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FEATURED

Advocates for the poor warn about two House bills

They predict that both laws, if passed, will increase food insecurity in Athens County and southeast Ohio

By Conor Morris 10 hrs ago



A volunteer picks up a box of food to hand to a patron at the Nelsonville Food Cupboard in January 2017.

By Lucas Reilly

Two Ohio House and Senate committees met earlier this month to discuss a pair of bills that Athens County Job & Family Services and others warn will harm the state's SNAP food stamp administration program's ability to help feed Ohio's most vulnerable citizens, especially those in Appalachia.

The laws – House Bill 608 and House Bill 119, which have yet to be scheduled for a vote during the Ohio Legislature’s lame-duck session (November to December) – seek to place additional layers of regulation on the state’s administration of SNAP.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is federally funded to provide assistance in buying food to people living with a gross monthly income at or under 130 percent of the federal poverty guidelines. Roughly 14 percent of Athens County residents received SNAP benefits as of January 2018 (about 9,190 people). Meanwhile, about 20 percent of Athens County’s population is considered “food insecure” (defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a household’s lack of access to enough food to live a healthy life).

Jack Frech, longtime Athens County Job and Family Services director before his retirement four years ago, charged that both bills are “punitive” measures designed by conservative “think tanks.”

“HB 119 seem to be addressing the non-issue of fraud in the SNAP program,” Frech explained in an email last week. “The actual error/fraud rate is about 3-4 percent. It calls for more rigid documentation requirements and more hoops for poor families to jump through. It also authorizes the privatization of collecting these documents. No surprise there. They (the Legislature) create more administrative costs and want to channel the money to a private business.”

Frech, who has continued his status as among the most vocal of anti-poverty advocates in Ohio since his retirement in 2014, said that HB 608 similarly makes the SNAP program “more punitive.”

“It forbids the state from getting waivers to punitive rules, and basically makes the state take the most punitive options when devising their state plan for administration of SNAP,” Frech said. “The loss of waivers will cost our region tens of millions of dollars in money for food for poor people.”

HB 608 would essentially forbid the state from applying for waivers from a work-requirement provision of SNAP that targets able-bodied adults aged 18-59 (in addition to other waivers). Currently, Athens, Vinton, Meigs, Washington and 30-plus other counties in Ohio – mostly in inner cities and Appalachian Ohio – have received the work-requirement waiver because they are considered areas with a significant lack of jobs. (Athens County started receiving this waiver last year.)

Essentially, the work requirement mandates that so-called ABAWDs (“able-bodied adults without dependents”) aged 18-59 in particular are subject to a three-month (per every three years) limit on food stamps unless they meet certain work requirements.

“To be eligible beyond the time limit, an ABAWD must work at least 80 hours per month, participate in qualifying education and training activities at least 80 hours per month, or comply with a workfare program,” the U.S. Department of Agriculture explains on its website. “Workfare means that ABAWDs can do unpaid work through a special state-approved program. For workfare, the amount of time worked depends on the amount of benefits received each month.”

The waiver does not eliminate the general SNAP work requirement for all recipients to register for work; to not voluntarily quit a job or reduce hours; to take a job if offered; and to participate in employment and training programs if assigned by the state.

HB 608 proposes to eliminate the state’s use of the ABAWD work requirement waiver that Athens County currently uses.

OHIO ASSOCIATION OF FOODBANKS Director Lisa Hamler-Fugitt predicted that HB 608, if it passes, will make poor Ohioans “even poorer.”

“It would force low-income Ohioans who would lose their SNAP benefits into my food pantries, soup kitchens and food bank lines because they can’t stand in grocery check-out lines,” Hamler-Fugitt said.

That would mean an increased need at food pantries such as the Nelsonville Food Cupboard on Chestnut Street in Nelsonville, where owners Margaret Sheskey and her husband Larry Lafferty have seen a huge increase in the number of people needing food in the last three-plus years. Lafferty said that in 2014, the Food Cupboard provided food to about 200 households per month; this year, the cupboard has been providing food to 650 households or more every month, Lafferty said.

Hamler-Fugitt noted that because of crackdowns in Ohio in recent years related to the state’s administration of the work requirements (even before either of the aforementioned bills were introduced), the state has seen 500,000 individuals kicked off the SNAP program, and the state has lost a total of \$2 billion in federal SNAP funding that could have been used to help feed poor Ohioans.

Frech said that that meant several million dollars per year in SNAP benefits that Athens County is not providing. At least 2,000 people in Athens County already have been “thrown off” SNAP benefits in recent years, Frech said, people otherwise eligible for SNAP who could not meet the ABAWD work requirement. Even after that requirement was waived in 2017, Athens County has not seen any increase in the number of people on SNAP.

In part, Frech said, many people cannot afford to keep a car on the road – largely due to the expensive insurance and maintenance required – to make it to work or to job trainings that are required by SNAP.

OHIO 94TH DISTRICT Rep. Jay Edwards, R-Nelsonville, voted to approve HB 119 along with the rest of the Ohio House's Republicans and 17 House Democrats in November 2017 (the vote was 80 to 14). The bill is now being considered by the state Senate's Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee.

"With respect to HB 119, the bill was designed to reduce fraud and make sure tax dollars go to those who need assistance," Edwards said in an email last week. "It had six hearings in the House, and there was no opposition testimony. The bill was unanimously supported in committee and received bipartisan support on the House floor. It's my understanding there has been no opponent testimony thus far in the Senate.

"As of this moment, I am yet to hear any opposition to HB 119. If interested parties are now finding issue with the bill, I hope they come to me and others as soon as possible so issues can be addressed in a prompt manner. I have displayed my willingness to do what is right to help folks living in poverty even if that means going against my own party," Edwards said.

Edwards was the lone House Republican to vote against Ohio House Bill 50, a bill that requires photo identification on EBT (SNAP and other benefit-access) cards. That bill was approved by the Ohio House last year and is currently being considered by the Senate.

As for HB 608, Edwards noted that the bill is still "very early" in the process, and that he has not heard any opposition. He said he plans to talk to Frech and Hamler-Fugitt soon to discuss both HB 608 and HB 119.

"I have consistently worked with Democrats and Republicans in southeast Ohio and at the Statehouse to help provide a hand up to those who need it, and that includes supporting additional funding for Ohio's food banks," Edwards said. "Standing up for those facing difficult circumstances and fighting for opportunity for my constituents is something I take very seriously. I have worked on many initiatives, including with Jack Frech and the Mayor's Partnership for Progress, on addressing issues facing people living in poverty in southeast Ohio, such as back water payments and free boxes of household needed items (soap, shampoo, laundry detergent, etc)."

JEAN DEMOSKY, director of Athens County Job & Family Services, and Randall Galbraith, assistant director of ACJFS, both raised concerns about the bills last week when asked by The NEWS.

Galbraith said that HB 608 in particular should concern "all" county JFS agencies in Ohio.

Under this law, he said, "ODJFS would no longer be allowed to ask for a work-activities waiver due to unemployment numbers for ABAWDs receiving food assistance, a waiver of income that may be used to determine eligibility for SNAP benefits, a waiver of resource limits that are used to determine SNAP eligibility, and the waiver of the requirement for SNAP beneficiaries to comply with the child-support program.

"Taken together," Galbraith added, "the elimination of these waivers would unnecessarily limit eligibility for the SNAP program while creating a tremendous unfunded burden on the child-support program."

Demosky said that HB 119 would make it harder for people to get assistance in Athens County in general.

"Any legislation that increases red tape and creates more hoops for disadvantaged citizens will be detrimental," she warned. "Our mission is to help as many people in need as we can."

Lafferty, with the Nelsonville Food Cupboard, said that things have only gotten more difficult for that food pantry to find enough food for needy people in recent years despite signs of a "recovery" since the Great Recession. While the unemployment rate has decreased in Athens County since that time, he said, the amount of food insecure people in the county has not; and the need for the Food Cupboard's services seems to continue to increase.

Working at the Food Cupboard, Lafferty said, is a "humbling" experience, adding that anyone concerned about people taking advantage of food stamps or food pantries should come by his food pantry to observe the need that exists there.

Lafferty said that the Food Cupboard's yearly budget was once about \$20,000 years ago; now, it's about \$70,000, all coming from fundraising and grant dollars. He referred to a Gofundme site where people can donate money to the facility.