

THE DAILY CALLER

USDA Stops Itself From Coercing People Onto Food Stamps

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The main federal agency tasked with providing food stamps proposed a rule Friday aimed at restricting funds from being used to recruit people into the program.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers the food stamp program — officially known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) — in coordination with state agencies. The new proposal would restrict state or federal officials from using food stamp funds to coerce people into the program.

“In this proposed rule, prohibited recruitment activities are those designed to persuade an individual to apply for SNAP benefits through the use of persuasive practices,” the proposal states. “Persuasive practices constitute coercing or pressuring an individual to apply, or providing incentives to fill out an application.”

The purposed rule, for instance, prohibits funds from being used for radio, television or billboard advertising. Officials will also no longer be able to use themed events like bingo night to recruit people. Congress has put significant pressure on the USDA to stop its efforts to recruit people into the program.

“Communicating factual information pertaining to SNAP is not a recruitment activity designed to persuade an individual to apply for SNAP benefits,” the proposal also noted. “The Department understands that it was not the intent of Congress to prohibit informational activities that provide basic program information to potentially eligible individuals.”

The USDA estimates the program has increased from 17 million participants in 2000 to nearly 47 million in 2014. The improved economy, however, has helped decrease the number of participants a little in recent years. The Congressional Budget Office found, since participation hit its peak in December 2012, the number of people receiving benefits has declined by more than 1.5 million.

“There have been a bunch of techniques used to recruit people onto the rolls,” Heritage scholar Rachel Sheffield told The Daily Caller News Foundation. “The sign of success shouldn’t be how many people they can get enrolled.”

Sheffield notes the proposal is a good step, but more must be done to reform the program so it promotes self-sufficiency. The program has expanded significantly under President Barack

Obama in response to the last recession and these recruitment efforts. Cato Institute scholar Michael Tanner notes it doesn't fix every problem but could be a positive change for the administration.

"Blanketed rules like this always trouble me because its a one size fits all approach," Tanner told The DCNF. "But it does strike me that there has been this shift in the administration."