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Expanding Work Requirements For Food Assistance At Center Of Farm Bill Debate

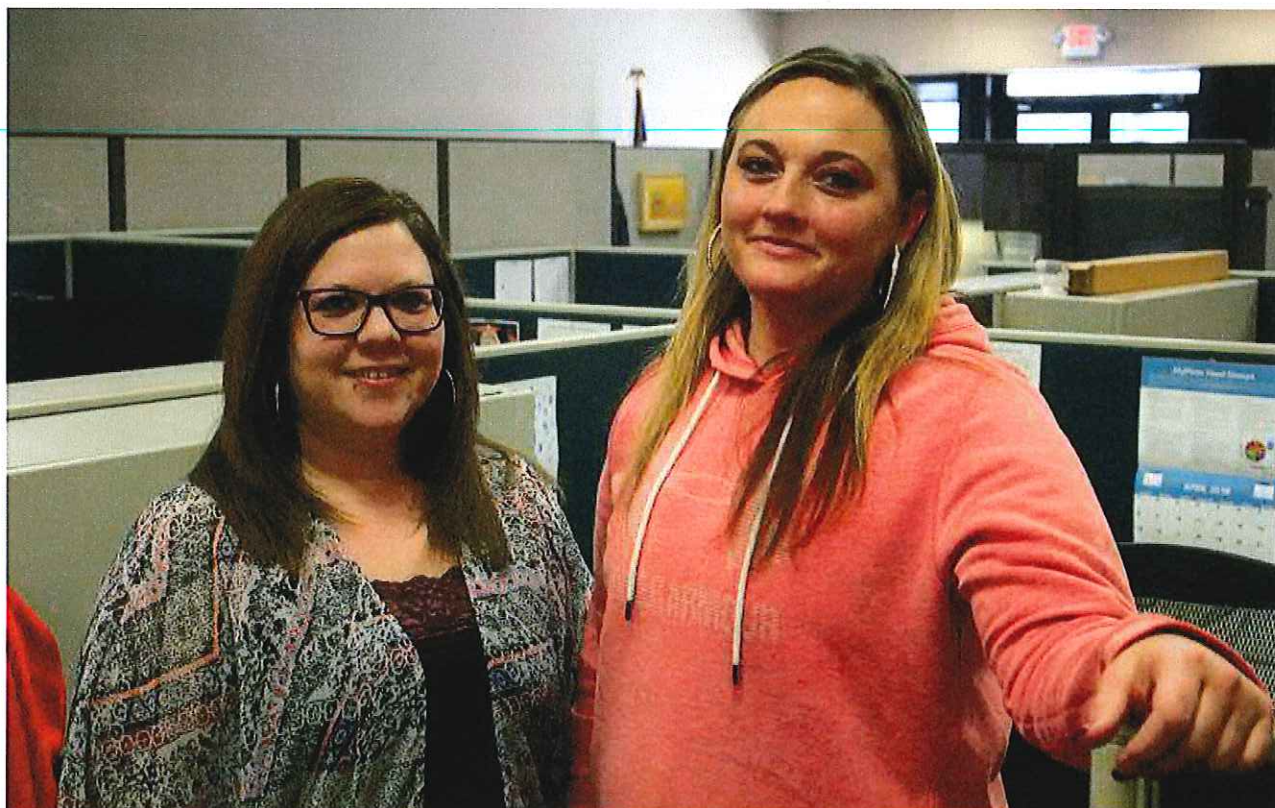
By GRANT GERLOCK (/PEOPLE/GRANT-GERLOCK) • APR 24, 2018

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(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kcur2/files/styles/x_large/public/201804/042118_GG_SNAP-Work_Michaela-Funkhouser_Erica-Galvan.jpg)

Erica Galvan (right) found a better job and is set to go off SNAP after enrolling in a Nebraska job-training program being overseen by case manager Michaela Funkhouser (left). The program is similar to what congressional Republicans are pushing.

GRANT GERLOCK / HARVEST PUBLIC MEDIA

There's a Republican-authored proposal in the next farm bill that would require millions more people to work or volunteer in order to receive federal food assistance.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program accounts for most of the spending in the bill, which is up for renewal this year, and provides monthly stipends for more than 40 million low-income Americans to buy food (though in many cases the funds may only cover a couple weeks).

Conservatives argue expanding work requirements will help SNAP recipients find jobs and move off of food assistance. But House Democrats have said the requirements would punish people who struggle to work, and it's become the central contentious issue in this year's farm bill debate.

Listen

4:11

Harvest Public Media's Grant Gerlock takes a closer look at the main part of SNAP that Republicans are looking to change in the 2018 farm bill.

The rules

Currently, the only group of people (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/able-bodied-adults-without-dependents-abawds>) required to work in order to qualify for SNAP is adults from 18 to 49 years old who are not disabled and have no dependents. Republicans have proposed extending the age limit to 59, as well as including parents whose kids are older than six.

If that becomes law, the House Agriculture Committee predicts the number of people who would have to work, volunteer or join training programs for 20 hours a week could double from about 3.5 million people to as many as 7 million.

Conservative groups believe it's a way to encourage those on welfare to find jobs.

"We set an alarm in the mornings to force us to wake up," said Kristina Rasmussen, who's with the conservative Foundation for Government Accountability. "We don't want to wake up, but sometimes having that deadline to focus on activity makes all the difference in the world."

But critics point to the statistic that more than 44 percent of SNAP recipients (<https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/Characteristics2016-Summary.pdf>) already live in a home where someone works. Ed Bolen, a policy analyst for the left-leaning Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, says the 20-hour threshold is an arbitrary hurdle.

"I do worry that a movement in that direction is just a punitive way to get people off of SNAP," Bolen said.

State training

But it's not just new requirements for recipients: The House proposal also demands that states expand their training programs to people who can't find a job.

Late last year, Ag Secretary Sonny Perdue hinted (<https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2017/12/05/usda-promises-new-snap-flexibilities-promote-self-sufficiency>) toward a push for states to take more responsibility for job training when the USDA said it would give more flexibility to "promote self-sufficiency."

The training programs called for in the farm bill would look similar to a pilot program in Nebraska for underemployed SNAP recipients that's been around for two years. The program is voluntary, though the SNAP recipients must meet certain criteria, including speaking English and having a work history. Most in the program are single women with children.

Seventy-nine people have taken part, and the state considers 27 to have been a success; that is, earning new degrees or certifications, being enrolled in on-the-job training or, like Erica Galvan, finding a new job.

Galvan joined the program about five months ago. At the time, the single mother was a nursing assistant, commuting an hour each day to a small-town nursing home where she worked the night shift.

"Because I could make the most money (on the night shift) to bring home to my family," Galvan said. But it was stressful. She said one of her sons struggled at school because of the family's topsy-turvy schedule. She was sleeping only a few hours a day.

"It was not a good situation," she said, but she didn't quit because she didn't know if she could find something better. "Crazy stability is better than no stability, I guess, is the way I looked at it."

The state program connected her with a caseworker who helped her update her resume, look for jobs and practice interviewing. It worked. Galvan is now working at a local pharmacy as a home health care representative. She earns \$1,000 more each month than before and she doesn't have to work nights or weekends.

She's also set to go off of SNAP in May for the first time in about two years.

"I have a job that I can stay at for years and years," Galvan said. "It fulfills me and it makes me happy and it's a good place for my kids."

If it weren't for the encouragement from her caseworker, Galvan said, she may never have taken the leap to find a new job.

Michaela Funkhouser, who handles Nebraska's pilot program and was Galvan's cheering section, said caseworkers provide a personal connection that backs up other kinds of support like transportation or tuition.

"They might need child care for a little bit or just that person to say, 'Hey you would be really good at this. Let's build that resume. Let's prep you for an interview. Let's take that chance,'" Funkhouser said.

The cost of requiring work

But the Nebraska program takes time and energy, and the farm bill proposal wants states to give one-on-one assessments and match people with job programs. It's not clear whether states will get the money they need from Congress to expand those training programs.



Starting in 2021, the House bill would put up \$1 billion per year. While people against expanding the work requirements argue that's not enough, House Agriculture Committee Chairman Mike Conaway is blunt: "Well, there's not any more to spend."

The Texas Republican said that the proposed funding triples the federal contribution to SNAP work programs.

http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kcur2/files/styles/x_large/public/201804/041218_Farm

House Agriculture Committee Chairman Mike Conaway, R-Texas, unveils the 2018 farm bill draft in April 2018.

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"We're going to give them that helping hand up. Now is it all the helping hand they need? Probably not. But it's going to be a really good one," he said.

The other problem that critics see with expanding work requirements is the penalty when people don't reach the required hours: They lose food assistance.

The bill allows states to offer a limited number of exemptions for those who struggle to meet their hours because of things like an injury, sickness or mental illness.

"Cutting them off of SNAP doesn't get somebody a house if they're homeless," said Bolen, with the CBPP. "It doesn't get them health care if they have an undiagnosed mental condition. It just takes away their food assistance."

Currently, people can be in SNAP for up to three months without meeting the 20 hour requirement. The proposed rules would tighten that timeline. If a person goes a month where they average less than 20 hours a week of work, they could lose SNAP for a year. If it happens again after that, there'd be no access to SNAP for three years.

Fractured coalition

The farm bill is often held up as one of the last bastions of bipartisanship on Capitol Hill. Urban lawmakers, often Democrats, who back SNAP and other food assistance programs find common cause with rural lawmakers, often Republicans, who need more votes for insurance, income and conservation programs for farmers.

But this issue of expanding work requirements undermines previous decades of compromise. In 2014 (<http://netnebraska.org/article/news/uneasy-marriage-food-stamps-and-farm-bill>), the farm bill was nearly derailed by attempts to broaden work rules and separate SNAP from the bill entirely.

The House version of the 2018 farm bill made it out of committee last week without a single Democratic vote, largely because of the work requirements and other SNAP changes.

For their part, Senate ag committee leaders say they're still committed to writing a bipartisan farm bill, which means it will have to be close to the status quo on SNAP.

That means it's likely that renewal of the farm bill, which expires Sept. 30, will hinge on work requirements.

This story is part of Harvest Public Media's series about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Follow Grant on Twitter: @ggerlock (<https://twitter.com/ggerlock>)