

SNAP Restrictions Fail to Connect Vulnerable Residents to Work While Straining Cabell County Charitable Providers

RHONDA ROGOMBE

Cabell County finds itself at the epicenter of the opioid crisis that has hit the southwest region of West Virginia particularly hard. This crisis has taken lives, hollowed communities, and harmed the local economy. While the average unemployment rate in the county between 2011 and 2021 was on par with the state average (5.5 percent versus 6 percent, respectively), nearly one in five residents face poverty, exceeding the state and national average.¹ These data highlight financial stratification in the region—some folks can stay economically afloat, while others are not so fortunate.

In the wake of devastating economic losses left behind by the opioid crisis, SNAP is a program that buoys Cabell County while alleviating hunger.



1 in 6

RESIDENTS IN CABELL COUNTY RECEIVE FOOD ASSISTANCE VIA SNAP

These economic hardships are a strong indicator of hunger in the county. About one in six residents in Cabell County receive food assistance via the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (or SNAP, formerly known as food stamps).² SNAP is the most powerful anti-hunger tool in the United States, connecting vulnerable populations with food and nutrition that would otherwise be inaccessible. The program keeps many families afloat and supports the local economy by putting money into its grocery stores and other food retailers. In the wake of devastating economic losses left behind by the opioid crisis, SNAP is a program that buoys Cabell County while alleviating hunger.

SNAP's rules require a population referred to as "able-bodied adults without dependents" (ABAWDs) to meet work reporting requirements to maintain food benefits. ABAWD time limits, suspended throughout the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, went back into effect in the fall of 2023 and apply to most adults between 18 and 52 without children under 18 in the household. The term "ABAWD" 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. Federal rules allow states to waive certain places from ABAWD work reporting requirements when the area is experiencing a spike in joblessness, such as during a recession or following a natural disaster.

1. US Census Bureau, "QuickFacts, Cabell County, West Virginia," Retrieved March 2024; O'Leary, Sean, "A Deeper Look at West Virginia's 2022 Poverty Data," West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, September 2023.

2. US Food and Nutrition Services, "Putting Health Food within Reach for Those in Need," US Department of Agriculture, Retrieved February 2024.

While Cabell County would likely not qualify for a waiver under current economic conditions, the county and the entire state of West Virginia were exempt from ABAWD time limits during the Great Recession between 2009 and 2016. However, in 2016, the Department of Human Services (DHS, formerly the Department of Health and Human Services) instituted a pilot program to reimplement time limits in some counties. Later, a 2018 state law barred DHS from ever applying for exemptions to help residents in Cabell and other places access food in times of economic crisis.³ This law has increased food insecurity in West Virginia by removing thousands of people from the SNAP program and harming the state economy—all without increasing employment.⁴

There are many barriers that SNAP recipients designated as ABAWDs face that can make it challenging to meet onerous work reporting requirements, many of which contribute to overall poverty and unemployment.



SNAP keeps many families afloat while supporting the local economy by putting money into its grocery stores and other food retailers.

The WVCBP interviewed ABAWDs in Cabell County and found that factors such as homelessness and mental and physical limitations significantly impacted whether they could meet the ABAWD time limits. While the term “ABAWD” should not include people with disabilities, it often does because receiving verification is an arduous undertaking with its own obstacles.

Contributing Barriers

FOR ABAWDs



**NO
LICENSE**



**NO
TRANSPORTATION**



**NO
INTERNET**

Barriers like not having a license, lack of access to public transportation, and unreliable internet connection made it difficult for those who should have been exempt from the requirement to report that to the agency. Nearly 30 percent of those surveyed are non-custodial parents, meaning that while they have dependents that they may be financially or otherwise responsible for, they are not exempt because they do

not technically have custody. However, many were supporting their families via child support and other means. This scenario is just one reason “ABAWD” is an inaccurate term for describing this population.

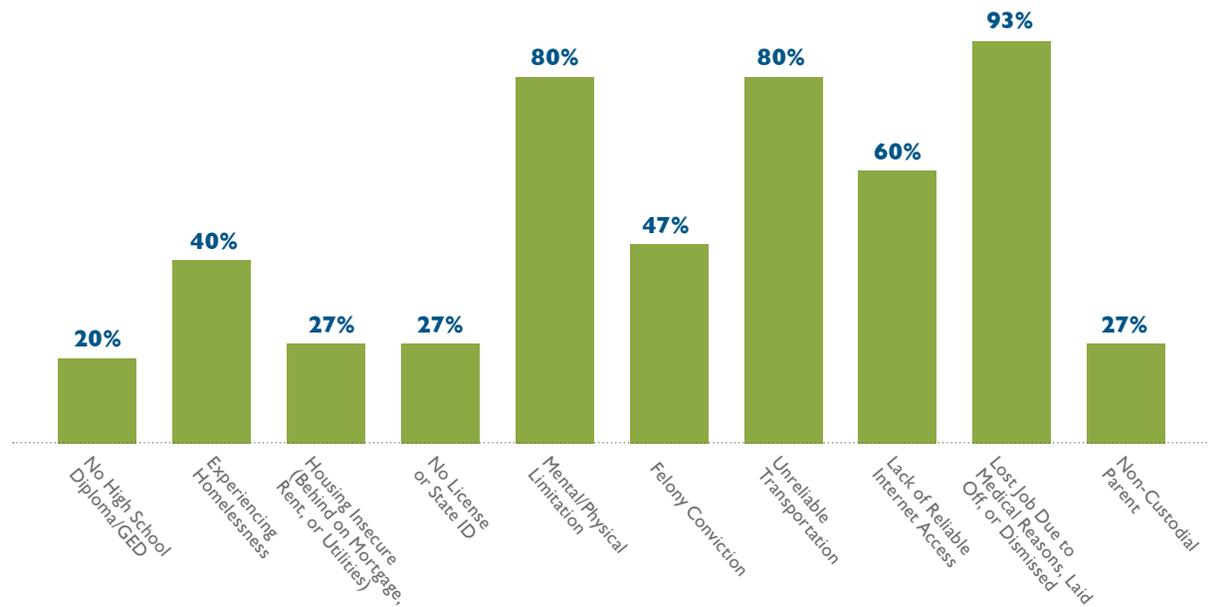
3. Rogombe, Rhonda, “Policies That Further Restrict SNAP Harm Families, Retailers, and Charitable Sector,” West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, January 2024.

4. Rogombe, Rhonda and Kelly Allen, “WV Policymakers Will Soon Lose Power to Use SNAP Flexibilities,” West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, February 2022.

Nearly half of respondents had a felony conviction, often making finding gainful employment impossible. Four in five reported a physical or mental limitation, though they did not have a disability designation from the Social Security Administration. Almost one-third lacked a state identification card or driver's license, and three in five lacked reliable internet access. Each represents challenges in finding and keeping paid work and successfully reporting work or exemptions to the county health agency that oversees SNAP benefits.

FIGURE 1
ABLE-BODIED ADULTS WITHOUT DEPENDENTS (ABAWDs)
IN CABELL COUNTY FACE SIGNIFICANT BARRIERS TO WORK
SURVEY RESULTS MEASURING BARRIERS TO WORK FACED BY
ABAWDs IN CABELL COUNTY, SEPTEMBER 2023 TO JANUARY 2024

Source: Survey conducted by the WVCPB



Between September 2023, the last month before the time limits went back into effect, and December 2023, nearly 800 Cabell County ABAWDs lost their SNAP benefits because they could not meet onerous work reporting requirements. This loss had a broader community impact beyond just those 800 individuals, costing the county over \$130,000 in lost SNAP benefits in just three months.⁵ This amount had an economic multiplier impact of over \$200,000—money that left families, retailers, and the county economy nearly overnight.⁶

Implementing the ABAWD time limit has no relationship with employment in Cabell County. In 2023, job growth was flat before and after reimplementing work reporting requirements. Cabell County had a zero percent change in employment before and after October 2023.

5. Ibid.

6. WVCPB analysis of data received from WV Bureau for Family Assistance; Feeding America Action, "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)," Retrieved February 2024.

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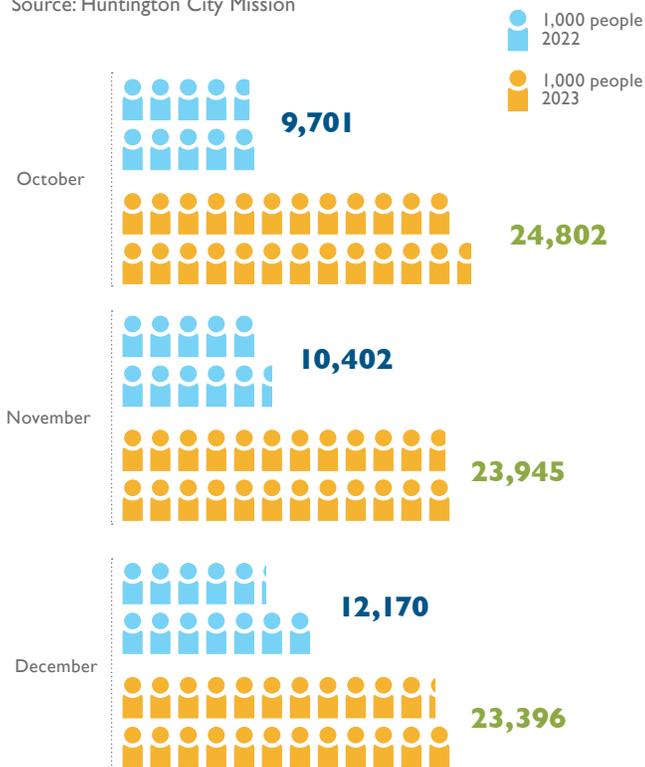
Similar studies show no clear correlation between work reporting requirements and jobs. These data imply that while many people lost SNAP benefits due to these onerous requirements, losing the benefits did not lead to increased work.



Charitable food providers step in to help feed communities when hunger increases.

FIGURE 2
RELIANCE ON CHARITABLE FOOD PROVIDERS HAS INCREASED SINCE END OF SNAP FLEXIBILITIES
NUMBER OF PERSONS SERVED AT HUNTINGTON CITY MISSION IN CABELL COUNTY, OCTOBER THROUGH DECEMBER 2022 AND 2023

Source: Huntington City Mission



The impact in Cabell County goes beyond individuals and the local economy. Charitable food providers mitigate these harmful trends and feed their communities when hunger increases. Huntington City Mission is one such provider. In the fall of 2022, before SNAP time limits were enacted, they served an average of 10,750 people monthly. In 2023, the waiver on ABAWD time limits, pandemic-era emergency allotments (that provided enrollees an average additional \$100 per month), and other flexibilities expired. West Virginia and Cabell County felt the impact immediately. Huntington City Mission jumped to serving an average of 24,000 people monthly in the fall of 2023—nearly 2.5 times the number of people served just one year prior. The change from month to month in 2023 was significant, peaking at 24,800 people in October 2023.⁷

Decision-makers must alleviate hunger in Cabell County and West Virginia more broadly. The state helps individuals and their families, communities, and local economies by addressing hunger. West Virginia cannot thrive while its population starves. Food access and security must be made a top priority. In doing so, the state can reduce hunger, improve employment, and make West Virginia a better place to live.

7. Huntington City Mission food pantry statistics, September to December 2022 and 2023.