

State should maximize federal food aid Cities, more counties should be included in state request for waiver of time limits

By Wendy Patton

Ohio plans to waive time limits on federal food aid during federal fiscal year 2016 (October 1, 2015 to September 30, 2016) in 18 mostly rural counties where the economy lags and jobs are scarce. This is a good and compassionate policy choice. But thousands of other working poor Ohioans are eligible to receive more federal food aid, and state plans do not include relief for them. In a state with hunger levels higher than the national average, state government needs to maximize access to federal food aid to help hungry Ohioans and stimulate lagging local economies.

When the economy is strong, the federal Department of Agriculture's "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program" (SNAP) puts time limits on food aid for adults who are not disabled, elderly or parents with custody of minor children. These limits restrict help to just three out of 36 months unless recipients work about 20 hours a week. When the economy is weak and many cannot find this many hours, federal rules allow states to waive the time limits.

Ohio qualified for a statewide waiver of SNAP time limits since the recession, but the Kasich administration rejected that waiver for most of Ohio's counties for the past two years, accepting it in 2014 for just 16 rural counties out of the state's 88 counties, and for 17 in 2015. In 2016, Ohio will no longer be eligible for a statewide waiver, but many counties and cities will remain eligible. Ohio has applied for the waiver for Adams, Ashtabula, Brown, Clinton, Coshocton, Gallia, Highland, Huron, Jackson, Jefferson, Meigs, Monroe, Morgan, Noble, Ottawa, Perry, Pike and Scioto Counties. Many more counties and a number of cities could also be waived - where the majority of SNAP participants live.

An estimated one million Americans are at risk of losing their SNAP benefits in 2016 because of time limits on food assistance. Last year, 31 states -- including Ohio's midwestern neighbors and conservative southern states -- accepted the statewide waiver of time limits. However, most states will not be eligible on a statewide basis in 2016. The population at risk of losing aid due to time limits is diverse: nationally, about 40 percent are women; close to a third are over 40 years old; about

Key findings

The federal government provides waivers to time limits on food aid when economies are struggling.

- Ohio excluded three counties and twelve cities that should qualify for a waiver.
- The state denied three counties the federal waiver because it misinterpreted federal rules or because of administrative issues that could be resolved.
- Ohio is vulnerable to further civil rights complaints because it is requesting the waiver for largely white counties while rejecting it for cities with minority populations and similar economic challenges.

half are white and half have only a high school diploma or GED. About 80 percent live in urban and suburban areas.

In Ohio, about 70 percent of SNAP participants live in urban counties. The state has requested a waiver of time limits in 18 counties, but up to 34 counties and 12 cities are eligible. The exclusion of cities meant many African-American, Asian and Hispanic Ohioans, who live mostly in cities, have been subject to time limits on food aid. In the summer of 2014, Columbus Legal Aid filed a civil complaint against Ohio based on the state's rejection of the waiver in cities, which disproportionately harmed minority populations.

Headed into 2016, the state could have redressed this inequity. The Kasich administration chose not to. The request for Ohio's 2016 waiver – again in rural counties – is a much smaller than it could be. There is much the state could do to maximize federal aid and help thousands of needy Ohioans:

- The request for the waiver should include Trumbull, Muskingum and Vinton Counties, which qualify for waiver of time limits under federal rules using the methodology the state employed in the 2016 request.
- The request for the waiver should include the 10 cities that are eligible.
- The state should use a regional approach to gauge eligibility. Using that federally approved approach, 34 counties -- nearly all Appalachian counties -- and 12 cities would qualify for the waiver.
- The state has more than 480,000 months of time limit exemptions that could be used to help job seekers whose three months are up but who have not been able to find 20 hours per week of work.

Why is the state not maximizing federal resources for Ohioans? Maybe it is because the legislative provisions creating these work-related time limits were co-sponsored in 1996 by then-Congressmen John Kasich and Bob Ney, who emphasized that states would offer “workfare” programs to jobseekers who could not find enough hours of work. Workfare has not worked out very well in many states because federal rules neither required nor funded workfare programs. The Ohio budget bill for FY 2016-17 emphasizes the importance of providing employment training or work slots, but these mandates are new. Implementation and outcomes are unproven. Federal waivers of time limits are needed as new programs are implemented.

The Kasich administration made a good and compassionate policy choice by expanding Medicaid, bringing billions of federal dollars into the state and helping hundreds of thousands of Ohioans. The same logic could be applied to federal food aid. Foregoing the waiver for eligible counties and cities leaves people and households exposed to hunger. The policy also means that millions of federal dollars are not being spent in Ohio supermarkets, farmer's markets and corner stores, dollars that could boost local economies.

Too many Ohioans experience hunger. The compassionate response to meeting basic needs of all Ohioans – particularly the most vulnerable – is to maximize federal dollars to help people and boost the Ohio economy.