states that people under 60 with more than \$2,000 in savings and other assets would no longer be eligible for food stamps. For people over 60, the limit would be \$3,250.

Houses and retirement benefits would not be counted as assets.

If a person owns a car, that vehicle also would be exempt, but any additional vehicle worth more than \$4,650 would be counted.

"All of a sudden, the state is in the used-car business?" Brady said. "And you save a lousy \$2,000 and then you're off food stamps?"

On Thursday, Brady wrote a letter to Gov. Corbett calling the asset test "devastating and counterproductive." He said it would burden an "already overworked county-assistance workforce" and damage the state's food industry, including grocers.

Brady represents the First Congressional District, one of the hungriest places in the nation. He followed up his letter with a call to Corbett, and said he was awaiting an answer.

Welfare department spokeswoman Anne Bale said Friday that the asset test was needed to "stretch every dollar to make sure we are funding only the people most in need. It's just making sure that people with means are not on the program."

Earlier last week, Bale said the asset test was related to Welfare Secretary Gary Alexander's initiative to reduce waste, fraud, and abuse across the department.

That statement has been challenged by Brady as well as union officials, who note that the fraud rate in Pennsylvania's food-stamp program is 0.1 percent, among the lowest in the nation. The state has won an award for its efficiency in running the program, now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Union officials also say an asset test is bound to cost Pennsylvania more money.

"The major cost we will see is in actual hours, which will go up tremendously," said Donna Scarboro, business agent for Service Employees International Union Local 668 in Philadelphia, which represents caseworkers.

She said that "the cars will be a big thing," as caseworkers are asked to assess whether second cars fall below \$4,650, and then deal with clients' appeals of the findings.

"We already have a backlog of cases, and there's purely not enough workers," she added. The number of caseworkers statewide dropped from 1,800 to 1,400 in the last three years, she said.

'Not true'

"This test will set workers even more behind," she said. "I don't understand this extra expense to the state for a federally funded program."

Bale said that the workload wouldn't expand much because some aspects of the asset test were already in use for programs such as welfare cash benefits.

Responded Bill Bacon, legislative director for SEIU Local 668: "Claiming that this will mean no [extra] work is simply not true."

There are asset tests in place for some welfare and Medicaid recipients, but that number is much smaller than the 1.8 million people statewide who receive SNAP benefits, Bacon said.

"An asset test for SNAP would require caseworkers to rereview all those assets of all those people," Bacon said.

Joel Levin, another SEIU official, said computers would have to be reprogrammed and workers would need training - and both cost money.

Neither Bale nor union officials could say how many resources would be needed to get the welfare department's caseworker force up to speed.

No 'big deal'

The asset test may begin as early as May 1, according to department official Lourdes Padilla. Padilla outlined the department's plans in a letter late last year to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees the SNAP program that sends \$2.5 billion annually to Pennsylvania.

Not everyone is against the asset test.

"I don't think it's a big deal to have an asset test," said Tad DeHaven, budget analyst with the Cato Institute, a national libertarian think tank.

"I don't understand the sky-is-falling rhetoric from others," he said.

Policy analyst Nate Benefield of the Commonwealth Foundation, a fiscally conservative think tank in Harrisburg, said the test was needed to weed out people getting SNAP benefits who don't need them.

He added, though, that the \$2,000 asset limit may be too low because it penalizes people trying to save. He suggested the asset limit be raised to \$10,000.

As though to underscore its worry about fraud, the state released the names of eight people on Friday said to have been prosecuted and sentenced for fraudulently receiving public-assistance benefits.

"Even if the fraud rate is .1 percent," Benefield said, "why should those people get benefits?"