



March 26, 2019

Certification Policy Branch
SNAP Program Development Division
Food and Nutrition Service, USDA
3101 Park Center Drive
Alexandria, Virginia 22302

RE: Proposed Rule: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): Requirements for Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents RIN 0584-AE57

Dear Certification Policy Branch:

The mission of the San Francisco-Marin Food Bank is to end hunger in San Francisco and Marin counties. We at the Food Bank envision a community where everyone is able to obtain enough nutritious food to support the health and well-being of themselves and their families. We address hunger head on: from our Pantry Network and home delivered groceries, to our nutrition education classes and SNAP application assistance, we work in many ways to nourish and empower neighbors in need.

Today, the Food Bank has more than 150 employees, 38,000 volunteers, and an organizational budget of \$23 million—supplemented by more than \$74 million in donated food. The Food Bank is the hub of the food safety net in San Francisco and Marin counties. We provide food for 140,000 people each week, and 225,000 over the course of a year through direct free food distribution and assistance in applying for SNAP (CalFresh benefits). Over 60% of the food we distribute is fresh produce. We are motivated by the power of nutritious food to transform lives, and we have witnessed firsthand what can happen to individuals, families, and communities who are deprived access to the food they need to thrive.

We take this opportunity to comment in opposition to USDA's Proposed Rulemaking on SNAP requirements and services for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs). The proposed changes would cause serious harm to our clients, our community and the nation. It would do nothing to improve the health and employment of those impacted by the proposed rule, and it is unconscionable to use hunger as a punishment for unemployment or underemployment. The proposed rule would harm the economy, grocery retailers, and agricultural producers by reducing the amount of SNAP dollars available to spur local economic activity. Additionally, the rule undermines Congressional intent, which was clear when it rejected these changes when enacting the 2018 Farm Bill.



Income Inequality and Cost of Living

We serve low-income people in San Francisco and Marin counties, two of California's most expensive areas to live. California has seen steep growth in wage inequality since the late 1970s. Workers at the bottom and in the middle of the wage distribution have seen their earnings stagnate in real terms, after adjusting for inflation, while high-wage workers have seen their earnings rise sharply.¹

Rising income inequality means that many people work low-wage jobs in a high-cost area. A recent study by the California Budget & Policy Center found that California has the highest percentage of people struggling to make ends meet of any state in the nation. The biggest culprit is the cost of living, and San Francisco and Marin are highest-cost counties of all. According to analysis by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, in San Francisco, a person would need to be making \$99,960 annually to afford a one-bedroom apartment, where the fair market rent is \$2,499 per month. If you were making minimum wage, you would be earning enough to pay \$572 a month for rent. It is clear why so many of our neighbors are turning to SNAP and the Food Bank to help feed themselves and why our region is suffering from a housing and homelessness crisis.

In the Bay Area, the proposed rule would only worsen the region's ongoing fight against hunger and homelessness, cutting basic assistance for already struggling communities and pushing people deeper into poverty. If you are already spending all of your income on rent, removing food assistance would simply add another expense you would not be able to pay, and increase your likelihood of becoming homeless. When people are deprived of food access, the result is more skipped meals, less nutritious food, or having to choose between paying for food and other necessities like rent or utilities.

Our most recent annual Missing Meals report, which calculates the amount of meals that low-income people are still missing after accounting for what they can afford with their household income, what the government provides, and what they receive from non-profit food providers, found that 35 million meals are still unaccounted for in San Francisco and Marin. The proposed ABAWD rule would only exacerbate the challenges we face in serving low-income people in our service area, and increase the number of meals people are having to skip. Even when the safety net is intact, people are still going hungry in our area. The proposed rule would cut additional holes in the net, and increase the number of people suffering from hunger.

The effects of hunger are widespread. Hunger exacts a long-lasting toll on our community—from childhood to old age. Food insecurity in adults is associated with chronic conditions including diabetes, obesity and

¹ <http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/low-wage-work-in-california/#the-numbers>



hypertension. Malnutrition is a major health risk for seniors and adults in the U.S., often resulting in extended hospital stays and exorbitant healthcare costs.

Low Wage Labor Market

The proposed rule will not encourage more ABAWDs to engage in work, and there is no evidence that time limits on SNAP benefits lead to increased work. There is also no evidence that ABAWDs who want to find work will be able to find well-paying work, enough hours of work, or to document that work. In fact, between 2007 and 2017 the share of jobs in middle-wage occupations (\$18 to \$30 an hour) declined to below one third of jobs in the nine-county Bay Area as well as in the surrounding 12 counties that make up the rest of the core Northern California megaregion (the Greater Sacramento, Northern San Joaquin Valley and Monterey Bay areas). Low-wage occupations remained the largest share of jobs, at 37 percent of total jobs throughout the decade. High-wage jobs increased from 27 percent of total jobs in 2007 to 32 percent in 2017 in the Bay Area and posted smaller gains in surrounding counties.² Low-wage jobs remain a big share of the employment landscape, while middle-wage job growth disappeared during the past 10 years.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics data used to make these determinations is not a sufficient measure of unemployment, underemployment, or availability of work opportunities for ABAWDs. Additionally, the Labor Market Area standard is insufficient to capture economically tied areas, or whether there is sufficient work for ABAWDs. For these reasons, the flexibility of waivers provides an essential stopgap for areas with significant variability of job availability within a small geographic area.

Research from the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities of the low-wage labor market shows that a large share of the people who would face these work requirements are employed, but they also experience high levels of job displacement and unemployment, and their wages have grown little. An understanding of the labor market that SNAP beneficiaries face makes clear that it will be difficult for many individuals to meet proposed work requirements. The proposed rule change would also be quite administratively burdensome, as county staff would have to turn their attention toward monitoring these clients and tracking down verifications.³

This research found that the majority of adults with low levels of education worked a substantial amount, but their annual incomes from wages were low and grew almost not at all between 2002 and 2017. This

²<https://www.spur.org/news/2019-01-23/wage-trends-show-increases-low-wage-jobs-while-middle-wage-job-growth-slows>

³ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/most-workers-in-low-wage-labor-market-work-substantial-hours-in>



shows that people are in need of support to make ends meet, even when they are working. In 2017, 9.5 percent of women with a high school degree or less who worked at least 30 hours per week for at least 20 weeks per year lived in households where total income from wages was below the poverty line.

Real median annual incomes from wages for people in occupations common among SNAP recipients did not grow between 2002 and 2017, after adjusting for inflation. Among those in common SNAP or Medicaid occupations, unemployment rates are higher; the share stably employed from one year to the next is lower; the share that lost or left a job in the last three years due to plant or company closing/moved, position abolished, insufficient work, or other similar reason is higher; and job tenure is lower than those in middle-class occupations. This shows that although the overall unemployment rate in our region may be low, the people who are most impacted by this rule change have been struggling to attain steady employment simply due to the nature of their work.

Together, these results suggest that it will be difficult for individuals who work and participate in benefits programs to meet proposed work requirements. Although employment levels are high among many of these types of workers, employment volatility is also quite high. Much of this volatility reflects characteristics of these types of occupations and is not necessarily due to decisions made by the workers. Since wage growth also has been stagnant in these jobs, an increasing share of people have combined work with participation in SNAP to make ends meet.⁴ The proposed rule would not promote self-sufficiency, well-being or economic mobility, since the population it targets is often already working.

The following are quotations from people who were deemed able-bodied adults without dependents while applying for SNAP. They illustrate the confusion people face about the existing requirements and the nuances in the labor market these individuals are subject to:

- “My county said that I’m an ABAWD and need to work 20 hours a week. I just got a job and they’re giving me 15 hours a week. Is that okay? Am I supposed to send you proof? I’m hoping I’ll do well enough that they’ll give me more hours next month.”
- “I am volunteering to keep my benefits, but would prefer to get a better job so I can stop working dead end jobs. Can you help me find a training or something? I don’t know what comes next. “

⁴ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/most-workers-in-low-wage-labor-market-work-substantial-hours-in>



- “I work two jobs and am lucky to get 20 hours a week. I’d like to work 1 job with 40 hours, but no one can help me figure out how. Would you hire someone like me?”⁵

Civil Rights

The proposed rule will disproportionately impact protected classes, including communities of color and people with undiagnosed disabilities. A reduction in time limit waivers and the resulting loss in SNAP benefits will disproportionately affect certain protected classes based on (a) an inadequate method for determining lack of sufficient jobs, a criterion for approving time limit waivers; and (b) the disproportionate rate of unemployment and underemployment for people of color.

70% of people receiving SNAP in San Francisco county are people of color, and 52% of Marin SNAP recipients are people of color.⁶ The civil rights impact statement and the proposed rule offers insufficient data and information about the extent of the disparate impact, any mitigation strategies that the USDA and/or states may undertake to address or reduce those impacts or details about the civil rights plan to monitor or address the issue. We do not believe that the proposed mitigation strategies can be significant enough to fully address the disproportionate impact of increased food insecurity and poverty on protected classes. This is a deeply troubling omission given that rates of food insecurity are already higher than the national average for Black and Latino headed households.

The proposed rule ignores core parts of the problem sought to be addressed by the previous agency policy concerning the ABAWD waiver: namely the impact on general health and welfare that would be caused by a potential chilling on individuals’ participation in the food program, including public health, work access, hunger, cost-benefits of implementing the rule, administrative ease of the rule.

We strongly oppose the proposed rule that would expose even more people to the arbitrary SNAP food cutoff policy and harm our community.

Sincerely,

⁵ Source: GetCalFresh.org

⁶ Data Source: California Dept. of Social Services, CalFresh Data Files (Oct. 2015).



SF-MARIN
FOOD BANK

Meg Davidson
San Francisco-Marin Food Bank
Associate Director, Policy & Advocacy