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The Missing Tool: How Work Requirements Can Reduce Dependency and Help Find Absent Workers

Alli Fick
Senior Research Fellow

Scott Centorino
Senior Fellow

KEY FINDINGS



WORK REQUIREMENTS IN FOOD STAMPS ARE **AMONG THE MOST EFFECTIVE TOOLS** IN LIFTING FAMILIES OUT OF DEPENDENCY AND INTO SELF-SUFFICIENCY.



THOUGH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HAS SUSPENDED SOME WORK REQUIREMENTS, **STATES ARE NOT WITHOUT OPTIONS.**



NINE STATES HAVE INSTITUTED SOME FORM OF MANDATORY EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING (E&T) PROGRAM REQUIREMENT.



STATES MAY ASSIGN WORK REGISTRANTS TO AN E&T PROGRAM, **MOVING MILLIONS FROM WELFARE TO WORK.**

THE BOTTOM LINE:

STATES SHOULD GET ABLE-BODIED ADULTS BACK TO WORK BY REQUIRING E&T PROGRAM PARTICIPATION.

Employers are desperate for workers

More than 10 million jobs are currently open across America, from food services and hospitality to manufacturing, education, and financial services.¹ Businesses are looking for workers and policymakers are looking for solutions.

Federal unemployment and welfare benefits have played an outsized role in driving the current worker shortage.²⁻⁵ But other government policies have strangled the economic recovery, including the suspension of work requirements in food stamps.⁶

Work requirements in food stamps rank among the most effective tools in lifting individuals out of dependency into self-sufficiency.⁷⁻¹⁰ Studies across multiple states have demonstrated how able-bodied adults leaving food stamps after work requirements are implemented find work in thousands of diverse industries and see their incomes more than triple.¹¹⁻¹²



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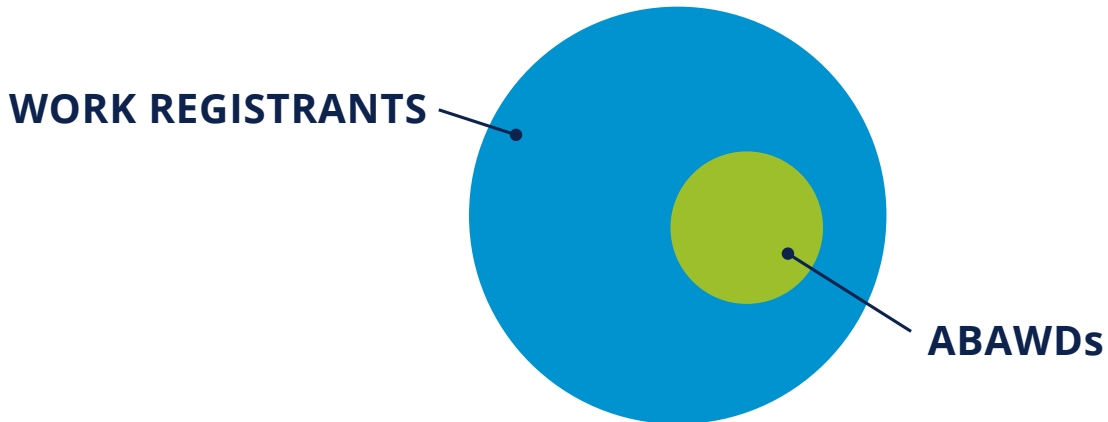
But in March 2020, the federal government suspended the work requirement that propelled these achievements.¹³ That suspension continues because the public health emergency to which it is tied remains in effect. Unfortunately, the Biden administration has not indicated any intention of ending the declaration soon.

However, the suspension only applies to one of the two work requirements in the food stamp program.¹⁴ The other requirement is still a viable option for state lawmakers who are looking for tools to help more Americans get off the sidelines and back to work.

Who are work registrants?

Work registrants are able-bodied adults under the age of 60 who do not have young children or meet some other exemption.¹⁵ This includes able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs), a subgroup within the work registrant population that are between the ages of 18 and 49 and who have no dependent children.¹⁶ This also includes parents of school-aged children and able-bodied childless adults between 50 and 59 years old.¹⁷

These requirements do not apply to adults who are mentally or physically unfit for employment, participating in drug or alcohol treatment programs, enrolled at least half time in training programs or at institutions of higher education, responsible for the care of a dependent child under age six or an incapacitated person, already complying with work registration requirements in cash welfare or unemployment programs, or who are earning at least \$217.50 per week.¹⁸



All of these individuals are subject to the general food stamp work requirement.

What are food stamp work requirements?

There are two work requirements in the food stamp program: one for all work registrants and one specifically for ABAWDs.

ABAWD WORK REQUIREMENTS

Individuals subject to the requirement must work, train, or volunteer at least 20 hours per week to receive food stamps.¹⁹ ABAWDs can meet the requirement by participating in a state’s employment & training program or other qualifying activities which meet the criteria.²⁰ Every state already operates an E&T program for food stamp enrollees.²¹

Unfortunately, Congress suspended the ABAWD work requirement entirely when it passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) in March 2020.²² The suspension will remain in effect until the president allows the public health emergency order to expire.²³

As long as the public health emergency remains in force, states may not remove any ABAWDs for refusing to comply with the ABAWD work requirement.²⁴ Even as the worker shortage intensifies, state policymakers have been handcuffed by this federal provision.



AS LONG AS THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY REMAINS IN FORCE, STATES MAY NOT REMOVE ANY ABAWDs FOR REFUSING TO COMPLY WITH THE ABAWD WORK REQUIREMENT.

But states are not powerless to bring work requirements back to life and get workers out of dependency and off the sidelines: They can use the second, general work requirement and doing so may be the key to truly jumpstarting economic recovery.

GENERAL WORK REQUIREMENTS

Unlike the ABAWD requirement—which only applies to a segment of the food stamp program—the general work requirement applies to all work registrants.²⁵

All work registrants are required to register for work, take a suitable job if offered, and participate in a state E&T or workfare program if assigned.²⁶ Unfortunately, many states do not make these assignments mandatory. Instead, many allow interested work registrants to decide for themselves if they want to participate.

Any able-bodied adult assigned to an E&T program who—without good cause—refuses to comply is disqualified and removed from the food stamp program.²⁷ States have discretion to disqualify individuals for one to three months after the first refusal, three to six months after the second, and six months or even permanently for the third refusal.²⁸



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Few states make E&T assignments mandatory

Despite the proven success of work requirements to help individuals increase their incomes, few states have made E&T program participation mandatory.

In fact, only nine states—Florida, Idaho, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Texas, and Utah—have instituted some form of mandatory E&T.²⁹ Among these states, Florida, Mississippi, and Ohio only require ABAWDs to participate in an E&T program, rather than all work registrants.³⁰

Otherwise, participation in E&T programs is entirely “voluntary,” making this work requirement more of a work suggestion.³¹

In Alabama, for example, fewer than 9,000 of the state's projected 376,000 work registrants will voluntarily participate in an E&T program.³² In Iowa, just 300 of the nearly 36,000 work registrants will voluntarily enroll in a program.³³ This is not a work requirement.



IN ALABAMA, FEWER THAN 9,000 OF THE STATE'S PROJECTED 376,000 WORK REGISTRANTS WILL VOLUNTARILY PARTICIPATE IN AN E&T PROGRAM.



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But states have an opportunity: **States still have the option to assign work registrants to an E&T program, potentially moving millions of able-bodied adults from welfare to work.**

BOTTOM LINE: States should get able-bodied adults back to work by requiring E&T program participation.

Thankfully, there are simple steps for state leaders to alleviate the worker shortage and get more Americans back to work. The good news is that states can act right now, without federal permission and despite federal restrictions, to move able-bodied food stamp enrollees back to work by referring them to an E&T program.

- 1 Require all ABAWDs to participate in an E&T program.**
- 2 Make E&T assignments mandatory for all work registrants.**
- 3 Watch millions move from welfare to work.**

As long as participating in E&T is entirely "voluntary," the economic recovery will be voluntary. When states implemented work requirements for ABAWDs, millions of able-bodied adults went back to work in industries touching every corner of the economy. Their incomes skyrocketed. Enrollment plummeted and resources were preserved for the truly needy. States should build on this past success and implement mandatory E&T assignments so that more people trapped in dependency can experience the power of work.

APPENDIX 1: FOOD STAMP ENROLLMENT IS REACHING RECORD LEVELS

Total work registrants and able-bodied adults without dependents enrolled in food stamps, by state

| State | Projected number of work registrants (FY 2021) | Projected number of ABAWDs (FY 2021) |
|---------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| Alabama | 376,164 | 59,056 |
| Alaska | 20,910 | 10,622 |
| Arizona | 268,155 | 156,022 |
| Arkansas | 147,118 | 13,241 |
| California | 1,516,793 | 482,685 |
| Colorado | 148,583 | 63,060 |
| Connecticut | 93,742 | 31,629 |
| Delaware | 18,146 | 12,821 |
| Florida | 949,771 | 238,955 |
| Georgia | 500,000 | 100,000 |
| Hawaii | 24,250 | 2,970 |
| Idaho | 26,097 | 15,753 |
| Illinois | 798,360 | 341,864 |
| Indiana | 170,000 | 20,000 |
| Iowa | 35,910 | 8,363 |
| Kansas | 61,688 | 16,523 |
| Kentucky | 164,342 | 10,905 |
| Louisiana | 90,000 | 40,000 |
| Maine | 31,569 | 16,660 |
| Maryland | 76,300 | 37,120 |
| Massachusetts | 226,172 | 158,280 |
| Michigan | 179,749 | 119,567 |
| Minnesota | 122,158 | 50,000 |
| Mississippi | 76,776 | 17,457 |
| Missouri | 140,000 | 32,000 |
| Montana | 18,508 | 7,882 |
| Nebraska | 21,020 | 12,450 |
| Nevada | 173,511 | 116,894 |
| New Hampshire | 19,638 | 2,389 |

| State | Projected number of work registrants (FY 2021) | Projected number of ABAWDs (FY 2021) |
|----------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| New Jersey | 39,398 | 11,800 |
| New Mexico | 135,816 | 44,694 |
| New York | 581,591 | 255,037 |
| North Carolina | 342,804 | 155,000 |
| North Dakota | 3,032 | 3,756 |
| Ohio | 332,795 | 110,835 |
| Oklahoma | 102,233 | 76,394 |
| Oregon | 304,426 | 224,538 |
| Pennsylvania | 543,612 | 233,163 |
| Rhode Island | 30,000 | 9,445 |
| South Carolina | 187,616 | 110,000 |
| South Dakota | 20,274 | 4,858 |
| Tennessee | 243,681 | 25,426 |
| Texas | 587,321 | 134,917 |
| Utah | 32,032 | 495 |
| Vermont | 8,500 | 3,300 |
| Virginia | 265,000 | 28,523 |
| Washington | 172,834 | 106,000 |
| West Virginia | 72,768 | 35,312 |
| Wisconsin | 102,500 | 12,300 |
| Wyoming | 6,315 | 1,525 |
| Total | 10,609,978 | 3,782,486 |

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15275 Collier Boulevard | Suite 201-279
Naples, Florida 34119
(239) 244-8808

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