

For more information or to find a local SFSP sponsor in your area contact:

Center for Civil Justice
Elizabeth Clive, (810) 244-8044
eclive@ccj-mi.org or
Terri Stangl, (989) 755-3120
tstangl@ccj-mi.org

THOUSANDS LOSING UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS WILL MISS OUT ON TIMELY INCREASES IN FOOD ASSISTANCE IF THEY MISS REPORTING DEADLINE

Thousands of out-of-work Michigan residents will be struggling to make ends meet as a result of Congress' decision not to extend unemployment benefits. Many of Michigan's jobless have supplemented their unemployment insurance benefits with Food Assistance benefits (formerly known as Food Stamps) to feed themselves and their families. Many more may be eligible now that their unemployment benefits have been exhausted. Anti-Hunger advocates are worried that thousands of people will not receive timely adjustments in food assistance benefits, however, if they do not report this loss of income to their DHS case workers right away. In order for regular August benefits to reflect the lowered income, households who lose unemployment insurance must report the change to DHS in writing by July 21st. According to data released by Public Policy Associates, Inc., 85,910 Michigan residents will be falling off the rolls this month alone.

"A household's monthly food assistance allowance is based on expected monthly income and expenses such as housing, childcare, child support, and medical expenses (for those households with senior or disabled members)," explains Terri Stangl, Executive Director of the Center for Civil Justice, a non-profit organization that operates a Statewide Food and Nutrition Program Helpline that now receives over 3000 calls per month. "Although the Department of Human Services does periodic computer matches with the unemployment insurance agency to verify whether or not someone is receiving unemployment benefits, DHS doesn't receive regular reports on when these benefits end or decrease." Stangl reports that the Helpline is receiving a surge of calls and questions from jobless workers, many of whom have never before sought food assistance. Callers want to know if they are eligible, how much assistance they should receive each month, and how to apply.

The Center recommends that those already receiving Food Assistance should report in writing to their DHS case worker that their unemployment benefits have ended (or when they will end) and to provide copies of any documents received from the unemployment agency that verify this within 10 days of the report. Once the case worker receives this report and verification, they can adjust Food Assistance benefits accordingly. This and any other change in income should be reported as soon as possible, because the case workers have 10 days to act on any reported changes. This means that in order to affect regular August benefits, changes in July or August income must be reported by July 21st.

Many DHS clients either do not realize that this change has to be reported or do not know how to report it. "I had no idea that I needed to report the change in writing. I had been trying for weeks to

find the change reporting phone number,” said Diane Meirthew, a Food Assistance recipient from Wayne County. Diane’s unemployment insurance ended in mid-April, but she did not figure out how to report the change until July. Wayne county residents used to be able to report changes by phone, but this hot line is no longer in existence. DHS policy requires that recipients report changes in writing and provide proof of the change. Change reports can be emailed, mailed, or dropped off in the DHS office.

Those with questions about how to report changes or when reported changes should take effect can contact the Food and Nutrition Help Line at 1-800-481-4989. Those interested in finding out if they are eligible for Food Assistance or if they receive the right amount of help can call the Food and Nutrition Help Line for a free eligibility screening, or visit the Food Stamp Calculator at foodstamphelp.org. To apply for Food Assistance benefits, individuals can go to Michigan.gov/mibridges, or apply at their local department of human services. Food Assistance benefits are funded entirely by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.