

SNAP benefit freeze will leave millions nationwide struggling to pay for food – including 472,711 people in Philadelphia

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Published: October 29, 2025 8:32am EDT



Currently, SNAP benefits average just over \$6 per person per day.

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The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, is the largest, most effective tool the U.S. has to reduce food insecurity. As of late 2025, it helps more than 42 million people – including 2 million Pennsylvanians and nearly half a million Philadelphians – buy groceries.

But starting Nov. 1, 2025, Pennsylvania will stop distributing SNAP benefits due to the federal government shutdown, which began Oct. 1.

Félice Lê-Scherban, a public health researcher and associate professor of epidemiology at Drexel University, studies food insecurity among low-income young children and their families in Philadelphia. The Conversation U.S. asked her about the program and what impact its suspension would have – especially in Philadelphia.

What is SNAP?

SNAP benefits – sometimes called food stamps – are provided through a federally funded program administered by the states. The amount of help received depends on a family's income and the number and ages of the people in the household. Currently, benefits average just over US\$6 per person per day. In Pennsylvania, the monthly benefits are loaded onto participants' electronic benefits transfer cards, or EBT cards, during the first 10 business days of each month.

Researchers have found that SNAP benefits reduce poverty and food insecurity – a term for when people don't have consistent access to enough food for all household members to lead active, healthy lives. It also contributes to healthy growth and development in childhood, and lower risks for obesity, diabetes, hypertension and poor mental health later in life.

Studies have also found that when eligible families lose access to SNAP benefits, even temporarily, they are more likely to get sick, and their children are at a greater risk of developmental delays.

Additionally, losing SNAP and similar benefits can strain household finances, forcing low-income people to choose between skipping meals or forgoing other basic needs like rent, utilities and prescription drugs.

How is the government shutdown affecting SNAP benefits in Pennsylvania?

The Department of Agriculture notified SNAP state agency directors in October that it would stop funding the program should the shutdown continue past Nov. 1. The federal agency directed all states to withhold November benefits until further notice.

The USDA is taking this step even though it has more than \$5 billion in its coffers, which could fund approximately two-thirds of what the nation spends each month on SNAP benefits.

In the more than 60-year history of SNAP and the programs that preceded it, the USDA has never before refused to spend contingency funds to disburse monthly benefits. During previous shutdowns, including the 35 days in 2018-2019, the federal government used the department's contingency funds to ensure SNAP wasn't interrupted.

On Oct. 17, the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services issued a statement to the more than 2 million Pennsylvanians participating in SNAP. It warned them that they won't receive their November benefits or any benefits thereafter until the USDA releases funds again.

Pennsylvania is also among 17 states that have suspended approving new SNAP applications until the government reopens, leaving hundreds, if not thousands, of food-insecure families in a prolonged state of hardship.

This disruption is likely to rattle the broader economy. About 12% of U.S. grocery sales are made with SNAP benefits, and over 9,800 supermarkets and other Pennsylvania retailers accept them.

What does this mean for people in Philadelphia?

There are over 470,000 SNAP recipients in Philadelphia – 3 in 10 Philadelphians – who will not receive these benefits until the government shutdown ends.

In the meantime, state agencies are urging people who get SNAP benefits to visit food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens, which are run by nonprofits and not the government. Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that those organizations will be able to keep up. For every meal nonprofits provide, SNAP provides nine.

Additionally, the Pennsylvania state budget impasse – the Commonwealth has been without a budget for nearly four months – has already affected other state-run programs that food banks in Philadelphia rely on.

This is particularly troubling because even when receiving their full benefit, most people who are enrolled in SNAP across the country say that they frequently struggle to afford a healthy diet.

Low-income parents and guardians in Philadelphia, according to research I've conducted and studies by my colleagues, say they strain to stretch their dollars to feed their children amid rising food prices, and sometimes skip meals or delay paying bills when the benefit runs out before the end of the month.

A robust body of evidence has demonstrated the serious mental and physical harm that food insecurity – even for short periods – causes across the lifespan. It can lead to billions of dollars of avoidable costs due to health care and educational needs, and lost productivity.

How this disruption of SNAP and other nutrition programs increases food insecurity will be hard to measure. The Trump administration has canceled the USDA's long-standing annual report on food security.

What can state and federal leaders do to fund the program?

The federal government and Pennsylvania lawmakers have options to at least restore some SNAP benefits in the state while the shutdown continues.

The USDA can reverse its earlier ruling and disburse its more than \$5 billion in emergency funds and issue guidance that states should continue to accept and process new SNAP applications. This would help states provide at least partial benefits to their residents enrolled in SNAP and ensure that new applicants get all the benefits they're eligible for.

The federal government can allocate discretionary and reserve funds to SNAP for the duration of the shutdown so benefits are not interrupted. The government did this with Supplemental Nutrition for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC benefits, as well as farm aid earlier this month.

The government of Pennsylvania and other state governments can pick up the costs of the program for November with their own state budget stabilization funds, also known as "rainy day funds." Pennsylvania's rainy day fund holds more than \$7 billion – well above what's needed to cover its SNAP benefits for November. Some states have already committed to doing this.

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Félice Lê-Scherban is the Philadelphia site principal investigator of Children's HealthWatch. She receives funding from the National Institutes of Health. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

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