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State funding eyed for some immigrants losing federal food aid

Cabral says Massachusetts stepped in before, and should do it again

Alison Kuznitz
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New Bedford Rep. Antonio Cabral chairing a House Bonding Committee hearing on former Speaker Robert DeLeo's "GreenWorks" climate adaptation bill.

Sam Doran sdoran@statehousenews.com

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, SEPT. 18, 2025....With thousands of immigrants in Massachusetts expected to lose federally funded food assistance, a longtime state representative from New Bedford is pitching a proposal to offer state-funded aid, hearkening back to decades ago on Beacon Hill when the policy was previously in place.

The Department of Transitional Assistance would be required to provide state-funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits to residents who are legally present in Massachusetts, under Rep. Antonio Cabral's bill (H 207).

The proposed state benefits would match the federal level, and residents would be subject to the same eligibility requirements, aside from immigration status or citizenship.

"From 1997 to 2002, Massachusetts provided these benefits at the state level. We actually set aside \$40 million in 1997 to address this same problem," Cabral told the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities on Tuesday.

"The speaker of the House at that time took the floor and advocated for the House to adopt that program, and that was Speaker Finneran -- not known necessarily as a big progressive, right?" the New Bedford Democrat continued. "That support was revoked in 2002 when Mitt Romney came in."

More recently in 2023, the Legislature and Gov. Maura Healey approved \$6 million for state-funded food assistance, Cabral said. His bill last session died in the House Ways and Means Committee.

Sen. Sal DiDomenico has a similar bill (S 117) this session that would provide state-funded SNAP benefits, plus cash assistance and "related benefits" to children, pregnant women and "caretaker adults."

Roughly 10,000 legally present immigrants could become disqualified from federal SNAP benefits due to policy changes embedded in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, according to DTA and an analysis from the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute. Terminating that number of benefits could translate into Massachusetts losing about \$20 million annually in federal food benefits, MLRI estimates.

"This policy change will also lower SNAP for U.S. citizen children living in immigrant households by reducing SNAP for the entire family," the MLRI analysis states.

Pat Baker, senior policy analyst at MLRI, said those immigrants include refugees who have fled persecution in their home countries, including Afghanistan, Syria and the Republic of the Congo. Others have been victims of sex trafficking or domestic violence, said Baker, a member of Gov. Maura Healey's Anti-Hunger Task Force.

"We have done this before. We have provided state-funded benefits to immigrants -- we can do it again," Baker told lawmakers.

Baker told the News Service Cabral's bill could cost between \$15 million to \$20 million for a full year, assuming average monthly SNAP benefits of \$200. The figures could fluctuate and potentially drop due to several factors, including when DTA conducts a case review and determines how many recipients are lawful permanent residents, the number of immigrants living in mixed-status households, and whether the individuals are working and could receive less aid, she said.

One in six Massachusetts residents receive SNAP benefits, and tens of thousands of additional Staters could lose some or all of their aid due to eligibility changes.

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act expands SNAP eligibility work requirements to older adults and parents, grandparents and other caregivers of children ages 14 and older. That could translate into 99,000 Bay Staters losing SNAP benefits, according to MLRI.

The law also overhauls administrative costs for states, which currently are responsible for half of the expense of administering SNAP benefits. Starting on Oct. 1, 2026, Massachusetts will be on the hook for 75% of administrative costs, at a price tag of \$53 million to \$60 million annually, according to MLRI.

While his comments were not specific to any program, House Speaker Ron Mariano cautioned at the start of this session that Massachusetts would be unable to pick up the tab for all federal funding cuts.

"The one thing we have to keep in mind and the one thing we have to remember is we can't think that we're going to replace every program the feds change," Mariano said on Jan. 1.

U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson's office said in June the One Big Beautiful Bill would "restore "integrity" to the SNAP program by eliminating waste, fraud, and abuse." The changes would prevent "illegal aliens from receiving benefits," strengthen work requirements

for "able-bodied" recipients, and close "loophole in work requirement waivers."

"To be clear, pregnant mothers, disabled Americans, the elderly, and children – those who this program was intended to serve – will continue to receive the assistance they need," Johnson's office said. "But illegal aliens and work-capable individuals who refuse to work will lose access to these benefits meant for the most vulnerable Americans."

According to Cabral's bill, it would facilitate nutritional assistance benefits to for people "who meet the eligibility requirements of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program except for the program requirements related to immigration status or citizenship."

Children who grow up in households that lack basic resources can experience poor long-term outcomes tied to education, health and brain development, said Palma McLaughlin, children and family specialist at the Massachusetts League of Women Voters. She testified in support of the SNAP benefit bills, as well proposals from Rep. Marjorie Decker and DiDomenico (H 214 / S 118) that would gradually increase cash assistance grants for families until they reach half of the federal poverty level.

"Reducing poverty now decreases future costs," McLaughlin said. "Having the assistance paid now helps to set Massachusetts up for having a stronger, more diversified, more skilled workforce, and sets us up for better future success."

Cabral lamented that food insecurity is rising across the commonwealth, and he said the federal policy shift will thrust immigrants into "deepening poverty."

"I urge this committee to pass H 207 favorably so we can have a full debate in the Legislature on how we're going to really provide to those residents that are legally present in Massachusetts," Cabral said. "We should not leave them behind."

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