

# Punishing the needy hurts us all

## HIGHLIGHTS

Time limit returns for some able-bodied food stamp recipients

Numbers of those receiving aid dropped in states that imposed rule again

California has a waiver from the time limit through end of 2017



Joe Heflin, left, of Jefferson City, Mo., loads free groceries into his car with help from a volunteer at the Samaritan Center food pantry. Missouri is among the states that reimposed a time limit on benefits for some food stamp recipients in April. David A. Lieb Associated Press

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California has a well-deserved reputation for offering a sturdy safety net for the less fortunate – or what critics would describe as overly generous benefits.

So it's to be expected that the state isn't part of returning to a three-month time limit for some food stamp recipients.

In April, there was a huge drop-off nationally in people enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – 773,000, the largest one-month decline since 2005, when temporary benefits ended for Hurricane Katrina victims.

Part of the drop is because of the improving economy; more people with jobs means fewer need food aid. But a big part is also the time limit for jobless adults between 18 and 49 who don't have dependents or disabilities. They're restricted to three months of benefits every 36 months, unless they're in a job training or community service program. During high unemployment, states can seek waivers from that rule, and most did during the Great Recession.

In the 20 or so states where the time limit first hit again in April, the number of recipients dropped by 2.8 percent from March, according to a new analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

In the other states, the overall decline was less than 1 percent. In California, it was 1.3 percent.

CalFresh, the state's food stamp program, won a one-year extension of its waiver, covering all counties until the end of 2017. California Food Policy Advocates says it's possible the waiver will be extended longer statewide if the economy weakens or at least in counties where unemployment is still high.

While the group is concerned about the time limit, it says officials here can look at what's happening in other states and avoid large numbers of recipients being cut off.

The benefit for Californians is about \$142 a month per person and about \$1.58 per meal. The program kept more than 800,000 Californians out of poverty, half of them children, during the recession, the budget center estimates, but reached only two-thirds of eligible people.

More than two-thirds of recipients are single mothers, about 9 percent have received benefits for more than five years and about a quarter also receive payments from CalWORKs, the state's welfare-to-work program, according to state figures.

This year, the Legislature and Gov. Jerry Brown finally got rid of a harsh law – passed in 1994 and aimed at “welfare queens” – that denies additional aid to children of women who get pregnant while on CalWORKs.

Many of us have conflicted feelings about public assistance. The food stamp time limit, passed in 1996, is another reflection. We want to make sure our neighbors aren't starving and to help families stay off the streets. But we also don't want able-bodied – especially single men – to lounge around on the dole.

Yet the way we look at these benefits should keep up with increasing income inequality and the changing economy. As the budget center points out, many of those caught by the time limit rely on food stamps while between low-paying jobs, so cutting off benefits only worsens their hardship.

Call me a bleeding-heart liberal if you want, but we'd all be better off if policymakers and politicians focused more on moving people into jobs and less on punishing those in hard times.

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## **BY THE NUMBERS**

Change in number of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program recipients from March to April 2016 for selected states:

- Arizona -1.1%
- California -1.3%
- Florida -8.4%
- Nevada - No change
- New York -0.4%
- Oregon -1.2%
- Texas -0.3%

Source: U.S. Agriculture Department