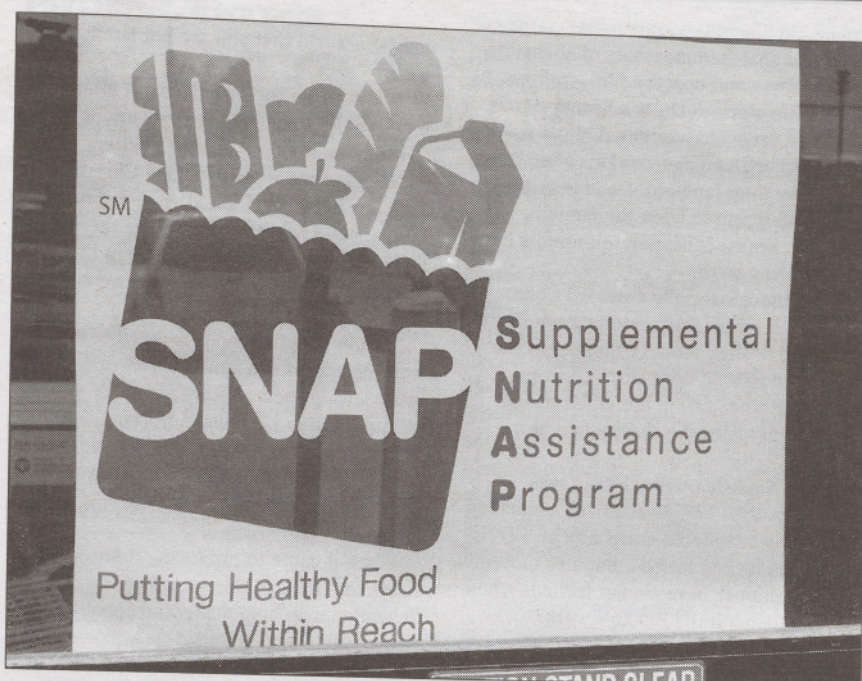




A SNAP sign in a grocer's window.

ISTOCK IMAGE

## Political SNAP scam

Push for stricter work requirements for Food Stamps are ineffective and cruel while wasteful farm subsidies are preserved

BY MARY KING  
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Congress has been mired in controversy in its effort to replace the expired farm bill governing agricultural subsidies and food aid. This week the bill passed the Senate and is awaiting a vote in the House.

The bill needs reform; farm subsidies increasingly go to profitable agribusiness and the biggest, most affluent farmers. Last year, the government sent checks for \$1 million or more to almost 400 farmers; Iowa's Pinicon Farms alone raked in \$9.9 million in subsidies, according to the Washington Times.

But, no, the fight in D.C. is over food stamps, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and whether to require even more work hours from impoverished food stamp recipients for benefits averaging \$125 per person per month. Researchers say the only likely outcome of harsher requirements would be to push working people out of the program, given the unreliability of low wage jobs these days.

### SNAP, the anti-poverty program formerly known as food stamps

Forty million low-income people receive SNAP benefits as part of our farm bill legislation. Electronic SNAP cards can be used to pay for food or for seeds or plants for growing food, but not alcohol, tobacco, hygiene products, pet food, vitamins, medicines, hot food or food that will be eaten in the store.

Two-thirds of people receiving SNAP benefits are children, seniors and people living with disabilities. Many of the rest are

### street smart economics



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single mothers, faced with the impossible task of both caring for their children and earning enough to support their families in an economy that provides neither public childcare nor wages much above the minimum for part-time work.

SNAP reduces food insecurity, improves children's health outcomes and puts a dent in child poverty rates. Researchers find that food benefits play an important role in cutting the depth and severity of poverty. The U.S. is alone in the wealthy world with our high rates of child poverty and extreme poverty, defined as subsisting on incomes of less than half the official poverty threshold.

Only households below or very near the poverty line are eligible for SNAP. Almost all experts agree that the U.S. poverty line is too low, at \$25,000 before taxes for a family of four, and less than half that for a single adult. Families of four in extreme poverty earn less than \$12,500 and single individuals up to \$6,000 annually.

SNAP is the only program that expanded automatically during the Great Recession, when so many people were thrown out of

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work. Other anti-poverty programs have been whittled away for forty years, and were never strong. Now, strict lifetime limits keep welfare (TANF) rolls small, and tightened eligibility for unemployment benefits mean that only a quarter of people looking for work are likely to “qualify” for unemployment payments.

### Working age SNAP recipients already work, but low-wage work is unstable

Most SNAP recipients who could work already do so. But nearly one-third of U.S. workers earned less than \$25,000 last year. The federal minimum wage, used by 21 states, is only \$7.25. Even if minimum wage workers in those states could get year-round, full-time work, they'd be paid only \$14,500 before taxes, \$2,000 below the unrealistically low poverty line for a household of two people.

And low-wage work is unstable. Low wage employers go in and out of business frequently, creating “churn” in the labor market as jobs disappear out from under people. Workers in low-wage jobs like fast food and retail can't get full-time work, or — too often — even regular schedules that would allow them to hold two jobs, go to school or maintain a consistent childcare arrangement.

SNAP recipients are particularly concentrated in occupations that pay poorly, lack paid sick days or benefits and increasingly offer only irregular, unpredictable schedules. Over one-quarter of the people working as personal care aides, maids and housekeepers, dishwashers, agricultural graders and sorters, packers and packagers, and laundry and dry cleaning workers are SNAP recipients. Right behind those occupations are those with more than one-fifth of workers on food stamps, including nursing, psychiatric and home health aides, roofers, transportation attendants, cashiers, cooks, insulation workers, agricultural workers, dry-wallers and parking lot attendants.

### Current SNAP rules already require half-time work

Working age adults without disabilities or dependents are already required to work at least 20 hours a week to be eligible for food assistance for more than three months in three years, no matter how poor they are. People who lose their jobs, or can't find work, must participate in training programs for at least 80 hours a month, or work unpaid in “workfare.” In Oregon, workfare means volunteer work for an approved nonprofit or faith-based organization.

States can waive work requirements in areas where the unemployment rate is 10 percent or higher, or where unemployment has been well above the national average for

two years. Currently eight counties in Oregon qualify, all in southern or eastern Oregon.

### Proposed requirements draconian and unrealistic

House Speaker Paul Ryan and others support changes to the SNAP program to raise work requirements to 25 hours a week, expand the group of people subject to work requirements and make it harder to stay in the program if you lose your job or aren't scheduled for enough hours each month — all without providing enough funding for more than half the people eligible for training programs.

They cite the fact that the unemployment rate is as low as it's been since the late 1960s, without mentioning that our official unemployment rate of 3.7 percent means that 1 in 27 people can't get a job. Among African Americans, it's 1 in 17, and of people aged 16 to 19, it's 1 in 8 who can't find work.

### Apparently not controversial: farm bill subsidies flow uphill

Taxpayer-funded farm subsidies authorized in the same legislation that regulates SNAP are now concentrated on giant factory farms. Last year, nearly a quarter of the program's \$13.2 billion in giveaways went to fewer than 1 percent of recipients, each of whom was paid at least \$250,000. More than a billion dollars went to the state of Iowa alone. Presumably holding the nation's first presidential primary encourages candidates to promise big bucks for Iowa's crops.

Twelve members of Congress receive subsidies. According to the Washington Times, “Rep. Doug LaMalfa, a California Republican ... has received \$1.27 million in farm subsidies since 2015, and \$637,059 in 2017 alone ... Mr. LaMalfa, a millionaire, is a member of the House Agriculture Committee who has averaged some \$87,000 in annual subsidies across two decades.”

### Fix the farm bill by increasing food aid and cutting wasteful farm subsidies

Congress should fix the farm bill by re-directing farm subsidies away from the wealthy owners of factory farms and toward small and mid-sized family farms that avoid harmful pesticides, as advocated by U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer, (D-OR).

And SNAP benefits should be expanded, supporting farmers by feeding hungry families and seniors, rather than creating work requirements so challenging in today's labor market that the only result will be kicking working people off the program and worsening food insecurity in America.