News

A woman holds a sign during "A Rally for SNAP" on the steps of the Massachusetts Statehouse

A woman holds a sign during "A Rally for SNAP" on the steps of the Massachusetts Statehouse in Boston Oct. 28 ahead of the anticipated suspension of food aid benefits Nov. 1 amid the ongoing U.S. government shutdown. (OSV News/Brian Snyder, Reuters)

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A federal judge in Rhode Island on Oct. 31 blocked the Trump administration from ceasing to pay for federal food assistance during the government shutdown.

The Trump administration previously said funding for SNAP — the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, a major part of the nation's social safety net — was scheduled to lapse Nov. 1 due to the federal government shutdown.

Judge Jack McConnell of the U.S. District Court for the District of Rhode Island said the Agriculture Department must distribute the contingency funds "timely, or as soon as possible, for the November 1 payments to be made."

About SNAP

About 42 million — or 1-in-8 — Americans rely on SNAP. Data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture showed that in fiscal year 2023, 79% of SNAP recipient households included either a child, an elderly individual or a nonelderly individual with a disability.

However, despite the ruling, it remained unclear what the extent of the disruption in funds would be, as they were scheduled to lapse Nov. 1. Some interruption is therefore expected, and the Trump administration could appeal McConnell's ruling.

In a joint statement, the coalition of plaintiffs in the case — Rhode Island State Council of Churches v. Rollins — called the ruling "a lifeline for millions of families, seniors, and veterans who depend on SNAP to put food on the table." The defendant is Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins.

"It reaffirms a fundamental principle: no administration can use hunger as a political weapon," the statement said. "This victory is about more than one program — it's about the American values of fairness, compassion, and accountability that hold our democracy together. Our coalition represents communities on the frontlines of the hunger crisis. We came together because we refuse to accept a government that turns its back on people in need. We will keep fighting to ensure that federal programs serve their lawful purpose — to help, not harm people and communities."

Catholic leaders and ministries are among those who have raised alarm at the prospect of a lapse in federal food assistance.

Read this next: USCCB president raises alarm about disruption of federal food assistance

Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said in a statement released late Oct. 28 the group is "deeply alarmed that essential programs that support the common good, such as SNAP, may be interrupted."

"This would be catastrophic for families and individuals who rely on SNAP to put food on the table and places the burdens of this shutdown most heavily on the poor and vulnerable of our nation, who are the least able to move forward," Broglio said.

The Trump administration had previously argued that it could not use the contingency funds for the program, despite previous precedent, including from President Donald Trump's first term.

In anticipation of a lapse in federal food assistance programs, Catholic Charities USA, the network organization dedicated to carrying out the domestic humanitarian work of the Catholic Church in the United States, announced a national fundraising effort to provide an emergency supply of food to Catholic Charities agencies around the country.

Anthony, a volunteer at the St. Benedict Church food pantry in Philadelphia, hands out dried f

Anthony, a volunteer at the St. Benedict Church food pantry in Philadelphia, hands out dried fruit to a client during an Oct. 31 distribution that took place hours ahead of the scheduled Nov. 1 lapse in funding for SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, amid the federal government shutdown. (OSV News/Gina Christian)

Volunteers were out in force at one Philadelphia parish Oct. 31, distributing food hours ahead of the anticipated funding lapse.

"They were calling the parish school to find out about this today," said Joyce Ramsey, a longtime volunteer at the St. Benedict Church food pantry, part of St. Athanasius Parish in Philadelphia. The ministry saw an uptick in new clients as SNAP was set to be suspended Nov. 1.

Speaking to OSV News on Oct. 29, St. Athanasius pastor Fr. Joseph Okonski — who oversaw the Oct. 31 distribution at St. Benedict — said that regular deliveries from the pantry's main partnering food bank have shrunk due to cutbacks, tariffs and the federal government shutdown. He also noted that a number of clients at the food pantry were reluctant to speak with OSV News directly, due to fear of possible immigration detention.

Yet amid the frustration and concern they expressed, the priest and his volunteer team pointed to the joy of serving others in need. "It's a blessing, just helping people," said a volunteer named Tina. "I can't help everybody, but I would try if I could."

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