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## Commentary: Jeb Bush, Please Talk to Bob Dole About Food Stamps

By Robert Greenstein

Presidential candidate Jeb Bush called on Friday for eliminating food stamps (now known as SNAP), handing the money over to the states, and giving them broad discretion over its use. Bush called SNAP a “failing, ineffective program” that “traps families in perpetual poverty.” He also implied that too much of its funding goes to a costly, bloated federal bureaucracy, and that it’s plagued by overpayments and fraud.

As substantial research and data show, Bush’s charges are far off base. Discussion and debate on poverty issues are healthy. But accusations that ignore basic facts and decades of research don’t advance poverty debates.

Bush could profit from a conversation with former Senate Majority Leader and GOP presidential nominee Bob Dole. No Republican policymaker of the past half century was more involved with food stamps and food stamp reform. Dole’s conclusion, after years of work in this area, was that food stamps represent the single most important accomplishment in American social policy since Social Security.

Dole knew whereof he spoke. Before the early 1970s, each state set its own food stamp eligibility standards, with some states ending eligibility at levels as low as 50 percent of the poverty line. Surveys by medical researchers in the late 1960s found shocking rates of malnutrition and nutrition-related diseases — akin to those in some Third World countries — among poor children in parts of the South and Appalachia. These findings prompted President Nixon to lead a successful bipartisan effort to establish national food stamp eligibility standards.

Studies in the late 1970s, after the national eligibility standards and other reforms that Dole had championed took effect, found dramatic reductions in child malnutrition and nutrition-related decreases. The researchers concluded that the impressive progress was due in large part to the federal reforms extending and expanding food stamps. As one medical research team reported:

In the Mississippi delta, in the coal fields of Appalachia and in coastal South Carolina — where visitors ten years ago could quickly see large numbers of stunted, apathetic children with swollen stomachs and the dull eyes and poorly healing wounds characteristic of malnutrition — such children are not to be seen in such numbers.

The researchers credited food stamps as the single largest factor for this progress and concluded that “no program does more to lengthen and strengthen the lives of our people than the Food Stamp program.”

Evidence of the program’s efficacy has only grown since then. For example, recent path-breaking research compared the life trajectories of poor children whose families did and didn’t have access to food stamps. (The researchers compared children growing up in the late 1960s and early 1970s who lived in counties *with* a food stamp program to comparable children who grew up in counties *without* a program, since the program wasn’t yet nationwide.) Disadvantaged children who had access to food stamps had an 18 percent higher high school completion rate, improvements in health in adulthood, and among girls, greater “self sufficiency” — which the researchers defined in terms of increased education, earnings, and employment in adulthood and reduced participation in public assistance programs.

In addition, SNAP now lifts 10 million people out of poverty each year<sup>1</sup> and brings another 25 million closer to the poverty line when SNAP benefits are counted in measuring poverty, as most analysts favor.

SNAP also helps the economy as a whole by moderating the severity of recessions. Moody’s Analytics Chief Economist Mark Zandi (an adviser to Republican John McCain’s 2008 presidential campaign) has estimated that, per dollar of cost, SNAP is more effective in stimulating the economy during a recession than virtually any other tax or spending option. The Congressional Budget Office reached a similar conclusion.

Bush’s proposal to end the program would mean the loss of many of these beneficial effects.

### **SNAP Primarily Goes to Working Families, Elderly, and Disabled**

Despite Bush’s portrayal of SNAP as anti-work, SNAP has, in fact, become a program predominantly for low-income workers and their families, along with people who aren’t expected to work because they are elderly or disabled. Some 66 percent of all SNAP households fall into one of these categories.

Among SNAP households with an adult who *isn’t* elderly or disabled, more than half work while receiving SNAP — and more than 80 percent work in the year before or after receiving SNAP. The rates are still higher for families with children: more than 60 percent work while receiving SNAP, and about 90 percent work in the prior or subsequent year.

Rather than trapping families in poverty and discouraging work, SNAP helps millions of households for temporary periods when they’re down on their luck, after which their prospects often improve and they leave the program, the data show. For millions of other people working at low-wage jobs, SNAP supplements their wages, helping them make ends meet. Each year that the minimum wage remains frozen and wages at the bottom of the income scale erode while the cost of

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<sup>1</sup> Arloc Sherman and Danilo Trisi, “Safety Net More Effective Against Poverty Than Previously Thought,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, May 6, 2015, <http://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/safety-net-more-effective-against-poverty-than-previously-thought>.

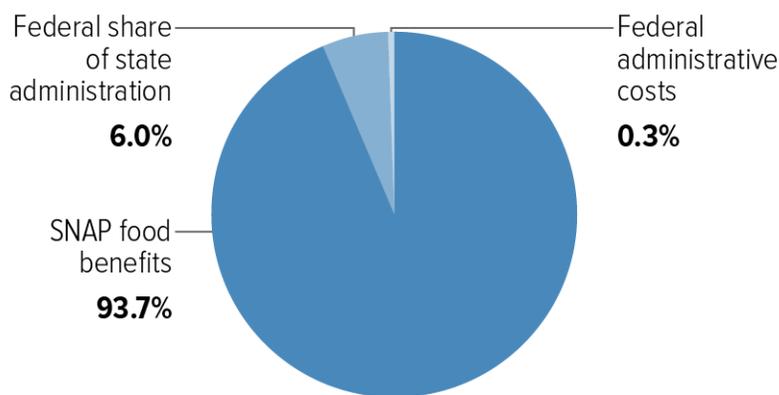
food and other necessities rises, more low-wage workers and their families become eligible for SNAP.

### Administrative Costs Are Low, as Are Error and Overpayment Rates

Nearly 94 percent of federal SNAP expenditures go directly for food purchases by low-income households. Most of the rest supports *state* costs in determining eligibility, administering work requirements, and the like. Despite Bush’s claim of an expensive federal bureaucracy eating up taxpayer dollars, less than 1 percent of federal SNAP spending goes for federal administrative costs. (See Figure 1.)

FIGURE 1

### 94 Percent of Federal SNAP Spending Is for Food



Notes: Chart excludes spending on activities not directly related to SNAP but in the SNAP budget account, such as nutrition assistance in the U.S. territories, support for food banks, and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations. The federal share of state administration includes state costs associated with SNAP operations – including eligibility determinations, benefit issuance, and Quality Control – as well as certain services for SNAP recipients such as Employment and Training and Nutrition Education. Federal administrative costs include the mandatory and discretionary federal costs of administering SNAP.  
Source: Department of Agriculture, Fiscal Year 2014, as reported in fiscal year 2016 “Explanatory Notes for Committee on Appropriations.”

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SNAP also is widely recognized for its low error rates. It has the most rigorous system of measuring overpayments of any federal means-tested program. This system shows that more than *99 percent* of SNAP benefits go to eligible households; less than 3 percent of benefits go either to ineligible people or to eligible people but in excessive amounts.

Debates over poverty are important; they can affect millions of our less fortunate fellow citizens. But politicians who issue proposals in this area should make sure they have at least a rudimentary knowledge of the basic facts and research — especially on programs they propose to abolish.