

Woman urging officials to change assistance criteria

Lancaster resident working to get legislators to revise guidelines for Food Stamp Program

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LANCASTER - Kelly Davis is on a crusade to change how the state determines who is eligible to receive assistance through the Food Stamp Program.

Davis is urging state and federal leaders to change income eligibility criteria - applicants' income cannot exceed 130 percent of the federal poverty level in Ohio. She also said she believes those determinations should be based on a family's net income - as opposed to their gross income, as rules dictate now - and take into account expenses such as car insurance and maintenance.

"There are a lot things that they don't take into consideration," said Davis, who launched Hear Our Voices, an online petition calling for those and other needed changes to food stamp eligibility guidelines. She said she hopes to collect 5,000 signatures by May 1. Copies of the petition will be sent to state legislators, Gov. Ted Strickland and President George Bush.

"The hardest part is getting the word out," Davis said.

The wife, mother and grandmother doesn't receive food stamps but she said her family needs the help.

"We have never needed assistance before, but we need it now," said Davis, who has a child and a grandchild living at her home in Lancaster. That's because their annual household income recently fell by about \$9,000 after her husband's employer cut wages.

Her husband, who is the family's sole breadwinner, earned about \$33,000, but only took home about \$26,000 after taxes in 2007. Even so, the family of four, whose expenses total \$2,465 per month, made too much money to qualify for food stamps.

The federal program is intended to help low-income people and families buy the food they need for good health, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, which administers the program.

Laura Holton, community services director for Fairfield County Job & Family Services, commends Davis for championing for reform.

The Community Services division is responsible for administering the Food Stamp Program locally.

"Almost half of our families (receiving food assistance) are working hard and bringing in income but still can't feed (themselves)," Holton said. "I'm all about families advocating for families. I think that this (will be) good for opening that dialogue."

Of Fairfield County's 140,729 residents, nearly 8 percent receive food stamps. That cost the agency \$1.1 million in January.

Holton also said the application and verification processes are cumbersome and need to be simplified. Community Services Team Supervisor Jodi Carmichael agrees the guidelines for determining eligibility and calculating benefits need to change. She doesn't understand why state and federal lawmakers have been slow to act.

"Maybe it is because they have never had to look a family in the face and say, 'I don't know how you're going to feed your family.' You only have to do that once before it breaks your heart," she said.