

**NORTH CAROLINA**    OCTOBER 8, 2015

# Food aid in jeopardy for more North Carolina healthy adults

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*Associated Press*

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RALEIGH, N.C. — Get a part-time job, get training, start volunteering or lose your food stamps: That's the message from Gov. Pat McCrory's administration and North Carolina lawmakers to certain healthy adults who have no dependents.

But Republican lawmakers want to accelerate the administration's plan and make the requirement permanent no matter the state's economic condition. Critics say the legislature's proposal for many who use the food benefits — called SNAP in North Carolina — goes too far and hurts the poor and rural economies.

McCrory's Department of Health and Human Services had already decided to end a federal waiver of the work-training requirement for "able-bodied" adults age 18 to 49 who have no dependents. The statewide waiver would be phased out over a year.

The waiver, which began in 2008 and can be received during high unemployment, will expire Jan. 1 in 23 counties with relatively low jobless rates. That will affect about half of the 105,000 people likely to have to meet the work requirements statewide. These adults would have to work, train or volunteer at least 20 hours week to keep SNAP benefits beyond three months.

But GOP lawmakers passed legislation before going home last week that goes further. It demands that all waivers end by next July 1 and tells DHHS to never again seek waivers for this category of adults going forward, except after natural disasters.

Sen. Ralph Hise, R-Mitchell and a health budget writer, said the provision only seeks to speed up what McCrory's administration already planned to do. He said the mandate will help these single adults find permanent work.

"Even someone volunteering with their church organization or with a civic organization allows them to not have gaps on their resumes," Hise said, adding it "places them in a better condition to be employed moving forward, and quite really builds a better sense of self-reliance for them."

The primary bill making the changes remains on McCrory's desk. He must decide by Oct. 30 whether to make it law or veto it. His office didn't immediately respond Thursday afternoon to an email seeking comment. DHHS spokeswoman Alex Lefebvre said the agency didn't request the food benefit provision.

People who work with nonprofit social service organizations call the permanent ban ill-advised, leading to more hunger and the loss of a key tool to inject money into economically distressed areas. The average SNAP benefit last year in North Carolina was \$126 per month.

Jobless adults in rural counties will face the greatest challenges to meet the requirements, said Ralph Gildehaus with Durham-based MDC Inc., which develops programs to reduce poverty. Rural areas have fewer volunteering opportunities, and the lack of public transportation makes monthly mandates even more challenging, Gildehaus said.

"There are not enough jobs for every one of those people and not enough job training program slots for every one of these people," Sen. Angela Bryant, D-Nash, said on the Senate floor late last month opposing the provision. "So we are basically relegating them, I guess, to steal for food."

County social services offices can offer education and training programs for SNAP recipients. Nine of the 100 counties currently are doing so, Lefebvre said. Other counties are examining how to create their own programs, she said.

Jennifer Lange, 44, received SNAP benefits in late 2011 and early 2012 when she was unemployed in Charlotte. She likely would have been subject to the mandates without the waiver. Now employed by Crisis Assistance Ministry in Charlotte, Lange said while jobless she sometimes fell short of 20 hours of work or training, even with an extremely active job search.

The mandate is "another burden on somebody who's already struggling to find a job," she said.

The bill on McCrory's desk also contains several immigration-related provisions. The governor has spoken favorably about ending any "sanctuary cities" in North Carolina, as the bill attempts to do. The North Carolina Justice Center and N.C. Legislative Black Caucus have urged McCrory to veto the bill.



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