

GOVERNING

THE STATES AND LOCALITIES

Trump Wants to End States' Power to Make Food Stamps More Accessible During Recessions

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The Trump administration, which often stresses the need for states to have more flexibility, wants to give them less when it comes to food stamps, formally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The federal government requires childless, able-bodied SNAP recipients to spend 20 hours a week working (paid or unpaid) or participating in a state-approved work or training program. If people fail to meet that requirement, they can only get food stamps for a total of three months in a three-year period. States are able to waive these rules, though, during economic downturns when unemployment is high.

President Trump's budget for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which needs approval from Congress to become law, would take away their ability to make those exceptions and would impose work conditions on more people.

"It adds up to a heck of a lot of cuts to SNAP," says Ellen Vollinger, legal director for the Food Research and Action Council.

The USDA estimated that the work-related changes alone would reduce spending by \$26.9 billion over 10 years. Those savings would largely come from people being kicked off the program.

Anti-hunger advocates question whether tougher work requirements would actually increase people's employment and earnings.

"When you hear the term work requirement, I think it conjures up the assumption of a work path," says Vollinger. But only five states pledge to find a work or training placement for every person who wants one. In most states, demand for state-approved programs outstrips supply.

"The public makes certain assumptions," she says, "that it's about willingness as opposed to availability."

States "are really the only ones that are capable of knowing whether or not they should have the [three-month] time limit in place," says Nune Phillips, an analyst at the Center for Law and

Social Policy, which advocates for low-income individuals and families. “This is really about the federal government telling states that it knows best.”

Most people on SNAP either already meet the work requirement or are exempt from it either because they have a disability or they're considered too young or too old.

After the Great Recession, most states got federal waivers to suspend work requirements on the grounds that not enough jobs were available. Today, Alaska, California, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico and the District of Columbia still have waivers in place for the entire state, and another 28 states have waivers for some areas of the state. Seventeen no longer have waivers in effect.

In the president's 2019 budget request, the USDA is asking Congress to make three work-related changes:

- Change the definition of “elderly” so that the work requirement would include adults in their 50s and early 60s (up to 62);
- Limit waivers to counties, not entire states, and narrow the allowable reasons for a waiver from high unemployment or insufficient jobs -- which are currently acceptable reasons -- to only a local unemployment rate above 10 percent; and
- Eliminate states' ability to exempt up to 15 percent of their SNAP caseload that would otherwise be subject to the work requirement. This is usually to help people who face barriers to employment.

The package of proposals come at a time when President Trump has pushed new or expanded work requirements for a variety of government programs, from Medicaid to housing aid.

The White House and some Republicans in Congress have sought to cut SNAP spending and reduce participation. Both spending, which totaled \$68 billion last year, and participation, which was 42 million people, have declined slightly each year since 2013. But critics say enrollment should be even lower now that the national unemployment rate is at its lowest point in a decade (about 4.1 percent).

“It’s basically recognition that at a time when unemployment is very low, food stamps should not be a way of life,” says Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

One in-depth study of able-bodied SNAP recipients in Ohio found that many had unidentified disabilities, such as back injuries, that prevented them from working. Others were willing to work or volunteer but had trouble picking up hours because they lacked access to reliable transportation, had a criminal record or lacked a college degree. Of those who were working, about 14 percent reported fewer than the required 20 hours a week. Without a waiver or exemption, part-time workers stand to lose their food benefits.

"They don't have to be totally jobless to be subject to the time limit," says Vollinger of the Food Research and Action Council.

Almost a third of food stamp users had a job in 2016, but their average monthly earnings were \$1,150, well below the federal poverty line.

"My concern with the work requirements is, are we really focusing on the right thing?" says Elaine Waxman, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute. "We're not spending very much time talking about whether work actually lifts people out of poverty."