

Ohio Groups Criticize Food Stamp Cuts in Farm Bill

Advocacy and policy groups from across the state are decrying proposed cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as food stamps, in the 2018 Farm Bill.

The bill in its current form threatens access to food assistance for thousands of Ohioans, including older workers up to age 59 and parents and grandparents with children over the age of six, say representatives of the Ohio Association of Foodbanks, Center for Community Solutions, Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging and Hunger Network in Ohio. According a blog post from American Farm Bureau Federation President Zippy Duvall, a supporter of the bill, the "Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018" could receive further action in Congress as early as next week.

Ohio Association of Foodbanks Executive Director Lisa Hamler-Fugitt told *Hannah News* that negotiations between Republicans and Democrats have broken down on the bill, with the U.S. House Agriculture Committee reporting out HR2 along party lines without any amendments.

"The Farm Bill has historically been bipartisan legislation that acknowledges the interconnectedness of our country's food systems. It invests in everything from income supports for widely-produced crops, to agricultural research and education, to crop insurance to protect farmers from the immense risk involved in their business, to nutrition programs that help Americans afford the food our farmers produce," Hamler-Fugitt said. "Instead of maintaining our country's long-term commitment to preventing hunger and ensuring access to basic groceries when our fellow Americans fall on hard times, it kicks older workers and families with children to the curb."

She said the bill could affect 263,000 SNAP recipients in Ohio by imposing new work requirements that build on current work requirements already included in the program.

"The current pending farm bill, HR2, makes sweeping and aggressive new work requirements that are unproven, unworkable and will substantially do more harm than they ever will good," Hamler-Fugitt said. "It would require that states develop all new, very large bureaucracies that we don't have any research that proves they're going to work. In fact, in the last farm bill there were very rigorous pilot programs that were initiated and the results of those are not expected until sometime next year. What's the rush?"

She said the proposed work requirements are "quite harsh," noting they'd have to prove every month that they are working or receiving job training for 20 hours a week.

"The capacity doesn't exist now and would take decades at which to bring those online. It also would impose very, very harsh sanctions," Hamler-Fugitt said. "The first sanction for non-compliance if somebody fails to meet the 20-hour threshold is a 12-month sanction from the program. Each subsequent infraction would block individuals out of the program for 36 months."

She said SNAP is already a program that mostly supports people working in low-wage, part-time or seasonal jobs.

"The majority of people who can work, do work in the program. But working in this contingent, temporary environment, you're at the mercy of the labor market and what the employer is going to provide," Hamler-Fugitt said. "We are jeopardizing a critical nutrition lifeline for very vulnerable populations."

Another problem, Hamler-Fugitt said, is that the bill would eliminate "categorical eligibility."

"This is a state flexibility that has been around for nearly 10 years. It allows for a low-income family with children -- if they're eligible for SNAP, their children become categorically eligible for school breakfast and lunch programs. It is a paperwork reduction and streamlining," she said.

Hamler-Fugitt said the bill also does away with several other options available for states to be innovative in conducting the program.

“This is about cutting benefits. HR2 intends to cut benefits, implement harsh new work requirements and are going to result in hurting low-income working families, their children and individuals that are struggling to find stable employment. It also really puts at risk seniors and persons with disabilities, including veterans. It is not lost that all of this is coming just four months after the tax cut law, which has mainly benefitted very wealthy millionaires and billionaires and profitable corporations,” she said.

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