
Greenstein: Roberts-Stabenow SNAP Proposals Represent Sound Policy

The nutrition provisions of the farm bill that Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts and Ranking Member Debbie Stabenow released today represent an important bipartisan step toward renewing the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps). SNAP, a key part of the farm bill, has long been one of our nation's most powerful and effective poverty-reduction programs. In addition to reauthorizing SNAP, the bill would provide for modest improvements to program integrity, operations, and administration. It also would expand the 2014 farm bill's pilot program to test new approaches to job training and other employment-related activities for SNAP participants, which is designed to determine what works best in this area.

Ideally, policymakers would use this year's farm bill to build upon the strong body of evidence regarding SNAP's important role in mitigating poverty and food insecurity and supporting participants' long-term health and well-being. That might include improving the basic benefit, building stronger connections between SNAP and WIC, and exploring through research the powerful connection between better food security and improved health outcomes and reduced health care costs. While the bill doesn't go down these paths, the proposal from Chairman Roberts and Ranking Member Stabenow stands in sharp contrast to the House farm bill, which would increase food insecurity and hardship through various SNAP cuts and eligibility changes. That partisan approach would take away food assistance from 2 million struggling Americans and impose a risky new scheme of administratively costly work programs that are not only likely to be ineffective but would almost certainly cause harm.

Moreover, improving program oversight and integrity and streamlining program operations, as the Senate proposal would do, would yield a stronger program for the 1 in 8 Americans that use SNAP benefits to afford food.

Most notably, the bill would:

- Let additional states participate in and provide additional funding for the SNAP employment and training demonstration pilots, creating more opportunities to build evidence on what works best in helping SNAP participants secure and retain jobs and advance in the labor market;
- Encourage states to create new public-private partnerships around job training and leverage existing private-sector job training programs for SNAP participants;
- Test the cost effectiveness of new commercially available tools to verify household income;
- Enhance states' ability to prevent dual participation by enabling states to check whether applicants are already enrolled in other states;

- Allow states to ease paperwork and office visit requirements on participants who are seniors or people with disabilities with stable income sources;
- Provide for a review of and improvements in the electronic benefit transfer systems that states use to issue benefits; and
- Provide increased administrative funding for tribal organizations that operate the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations.

The bill does include an unfortunate provision that would repeal bonuses to states that demonstrate strong and improved benefit payment accuracy as well as strong and improved program participation among eligible beneficiaries. States with strong program accuracy and access have used these bonuses to further improve program operations. Repealing these funds would end a useful incentive for states to focus on accuracy and reaching eligible households.

Throughout SNAP's history, policymakers have made most reforms and program improvements on a bipartisan basis. This proposal stands squarely within that tradition. Maintaining and strengthening SNAP, as the Roberts-Stabenow proposal does, will ensure that tens of millions of Americans will continue to have the resources they need to put food on the table each day.

#

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization and policy institute that conducts research and analysis on a range of government policies and programs. It is supported primarily by foundation grants.