

Hi — I am writing regarding the Food Stamp Program benefits for adults not living with children. I work on nutrition programs for the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. We are involved in the nutrition title of the Farm Bill, which includes the Food Stamp Program (which is called Basic Food in Washington). I could not tell from your website whether you do policy work in addition to direct service work. If you are able to write a letter to Congress, you could help secure additional food benefits for childless adults.

As you may know, the Farm Bill has passed the Senate and House and is in conference now. One provision that we were able to get into the Senate version of the bill, but that is not in the House, would soften the 3 month time limit on unemployed adults (18-49 year olds) who are not living with children. Most homeless men fall into this category even if they have children, because family shelters will not accept men, so the men are separated from their families. Of course, childless men and women or those whose children are not living with them also fall into this category, regardless of where they are living.

Theoretically, the provision does not affect disabled people but, as I am sure you know, many people who are disabled, especially with PTSD or other behavioral health problems, have difficulty establishing their disabled status. During the months or years that they struggle to come to terms with their new challenges and establish their claim, food stamps may be one of the few benefits available to help them.

I was wondering whether someone at your organizations would be willing to write a letter in support of this provision. We would be happy to provide a first draft and as much detail as you want about the provision. I am attaching a short memo on the provision. (You will see that we are “selling” it as a simplification for political reasons.)

Thank you for your help, and please feel free to call or email me with any questions. — Colleen

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THE FARM BILL CONFERENCE SHOULD PROVIDE MODEST FOOD STAMP HELP TO CHILDLESS UNEMPLOYED WORKERS

What's the issue: The Senate-passed version of the farm bill includes a provision that would simplify and modestly improve the overly harsh food stamp eligibility rules with respect to unemployed childless workers. The House does not include such a provision. The final conference agreement should include it.

What the provision does: This provision would simplify the rules governing food stamp eligibility for unemployed childless adults by combining two 3 month periods of eligibility into a single six month period of eligibility every 36 months. Currently, adults aged 18-49 without children may receive only three months of food stamps in any 36-month period, unless they are working at least 20 hours per week or participating in an employment and training program. They can requalify for a second 3 month period of eligibility under a different and confusing set of rules.

Often, this group is trying to work, but cannot find employment and do not have access to a training program, so they lose food stamps after just 3 months despite doing what they can to find a job. Simplifying the rules by creating a single 6 month period of eligibility would also give states more opportunity to work with this population in an effort to help them find and keep employment.

Who is helped: These adults are very poor and typically have limited education, very low skills, and no access to other safety net programs.

- Many have no income other than food stamps and qualify for no other benefits; the food stamps they may receive (up to \$162 per month) are their only safety net.
- 82 percent of those affected by the 3 month limit are in households with income below *half* of the poverty line. A majority have no cash income at all.
- *More than 40 percent of this group are women.*
- Close to one-third — 29 percent — are over the age of 40, an age above which individuals with limited skills may have more difficulty finding jobs quickly.
- More than 40 percent lack a high school diploma. Some have limited cognitive abilities.
- Many have lost their jobs due to a plant closing or company downsizing and cannot find employment within a few short months. Some are veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The two 3-month periods of eligibility are inconsistent and don't make sense: One of the more complicated areas of the policy is how individuals subject to the time-limit may qualify for a second 3 months of benefits within the 36 month period. After individuals hit the time-limit and lose food stamp eligibility, they may regain eligibility while they are working more than 80 hours in a month (i.e., more than 20 hours week), assuming they still meet the income eligibility standards which this group normally would. Once on the program again, these individuals can regain 3-months of eligibility to be banked for a future period of unemployment. Often, such individuals never get access to the second three months of eligibility because they do not think to apply for food stamps while working, even though they may be earning wages low enough to qualify for food stamps. Even if they do participate as a worker, many may not know to seek a reinstatement of the additional three months of eligibility because it would only be available to the individual if they lose their job at some later point. These cumbersome program rules make the second three months difficult to administer and hard for eligible individuals to understand.

States support reform of the current rules: States have long opposed the current three-month restriction. They find it complicated to administer and believe it undermines their efforts to simplify program rules and improve payment accuracy. The design also makes it difficult for states to effectively target employment and training funds. The current 3-month limit gives states very little time to assess their clients and determine who needs training, and who is work-ready and will return quickly to the labor force on their own. As a result, training slots are often wasted on clients who do not need them or are used more as a mechanism to help people retain eligibility beyond the 3-month limit rather than to

improve the employment prospects of this population. A number of these problems could easily be addressed by setting the time-limit at a more realistic period of six months, without weakening the core intent of the time-limit.

Finding a job can be difficult for low-skilled workers: The current restriction on unemployed adults participating in the program is too severe. This population has a demonstrated attachment to the labor force, but because they typically work in low-skilled jobs, their employment is often part-time and not always steady. Research shows that workers who have limited education and low skills experience substantial periods of unemployment and have difficulties finding jobs even when the economy is strong. Unemployed workers in some poor rural areas confront still more limited employment opportunities.

The Senate is on record in favor of reforming the time-limit: This proposal would restrict childless unemployed adults to no more than 6 months of food stamp benefits out of every 3 years. All other aspects of the current time-limit would remain in place. The Senate, on a bi-partisan basis, has supported a less restrictive limit than current law or the one proposed here — 6 of every 12 months in its initial 1995 welfare reform bill, 4 of every 12 months in the later 1995 and 1996 versions which reflected a Conference Agreement with the House, and in 2001, 6 out of 24 months. But the Senate's more reasonable approach to administering this limit has not been enacted.

Many in the House are on record of addressing this harsh provision: Under Republican leadership, the House rejected Senate efforts to improve this overly harsh rule. While the House-passed farm bill does not include this provision, many in the House favor improving the rule. Historically, the Black, Hispanic and Progressive caucuses have called for repealing this ban. And, this year, three separate farm or nutrition bills introduced by Reps. Baca on behalf of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, Reps. DeLauro/Gilchrest, and Reps. McGovern/Emerson all would have repealed the time-limit. A full repeal goes far beyond what is included in the Senate proposal.

The Farm Bill Conference should adopt this simplification: This low-cost simplification would modestly ease the harsh time limit and simplify state administration. The Conferees should adopt the Senate position on this simplification provision.