



## Food and Cash Programs for Noncitizens

### Can I get food stamps 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 got 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. If you are not a citizen, you usually have to be a **“qualified” noncitizen**.

You are a **“qualified” noncitizen** if you:

- Have a **green card**. (Meaning 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 is 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.



## Do I have to wait to get SNAP benefits?

Even if you are a “qualified” noncitizen, **you may have to wait 5 years** (from the date you became “qualified”) 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
- someone granted asylum
- someone who has 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 who was in the US legally on August 22, 1996, **AND** has been certified disabled by Social Security or the State
- under 18
- someone who was in the US legally on August 22, 1996, **AND** was 65 or older on that date
- Hmong or Highland Lao



### 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 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 more than one person sponsored you, the income and assets of all your sponsors 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.

## 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 a “qualified” noncitizen, or 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.

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.
- 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 52 and you don’t have minor children, you may have to work in order to get MFAP more often than 3 months in a 3-year period. There are exceptions.

## 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 are a **“qualified”** noncitizen. You can also get any of these benefits if you live in the US legally. For example, you can get these benefits if you:

- are a Legal Temporary Resident
- have Temporary Protected Status (TPS)
- applied 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

Because of a rule change in March 2024, you can now get family cash benefits if your status is based on a U-Visa.

If you have been in the US for less than a year, you automatically go into the FSS program instead of MFIP or DWP.

## 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 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. If more than one person sponsored you, the income and assets of all your sponsors count as your income and assets. Sponsor income counts 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 MFIP and DWP.

To get FSS benefits, you must take “steps” toward citizenship, even if you have a green card.

## 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 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.

**NOTE:** You may be eligible for GA if you have a U-Visa or DACA status.

### 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.*

© 2025 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.