Trump administration tightens work requirements for food stamps

Trévon Austin
22 December 2018

The Trump Administration announced Thursday that it will impose tougher work requirements on adults seeking food assistance. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) unveiled the proposed rule, which will strip food stamp benefits from hundreds of thousands of poor workers. The proposal came on the same day that a five-year farm bill, from which a similar work requirement rule had been removed, headed to the president's desk for his signature.

The administration's overhaul is a response to compromises made by House Republicans in the final version of the farm bill. Trump, along with Republicans in Congress, had pushed for the bill to mandate stricter work requirements or tightened eligibility criteria for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), more commonly known as food stamps. Failing to obtain this through legislation, Trump is seeking to achieve the same ends by means of administrative action.

The proposed rule will make it harder for states to issue waivers for people who say they cannot feed themselves under current SNAP work requirements. The program already requires able-bodied adults without dependents to have jobs. Assistance is granted only for three months every three years unless a recipient is working or attends a training program 20 hours a week. However, states can waive the work requirement in areas with at least 10 percent unemployment or if there is an insufficient number of available jobs.

The new rule inhibits the ability of states to receive these waivers by narrowing the definition of an area with insufficient jobs, limiting states' capacity to "bank" waivers for future years, and limiting waivers to only one year instead of up to two.

In 2016, 3.8 million people fell into the category that could receive waivers. About 2.8 million in this category were not working.

According to the Center on Budget & Policy Priorities, an estimated 755,000 individuals aged 18 to 49 will lose SNAP benefits over the next three years if the USDA rule is implemented. The liberal think tank says the proposal will cut the number of areas with waivers by three-quarters. One-third of Americans live in areas where work requirements are waived.

The USDA rule will limit carry-over exemptions. Currently, states can exempt up to 15 percent of their caseload from SNAP time limits. This is often used to extend the eligibility of recipients who cannot find work. States do not have to use all of their exemptions in one year, but are instead allowed to accumulate them indefinitely. The proposal would limit the carry-over allowance to one year.

The proposal also raises the minimum unemployment rate required for waivers to a strict 7 percent. Current rules allow states to distribute waivers in areas with unemployment as low as 4 percent, as long as they can demonstrate an insufficient number of jobs. Conservatives and the Trump administration argued that SNAP was never meant to supply long-term assistance and Americans should be able to find a job in the "booming economy."

According to the most recent government statistics, approximately 43 million Americans currently receive SNAP benefits. To qualify for food stamps, a household must have a net income below 130 percent of the poverty line, or about $26,000 a year for a family of three. On average, individuals with SNAP benefits receive an average benefit of $123 a month, compared with $245 for families. The minimal assistance that is granted often does not cover a full month's worth of food.

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Nutrition advocacy groups say work requirements increase food insecurity. They argue that food, health insurance and housing are all keys to helping people get a job and stay employed. One Ohio survey found that many SNAP recipients have unidentified injuries, such as chronic pain, that prevent them from working. Factors such as language barriers, education and lack of transportation also prevent people from working.

Furthermore, a significant proportion of available jobs are volatile part-time minimum-wage jobs. Approximately 95 percent of jobs created since the 2008 financial crisis fall into this category. The notion that the 3.7 unemployment rate is indicative of a recovery for working people is false. But this idea is being used to strip workers of necessary assistance.

In a statement, Robert Greenstein, the president of the Center on Budget & Policy Priorities, called the USDA proposal “draconian” and said it would “cut off basic food assistance for hundreds of thousands of the nation’s poorest and most destitute people.”

He added: “Those hit the hardest would be those with the greatest difficulties in the labor market, including adults with no more than a high school education—whose unemployment rate is much higher than the overall unemployment rate—and people living in rural areas where jobs are often harder to find.”

A decent “Feeding America” report found that 40 million people, including 12 million children, face poverty and hunger in the US. Furthermore, 58 percent of food-insecure households participated in at least one of the major federal food assistance programs (SNAP, National School Lunch Program, WIC). The proposed USDA rule will only make it harder for poor people to purchase food, leading to increased food insecurity in the United States.

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