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Fewer food stamps for families with undocumented immigrants?

Welfare » Advocates worry poor families will lose benefits.

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A proposed change to Utah's food stamp rules could mean nearly 8,000 households with undocumented members get less financial aid for food -- or none at all.

Families qualify for food stamps based on how much income they make. In a household that has both undocumented members and citizens -- such as parents with a child born in the U.S. -- Utah officials have not been fully counting the earnings of undocumented workers.

That means some such blended families qualify for food stamps, while a household of all-citizen members with the same income might not.

Department of Workforce Services officials say the two-tier system was developed because an old computer system required "a complicated process" to determine eligibility for households that included non-citizens. They propose to change it now because a new computer-based eligibility system comes online July 1.

Kathy Link, who oversees Utah's administration of the food stamp program, responded to questions in a memo. The practice of not fully counting income from undocumented household members "was the most simple and least error-prone to implement," the memo states.

Under the proposed change, income from all earners in a household will be fully counted. Some families with a mix of undocumented members and citizens could continue to qualify for help.

Because determining food stamp eligibility is a complex equation, many community members are questioning differences between the current and proposed system, puzzled about why two processes existed.

"This is a mystery to me and I am still in shock," said Sen. Luz Robles, D-Salt Lake City. "I want to do more review -- I'm still not completely satisfied with [DWS'] answers at this point."

The food stamp system provides low-income families with supplemental money each month for food. That aid is in federal dollars. Until this spring, the number of Utah households relying on food stamps had grown steadily since 2007, reaching a record high of nearly 100,000 in April.

Some critics say a recession is not the time to decrease benefits for the poor.

"So you're cutting benefits for thousands of families so you can cut off one or two who you feel are getting an unfair advantage?" asked Bill Tibbitts, an advocate at Crossroads Urban Center. "It's the old doing surgery with a chainsaw. We're also concerned because it seems to be targeting a group of families because they're unpopular."

Utahns Against Hunger, a nonprofit, plans to meet with state officials in coming weeks to review the math. Advocates have been hoping for various changes to food stamps rules, including some that would increase access to the program.

"Why is this the first food stamp policy change they choose to implement when there are other [options] that would help families qualify instead of make families ineligible?" said Gina Cornia, executive director of Utahns Against Hunger.

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Do you want to give feedback?

Written comments can be submitted until 5 p.m. June 14. Questions or comments can be addressed to Suzan Pixton at 801-526-9645, by fax at 801-526-9211, or by e-mail at spixton@utah.gov. A public hearing will be held from 5 to 6 p.m. Tuesday at the Department of Workforce Services, 1385 S. State Street in Salt Lake City.

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