



FIRST FOCUS

MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY

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April 6th, 2018

Ms. Sasha Gersten-Paal
SNAP Program Development Division
Food and Nutrition Service
3101 Park Center Drive
Room 812
Alexandria, VA 22302

Re: Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Requirements and Services for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents RIN 0584-AE57

Dear Ms. Gersten-Paal:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on USDA's Advanced Notice on requirements and services for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs).

As a bipartisan advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families the priority in federal policy decisions, First Focus pays very close attention to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) because SNAP plays a critical role in addressing child poverty and child hunger and food insecurity. The SNAP three-month time limit, though it claims to target adults without dependents, is a policy that has in reality impacted the availability of food assistance to low income children and youth.

Federal law limits SNAP eligibility for childless unemployed and underemployed adults age 18-50 (except for those who are exempt) to just three months out of every three years unless they are able to obtain and maintain an average of 20 hours a week of employment. This rule is harsh and unfair. It harms vulnerable people by denying them food benefits at a time when they most need it and it does not result in increased employment and earnings. At least 500,000 low-income individuals nationwide lost SNAP in 2016 due to the time limit. This put their food security at risk. And, by time-limiting food assistance to this group, federal law has shifted the burden of providing food to these unemployed individuals from SNAP to local charities.

The SNAP time-limit that targets ABAWDs unduly harms children as well. Children living in poverty often depend on pooled resources (including SNAP benefits) from extended family members who do not claim them as dependents. Studies have also shown that low-income Non-

Custodial Parents (who do not have primary custody of children) rely on supplemental income through SNAP and other forms of assistance, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, to be able to provide for their children and afford child support payments. In both scenarios, additional burdensome restrictions on SNAP eligibility for ABAWDs would translate to less resources available to support the health and wellbeing of those children. Furthermore, youth aging out of foster care experience high rates of unemployment and poverty. This population already faces barriers to accessing SNAP due to existing ABAWD time limits. Any efforts to implement shortened time-limits or eliminate state exemptions from these requirements would be particularly harmful to the population aging out of foster care.

While this request for comment asks for suggestions on how to improve the time limit, we are concerned that the Administration seeks to expand the scope of the cutoff and to eliminate the little flexibility states have to limit the damage of the rule. The Department's stance on the time limit is not one that our organization shares. The Secretary of Agriculture has suggested that they need to "remove those waivers for able-bodied adults without dependents," because "it's become a lifestyle for some people." USDA's budget has proposed making the time limit harsher by repealing states' flexibility to exempt certain individuals and most high unemployment areas from the time limit and exposing more people to this punitive policy. As a result, we are deeply concerned that this request for comment is part of an administrative effort to make the time limit even more harsh.

We strongly oppose any administrative action by USDA that would expose more people to this cutoff policy. Under the law, states have the flexibility to waive areas within the state that have experienced elevated unemployment. The rules governing areas' eligibility for waivers have been in place for nearly 20 years and every state except Delaware has availed themselves of waivers at some point since the time limit became law. The waiver rules are reasonable, transparent, and manageable for states to operationalize. Any change that would restrict, impede, or add uncertainty to our state's current ability to waive areas with elevated unemployment must not be pursued.

The request for comment also seems to suggest that potential improvements to other aspects of the time limit policy, such as individual exemption policy, would justify weakening states' flexibility to waive the time limit in areas with elevated unemployment. This logic is unfounded. States' current ability to exempt certain individuals from the rule, while important, is wholly insufficient and could never make up for having to apply the time limit in areas with elevated unemployment. And, the underfunded workforce system and SNAP employment and training programs are not designed or well suited to meet the job training requirements under this rule. Put simply, there is no justification for weakening current waiver rules and exposing more vulnerable people to this SNAP eligibility cutoff.

The only action we encourage USDA to take with respect to this time limit rule that impacts Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents is to propose its elimination. Restoring SNAP's ability to provide food assistance to impoverished unemployed people would be a powerful policy improvement that would reduce food insecurity among those seeking work.

Sincerely,

First Focus