

Testimony on New Mexico's Plan to Re-impose Work Requirement on Food Stamp (SNAP) Recipients

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Since 2009, New Mexico has waived federal work requirements tied to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The Martinez Administration's proposal is to reinstate the rules limiting able-bodied people – including parents of children older than six-years – to three months of SNAP benefits unless they work, do volunteer work, or attend job training classes at least 20 hours per week. The requirement would also apply to teens that are not in school.

Over 21 percent of all New Mexicans receive food stamps, behind only Mississippi. Somewhere between 26,000 and 80,000 people could be impacted by the proposal. According to a September 2014 report from the Pew Center, no fewer than 17 states were working to re-instate their work requirements.

Other states have seen dramatic effects in terms of reduced dependency from re-imposing food stamp work requirements. In 2014, for example, Maine re-imposed a three-month limit (out of every three-year period) on food stamps for able-bodied adults without minor dependents — unless they work 20 hours per week, take state job-training courses or volunteer for about six hours per week. The number of such people receiving food stamps in Maine has dropped nearly 80 percent since the rule kicked in, to 2,530 from about 12,000.

Maine's requirement has been in effect for about a year now and I have heard no reports of even a single person starving as a result of this policy change. There were also no such reports for the decade+ during which this policy was in effect nationwide from the time of the welfare reforms enacted by then-President Bill Clinton and a Republican Congress in the mid-1990s.

Food stamps were meant to provide a bridge for people who are between jobs or have fallen on hard times. They were not created to be a permanent way of life. The Administration's proposal requires food stamp recipients to simply give themselves the opportunity to access gainful employment.

This is wise because allowing people to completely remove themselves from the work or volunteer forces hurts the very people the program is supposed to help. Sitting at home watching television or waiting for the phone to ring is no way to look for work. Career counselors will be the first to note that volunteering and improving one's skills through enhanced education are two great ways to find a job.

Indeed, while unemployment rates in New Mexico remain somewhat higher than the national average at 6.2%, the rate in neighboring Texas is currently 4.2% which economists consider very close to “full employment.” Even New Mexico’s largest cities have reasonably-low unemployment rates with Albuquerque at 4.9%, Santa Fe at 4.2% and Las Cruces at 5.2%.

There is no doubt that the economic recovery in New Mexico has not been as robust as we’d like. But keeping more New Mexicans on the sidelines allowing their skills to atrophy for months or even years is not helpful especially if potential employment is as close as one of her major cities. Absent that, of course, there are opportunities aplenty in neighboring Texas which is a day’s drive or less for nearly all New Mexicans.

The Martinez Administration’s proposal is eminently reasonable and encourages self-reliance rather than dependency. What doesn’t work is forcing American taxpayers to spend \$80 billion a year on a rapidly-expanding welfare program and imposing little or nothing in the way of requirements.

Lastly, it is worth noting that food stamps are not an economic stimulus. The money has to come from somewhere and dollars that are taxed away and spent on food stamps can no longer be invested in our economy. Welfare programs do not stimulate the economy. Average New Mexicans working every day and honing their skills will make our state better and more prosperous.

Not only can high debt from increased spending reduce opportunity, but welfare spending itself can impose substantial non-economic costs: discouraging work, rewarding government dependence, and eroding personal dignity. As President Franklin Roosevelt said in 1935:

Continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fibre. To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit.

Pope Francis too has emphasized the importance of work, having recently said, “Work is part of God’s loving plan; we are called to cultivate and safeguard all of creation’s resources and this is how we participate in the act of creation.”

Requiring able-bodied adults without small children to work, learn, or give back to their communities is hardly too much to ask of those who wish to receive food stamps.

Thank you for your time.