

Iowa's new SNAP food rules challenged

William Morris
Des Moines Register
USA TODAY NETWORK

Despite minimal income and at times having to live out of his car, Marc Craig was able to mostly manage his diabetes and kidney failure by carefully controlling his diet.

That was 2025. This year, after changes to Iowa's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program billed as bolstering healthy food, Craig says that has become a lot harder.

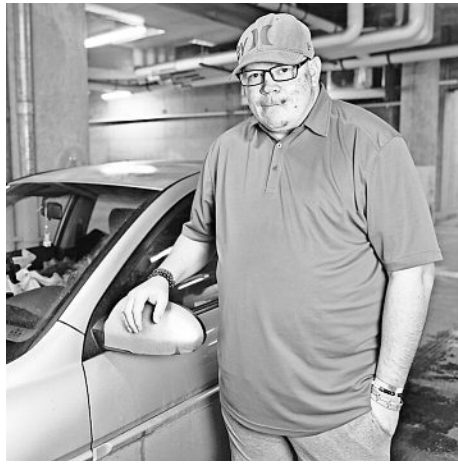
Craig, of Des Moines, is among the plaintiffs in a new lawsuit challenging sweeping changes to SNAP food restrictions in Iowa, Colorado, West Virginia, Tennessee and Nebraska. They are among 22 states that, with U.S. Department of Agriculture approval, have adopted definitions of food for SNAP eligibility that are more restrictive than the federal guidelines, according to the National Center for Law and Economic Justice, which is bringing the lawsuit.

The suit is directed at the federal government, not Iowa or any of the other states. But the goal is to force the USDA, which oversees SNAP, to rescind approval for the new restrictions Iowa and the other states have imposed on the program.

If the changes survive the challenge, they could be codified into Iowa law this year under a bill passed by the state House and pending before the Senate.

Gov. Kim Reynolds touted the new restrictions in her Condition of the State address in January. Spokespeople for her and Attorney General Brenna Bird did not respond messages inquiring about the lawsuit.

Jeffrey Shinder, an attorney for the plaintiffs, said in a news release that "SNAP is a critical lifeline for millions of families and households, and Congress has established clear guardrails for how the program must operate across the country."



Marc Craig poses for a portrait with his car at Central Library on Friday, Dec. 12, 2025, in Des Moines.

LILY SMITH/THE REGISTER

"The USDA is attempting to bypass those strict guardrails by empowering states to curtail access to SNAP in ways that will create significant hardship on recipients and retailers," Shinder said. "We urge the Court to halt this attack on SNAP, which threatens millions of individuals' access to essential food assistance nationwide."

What can SNAP recipients buy in Iowa?

Beginning in January, Iowa barred SNAP recipients from using their benefits on items such as soft drinks and candy. Danielle Sample, a spokesperson for the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services, said at the time that Iowa's program "includes continued eligibility for items such as fruits, vegetables, meats, dairy and grains, while excluding soda, candy, gum, vitamins and some in-store prepared foods."

But what's actually eligible under the new rules and what isn't often is far from clear and varies from retailer to retailer. For example, fruit that is cut and

packaged in store is SNAP-eligible, but a fruit cup with a plastic spoon attached is not. A pre-packaged sandwich can be eligible or not, depending on whether the store has seating or a microwave customers can use to warm up their food.

In other cases, customers need to analyze individual ingredient lists. For example, under Iowa regulations, the category of candy would include barbecue-flavored peanuts or breakfast bars containing whole grain, but not a bar of chocolate containing flour.

In a previous interview, Craig told the Des Moines Register the new rules left him in the dark about what he could or could not buy with his SNAP benefits.

"I have no clue. It's very, very confusing," he said. "Some sandwiches, it says it's processed, you can buy, some you can't. If it has a fork you can, if it doesn't have a fork, you know, it's — honestly, the more I look into it the more confused I get."

The new lawsuit, filed March 11 in the District of Columbia, says those restrictions have negatively impacted Craig's health.

"Since the Iowa waiver took effect, Plaintiff Craig's diet has worsened, and he is consuming more highly processed foods that are high in sugar and sodium," it says. "As a result, he is increasingly reliant on medication to manage conditions that he previously helped control through diet."

Lawsuit claims waivers confusing, illegal

In their lawsuit, the plaintiffs argue the new state-by-state restrictions aren't just onerous for recipients, but were granted in violation of federal law.

Like the other states, Iowa had to obtain a waiver from the Department of Agriculture to vary from the federal definition of food.

The law authorizing SNAP allows

states to conduct "pilot or experimental projects," but the plaintiffs allege the food restriction waivers far exceed the statutory criteria for such projects, and did not follow the required legal process for enactment, including public notice and comment periods and metrics to evaluate their success.

The result, according to the plaintiffs, has been mass confusion.

Each of the 22 states now has a different definition of food for SNAP benefits, often turning on seemingly arbitrary distinctions like Iowa's line between "whole grain" and "flour." Since states do not issue comprehensive lists of allowed or disallowed products, individual retailers, and in many cases individual cashiers, must make judgment calls about what is covered by their state's program.

"As a result, retailers must make difficult, product-level eligibility determinations across differing state regimes under threat of investigation and removal from the program, making even minor errors potentially devastating," the plaintiffs argue.

Craig, in a statement, said those conditions make every grocery trip an ordeal.

"When I shop for food, I have to read the ingredient list on everything I buy to try to figure out if I can use SNAP to buy it," he said. "I still get to the register only to be told I cannot use SNAP to buy everything I have selected."

The lawsuit argues the USDA's waivers violate the Administrative Procedures Act and the Food and Nutrition Act, and asks the court to reverse the department's approval for the waivers and order states to resume using the federal definition of food.

The federal government has not yet responded to the lawsuit in court.

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State says it's owed \$22M by company managed by legislator

Clark Kauffman
Iowa Capital Dispatch

The State of Iowa is suing a pharmaceutical firm that is managed in part by a state legislator, alleging the company has spent \$22 million owed to the state for an HIV treatment program.

NuDak Ventures, a limited liability corporation that does business as NuCara Specialty Pharmacy, is being sued by the state in Polk County District Court. NuCara owns and manages more than 30 full-service, community-based pharmacies in Iowa, Texas, North Dakota and Minnesota.

In its lawsuit, the State of Iowa alleges the company has repeatedly failed to make millions in monthly payments due to the state under a contract with the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services.

Iowa Rep. Brett Barker, a Republican from Story County, is vice president of operations for NuCara. When asked about the \$22 million the company allegedly owes the state, Barker said Monday, "There is no knowledge that I have into what's been going on, so I don't have anything to add ... I don't have anything to do with that. I am on the community pharmacy side of the business

and that's a separate division. So, I wasn't aware of anything until there was a lawsuit filed."

NuCara's website indicates Barker began serving as the company's vice president of operations in November 2012, having previously served as director of clinical services for two years.

State records show Barker also served as a member of the Iowa Board of Pharmacy from May 2017 to December 2021.

The lawsuit, filed in Polk County District Court, states that until recently NuCara was a state-contracted pharmacy, providing pharmacy services related to sexually transmitted diseases, tuberculosis control, immunization, and substance abuse treatment since 1998.

NuCara also provided services related to a federal AIDS drug program established by Congress in 1990, according to the company's contracts with the state. As part of that program, the federal government has provided states with money to improve access to HIV medical care and support services. Iowa has used its share of that revenue to operate the Iowa AIDS Drug Assistance Program, which provides critical medications, treatment, and assistance with

health insurance costs to low-income Iowans, the contacts show.

Under the federal law, the program requires pharmaceutical manufacturers to sell outpatient drugs at discounted prices to Iowa DHHS. If patient-clients in the program have health insurance, the law allows DHHS to generate program income by purchasing the medications at the discounted rates while billing insurers at the standard, non-discounted rate. The resulting "profit" is then reinvested in the program itself.

As part of its contract with the state, NuCara was tasked with ordering the outpatient medications purchased by DHHS at discounted prices. Under the terms of that deal, NuCara was responsible for paying DHHS the program "profit" that was generated each month.

Ten days ago, on March 6, 2026, the state terminated its contract with NuCara, alleging that between October 2024 and January 2026 the company had repeatedly failed to make all of the required monthly payments.

NuCara is now alleged to be eight months in arrears, totaling more than \$22 million in money owed to the state.

NuCara is also alleged to have improperly spent the state's program income to pay off other creditors in viola-

tion of the contract and state and federal laws, and the state claims the company "no longer has, and is unable to return," the state's lost revenue.

While NuCara is reportedly pursuing a corporate acquisition by OneroRX, the state alleges that OneroRX does not intend to accept NuCara's liabilities as part of any proposed corporate acquisition. "Even if NuCara is acquired by OneroRX, the proceeds from the sale and collection on any pending invoices will not be sufficient to repay the program income" the state is due, the lawsuit claims.

The lawsuit alleges breach of contract and conversion, and is seeking reimbursement of all money owed to the state, plus interest.

NuCara has yet to file a response to the lawsuit and company officials did not respond to emails seeking comment on the lawsuit.

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5 Iowa candidates face ballot removal in 2026 over paperwork

Brianne Pfannenstiel
Des Moines Register
USA TODAY NETWORK

Five Iowa candidates will face challenges to their political campaigns at a meeting of a state review board Tuesday, March 24.

Candidates for state and federal offices were required to file paperwork with the Secretary of State's office by March 13 that included a specific number of signatures from a set number of counties to be approved to appear on the June 2 primary ballot.

Individual Iowans and other campaigns had one week to issue challenges for potential errors in the paperwork.

Five candidates were flagged for further review. They include:

- State Rep. Eddie Andrews, Republican candidate for governor.
- State Sen. Mike Bousset, Republican candidate for Iowa Senate, District 23.
- Xavier Carrigan, Democratic candidate for U.S. House, District 3.
- Jared Gadson, Democratic candidate for Iowa House, District 75.



State Rep. Eddie Andrews talks with an attendee during a rally at Horizon Events Center on Tuesday, Jan. 27, 2026 in Clive.

LILY SMITH/THE REGISTER

- Eric Pearson, Republican candidate for Iowa Senate, District 21.

The State Objection Panel includes Iowa Secretary of State Paul Pate, State Auditor Rob Sand, and Attorney General Brenna Bird.

The group is scheduled to convene at 10:30 a.m. in the legislative dining room



Iowa State Sen. Zach Wahls submits petition signatures to appear on the Iowa ballot on March 11, 2026, at the Iowa State Capitol.

CODY SCANLAN/THE REGISTER

at the Iowa State Capitol.

Pate's office said Sand, who is running for governor as a Democrat, has renewed himself for the reviews of Andrews' and Gadson's candidacies.

Andrews is also running for governor, and one of Sand's staffers is running in the primary race against Gadson.

Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig will replace Sand in reviewing those two objections.

The reviews could have big implications.

The panel has booted high-profile candidates from the ballot in the past, such as 2018 Republican gubernatorial Ron Corbett.

And a challenge to Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Abby Finkenauer's 2022 candidacy went all the way to the Iowa Supreme Court before it was ultimately accepted and put on the ballot.

Brianne Pfannenstiel is the chief politics reporter for the Des Moines Register. She writes about campaigns, elections and the Iowa Caucuses.