

SNAP Loss Can Interfere with Path to Wellness and Self-Sufficiency

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A recent wave of policy modifications related to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) may amplify the challenges working poor families face in meeting basic needs, and subsequently may contribute to the toxic stress and early childhood adversity already facing too many communities. This includes rule changes that will restrict states from providing exemptions of the work requirement to eligible adults, proposed policy changes that standardize how utility costs play into benefit calculations, and the elimination of the program's broad-based categorical eligibility, described below.

Harvard's Center on the Developing Child provides several examples highlighting the critical role of advocating for policies that support basic needs in achieving healthy child and family outcomes.¹ This includes reducing barriers to accessing basic needs, streamlining the eligibility process, "minimizing punitive regulations that add stress to already stressful situations," as well as ensuring that services are funded consistently, without abrupt disruptions, which can interfere with family stability and lead to high levels of caregiver stress. At the IFCI we will continue to monitor policies that we believe may increase chronic stress among low-income families.

Upcoming changes to eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) will result in a loss of food assistance to an estimated 61,000 Ohio households. Of most serious concern are the 16,500 households with children who would lose any SNAP assistance.²

These losses would result from a USDA rule change that would eliminate the program's broad-based categorical eligibility.³ Through this state option, households can become categorically eligible for SNAP if they qualify for non-cash benefits through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or state maintenance-of-effort (MOE) funding. This has allowed a greater number of low-income families to benefit from the food assistance program and greatly benefited children, as SNAP households automatically are eligible for free school meals.

In addition, as a result of this policy, states were able to eliminate asset requirements to allow participants to retain a modest amount of savings, which is key for low-income families working towards self-sufficiency. Furthermore, with broad-based categorical eligibility, the application process is streamlined and more efficient; this is essential for low-income families who may struggle to manage cumbersome paperwork while juggling multiple other challenges.

An elimination of this state option would result in harm to Ohio's families and communities, diminish the economic impact of SNAP on low-income communities, and place greater demand on already overwhelmed food banks and pantries. At the Institute of Family and Community Impact, we are well-versed on the research linking hunger and malnutrition to negative physical and mental health outcomes, especially among children. The implications for academic outcomes and future planning also are severe.

According to the American Psychological Association, “We all have a limited cognitive bandwidth. People tend to spend their limited mental reserves on resources that they lack, and so hungry children focus on food, which can lead to neglect of other areas of life such as school work.”⁴ At OhioGuidestone, we observe every day the impact of food insecurity on one’s ability to recover from mental illness or substance use disorders. Our interventions are most effective when families are not struggling to meet their basic needs.

We echo the concerns of advocates across the country in expressing great concern around the implications of these potential SNAP reductions.

1. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2017). “Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families.” <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>
2. Mathematica (2019). “State-by-State Impact of Proposed Changes to ‘Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility’ in SNAP.” <http://www.mathematica.org>
3. “Revision of Categorical Eligibility in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Proposed Rule.” 84 *Federal Register* 142 (24 July 2019), pp. 35570-35581.
4. American Psychological Association (2016). “Fact Sheet: What are the Psychological Effects of Hunger on Children?” <http://www.apa.org/advocacy/socioeconomic-status>