

# Engler asked to spare food stamp limitations

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BY RENA FULKA  
SPECIAL WRITER

With the new federal welfare reform law already in place, a growing number of activists are stepping up their cause to save 60,000 individuals across the state, including 2,507 in Oakland County, from losing food stamps through a gradual process beginning March 1.

Under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, childless individuals between the ages of 18 and 50 would be required to work 20 hours a week, participate in an approved job training program or perform 25 hours of community service a month to retain benefits. Non-compliance would reduce food stamp allotments to three months over a three-year period.

The \$72 million in benefits could continue to flow into the state annually if Gov. John Engler would request a waiver from the U. S. Department of Agriculture for this group of individuals living in areas where unemployment runs 7.1 percent or higher. The U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics lists 44 counties and 11 cities in Michigan as labor surplus areas that fall under the waiver allowed by the new federal welfare law.

More than two dozen states have already applied for waivers. Michigan is not among them.

"We're committed to consistent welfare reform," said John Truscott, press secretary for the governor. "You can't get something for nothing anymore. You've got to be willing to give something back."

But Sylvan Lake residents William and Mary Carry worry that many of the recipients will not find placement quickly enough. "Our concern is hungry people," said Mary Carry, co-chair of Pax Christi Michigan and coordinator of Orchard Lake-based Peace and National Priorities Center in Oakland County. "These are the people who are going to be without food."

The Carrys are two of 100 activists involved with The Michigan Emergency Alliance against Losing Stamps, an ad hoc campaign that grew out of the Detroit-based Michigan Fair Budget Action Coalition. Begun in December, MEALS has drawn representatives from religious congregations, non-profits, civil rights organizations, human services providers and food retailers. The group is headquartered in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference Building in Detroit.

Maggie Tyson of Bloomfield Township was among a 13-member delegation that met with Gov. Engler for 80 minutes in his Lansing office on Feb. 7, to discuss the waiver issue.

"The fact that he met so long attested to the fact that he thought it was an important delegation," said Tyson, a MEALS representative who also chairs the Friends of Oakland County Welfare Rights Organization. "The doors are still open to us."

Other delegates included representatives from Catholic Charities, Catholic Conference, the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan, Holy Trinity Community Outreach, Hunger Action Coalition of Michigan, Wellness House of Michigan and Westside Mothers. A main concern for members of MEALS and other groups is the Food Stamp Community Services Program, created by the Family Independence Agency, which will send able-bodied food stamp recipients in the single, 18-to-50 age group into religious institutions and non-profits for volunteer service.

"We tried to show the governor and other people that non-profits are totally incapable of opening slots for that many volunteers. They're not skilled enough, so we cannot expect the churches and non-profits to take up the slack," said Tyson. "We kept emphasizing that 60,000 people may be in real danger of malnutrition before they get this in place."

"That's an erroneous fear," said state Senator Michael Bouchard, R-Birmingham.

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Howard, secretary of the judges association, said the organization discussed Van Regenmorter's legislation Tuesday and vigorously agreed with the proposed changes. "The association (composed of appellate, circuit and district judges) has previously gone on record calling for changes in the drug-lifer law," he said.

The existing drug-lifer law mandates that judges sentence anyone convicted of trafficking in 650 or more grams of cocaine or heroine to life in prison with no chance of parole. The law, enacted in 1978, also calls for mandatory sentences for defendants convicted of dealing in lesser amounts of cocaine or heroine.

A person convicted of trafficking in 225 grams of cocaine, for example, is subject to a minimum sentence of 20 years in prison.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the law is the lack of discretion on the part of judges. Once a defendant is convicted, judges must impose the mandatory sentence.

Several judges — including Oakland Circuit Judge Breck — have imposed lesser sentences only to have the state's higher courts subsequently require them to impose the mandatory penalty.

The proposed changes would allow judges to impose life sentences for defendants convicted of dealing 650 or more grams of cocaine or heroine, said Van Regenmorter. "That amount can still cause a lot of problems," said the west Michigan law maker, "and life in prison might

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The big change, Van Regenmorter said, is giving judges the option of imposing a lesser sentence providing the person convicted of dealing 650 grams or more has no previous drug or assaultive felony conviction.

"Furthermore, that person must cooperate with police," said the senator.

Van Regenmorter said he is

confident the proposed changes will be acceptable this time because he has had lengthy discussions with law enforcement officials.

To escape life in prison, he said, the defendant must have minimal involvement in drugs and cooperate with law enforcement officials to apprehend major dealers.

"The law was intended to get king pins," said Van Regenmorter. "But too often it's been used on mules (couriers or others with low level involvement) because of the mandatory sentencing."

Even with his proposed changes, Van Regenmorter said the law would remain tough enough to deter would-be dealers. Judges can, for example, impose life time probation as a condition of release, he said.

One false step — one additional drug arrest — could put somebody behind bars again — this time for life.

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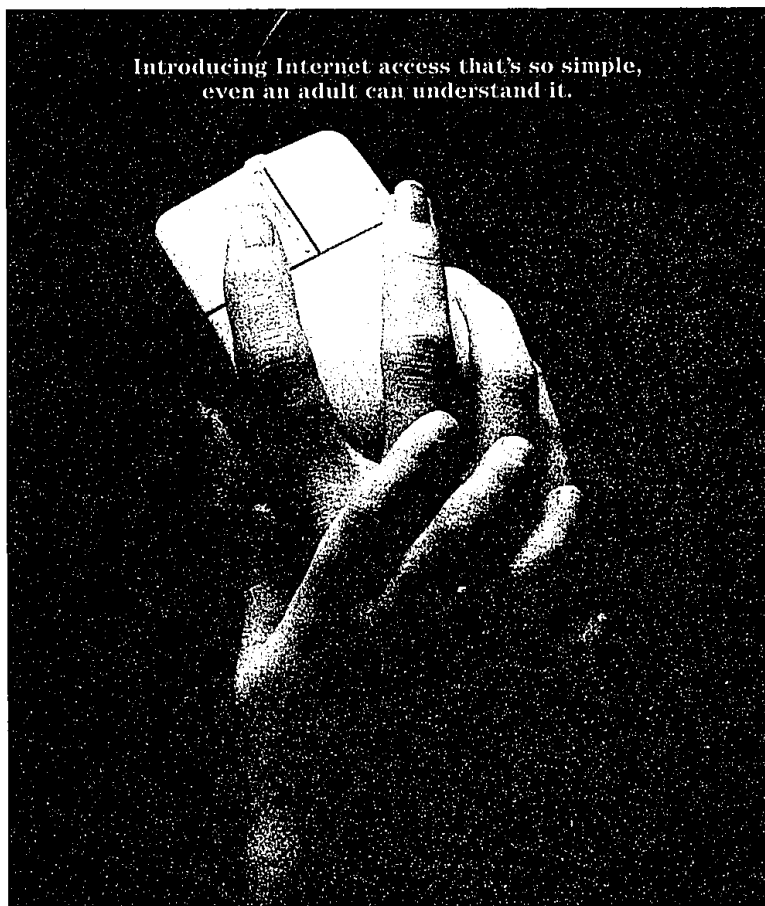
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