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Undocumented immigrants lose government food aid

By Julia LYon

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At the beginning of July, more than 2,000 families with undocumented immigrants stopped receiving food stamp benefits due to a change in Utah's rules. Now a growing number of them are showing up at emergency food pantries confused and needing help.

"But, of course, I have to feed my family," said an undocumented mother of five who works as a housekeeper at a nursing home. She is among those who recently lost food aid.

Earlier this year, the state announced it would begin to fully count the income earned by all members of a household when determining food stamp eligibility. Previously, only a portion of undocumented immigrants' income was counted in the food stamp calculation, due to the limitations of an old computer system.

That meant, in some prior cases, that a family with several undocumented members might qualify for food stamps although a family of native Utahns making the same amount of money might not.

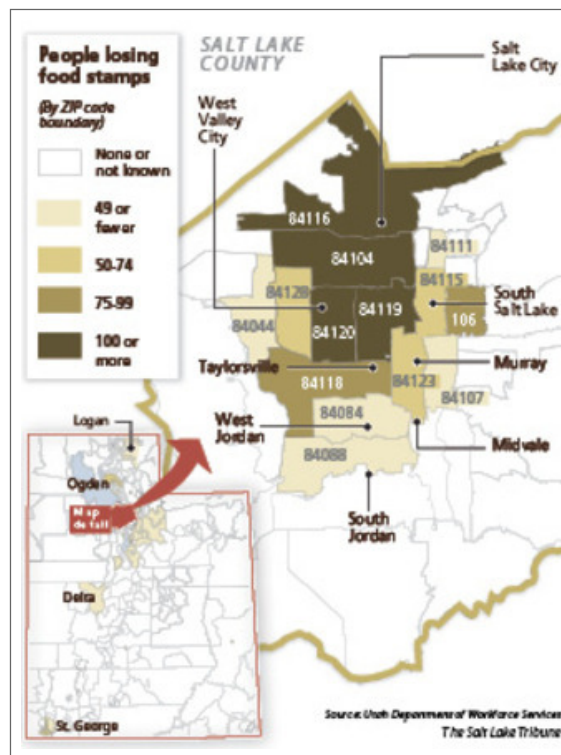
"We believe this is fair and equitable across the board to treat all people equally when it comes to calculating the benefits that people get when they apply for food stamps," said Curt Stewart, a spokesman for the state Department of Workforce Services, which oversees the food stamp program.

Despite the new rules, a blended family with children born in America and undocumented parents could still qualify for help if their income was low enough. The new computer-based eligibility system began July 1.

But the families who have showed up at Hildegard's Pantry at St. Mark's Cathedral in Salt Lake City have not understood the bureaucratic changes and wonder if Americans are being given preference over them.

"I'm worried about running out of food," said Lydia Herrera, the pantry director. "Everybody is complaining about that: 'they cut my food stamps.'"

Because families received the final decision in mid- to late June, they were often not prepared for the financial hit. The housekeeper's family normally received about \$300 in food stamps each month. Now she plans to visit pantries more often seeking donated food.



Hungry in Salt Lake County More than 2,000 families no longer qualify for food stamps under Utah's new rules affecting undocumented immigrants. Previously, those families had benefited from a system that counted only a portion of their income. Hundreds are affected in Salt Lake County alone.

“We need to eat right for the [children’s] health,” she said.

Not all pantries are reporting a bump in need from the Latino population. However, some pantries do not inquire about a family’s specific circumstances.

In addition to the 2,220 households that lost benefits, another group will qualify for fewer food stamp dollars now that their income is fully counted. The number in that group was not available from the Department of Workforce Services this week. The state had originally estimated that a total of almost 8,000 households could be affected by the food stamp rule change.

Gina Cornia, the executive director of the advocacy group Utahns Against Hunger, said organizations like hers or others should perhaps follow up with Latino families at pantries to see if the rule change is the reason they’re in need.

Even if they don’t qualify for food stamps, these remain poor, struggling families, she said.

“The failing of the food stamp program is that it doesn’t capture all the families that need help,” Cornia said. “If you make one dollar over, you’re not eligible.”

And not providing food stamps doesn’t mean these families’ needs are going to diminish, said state Sen. Luz Robles, D-Salt Lake City.

“The cost is going to shift somewhere else or there is going to be other social consequences of not having food for people,” she said.

Yet she recognized that Utahns of all backgrounds are struggling right now.

“I’m more concerned about the children,” Robles said. “The children are the ones who are impacted. They are the future in the nation.”

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