

EDITORIAL

90,000 in Mass. could be affected by Trump's callous food-stamp cuts



How did it get to the point that the Trump administration now seems to be hunting for excuses to deprive low-income families of food benefits? (MARK RALSTON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

Not too long ago, food stamps enjoyed bipartisan support in Washington. After all, it's hard to argue with a program that keeps the poorest Americans fed — and the fact that American [grocery retailers](#) also benefit from the extra business only cemented its popular appeal. When he left office, former president George W. Bush's agriculture secretary [boasted](#) of the fact that the Bush administration had added 9 million

Americans to the rolls of food stamp recipients.

So what happened?

How did it get to the point that the Trump administration now seems to be hunting for excuses to deprive low-income families of food benefits — most recently with a mean-spirited plan [unveiled Tuesday](#) by the Department of Agriculture to boot 3.1 million people from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program?

Food stamps can be used only to pay for staples, and come with a [bundle of restrictions](#): no prepared foods, no alcohol, no pet food. About 36 million American rely on them. They're a net positive for the economy: In Massachusetts, for instance, every dollar in SNAP benefits generates an estimated \$1.79 in economic activity.

If anything, the federal government should be working to make sure every American currently eligible for food benefits is receiving them.

Instead, the Trump administration's plan would tie the hands of state officials and force them to reduce or eliminate benefits.

For starters, it would restrict the ability of states to offer food stamps to recipients who have certain levels of savings or other assets. The administration characterizes such state policies as loopholes that allow people who don't really need food stamps to receive them. In theory, a person with no income, but a pile of gold bars buried in the backyard, could collect food stamps in many states. (If you find any such SNAP recipients, please let us know.)

The reality is that a strict savings limit would only punish poor families for acting responsibly. If they manage to scrape together more than a small amount — as little as \$2,250 — they'd lose access to food stamps. Critics of welfare programs sometimes complain that they act as a disincentive to work, but in this case it's the other way around: Strictly limiting assets, as the administration proposes, would perversely

discourage recipients from working more and saving more.

“We shouldn’t penalize people for having some savings if they get SNAP,” said Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba, the executive director of Children’s HealthWatch, a policy research network headquartered at Boston Medical Center. “We want people to have something to fall back on, and this allows people to do it,” Ettinger de Cuba said.

The administration also wants to restrict the ability of states to enact another common-sense provision. To qualify for food stamps, recipients must have poverty-level *net* incomes — that is to say, their income after expenses. That’s true no matter where in the United States recipients live. The government also imposes a limit on *gross* income. But [most states](#), including Massachusetts, have been allowed to set the gross income limit higher — in the Commonwealth’s case, at 200 percent of the poverty level. In a state with high housing, health care, and energy costs, the higher gross income limit makes a lot of sense, and means more families with a bona fide need for food assistance qualify.

Food stamps are a lifeline for about one in nine Massachusetts residents. This isn’t filet mignon money: The subsidies work out to about \$1.38 per meal per person, according an [analysis](#) by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. If the new rules go into effect, the state estimates that about 90,000 residents will be affected.

And so the question remains: Why has the national Republican Party turned against what ought to be the least controversial social welfare program of them all — one that it championed itself during the Bush years?

The depressing answer seems to be that during the Obama administration, the Tea Party developed an obsession with food stamps and Republicans who should have known better, like former Massachusetts governor and 2012 presidential nominee Mitt Romney, played along. Donald Trump inherited the collections of grudges developed during those years, and seems intent on turning each into policy.

But now some of the poorest Americans stand to suffer if this misguided plan goes forward — and for their sake, it shouldn’t.

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