



April 23, 2014

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Bridge Card Recipients to See Changes in Benefits Starting May 1st
Food Insecurity a Concern Statewide

MICHIGAN— Changes in the way Michigan Department of Human Resources calculates benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP – formerly known as Food Stamps) will lead to a reduction in food assistance for some recipients in the state. These changes were enacted by Michigan Department of Human Service (DHS) in order to address adjustments in the Farm Bill passed by Congress earlier this year. All SNAP recipients will have their SNAP benefits recalculated under the new rules starting May 1, 2014 with the exact date depending on their recertification date.

Benefit reductions are caused by what is known as the “Heat and Eat” provision. New rules stipulate that a recipient’s heating or cooling costs must be billed separately from housing costs in order for the household to receive a “standard utility allowance” that – in most cases – leads to a bigger SNAP allowance. An estimated 20% of Michigan’s SNAP recipients will be affected, and an impacted family of four could see a decrease of \$75 per month. These changes come after an across the board cut to food assistance last November of about \$36 for a four person family.

All households will now need to verify utility expenses in order for DHS to determine their benefit amounts. Households that do not pay for heating or cooling expenses separately from their rent are most likely see a reduction in their food assistance benefits. Households who have received a state home heating tax credit or a state emergency relief energy payment in the past 12 months may still be able to receive the utility allowance.

Food advocates are concerned cumulative decreases in food assistance will place greater stress on an already strained food bank network. The Food Bank Council of Michigan projects a loss of 59 million meals per year in Michigan due to these cuts. An estimated 1.8 million Michiganders are already food insecure, and these cuts will further increase food insecurity among this population.

Some advocates are disappointed that Michigan, unlike other states using the Heat and Eat provision, did not take steps to prevent the cuts. “Michigan decided not to use an option offered by Congress that would have allowed us to preserve \$250 million in SNAP benefits by leveraging \$8.4 in utility assistance,” says Terri Stangl, Executive Director of Center for Civil Justice.

Anyone who has questions about the cuts or how to proof a heating or cooling obligation can contact the Food and Nutrition Helpline at 1-800-481-2989. The Helpline is a collaborative project from Center for Civil Justice and Legal Services of Eastern Michigan.

Center for Civil Justice is a non-profit group that monitors changes in public assistance policy and advocates on behalf of low-income clients.

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