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Trump's plans to cut food stamps could hit his supporters hardest

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President Trump's anticipated cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, better known as food stamps, will likely be felt most in regions of the country with chronic high rates of unemployment — from the rural Southeast to aging manufacturing towns to Indian reservations.

People in those regions are temporarily exempt from national work requirements for the SNAP program, because there are not enough jobs there for everyone who wants one.

But there is growing anticipation that the budget to be unveiled on Tuesday could incorporate proposals drafted by the conservative Heritage Foundation that would eliminate or curtail the unemployment-rate waivers. That means the federal government could cut off assistance to unemployed adults who live in areas where few jobs are available.

The areas hit would likely include Southern and Central California, where the unemployment rate can spike as high as 19 percent, as well as cities, such as Detroit and Scranton, Pa., where joblessness remains rampant. The change would also affect numerous counties in Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Louisiana, according to anti-poverty advocates who were familiar with budget discussions within the administration.

Across the board, the people with the most to lose under plans to tighten work requirement are Native Americans living on reservations, where large percentages of unemployed adults rely on SNAP.

"It's unconscionable, cruel and ineffective," said Josh Protas, the vice president of public policy at MAZON, a national anti-hunger organization that focuses on hunger on reservations, among other problems. "I'm honestly not sure what their goal is."

Changes to the work-requirement waivers will likely not be the Trump administration's only proposed cuts to SNAP. While details remain sparse, Trump is expected to propose cutting as much as 25 percent of the program's funding over 10 years, which would go far beyond past House Republican proposals — and require far more than axing SNAP's unemployed adults. (According to the Department of Agriculture, only 14 percent of the people who receive benefits are able to work, and do not.)

But the work-requirement waivers are a prime target, given the demonstrated interest of the Heritage Foundation and other prominent conservatives. Robert Rector, a senior research fellow at The Heritage Foundation who has asked the White House to prioritize work requirements, said the Trump administration needs to "go after" the four million able-bodied adults without dependents in the food stamp program.

“You say to them, ‘We will give you assistance, but come to the office one day a week to do job search or community service,’” Rector said. “When Maine did that, they found almost immediately that their caseload dropped 85 percent.”

The SNAP program does already have a federal work requirement, though that’s not always acknowledged by the safety net’s conservative critics. Able-bodied, working-age adults who aren’t raising small children must work at least 20 hours per week, or risk losing their benefits.

Since the late 1990s, however, the federal government has granted temporary waivers to areas that demonstrate high rates of unemployment. The number of states requesting such waivers spiked dramatically during the recession; in fact, most SNAP recipients were effectively exempt from work requirements until 2016.

Over the course of that year, 22 states either lost their work-requirement waivers or voluntarily gave them up. As a result, as many as one million people were cut from SNAP, according to the left-leaning Center for Budget Policy Priorities. And the percentage of Americans who live in waiver areas has fallen to 36.4 percent, from a high of nearly 90 percent.

Anti-hunger advocates argue that the people still covered by the waivers remain in need of them. Those places include California, Nevada, New Mexico, Louisiana, Alaska and Illinois, as well as large portions of New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Idaho and Michigan.

Many of Pennsylvania’s rural counties still have waivers, as do those in New York, Virginia and Minnesota. Native American reservations in North and South Dakota, Montana and Arizona have had waivers since a decade before the recession, a reflection of both chronically high poverty and unemployment.

SNAP benefits are too small for people to subsist on them without working. The average food stamp benefit was \$465 a month for a family of four in 2015. The maximum monthly benefit for a family that size is \$649 — which equates to about \$5.40 worth of food per day for each family member.

In explaining its waiver requests for 2016, the state of Montana wrote that the reservations and counties included in its application “do not have a sufficient number of jobs to provide employment” — raising fears that a work requirement would leave vulnerable people without food or the jobs needed to buy it.

That has been the case in other states, advocates argue — though the evidence remains mixed.

In Kansas, for instance, which reinstated the requirements in October 2014, 40 percent of unemployed adults were still unemployed a year after being kicked off SNAP. Among those who found jobs, the average annual income was only \$5,562, according the Foundation for Government Accountability, a right-wing think tank based in Florida.

Progress has also been hotly debated in Maine, a state that conservatives regularly hold up as evidence that stricter work-requirements are effective. When the state dropped its waiver in 2015, the number of unemployed adults in the program immediately fell by nearly 80 percent.

But a May 2016 report by the state found that nearly 60 percent of those affected individuals did not report any income in the year after they left the program — suggesting they were still unemployed or underemployed a year later.

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On the national level, Michael Tanner, a senior fellow who focuses on social welfare issues at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, said he doesn't think similar mandates will have a huge impact on moving large numbers of recipients into employment or result in significant budget savings. Most SNAP recipients who can work are already working, and many of those who are not meet one of the various exemptions such as being disabled.

“It's making a statement that Republicans think people who are on public assistance should be doing all they can to get off,” Tanner said, “and that means working whenever possible.”

In Maine, advocates have recently begun lobbying the state legislature to re-allow waivers for counties with high unemployment rates, or, separately, to exempt veterans from the work requirement, given the unique challenges they face.

Several of those veterans recently testified before Maine's Committee on Health and Human Services, explaining how the elimination of the work-requirement waiver had affected them. One 49-year-old man, who could not afford a doctor to verify his disability status, and is thus considered able-bodied under SNAP, described his diet in the months since he'd been kicked off the program.

“I was eating what I could find, and borrowed from friends and strangers,” he said. “It turns out that red squirrel is a little tastier than one might think. There were many times ... when I would go two or even three days without food. If one was inclined to lose a lot of weight, I could recommend this diet wholeheartedly.”