
Statement of Robert Greenstein, President, On the House Republican Leadership's New SNAP Proposal

Yesterday's disclosure that House Republican leaders plan to move a bill in September that doubles — to \$40 billion over ten years — their proposed cuts in SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly called food stamps) and drops up to 4 million more poor people from the program is the latest startling development on this front. The new proposal is stunningly harsh. To understand just how harsh, you need to understand how we reached this point.

The House began in June with the House Agriculture Committee's severe bill, which would have cut SNAP by more than \$20 billion over the coming decade — with nearly all of it coming from ending or cutting benefits for low-income families and individuals. The bill would have cut nearly 2 million people off SNAP, primarily people in low-income working families and elderly individuals. Some working-poor families would be cut adrift simply because they own a modest car that they need to commute to work at low-wage jobs. Hundreds of thousands of other poor recipients would see their benefits reduced.

These cuts would come on top of an across-the-board SNAP benefit cut for all of the more than 47 million Americans, including 22 million children, who receive SNAP that will take effect on November 1, when a temporary provision of the 2009 Recovery Act expires. Every family of four, for instance, that receives SNAP will see its benefits cut \$36 a month in November, or about \$400 for the rest of the fiscal year.

Yet, this wasn't severe enough for arch-conservative House Republican members. When the committee's bill came to the House floor, lawmakers added one of the most extreme SNAP measures in the program's history. It would allow states to end benefits to large numbers of low-income people who want a job but can't find one — and to keep half the savings and use them for any purpose that state politicians want, including tax cuts, special interest subsidies, or plugging holes in state budgets.

Specifically, the amendment would let states end benefits for people — including parents with children as young as 1 — if they are not working at least half-time or in a work or job training program at least half-time. States are already allowed to cut people off SNAP if they quit a job, turn down a job offer, or refuse to search for a job. The House provision would go further by authorizing states to cut people off even if they're looking hard and are willing to take any job that's offered them but can't find one — and it would entice and reward states for doing so by giving them windfalls of federal cash. The provision contains no requirement that a state provide a placement in a work or training program for someone who can't find a job, and it provides no money to states to create or expand work or training programs (some of which are being cut due to sequestration).

Yet, this, too, was not enough for many of the most conservative House members. So, after the House defeated the original farm bill, House leaders stripped out SNAP and other nutrition programs and passed the farm bill. Now, they plan to bring a separate SNAP bill to the floor in September with the still-harsher cuts described here.

The new House leadership SNAP proposal disclosed this week would maintain all of the cuts already described, and would layer an additional \$20 billion in cuts on top, mainly by ending SNAP coverage for up to 4 million more people who are among our country's most desperately poor individuals. To understand the Dickensian nature of this proposal, we need a little historical context.

In 1996, when welfare reform was moving through Congress, a House floor amendment suddenly emerged to limit food stamps to three months of benefits out of every three years for unemployed people between the ages of 18 and 50 who aren't raising minor children. Any month in which you weren't employed or in a work or training program for at least 20 hours a week would count against your three-month limit and, after three such months during which you received benefits, you'd be out for the next 33 months.

The amendment's conservative Republican authors defended it on the House floor, claiming it would not have draconian effects for two reasons: (1) states would offer slots in workfare programs to everyone who couldn't find a job; and (2) states could seek waivers to suspend the three-month cut-off in localities that were experiencing high unemployment or otherwise lacked sufficient jobs.

The first claim turned out to be false advertising; states were not required to offer slots in workfare programs to the affected poor people, and most did not. After all, workfare programs cost money to operate.

But, the second claim turned out to be more legitimate — most states have sought waivers from the three-month cut-off for areas with high unemployment. Today, with 7.4 percent unemployment and a weak job market, more than 45 states — Republican and Democratic alike — have such waivers for parts of their states.

The new House measure that emerged this week would end that. Henceforth, it would prohibit all such waivers. Childless adults aged 18 to 50 who couldn't find at least a half-time job would be summarily thrown off the program after 90 days — regardless of how high local unemployment is.

The resulting hardship would be extraordinary. Most of these childless adults are already ineligible for any federal cash assistance and, in most states, for any state or local cash assistance either — no matter how poor they are. Indeed, the average income of these SNAP recipients is just 22 percent of the poverty line. Moreover, because they aren't raising children, these adults are ineligible for Medicaid as well (something that will change on January 1 in states that take the health reform law's Medicaid expansion but not in states that don't).

In areas with elevated unemployment where jobs are hard to find — especially for people with limited education or skills, as is the case with many of these individuals — these people at least can get SNAP benefits now. Under the new House measure, they would lose those benefits as well (except for three months out of every three years).

Consequently, some of our poorest fellow Americans would fall deeper into destitution. Undoubtedly, more would become homeless; if you have barely any money and you must use some of it for food, it's even harder to find the money to pay the rent.

This proposal would affect as many as 4 million people, more than two-fifths of whom are women. That may sound like a large number of unemployed adults to be receiving SNAP. But it shouldn't. Over 46 million Americans live below the poverty line. Nearly 14 million people are unemployed or have given up looking because they can't find a job in the current labor market, and millions more want to work full time but can only find part-time work.

You wouldn't know all that from how its proponents are "spinning" this proposal. They say that it's simply a "work requirement." In reality, however, that's an Orwellian description of what they propose.

A "work requirement" traditionally means that a person who isn't employed must look for a job, accept any job offer, and participate in any workfare or training program if a slot is available. By contrast, this proposal would summarily end benefits after three months regardless of how hard an individual is looking for a job, how high the unemployment rate is, how depressed the local economy is, or whether the individual was offered a placement in a work or training program. Thus, this proposal is a draconian benefit cut-off that's dressed up as a benign "work requirement."

Proponents imply that any of these people who want a job can get one. They don't explain where 4 million new, largely low-skilled jobs will suddenly come from. The economy is now creating only 150,000 to 200,000 jobs a month — not much more than needed just to keep up with population growth — and these SNAP recipients don't qualify for many of them.

This new proposal is a sad development, not only in how it would affect poor people but in what it says about our politics and our society. Something is seriously awry when the richest nation on Earth has higher levels of poverty and inequality than most other Western nations; when its tax code and spending programs are awash in unproductive or special-interest subsidies; and when, in spite of all that, policymakers would seriously consider a proposal that would increase hunger and deprivation among our least fortunate fellow citizens on a scale that we have not seen in years.

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