GOP proposes stricter work requirements for food stamp recipients, a step toward a major overhaul of the social safety net

By Caitlin Dewey  April 12

House Republicans took their first step Thursday toward overhauling the federal safety net, pushing for new work requirements in the food-stamp program used by 42 million Americans.

The plan, introduced as part of the 2018 Farm Bill over objections of Democrats, would dramatically expand mandatory state workfare programs in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, better known as food stamps.

Under the proposal, most adults between 18 and 59 will be required to work part-time or enroll in 20 hours a week of workforce training to receive assistance. The plan budgets $1 billion per year to fund the training program expansion.

Preliminary Congressional Budget Office estimates suggest the requirements would cut SNAP participation by as many as 1 million people over the next 10 years.

The bill, slated for markup in the House Agriculture Committee on April 18, launches the first major skirmish in Republicans' push to overhaul welfare and nudge recipients closer to self-sufficiency through work.

House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) and President Donald Trump have vowed to tighten work requirements in a range of welfare programs, with the president directing federal agencies on Tuesday to conduct a broad review of welfare work rules.

The campaign has outraged Democrats who argue such changes hurt the poor. They also said the proposals in the Farm Bill lack the votes to advance to the Senate.

In a Thursday news conference, House Agriculture Committee Chairman K. Michael Conaway (R-Tex.) defended the bill as a practical plan to protect the needy while also helping them become self-sufficient. "We believe breaking the poverty cycle is the only way forward," he said.

The Republicans' proposed plan functions in two parts: First, it introduces a new, unified work requirement for all SNAP participants. Second, it mandates and massively expands the state training programs available to unemployed participants who cannot find jobs.

Under current law, adults ages 18 to 59 who are not pregnant, disabled or otherwise exempt are required to work at least a part-time job or agree to take a job if it is offered to them. An additional set of work requirements applies to unemployed childless adults, who lose benefits if they are unable to find a job in three months. The Agriculture Department estimates that in 2017 there were 2.9 million unemployed, childless SNAP recipients.

But Republicans have long complained that the current rules are unenforceable, particularly for adults with children. The Farm Bill proposal would establish a single work standard for adults ages 18 to 59, requiring them to hold at least a part-time job within a month of receiving benefits. As many as 7 million adults will be subject to the new rules, according to Republican staff.

In addition, the proposal would fund a massive expansion of state education and training or "workfare" programs and mandate, for the first time, that unemployed, working-age SNAP recipients enroll. States will be required to offer a slot to every adult who is eligible, up from the 700,000 slots currently
The plan budgets $1 billion per year to fund the expansion, after a two-year phase-in period. States will have wide flexibility in administering the program, Republicans said, offering everything from subsidized employment to far cheaper supervised job search and literacy classes.

“Insufficient, vague and unenforceable work requirements ... dissuade employment and restrict opportunities for recipients,” Republican staffers wrote in a briefing document for reporters. “Instead, the farm bill proposes realistic, supportive and simplified work requirements paired with funding for states to provide guaranteed, improved and constructive options to move participants toward improved wages, higher-quality employment and independence.”

The proposal would also change the way states and counties qualify for work-requirement waivers at times of high unemployment, effectively shrinking the geographic areas allowed to suspend those rules.

And it would impose stricter eligibility guidelines for low-income families who qualify for SNAP through other welfare programs, a practice known as Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility. In single-parent families, it would link parents’ benefit amounts to payment of child support and cooperation with child support agencies.

The bill did not include the controversial proposal from President Trump’s 2018 budget, which would have cut SNAP benefits to many households and replaced them with a box of non-perishable goods. It also did not mention drug-testing SNAP recipients, though Rep. Conaway said that would likely be debated during next week’s markup.

According to preliminary estimates by the Congressional Budget Office, the changes to the work requirements alone would cut SNAP rolls by as many as 1 million people over the next 10 years. But it is unclear how many participants will leave because their incomes have risen to a point where they no longer need help, and how many will leave because they cannot complete the work requirements.

Supporters of the proposal said it could reduce poverty and hunger among low-income families. Because SNAP benefits are not sufficient to cover the full cost of a households’ meals -- the average benefit is $125.80 per month -- it is particularly important that households have earned incomes, said Robert Doar, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who previously administered the food-stamp programs of both New York City and the state of New York.

“I think when it’s explained to the vast majority of the American people, that this is a proposal intended to help move people into jobs where they’ll have higher incomes and are less likely to be poor, most people will agree that’s something we should be doing,” Doar said.

But many Democrats and anti-hunger advocates harbor deep reservations about the proposal — even if they have supported employment and training programs in the past. Most agree that these programs are a valuable and effective way to get people into well-paid jobs and out of poverty, particularly when they consist of more intensive services, such as apprenticeships or subsidized employment.

Experts expressed concerns, however, that the proposal would force SNAP participants into these programs without providing enough funding for them. High-quality training programs such as subsidized employment can range upward of $10,000 per year per participant. A Thursday analysis from the left-leaning Center for Budget and Policy Priorities estimated it would cost $15 billion per year to fully fund a national employment and training program.

“There’s a kernel of a good idea here,” said Kermit Kaleba, federal policy director at the National Skills Coalition, which advocates for workforce development programs. “There is a lot of evidence that high-quality employment and training programs help people with relatively low basic skills move out of minimum wage jobs and into family-supporting careers. The challenge is that these programs are not cheap to run. And our concern, based on what we’ve heard so far, is that it isn’t clear [the Republican proposal] will make a sufficient investment.”

Democrats say they are also puzzled by Republicans’ move to expand training programs before USDA has finished evaluating 10 state pilot programs authorized by the last farm bill. Those pilots were intended to identify best practices for future training programs, as well as to surface and address funding and implementation challenges.

Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester (D-Del.), a member of the House Agriculture Committee who previously implemented SNAP training programs in Delaware, said many SNAP recipients face legitimate obstacles to enrolling in these programs, such as unreliable transportation, low housing security, and shifting child care and medical schedules.
"In our pilot program, it was a significant challenge just reaching out to families to get them in the door," Rochester said. "If our goal is to fill the millions of jobs we have in our country, then investing in people is the right way to go. The question is, is the investment sufficient for this population?"

The Republican proposal -- and by extension, the entire Farm Bill -- faces a tough uphill battle in the House, where it’s due for markup in the Agriculture Committee next week. In a statement Thursday afternoon, Rep. Collin Peterson (D-Minn.), the ranking Democrat on the committee, slammed the majority’s SNAP proposal as a means to "force people off of SNAP to pay for massive state bureaucracies that won’t work and are a waste of money."

But the Republican campaign to overhaul welfare programs is likely to continue. On Tuesday, Trump signed an executive order directing federal agencies to strengthen their existing work requirements, and potentially introduce new ones, for low-income Americans receiving SNAP, Medicaid, public housing subsidies and other forms of assistance.

In February, the USDA, announced it will begin reviewing ways to tighten work requirements in SNAP, particularly in high-unemployment areas that have been exempted from them.

“Long-term dependency has never been part of the American Dream,” Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said in a statement at the time. “Everyone who receives SNAP deserves an opportunity to become self-sufficient and build a productive, independent life.”

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