

# House Farm Bill Would Increase Food Insecurity and Hardship



The House farm bill, which the House rejected on May 18 but likely will vote on again, includes provisions that would increase food insecurity and hardship. Its changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) would cause more than 1 million low-income households with more than 2 million people, particularly low-income working families with children, to lose their benefits altogether or have them reduced.

SNAP is the country's most effective anti-hunger program, helping 1 in 8 Americans — mostly children, seniors, or people with disabilities — to afford a basic diet. Despite providing modest benefits that average only about \$1.40 per person per meal, SNAP combats food insecurity, alleviates poverty, and has long-term positive impacts on health and children's educational attainment. The House bill would reduce SNAP's effectiveness and put large numbers of families and individuals at increased risk of hardship.

Many of House Agriculture Committee Chairman Michael Conaway's stated themes for the farm bill's nutrition package — funding job training, modernizing benefit delivery, strengthening program integrity, and supporting healthy eating — are broadly shared and could have been the basis for a meaningful bipartisan bill. In some of these areas, the bill contains modest, useful proposals, but they are dwarfed by its damaging provisions and benefit cuts. The bill, which the House made even worse by adopting harmful amendments during floor debate, breaks with longstanding bipartisan tradition by presenting a package of proposals from Republicans alone that's unbalanced, untested, and likely unworkable in key areas. It threatens food assistance through sweeping work requirements, restricts state flexibility, and vastly increases state administrative burdens. In contrast, the bipartisan Senate farm bill makes progress in all of the areas that Chairman Conaway cited without taking food assistance away from low-income households.

## Harsher Work Requirements Would Put Food Assistance at Risk for Working and Unemployed Households

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The bill would expand SNAP's existing work requirements, imposing new rules on millions of participants. It would require participants ages 18-59 who aren't disabled or raising a child under 6 to prove — every month — that they're working at least 20 hours a week, participating at least 20 hours a week in a work program, or a combination of the two. Those who couldn't comply would face harsh sanctions. The first sanction for non-compliance would mean a loss of the person's share of the household benefit for 12 months. Each later infraction would lock people out of SNAP for 36 months.

These sweeping requirements would likely do more harm than good, increasing hunger and poverty. They would force states to develop large new bureaucracies to track millions of SNAP recipients. And they likely would do little to boost employment, particularly since the bill's new funding for job training and work slots amounts to less than \$30 per month for recipients who'd need a work slot to retain SNAP benefits. Also, experience suggests that many people with barriers to employment, such as very limited skills or ill family members, would end up with neither earnings nor food assistance.

The bill would allow states to request a waiver of the work requirement in areas of high unemployment but restricts this option so that many distressed areas wouldn't qualify. States also could exempt a limited number of people from the work requirement, but that number is capped.

These new requirements fly in the face of House Speaker Paul Ryan's call for evidence-based policymaking. Ten major state demonstration projects are nearing completion that test approaches to employment services, work programs, and work requirements for people receiving SNAP. Rather than await the results, the bill would require all states to move now to institute sweeping changes that carry significant risks for poor households.

## Cutting Food Assistance and Creating Unnecessary Bureaucracy

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Aside from the impact of the major new work requirement, the bill includes eligibility restrictions and benefit cuts to SNAP participants that would mean nearly \$19 billion less in food assistance for low-income households over the next ten years.

States currently have an option, called categorical eligibility, to modestly raise SNAP income eligibility cutoffs and asset limits by aligning SNAP's rules with those that states set for benefits funded through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Thirty-two states have used it to extend SNAP to more working families by lifting the program's income limits. And over 40 states have used it to adopt less restrictive rules over the amount of financial and other assets (such as vehicles) that a household may own and remain eligible for SNAP.

The bill would largely eliminate this option by setting a much more rigid standard for the types of services that states could use to lift SNAP income and asset tests. It would also eliminate a second option that allows states to set less restrictive vehicle asset limits. While the bill would also raise SNAP's federal asset limits, as a whole it imposes stricter eligibility rules by eliminating state flexibility.

As a result, some households would lose SNAP eligibility, and states and SNAP households alike would face more paperwork and bureaucratic hassles.

## Causing Some Households With Utility Expenses to Lose Benefits

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The bill would make it harder for certain SNAP households, particularly families with children, to claim the benefits for which they're eligible by eliminating an administrative simplification that enables participants in the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) to qualify for a SNAP income deduction that's tied to their utility expenses.

This connection between LIHEAP and SNAP reduces unnecessary paperwork for states and poor households. However, the House bill would end this simplification for most households (households with elderly persons or persons with disabilities would be exempted), demanding that households turn in more receipts and that SNAP caseworkers spend their time sifting through extra documents. Households that couldn't provide the required documentation of their utility costs would receive a smaller SNAP benefit.

## Imposing Unproven Child Support Mandate

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The bill would take away food assistance from parents or guardians who don't live with the child's other parent and don't cooperate with child support enforcement. States have the option of requiring parents to participate in the child support program, but only six states do, based on evidence that it would be costly to implement, wouldn't significantly increase child support collections, and would risk cutting SNAP to needy families. The bill would mandate it for all states.

## Allowing States to Outsource SNAP Operations to Corporations

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The bill would allow states to turn SNAP's core eligibility functions over to private contractors. While it may be appropriate to outsource some SNAP operational functions (like computer systems or building maintenance) in order to leverage their competitive advantage in these areas, the government must retain others, like determining eligibility. Some SNAP clients, including many elderly persons, have complex cases that require trained, professional civil service workers to dedicate significant time to appropriately screen and verify their information and ensure they receive the correct benefit levels.

Furthermore, privatization could compromise participants' data. SNAP collects detailed information about applicants and participants, including Social Security numbers, household composition, and income and employment information.

During the early 2000s, Texas and Indiana contracted for-profit companies to perform key parts of the eligibility process — including accepting applications, advising clients on program requirements and eligibility, and verifying eligibility — and the results were disastrous. In Texas, for example, thousands were unable to apply or were given misinformation; private information was released, compromising participants' security; and taxpayer dollars were wasted.

## Modest Benefit Enhancements Much Smaller Than Benefit Cuts

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In all, the bill's benefit cuts described above would reduce SNAP spending by \$24.6 billion over ten years. The bill uses \$5.8 billion of those savings to pay for a few modest benefit improvements, such as requiring all states to provide five months of transitional SNAP benefits to families that leave TANF cash assistance without requiring the family to reapply or submit additional paperwork. The bill's net effect, however, would be a significant reduction in food assistance to low-income households.