Work requirements work against children
April 6, 2023
Contact: Michele Kayal, VP Media and Communications, MicheleK@FirstFocus.org

Work requirements snagged the spotlight on Capitol Hill this week as lawmakers began floating ideas for strengthening them as a condition of food, medical and other aid to low-income households.

Many supporters of stronger work requirements have been careful to suggest they will only apply to “those without dependents” or “able-bodied…childless adults.” This sounds like it will spare people with children. Here is the truth: Children will suffer anyway.

Let’s start with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly called food stamps, which several lawmakers have squarely in their sites. SNAP currently feeds more than 14 million children. Four million of them could go hungry, as First Focus on Children’s policy experts note in this recently released brief, under current proposals to expand SNAP’s work requirements to parents and caregivers of school-age children, that is, kids 7-18 year-olds. But children will also suffer even under legislation that focuses specifically on individuals without children. The fact is that families are often complex and multi-generational, and in many cases, low-income families pool resources. Taking food from adults in the household affects everyone who sits at the table.

The word “dependents” causes part of the problem. Non-custodial caregivers — aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents — may provide most of a child’s care even if they do not have legal custody. One proposal suggests raising the age for work requirements from 49 to 65, which would implicate a large number of care-taking grandparents.

Proposals requiring “adults” — people age 18 and above — to meet work requirements also would severely disadvantage children aging out of the foster care system and youth experiencing homelessness. These young people already experience high rates of unemployment and poverty and face barriers to accessing public assistance programs.

The term “work requirements” offers another thorny issue. Data shows that in most low-income households at least one family member has a steady job. In many cases, “work requirements” simply “require” the employed individual to document their “work,” erecting new barriers to aid for those who need it most. Low-wage earners often work an unpredictable number of hours from week to week. Many immigrant workers are paid in cash and therefore have no evidence of employment — or bosses who are unwilling to provide evidence. Many individuals are self-employed, complicating employment verification. Perhaps most important, none of these proposals consider uncompensated childrearing “work.”
Increasing work requirements will ripple through aid to children.

For instance, 85 million people — including more than 34 million children — have health insurance through Medicaid, another program being considered for work requirements. Data shows that children are much more likely to be insured when the adults in their household are insured. Pandemic-era provisions that suspended disenrollment pushed the number of uninsured individuals: Just 5.4% of children were uninsured during this time. Those provisions have now ended. Federal research suggests that 74% of the kids who lose coverage now will actually still be eligible, but will be disenrolled as a result of bureaucratic red tape. Compound this red tape with the red tape of work requirements and you’ve created a fast lane to coverage loss for eligible people, with and without children.

So far, the conversation around work requirements has simply revealed the need to strengthen, not weaken, the country’s social safety net. As usual, the blunt edge of the policies under discussion will disproportionately hit children of color and families in marginalized communities. In a 2019 study, the National Academy of Sciences determined that “work requirements are at least as likely to increase as to decrease poverty.” In the post-Roe era, work requirements and other miserly policies are more likely to continue hurting children and the people who care for them. Our policy team outlines the danger of work requirements and other obstacles to services in this brief.

Supporters cite record employment and a dearth of workers as part of the rationale for work requirements. Pandemic-era assistance such as the improved Child Tax Credit showed that when you give people — especially single mothers — unrestricted aid, they will use it on child care, transportation and other services that make it possible them to get to work. So perhaps restricting aid is not the way to encourage more people to enter the workforce.

Then again, a growing number of states are making it easier than ever to put children themselves to work. Perhaps they can fill the gap.
First Focus on Children
1400 I Street NW
Suite $50
Washington, DC 20005
United States

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