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Commentary: Portraying Severe SNAP Benefit Cuts As a Mere Work Requirement

By Robert Greenstein

Over the years, some policymakers who have sought deep cuts in eligibility and assistance in programs for low-income families have tried to make their plans seem inherently reasonable by camouflaging them through the use of benign verbiage — portraying them, for instance, as efforts to eliminate “fraud, waste, and abuse.” That tactic is now back in a big way in the House debate over SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps).

Today, proponents describe their proposals to deny benefits to millions of low-income SNAP recipients as appropriate efforts to tighten “work requirements.” They imply that only undeserving people who refuse to work will face these SNAP cuts; those who are willing to work, they imply, will continue to receive them.

That’s not the case.

Those who work on social policy have generally used the term “work requirements” to mean that an unemployed applicant or recipient should look for a job and accept any job offer, as well as any assignment to a workfare or job training program — and that people who turn down jobs or places in work programs, or who quit their jobs voluntarily, should not get benefits. SNAP has long authorized states to cut people who don’t comply with such requirements off of SNAP.

But the provisions that proponents described as “work requirements” in the SNAP part of the farm bill the House defeated in June — which will appear again in the SNAP bill that House Republican leaders plan to bring to the floor this week — are different. So are the \$19 billion in additional SNAP cuts, which proponents also portray as “work requirements,” that House leaders have added on top.

These provisions would end food assistance for large numbers of people who want to work, are looking for jobs, and will take a workfare or job training placement, but who cannot find a job in a weak labor market — many of them have limited education and skills — and have not been offered a place in a work or training program.

The so-called “work requirement” provision of the June farm bill would let states cut off non-elderly adults, including parents with children as young as 1, who are not working at least 20 hours a week or enrolled in a work or training program for at least 20 hours a week, even if they want to work and are looking hard for a job but can’t find one — regardless of local labor market conditions. Moreover, the provision would incentivize states to cut off such non-elderly adults because the states would keep half of the savings.

The \$19 billion in additional cuts that House leaders have added, bringing total SNAP cuts to \$39 billion over ten years, would end benefits after three months (and keep benefits shut off for nearly three years) for 18- to 50-year-old individuals in high-unemployment areas who aren’t raising minor children and aren’t employed or participating in a work or training program for at least 20 hours a week.

SNAP already requires states to cut these people off after three months — more specifically, to limit their eligibility for SNAP to three months out of every *three years* — regardless of how hard they’re looking for work or whether the state has offered them a work or training placement. (Most states do not provide sufficient job training slots for these people.) But, current law lets governors request waivers from this three-month cut-off for areas that have high unemployment or otherwise lack sufficient jobs — and more than 45 states, run by Democratic and Republican governors alike, have requested and received such waivers in today’s weak economy.

House Republican leaders would get the \$19 billion in additional SNAP cuts by disallowing all such waivers. People in very high-unemployment areas who diligently look for work but can’t find jobs would be cut adrift.

Doug Heye, spokesman for House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (who is driving the effort to push these cuts into law), recently referred to the new \$19 billion cut (and other provisions of the bill) as “work requirements and job training requirements.” His reference to “job training requirements” is particularly striking, since the proposal does not require states to offer job training (or other work-program placements) to *any* of these 18- to 50-year-old individuals, or anyone else, and provides no new funding for training programs. In fact, the bill actually shrinks funding for such programs over time.

Moreover, under the House Republican budget and appropriations bills, job training programs would be cut significantly, thus providing *fewer* training slots, not more. Heye’s verbiage may reflect a misunderstanding of how the new proposal would work, or it may reflect the practice of playing fast and loose with the facts. The latter is hardly uncommon in Washington, but it’s especially dismaying when proponents use the tactic to whitewash proposals that would push some of the nation’s poorest people deeper into destitution. The average income of the affected 18- to 50-year-old childless adults is 22 percent of the poverty line.

Simply put, there’s a huge difference between, on the one hand, requiring SNAP recipients to try to find jobs, to take jobs that are offered, and not to quit jobs, and, on the other hand, denying benefits to needy people who try to find jobs but cannot do so and who aren’t offered a work program or job training slot.

I ask people who are reading these words whether you think a benefit cut-off after three months because a poor individual can’t find a job in a weak economy is what comes to mind when you hear

the term “work requirement.” I ask journalists whether, if they use the politically antiseptic term “work requirement,” they think that their readers will understand what the proposal is really all about.