

Federal SNAP change could make waves in Umatilla County

By JESSICA POLLARD
STAFF WRITER

Able-bodied adults without dependents who aren't working in Umatilla County could face a restriction on government food assistance benefits in April.

A new rule, which the U.S. Department of Agriculture described as a "rule to promote work" in a press release earlier this month, targets able-bodied adults ages 18-49 with no dependents if they aren't employed, training or volunteering for at least 20 hours each week and are receiving assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

It's got Tori Colvard, a food and nutrition program manager at CAPECO, concerned.

The program receives donations through the Oregon Food Bank and from local growers, and distributes them to food pantries and meal sites across Umatilla, Morrow, Gilliam and Wheeler counties.

"It most definitely would put pressure on our area," she said. "Having benefits reduced or cut off, that's going to mean more people coming to banks and sites. We cannot match the power of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program."

Colvard noted that SNAP provides some benefits that a food bank can't.

"With SNAP you can go to the store," she said. "Peo-

ple have the ability to go and purchase what they can cook and eat. Folks who are homeless don't have a way to cook beans and rice, and a lot of staples we provide."

In 2018, CAPECO's point-in-time count logged more than 500 people facing homelessness across Umatilla County, although it's uncertain how many of them would be affected by the new rule.

The average monthly allocation of SNAP benefits statewide is \$191. But in Umatilla County, that number is closer to \$110 a month. Between January and June of this year, an average of more than 15,000 people receive SNAP benefits each month.

DHS warns that this change could affect 19,000 Oregonians, but didn't provide specific data by county.

Each year, the state of Oregon usually uses waivers for a majority of its 36 counties to extend the amount of time that people in the single, able-bodied demographic can utilize food assistance benefits. Without a waiver, SNAP eligibility is limited to three months every three years.

Time limits in both Umatilla and Morrow counties were waived for this year, along with 21 other counties.

But that's about to change.

According to the DHS, only six counties might receive such a waiver after the rule goes into effect



HH file photo
Oscar Garcia, a driver for the Fresh Alliance program, does inventory inside the CAPECO warehouse in Pendleton in 2017. A new rule, which the U.S. Department of Agriculture described as a "rule to promote work" in a press release earlier this month, targets able-bodied adults ages 18-49 with no dependents if they aren't employed, training or volunteering for at least 20 hours each week and are receiving assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

in April — Crook, Curry, Grant, Harney, Wallowa and Klamath counties.

"However," said Christine Stone, a communications officer for the Department of Human Services, in an email, "this is still pending federal approval and until a waiver is approved, we can't know for certain."

According to DHS, areas requesting federal waivers must have unemployment

rates at least 20% higher than the national rate but not less than 6%.

In a press release earlier this month, the agency stated that rural areas with limited transportation for getting to work or areas with lower rates of high school diploma owners are more likely to fall into such a category.

"Transportation in our rural communities is such a huge barrier. People who

are low income might not be able to get around and to work," Colvard said.

Umatilla County Commission Chair George Murdock said he applauded Kayak Public Transit for addressing the issue throughout a lot of the county.

"I do not think the inability to get there is a major cause of people in the county's inability to work," Murdock said.

For him, a change in SNAP eligibility is a complex issue.

"I've never seen a time when our food banks have a surplus," he said. "Any actions that put additional strain on our food banks could have a negative impact."

He also said he has the greatest empathy for the elderly and children when it comes to food insecurity, but that when it comes to able-bodied adults facing unemployment, "employers are begging for workers," across the county.

DHS stated the change could carry an economic impact on local Oregon businesses that might accept SNAP benefits.

David Meade, who manages Harvest Foods in Umatilla, said it will be hard to tell how the new rule might affect business until it actually goes into effect in April.

"If there is a reduction in business, it would be subtle," he said. "For us, it will be vague. We'd start to see it in our numbers in the reports we get monthly."

Erica Miller manages the Gotta Stop Mini Mart on Highway 395 in Hermiston. She said that during the first few days of each month, customers ring up high amounts of electronic benefits.

"As the month goes on, it kind of dwindles," Miller said. "It seems like this rule will affect those who are unemployed, and it could affect us too."

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