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Change in Food Stamp Rule Could Make Hundreds of Virgin Islanders Ineligible for Assistance

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The Trump administration will soon implement rules meant to tighten work requirements for recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, known as SNAP or food stamps, which could potentially render hundreds of Virgin Islanders ineligible for assistance by mid-2020.

Last week, the administration said it had completed a new rule curbing states' (and possibly U.S. territories) ability to shield adults without dependents from federal work requirements tied to receiving assistance through the program formerly administered via food stamps. Officials say the rule, which takes effect April 1, 2020, will save the government billions of dollars and encourage more people to work at a time when jobless rates are near a 50-year low on the U.S. mainland, according to the [Wall Street Journal](#).

WSJ said the rule is the first to take effect among several Trump administration proposals to restrict access to SNAP, which provides aid to 36.4 million people. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees the program, separately has proposed tightening eligibility requirements for low-income households and changing how utility costs factor into eligibility.

In a letter addressed to Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett, Senate President Novelle Francis asked that Ms. Plaskett seek clarification on the Trump Administration's rule changes. Mr. Francis said the changes would be detrimental to Virgin Islanders, particularly as the territory's job market, he said, has not fully rebounded from the 2008 recession, HOVENSA closure or Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017.

"The territory's economy and job market has not completely rebounded from the 2017 hurricanes," Mr. Francis wrote. "The favorable employment numbers the territory has enjoyed post-hurricane primarily reflect recovery related jobs and, on St. Croix, refinery construction jobs. As the territory transitions out of hurricane related repairs and the refinery moves onto the next phase of operations, unemployment is expected to increase. This rule change would most impact the segment of our population that is affected by the shifting job market."

Mr. Francis has asked Ms. Plaskett to share any steps taken by her office regarding the rule change, as well as any ways that the Legislature can support initiatives that protect local SNAP beneficiaries.

USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue said the rule change would encourage Americans who can work to reenter the booming jobs market. "This rule lays the groundwork for the expectation that able-bodied Americans reenter the workforce where there are currently more job openings than people to fill them," said Mr. Perdue.

According to WSJ, critics, including Democratic members of Congress, have said the Trump administration's efforts deepen hardships for poor families and circumvent congressional authority over government assistance programs. "Putting up barriers to food assistance will not incentivize or equip people with what they need to seek and maintain work," wrote representatives for Oxfam America, a poverty relief group, in a 2018 letter opposing the proposed tighter work requirements.

The new rule requires the unemployment rate to be 6 percent or higher for states to issue such waivers. The rule also curbs the amount of discretionary exemptions from federal work requirements that states can issue, WSJ said. The USDA estimates that the new rule will affect about 1.1 million people and that 223,000 might no longer get benefits after it takes effect.

The USDA projects it will save the government \$12.8 billion over 10 years following implementation.