

# NM to seek new waivers of SNAP work rule

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JOURNAL CAPITOL BUREAU

**SANTA FE —** Tens of thousands of adults in New Mexico are at risk of losing their food stamp benefits next year under a new federal rule that tightens work requirements.

But state officials said Friday that they will try to shield some residents from the loss by seeking smallscale waivers, which will still be allowed under the new system.

The state Human Services Department also plans to seek nearly \$7.5 million in new state and federal funding to expand services aimed at helping unemployed adults find work.

The responses address a new regulation crafted by the Trump administration — aimed at reducing government dependency and encouraging able-bodied adults to find work.

But opponents in New Mexico say the tightened work requirements are especially cruel in a poor, rural state with high levels of unemployment.

“This rule will punish New Mexicans who want to work but, through no fault of their own, have not yet found a job or have been disadvantaged by economic factors outside their control,” Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham said in a written statement. “It is flatly unacceptable.”

The rule focuses on able-bodied adults 49 or younger, without dependents. Generally, they can receive only three months of benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program over a three-year period, unless they meet certain work requirements.

But New Mexico and other states have been able to waive the work requirements by citing economic conditions.

Statewide waivers will no longer be allowed, but New Mexico officials said they can seek waivers covering smaller geographic areas, such as a city or county.

“My team is going to apply for every waiver we can,” Gavino Archuleta of the state Human Services Department said Friday.

His agency also intends to seek about \$3.7 million in state funding to offer employment services targeting the affected population — roughly 36,000 people throughout New Mexico. The state appropriation would be used to secure matching federal funds, making almost \$7.5 million available altogether.

The funding would expand an existing program and provide job training and other services to adults who might otherwise lose their SNAP benefits.

The New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty, a nonprofit advocacy group, said there's no evidence that taking away food benefits will increase employment. Instead, attorneys for the center said, individualized job training, child care assistance and other strategies are effective ways to help people find or keep jobs.

“Taking away basic food assistance only makes people hungry and does not help anyone find a job,” said Teague González, the center's supervising attorney.

In a written announcement this week, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said the new rule is aimed at encouraging adults to find a job, if they're capable of work. The national economy is booming, he said, and there are more jobs available than workers to fill them.

“Government can be a powerful force for good,” he said, “but government dependency has never been the American dream.”

In New Mexico, more than 260,000 adults receive SNAP benefits. The state Human Services Department estimates that 14% — or roughly 36,000 people — would be affected by the new rule.

State officials strongly contested the proposed rule before it was enacted. New Mexico's existing waiver will expire Feb. 29.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps, provides assistance to low-income New Mexicans, allowing them to buy food at groceries or similar stores.

Lujan Grisham's predecessor as governor, Susana Martinez, pursued work requirements for SNAP recipients at one point, but they were blocked in court.