USDA's rule to Harm Childless Individuals Living in Higher Unemployment Areas: Harm to Massachusetts

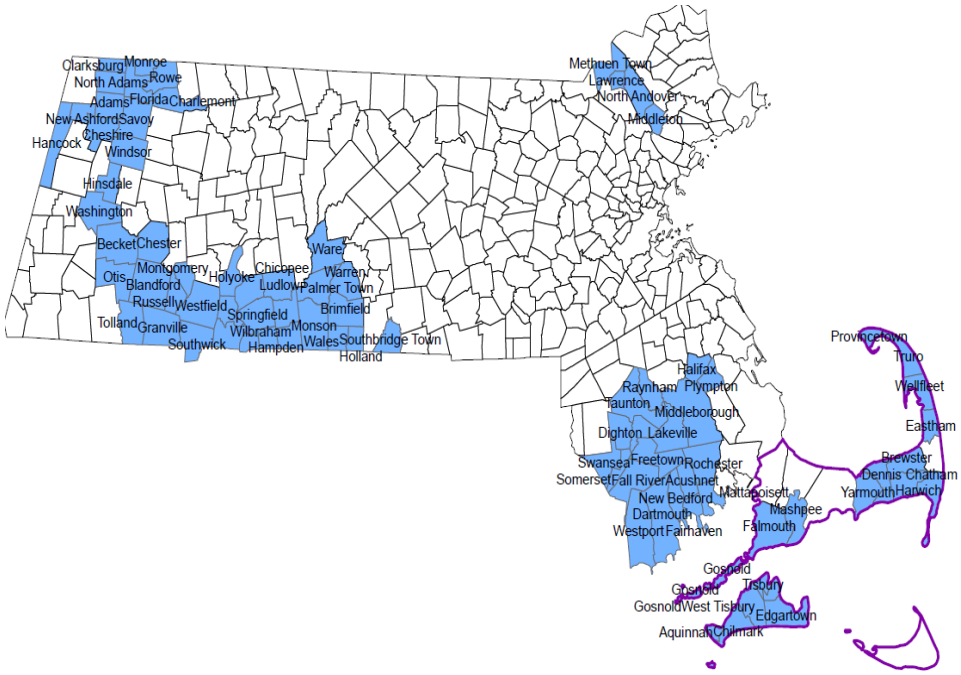
SNAP benefits are time-limited for non-disabled adults ages 18-50 without children (also known as "ABAWDs"). These individuals qualify for only 3 months of SNAP in a 3-year period unless they can prove a disability, are homeless, or meet other exemptions. Otherwise, they must meet strict work rules to get SNAP benefits.

States historically have had the federal option to exempt individuals living in areas with *elevated rates of unemployment* under USDA-approved "geographic area waivers." These area waivers allow states to provide SNAP to individuals who need more time to prove an individual exemption, or to find training programs or reliable work. Many "ABAWDs" have limited education or are ex-offenders, or face other significant barriers to employment, including lack of transportation and lack of access to reliable health care.

USDA's SNAP rule dramatically limits the options for states to waive geographic areas struggling with elevated unemployment. For example, areas of the Cape and Islands struggle with higher unemployment due to the seasonal job market. In 2019, Provincetown had an unemployment rate of about 10%. Areas of Western MA, Merrimack Valley, and Southeastern MA also have higher unemployment rates. None of these areas qualify for waivers because they are part of federal "labor market areas" with current unemployment rates that do not meet new USDA criteria. And if the Massachusetts economy sours, the state would be prevented from helping residents in many areas across the state.

Who is harmed by USDA's rule expanding the 3-month time limit?

- **688,000 ABAWDs likely to lose SNAP benefits nationwide:**
  - Approximately 16,600 individuals in MA will face the 3-mo time limit starting in April 2020.
  - MA may lose $30-35 million in SNAP per year when fully implemented.
  - MA will be less able to respond to elevated rates of unemployment/local economic downturns or to support residents with barriers to employment.



As of April 1 (if no lawsuit delay/halt):

Zero Massachusetts cities and towns waived. Approx. 16,600 at risk of losing SNAP in July (after 3 months of April, May & June).

MA communities hardest hit:

- Lawrence & surrounding areas
- New Bedford, Fall River & surrounding areas
- Western MA including Springfield, Holyoke, Westfield
- Cape and Islands including Provincetown, Yarmouth, Falmouth.

MLRI MASSACHUSETTS LAW REFORM INSTITUTE

For more information about the SNAP time limit, see MassLegalServices.org/ABAWD

Created by the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, updated February 2020.
Pat Baker, pbaker@mlri.org, or Vicky Negus, vnegus@mlri.org.