NINA MOINI: A new set of changes to federal food assistance will take effect next week. County staff have implemented the work requirements and eligibility changes to SNAP that Congress passed in a spending law the White House refers to as One Big, Beautiful Bill Act last year. Starting October 1st, they'll also take on more of the administrative costs of food aid, and the federal government will provide a quarter of that funding instead of half. Counties are also preparing their budgets for next year when they're expected to take on additional costs.

So joining me with perspective from the southwest suburbs is Scott County Social Services director Barb Dahl. Thank you so much for joining us again on the program, Barb.

BARB DAHL: Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: It's really important to us to check in with all of you because we have been hearing now for so many months the nerves, the tension around having to take on more resources at the county level. The State Department of Children, Youth, and Families told us, again, that as of October 1st counties will lose a projected $32 million in federal funding that was used to administer SNAP. Can you talk about what that money is used for in practice, what that looks like and how it will change for Scott County?

BARB DAHL: Yeah, sure. So the state of Minnesota is one of only three states where counties actually pay the non-federal share of economic assistance administration. And so as you stated, beginning October 1st, that is going to be reduced down to 25% where it's currently 50% of the cost. So that is for all of our staff for helping to determine eligibility. So even though the rules have changed and added in some additional complexity, we now have less money and less funding to do that work.

NINA MOINI: So you're also preparing for another change I understand for October 1st of next year. Some state and local governments will have to pay a portion of the benefits giving to people depending on the state's error rate, and proponents of this change say that it will reduce fraud and waste. Can you talk a little bit about the error rate, and there's obviously a lot of energy right now around fraud. With the election coming up and the stories coming out of Minnesota and the stories that have been focused on here in Minnesota. But can you talk a little bit about that error rate and some of the checks that are in place already for fraud?

BARB DAHL: Yeah, so for the first time, states beginning October 1st of next year for any state that has over a 6% error rate are going to have to pay a portion of the benefits that participants on the SNAP program would receive. In Minnesota counties, we would have to be right now absorbing half of what that would be, so half would go to the state and half would go to local counties beginning of October 1st next year, that is roughly about 200-- about 125 million annually. So for Minnesota counties, that's about $62 million.

I think it's important to note, too, you mentioned the point about fraud, and the payment error rate is actually-- it's not fraud. It's an error. And so if I can give you an example that we have from Scott County, in federal fiscal year 2024, Scott County served about 4,000 SNAP cases, yet only 10% of those were actually pulled for part of this payment accuracy. So 4,000 cases, 10 were reviewed so like 0.3%.

NINA MOINI: So as you're making those preparations, are you looking at changing any of the inner workings of the way I guess Scott County operates in terms of anything related to the error rate, and that's an important distinction you make, that an error is not a fraud. But are you-- do you foresee making any changes because it seems like the incentive here is meant to make sure that counties buckle it up and make sure you're paying attention? But you-- from what you're saying, it sounds like you're already paying attention. Are you going to be making any procedural changes?

BARB DAHL: I think one thing that we are very pleased with is this last legislative session there was really unanimous support for system modernization. And so I think we're hopeful that some of those pieces will come in to help support our work, but it's going to take time for those improvements to take place. I think our staff have continually tried to look for ways that we can continue to always monitor this, but I will say the error rate in and of itself can still be an error even if it's corrected.

So in 2024, we had 10 cases that were pulled, $2,100 of total benefits were issued, but $149 was deemed an error. That's an 8% error rate. So it's a calculation that doesn't necessarily have a lot of statistical significance, but the penalties for it are significant.

NINA MOINI: There is a proposal that would give states and counties another year before they'd have to pay this portion of the benefits. The US Senate could soon take it up within the Farm Bill. How hopeful are you that this will pass and that it will be helpful in time for your county?

BARB DAHL: I think that is really some of the aspect that counties are looking for right now. We would love to see a delay in both the administrative costs but particularly the payment error rate so that not only Minnesota but really counties and states across the country have time to modernize system and adjust budgets for this change, this budgeting shift that's occurring. That and then I would say this coming legislative session, we would be hopeful that we could take a look at how the payment of the payment error rate and how the administrative costs are being picked up and paid for across the state.

NINA MOINI: How do you foresee Scott County if things progress as they are now being able to make up for this extra amount that the county has to pay in?

BARB DAHL: I think that's the piece that's really troubling and difficult for many counties is that we have to try to absorb really a federal benefit that our county boards really don't have any control over saying if we do or not. It's being handed down and required for us to do, and so the only way to grapple with that is you either have to raise property tax or you have to look at cutting elsewhere. And so I think that is really something we're looking at right now. I think an average property tax really of historic proportions over the last couple decades for many counties across the state.

NINA MOINI: When we talked in April was the last time we chatted, the new work requirements for SNAP were starting to impact some people's eligibility. Have you seen much change, Barb, in the number of people receiving these benefits in Scott County? Are you seeing a decline in eligibility?

BARB DAHL: We have started to see a slight decline. If we look at August of 2025, we had about 5,600 people that were on SNAP in Scott County. As of August of 2026, that's about 5,200 people. So we've seen a decline. However, we haven't seen a decline in the number of applications. That stayed pretty consistent at about 55 or 60 a week. So I think it's something we're going to have to monitor to see if some of the additional requirements are part of that or if there's something else we should be considering in our community.

NINA MOINI: OK, Barb, and just lastly, what do you recommend to people who are concerned about losing their benefits with all these changes going on. Should they reach out to the county, or where can people begin?

BARB DAHL: Yeah, if people have questions, reaching out to their eligibility worker and seeing if there's any changes or anything that they need for their case is always a great place to start. And we're happy to answer questions from there.

NINA MOINI: Barb, thank you for checking in with us. We hope you'll join us again sometime soon.

BARB DAHL: Thank you.

NINA MOINI: Barb Dahl is social services director for Scott County.