



## **Leveraging SNAP to improve worker skills: Testimony to the House Finance Health and Human Services Subcommittee**

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Chairman Romanchuk, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on a proposal that is not in the state budget, but perhaps should be. My name is Hannah Halbert. I am a researcher with Policy Matters Ohio and I focus on policies that support working poor families.

Ohio ranks sixth in the nation for people living with food insecurity. Amidst this crisis, state policymakers increased work search and work requirements for some SNAP benefits, the supplemental nutrition assistance program once known as food stamps. Broadly, able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) who are not working, or complying with the SNAP work program for 20 hours or more each week are limited to three months of food assistance every three years. Ohio's current SNAP state plan suggests the vast majority of participants (35,059) will meet their requirements at Work Experience Program (WEP) assignments. Typical WEP placements include janitorial duties, grounds maintenance, office work, or warehouse packing—the kinds of work experience many already reported having in the program.

Despite data showing many SNAP recipients do not have a high school diploma (30 percent of WEP participants in Franklin County), and many have collateral sanctions from prior convictions (35 percent in Franklin County WEP study) the state does not prioritize employment and training to address these barriers. Far fewer recipients (16,400) will receive education and training assistance, which could include literacy skills, vocational training, or post-secondary education. In short, the assistance available to many of these participants does little to address underlying employability barriers or the fact that without training many of the jobs available will not pay enough at the median to alleviate the need for assistance.

Recognizing this need, the Federal Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has created the [SNAP to Skills](#) initiative. Among other suggestions to improve SNAP employment and training services, the program highlights how states can use federal 50 percent reimbursement grants (“50-50 funds”) to supplement state or third party partner money spent helping SNAP recipients engage in education and training. These funds can reimburse the state, county, and/or other third party providers on administrative expenses, tuition and fees, case management, career guidance, and job development spent on SNAP recipients. The [50-50 funds](#) can also reimburse some participant expenses that other forms of federal SNAP funding cannot: transportation, dependent care, equipment, books, uniforms, or licensing fees. This form of funding is also unique because, there is no cap on the annual federal reimbursements.

SNAP E&T programs can be great tools in helping Ohioans build work-relevant skills and reduce employment barriers. These programs, however, can leave participants worse off, if they are mandated to participate in a way that threatens food assistance. High-performing programs are voluntary. Washington State, the national model, exempted all SNAP recipients from all E&T programs and operates its program on an all-volunteer basis. That state has found that this change allows program partners to avoid the administrative burden of tracking and reporting hours and managing compliance. Instead these partners can focus on helping students gain the skills necessary for better-paying jobs and meeting employer workforce needs. Decreasing the administrative burden on partners should be a priority for Ohio, given the known difficulty in securing WEP sites.

SNAP works in Ohio. It reduced the share of participants living in deep poverty by 10 percentage points and increased the share living above the poverty line by 10 percentage points. Without addressing employment barriers, education needs, and the realities of the Ohio labor market, many will not be able to work their way to self-sufficiency. Nearly one-third of Ohio jobs pay a median wage so low it would not keep a family of four out of poverty. Ohio is the 33<sup>rd</sup> worst state in the nation for the share of work paying poverty wages. Securing work that pays enough to eliminate the need for food assistance is a high bar in our low-wage economy. Adding meaningful education and training into the mix would help. Voluntary SNAP to Skills programs have two goals: to ensure the hungry are fed and for those who can benefit, provide education and training that can help reduce need. I encourage the committee to explore how Ohio can participate in the federal 50 percent reimbursement grants (“50-50 funds”) to expand education and training resources for SNAP recipients and to do so without requiring participation in order to receive food assistance, so we can have better returns for *all* stakeholders.

Thank you for letting me share this program with you. I am happy to take any questions you may have.

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