

New Protections Aim to Safeguard SNAP Benefits for Pennsylvanians

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In Pennsylvania, nearly 2 million people rely on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to feed themselves and their families. But for too many, that crucial help has been disappearing sometimes in seconds due to sophisticated thieves targeting benefits cards.

Jesse Richardson, a Carnegie resident, learned this the hard way. He was inside a 7-Eleven in downtown Pittsburgh, ready to buy a simple beverage, when his card was declined again and again. Later, he discovered that \$500, his entire monthly benefit, had been drained by

criminals. “It was \$500, and when I saw it, I was floored,” Richardson said. “I got to feed me and my son.”

According to Pennsylvania Inspector General Michelle Henry, this is happening far too often. Last year alone, more than \$15 million in SNAP benefits were stolen across the state. “This is food for families,” Henry said. “Can you imagine going to the store to get the nutrition your family needs and finding out your money is gone and no one is reimbursing you?”

Henry’s office has made fighting these thefts a priority. Investigators are working alongside the Pennsylvania State Police to locate and remove skimming devices that criminals attach to card readers to steal information. These devices are then analyzed as evidence to track down and charge offenders with felonies.

While Pennsylvania does not yet issue benefits cards with chip technology, officials are considering adding that feature in the future to reduce fraud. In the meantime, recipients now have access to a new tool: the Connect Electronic Benefits Transfer (Connect EBT) app.

“The number one thing I would say is to utilize the lock feature,” Henry advised. With the app, users can lock their cards automatically every 30, 60, or 90 minutes. This prevents anyone from using the benefits online or in stores without permission. The app also lets people restrict transactions so benefits can only be used within Pennsylvania.

Henry also encouraged SNAP recipients to choose strong PINs instead of basic number combinations, check card readers carefully for hidden skimmers, change PINs regularly, and report any suspicious devices right away.

With these new safeguards in place, Pennsylvania hopes to protect families like Richardson’s from the financial shock and hardship caused by stolen benefits.

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