

House Farm Bill's SNAP Cuts, Work Requirements Would Hurt Older Americans



The House farm bill (H.R. 2) would end or cut SNAP (formerly food stamp) benefits for a substantial number of older Americans, [increasing food insecurity and hardship](#).

SNAP is the country's most effective anti-hunger program, helping 1 in 8 Americans afford a basic diet. Despite providing modest benefits averaging about \$1.40 per person per meal, it combats food insecurity, alleviates poverty, and has long-term positive impacts on health as well as on children's educational attainment. In 2016, some 5.1 million seniors aged 60 and over received SNAP, and an additional 4.2 million older Americans aged 50 through 59 got SNAP each month. SNAP is especially important for seniors given that food insecurity among seniors is linked to negative health outcomes, including a higher risk of chronic conditions such as diabetes and more limitations in daily activities. Elderly SNAP participants are less likely than similar non-participants to cut back on medications due to cost or to be hospitalized or admitted into a nursing home, [research](#) finds.

For over 15 years, state and federal policymakers have worked on a bipartisan basis to strengthen SNAP, including increasing eligible seniors' participation rates, which have been historically low, from 25 percent in 2002 to 42 percent in 2015. This bill would take a large step backward, reducing or eliminating benefits for more than 1 million households with more than 2 million people. It would make significant overall cuts to SNAP and impose unworkable, expanded work requirements that would take benefits away from people who don't meet them — including Americans aged 50 through 59 — despite the evidence that such requirements do [little to improve employment](#).

Unwieldy Work Requirements Would Burden Older Recipients and States

SNAP already requires working-age adults (with limited exceptions) to register for work and 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 for people who don't comply. And, individuals aged 18 through 49 without children can only participate for three months out of every three years unless they are working 20 hours per week, a policy that has led [many poor participants to lose SNAP](#).

The House bill would impose an even harsher policy, requiring most adult SNAP participants, including older workers between the ages of 50 and 59 and parents who have no children under age 6 (among others), to prove every month that they worked, participated in a work program for at least 20 hours a week, or qualified for an exemption. Workers whose employers don't provide enough hours or who don't have paid sick leave, and recipients, including caregivers and those with disabilities, who can't navigate a bureaucratic exemption process could lose SNAP.

Beginning in 2021, an estimated 7.5 million SNAP participants, including 1.7 million older adults (those aged 50 through 59), would have to go through this process every month, and states would have to build expensive systems to track them. The bill's new funding for such programs is woefully inadequate, amounting to less than \$30 per month for each recipient who would need a work slot to retain benefits — [well short](#) of the cost for effective employment programs. States would find it impossible to provide high-quality job training for those that need it.

Recipients who couldn't comply with the requirements would be at risk of harsh sanctions: the first failure would mean a loss of benefits for 12 months, while each subsequent failure would lock out individuals for 36 months. They could regain eligibility only by working at least half time for a month or requalifying through an exemption.

Many Older Americans Would Lose Some or All Benefits

The bill's SNAP provisions would hurt many older people, including those with disabilities or chronic health conditions and those caring for family members with disabilities, as well as older workers and seniors caring for grandchildren.

Older SNAP recipients with health conditions — and caregivers — could lose SNAP due to work requirements. Many older SNAP recipients have health issues: disabilities are more than [twice as prevalent](#) among individuals aged 50 through 59 as among younger adults. Older adults who receive disability benefits would likely be automatically exempt from the work requirements. But others who have serious health conditions — and those caring for family members

who do — would have to prove that they qualified for an exemption. Recipients would have to understand that they may qualify, gather documentation, and submit it to their caseworker, who then must accurately decide if they qualify and process the paperwork properly. Older participants who have serious health conditions, including mental health issues, may find it very difficult to manage the red tape.

Also, many older recipients with significant caregiving responsibilities may not be exempt under the bill's strict standard that the person needing care must be "incapacitated." Those who aren't exempt would risk losing SNAP if attending medical appointments forces them to miss hours of work or participation in a work program. Caregiving is difficult and time-consuming — added paperwork, mandated participation in ineffective work programs, and loss of SNAP benefits would make it even harder for them to manage these responsibilities and afford food.

Older workers who receive SNAP also could be hurt. Most SNAP participants aged 50 through 59 who don't receive disability benefits are workers, though they often have unstable jobs and face periods of joblessness. About half of such recipients are in households that work in a typical month while receiving SNAP; about two-thirds are in households that work the year before or the year after SNAP receipt. While the bill's supporters say they want to do more to help people work, the bill would hurt many older workers.

Older workers would have to prove each month that they worked or trained 20 hours per week. An older worker who misses work because she is sick or needs to stay home with a sick child or family member would be at risk of losing SNAP benefits. And, workers whose employers cut their hours would also be at risk. Many working SNAP recipients, including older workers, have jobs with low pay, high turnover, and poor benefits, such as home health workers, custodial staff, and cashiers. That's why, over the course of a year, [about half of all working SNAP participants](#) had at least one month in which they participated in SNAP but didn't work at least 80 hours.

Job training may not effectively serve older participants. Older workers often face specific [challenges](#) to finding a job, including age discrimination, health and ability struggles, skill limitations, and caregiving responsibilities. They are [underserved](#) in workforce development programs and frequently face [barriers](#) to completing them, including because such programs often don't target them. Older recipients unable to find a job or complete training — which may not be effective for their needs — would lose food assistance.

Seniors living with other participants could also lose benefits. In addition to the 50- to 59-year-old participants whose SNAP benefits would be at risk, some 175,000 elderly individuals (ages 60 and older) live with other SNAP participants who could be subject to the work requirements. If other household members' SNAP is cut there are fewer resources available to the entire household for food.

Seniors caring for grandchildren could lose SNAP. The bill would require single parents and others raising children (even temporarily), such as grandparents, to participate in an unpopular federal child support enforcement program. Currently states can opt into the program but only six have done so because it's expensive, it risks increasing food insecurity among children if caregivers don't meet the child support requirements, and it isn't likely to generate significant child support collections.

If parental rights have not been terminated and there is not a formal child support agreement already in place, the grandparent would be mandated to establish one *unless* the child support agency determines that the grandparent has good cause not to. Faced with this mandate, some grandparents may forgo SNAP if they have concerns about the agency pursuing the parents for child support. A parent may be struggling with drug addiction or mental health issues, and the grandparent may not want to implicate the parent in an enforcement action while trying to get healthy. Or the grandparent may fear for her own or the children's safety. This rigid policy could cause grandparents to lose vital food support for themselves and the grandchildren they are caring for. Senior households with grandchildren are [two to three times as likely](#) to face hunger as senior households without grandchildren.