

# Employment training costs designed to reduce SNAP participation are vastly underestimated

Nothing has caused more problems for the House of Representatives' 2018 Farm Bill than the proposed cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP—the successor program to food stamps). There are Republicans who think that the cuts are not severe enough and are withholding their votes. On the other side the Democrats, who complain that they were shut out during the drafting of the legislation in the Agriculture Committee, oppose any cuts to SNAP. As a result, they too have withheld their votes. The result was that the House failed to pass its version of the 2018 Farm Bill.

We have read that the SNAP language was written by the Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan, putting House Ag Committee Chair Mike Conaway in a difficult position in his relationship with Ranking Member Collin Peterson. Having failed to get entitlement reform adopted by the House, Ryan needed a down payment to cover a portion of the massive tax cut bill signed into law earlier this session.

While it is clear that the Senate will not include large cuts to SNAP in its version of the farm bill, we do think it is important to take a closer look at the language that fractured the bipartisanship that usually accompanies the farm bill.

The changes to SNAP proposed by the legislation before the House would affect all able-bodied adults 18-59 years old who are not caring for a pre-school child. It has been estimated that this could affect as many as 2 million persons in 1 million households.

The rationale for these cuts was made clear by Ag Secretary Sonny Perdue when he told reporters that SNAP was “supposed to be a hand-up, not a continual dependency.” That statement assumes that taking away a person’s meager \$126 monthly SNAP benefits would be sufficient to motivate them to seek work.

To continue to receive SNAP benefits those affected by this legislation would have to engage in a combination of work and job training totaling 20 hours per week beginning with fiscal year 2021. The number of hours per week increases to 25 beginning in fiscal year 2026. In addition, they would have to report their hours on a weekly basis. Those who violate these requirements would lose their SNAP benefits for a year and further violations would result in a 3-year loss in benefits.

What all of this ignores is the current employment situation in this country. Unemployment is low and all of the easy-to-employ people in all of the locations with sufficient jobs are already employed. The people remaining are faced with multiple challenges from shifting schedules, seasonal work, jobs with no sick leave or bereavement benefits to problems with transportation. Job turnover is also high among this population. Some have disabilities that are not significant enough to qualify them for disability benefits but nonetheless make stable work difficult.

Also ignored is the reality that a large number of people receiving SNAP benefits are already employed and would gladly snap up more hours at a higher wage if they were available.

So, what is needed for this program change to work as its advocates suggest?

While states would be required to “to offer minimum services in employment and training (including offering case management services) so that every covered individual may

meet the work requirements,” the funding for the needed programs is not sufficient to meet the needs of the affected population. The legislation provides \$1 billion a year for job training, which sounds like a lot of money.

But it costs at least \$10,000 per person for job training that meets the needs of a population with multiple challenges. If the estimate of the size of the affected population is accurate, the cost would come closer to \$10 billion than \$1 billion so some people would not be able to access help until the tenth year. And during that period there will be additional people who enter this vulnerable population due to illness, family changes, and shifts in the job market.

This is not to say that we don’t need good employment and training programs. We do. And if these programs work the way they are supposed to work, people will earn enough that they no longer need \$126 a month in SNAP benefits.

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