

USDA LAWSUIT

Iowa's new SNAP food rules challenged

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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."

"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 stores 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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Suspect

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HomeServices is, the company's holdings include Iowa Realty, the state's largest real estate company — where Okland had been affiliated as an agent.

As a title officer, Ramsey would have

researched real estate deals before they closed to make sure the transactions were legal. Midland Title & Escrow removed Ramsey from its website on Wednesday.

"While we take comfort that Ashley's family and our community as a whole finally has closure, it is with tremendous shock and sadness that we learned of the arrest of Kristin Ramsey, an employ-

ee of Midland Title & Escrow, an organization which is a part of Iowa Realty," the statement from Iowa Realty said. "Kristin became associated with the company several months after the events of 2011. Along with everyone in our community, we are understandably stunned."

Register courts reporter William Morris contributed to this story.

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