COLORADO REPRESENTATIVES

Work requirements don’t work for Colorado

Statement attributed to Kathy Underhill, CEO, Hunger Free Colorado & Abby J. Leibman, President & CEO of MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

DENVER, June 19, 2018 — This week, the House version of the 2018 Farm Bill, is slated to come up for another full vote. (It failed to pass the first time it was brought to the floor.) This bill, crafted behind closed doors, imposes new and harmful requirements that would make it harder for low-income Coloradans to put food on the table. We call on the Colorado congressional delegation to act in the best interest of all Coloradans and reject this bill.

For decades, bipartisanship has been a hallmark of our nation’s food and farm policy. The Senate Agriculture Committee, of which Colorado’s Senator Michael Bennet is a member, wisely continued this longstanding tradition. Their approach yielded a compromise bill that effectively balances the needs of farmers and consumers, as well as urban, suburban, and rural populations. Their bill protects the people who need help from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to weather life’s storms. It passed out of Committee easily on a bipartisan 20-1 vote.

By contrast, the House version of the Farm Bill has been partisan from the start. It represents a dangerous shift in the bill’s long-standing history, and it plays politics with the lives of real people. It includes new Draconian work requirements to qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which will make it harder for low-income Coloradans—including older adults and families with young children—to put food on the table.

SNAP provides an average of just $1.40 per person, per meal. That modest support helps ensure Colorado families who are experiencing soaring housing costs and an acute shortage of childcare don’t have to choose between paying rent and feeding their families.

Let’s set the record straight: people who get help from SNAP must already meet strict work requirements. And in our experience, most people who can work do. Under the current law, adults ages 18-49 who do not have children under 18 or other dependents must work at least 80 hours per month or participate in a state-administered employment and training program for the same amount of time. If they do not, they become ineligible for a month for the first infraction, three months for the second, and six months for the third.

Under the House Farm Bill proposal, these work requirements would expand to include people 50-59 years old. This proposal may sound benign, but it’s not. Unemployed older Americans face significant
challenges in reentering the workforce, including age discrimination and limited availability of effective training programs. The AARP reports that job seekers age 55 and older remain unemployed more than five months longer than younger workers and are paid about 20 percent less. A policy like this, which doesn’t recognize these realities, could easily doom older Coloradans to hunger and worsened health outcomes.

In another cruel twist, households that include school-age children would also be impacted, because the new rules would apply to anyone with a child over age six. But the Afterschool Alliance reports that more than 256,000 students in Colorado are waiting for a spot in afterschool programs. It would seem the House assumes children as young as seven can simply fend for themselves.

While it’s true that a good job can be a path out of poverty, such jobs must actually be available. Imposing work requirements without reference to employment possibilities, let alone the infrastructure to support working parents, is not evidence-based policymaking. Ironically, the 2014 Farm Bill included a number of pilots testing the efficacy of workforce development programs, but none of these pilot programs are yet complete. Rather than waiting for evidence, the House simply used an ideological litmus test. What we do know is that work requirements alone have proven to be ineffective in increasing employment and reducing poverty. For example, in 2016, West Virginia piloted work requirements in nine counties with the lowest unemployment rates. The result of this complex and costly program: just 5 percent of adults who were subjected to these new work requirements actually gained employment that year.

We can and must do better. If we want to see more Coloradans with the capacity to improve their lives and the lives of their children, if we want to improve health outcomes, and if we want to reduce healthcare costs, then we should be doing everything we can to increase Coloradans’ access to affordable, nutritious food.

The House Farm Bill is a short-sighted bid to vilify Americans who, amidst ever-rising costs and stagnant wages, are unable to make ends meet. With its severe cuts and changes, the House Farm Bill will increase hunger and hardship in Colorado and across the nation. We cannot let that happen.

All of Colorado’s congressional delegation has an important responsibility in ensuring a fair Farm Bill. They must do their part on behalf of all Coloradans, including those who struggle with hunger, and reject the harmful changes proposed in the House Republican Farm Bill.

Kathy Underhill is CEO of Hunger Free Colorado, a statewide nonprofit organization, connecting families and individuals to food resources and fueling change in systems, policies and social views, so no Coloradan goes hungry.

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