



Cuts to food subsidies will hit low-income families

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A 50% cut to state benefits that subsidizes fruits and vegetables purchases for low-income residents will hit local families and farmers hard, according to food insecurity advocates.

The Health Incentives Program (HIP) provides limited funding for households that qualify for SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, to buy local fruits and vegetables from local farm vendors.

This coming December, program participants will see weekly allowances cut in half to \$20 a month or sliced even further, depending on family size, as the state attempts to stretch the program's \$15 million budget through the remainder of the fiscal year.

Vendors who participate in the program first heard of the planned cuts last month.

"My heart dropped," said Ellen Townson, an Andover Select Board member who has for years worked to spread awareness about HIP, helping people navigate the sometimes confusing system and fight negative stigma.

It's a program "we really cherish," Lisa Smith, the executive director of Neighbors in Need, a local organization which provides food for low-income families in the Lawrence area, added.

Smith said with food and housing costs rising, the program is vital to many in the region.

"It may not seem like a lot," Smith said. "But it makes a huge difference to the people we serve."

She added the program gives people the ability to choose rather than just accept what is available at a pantry.

There is "a lot of dignity in families being able to make their own choices," Smith said.

Neighbors In Need distributes food across Lawrence, Methuen and Andover.

While Andover may have substantially higher median income than surrounding communities, there is less of a safety net for the 1,839 residents who do qualify for SNAP and HIP, according to Townson.

The town, which also has little in the way of public transportation, has few resources aimed at easing hunger.

The change may also increase existing health disparities between rich and poor, she said.

Townson said the program allows poorer families to purchase food they may otherwise not be able to afford, since healthy food tends to be more expensive than processed foods.

The state has said the cuts are necessary due to budget constraints.

"We know how critical the Healthy Incentives Program is to families and farmers in Massachusetts," Department of Transitional Assistance Commissioner Jeff McCue said.

"We are restructuring the program to ensure it can continue to operate year-round within the current funding level, to allow ongoing support for families and farmers to plan."

Department Director of Communications Julianne Lima said Gov. Maura Healey initially requested \$25 million be allocated for the program, but only \$15 million was approved by the state's legislature.

"Sadly, what we had to land on," said Lima.

With increased demands for HIP benefits and a decrease in funding, households of all sizes will be capped at \$20 for the month, a 50% reduction for one- to two-person households and 75% reduction for households with six or more people.

In September, use of the program jumped 17% over the previous September and the state had doled out \$6.3 million in health foods since July, according to stats provided by the state.

This leaves around \$9 million for the rest of the fiscal year, which ends in July.

As of the end of September, 10% of SNAP eligible households in Essex County utilized the HIP program.

Townson said the program requires participants to first use SNAP funds, which are then refunded to their account 12 seconds later.

"I really hope the state can revisit it," she said. "SNAP is never enough."

Come December, low-income families that rely on a combination of federal and state programs, as well as nonprofits and other charitable organizations, will find it just a bit harder to get by.

Despite the recent bad news, Smith said other changes such as the formal implementation of universal school lunches were making a difference.

Among many other resources in the Merrimack Valley, the Ballard Vale United Church, 23 Clark Road, Andover, operates a food pantry 24 hours a day. For a list of resources in Essex County visit: mhl.org/food-resources-essex-county. Townson also makes herself available to the community for questions or help.

In order for a two-person family to qualify for SNAP and HIP, the household's monthly income can't be more than \$3,408 before taxes.

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