

## Thousands of Illinois families cut off from food stamp benefits WGN-TV 12/17/2017

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CHICAGO — Tens of thousands of Illinois households have been cut off of federal food stamps as a state agency transitions to a new computer system that handles such benefits.

The problems come after the Illinois Department of Human Services rolled out the second phase of a new computer system to administer entitlements, including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits.

A certain number of people who receive food stamps lose benefits each month because of missed deadlines or ineligibility, [The Chicago Tribune](#) reported, but that number grew significantly after the second phase began in October. With the old system, the state canceled some 14,000 to 15,000 cases per month, said Diane Grigsby-Jackson, director of the division of family and community services for the Department of Human Services. Under the new system, the state canceled 41,000 cases on Nov. 15, about 12,000 of which have since been reinstated, she said.

Department of Human Services officials and representatives of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union, which represents more than 2,400 Illinois human services caseworkers, disagree on what's causing the problems.

People receiving food stamps must complete an application every six months to recertify their eligibility. Vonceil Metts, president of AFSCME Local 2808, said some who completed those applications in the past two months lost their benefits because their files had not been converted into the new system. Converting the files has been a tedious process, Metts said.

“Everybody’s learning the new system, but the problem is we’re learning on the backs of poor people. And we’re taking their benefits away during the worst possible season.”

said Metts, who is also a human services casework manager in Chicago’s West Garfield Park neighborhood.

Grigsby-Jackson said there are no glitches in the new computer system and that caseworkers were properly trained. She said differences between the new and old systems likely caused some people to not receive their benefits.

For example, under the new system, benefits are automatically cut off after the 15th of the month for cases that don’t meet the deadline to renew eligibility. Cases had to be canceled manually in the old system, she said, giving applicants more of a grace period.

Chicago resident Edna Marshall said she's still waiting for food stamps for herself and six of her children since filing for assistance in late October, after missing an earlier deadline to renew her benefits. Marshall, 31, said caseworkers have told her the delay is because of the new computer system.

"We've got to feed our kids," she said. "I've been feeding my kids with my rent money."

State officials acknowledge that the launch of the system's second phase hasn't gone smoothly, but they say the system eventually will be more efficient and easier to use for the 1.8 million people in Illinois who receive food stamps.

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