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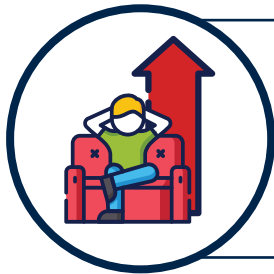
Help Wanted: How Assigning Able-Bodied Adults to Employment and Training Programs Can Help Solve the Labor Shortage

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KEY FINDINGS



AMERICA'S LABOR FORCE IS SHRINKING WHILE
FOOD STAMP ENROLLMENT IS EXPLODING.



ABLE-BODIED ADULTS ARE THE DRIVING FORCE
BEHIND THE FOOD STAMP ENROLLMENT SURGE.



MOST ABLE-BODIED ADULTS ON FOOD STAMPS
ARE NOT WORKING, EVEN PART-TIME.



REQUIRING ABLE-BODIED ADULTS TO PARTICIPATE
IN EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING PROGRAMS CAN
HELP MOVE PEOPLE FROM WELFARE TO WORK.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

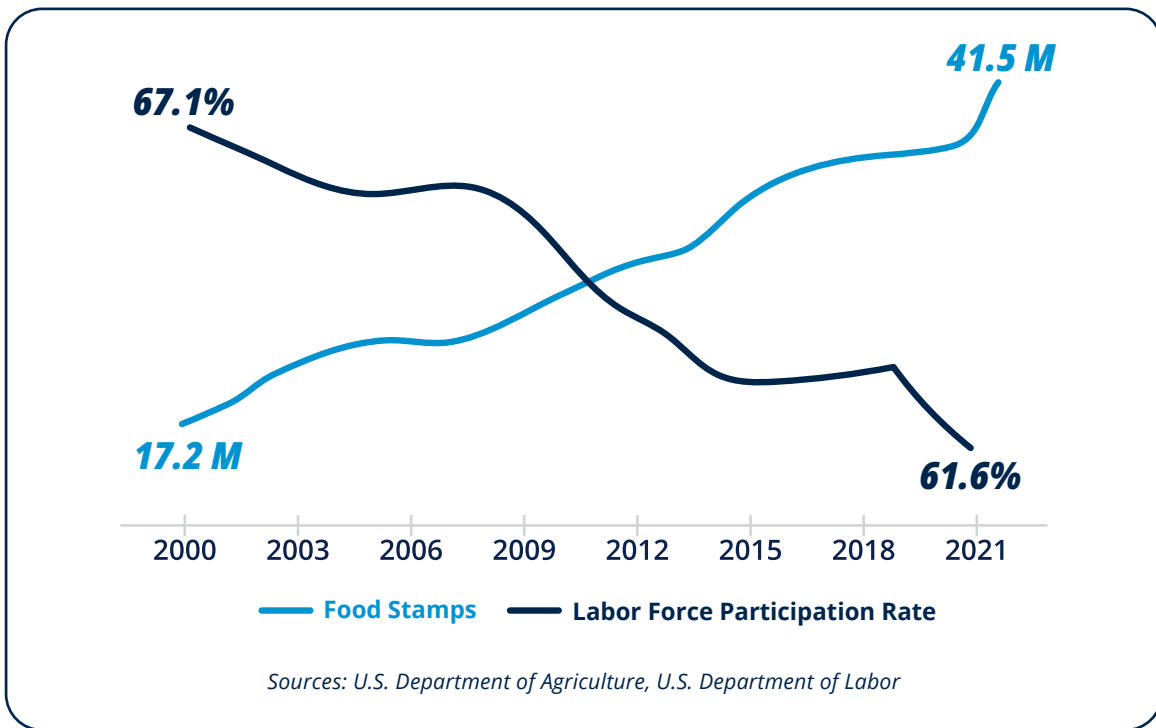
STATES SHOULD ASSIGN ALL ABLE-BODIED ADULTS ON FOOD
STAMPS TO EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING PROGRAMS TO
ADDRESS THE LABOR FORCE SHORTAGE.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has wrought havoc on state and local economies across the country. While states are attempting to recover, there is still one major hurdle impeding progress—a shortage of able-bodied workers.¹

There are nearly 11 million open jobs nationwide—a near-record high—but not enough workers to fill them.² Despite employers being desperate to fill these openings, there continues to be more open jobs than people looking for work.³ Recent data reveals that there are nearly three million workers missing from the labor force compared to before the pandemic began.⁴

Worse yet, labor force participation has steadily declined over the last two decades.⁵ Meanwhile, food stamp enrollment has skyrocketed—with able-bodied adults driving the enrollment surge.⁶



At a time when the country needs a vibrant workforce, far too many individuals are choosing to stay on the sidelines. To truly kickstart an economic comeback, able-bodied adults must be moved from welfare to work.

Able-bodied adults are fueling skyrocketing food stamp enrollment

Getting people off the sidelines and back to work is not a new problem. In 2000, the nationwide labor force participation rate was more than 67 percent.⁷ But by late 2021, labor force participation was near a 45-year low.⁸ If labor force participation had remained constant during this period, the economy would have had the benefit of an additional 12.7 million workers in the labor force.⁹

Over the same period, food stamp enrollment experienced the opposite trend and grew exponentially. From 2000 to 2021, more than 24 million people were added to the food stamp

program—a 141 percent increase.¹⁰ **Today, more than 41 million Americans are on food stamps—more than the entire population of Canada.**¹¹⁻¹²

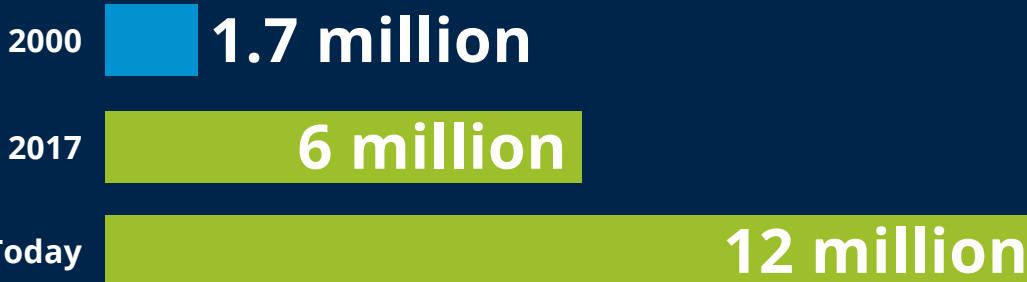


FROM 2000 TO 2021, MORE THAN 24 MILLION PEOPLE WERE ADDED TO THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM—A 141 PERCENT INCREASE.

This growth has been fueled by the skyrocketing enrollment of able-bodied adults. In 2017, there were nearly six million work registrants—able-bodied adults between the ages of 18 and 59 without children under six who do not meet any other exemption criteria—in the food stamps program.¹³⁻¹⁵ But today, that number has ballooned to more than 12 million—roughly doubling in size over the last five years.¹⁶

WORK REGISTRANTS IN THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

Able-bodied adults between the ages of 18 and 59 without children under six who do not meet any other exemption criteria



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Able-bodied adults on food stamps are not working

During the height of the pandemic, the federal government made changes to food stamp program policies, which disincentivized work.¹⁷ As part of the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act, the work requirement for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWD) was suspended, and remains suspended today, despite states having reopened their economies.¹⁸

Additionally, the Biden administration unilaterally implemented the largest permanent increase in food stamp benefits in program history.¹⁹ The average benefit paid was increased by roughly 25 percent when compared to pre-pandemic rates, and the maximum allowable benefit was increased across the board.²⁰

Together, these and other recent federal policies are fueling the near record-high food stamp enrollment and keeping enrollees out of the workforce. With government policies discouraging work, it should come as no surprise that most able-bodied adults on food stamps do not work at all.

MOST ABLE-BODIED ADULTS ON FOOD STAMPS ARE NOT WORKING

Work status among able-bodied adults between the ages of 18 and 59 who have no dependent children under the age of six

Type of Work	Percentage of Enrollees
No work	64.6%
Part-time	29.4%
Full-time	6.1%

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

While this data shows an alarming trend, it does not paint a full picture. The latest available data is from fiscal year 2019—which excludes pandemic-related shutdowns, increased food stamp benefits, and the suspension of the ABAWD work requirement. Once up-to-date numbers are available, it is likely the situation will have gotten much worse.

In a time where employers are desperate for workers, small businesses are closing, and the number of open jobs remains at near-record highs, those that should be working—able-bodied adults—are increasingly receiving welfare checks, not paychecks.

The solution: Mandatory assignments to employment and training programs

Though the ABAWD work requirement has been temporarily suspended, states are not without options. States may require work registrants to participate in employment and training (E&T) programs.²¹ E&T programs provide job search training, teach skills related to employment, and offer career coaching.²² Participants may also simply work or volunteer to satisfy program requirements.²³

Though E&T programs are well-funded, few states are taking advantage of available resources.²⁴ In fact, only six states have some form of mandatory E&T—and only two of these states require most eligible enrollees to attend.²⁵ Meanwhile, 42 states and territories exempt all potential mandatory E&T enrollees.²⁶ Without making E&T assignments mandatory, most able-bodied adults will choose not to participate.



MEANWHILE 42 STATES AND TERRITORIES EXEMPT ALL POTENTIAL MANDATORY E&T ENROLLEES.

Codifying this practice would turn an optional suggestion into a mandatory requirement that able-bodied adults on food stamps must meet to continue receiving benefits. This commonsense measure will help move able-bodied adults from welfare to work and help address the critical labor force shortage that is holding America’s economic comeback hostage.

THE BOTTOM LINE: States should assign all able-bodied adults on food stamps to employment and training programs to address the labor force shortage.

Over the last two decades, labor force participation has declined nationwide, while the number of Americans on food stamps has skyrocketed. This has created a dependency trap for a near record-high number of Americans, which is fueling the labor force shortage. Fortunately, lawmakers have a simple solution to start solving the labor force crisis: Require all able-bodied adults on food stamps to participate in E&T programs.

If the American economic comeback is to kick into overdrive, able-bodied adults on food stamps must stop reaching for welfare applications and start filling out job applications.



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