

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

What Trump food stamp cuts mean for California

Sammy Caiola

May 25, 2017

A bulging bag of dark red cherries cost Sandy Nemeč four coupons from her state-provided monthly grocery budget Wednesday at the downtown Sacramento farmers market. With the help of that food aid, Nemeč stretches her budget to feed herself and her 4-year-old daughter as healthily as she can.

The 40-year-old is among the 4.4 million Californians who rely on CalFresh, the state's version of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, to purchase food and beverages. Those families are now bracing for deep cuts to the decades-old federal program, popularly known as "food stamps," as it faces a \$193 billion – or 25 percent – chop over 10 years under President Donald Trump's proposed federal budget.

Republicans have called the SNAP program a recession-era safety net and argue that maintaining it in a stable economy only encourages the 44 million people who depend on it nationally to stay impoverished. Nemeč said she uses it to simply get by day to day.

"It really helps us out," Nemeč said of the \$349 in CalFresh aid she receives each month. "I just do what I can. I try to make sure I have all the staples, get plenty of proteins, fruits and vegetables."

In 2015, Californians received \$7.5 billion in SNAP benefits – about 11 percent of total national spending for the program, according to the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California. Enrollees receive an average of \$142 per month, although stipends vary based on family size, income level, disability status and other factors. All of California's SNAP dollars come from the federal government, but the state spends roughly \$80 million annually on a corresponding program that provides food benefits to non-U.S. citizens.

SNAP isn't the only entitlement program on the chopping block in the new federal budget. It also cuts \$610 billion from Medicaid over the next decade, on top of slashes included in the American Health Care Act. Other federally funded poverty assistance programs in jeopardy include Meals on Wheels, Habitat for Humanity and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

The federal program already requires able-bodied SNAP recipients without dependents to work, but many states, including California, have remained exempt from the policy during times of enduring unemployment. When California's exemption waiver runs out in 2018, it's unclear whether the state will impose the work requirement or any other federal changes for SNAP

recipients, said Cathy Senderling-McDonald, deputy executive director of the County Welfare Directors Association of California.

“California does tend to be a state that tries to protect its recipients from bad things that happen federally,” she said. “Are we going to make those changes? Or are we going to say no, and find a way to match those who would lose federal eligibility? Do we take steps to protect them at 100 percent state costs?”

Senderling-McDonald said she also wasn’t sure how the state would backfill the CalFresh program without federal assistance.

“It would likely be an unsustainable amount,” she said. “If this was the only change happening across the board it would be a lot, but then add Medicaid changes, cuts to (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), housing cuts, and it adds up.”

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Washington-based libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, said it makes sense for people to move off of SNAP now that unemployment rates are down nationwide. The federal cuts could bring SNAP spending back to where it was pre-recession, and beneficiaries should be able to adjust accordingly, he said.

“The idea that this is going to create enormous hardship in America is misguided,” he said. “(SNAP) was originally designed to be a temporary stop gap, and it’s becoming a part of the long-term welfare system. ... We’re not seeing much in the way of people moving out of poverty and becoming self-sufficient, so somewhere along the way we’ve gotten it wrong.”

Millions of people do rely on the federal grocery money, distributed via pocket-size electronic benefit transfer, or EBT, cards, to keep them afloat while they search for work, supplement a low-paying or low-hours job, or provide for others who can’t work, said Jessica Bartholow, policy advocate with the Western Center on Law and Poverty.

CalFresh enrollment climbed during the recession years of 2007-2009 and evened out after 2012. The state has struggled to enroll eligible adults, recording the lowest SNAP participation rate, 52 percent, in the nation in 2013 for low-income, working individuals, compared to 74 percent nationally.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service, every \$5 in new CalFresh benefits creates \$9 of economic activity.

“If we’re going to tell people they can’t get food help unless they’re employed, let’s help get them employed,” Bartholow said. “At the end of the day, making someone hungry doesn’t help get them a job. ... People eat cheaper food, eat less food and eat less frequently. While they may be saving food money by not eating, the science shows that we pay for it in the long run.”

In California, dozens of nonprofit groups educate recipients on how to eat and shop with nutrition in mind. At most farmers markets around Sacramento, enrollees can present their EBT cards for farmers market coupons. If they spend \$5 on produce, they get another \$5 in credit.

Still, at the downtown market, several EBT recipients were just browsing or panhandling, saying they'd already used up their CalFresh benefits for the month. One enrollee said he mostly spent his stipend on convenience store pizza and burritos.

Nemec, of Carmichael, said she's worked hard to maintain a healthy diet on CalFresh, even though she has diabetes and is lactose intolerant. She landed a job with the state two months ago and expects to move off of the CalFresh program within the year. Until then, she's hoping the program won't disappear.

"I'm trying to get ahead," she said. "I've got a really good job now. It's helped me and my daughter in a really big way."

Richard Nordlund, a 60-year-old Sacramento resident, said he's relied on CalFresh for the last year while trying to make ends meet with his mortgage sales business. Nordlund, who is legally blind, works part-time but still struggles to pay for food on top of his rent and other expenses, he said.

"Whatever they give me, it's better than nothing," he said. "I do everything I can to maximize my use of it all. I've developed some very great kitchen skills."