

U.S. food stamp official: State could be aiding more Texans

He says participation rate is tied to backlog in applications.

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Texas could be providing food stamps to 650,000 more people and could increase the amount of federal money it receives for the program each year from \$4 billion to \$5 billion if the state increased its participation rate to the national average, according to President Barack Obama's top food stamp official.

But Texas officials, who are struggling with a strained application system, say increasing participation is not their goal.

Kevin Concannon, undersecretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, was in Austin on Tuesday to meet with Texas Health and Human Services Executive Commissioner Tom Suehs to check on Texas' progress in meeting the food stamp application backlog. The state is routinely failing to process applications within federal and state deadlines — 30 days for a regular application and seven days for an emergency application — and many Texas families have been waiting months for assistance.

Concannon, who started his job last year, said Texas is one of the poorest-performing states on food stamps and that no other state has had such large or long-standing problems processing applications on time.

"There are still thousands and thousands of Texans who, if they lived elsewhere in the United States, would receive these same benefits ... in a more timely manner," he said Monday evening.

And for those who aren't concerned about poor people or those who have lost their jobs, he said, he'd argue that Texas is missing out on federal dollars that would be spent at grocery stores and would stimulate the state's economy. Nationwide, there are about 37.9 million people on food stamps, he said. There are about 3.1 million Texans on food stamps, and the program reaches about 55 percent of eligible Texans, Concannon said. The national average is 66 percent. The federal government pays for the food in the program, and the state and federal governments split administration costs.

Stephanie Goodman, a state health and human services spokeswoman, said her agency's philosophy differs from the federal government. "I don't think our focus is a participation rate," she said. "If there's a family that qualifies for assistance and they don't feel it's right to ask the government for help, we're not here to talk them out of that."

Concannon said the participation rate is closely tied to the slow application processing.

"If the word gets out that if you go to the office in Houston, you have to wait months for help, I might be so emotionally exhausted, I might say, 'I'm not even going to bother trying,'" Concannon said during an interview at the Driskill Hotel. "These are struggling people. They're not driving around outside this hotel in new cars and saying, 'Life is good.'"

Other states are seeing a recession-related surge in food stamp applications. But other states are handling the surge better, he said.

To streamline Texas' application process, Concannon is urging the state to stop finger-imaging applicants, something done by just two other states, California and Arizona, and by New York City. He said that if a state asked to start a fingerprinting program now, he'd say no. Suehs has said he can't stop it because it's state law.

"We fingerprint people who have committed crimes or who have been accused of crimes, and to me that's an unfortunate attitude that may be reflected," Concannon said. "It creates a burden on the worker, a burden for the applicant, and I think it's a waste of money, frankly."

Goodman said Texas is getting conflicting messages from federal officials, who have requested the state stop finger imaging but haven't banned it. (Concannon said he's researching the possibility of requiring Texas to stop, but that the state's fingerprinting was approved years before his arrival.)

"As long as we have a very clear state law, mixed signals from Washington don't trump that," Goodman said.

Arlene Wohlgemuth, executive director of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which advocates for limited government, said finger imaging deters fraud by preventing people from "double dipping," or securing benefits at multiple food stamp offices. "We owe it to the taxpayers to make sure that the money they entrust to the government is spent wisely," said Wohlgemuth, a former state lawmaker.

Another way federal officials have suggested streamlining Texas' system is by getting rid of an asset test. To qualify for food stamps, families may have one vehicle worth up to \$15,000 — and, for each adult, an additional vehicle worth up to \$4,650 — and any value over that counts toward a \$5,000 maximum for liquid assets, such as checking accounts. Some assets, such as retirement accounts, are exempt.

Concannon said that, for example, if a restaurant employee's hours are cut from 40 to 20 per week, the state shouldn't require him or her to exhaust modest savings before being eligible for food stamps.

"I might have been on an hourly wage, and all of a sudden (my hours are cut) ... and I might have \$10,000 or \$12,000 in the bank," Concannon said. "Why force me to spend down that very limited asset?"

But Goodman said that's another philosophical disagreement between Texas and the federal government.

"I think we just have a different view in Texas," she said. "Most taxpayers would expect a person who has \$10,000 to \$12,000 sitting in the bank to use that to feed their family."

Cynthia Martinez, a spokeswoman for Texas RioGrande Legal Aid Inc., which is suing the state over the food stamp application backlog, said Texas' reasons for not implementing federal officials' recommendations are excuses. "Those excuses are fine — we hope they help the agency sleep at night," she said. "But they don't put food on the table."

Her group's lawsuit, filed on behalf of families applying for food stamps and nonprofits serving low-income people, seeks to force Texas to meet processing deadlines. As of December, responses were overdue for some 40,000 applicant families, state officials said.

Concannon said Suehs inherited "a 19th-century system" and has made strides in fixing the problems, such as hiring more than 600 eligibility workers in recent months. But he said Texas still has a long way to go to fix problems that stemmed from a failed privatization attempt.

People outside of Texas are aware of the problems with the backlog, he said. "We wouldn't allow our football team to be viewed that way," Concannon said. "We should have the same energy and self-pride about how we treat our poorest citizens."

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