



Food and Cash Programs for Noncitizens

Can I get food support or other public benefits if I am not a US citizen?

There are public benefit programs that can help Minnesotans with food and cash. Whether you can get these benefits as a noncitizen depends on your immigration status and the date you came to the US.

Food Support Programs

1. SNAP – Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Food Stamps)

SNAP, which used to be called Food Stamps, is a program that helps low-income people and households buy food.

Can I get SNAP?

To get SNAP benefits, you have to be low-income. In the past, if you were not a citizen, you usually had to be a **“qualified” noncitizen**.



This means you:

- Have a **green card**. (This means you are a legal permanent resident or have LPR status).
- Have been granted **asylum**.
- Were **paroled** into the US for at least a year, and your parole has not expired.
- Have **withholding** or **cancellation of removal**.
- Have a **T-visa** as a victim of severe trafficking.
- Have **battered immigrant** status.
- Are a **refugee** or treated as if you are a **refugee**. This means you are:
 - An “Amerasian” immigrant whose father was a US citizen in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War years.
 - A Cuban or Haitian entrant
 - An Afghan or Iraqi Special Immigrant
 - An evacuee from Afghanistan by the US military between 7/31/21 and 9/30/22 (until your parole ends)
 - The immediate relative of an evacuee from Afghanistan described above who was paroled after 9/30/22
 - Paroled from Ukraine between 2/24/22 and 9/30/23
 - A citizen of the “Compacts of Free Association.” This means you are from Palau, Micronesia, or the Marshall Islands.

STARTING VERY SOON, only 3 categories of “qualified” noncitizens will be eligible for SNAP:

1. Noncitizens who have a green card (this means you are a lawful, permanent resident, or LPR).
2. “Cuban or Haitian entrants.”
3. Citizens of the “Compact of Free Association,” or COFA (meaning you are from Palau, Micronesia, or the Marshall Islands).

Because of the law changes, a lot of “qualified” noncitizens are going to lose SNAP unless they have a green card.

Do I have to wait to get SNAP benefits?

Some noncitizens **may have to wait 5 years** from the date you got your immigration status to get SNAP. You do **NOT** have to wait 5 years if you are any of these:

- a refugee or treated as if you are a refugee
- granted asylum
- granted withholding of removal
- a US veteran or on active duty with the US armed forces
- the spouse or minor child of a veteran or someone on active duty with the US armed forces
- someone in the US legally since August 22, 1996, who has been certified disabled by Social Security or the State
- under 18
- someone in the US legally since August 22, 1996, **AND** was 65 or older on that date
- Hmong or Highland Lao

Starting very soon, being in one of the above categories doesn’t guarantee you can get SNAP. You will only be able to get SNAP if you:

- 1) have a green card
- 2) are a “Cuban or Haitian entrant” or
- 3) are a citizen of COFA (from Palau, Micronesia, or the Marshall Islands.)



I came to the US through a sponsor. Does that matter for getting SNAP?

Most people who come to the US have a relative in the US sponsor them. A relative sponsor is a family member who is a citizen or LPR. The sponsor agreed to be responsible for you in the US. Sponsors promise the USCIS that if you become poor, they will support you. If your relative didn’t have enough money alone to sponsor you, that relative probably had to get another person to act as cosponsor. The cosponsor also agreed to support you.

If you came to the US **after December 19, 1997**, through a relative sponsor, the government can count the income and assets of your sponsor and your sponsor's spouse like it is your income and assets. If you also have a cosponsor, the income and assets of your cosponsor also count as your income and assets.

Sponsor income and assets count until you are a US citizen, your sponsor dies or permanently leaves the US, or you have worked 10 years and had FICA taxes taken out of your pay. You may also get credit for work done by your spouse or by your parent(s) when you were a minor.

Counting your sponsor's income and assets may put you over the income limits for the SNAP program. There are 2 exceptions to counting your sponsor's income and assets:



- a. **Poverty:** Your sponsor's income and assets are not counted for 12 months if you can show you would be without food AND shelter if the income and assets are counted.
- b. **Abuse:** Your sponsor's income and assets are not counted if you can show that you have or your child has faced abuse or extreme cruelty by your spouse or parent. You can't be living with the abuser anymore. You must show that you need SNAP because of the abuse.

Note: Sponsor income and assets are **NOT COUNTED FOR CHILDREN** in the SNAP program.

Also Note: For SNAP, the county looks at your sponsor's family size and fixed debts when deciding how much of your sponsor's income and assets count.

Do I have to work to get SNAP?

If you are between ages 18 and 64 and you don't have minor children (or you do, but your youngest child is at least 14), you may have to work to get SNAP. If you are required to work and you don't, you can only get SNAP for 3 months in a 3-year period

2. MFAP – Minnesota Food Assistance Program

MFAP helps older noncitizens in Minnesota buy food. It follows SNAP rules. You must be at least **50** years old.

Can I get MFAP?

If you are not eligible for SNAP due to your immigration status, or if you are waiting the 5 years to get SNAP benefits, you may be able to get MFAP. You have to be **living legally** in the US, but you don't have to be a "qualified" noncitizen.

You have to meet SNAP income and asset requirements to get MFAP. This means that if you are not eligible for SNAP because sponsor income is counted, you won't be able to get MFAP, either. The same 2 exceptions about poverty and abuse apply to MFAP.

MFAP and Citizenship

If you apply for MFAP and you are a Lawful Permanent Resident (you have a green card), you have to take “steps” toward citizenship. These things count as taking “steps”:

- Taking citizenship, literacy or English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. It counts if you are on a wait list for ESL or literacy classes. It doesn’t count to be on a wait list for citizenship classes.
- You have an application for citizenship on file with USCIS and you are waiting for a testing or swearing-in date. Or you apply for a waiver of the test requirements.
- You failed the citizenship test at least 2 times or you can’t understand the rights and responsibilities of US citizenship.

You **do not** have to take “steps” if you:

- have lived in the US legally for less than 4 years,
- are 70 or older, or
- live in a nursing home, group home, or somewhere like that.

MFAP and Work

If you are between the ages of 50 and 64 and you don’t have minor children, or you do and your youngest child is at least 14, you may have to work in order to get MFAP more often than for 3 months in a 3-year period. There are exceptions. Talk to a lawyer if you have questions.

Cash Assistance Programs

1. **Cash Programs for Families**
 - MFIP (Minnesota Family Investment Program)
 - DWP (Diversionary Work Program)
 - FSS (Family Stabilization Services)



Note: SSI is not included here. See our fact sheet [SSI for Noncitizens](#).

Can I get cash benefits for my family?

You can get MFIP, DWP, or FSS benefits if you live in the US legally and permanently. For example, you can get these benefits if you:

- are a Legal Temporary Resident
- have Temporary Protected Status (TPS)
- have an application pending for asylum
- are the spouse or child of a US citizen and have an approved visa petition and a pending application for adjustment to LPR status,
- were granted humanitarian parole,
- have Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) or deferred action status, or a stay of deportation, or

- have DACA status
- have a U-Visa
- have other lawful status.

If you have been in the US for less than a year, you automatically go into the FSS program instead of MFIP or DWP. Note that the DWP program will end on March 1, 2026.

Do I have to wait to get benefits?

There is no waiting period for MFIP, DWP, or FSS.

I came to the US through a sponsor. Does that matter for getting MFIP, DWP or FSS?

If you came to the US after 12/18/1997 through a petition from a relative, the government can count the income and assets of your sponsor and your sponsor's spouse like it is your income and assets. The government can also count the income and assets of your cosponsor. Sponsor income and assets count until you are a US citizen, your sponsor dies or permanently leaves the US, or you have worked 10 years and had FICA taxes taken out of your pay. You may also get credit for work done by your spouse or by your parent(s) when you were a minor.



Counting your sponsor's income and assets may put you over the income limits for cash assistance programs. There are 2 exceptions to counting your sponsor's income. They are the same as the exceptions listed above under *"I came to the US through a sponsor. Does that matter for getting SNAP?"*

There is a special 3-year rule for people who are in the US through a diversity visa. You get this if you win the visa lottery. If you have a diversity visa, some of your sponsor's income may count as your income. But less of it counts than if you came to the US through a relative petition. Counting your sponsor's income may put you over the income limits for the MFIP, DWP and FSS programs.

MFIP, DWP, FSS and Citizenship

If you are not a "qualified" noncitizen, but you are a Lawful Permanent Resident (you have a green card), the same "steps" you have to take for MFAP (above) apply to you for all 3 family cash programs.

Is there a work requirement?

If you are getting family cash benefits, you may have to look for or get a job. You may be able to count ESL classes in your job search hours and work plans.

2. Non-Family Cash Programs

GA (General Assistance)

MSA (Minnesota Supplemental Aid)

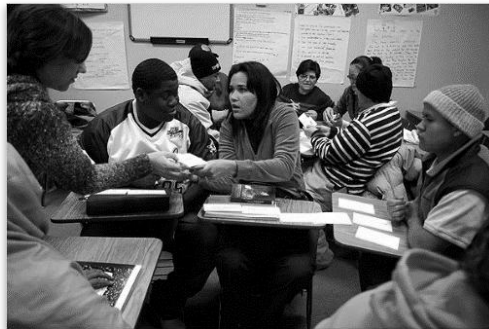
General Assistance - GA

The same immigration restrictions that are in the MFAP program apply to GA:

- You may get GA if you are “**legally**” and **permanently living** in the US, even if you are not a “qualified” noncitizen.
- You may have to take “steps” toward citizenship.
- Your sponsor’s income may count and make you ineligible, unless you can meet one of the 2 exceptions.

Minnesota Supplemental Aid - MSA

MSA is for people getting SSI or Social Security disability benefits. The immigration rules for MSA are the same as for the SSI program. See our fact sheet [SSI for Noncitizens](#).



Fact Sheets are legal information NOT legal advice. See a lawyer for advice.

Don't use this fact sheet if it is more than 1 year old. Ask us for updates, a fact sheet list, or alternate formats.

© 2026 Minnesota Legal Services Coalition. This document may be reproduced and used for non-commercial personal and educational purposes only. All other rights reserved. This notice must remain on all copies. Reproduction, distribution, and use for commercial purposes are strictly prohibited.