



MYTH vs. FACT

Mandatory Employment and Training Under the General Work Requirement in Food Stamps

MYTH #1:

“Food stamp work requirements are suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.”

FACT:

There are two separate work requirements in the food stamp program and **Congress only suspended one**. One work requirement is for all work registrants, and another is specifically for certain able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs). The first and broader requirement for all work registrants is called the “general work requirement.”

The second and more narrow work requirement for ABAWDs is called the “ABAWD work requirement.” Congress suspended the ABAWD work requirement entirely when it passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) in March 2020.¹ That suspension will remain in effect until the president allows the public health emergency declaration to expire.²

But Congress did *not* suspend the general work requirement for any work registrants or prohibit mandatory E&T.

MYTH #2:

“Mandatory Employment and Training (E&T) under the general work requirement is unnecessary because there is already a work requirement in food stamps.”

FACT:

The ABAWD work requirement, as explained above, is one of two work requirements in food stamps but is far better known than the general work requirement. **The two requirements operate differently and apply to different but overlapping populations.**

The general work requirement applies to all work registrants. ABAWDs are a subgroup within the work registrant population who are between the ages of 18 and 49 and who have no dependent children.³ ABAWDs can comply with the ABAWD work requirement by working, training, or volunteering for at least 20 hours per week, including by participating in a state’s E&T program.⁴

Work registrants, on the other hand, include ABAWDs but also able-bodied parents of school-aged children and able-bodied, childless adults between 50 and 59 years old.⁵

But without mandatory E&T in the general work requirement, **these additional groups of able-bodied adults on food stamps are not subject to any work requirement.**

MYTH #3:

“We already have mandatory E&T under the general work requirement.”

FACT:

Every state already has the general work requirement, as it is federal law, but **the general work requirement is not the same thing as mandatory E&T**. In other words, a work registrant is not the same thing as a mandatory E&T participant.

The general work requirement only requires work registrants to register for work, take a suitable job if offered, and participate in a state E&T or workfare program *if assigned*.⁶ Mandatory E&T, on the other hand, means state agencies are actually *making those assignments* for some or all work registrants.

All states have the general work requirement but only some have mandatory E&T. **States without mandatory E&T simply have “voluntary E&T,”** in which the state invites work registrants to volunteer to participate.

In these states, without mandatory E&T, the general work requirement is essentially a work suggestion. 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.⁷ In Iowa, just 300 of the nearly 36,000 work registrants will voluntarily enroll in a program.⁸

A general work requirement with voluntary E&T is a work requirement in name only.

MYTH #4:

“No other states use mandatory E&T.”

FACT:

Nine states—Florida, Idaho, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Texas, and Utah—**have instituted some form of mandatory E&T**.⁹

Arkansas will soon join them. The state is in the process of implementing mandatory E&T, as passed by the state legislature in 2019.¹⁰

MYTH #5:

“My state doesn’t have enough money to provide an E&T slot for every work registrant in the state.”

FACT:

States are not required to provide an E&T slot for every work registrant to begin implementing mandatory E&T.

States that use mandatory E&T often grant many exemptions to work registrants. For example, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Utah exempted 68 percent of its work registrants from participation and Ohio exempted 58 percent.^{11 12}

More to the point, even among mandatory E&T participants assigned to slots, **participation will be lower than 100 percent**. Some may participate. Many others will fail to comply and be removed from food stamps. And even more will simply get a job and leave the program.

For example, Texas assigns about 278,000 work registrants to mandatory E&T participation.¹³ But Texas will see fewer than 50,000 total assignees actually participate.¹⁴

MYTH #6:

“The federal Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has said states must provide a slot for everyone in order to implement mandatory E&T.”

FACT:

States are not required to provide an E&T slot for every work registrant to begin implementing mandatory E&T. Any statement to that effect directly contradicts federal law and previous, written agency guidance.

States are required to assist, with help from federal funding streams, those who do participate in the E&T program, including case management and monthly supervision.¹⁵

But **states are not required to prospectively build a massive infrastructure for every work registrant based on false assumptions of complete participation.** Federal regulations specifically allow E&T programs to operate without the capacity to serve all enrollees.¹⁶

In fact, FNS has specifically clarified that, for example, “if a State agency requires 175 participants to participate in E&T, but the State agency has only provided 100 slots with appropriate services for those individuals, then the State agency must provide good cause to the 75 individuals who do not have access to a slot with appropriate services.”¹⁷

MYTH #7:

“The state doesn’t have enough money to implement mandatory E&T.”

FACT:

Every state already operates an E&T program for food stamp enrollees and **additional federal funding for mandatory E&T is available.**¹⁸

The federal government provides 100 percent reimbursement for E&T administration costs up to each state’s biennial grant.¹⁹ These funds can cover the “planning, implementation, and operation” of an E&T program.²⁰ This does not include initial applicant screening but it does include initial E&T assessments.²¹ States which use their E&T grant funding can receive additional federal funds upon request in the interim year from states which did not use their funds.²²

Even if a state exceeds its annual grant, states continue to receive 50 percent federal reimbursement for additional E&T administrative costs.²³ They also receive 50 percent federal reimbursement for participant reimbursements for expenditures like childcare and transportation.²⁴

Additionally, on an ongoing basis, **tens of millions of federal dollars in “ABAWD pledge funding” are available to states** if they offer all ABAWDs in their third month of enrollment an E&T slot.^{25 26}

Finally, funds appropriated in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) can be used for many E&T administrative expenses allowable under, including agency and contractual costs.²⁷

MYTH #8:

“Even with more federal funds, state costs are too high to implement mandatory E&T.”

FACT:

The additional financial burden of mandatory E&T is often wildly overstated for a number of reasons.

First, **states have flexibility** in what the “slots” are to which work registrants are assigned. They need not be well-funded programs in community colleges or career centers. Slots can constitute any simple check-in program that would allow an enrollee to meet the requirement, including work experience and volunteering.

Second, other costs associated with mandatory E&T such as transportation and childcare reimbursements, tend to be much lower than expected.

Estimates often assume that all work registrants will participate and that, among these participants, all will need transportation assistance. Both are deeply flawed assumptions. For example, Texas, a big state with a big E&T program, only spends \$1.8 million for transportation costs.²⁸

Similarly, a small minority of the work registrants are responsible for the care of small children not old enough to be in school. Those in that minority will receive subsidized funding for childcare through TANF, the Child Care Development Block grant, or other state and federal childcare programs. Again, Texas only budgets \$4,000 for childcare reimbursement statewide.²⁹

MYTH #9:

“Mandatory E&T is far too burdensome to administer.”

FACT:

States have enormous flexibilities in administering E&T programs. Specifically, states have a number of options for how they can track participants, check in on job searches, how often agencies provide participants services, and the extent to which third-party “E&T partners” assume responsibilities, including case management.^{30 31}

Fear of administrative burden often comes from an over-emphasis on the “training” portion of “employment and training.” But employment services, especially in partnership with private employers and “work partnerships,” are much less burdensome for the state and can effectively **move able-bodied adults into work settings which often become jobs.**³²

Specifically, “work experience” is an E&T component under federal law and includes actual work activity performed in exchange for food stamp benefits.³³ For example, in Texas’s mandatory E&T program, the state assigns participants to work activities, rather than automatically assigning them to community college or longer-term training programs, although those programs are still available for some.

MYTH #10:

“The federal Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has said states must provide a slot for everyone in order to implement mandatory E&T.”

FACT:

States with limited funding can choose to prioritize ABAWDs for mandatory E&T. This is especially important when the federal government waives the ABAWD work requirement, such as during the ongoing public health emergency related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, **some states only used mandatory E&T for ABAWDs** rather than all work registrants, including Florida, Mississippi, and Ohio.³⁴

MYTH #11:

“Work requirements don’t work, especially for work registrants not already subject to the ABAWD work requirement like parents and adults 50-59.”

FACT:

Work requirements in food stamps rank among the most effective tools in lifting individuals out of dependency into self-sufficiency.³⁵

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.³⁶

Work registrants who are not ABAWDs but still able-bodied, particularly parents, are among the individuals who can benefit the most from higher incomes and reconnecting with their communities.³⁷

MYTH #12:

“If a state exempts ABAWDs from mandatory E&T because they don’t have enough slots, it will exempt ABAWDs from the ABAWD work requirement and result in fewer people working.”

FACT:

If an ABAWD receives a good cause exemption from mandatory E&T, it usually means they’re also exempt from the ABAWD work requirement.³⁸ But that’s not always true. FNS has clarified that if an ABAWD only receives a good cause exemption from mandatory E&T because the program did not have an open slot, that exemption does not carry over to the individual’s ABAWD work requirement because **E&T participation is only one of many ways in which an individual can comply with the ABAWD work requirement.**³⁹

MYTH #13:

“Mandatory E&T under the general work requirement doesn’t provide flexibility for non-compliance.”

FACT:

States have discretion in setting their own standards for non-compliance sanctions. **States have discretion to disqualify individuals** for one to three months after the first failure to comply, three to six months after the second failure to comply, and six months or even permanently for the third failure.⁴⁰

Furthermore, even among able-bodied enrollees, many will be exempt from mandatory E&T under the general work requirement because they take care of a child under six years old or an incapacitated person, participate in an alcohol or drug treatment program, are in school, or already work at least 30 hours per week or earn equivalent wages.⁴¹

Additionally, **states can create additional “state-specific” exemptions of their own** and exempt individuals for other reasons which constitute “good cause” as part of the eligibility process.⁴²

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