



SNAP time limits: What you need to know

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Many unemployed Alabama adults once again face strict time limits for assistance under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known as food stamps. These “able-bodied adults without dependents” – folks who do not live in a SNAP household with children – will be allowed to receive SNAP benefits for only three months during a three-year period (ending Dec. 31, 2018), unless they either meet complex work requirements or are found to be exempt from the time limit.

This federal rule was part of the 1996 welfare reform law, but because of the recession, it has not been in effect for nearly a decade. Now that the economy has improved, reinstatement of this rule will deny food assistance for many of the nation’s most vulnerable low-income people.

Because Alabama’s three-month clock started ticking Jan. 1, all able-bodied adults without dependents receiving SNAP on Jan. 1 will lose benefits on April 1, 2016, if they are not working, participating in job training or declared exempt. The change could cut off SNAP benefits for nearly 50,000 Alabamians and as many as 1 million people nationwide.

Exemptions from the SNAP time limit

Some circumstances will exempt a person from the three-month time limit, a requirement that a recipient register for work, or both. These include:

- People who live in a county that has very high unemployment. Counties that now fall into that category are Barbour, Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Monroe, Perry, Sumter, Washington and Wilcox.
- A person who is “physically or mentally unfit for employment.” This does not necessarily require that the person receive disability benefits. A person also could be certified by a medical professional as having a disability, illness or injury that would make it difficult or impossible to work.
- A person who is under age 18 or over age 49.
- A person who is in school at least half-time.
- A woman who is pregnant.
- A person who is responsible for the care of a child under age 6 or an incapacitated person. The child or incapacitated person does not have to live with the caretaker.
- A person who is in a SNAP assistance unit that also includes a child under 18. It does not matter what the person’s relationship is to the child, only that they are in the same SNAP household.

- A person who is registered for work through the unemployment compensation system.
- A person who receives assistance under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (commonly known as welfare) and participates in the JOBS program.
- A person who is working at least 80 hours a month or working fewer hours but earning at least \$217.50 a week or who has been hired for a job that offers at least 30 hours a week.
- A person who is performing volunteer service of at least 80 hours per month.
- A person who participates in an employment and training program that meets SNAP guidelines. Many, though not all, people who are subject to the three-month time limit will be referred to an approved training program.
- A person who participates regularly in a drug or alcohol treatment program. Participation does not have to total 80 hours per month, and 12-step programs are included in the definition of “treatment program.”
- A person who is homeless. This includes people who are living in temporary shelters, halfway houses, domestic violence shelters, or in a place not meant to house someone (such as in a car or under a bridge). People who live with friends or relatives are not considered homeless under this definition.
- States also are allowed a limited number of “individual” exemptions that can extend the three-month time limit by one or two months. Alabama has not yet decided how it will allocate those individual exemptions. In the past, these exemptions have been limited to situations involving natural disasters or the loss of a major employer in the area.

If people lose SNAP benefits because of the time limit, they can become eligible again after 36 months, if they meet one of the above exemptions, or if they meet work requirements.

What service providers can do to help

One of the big concerns about reinstatement of the time limits is that people who are exempt will not be properly identified and will lose SNAP benefits that they should be entitled to receive. Many people who lose benefits likely will try to get help from community agencies and charities that provide emergency food and other assistance.

Service providers like food closets, soup kitchens, homelessness agencies and substance abuse programs can identify people who might be exempt from time limits and help them document their eligibility with the Department of Human Resources (DHR). For example, a homeless shelter could write a letter saying a homeless veteran is staying there, or a Meals on Wheels program could certify that a SNAP recipient is taking care of her elderly mother.

Programs that offer services to low-income people also can:

- Tell their clients about time limits, possible exemptions, and how to meet work requirements.
- Screen clients for eligibility for an exemption listed above and then help them verify that eligibility with DHR.
- Help clients who are participating in drug or alcohol treatment verify their regular participation.
- Help clients who are not exempt access employment and training opportunities.
- Provide 80 hours per month volunteer opportunities for non-exempt clients.
- Refer clients who are having their SNAP benefits terminated to Legal Services Alabama (866-456-4995) for help getting a fair hearing on their termination.