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Pennsylvania Moves to Starve Poor People

By Tad DeHaven

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That's the message I came away with after reading [an online article](#) from a *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter about a decision by the state of Pennsylvania to limit eligibility for food stamps. The article is a perfect example of the difficulty advocates for limited government face in communicating their message through the mainstream press.

At issue is the PA Department of Public Welfare's decision to eliminate eligibility for food stamps for people under the age of 60 who have more than \$2,000 in assets (the value of one's house, retirement benefits, and car would be excluded). The DPW estimates that only "2 percent of the million Pennsylvanians receiving food stamps would be affected by the asset test." Indeed, the DPW's [website notes](#) that "Because of changes to SNAP, most Pennsylvania households are not subject to a net income limit, nor are they subject to any resource or asset limits."

(SNAP is the acronym for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which was known as the Food Stamp program until 2008 when Congress changed its name to sound more palatable. The program is run jointly by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and state governments, but federal taxpayers pay for the direct benefits.)

One of the "changes" that the DPW refers to is *categorical eligibility*, which basically means that Pennsylvania households already receiving benefits from other welfare programs, including cash welfare and Supplemental Security Income, automatically qualify for food stamps. In recent years both the [state of Pennsylvania](#) and the [federal government](#) have made it *easier* to qualify for food stamps benefits.

Unfortunately, the *Inquirer* reporter either wasn't aware of these details or didn't deem them important enough for inclusion. Instead, he quotes ten—let me repeat that, *ten*—critics of the DPW's decision. The critics include a "national hunger expert," the legal director of a "leading anti-hunger group," executive director of the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger, the executive director of "liberal Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center," and an older woman who says that she'll "have to give up paying for my health insurance."

It took me all of two minutes to get a quote from Nathan Benefield, the director of policy analysis

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Unfortunately for taxpayers, politicians in Harrisburg and Washington have for the past few years considered it a "success" to have more families on welfare. Pennsylvania welfare eligibility and spending—including for food stamps—has exploded, threatening to crowd out everything else in the state budget. Means testing for assets is a common sense reform to ensure those who truly need aid get it.

There, was that so hard?

Of course, journalists who are interested in getting the pro-liberty take on welfare reform are welcome to contact my [colleagues](#) and [me](#) at the [Cato Institute](#). Honestly, we don't want people to starve in order to save a buck—we just believe that the federal government is an improper and less effective means for assisting those who are truly in need.

Pressed for time? Here are Cato essays on [food subsidies](#), [welfare](#), and [federal subsidies to states and local government](#).

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