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USDA Publishes Final Rule to Take Food Assistance Away from People Struggling to Find Work Despite Strong Nationwide Opposition

AUGUSTA, Maine (December 9, 2019) — Following the release from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) of the final rule that threatens to bar nearly 700,000 people who are struggling to find steady work from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Maine anti-hunger advocates condemned the approach as cruel and undemocratic. Advocates say the final rule runs counter to the will of Congress, where the very same measure was soundly rejected by Democrats and Republicans during 2018 Farm Bill negotiations, and the tens of thousands of Americans who commented in opposition to this rule during the public comment period.

“SNAP is the first line of defense against food insecurity and hunger, a critical work support, and a bridge to employment,” said Kristen Miale, president of Good Shepherd Food Bank. “The three-month time limit is a failed policy that punishes people who face barriers to work like unreliable transportation, homelessness, health challenges, and underemployment while doing nothing to address the underlying causes of their unemployment. The time limit causes undue hardship on people living in extreme poverty; the average income of people subject to the time limit who are enrolled in SNAP is just 18% of the poverty level.”

“This rule unfairly targets some of the most vulnerable members of our community,” said Mark Swann, Executive Director of Preble Street. “Most adults without minor children aren’t eligible for other forms of federal assistance so they will be forced to make difficult decisions between paying for food or paying for other necessities, like medication or housing. Many have no more than a high school education, some are homeless and many lack basic transportation. Others are living with health conditions that make working full time difficult.”

Under federal law, SNAP participants ages 18 through 49 without dependent children cannot receive benefits for more than three months in a 36-month period unless they are working or in certain education and training programs for at least 20 hours a week. States can request waivers to temporarily exempt people from the three-month time limit in areas with higher levels of unemployment, which Maine recently did for more than 200 municipalities with heightened

unemployment. This waiver is the first Maine has received since 2015 when the LePage Administration decided to stop waiving the time limit even though many areas of our state still qualified.

“One of the particular strengths of SNAP is the program’s ability to quickly respond to changes in the economy and the labor market,” said James Myall of Maine Center for Economic Policy. “The USDA’s final rule will hinder SNAP’s flexibility and effectiveness by making it harder for states to receive waivers for areas with rapid increases in unemployment. This rule will be especially devastating when we experience our next economic recession. States will have significantly less ability to obtain waivers in areas of high unemployment under this final rule’s arbitrary and inflexible standards.”

The new rule will go into effect on April 1, 2020. The Maine Department of Health and Human Services said publicly that at least 1,300 Mainers are estimated to be harmed by this rule change.

“We are very disappointed to see this final rule issued with such harsh measures included, despite over 100,000 comments submitted in opposition,” said Josh Kauppila of Food AND Medicine. “Here in Maine, our Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) took steps to alleviate the time limit for struggling Mainers by applying for the waiver that went into effect in October. The federal government is taking us in the wrong direction by moving forward with this rule.”

“This rule change will increase suffering across our state — especially in rural areas,” said Kathy Kilrain del Rio from Maine Equal Justice. “We know from Maine’s own experience taking food assistance away from people doesn’t help them get a job — it only makes them more hungry and less healthy. SNAP is a proven work support and is one of the best anti-poverty programs in our country. Instead of making it harder for people to food on their tables, we should be working to strengthen SNAP and remove barriers to work.”

The rule is scheduled to take effect on April 1, 2020, unless likely litigation results in a stay of some or all provisions of the rule. Those who may be affected by this change can still count on their SNAP benefits until at least April 1. Advocates will continue to push back against this and other harmful policies aimed at making life harder for people with low incomes.

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Preble Street is a nonprofit human services, anti-poverty agency serving the most vulnerable people in Maine since 1975 through innovative, best-practice, client-centered programs that respond to and prevent hunger and homelessness. In addition to the largest emergency food service program in northern New England, Preble Street operates over a dozen low-barrier programs throughout Maine providing 24/365 services for individuals and families living in poverty, including homeless youth, women, veterans, and victims of human trafficking, driven by its mission to meet urgent needs, empower people to move beyond the crises in their lives, and advocate for solutions to homelessness, hunger, and poverty. www.preblestreet.org

Good Shepherd Food Bank is the largest hunger relief organization in Maine, which provides for Mainers facing hunger by distributing nutritious food to more than 450 partner agencies across the state, including food pantries, meal sites, schools, and senior programs. Together with its network, the Food Bank contributes to a statewide effort to combat the root causes of hunger by engaging in advocacy, nutrition education, targeted interventions, and strategic partnerships. In 2018, the Food Bank has distributed 25 million meals to families, children, and seniors in need throughout Maine. www.feedingmaine.org

Maine Equal Justice is a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. www.mejp.org

The **Maine Center for Economic Policy** provides citizens, policymakers, advocates, and media with credible and rigorous economic analysis that advances economic justice and prosperity for all Maine people. www.mecep.org

Food AND Medicine's mission is to organize, educate, and empower workers and our communities in the fight for economic and social justice. Food AND Medicine believes that by working together with unions, farmers, community groups, small businesses, and faith-based organizations we will create solutions and positive change. www.foodandmedicine.org