

## TESTIMONY

### United States House Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight and Department Operations: Examining the ABAWD Rule and Its Impact on Hunger and Hardship

April 3, 2019

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt, Executive Director  
Ohio Association of Foodbanks  
Ohio's largest charitable response to hunger  
101 East Town Street, Suite 540  
Columbus, Ohio 43215  
614/221-4336 ext. 222  
614/271-4803 cell  
[www.ohiofoodbanks.org](http://www.ohiofoodbanks.org)  
[lisa@ohiofoodbanks.org](mailto:lisa@ohiofoodbanks.org)

The findings of our comprehensive assessment of able-bodied adults without dependents can be found at our website at:  
<http://ohiofoodbanks.org/wep/WEP-2013-2015-report.pdf>

Good morning Chairwoman Marcia L. Fudge, Ranking Member Dusty Johnson and distinguished members of the U.S. House Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight and Department Operations.

My name is Lisa Hamler-Fugitt and I serve as the executive director of the Ohio Association of Foodbanks, Ohio's largest charitable response to hunger. My association represents Ohio's 12 Feeding America foodbanks and their more than 3,500 member hunger relief charities. Our mission is to provide food and resources to people in need and to pursue areas of common interest for the benefit of people in need. Last year, the association distributed 216 million pounds of food to more than 2 million low-income Ohioans – 1 in 6 of our hungry friends and neighbors.

Thank you for convening this hearing today and inviting me to testify on the Trump administration Proposed Rule: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): Requirements for Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents RIN 0584-AE57.

This rule would limit the ability of states to waive the three-month time limit that applies to unemployed and underemployed Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents who receive benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

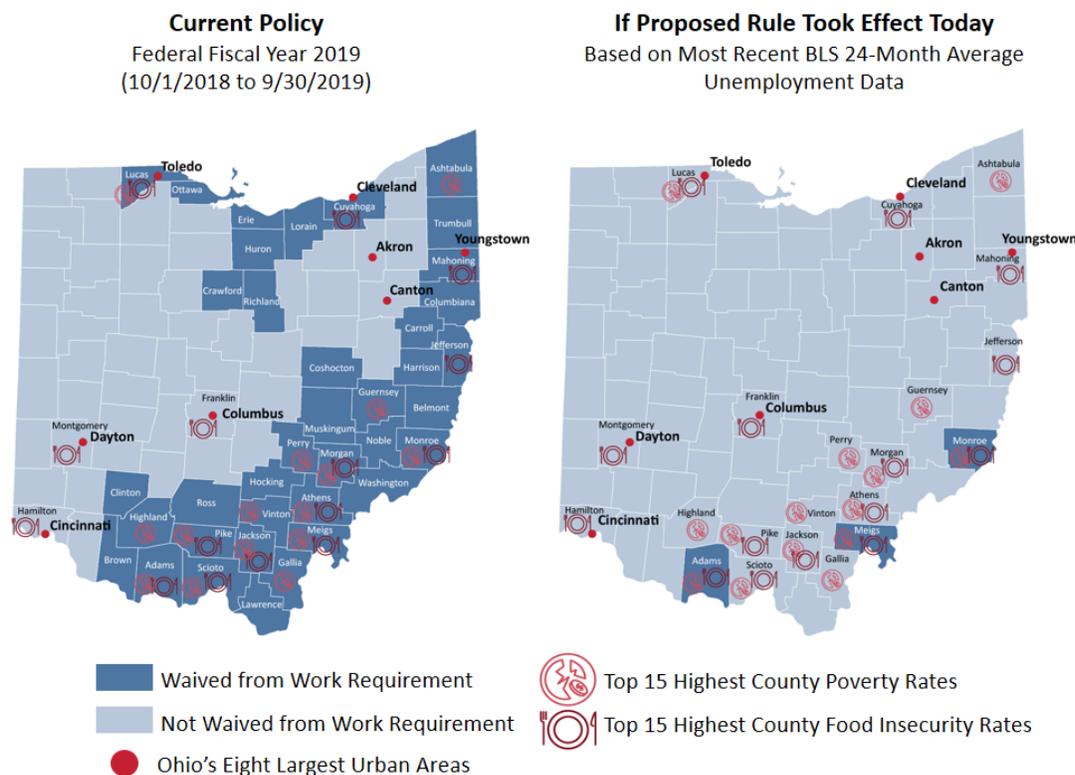
I'm here today to provide you with our association's firsthand experiences operating the SNAP Work Experience Program that serves only work-mandated unemployed and underemployed Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents in Franklin County, Ohio. The program began in SFY 2014, when the administration of then-Governor John Kasich eliminated the statewide waiver and instead applied for a limited number of exemptions for only 16 predominantly rural, white counties. The administration did not request exemptions for eligible cities where minority communities are concentrated and unemployment is high. Ohio had a statewide waiver that had been in place since mid-2000, when the Ohio General Assembly enacted legislation to compel the State of Ohio to apply for and implement the waiver.

### Current Ohio Landscape

In FFY 2019, there are 38 counties in Ohio where the time limit has been waived due to high unemployment. Based on unemployment data obtained from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the 24-month average unemployment rate in each of the counties was greater than 120 percent of the national unemployment rate during the same 24-month period.<sup>1</sup>

If the proposed rule were to take effect today with the seven percent threshold for waiver eligibility, only three Ohio counties would qualify for a time-limit waiver (according to BLS unemployment data over the most recent 24-month period available).<sup>2</sup> These three counties—Adams, Meigs, and Monroe—account for less than one percent of Ohio’s SNAP population. If the geographic distribution of ABAWDs matches that of the broader SNAP population, over 99 percent of Ohio’s ABAWDs would now be subject to the SNAP time limit (up from 52 percent under current policy). In effect, the rule would add additional barriers blocking Ohioans in the poorest parts of the state from accessing basic nutrition.<sup>3</sup>

**Ohio Counties Waived in FFY2019**  
 Adams, Ashtabula, Athens, Belmont, Brown, Carroll, Clinton, Columbiana, Coshocton, Crawford, Cuyahoga, Erie, Gallia, Guernsey, Harrison, Highland, Hocking, Huron, Jackson, Jefferson, Lawrence, Lorain, Lucas, Mahoning, Meigs, Monroe, Morgan, Muskingum, Noble, Ottawa, Perry, Pike, Richland, Ross, Scioto, Trumbull, Vinton, and Washington



**Map by The Center for Community Solutions.**

Sources:  
 U.S. Census Bureau. (2018) American Community Survey 5-year estimates, poverty status in the past 12 months. Feeding America. (2018). Map the meal gap 2018: overall food insecurity in Ohio by county in 2016. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2018). Local Area Unemployment Statistics, January 2017-December 2018. Author’s analysis, assuming waiver eligibility floor of 7 percent county unemployment rates.

<sup>1</sup> Ohio Department of Job and Family Services FAL- 171 Federal Fiscal Year 2019: Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents <http://jfs.ohio.gov/ofam/FAL-171-FFY-2019-ABAWD-090718.stm>

<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2018). Local Area Unemployment Statistics, January 2017-December 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Requirements for Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents” [RIN 0584-AE57] The Center for Community Solutions, March 26, 2019.

Americans want to work. The proposed SNAP able-bodied restrictions will hurt many who want to work but can't for a whole host of reasons – often because there are no jobs for them.

However, living in a county where the time-limit has been waived does not exempt ABAWDs from their obligation to participate in the labor force. Ohio administers a mandatory SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) program that is inclusive of ABAWDs. Under SNAP E&T, ABAWDs must participate in education/job training, job search/job readiness activities, or work experience or else be subject to a sanction, regardless of whether the individual lives in a county where the time-limit has been waived.<sup>4</sup>

### SNAP is Essential for Ohio

The households served by our statewide emergency food assistance network represent diverse circumstances and challenges. Clients face a wide array of obstacles to food security, such as health issues, education levels, housing instability, unemployment/underemployment, disabilities, and insufficient income and resources.

Our association recognizes that hunger is merely a symptom of poverty and we engage in other efforts to eradicate poverty and hunger. For more than a decade, we have provided services to connect low-income Ohioans with nutrition benefits and other work support programs. Knowing first-hand that hunger and health are directly linked, the association partners with the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services and the USDA Food and Nutrition Service as the state's SNAP outreach grantee. The association and our member foodbanks administer and conduct outreach and education on this critical food assistance program. We work on the front lines – reaching hungry Ohioans where they work, live, pray, play and learn.

For more than 25 years, we have advocated for equitable public policy at the state and federal levels to decrease hunger in Ohio. We work with local, regional, and national partners to inform policymakers, media, and other stakeholders about the issues facing Ohio's families.

We know that SNAP is the first line of defense against hunger in our state and nation – in fact, our charitable

### Background: How Did We Get Here?

Under the 1996 welfare law, adults aged 18-49 who are not physically or mentally unfit for work or caring for a minor child are eligible to receive Food Stamp/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for only 3 months in a 36-month period, unless the individual meets certain work requirements. These individuals are known as Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) and are required to work at least 20 hours a week, participate in qualifying work or training program activities for at least 20 hours a week, or live in an area with high unemployment where the three-month limit is temporarily waived.

On the request of a State SNAP agency, the law also gives the USDA the authority to temporarily waive the time limit in areas that have an unemployment rate of over 10 percent or a lack of sufficient jobs. The law also provides State agencies with a limited number of percentage exemptions that can be used by States to extend SNAP eligibility for ABAWDs subject to the time limit. The Department proposes to amend the regulatory standards by which the Department evaluates State SNAP agency requests to waive the time limit and to end the unlimited carryover of ABAWD percentage exemptions.

When signing the welfare law in 1996, President Clinton singled out this as one of the bill's most harmful provisions and called for it to be substantially changed.

The Administration's proposed rule RIN 0584-AE57 would encourage broader application of the statutory ABAWD work requirement and is intended to circumvent the will of Congress.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <http://jfs.ohio.gov/ofam/FAL-171-FFY-2019-ABAWD-090718.stm>

<sup>5</sup> President William Clinton, Statement on Signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, August 22, 1996, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=53219>

network could never respond to the lack of adequate access to nutritious food on our own. In December 2018, Ohio SNAP issuance was \$165 million, which provided supplemental food assistance benefits to 1.3 million Ohioans living in 660,000 Assistance Groups. These households received an average of \$124.48 in SNAP benefits per person, per month. Nearly half (43 percent) were children.<sup>6</sup>

To get SNAP benefits, households must meet certain tests, including resource and income tests. Benefits are limited to a person with net income at or below 100% FPL (monthly net income of no more than \$1,041 per month for a household of one and \$1,409 for a household of two people). The program also has work and work registration requirements for everyone 16 to 60 years of age.

**In October 2013, 1.8 million Ohioans were receiving SNAP to help feed their families.<sup>i</sup> As of December 2018, enrollment had fallen to 1.3 million, a decline of more than 26 percent.<sup>ii</sup>**

<sup>i</sup> “Statement on the November 1st Cuts to the SNAP Program,” Food Research and Action Center. <http://frac.org/statement-on-the-november-1st-cuts-to-the-snap-program/>

<sup>ii</sup> Ohio Association of Foodbanks analysis of Ohio Department of Job and Family Services Public Assistance Monthly Statistics <http://ifs.ohio.gov/pams/index.stm>

### **The Beginning and Approach of Ohio’s Work Experience Program in Franklin County, Ohio**

The association was approached in late 2013 by the Franklin County Department of Job and Family Services (FCJFS) to assist them in the development of a process to screen and evaluate an estimated 12,000 Franklin County SNAP recipients that would be affected by the State’s decision to reimpose the ABAWD work requirement and time limit.

The goals of this partnership, which began as a pilot program, were multifaceted, including not only assisting recipients in meeting the federal work requirement in order to maintain their food assistance, but also providing them with meaningful work experience and job training and enhancing their ability to secure sustainable employment in order to become economically self-sufficient. To do that we needed to understand the barriers and challenges these Ohioans already face.

The association developed and utilized a Work Experience Assessment Portal to conduct in-depth, comprehensive interviews and assessments designed to determine employability and identify barriers to employment. The data collected included: age and gender demographics, access to reliable transportation, methods of communication and identification, housing and living situations, criminal history, education completion, physical and mental health disabilities and limitations, employment history, and dependent and family relationships. These findings provided us with a deeper understanding of the issues and challenges participants face and provided us a framework for identifying and recruiting the types of community organizations that we needed to partner with that could help and host participants in order for them to meet the work requirements.

Our recruitment process for developing new sites involved calling, mailing, e-mailing, and visiting numerous nonprofit and faith-based organizations in Franklin County. Each organization is required to sign a Memorandum of Agreement, establishing a strong partnership that also holds these organizations accountable for reporting hours for clients. The Work Experience Program Host sites

<sup>6</sup> [http://ifs.ohio.gov/pams/Case-Load-Summary-Report-December-\(002\).stm](http://ifs.ohio.gov/pams/Case-Load-Summary-Report-December-(002).stm)

(WEP) provided each participant with a volunteer assignment intended to provide training, education, and on-the-job work experience that would be beneficial in their search for future employment. Some sites even report hiring WEP participants at their organizations when they had open positions available.

Prior to the participants being placed at a WEP host site, they were required to attend a three-part clinic to conduct an FBI/BCI background check and meet with possible employers and other employment service providers who helped secure identification, develop resumes, and demonstrate job search opportunities.

After clients complete the assessment and attend the clinic, participants are placed at a qualified WEP host site to complete their monthly work requirement which allows them to maintain their SNAP benefit eligibility for the duration of their participation.

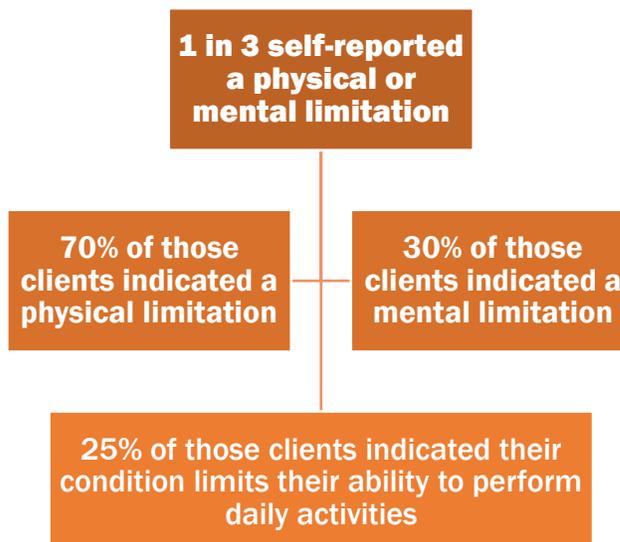
Our interest in the ABAWD participants did not end when they exit our program. We are concerned about the well-being and long-term outcomes of our clients. The association conducted a post-WEP client study to examine the course of clients after they exited the program. The findings of this report provide information about post-participation employment status and the most common causes of failure to comply with mandated ABAWD work requirements and WEP involvement.

During the project's pilot period, from December 10, 2013 through September 1, 2015, WEP Assessment Specialists completed in-depth interviews with 4,827 ABAWD participants and gathered information from 5,434 self-reported employability and skills assessments. Over the nearly two-year pilot, the information obtained represents the most comprehensive and up-to-date information collected about this misunderstood population. These findings offer instructive, meaningful insight into who these individuals are and what is required in order to help address the barriers and challenges they face as they attempt to secure stable employment. These findings have provided the association with a framework that continues to guide our Work Experience Program partnership with the Franklin County Department of Job and Family Services that is now in its sixth year of operation.

### **ABAWD – “Able-Bodied” – is a complete misnomer for who this population really is**

“Able-bodied” indicates that clients are not medically certified and/or documented as physically or mentally unfit for employment. As part of the association's assessment, clients are asked to self-report disabilities or limitations, both physical and mental. Our findings identified elevated rates of participants with undiagnosed and untreated mental and physical limitations and disabilities. Clients who self-reported they were disabled with a physical or mental condition that rendered them unable to work required access to a doctor or medical professional who could provide the necessary documentation. Other clients were clearly disabled and required more intensive support services to complete an application for SSI or SSDI.

Nearly 1 in 10 clients requested special accommodations such as work assignments that require no heavy lifting, or no standing/walking for long periods of time.



1 in 6 clients reported that they had filed for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI).

Most Common Types of Physical and Mental Limitations Reported:

- 18.3 percent - Back Injuries
- 6.0 percent - Respiratory Difficulties
- 5.9 percent - Knee Injuries
- 3 percent - Diabetes
- 2.8 percent - Shoulder Injuries
- 2.5 percent - Arthritis
- 2.3 percent - Heart Conditions
- 10.1 percent - Depression
- 9.3 percent - Bipolar Disorder
- 8.1 percent - Anxiety
- 3.1 percent - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- 1.5 percent - Schizophrenia

According to the Ohio Department of Health, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are a critical public health issue. ACEs are potentially traumatic experiences and events ranging from abuse and neglect to witnessing violent behavior and living with someone who has a problem with alcohol or drugs. Ohio is among five states where as many as one in seven children have experienced three or more ACEs – a significantly higher ratio than the national average.

The association's WEP Assessment Specialist reported when conducting assessments that many participants appeared to be marginally and functionally illiterate, and likely experiencing significant learning disabilities. This prompts a deeper examination of social promotion policies that may exist in schools.

Additionally, while assessing and observing clients, WEP Specialists noted that many clients appeared to have social and/or cognitive impairments, difficulty communicating, and a tendency to engage in repetitive behaviors, all signs of autism spectrum disorder. Since autism is a more recently identified disorder and has become a well-recognized ailment effecting 1 out of every 68 kids, it is highly likely that the ABAWD population may have high levels of undiagnosed autism, and certainly warrants further exploration.

**Client Story:** *Mary is a 22-year-old part-time college student who is studying to earn a Pharmacy Technician degree in hopes of one day becoming a Pharmacist. She is the first in her family to go to college and she has applied for and receives student loans that cover the cost of her tuition, books, and housing. She also receives SNAP and Medicaid benefits. Mary doesn't own a car and relies on public transportation and catches rides with family and friends or she walks. Mary also helps her mother care for younger sisters. Mary works for a large drug store chain which is on a bus line near the school she attends. When she was hired for the job, the store manager promised Mary she would work between 20 and 26 hours per week. Mary adjusted her class schedule to accommodate her work schedule, but unfortunately when the store sales began to lag behind projections, Mary's hours were cut in half, causing her to lose her SNAP benefits and leaving her with no way to feed herself. She has been pleading with the store manager to schedule her for additional hours, as this is a 24 hour/7 day a week store. Mary was told that she would need to be on call, but there are no guarantees that she will be called into work. The loss of SNAP benefits now threaten Mary's dreams and hopes and she is considering dropping out of school if she can't secure additional hours and regain her SNAP benefits.*

## Employment

There is limited employer demand for the “hardest to employ” groups, such as those with criminal records, lengthy periods of unemployment, or other barriers to works. Working 20 or more hours of paid employment per week, every week, qualifies an ABAWD to receive SNAP. Unfortunately, many clients were unable to identify how many hours they work per week because they are employed through a temporary employment agency (including day labor and labor pool agencies), which means clients may not have consistent work on a weekly basis.

11.3%	Currently working
8.3%	Working in-kind for rent or housing
24%	Dismissed or fired from a job

While some have described this population as “takers” – our research found that nearly **8 in 10 ABAWD clients** have never been eligible for unemployment compensation benefits.

## Education

While the unemployment rate in Ohio is declining, clients in this population may not meet the educational standards for the jobs becoming available. Analyzing the statistics collected on education, we find how limited the prospects are for clients to enter the workforce in a position that will pay a sustainable living wage.



**30 percent** of clients have no high school diploma or GED.

Although 69.2 percent of clients have graduated from high school or have earned a GED, only **38.1 percent** have attended college.

A very small portion of clients (11 percent) who have attended college went on to earn a degree.

**More than 1 million adults in Ohio do not have high school diplomas. Ohio’s Adult Basic Education Programs only have the capacity to serve approximately 7,000 Ohioans each year.**

[https://obm.ohio.gov/Budget/operating/doc/fy-20-21/BlueBook\\_BookOne\\_BudgetRecommendations\\_FY20-21.pdf](https://obm.ohio.gov/Budget/operating/doc/fy-20-21/BlueBook_BookOne_BudgetRecommendations_FY20-21.pdf)

## Transportation

Clients are supposed to receive a monthly travel stipend from their FCDJFS caseworker. Many clients report that they have not received the stipend. This could be due to an inaccurate mailing address, the inability to contact their caseworker, or a delay in dispersing of funds. Some clients report that the travel stipend is not enough to cover travel to and from work sites. Some clients do not have bank accounts and have to pay a service fee to cash the check they receive from FCDJFS, leaving an insufficient amount to purchase a monthly bus pass which the stipend should cover.

Just **57 percent of clients report they have reliable access to transportation**. This can be a personal vehicle, public transit, or utilizing friends and family members for transportation.

Only **40 percent of clients have a valid driver’s license**, which indicates that clients are either using public transportation or

## Suspended Driver’s Licenses

In 2017, 1.1 million Ohioans had a suspended driver’s license — nearly 12 percent of those old enough to drive in the state. Some suspensions have nothing to do with driving. If you don’t pay your child support, you can lose your license. You can also lose it for dropping out of high school or getting caught smoking as a juvenile. It can be suspended if you miss a court date or fail to pay court fines on misdemeanor charges.

<https://www.daytondailynews.com/news/state-regional/ohio-fee-amnesty-for-suspended-drivers-has-started-but-only-lasts-six-months/5qQck20Vi2e3MmEFRI1NTM/>

are driving without a license. Some clients may not be able to obtain a driver's license if they owe child support and have had their driving privileges suspended, or if they have outstanding tickets or unpaid fines which they may be unable to resolve with their limited income.

Fewer than **1 in 5 clients report having car insurance**, inferring that some are driving without insurance which can be attributed to a variety of factors, including affordability.

**1 in 4 clients** do not live near a bus stop or bus line.

About **15 percent of clients** report they have been documented as Driving Under the Influence (DUI) or Operating a Vehicle Impaired (OVI). Having a DUI/OVI on an individual's driving record can affect their ability to obtain employment or housing, result in higher car insurance which they may be unable to afford, and/or lead to loss of driving privileges.

### Criminal History

As part of the assessment, clients are asked to complete an FBI/BCI background check. An overwhelming 96 percent of clients agreed to comply with this request. Clients who declined a background check do not qualify to participate in WEP with the Ohio Association of Foodbanks.

#### Long-term impact of encounters with criminal justice system

People with criminal justice (CJ) system involvement are more likely than the general population to face poverty, homelessness, unemployment, and poor health conditions, even before arrest. For example, people returning to their communities after incarceration are three to six times more likely to be diagnosed with a mental illness and about 50 percent experience chronic health conditions such as asthma and hepatitis.

<http://www.georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Unworkable-Unwise-20190201.pdf>

Domestic violence can happen in any household regardless of socioeconomic status, race, age, or any other demographically defining factor. Studies show that domestic violence is three times as likely to occur when couples are experiencing financial strain. **11.2 percent** of clients reported having domestic violence charges.

A history of criminal activity or previous incarceration can have a tremendously negative impact on someone. They miss out on many opportunities, job related or otherwise. The stigma of a felony conviction can follow someone for a lifetime, even if their release is meant to suggest that they have been rehabilitated.

**35.8 percent** of the clients in our program have felony convictions; some clients have multiple felonies, or a combination of felonies and misdemeanors.

**12.8 percent** of clients are on probation or parole which means they may not qualify for services offered through legal aid, such as record sealing.

A recent report from the Kirwan Institute found that 1 in 4 people incarcerated in the State of Ohio were between the ages 18 to 24. The incarcerated population from the 18 to 24 age group in Ohio has grown nearly 70 percent in recent years. Prison intake data from Franklin County indicate that the median age of first arrest for those entering the state correctional system in 2012 was 19 years old.

**Client Story:** At 15 years old, David was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Now, at 30 he has been released and was eager to start his life over. He was nervous during the assessment, but the WEP Specialist was able to get him to relax as he told his story. Later, he called our office to thank the Specialist for being so kind and understanding during the assessment and for also believing in him. He was thrilled to tell her that he learned to drive and is now enrolled at Columbus State Community College.

## Other Issues Facing the ABAWD Population

### Youth Aging Out of the Foster Care system

**5 percent of the clients had aged out of the foster care system** and reported they were living with friends, in homeless shelters, or on the street.

### Homelessness and Housing

Clients experiencing homelessness, health problems, language barriers and a lack of stable employment to fit their skill set make up nearly 12.7 percent of clients who reported other barriers standing in the way of employment.

### Non-Custodial Parents and Caregivers

According to the USDA definition of an ABAWD, it is assumed that all clients do not have dependents. We found that clients with children, although not in their custody, still spend time parenting their children on a regular basis while the custodial parent works.

**1 in 4 clients** (23.5 percent) indicated that they had children not in their custody.

Nearly **1 in 5 clients** (18 percent) indicated that they owe child support.

An under-employed or unemployed noncustodial parent who loses SNAP may need to divert his or her income from child support payments in order to stay afloat financially. This would be devastating given that child support represents more than half of the income of the families in poverty who receive it.

Having the status of caregiver to a relative should potentially exempt an individual from the work requirement. Caregivers can often replace the services of a Medicaid or Medicare home-healthcare provider. Nearly **13 percent** of clients indicated that they are caregivers for a parent, friend, or relative.

## Employment & Job Seeking Needs

### Ohio Means Jobs Registration

In an effort to offer more job seeking resources to clients, they are referred to Ohio Means Jobs ([www.ohiomeansjobs.com](http://www.ohiomeansjobs.com)). When asked if clients were already registered with Ohio Means Jobs 74.1 percent reported they were not registered, and most clients reported they have never heard of the website.

### Additional Barriers

To ensure a client is able to perform the duties assigned to them, we inquire about any supportive services they may need to successfully complete their work assignment. Over 15.7 percent of clients report needing supportive services. The most common services requested were language interpretation (especially for Somalian refugees) and help with transportation.

**Client Story:** Dahman speaks only Somali and requires an interpreter or translator to fulfill his mandatory work activities and assignment. He has no transportation and relies on public transportation. Dahman returned to the JFS office attempting to find out about his food assistance benefit. Dahman had a large open wound on his arm that is draining, making it impossible for him to participate in any form of activity. Unfortunately, his County caseworker had not changed his employability plan or there had been an administrative delay in updating his care record, causing him to be sanctioned and to lose his SNAP benefits. Dahman was sent to a local food pantry to get food until his case could be sorted out and a new WEP placement could be located for him.

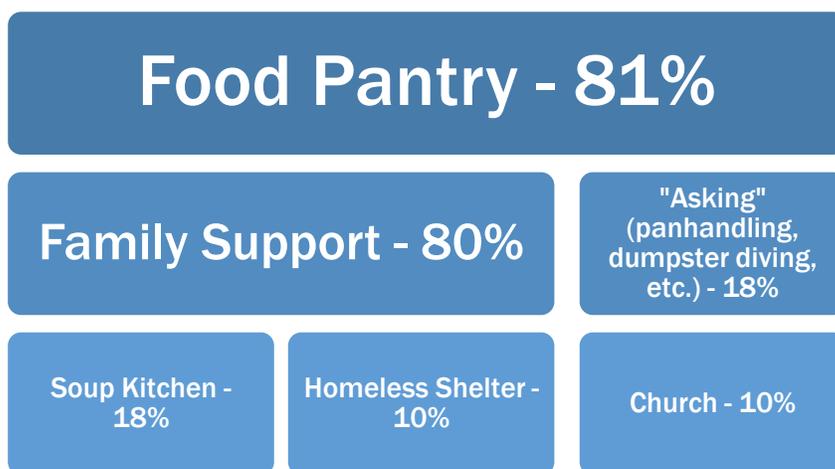
## Churn Rates Are High

When a client is no longer a participant in WEP due to a sanction, they may need to apply for a state hearing to overturn their sanction. Nearly 66 percent of clients reported taking this step to overturn their sanction, or reapplied for food assistance in another way after exiting WEP. It is estimated that there is a 3-month churn window, which is the average amount of time it takes for WEP participants to reenter SNAP after exiting the program.

The amount of churn generated by the most common causes of noncompliance creates increased work as an average 2 out of every 3 participants, including those who identified some form of employment, must restart the entire process by reapplying through their case worker for SNAP benefits.

### Food sourcing strategies of clients who no longer received SNAP benefits

If a client is not receiving food assistance due to a loss of SNAP benefits, they look for food elsewhere. When asked, “How are you providing food for yourself in the absence of food benefits,” clients gave multiple answers to the question, reflecting an increased demand on our emergency food network.



## Conclusion

Based on our experience, we know that harsh and arbitrary time limits are misguided and only increase hunger and hardship. This proposed rule is harsh and unfair. It denies vulnerable people food benefits at a time when they most need it and it does not result in increased employment and earnings. By time-limiting food assistance to this group, federal law clearly intends to shift the burden of providing food to these unemployed individuals off of SNAP and onto states, cities, and local charities like ours. We can't meet the demand for emergency food assistance now – this rule will make a bad situation far worse. This rule will increase food insecurity among populations that are suffering from a lack of services, opportunities, and access to basic human needs.

These individuals face daunting challenges in finding employment even when general unemployment rates are low. Our findings illustrate why Congress gave states the option to waive the time limit in areas where there are insufficient jobs for those subject to the rule. Without providing any evidence to the contrary, the rule proposes to limit the ways in which a state can demonstrate a lack of sufficient jobs for the individuals subject to the time limit. It does this by eliminating Labor Surplus Areas, low and declining employment-to-population ratios, and seasonal unemployment, and requiring recent unemployment rates to be at least 7 percent. But the Department fails to explain how it determined that the proposed new standards relate to employment opportunities for those subject to the rule, particularly given the significant barriers to employment facing this population that I've just shared with you.

The Department's commissioned reports as well as other research, including the association's WEP program results, paint a clear picture of individuals in this targeted group who have common characteristics that distinguish the group from other unemployed adults. These characteristics — including high poverty rates, health issues, and few supports — make finding and keeping employment a unique challenge. The Department simply asserts that the time limit will increase employment for this population but does not acknowledge its own research showing that this is not the case. While all aspects of the rule strike us as arbitrary, this disconnect between the agency's basic knowledge of the affected population and the assertions about how the proposed policy would increase employment is particularly surprising.

Additionally, adequate work training slots do not exist even for the ABAWDs already impacted by the work requirements as currently imposed. This rule would subject hundreds of thousands of additional people to a requirement to fulfill work training if unable to secure paid employment, without acknowledging that availability of work training slots is grossly inadequate.

In closing, the Department's proposed rule does not provide the analytical information needed to justify the policy change and to evaluate the proposed rule's likely impacts. Because of the deficiencies in reasoning and analysis, the proposed rule fails to answer basic questions related to the impact of the change and the people whom the proposed rule would affect, and so does not contain the information and data necessary to fully evaluate the proposed rule or to comment on key aspects on the Department's justification for the rule.

**The proposed rule would increase food insecurity and poverty in Ohio, as well as stifle economic activity.** By scaling back one of the nation's most effective poverty-reduction programs, the rule would exacerbate hardship and reduce economic activity in areas that are already economically disadvantaged compared to the rest of the country.

**The proposed rule undermines states' ability to respond to economic hardship.** By imposing artificial definitions of what it means for an area to "lack sufficient jobs," the rule would undermine states' discretion to provide hunger relief in economically disadvantaged areas.

**The intent of the proposed rule is not supported by evidence.** Though the USDA predicts that subjecting more SNAP recipients to work requirements would result in higher workforce participation rates, there is a lack of evidence to support this theory. In fact, existing evidence suggests that SNAP enrollment improves employment outcomes.

**The proposed rule would have a disparate impact on people of color in Ohio.** The rule would make it even more unlikely that Ohio counties where people of color are concentrated would receive a time limit waiver.<sup>7</sup>

**The Ohio Association of Foodbanks requests that USDA consider each of these points and withdraw the proposed rule.**

#### Proposed rule undermines existing law

The proposed rule would:

- Take food away from 755,000 low-income Americans, cutting food benefits by \$15 billion over ten years (based on the Administration's own estimates).
- Not result in improvements in health or employment among the affected population (based on the Administration's own estimates).
- Fuel rates of hunger and poverty by denying vulnerable people nutrition assistance at a time when they most need it.
- Harm the economy, grocery retailers, and agricultural producers by reducing the amount of SNAP dollars available to spur local economic activity.
- Sidestep Congress, which rejected these changes when it enacted the 2018 Farm Bill.

<sup>7</sup> The Center for Community Solutions: Public Comment to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food & Nutrition Service