

Trump's budget proposal to slash \$192 billion from food assistance programs

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26 May 2017

Included in the Trump administration's fiscal year 2018 budget proposal are a massive \$192 billion in cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The cuts would be phased in over a period of 10 years and are of a piece with the broader budget, which would inflict an unprecedented \$3.6 trillion in austerity.

The decision to drastically slash SNAP funding occurred days after Trump's Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue stated in a panel before Congress that "as far as I'm concerned, we have no proposed changes [to SNAP]. You don't try to fix things that aren't broken."

The proposal would eliminate nearly 25 percent of the funding for the federal food assistance program, popularly known as food stamps. The 2018 fiscal budget for SNAP would see the federal government forcing states and municipalities to foot a portion of the bill. Whereas prior to 2018, the federal government assumed the full cost of SNAP, now states would be required to spend \$1 for every \$5 contributed at the federal level, leaving states under financial strain and likely to limit services.

"The food stamp program has always had as its basic premise that poor people, particularly poor kids, should not be allowed to go hungry because of the state they live in," Sharon Parrott, senior fellow at the liberal Center for Budget Policy and Priorities told the *New York Times*. Remarking on the proposed budget Parrott noted, "Realistically, if you shift costs to states, that is going to come with more flexibility for states, and that could undermine the basic food assistance safety net for people across the country."

In addition, the program would impose an increased number of work requirements on recipients. Trump officials have estimated such requirements would save the government a projected \$75 billion. Finally,

Trump's budget would impose fees on grocery stores seeking to participate in SNAP, likely further restricting access in impoverished communities.

Nearly 42 million Americans rely on SNAP, representing 15 percent of the US population. Households with incomes under roughly 130 percent of the official poverty line (\$23,550 for a family of four) are eligible for assistance. The federal government expanded access to the program in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, allowing states to waive federal work requirements in regions of the country where employment had dried up.

Trump officials, citing the budget proposal's unsubstantiated claim that economic growth will exceed 3 percent in the coming year, will likely insist they have justification for removing the work requirement waiver altogether in the few states where it still exists.

Introducing the budget, Mick Mulvaney, Trump's director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), hypocritically claimed that such restrictions and attacks would "not try to remove the social safety net for the folks who need it," while callously warning, "If you don't have any dependent children, and you're an able-bodied adult, we start to phase in that [work] requirement."

In fact, recipients of SNAP benefits are already required to have jobs in a majority of cases. Rather than a lack of "motivation" or any such reason for the influx of food assistance recipients, many receiving SNAP currently hold jobs or were forced out of work due to economic circumstances. A recent report released by Feeding America found that roughly one in eight people in the United States is food insecure.

Fiscal hawks and other right-wing critics of the Obama administration have blamed the temporary

waiving of work requirements for expanding the number of people relying on food assistance. Such critics fail to note the average individual receiving food stamps in 2016 received less than \$126 monthly—or \$1.39 per meal—while the *maximum* benefit for a family of four people measures out to roughly \$5.40 per meal.

In the last decades, federal authorities have implemented numerous cuts and restrictions on individuals and families receiving assistance. In the Welfare Reform Act, President Bill Clinton introduced work requirements for able-bodied adults without disabilities (ABAWDS) while denying such benefits altogether to undocumented immigrants.

Barack Obama inflicted consecutive cuts on the program during his time in office. In 2010, with the help of a Democratic controlled Congress, Obama cut \$2.2 billion from the program, while the Obama administration’s 2014 Farm Bill slashed \$8.7 billion from the program over a 10-year span, ending the program’s “Heat and Eat” utility service.

The signing of the 2014 farm bill—presented hypocritically by Obama as a way to “give more Americans a shot at opportunity [while including] protections for vulnerable Americans”—came just months after the president gave a speech declaring economic inequality to be the “defining challenge of our time,” which he rhetorically pledged to combat.

In 2016, over a million people were cut from SNAP services as states began re-imposing work requirements on recipients in light of the so-called economic recovery.



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