September 12, 2013

Dear Representative:

On behalf of National Skills Coalition—a national network of business leaders, union affiliates, community colleges, community-based organizations, and public workforce agencies working together to help every worker and every industry in this country gain the skills they need to compete and prosper in today’s economy—I am writing in opposition to the House Leadership’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) proposal. If enacted, this legislation would cut SNAP funding by at least $40 billion over ten years and would force millions of low-income households—including many working families—off of the program.

House Leadership has suggested that part of the motivation behind this proposal is to ensure that more SNAP recipients work. Unfortunately, the provisions included in this proposal are extremely unlikely to result in more SNAP recipients obtaining family-supporting employment and, in fact, will almost certainly result in a loss of access to exactly the kinds of education and training that we know can help SNAP recipients succeed in the labor market.

Rather than investing in the skills necessary for SNAP recipients to gain employment, the House Leadership’s proposal would allow states to cut off SNAP benefits for most adults, including parents with children as young as 1 year old, if they are not working or participating in an employment or training program for at least 20 hours a week. The proposal would create a perverse financial incentive for states to take up this option by allowing states to keep half of the federal savings from cutting people off of SNAP. Furthermore, states that decline to take up this option would actually face a fiscal penalty, as these states would lose all federal matching funds (commonly referred to as “50-50 funds”) for their existing SNAP Employment & Training (SNAP E&T) programs. The House Leadership’s proposal offers no funding for job creation, work or workfare programs, or new employment or training programs. States would receive no recognition for actually helping SNAP recipients find and retain employment, but rather would be rewarded solely on the basis of declining SNAP caseloads. Realistically, it is difficult to imagine that even the most well-intentioned states could provide the kind of employment and training services that many low-skilled SNAP recipients need to succeed in the labor market under these circumstances.

With two-thirds of all jobs created over the next decade expected to require at least some form of postsecondary education and training, it is clear that skills are the key to economic self-sufficiency. And yet, many SNAP recipients lack the skills or credentials needed in today’s economy: in Fiscal Year (FY) 2010, four out of five SNAP households did not include anyone
with an education beyond the high school level, and one-third of households did not include even a high school graduate. With unemployment still above 7 percent—and more than 40 percent of the unemployed out-of-work for 26 weeks or longer—it is increasingly difficult for lower-skilled workers to compete in today’s economy. To suggest that we can increase employment among SNAP recipients simply by demanding that they obtain employment or lose their benefits reflects a fundamental lack of understanding about the realities of the current labor market. If House Leadership is genuinely interested in helping SNAP recipients succeed in the labor market, move toward economic self-sufficiency, and ultimately exit SNAP, then we would urge them to consider expanding investments in SNAP E&T (as the House Agriculture Committee passed Farm Bill did) rather than threatening to further reduce already limited federal investments.

SNAP E&T is one of the only federal programs specifically targeting very low-skilled, low-income individuals, providing them with access to the job search, work experience, and job training services they need to find and keep family-supporting jobs. In FY 2011, nearly 2.8 million individuals participated in E&T programs, including nearly 1.4 million who used the program to pursue a secondary diploma or GED. Without skills training, many SNAP recipients simply cannot successfully enter employment and exit SNAP. As a result, a growing number of states are administering SNAP E&T programs designed to connect SNAP recipients with meaningful education and training opportunities leading to postsecondary degrees and other industry-recognized credentials with value in the labor market.

- In Washington, nearly all of the state’s 34 community and technical colleges and more than 20 community-based organizations (CBOs) participate in the state’s Basic Food Employment & Training (BFET) program, serving nearly 50,000 SNAP recipients since 2005. At South Seattle Community College—the largest community college BFET program—completion rates for short- and long-term training participants exceeded 75 percent in 2008–2009, while the overall employment placement for BFET participants was 70 percent.
- In Connecticut, Capital Community College has served about 1,000 students under SNAP E&T just since 2009, including graduating more than 300 certified nurse aides over that time period.
- 83 percent of graduates of Maine’s Competitive Skills Scholarship Program—which supports training targeted at high-demand industries within the state—were employed as of June 2011. Full-time workers earned an average hourly wage of more than $16, an increase of 51 percent over average wages before program entry.
- Iowa’s Kirkwood Community College serves SNAP recipients through its Gap Tuition Assistance Program, which helps working adults obtain occupational training and credentials. More than 400 students participated in the Gap program between 2007 and 2011, with an overall employment rate of 90 percent.
Because federal funds for SNAP E&T are extremely limited, all of these successful programs are utilizing additional 50-50 funds to provide robust employment and training services to the greatest number of program participants. In FY 2012, states used this funding to leverage more than $241 million in state, local, social enterprise, philanthropic, and corporate dollars. Yet the House Leadership SNAP proposal would eliminate this funding entirely unless states are willing to impose TANF work requirements on program participants, which would almost certainly result in the dismantling of these proven employment and training programs.

With low-skill individuals still struggling to regain a foothold in the labor market, federal policy should be focused now more than ever on helping SNAP participants prepare for sustainable careers in high-demand industries. SNAP E&T is the cornerstone of such policy. Yet the proposed changes to SNAP E&T under the House Leadership’s SNAP proposal will undermine the very flexibility to focus on skills and education that makes SNAP E&T—especially the 50-50 funding—such an effective investment. Rather than increasing employment and moving SNAP recipients toward economic self-sufficiency, the House Leadership’s SNAP proposal will almost certainly actually reduce access to critical employment and training services and increase economic hardship for countless current and future SNAP recipients.

Therefore I urge you in the strongest possible terms to reject this proposal, and instead work together to find better alternatives that will strengthen the SNAP E&T program and ensure that SNAP recipients can obtain family-sustaining employment, move toward economic self-sufficiency, and ultimately exit SNAP.

Please feel free to contact me at 202-223-8991, ext. 102 or rachelg@nationalskilloalscoalition.org if you have questions.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Rachel Gragg, Ph.D.
Federal Policy Director
National Skills Coalition