

FACT SHEET

A strong safety net means a stronger Alabama for all

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We all know that people get down on their luck sometimes. They lose a job, have a sick child or need time to recover from an injury. And most Alabamians – understanding that “there, but for the grace of God, go I” – want to do what they can to help people going through a rough time.

The way that we, collectively, help our fellow Americans is through the “safety net,” a set of publicly funded services designed to help people meet basic needs when things get tough. Safety net programs include:

- Food assistance through the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP).
- Health insurance through Medicaid or the Children’s Health Insurance Program (known as ALL Kids in Alabama).
- Unemployment compensation.
- Disability benefits.
- Cash assistance through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Attacks on the safety net in Alabama and other states

Some conservatives have been trying to cut the safety net at state and federal levels. During the 2018 Farm Bill reauthorization debate, the Foundation for Government Accountability (FGA) and other groups encouraged Congress to restrict hungry people’s ability to put food on the table. But these efforts failed, and SNAP emerged even stronger than before.

After this failure, opponents of the safety net turned their attention to the friendlier

administrative rule process. They sought to force rules through the federal Departments of Agriculture, Housing and Homeland Security to cut food and housing assistance to marginalized people, including immigrant families.

Alabama Arise members and our state and national partners have submitted thousands of comments against these proposed changes. This advocacy has stopped or slowed some harmful plans, including the state’s proposed Medicaid work requirement. But the threats persist.

Another insidious attack on the safety net is happening in state legislatures across the country, including Alabama. While Medicaid and SNAP operate largely by federal rules, states have some discretion in how they design their programs. This discretion is called “state options” in SNAP.

Groups like the FGA have combed through the choices states have made in these state options. They have written “model” state legislation that would force states to select the most restrictive options allowed under federal law. Some of these bills are crafted to sound “reasonable” to legislators and to the general public. But together, they are designed to cut millions of struggling people off from the help they need.

Barriers to food and health care for struggling Alabamians

Since 2016, Arise has fought successfully against harmful barriers that would keep struggling Alabamians from getting the help they need. And we’re geared up to continue that fight for years to come. Here are a few of the damaging legislative proposals we expect to see again:

- Stigmatize SNAP and TANF participants by requiring some of them to be tested for illegal drugs. States that implemented this approach have found it expensive and ineffective, with few participants testing positive. The plans would deny assistance to people who refuse a drug test or fail a drug test more than once. But they would not guarantee those participants get treatment for substance use disorders.
- Prohibit Alabama from requesting a waiver of time limits for a small class of SNAP participants called able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs). New federal rules already severely restrict these waivers, and the governor should have the authority to respond to an economic or environmental crisis by ensuring affected Alabamians can get the food they need during bad times.
- Impose work requirements on SNAP participants who are not already working and who are not seniors or people with disabilities. This proposal would end Alabama's very promising volunteer job training and employment assistance program for SNAP participants. Instead of getting the real job training they need, SNAP participants would be forced either to engage in less effective job search programs or to lose food assistance their families desperately need.
- Require participants in "public benefits" to engage in community service at schools, nonprofits or other places. This could cut off assistance to hundreds of thousands of Alabamians who cannot jump through complex administrative hoops. It also would be time-consuming and expensive for participating agencies.

Other costly, harmful proposed administrative barriers

- Require a photo ID to buy groceries using an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card for SNAP. This would be a tremendous barrier for seniors, people with disabilities and other Alabamians

with transportation challenges. It would require store clerks to learn complex federal rules about who is allowed to use SNAP benefits. And it would slow down grocery store checkout lines for everyone.

- Impose an asset test on applicants for SNAP food assistance. Alabama ended asset tests for SNAP because they were complex, time-consuming and expensive to administer, especially for seniors. They also rarely identified anyone too wealthy to be eligible for assistance.
- Impose complex, duplicative and costly verification of income and assets for Medicaid, SNAP or TANF. This would slow down the processing of applications and deny or delay essential health and nutrition services for eligible people.
- Require SNAP applicants to "comply" with child support orders or seek child support from the other parent before receiving food assistance. Cutting food assistance for families behind in child support does nothing but make children hungrier. And cutting assistance to a parent who has not demanded child support may force victims of domestic violence or child abuse to choose between their safety and their next meal.

The bottom line

All of these harmful ideas would make life harder for struggling Alabamians. Several proposals also would force agencies to pay millions of dollars to private firms that operate verification and client tracking functions now performed by state employees. Most importantly – and most troublingly – these proposals would increase the number of sick and hungry people in Alabama.

Alabamians deserve shared prosperity and inclusion, not increased human suffering and isolation. That is why we oppose cuts to Medicaid, SNAP, TANF and other programs that help people reach their full opportunity. Arise's members rose to this challenge during the Farm Bill debate and in response to harmful federal rule changes. And we know you will continue to help protect the safety net that protects all Alabamians when times get tough.