



ADVOCATES FOR JUSTICE, INSPIRED BY CATHOLIC SISTERS

WORK REQUIREMENTS DON'T WORK

Limiting Access to Critical Programs is Ineffective and Wrong

NETWORK believes all people have inherent dignity and the right to basic life essentials such as food, healthcare, and housing. Our government has a moral obligation to support children, people who are sick or disabled, those experiencing poverty or discrimination, and the elderly.

Our Values

- The Gospel and Catholic Social Justice teach us that every person, regardless of their life circumstances, deserves the ability to thrive.
- Federal policy should reflect a special concern for people who are most vulnerable, including children, the elderly, and those experiencing poverty or discrimination.
- In a nation with as much wealth as the United States, no one should go hungry or lack basic shelter and healthcare.

Our nation's safety net includes successful federal programs that help individuals in times of crisis and need protection, so as not to increase economic divides in our society. Programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and housing vouchers are designed to assist individuals and families experiencing economic hardships, and they work. As critical investments in human capacity, they deserve to be strengthened, rather than targeted with budget cuts.

Recent proposals to cut these programs threaten their effectiveness. Budget cuts can take many forms, from block grants to spending caps to the imposition of increased work requirements. All of these proposals will cut off millions from essential food, health, and housing support. These proposals are divorced from the reality of low-wage work in America. Workers in the "gig economy", whether white, Black, or Brown, must contend with low wages, unpredictable schedules, no benefits, and high costs for childcare or elder care that impact their income and the ability to work.

Let's Talk Facts:

Most participants of the major food, nutrition, and health care programs who can work, do.

Overwhelmingly, most people receiving assistance who can work are already employed in low-wage jobs inadequate to afford basic necessities without public support. Recipients qualify for these life-sustaining programs because they work at shockingly low-income jobs—not because they are unemployed. For example, Department of Agriculture data have shown that only 3% of adult pre-pandemic SNAP participants without dependents had no earnings or other income.

The programs under attack typically have work requirements already. SNAP, for example, has strict and complex work requirements, such that “Able Bodied Adults Without Children” under age 50 can only get SNAP for 3 months while unemployed in any 3-year period unless they meet narrow exceptions for disability, pregnancy, or care of their young children. Similarly, HUD housing programs currently have robust maximum earned income and other income verification requirements.

Work requirements punish the most vulnerable for whom regular employment is an impossible goal.

Compelling obstacles prevent most non-employed program recipients from holding regular jobs. Nonetheless, amidst increasing calls for expanded work requirements, legislation called the “America Works Act” (HB 1581) doubles down on SNAP’s existing work requirements and would deprive an estimated one in four participants, including four million children, of food assistance. Just a few disturbing examples of who would be cut off include:

- **A 62-year old grandmother** who cares for her elementary school-aged grandchildren—so that their mother can hold a full-time job
- **Veterans and other individuals with serious health conditions** who are struggling with unacceptable delays and red tape in their disability applications. As the Social Security Administration reported for January 2023, wait times for just initial disability determinations are from six months to 746 days.

Similarly, in an experimental Arkansas program that imposed harsh Medicaid work requirements, nearly 1 in 4 participants lost their coverage—until the courts put an end to the policy.

Work requirements do not improve employment and income prospects. Research has shown that expanding SNAP work requirements do not result in long-term employment or a living wage. Rather, work requirements can force a person into unstable temporary, or part-time work, only making it harder to find stable employment. Likewise, a study by Harvard researchers found no evidence that the Arkansas Medicaid work requirements policy increased employment.

Work requirements create bureaucratic hurdles for people in poverty who are already working.

Federal program participants are already subject to a maze of bureaucratic hurdles. State work requirements generally require enrollees to regularly submit paystubs, timesheets, and other documentation. As the Arkansas Medicaid experience demonstrated, many who lost coverage were in fact working, but could not meet the required number of hours or officially document their hours, while others who were exempt due to disabilities or caregiving duties could not overcome the bureaucratic red tape to claim those exemptions. Especially for millions of gig workers with seasonal employment, unpredictable or erratic scheduling, and informal employment, navigating complex bureaucratic obstacles is simply impossible.

If Congress is committed to promoting work, it should raise the minimum wage, expand and make permanent the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit, invest in workforce development, and enact family-friendly policies that allow families to balance work and home responsibilities. Budget cuts will drive the vulnerable to fall through the cracks, increasing burdens on churches and the non-profit sector to provide uncompensated services. The biggest burden, however, will be a moral one, as individuals, families, and children face increased hunger, homelessness, and poor health as they bear the costs of failed policy.