

MAZON Talking Points – House Farm Bill Proposal (H.R. 2)

Spring 2018

MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger closely follows Farm Bill negotiations, as this major legislation sets U.S. policy for agriculture, nutrition, conservation, and many other sectors. The Farm Bill is reauthorized by Congress about every five years—the current Farm Bill is due to expire at the end of September 2018.

The first Farm Bill draft, the Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018 (H.R. 2), passed through the House Agriculture Committee along party lines on April 18, 2018. MAZON is deeply concerned that this legislation represents a fundamental and cruel shift in the reach and impact of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which would harm millions of Americans who are struggling to feed themselves and their families.

MAZON calls on legislators to pass a Farm Bill that protects against hunger by strengthening SNAP and other federal nutrition assistance programs—not one that adds to the problem.

GENERAL MESSAGING:

SNAP is the Nation's Frontline Defense Against Hunger

- SNAP's purpose has always been to provide a modicum of stability to prevent people who have fallen on hard times from going hungry.
- If enacted, this bill would increase hunger in this country, not help resolve the problem.
- Severe changes to SNAP are an attack on broad swaths of the American public, including older adults, single mothers, children, military families, people in rural and Native communities, veterans, and working families.

SNAP Is Not a Jobs Program

- House Agriculture Committee Chairman Mike Conaway and the Trump Administration want to reclassify SNAP and other public benefits as workforce development programs. SNAP was created to be primarily a nutrition assistance program, and any efforts to alter that are harmful.
- While we all agree that work is essential, placing more stringent restrictions on struggling Americans without also expanding support systems—i.e. affordable childcare programs, access to college education, etc.—will not lead to sufficient gains in employment.

This Bill Reveals a Breakdown in Longstanding Bipartisanship

- While politicians say these changes aim to move people to “self-sufficiency,” the real effect of the bill will be to shrink the number of Americans enrolled in federal safety net programs.
- This ideologically-driven strategy favors reducing government spending to help poor Americans, without regard for the facts and circumstances that render people in need.
- Following the largest tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations in American history, it is galling to see these proposed cuts to programs that only help poor people survive.

SNAP Benefits Will be Diverted to Create Wasteful Bureaucracy

- The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) reports that this bill would cause millions of people to lose SNAP benefits while “reinvesting” the funds into new workforce development programs. In reality, this “reinvestment” will force states to create new levels of bureaucracy that will only reach a small fraction of those in need.
- The 2014 Farm Bill established and funded 10 pilot programs to examine best practices for SNAP employment and training, and the results from these programs are not yet available. The new House Farm Bill proposal would mandate states to create an unproven, unworkable, and underfunded workforce development bureaucracy without the benefit of evidence based on results of those pilot programs.

SPECIFIC POLICY CONCERNS:

Work Requirements Will Harm Older Americans

- This Farm Bill would expand work requirements to include people between 50 and 59 years of age, and add harsh new penalties for those falling short of the work requirement.
- The millions of older Americans who will be impacted are veterans who served our country, those who live in economically depressed communities, and parents who have been laid off from stable manufacturing jobs due to plant closures.
- Older Americans face exceptional challenges reentering the workforce: research shows the average length of unemployment among job seekers 55 and older was over 54 weeks, five months longer than their younger counterparts.
- Under this bill, unemployed SNAP applicants would have 30 days to find a job or enter a work training program—or be dropped from the program. Without evidence to support the structural change, this would require creation of an unhelpful bureaucracy with insufficient funding in every state.

An Attack on Women and Children

- New work requirements represent an unprecedented attack on women and their children. New guidelines redefine “dependents” as children age six and below. This means parents with children older than age six would be subject to work requirements in order to receive SNAP benefits. Nearly 66% of children receiving SNAP live in single-parent households. With women making up more than 80% of single parents in the United States, households headed by women are disproportionately represented among those who receive SNAP benefits.

Rural America Will Be Hard Hit

- Approximately 15% of rural households struggle with food insecurity. Rural communities face significant challenges that increase their susceptibility to hunger, including insufficient infrastructure or transportation options, fewer well-paid or full-time work opportunities, and limited access to food.

Insufficient Support for Military Families and Veterans

- It’s a sad and underreported fact that 23,000 currently-serving military families and nearly 1.5 million veterans participate in SNAP.
- A glitch in existing law prevents many low-income military families from qualifying for SNAP. This technical error could be fixed by excluding a service member’s Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) from counting as income when determining eligibility for SNAP. Instead, the draft Farm Bill offers a confusing proposal to exclude only the first \$500 of a service member’s BAH from counting as income for SNAP eligibility determination. This arbitrary proposal adds an additional layer of complication and falls far short of solving the problem, leaving thousands of military families behind.
- Various provisions in this bill would cut benefits and unfairly restrict access to SNAP for veterans who are struggling. Punitive work requirements and harsh penalties would be particularly harmful for veterans who face unique barriers to employment, including those with disabilities.

Creating Additional Barriers to Assistance

- This bill aims to eliminate “broad-based categorical eligibility,” which for years has improved access and simplified states’ administration of SNAP. Under these changes, states would no longer be able to administer public benefit programs simultaneously, which could create harsher burdens—financial and bureaucratic alike—on individuals trying to feed themselves and their families. Categorical eligibility supports work, particularly helping low-income working households when their monthly income approaches SNAP’s cutoff of 130% of the federal poverty line (about \$1,700 for a family of three).
- This bill also seeks to eliminate the linkage between SNAP and the Low-Income Heating Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), forcing many low-income households—including those that receive SNAP—to choose between paying heating bills or buying food. The bill sharply reduces the amount of benefits for SNAP households struggling to pay for both utilities and food and would have a disproportionate effect on households that include someone with a disability.