

## Policies That Further Restrict SNAP Harm Families, Retailers, and the Charitable Sector

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### Overview

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) is the most powerful anti-hunger tool in the United States. It is highly responsive to economic downturns, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, where unemployment peaked at over 15 percent in West Virginia.<sup>1</sup> SNAP already contains work reporting requirements and robust fraud protection measures and has among the lowest fraud rates of any federal program.<sup>2</sup> Despite all the robust protection measures already in place, state lawmakers have regularly introduced legislation to further limit the program through additional bureaucratic red tape or increasingly complex eligibility requirements, which often have significant unintended consequences for families, retailers, the charitable food sector, and the broader economy.

In recent months, the state has lost significant federal SNAP dollars due to the reinstatement of pre-pandemic policies. SNAP provided emergency allotments to enrollees throughout the pandemic to maintain access to food amid rising food costs and economic uncertainty. In West Virginia, individuals received an additional \$100 on average.<sup>3</sup> Families and charitable food providers felt the impact when the allotments ended in March 2023, taking roughly \$32 million monthly out of the state economy.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, in October 2023, pre-pandemic time limits for so-called “able-bodied adults without dependents” (often referred to as ABAWDs) went back into effect. Since that provision was rolled out, approximately 12,000 West Virginians have lost their federal SNAP benefits, resulting in over \$2 million in lost food assistance each month.<sup>5</sup>

Combined, the state’s food economy has \$34 million less circulating through it monthly than it did just a year ago.

### SNAP Restrictions Negatively Impact Retailers

Fewer SNAP dollars impact retailers and grocers, many of whom serve communities with high rates of families who utilize the program. A 2016-2019 pilot program to reinstate ABAWD time limits showed correlation between the number of SNAP dollars in the state’s economy and participating retailers, with the number of retailers declining dramatically in 2018 and 2019.<sup>6</sup> Only when additional federal dollars entered the state due to

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<sup>1</sup> Rogombe, Rhonda and Kelly Allen, “West Virginia Policymakers Will Soon Lose Power to Use SNAP Flexibilities to Address Economic Downturns if Action is Not Taken,” West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, February 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Food and Nutrition Service, “USDA Releases New Report on Trafficking and Announces Additional Measures to Improve Integrity in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,” United States Department of Agriculture, August 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Hall, Lauren, “End of SNAP’s Temporary Emergency Allotments Resulted in Substantial Benefit Cut,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, September 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, Lauren and Catlin Nchako, “A Closer Look at Who Benefits from SNAP: State-by-State Fact Sheets,” February 2023. Note: Multiplied the number of recipients in FY 2022 by the difference in average allotments before and after emergency allotments ended March 2023.

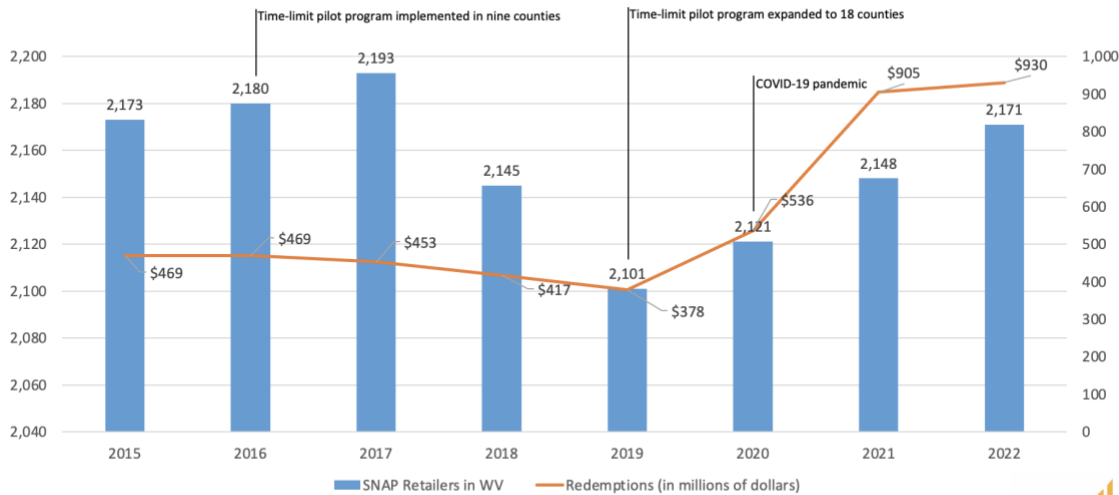
<sup>5</sup> West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources data received through an email request dated December 21, 2023. Note: Calculated the difference between non-exempt ABAWDs September to December 2023 plus the difference between exempt ABAWDs over the same period.

<sup>6</sup> Rogombe, Rhonda, “West Virginia Policymakers Will Soon Lose Power to Use SNAP Flexibilities.”

COVID-19 pandemic policies did West Virginia experience a reversal of the downward trend associated with SNAP closures.<sup>7</sup> Clay County’s only grocery store, Small Town Market, closed its doors permanently in September, citing the end of SNAP pandemic provisions as a major reason for its closure.<sup>8</sup>

## Fewer SNAP Dollars in State Associated with Fewer SNAP Retailers

SNAP retailers and redemptions (in millions of dollars) in West Virginia, 2015-2022.



Source: Food and Nutrition Service SNAP retailer reports  
WVPOLICY.ORG



Alt-text: Bar and line graph showing the number of redeemed SNAP dollars and SNAP retailers in West Virginia between 2015 and 2022, where time limits (restricted SNAP dollars) are associated with fewer SNAP retailers.

## SNAP Restrictions Harm Vulnerable Populations That Face Barriers to Work

ABAWD time limits, reinstated in the fall of 2023, apply to most adults between 18 and 52 (up to 54 in September 2024) without children under 18 in the household. The term “ABAWD” itself is often inaccurate and fails to capture the significant barriers to work this population faces. Regardless, these adults are only eligible for SNAP for three months over three years unless they report work or meet and report an exemption.<sup>9</sup>

Despite comprising less than 10 percent of the SNAP population as of December 2023, the state dedicates outsized resources toward enforcing ABAWD time limits. This vulnerable population faces various barriers that make meeting the program requirements difficult. A survey conducted by the WVCBP found that mental and physical limitations, housing insecurity, and other barriers significantly impacted whether a person could meet the time limits. While some of those surveyed could be eligible for an exemption, a lack of reliable internet access and transportation, amongst other barriers, made reporting these events to the agency onerous. One in four respondents have children but do not have custody of them, though many still support their families via child support and other means.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Food and Nutrition Service, “SNAP Retailer Data,” 2015 to 2022, retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailer/data>.

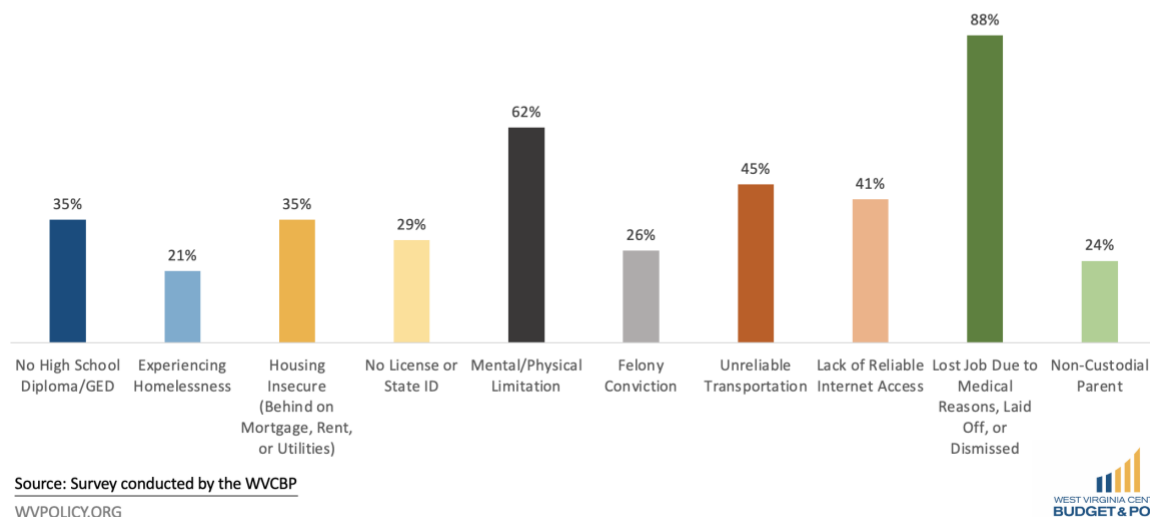
<sup>8</sup> Allen Siegler, “A devastating loss: Clay residents lose their only grocery store,” Mountain State Spotlight, September 6, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> USDA Federal Nutrition Service, “SNAP – Families First Coronavirus Response Act and Impact on Time Limit for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs),” Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/ffcr-impact-time-limit-abawds>.

<sup>10</sup> West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy Survey conducted September 2023 to January 2024.

## Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents (ABAWDs) in West Virginia Face Significant Barriers to Work

Survey results measuring barriers to work faced by ABAWDs in Cabell and Mingo Counties, 2023-24.



Alt-text: Bar graph showing barriers that able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) face significant barriers to work, including a lack of education, housing insecurity, transportation, and more.

## SNAP Restrictions Increase the Demand on State’s Charitable Food Sector

Beyond the personal impact that a lack of consistent access to food can have on individuals and their families, the restrictions on ABAWDs also have community implications. Many people rely on food pantries to provide meals, and charitable food demand increases when access to SNAP decreases.<sup>11</sup> While they provide meals, often alongside a warm space and community, they also experience the strain of restricted access to food.

Governor Jim Justice pledged 10 million state dollars to food banks earlier this month in his State of the State address. While these funds are vital to services increasingly helping families get fed, they pale compared to the money leaving the state between removing ABAWDs from the program and ending emergency allotments.<sup>12</sup>

It is critical that decision-makers in West Virginia protect SNAP and the people the program serves. It provides vital nutrition for individuals and families and positively impacts local SNAP retailers and economies. By ensuring that people have adequate access to food, the state can reduce hunger and make West Virginia a better place to live.

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<sup>11</sup> Bunton, Xena, “Families, food banks adjust to SNAP cuts,” Charleston Gazette-Mail, April 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Rosenbaum, Dottie et. al, “Temporary Pandemic SNAP Benefits Will End in Remaining 35 States in March 2023,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, February 2023.