

The Truth About the New Food Stamp Work Requirements' Effects

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The Trump administration on Wednesday released a final rule strengthening work requirements in the food stamp program.

Predictably, it set off alarms on the left. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., tweeted, “My family relied on food stamps ... when my dad died at 48. I was a student. If this happened then, we might’ve just starved. Now, many people will. It’s shameful how the GOP works overtime to create freebies for the rich while dissolving lifelines of those who need it most.” <https://twitter.com/nbcnews/status/1202297479556993024> ...

Headlines blared about 700,000 Americans losing access to food stamps. A Washington Post columnist wrote, “Just in time for Christmas, the [Trump administration finalized](#) the first of three new rules requiring more people to go hungry.”

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But the critics are simply not being fair.

So, first, let’s look at what the Trump administration food stamp reform would do and who it would affect. Contra the implication of Ocasio-Cortez’s tweet, the reform does not affect parents with minor children, the elderly, or disabled.

It is limited to able-bodied adults without dependents. There are currently 3 million such people receiving food stamp benefits. The overwhelming majority have zero employment and earnings.

Under the rule, some recipient able-bodied adults without dependents who have received aid for more than three months would be required to take a job; if a job is not immediately available, recipients would be required to undertake training, perform community service work, or at least look for a job.

The reform is quite modest: Two-thirds of all recipient able-bodied adults without dependents are exempt from the requirements.

While the press ambiguously reports that some 700,000 recipients would “lose benefits” under the rule, it’s important to note that not a single individual will lose benefits if they perform the pro-work activities required by the program.

Again, benefits would be terminated only if the recipient earns enough to no longer need food stamps or if the recipient refuses to perform the assigned activities.

The administration’s rule represents a positive nudge toward employment for work-capable adults who are currently unemployed and receiving aid. Studies show that this type of work requirement reduces dependence and increases employment.

Work requirements also ultimately benefit Americans who are capable of working. A major problem in the welfare state is that benefits tend to reduce work and earnings among the affected population. Random assignment controlled experiments (conducted as part of national income maintenance experiments) offer—by far—the best information on the effects of welfare on behavior.

These experiments show that each \$1 in welfare transfers typically results in 66 cents in reduced employment and earning.

Traditional welfare, therefore, is a very inefficient means of raising income and living standards. Moreover, if welfare encourages recipients to remain out of the labor force for longer periods, the gaps in work experience will not only reduce immediate incomes, but will also pull down long-term earnings potential.

Unfortunately, despite the value of work requirements, too many states have tried to dodge implementing them.

The work requirement approach has nearly universal public support. [More than 90% of the public agrees](#) that “able-bodied adults who receive cash, food, housing, and medical assistance should be required to work or prepare for work as a condition of receiving those government benefits.”

The public does not want to deny aid to those who need it, but does believe that recipients should take steps toward self-support in exchange for the assistance they are given.

Welfare should be based on reciprocal obligations between society and recipients, rather than a one-way handout from taxpayers to recipients.

We have been down this road before. Work requirements were at the heart of successful welfare reform in the 1990s. That reform replaced the old Aid to Families with Dependent Children program with a new program called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.

The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program, for the first time, required single parents to work or prepare for work as a condition for receiving aid. As a result, welfare caseloads plummeted, employment surged, and [child poverty dropped at a record rate](#).

The program was regarded as a remarkable success. But not everyone agreed. [Progressives opposed welfare reform](#), and have opposed all work requirements in welfare with dogged consistency since then. In their view, welfare aid must be given unconditionally without any behavioral requirements.

The opposition to work requirements for recipient able-bodied adults without dependents is just the latest battle in an ongoing struggle against welfare work requirements per se.

Earlier this year, Ocasio-Cortez let the cat out of the bag when, as part of her “Green New Deal,” she advocated providing “[economic security to all those who are unable or unwilling to work](#).”

This revealing remark was quickly withdrawn, but the New York Democrat’s position is, in fact, standard for the left. In particular, the left sees food aid as a [universal human right](#). Behavioral requirements for food stamp eligibility are, therefore, anathema.

Perhaps not coincidentally, Ocasio-Cortez’s remark tracks actual policy in most of the current welfare state. Each year, government spends \$1.1 trillion on more than 90 means-tested aid programs that provide cash, food, housing, and medical benefits to poor and low-income Americans.

Nearly all of these programs are unconditional entitlements. They do not require constructive self-help behavior from recipients.

Only two programs, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families and the earned income tax credit, have substantial work requirements. Even there, the work requirements are riddled with loopholes.

As noted, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families initially focused on work, but today, half the able-bodied caseload in it is completely idle. The earned income tax credit ostensibly links benefits to employment, but actual employment is not verified, and the requirement is weakened because the parent is free to transfer the work obligation to other adults who are already working.

Clearly, a lot needs to be done to transform the current welfare system into a more benign system that provides ample aid to those who need it, while at the same time promoting the positive behaviors of work and marriage.

Such a reformed system would not only be more efficient in raising overall income, it would also be more humane, because work and marriage provide intrinsic psychological and social rewards well beyond their immediate economic impacts.

The Trump administration's food stamp rule is a positive step in that needed reform.

COMMENTARY BY

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