



Sangamon Sun

Food stamp 'block grants' could be on the table

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Returning Illinois state officials might soon have more control of the federally funded food stamps program if the GOP-controlled U.S. Congress gets its way.

GOP leaders have said they would prefer "block granting" funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or food stamps, to the individual states, which could then design their own versions.

Under President Barack Obama, food stamp usage expanded by 60 percent nationally, including a big jump in Illinois. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, more than 1 million Illinois households -- more than one in five -- now receive food stamps, at a monthly cost of \$357 for a family of two and \$649 for a family of four.

The *Sangamon Sun* talked with Michel Tanner of the Cato Institute about food stamp reform, what it could mean for Illinois, and why SNAP has seen such a sharp increase.

"Part of it has to do with that we went through a recession-higher unemployment time," he said. "The Obama Administration heavily pushed food stamp use. They deliberately wanted to expand people on the program."

In an article he published, "Policy Analysis," Tanner said SNAP has been active since 2000 but has not solved any major hunger issues.

He also noted that "there is little proof that the expansion of SNAP has significantly reduced hunger or improved nutrition among low-income Americans. In the absence of much stronger research, continued expansion of the program seems to be based more on faith than evidence."

Tanner also said congressional leaders are sharply divided on a possible food stamp block grant.

"I think it's very split," he said. "Democrats obviously are split and Republicans are divided. Farm state programs have traditionally supported the program."

Farm states include Texas, Oklahoma and other rural states that produce most of the program's food.

Tanner believes reform is the best way to relieve the rising cost of food stamps and the number of people in the program.

“The time has come to reform the food stamp program by reducing its spending and enrollment and, ultimately, by returning responsibility for its operation to the states,” he said.

Food stamps tend to become long-term solutions to hungry families, although they are intended for short periods, Tanner said.

“Too many recipients are remaining on the program for far too long,” he said. “I think a better economy and less poverty is a good idea. You should consider food stamps as a vacuum -- one of the programs that we cannot look at in insulation.”

Tanner said SNAP is only one government programs that costs the country millions.

“SNAP represents just one portion of a much larger welfare state that includes 21 federal food and nutrition programs,” he said.

Those programs include Women, Infants, and Children, as well as public school food, Tanner said.

Tanner believes change will depend on how the food stamp funding is divided.

“Maybe some people need more help for health care and more for food,” he said. “We need to treat individuals as individuals.”