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Ohio deprives thousands of eligible residents of federal food aid

Thousands of working poor Ohioans qualify for an extension of federal food aid, but the state has failed to provide access to dozens of eligible cities and counties where they live, according to a new Policy Matters Ohio report.

Federal rules allow states to waive time limits in areas where working-poor adults cannot find enough work hours (without a waiver, recipients are restricted to food aid for three out of 36 months unless they work at least 20 hours per week). A statewide waiver isn't allowed in 2016, but many cities and counties remain eligible.

Ohio has requested a waiver of time limits for 18 rural counties in 2016. Three counties that qualify for a waiver under the federal eligibility standards used by the state to determine this year's request – Trumbull, Muskingum and Vinton Counties -- are not part of the request. Although 12 cities qualify, no request is made for any cities. Moreover, the state has the ability under federal rules to broaden the waiver to even more counties – up to 34 – in addition to the 12 cities.

Ohio has a high rate of food insecurity (assured access to meals.) The state has qualified for a federal waiver of time limits since the recession, but the Kasich administration rejected it for most of the state in the past two years. Ohio accepted it last year for only 17 rural counties.

The exclusion of urban counties and cities from the state waiver disproportionately hurt minority populations. In Ohio, 70 percent of those participating in the food-stamp program live in metropolitan areas, where Hispanic, Asian, African-American and other minority groups tend to live. Nationally, about half of food stamp recipients are white and half are minority, but about 80 percent live in urban areas and suburban areas. The exclusions in recent years prompted Columbus Legal Aid to file a civil rights complaint against the state, arguing the state's rejection of the waiver in cities is unfair to minorities.

“The state could have addressed the racial inequity in 2016,” said Wendy Patton, Policy Matters Ohio senior project director, who authored the report. “The Kasich administration chose not to. The state should broaden its request to encompass all places and regions where jobs are scarce and people are hungry.”

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