

Needy Texas families had to choose between a car and food aid

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Now, more Texans will be eligible for SNAP with updated vehicle asset test.



By [Dallas Morning News Editorial](#)

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The Texas Legislature recently expanded the state's SNAP food benefits program by updating the vehicle asset test. (Jonathan Weiss / Getty Images)

The price of groceries increased a staggering 14% in the Dallas area last year. With inflation rates like these, hunger increasingly affects middle-class Texans who need to make difficult choices about their finances to keep their kids fed.

It's a relief that the Texas Legislature expanded the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in the state with three bills that will take effect in September. House Bill 1287, specifically, reforms what's known as the vehicle asset test used to determine which families are eligible for benefits.

It has long been difficult for families who own a car to acquire food assistance because the asset test did not accurately measure the value of a vehicle in today's dollars. In other words, people who owned a reliable car to get to work could be dinged on their application for assistance. That didn't make sense.

Though SNAP is a federal program, it's up to individual states to decide on the requirements for eligibility. In addition to household income, authorities also consider whether a person owns a vehicle and the value of those vehicles, when they consider who qualifies for food benefits.

Under the old vehicle asset test requirements, last updated in 2001, a person whose first car was valued at \$15,000 or more could not be eligible for benefits. If they had two cars, the second vehicle needed to have a value of \$4,650 or less to qualify for benefits.

As inflation raised all prices, car values, even for older vehicles, climbed right to record highs, meaning that a large chunk of food-insecure Texans couldn't get the benefits they needed. Maybe a \$15,000 car was a nice ride in 2001. But we all know these days that it's, at best, a get-around. As for a \$4,650 car, you'll be lucky if it starts.

In car-centric Texas, it's extremely difficult to keep a job and live in an affordable area without your own reliable transportation. This earlier policy of withholding benefits from food-insecure Texans who happened to have vehicles was short-sighted, as it didn't help to break the cycle of poverty.

Under the updated standards, a person's first vehicle would need to be valued at \$22,500 or less and their second at \$8,700 or less, for them to qualify for benefits. This expansion is encouraging, but it's worth noting that Texas is one of just 10 states that still has a vehicle asset test for SNAP. Legislators should consider a more sustainable reform of the vehicle asset test, preferably one that has an adjustment for inflation baked into it, going forward.

In the short term though, we're glad that lots of families will get the help they need and won't have to sacrifice the convenience of having a reliable car just to feed their children. Being able to get to work and be sure their families are fed could even put them on a better path to independence.

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