



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING



ISMAEL AHMED
DIRECTOR

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Dr. Gary Wheeler, President
Glen Oaks Community College

Dear President:

I would like to share information on a program that may affect thousands of your students – the Michigan Food Assistance Program administered by the Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS.) This program, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, supplements the food purchasing power of low-income individuals and families. The federal government funds the benefits and DHS determines eligibility for participation.

In 2009, Michigan introduced an online application for food assistance at <http://www.michigan.gov/mibridges>. Since that time, thousands of Michigan citizens, including college students, have applied for and been approved for food benefits. Those food benefits averaged about \$132 per month per person in June.

At any given time during the 2009-10 school year there were 10,000-18,000 Michigan college students receiving food assistance benefits, or between 1-2 percent of all the people receiving the benefit. Most applied online and many completed the application process without visiting a DHS office. We know most students, and the overwhelming majority of people receiving this benefit from our department, are doing so legally and complying with state standards.

The issue of college students receiving food assistance benefits has drawn the attention of state legislators and student newspapers due to charges that students may be inappropriately receiving the benefits. Information from blogs, anonymous stories online, and stories in news outlets have contributed to these suspicions by certain legislators. As a result, several bills to restrict the use of Bridge cards – the ATM-like card people use to “spend” food benefits – have been introduced in the current legislative session.

My letter is not to substantiate or deny any such charge; it is to advise you of the situation and to ask for your help in reaching students who may have Bridge cards. I appreciate your help in sending these messages to your students:

- In order for a college student to receive benefits, s/he must meet one of the federal government approved guidelines such as having a child under age six, working 20 hours per week, participating in work study, or being engaged in an educational plan approved by the Department of Human Services.
- Money received from friends or family members **must** be reported to DHS as income and will be used to determine the benefit amount.
- If a person is buying and preparing food with others (such as roommates), **everyone** (with the exception of disqualified/non-group members) must be eligible or **no one** is eligible.

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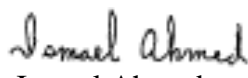
- Students living in a dorm who have a meal plan that provides a majority of their meals are **not** eligible.
- If students move home when not attending college – during spring or summer session, for example – this may have to be reported to his or her DHS case specialist. Parents, children under age 22 and others who eat together must have eligibility determined or the case must close.
- Food Assistance benefits **cannot** be used for anything other than food products.
- It is illegal to “trade” benefits for cash or services. That is considered fraud and/or abuse. A person who participates in such is liable for prosecution.
- The DHS Office of Inspector General monitors online social media and investigates alleged fraud and abuse discovered in the course of this monitoring.
- Fraud and/or abuse of benefits can result in prosecution. Any person found guilty will be required to repay benefits received. They will also be disqualified from the program for a minimum of one year up to a lifetime.

DHS documentation suggests college students with Bridge cards met qualification standards and went through the appropriate process. However, the issue has grown to such extent that newspapers including Central Michigan University’s *CMU Life* and Michigan State University’s *State News* have regularly written about it. As an institution that may receive state funds from the Michigan Legislature or whose students may receive grants or loans funded by the state, I’m sure you realize the ramifications of this type of media attention and the adverse effect it could have.

Our goal is to serve Michigan citizens who qualify for the benefit programs we administer. This includes the services and programs that serve Michigan’s secondary education students. However, we need your help communicating these issues to your students. I would appreciate it if this information could be published in your campus newspaper or online newsletter so that your students are better informed on the intricacies of the Food Assistance Program.

If you need further information on this matter, please contact Kari Mardyla-Goddard at 517-241-5091 or by email at Mardyla-Goddardk@michigan.gov. Thank you.

Sincerely


Ismael Ahmed
Director