

Kentucky legislature seeks to limit access to SNAP food stamp benefits

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On February 22, the Kentucky House of Representatives passed a bill that would restrict access to food assistance and push of thousands of low-income people into hunger.

House Bill (HB) 367, which passed the Republican-controlled chamber by a margin of 61 to 33, seeks to reinstate asset testing for those who depend on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a program formerly called Food Stamps that provides a monthly benefit to low-income people.

The legislation must now be considered by the Republican-controlled state Senate before going to Democratic Governor Andy Beshear. If Beshear vetoes the bill, his move would be overridden by the legislature, as happened with an earlier round of food stamp cuts in 2022.

SNAP is a federal program that is completely funded by the federal government. It is the largest nutrition assistance program administered by the US Department of Agriculture. The program relies upon both federal and state governments to share in the administrative costs, with over 50 percent contributed by the federal government. Despite this, Kentucky's legislature and the wealthy are seeking to cut the administrative cost further through this new piece of legislation.

In order to access SNAP assistance, the new bill would require a person to have less than \$2,750 in total assets. This change will force 588,000 Kentuckians, including 256,000 children, to reapply for the program in order to secure food. The bill also seeks to dramatically drop the poverty threshold from 200 percent to a poverty level of 130 percent, putting everyone using SNAP at risk for losing their benefits.

Having \$2,750 in total assets is not a sign of being "food secure." In fact, it is far lower than the estimated \$3,400 average cost of living per month in the state.

As more people in the US struggle to obtain food, the danger of malnutrition has risen. According to the food

bank network Feeding America, Kentucky has the highest rate of food insecurity for older adults in the country.

Some 580,000 Kentuckians face hunger, among them 154,290 children. This amounts to one in eight Kentuckians and one in every seven children. Far greater numbers of people are essentially one financial emergency away from the same crisis.

At the present moment, in order for someone to qualify for SNAP benefits in Kentucky, the person must be at or below the federal poverty level and if considered "able-bodied" must work part-time for 20 hours a week.

Kentucky state law defines "able-bodied" as anyone who is over the age of 18 and under 60 years of age. This deems the person automatically as being physically and mentally able to work, unless otherwise determined through medical documentation. They cannot be responsible for the primary care of a dependent child or a dependent disabled adult.

Republican Representative Wade Williams, the bill's sponsor, states that the driving force behind the bill is to "get workers off the sideline and back into the workforce." In reality, HB 367 will remove the Cabinet for Health and Family Services' ability to waive those limits and loosen standards in times of "economic distress," without permission from the legislature. This would provide the legislature with greater control over SNAP work requirements.

This will only exacerbate food insecurity for nearly everyone receiving food assistance, including children and the elderly. For decades Kentucky has consistently ranked among the worst states in the nation in regard to poverty, labor force participation, addiction, incarceration rates and more.

The planned cuts are a part of a larger national effort to slash vital social programs, as evidenced by the appearance of Scott Centorino, a member of the Florida-based conservative think-tank Foundation for Government

Accountability, on the Kentucky House floor February 15. Centorino's outfit focuses on reducing labor law restrictions on teenage workers, blocking the expansion of Medicaid at both state and federal levels, and generally hacking at the few remaining tatters of the social safety net characterized as the "welfare state."

Speaking before the Kentucky House of Representatives, Centorino stated that HB 367 "simply restores the federal asset test in food stamps and closes the loophole."

The supposed "loophole" that Centorino speaks of is the federal policy called Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE) that is utilized by a majority of states, including Kentucky. BBCE allows state governments to skip the asset test when determining if a person is eligible for SNAP benefits.

BBCE grants an individual or a household categorical eligibility for SNAP benefits if they also qualify for other assistance programs, which would include Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), another federally-funded program that is designed to provide short-term cash assistance for low-income families. This streamlines the process for Kentuckians to receive federal assistance like SNAP by waiving the asset test.

HB 367's sponsor, Williams, accused 34,000 individual SNAP recipients of being in violation of qualifications due to categorical eligibility, providing zero evidence of this occurring. "Kentucky has more than 130,000 unfilled jobs with a labor force participation rate of just over 57 percent, which is among the lowest in the country," he complained.

The labor force participation rate is calculated by the percentage of working-age people who are currently part of the workforce. This rate obscures the various geographical trends in a state's local economies. The Kentucky Center for Statistics notes that the 57 percent cited by Williams is largely driven by the 54 Appalachian counties making up the eastern portion of the state. These counties have a median participation rate that is nearly 10 percentage points below the overall state level.

Central Appalachia—the mountainous areas of eastern Kentucky, West Virginia, southwest Virginia, and eastern Tennessee—has among the worst health statistics concerning mortality and morbidity in the country: heart disease, cancer, COPD, accidental injury, poisoning, stroke, diabetes, suicide, infant mortality, and years of potential life lost. It also has considerably lower household incomes, worse living conditions, and higher rates of poverty when compared to the whole of the

United States.

This region in particular has experienced decades of economic strain intensified under "economic restructuring," due to a precipitous decline in employment opportunities within manufacturing and coal extraction industries.

The primary causes of food insecurity within Kentucky and across the US is poverty, unemployment, and stagnant wages. The false claim made by proponents of HB 367 that their aim is to get people back to work masks the fact that there are little to no employment opportunities available to them. The jobs that are available are offered at low wages, requiring many to obtain multiple jobs in order to support themselves and their families.

What is propelling these attacks upon the working class in Kentucky and throughout the US is the clear threat of another financial crisis caused by the inherent contradictions of capitalism. In an attempt to offset another financial crisis, one that would have international implications, the US seeks to maintain its global hegemony through imperialist war.

The expense of these ambitions are being placed upon the working class with renewed attacks on social infrastructure, wages and conditions. The state of Kentucky alone has seen a wave of such legislation since the start of 2024. Each proposed bill builds upon the other, seeking to prey upon the most vulnerable segments of the working class. All the while, Kentucky itself is seeing consecutive growth in revenue each year.

Passing through the House the same day as HB 367, another bill (HB 255) seeks to remove state restrictions on child labor, to increase the working hours of minors within the workforce. Passed on February 22 on a 25-11 Senate vote, HB 18 would ban municipalities from enacting rules which require landlords to rent to people who receive federal housing assistance, which would affect 34,000 Kentucky households. Meanwhile, HB 5, which criminalizes homelessness and increases punishments for various criminal offenses, is continuing to move through the State Senate with minimal opposition from the Democratic Party.



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