

Counties rally to preserve food assistance for thousands

Poverty has a lot to do with money, of course. But it also has a lot to do with politics, obstacles, endless hoop jumping.

That's the story of food stamps this month.

Multnomah County is trying to reach the thousands of residents at risk of losing their food stamp assistance before their options run out on March 30. And it's all coming from 2,000 miles away at the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

For years, Multnomah and Washington counties were exempt from some federal food stamp time limits because the local, averaged unemployment rate exceeded federal criteria.

In December, the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistant Program notified local governments that the region no longer qualified under the previous exemptions. That means the limit of three months assistance in a 36-month period returns for able-bodied adults without dependents.

As a result, the county estimates that approximately 9,000 Multnomah County residents are at risk of losing their food stamp assistance, prompting the county to take action and try to reach people before they lose their SNAP.

Because in reality, many, if not most of these recipients are still qualified to receive assistance. It's a matter of reaching them, letting them know of the requirements, and, if they aren't already, bringing them into compliance.

That doesn't sound like much, but it is a tremendous obstacle when you're talking about someone experiencing homelessness, a refugee learning a new language, or someone with a mental health issue who might have difficulty connecting with services in the first place.

And the reality behind our lower unemployment figures is the rise in part-time, low-paying jobs with few or no benefits. Sure, people are working, but they are not better off, and they certainly aren't getting ahead. This kind of reactionary policy turns a blind eye to the rising costs – housing and otherwise – burdening men and women who have lived in the Portland metro area for years.

Pulling their food benefits only knocks out one leg just when the other finds stable footing.

You want people to participate, to rise above, not be shut out. But shutting people out is the consequence of socially marginalizing people, putting them in silos and sweeping them to the edge of town.

Nationwide, it is estimated that half a million people will be dropped from the program, which averages \$150 to \$170 a month.

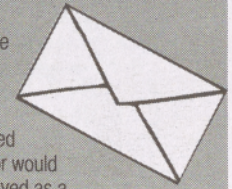
"This faulty policy puts thousands of people in our community at risk of hunger," said Liesl Wendt, director of Multnomah County Department of County Human Services. "The impact is real, and it's happening now. Fortunately, it's not too late to help. Talk with clients and people you know who are at risk of hunger and help them take action to keep their SNAP benefits"

Throughout Multnomah County, the network of social workers is diligently trying to reach people and preserve their food supplement. We are fortunate in this county to have such dedicated servants, but this bureaucratic scramble is a sad waste of energy, particularly when it's all about correcting even more wasted energy coming from Washington D.C.

If you know of someone who might be affected by these changes, please urge them to contact the SNAP offices: In Multnomah County, call 971-673-2422 or 971-673-2333. In Washington County, call 503-693-4769.

Write in

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