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Making SNAP Work Requirements Harsher Will Not Improve Outcomes for Low-Income People

By Stacy Dean, Ed Bolen, and Brynne Keith-Jennings

As Congress prepares to reauthorize the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) through the Farm Bill that is set to expire in September 2018, the Trump Administration and some members of Congress have suggested increasing work requirements on those seeking SNAP benefits. SNAP already requires work: individuals age 18 to 50 are limited to three months of benefits out of every three years unless they work or participate in a training program. A proposal in the President's 2019 budget would expand this stringent requirement by raising the age of those who face the time limit to 62 and by changing current law to make it harder for states to exempt vulnerable individuals, such as those who live in high-unemployment areas. Others have suggested that a similar work rule could be applied to unemployed parents who participate in SNAP. Imposing harsher work rules would do little to move long-term unemployed participants into the workforce, could harm those who are working but need SNAP's benefits to make ends meet, and would cut off critical food assistance to unemployed people, putting children at greater risk of food insecurity.

While the national unemployment rate is low, the labor market continues to feature a large number of jobs that provide low wages, no benefits, unpredictable hours, and high rates of turnover that leave workers with periods of joblessness. Given this reality, policymakers considering work requirements should recognize that:

- **SNAP is a crucial work support.** Most working-age adults on SNAP who can work, do so. Unfortunately, low-paying jobs with unreliable hours and little to no benefits are all too common. Workers in the low-wage market can't rely on always having a steady full-time job that pays a living wage, and work requirements won't create these jobs. Without basic benefits, having a sick child, a transportation snafu, or a scheduling conflict can often mean a worker loses their job. SNAP is there to help them when they are in between jobs and searching for work. And SNAP boosts wages for workers who don't earn enough to afford a basic diet.
- **Work rates are high among SNAP households that can work.** SNAP has become increasingly effective at supporting work among households that can work. More than half of SNAP households with at least one working-age, non-disabled adult work while receiving SNAP. Because people often participate in SNAP when they are between jobs, work rates are higher over a longer time frame: more than 80 percent of SNAP households work in the year before or the year after receiving SNAP. Work rates are even higher for families with children:

more than 60 percent work while receiving SNAP, and almost 90 percent work in the prior or subsequent year.

- **SNAP already has a harsh cut-off for unemployed workers without children.** SNAP is limited to just three months out of every three years for unemployed workers who work less than 20 hours a week (there are some exemptions). States are not required to offer individuals subject to this limit a work slot and most do not. States can waive the rule temporarily in areas with elevated unemployment. Otherwise, they must impose this rule even on individuals actively looking for work or working less than half time. In 2016, at least a half-million unemployed individuals lost SNAP benefits due to this rule. States, workforce training groups, and anti-hunger advocates have called on Congress to ease this rule, not make it worse.
- **States have been able to set additional work requirements for over 30 years.** SNAP requires all working-age adults (with limited exceptions) to register for work and to accept a job if offered. States can go further and impose very tough work requirements (up to 30 hours a week) and cut off benefits — including those for children in the household — to those who don't comply. States mostly require job search and workfare activities, interventions that aren't effective at improving long-term employment and earning outcomes.¹ The U.S. Agriculture Department (USDA) and states spent more than \$700 million for SNAP employment and training programs in 2016.
- **Work requirements aren't an effective way to encourage or support employment.** Work requirements in other programs have generated little or no long-term increase in earnings and employment and have caused many families — often those with the greatest disadvantages — to lose assistance, leaving them in deep poverty, research shows.² In an effort to find more effective ways to help SNAP participants move to work, states have started to experiment with approaches that focus on helping them increase their earnings through training in high-demand sectors, modeled after successful training targeted to some middle-class workers. These approaches are expected to have better outcomes than work requirements and do not risk cutting off food benefits to unemployed individuals who need them to eat.
- **The USDA is also testing new approaches to improve results through SNAP employment and training.** In response to the lack of proven interventions to increase employment outcomes for SNAP recipients, Congress on a bipartisan basis set up ten comprehensive SNAP employment and training demonstration projects to test whether new, innovative approaches would help boost employment and earnings. These projects, which build upon the existing state efforts, are testing a variety of interventions, including intensive supports for individuals with significant barriers to work as well as training based on the needs that local employers identify.

¹ U.S. Agriculture Department, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training (E&T) Best Practices Study: Final Report,” November 2016, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/SNAPEandTBestPractices.pdf>.

² LaDonna Pavetti, “Work Requirements Don't Cut Poverty, Evidence Shows,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, updated June 7, 2016, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/work-requirements-dont-cut-poverty-evidence-shows>.