

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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<http://www.wsj.com/articles/maine-wants-candy-soda-excluded-from-food-stamps-1448447401>

## U.S.

# Maine Wants Candy, Soda Excluded From Food Stamps

USDA, which funds federal program, has denied similar requests by Minnesota and New York City



A woman in Portland, Maine, uses her state Electronic Benefits Transfer card to buy groceries. *PHOTO: DEREK DAVIS/PORTLAND PRESS HERALD/GETTY IMAGES*

By **JON KAMP** And **JESSE NEWMAN**

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As American families plan their holiday meals, officials in Maine would be thankful if they could stop thousands of residents from using food stamps to add soft drinks and

candy to their menus.

The New England state is one of several locales that have sought to keep sugary items out of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, which helps low-income Americans buy food. Nearly 200,000 Mainers, or roughly 15% of state residents, are on food stamps, on par with the share of Americans using the program nationally.

The federal government covers the program's cost, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture has denied prior requests to impose similar restrictions.

But Maine—where Republican Gov. Paul LePage has long pushed for food-stamp restrictions—sent the USDA a letter this week seeking a waiver to allow the limits specifically on candy and soda, based on how those foods are defined in its tax code. The proposal doesn't include other sugary foods, such as cookies or ice cream.

The state said the move could help improve public health, address obesity and contain costs for Medicaid, the government health plan for the poor.

“Like all requests to test changes in SNAP, we will review this carefully,” a USDA spokeswoman said.

Halting such purchases is an “obvious reform,” said Mary Mayhew, commissioner of Maine's Department of Health and Human Services, adding: “I don't need to conduct research to know eating candy and consuming sugary drinks is bad for you.”

A spokeswoman for the American Beverage Association said, “We think families should be free to choose what they put in their grocery carts.”

Overall, the federal food-stamp program cost the USDA nearly \$70 billion in benefits in fiscal 2014, down from roughly \$76 billion a year earlier.

In fiscal 2014, the most recent year for which final data are available, 46.7 million people participated in SNAP, down from 47.6 million the year prior.

Some critics questioned whether Maine's effort would really be effective. Most people on food stamps use the benefit as a supplement, rather than relying on the program for all their food purchases, according to Ed Bolen, senior policy analyst at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a left-leaning think tank. That means people can still stock up on soda on their own dime, he said.

In fiscal 2014, the average monthly food-stamp benefit per person totaled about \$125.

The USDA earlier denied a Minnesota request to ban the use of food stamps to purchase certain items. In 2011, it turned down New York City's request to prevent food-stamp recipients from using food stamps to buy soda and other sugary drinks. The USDA said the city's proposal had some holes.

Mississippi applied for a waiver in 2012 to restrict food-stamp users from buying soda water and sweets, including confections with marshmallows and candy-coated popcorn. But the state later withdrew its request, opting instead to focus on nutrition education and improving participants' access to farmers markets.

Earlier this year, Wisconsin's state Assembly approved a bill requiring food-stamp recipients to use at least two-thirds of their monthly benefits on foods authorized by another federal nutrition program, including meat and fresh produce, while restricting them from purchasing crab, lobster, shrimp or other shellfish. The bill hasn't been taken up by the state Senate, and Wisconsin officials haven't sought a USDA waiver.

The Maine Legislature had considered a bill including candy and soda limits, but it failed. The legislation would have also pushed the state to seek a federal grant to help SNAP users buy more produce.

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### **Corrections & Amplifications**

Some 47.6 million people participated in USDA's SNAP program in 2013. An earlier version of this article incorrectly gave the number as 47.6 billion.

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