

## **A reasonable request for food stamp recipients**

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Taxpayer compassion is reaching its limits.

U.S. Rep. Robert Aderholt, R-Alabama, has sponsored H.R. 4540, a bill that permits states to drug-test beneficiaries of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), better known as food stamps. “If a welfare recipient has the money to buy drugs, then they have the money to buy food,” the congressman said. “The federal government should not be enabling people to fund their drug addiction at taxpayer expense.”

Maine’s governor is asking Washington to allow his state to waive the rules that allow the purchase of candy and soft drinks with SNAP benefits.

Here in New Mexico, Ty Vicenti, president of the Jicarilla Apache Nation, claims the “Human Services Department implemented a harsh federal penalty in most of the state that limits unemployed adults without children to just three months of SNAP benefits in three years unless they do 80 hours of unpaid work activity each month.”

Wrong and wrong.

The Martinez administration’s “harsh federal penalty,” as the SNAP website explains, “has been part of the law since 1996.” (Welfare reform was sponsored by John Kasich, now a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, and signed by Bill Clinton, a Democrat.) As for “unpaid work activity,” the able-bodied adults without dependents being asked to step up can be either employed, in job training, or perform community service. The requirement does not apply to those who are pregnant, disabled, addicted to drugs, under 18, and over 50.

Unreasonable? Cruel? Onerous? Hardly.

In 2009, at the height of the Great Recession, New Mexico and many other states asked D.C. for permission to grant unrestricted SNAP benefits to the able-bodied. According to an HSD spokesman, the request “was only temporary and was never intended to stay indefinitely.” On Jan. 1, limits were restored.

New Mexico is hardly alone in returning to standard SNAP practice. According to the Pew Research Center, only California, Louisiana, Nevada, Michigan, Illinois, South Carolina, and Rhode Island have yet to lift requirements for able-bodied adults without dependents.

As the press secretary for Wisconsin's governor put it, "We aren't making it harder to get benefits — we are making it easier to get a job." In the Land of Enchantment, that goal is imperative. The labor-force participation rate in our state is disturbingly low, and welfare has become a way of life for far too many of our neighbors.

Dependency is rampant, in part because New Mexico's taxpayers are more generous to the state's poor. Medicaid, housing subsidies, welfare, energy assistance, food stamps, and other programs have stitched together a sturdy safety net. A 2013 Cato Institute analysis found the "hourly wage equivalent" for major welfare programs was \$13.41 — within striking distance of the state's median hourly wage.

No one would argue New Mexico's economy is strong. But that's no reason to continue incentivizing SNAP benefits for the able-bodied. As the Foundation for Government Accountability explained: "Fewer than 3 percent of all non-disabled, full-time, year-round workers are in poverty, compared to nearly a third of non-workers. This difference holds regardless of age, gender, education, race, citizenship or immigration status, region, or other demographic characteristics."

With revenue shortfalls mounting at the state and federal levels, welfare programs are facing increased scrutiny. Asking able-bodied New Mexicans to work, or prepare to work, to obtain food stamps is neither mean-spirited nor unworkable. It's a step toward dignity, economic development, and fiscal responsibility.