
Greenstein: Partisan House Farm Bill Would Turn Clock Back on Efforts to Reduce Hunger and Hardship

With its vote today, the House approved a farm bill that would move our country in the wrong direction by taking food assistance away from many people in need. It would reverse progress under Presidents of both parties by making SNAP less effective in reducing food insecurity and supporting low-wage working families.

The bill includes cuts and changes to SNAP (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) that would eliminate or reduce food assistance for more than 1 million low-income households with more than 2 million people. It includes a sweeping proposal to impose harsh penalties on those who don't prove within a limited time frame that they have worked or participated in work programs for enough hours each month or that they qualify for an exemption from the bill's aggressive work requirements, taking food assistance away for a full year the first time this occurs and for three years the second time.

Among those likely to lose food assistance are a considerable number of working people — including parents and older workers — who have low-wage jobs such as home health aides or cashiers and often face fluctuating hours and bouts of temporary unemployment that could put their SNAP benefits at risk. In addition, substantial numbers of people with serious physical or mental health conditions, as well as many caregivers, may struggle either to meet the monthly work-hours requirement or to provide sufficient documentation to prove they qualify for an exemption — and, consequently, may be at risk of losing nutrition assistance.

While the requirements focus on adults, children, too, will be harmed, because when parents lose SNAP, there are fewer resources available for food for the family. Going forward with policies that reduce food assistance to poor children flies in the face of research showing that SNAP not only reduces short-term hardship but has a positive effect on children's long-term health and educational outcomes.

Though the bill's proponents say they want to encourage work among more SNAP recipients, the bill is likely to leave many people who face substantial barriers to work with neither earnings nor food assistance. Most people who participate in SNAP are workers — most work while receiving SNAP, while many others are between jobs. The large majority of those who aren't working are caring for someone else, suffering from a disability or chronic health condition that limits their ability to work, or going to school.

The bill's harsh new requirements also fly in the face of House Speaker Paul Ryan's call for evidence-based policymaking. Policymakers on a bipartisan basis in 2014 provided \$200 million for demonstration projects in ten states to test various approaches to moving jobless SNAP participants into employment. Rather than waiting for the evaluations to conclude in just a few years and using the findings to design sound work and job training policies, the House bill would mandate that all states move now to institute sweeping changes — on an unprecedented scale — that will likely do little to increase employment.

Amendments approved on the House floor when the bill was first considered made the bill more extreme. As amended, the House-passed bill would make it still harder for states to obtain waivers from work-related requirements for areas with high unemployment. In 2021, this change would result in an estimated 600,000 more SNAP recipients losing benefits compared to the bill the Agriculture Committee passed. The bill as amended also would disrupt SNAP's balanced public-private partnership, allowing states to privatize core elements of SNAP implementation — particularly eligibility determinations — that ought to remain a government function. Evidence from Texas and Indiana, which tried SNAP privatization in the early 2000s, shows that when such functions are turned over to for-profit companies, efficiencies generally aren't realized and instead the quality of services deteriorates, some eligible families lose SNAP through administrative errors, and program integrity suffers as companies focus on their bottom line, rather than on providing adequate service to needy applicants.

The House farm bill breaks with the long history of bipartisan efforts to improve and reform SNAP. In sharp contrast, the members of the Senate Agriculture Committee worked together across party lines to produce a farm bill that will strengthen America's most effective anti-hunger program. We urge the Senate to continue this bipartisan approach when the bill moves to the Senate floor as soon as next week. Maintaining and strengthening SNAP, as the Senate Agriculture Committee bill 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.

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