



September 23, 2019

SNAP Program Design Branch
Program Development Division
Food and Nutrition Service, USDA
3101 Park Center Drive
Alexandria, Virginia 22302

RE: Proposed Rule: Revision of Categorical Eligibility in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program RIN 0584-AE62

Dear SNAP Program Design Branch:

The National Consumers League (NCL) appreciates the opportunity to comment in opposition to USDA’s Proposed Rulemaking on the revision of categorical eligibility in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This action closes a loophole that allows states to make participants in certain programs “categorically eligible” to participate in SNAP.

NCL is a private, nonprofit advocacy organization representing consumers on marketplace and workplace issues. Founded in 1899 and located in Washington, D.C., it is the nation’s oldest consumer organization. Our mission is to protect and promote social and economic justice for consumers and workers in the United States and abroad. Throughout our 120-year history, NCL has concurrently focused on nutrition and food safety regulatory policies, aiming to empower consumers to make informed food choices and protect anti-hunger programs.

Our organization is deeply concerned that the proposed changes would deprive an estimated 3.1 million people of access to this vital program¹ and cause 500,000 children to lose their automatic eligibility for free or subsidized school lunch². This proposed rule may potentially worsen hunger among low-income households, harm local economies, and increase SNAP administrative costs.

Many working families have gross income just above SNAP’s income limit but face significant expenses, including costly housing and childcare, that can put a healthy diet out of reach. States can use the categorical eligibility option to ease their SNAP income cutoff and provide SNAP

¹ <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/media/image/BBCE-Fact-Sheet-1.jpg>

² <https://talkpoverty.org/2019/07/23/new-trump-rule-threaten-school-lunch-thousands-students/>

benefits to these working-poor families. For this reason and more, we urge that the rule not be implemented.

SNAP is a Vital Program

Research shows that SNAP alleviates household food insecurity, which in turn can help to prevent the onset of chronic diseases and mental health issues. In 2017, SNAP lifted 3.4 million people out of poverty³ and reduced food insecurity by up to 30 percent⁴. Consequently, the proposed rule may exacerbate health problems among able-bodied childless adults, making it harder, not easier, for them to find stable employment. Children who rely on adults not formally designated as caregivers may also suffer health consequences: young children's participation in SNAP is linked to a higher likelihood of high school completion and lower rates of obesity and metabolic syndrome into adulthood.⁵

This Proposed Rule Could Harm Local Economies

The proposed rule changes, for which the underlying argument is a strong economy,⁶ are scheduled to be implemented right at a time when the economy may be poised to weaken. The United States at large have experienced historically lengthy economic expansions since 2009, and there are concerns that this period of growth may be reaching a natural pause or downturn.

Furthermore, while the economy may be booming for some, not everyone has shared equally in the rewards. The most disadvantaged regions were experiencing up to 6.3% unemployment. It is easy to envision a near-term scenario in which areas like that quickly tip back into a higher unemployment range, yet the proposed rule changes would dramatically reduce state's and county's flexibility to provide nutritional support for residents who face the most challenging work obstacles.⁷

Increase Administrative Costs

According to the study conducted by the Manhattan Strategy Group in partnership with the Urban Institute for the USDA, state administrative costs per case are generally lower in states that use streamlining policies such as Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE). While many

³ <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2018/09/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-lifts-millions-out-of-poverty.html>

⁴ <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/28506/412065-How-Much-Does-SNAP-Reduce-Food-Insecurity-.PDF>

⁵ https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/documents/SNAP_report_final_nonembargo.pdf

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-foodstamps/trump-administration-proposed-rule-would-cut-3-million-people-from-food-stamps-idUSKCN1UI0AH>

⁷ https://ehsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Public-Comment-Opposing-Proposed-SNAP-Rule-Changes_March-2019.pdf

factors contribute to state administrative costs—including the state’s economic conditions, policies and eligibility systems—the adoption of BBCE significantly lowered administrative costs by 7 percent. When states remove the asset test, they no longer need to collect and verify information on assets. This can be time consuming, as the asset rules are complicated. The report also notes that BBCE helps states to process SNAP applications in a timely manner, which lets hungry people buy food sooner and also ensures that states won’t have to pay fines for failing to meet the federal processing deadlines.⁸

For all of the reasons outlined above, The National Consumers League strongly opposes the proposed rule that would expose even more people to the arbitrary SNAP food cutoff policy, and respectfully requests that the proposal be withdrawn from consideration.

Sincerely,

The National Consumers League

⁸ <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNAP-Timeliness.pdf>