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More Ohio Amazon workers relying on food aid

Almost overnight, Amazon has become one of Ohio's largest employers, with more than 6,000 workers and thousands more to be added soon at three more big warehouses. It has also become one of the largest employers of workers who need food assistance to get by.

As of last August, 1,430 Amazon employees or family members were getting assistance under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), according to the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services. That ranked the company 19th among all Ohio employers. Just months before, it wasn't even in the top 50.

In August, the average Ohio family receiving SNAP contained just more than two people. Based on that average, more than 700 Amazon workers received benefits that month, or more than one in every 10 of those Ohioans employed by the company. Figures include both full- and part-time workers, and it is likely mostly part-time workers who qualify. While the firm operates data centers, wind farms, and Whole Foods outlets in Ohio, the largest number of employees are at two big warehouses near Columbus (it also has a smaller sorting center in Twinsburg).

"It is essential that hungry Americans get help affording meals," said Policy Matters Research Director Zach Schiller. "But it is troubling that so many of those who qualify are working and still don't make enough to get by. The sudden emergence of Amazon as an employer of so many who need that assistance raises a question: Why is this giant, successful company offering such limited pay and hours of work that many of its workers need help buying food?"

The large number of workers at Amazon and other big entities like Wal-Mart, Kroger, Home Depot, the Cleveland Clinic and Target that receive SNAP aid illustrates that most people getting food assistance are working.

Amazon also receives millions of dollars in state and local subsidies at its warehouses. A recent article in Bloomberg Businessweek detailed how emergency responders in Licking County answer calls at an Amazon warehouse there at least once a day without any financial support from the company. "While most big companies extract tax breaks from states and municipalities where they're looking to expand," it said, "in Ohio Amazon has become something of a poster child for incentives that make it tough for public services to accommodate the added strain its facilities bring."

"The state and local tax incentives Amazon receives doesn't include the tens of thousands of dollars its Ohio workers need each month in food benefits," Schiller said. "When you consider that, the subsidies are even larger."

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Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan state policy research institute with offices in Cleveland and Columbus.