

**Hearing to Examine the Proposed ABAWD Rule
and its Impact on Hunger and Hardship
April 3, 2019**

**House Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations
Rep. Marcia L. Fudge, Chair**

“The purpose of today’s hearing is to examine proposed changes to a long-standing USDA Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents, or ABAWD, policy that will impact a significant number of SNAP recipients. Such a change demands careful and deliberate consideration. Today, we will have this long overdue conversation.

“On February 1st, I sent a letter to Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue outlining my serious concerns with the Department’s proposed rule on ABAWDs. The proposed rule included a 60-day comment period. However, given the seriousness of this topic, I requested an extension on the comment period so that there may be more time to explore its potential impacts. The Department rejected that request and, instead, Secretary Perdue responded by saying, and I quote:

“‘The proposed rule...would encourage broader application of the statutory ABAWD work requirement, consistent with the Administration’s focus on fostering self-sufficiency and promoting the dignity of work. I believe these proposed changes support our mutual goal of improving the lives of those participating in SNAP.’

“Well Mr. Secretary, I disagree. The goal of improving lives is mutual – his methods are harsh, arbitrary and mean. There is no dignity in taking food away from the poorest and most vulnerable of our citizens. It is dishonest and immoral for anyone to assume or suggest that poor people do not want to work, especially if that work only pays an average of \$125 a month.

“And before we go any further, I want to make it very clear: people want a hand up, not a hand out, and it is insulting to suggest otherwise.

“The proposal before us fails to consider that unemployment is not the sole problem ABAWDs face. Many ABAWDs experience other hardships, including lack of housing, undiagnosed mental illnesses, learning disabilities, and poor health.

“The proposal before us makes clear this Administration does not understand nor care about the lack of access or barriers and hardships, that keep many from finding and securing long-term employment. The proposal also tells me the Administration foolishly assumes everybody has the same access to the resources needed to escape the cycle of poverty – “If they just work 20 hours per week, it would solve their problems and move them out of poverty.”

“‘Lifting yourself up by your boot straps’ only works if you have boots.

“What I want to know is what USDA actually knows about those who will be affected by their rule? Based on the report from our witness, Mathematica, we are most likely dealing with the poorest of the poor. In fact, I’m still waiting on my request for information during last month’s hearing with Secretary Perdue, where I asked, ‘What percentage of the ABAWD population are veterans, homeless, have mental or physical limitations, or lack access to public transportation?’

“Were any of these factors analyzed or data collected before the release of the proposed rule? Does the Department even internally track this kind of relevant information to better inform its rulemaking and policy decisions? If they were, please present it to us. It’s time we call this what it is: a rush to accomplish a conservative political wish-list.

“If this was really about the dignity of work and efficiency of the program, we would wait to see the final results from the 2014 Farm Bill, which provided \$200 million for 10 Employment and Training pilot projects. It is ill-advised to issue a rule without the supporting data or best practices learned from the pilots, to better serve the ABAWD population.

“USDA estimates that 755,000 people will lose benefits and predicts a savings in federal spending on SNAP benefits of \$7.9 billion over five years. What will happen to the 755,000 people? If the Department is so eager to get people into jobs, will they hire them? The unemployment rate in my district is 9.8 percent. Where are the jobs? My Republican colleagues love to talk about the surplus of jobs or low unemployment numbers, but we should remember that there’s a skill gap at play within this population and many ABAWDs live in smaller, rural communities where jobs are not as readily available.

“Was the skills gap taken into consideration during formulation of this proposed rule? Low unemployment rates do little to tell us whether jobless individuals in a specific geographical area lack the necessary skills to obtain gainful work in their communities. However, the Department proposes to limit existing State flexibility to submit a variety of credible resources and support materials to help tell the story a Bureau of Labor Statistics unemployment rate is unable to tell. A low unemployment rate does not erase the existence of significant barriers to employment in our nation’s poorest communities.

“Without the skills necessary to obtain gainful employment and meet SNAP work requirements, what other options are there for these individuals to put food on the table? I am very concerned about the added burden these proposed cuts to SNAP place on other low-income services and charities like food banks. Every time Republicans trot out calls for welfare reform, they argue the private sector will pick up the slack.

“Let me ask this, what does \$7.9 billion in savings from SNAP mean if it increases the demand for other low-income programs or local charities that are already stretched thin?

This proposed rule is nothing more than another attempt by the GOP and the Trump Administration to reintroduce the thoughtless House Republican SNAP provisions that were rejected in the 2018 Farm Bill. We passed a bill – follow the law!

“The House and Senate passed a farm bill conference report by a historic 369 votes, and the President signed the bill without delay. Follow the law! Rehashing failed policies is an affront to the democratic process and an utter waste of time. We have seen this Administration and my Republican colleagues reciting the same negative talking points about people who are on SNAP time and again; I am tired of it. Instead of proposing cruel and unsound ideas without merit - let’s figure out how to help people in need.

“Our job is to do the most for those who have the least.”

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