

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

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Mingo County is one of West Virginia's southernmost counties. Like many places in the Mountain State, its economy once relied heavily on coal. In the decades since its economic peak, Mingo and much of southern West Virginia have struggled to recover. Today, nearly one in three residents live in poverty, exceeding the state and national average.¹ The average unemployment rate in Mingo County averaged just over ten percent between 2011 and

2021, compared to six percent in the rest of the state.

The US Department of Labor designated Mingo County as a labor surplus area, which is a jurisdiction in which the unemployment rate is more than 20 percent higher than the national average.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.

Economic hardships are a strong indicator of hunger in the county. About one in three residents in Mingo County receive food assistance via the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (or SNAP, formerly known as food

stamps).³ SNAP is the most powerful anti-hunger tool in the country, connecting vulnerable populations with food and nutrition that would otherwise be inaccessible. The program keeps many families afloat and supports local economies by putting money into grocery stores and other food retailers. In the wake of devastating economic losses left behind by the coal industry, SNAP is a program that buoys Mingo 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



1 in 3

RESIDENTS IN MINGO COUNTY RECEIVE FOOD ASSISTANCE VIA SNAP

1. US Census Bureau, "QuickFacts, Mingo County, West Virginia," Retrieved February 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 Department of Labor, "LSA FY 2024 Federal Register Notice," Federal Register Vol. 88, No. 166, August 2023.

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

and report an exemption. Federal rules allow states to waive certain areas from ABAWD work reporting requirements. As a labor surplus area, Mingo County would usually have been exempt from these time limits; however, a 2018 state law barred the state agency responsible for the program from applying for exemptions to help residents in Mingo, and other places with few job prospects, access food.⁴ 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.⁵

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.

The WVCBP interviewed ABAWDs in Mingo 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.

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. One in five 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.

One in five surveyed (by WVCBP in Mingo County) are non-custodial parents, meaning while they do have dependents, they are not exempt because they do not have custody.

More than two in five ABAWDs surveyed in Mingo County did not have a high school diploma or GED. Forty-seven percent reported a physical or mental limitation, though they did not have a disability designation from the Social Security Administration. Over one-third lacked a state identification card or driver’s license, and over one-fourth 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.



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

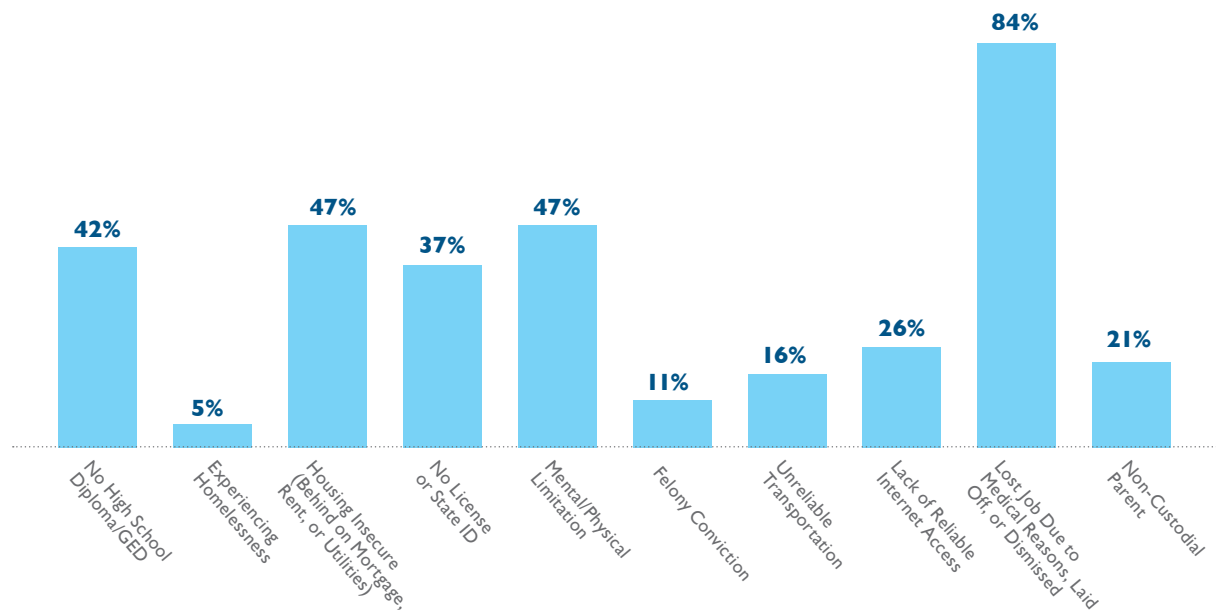
4. Rogombe, Rhonda, “Policies That Further Restrict SNAP Harm Families, Retailers, and Charitable Sector,” West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, January 2024.

5. Rogombe, Rhonda and Kelly Allen, “WV Policymakers Will Soon Lose Power to Use SNAP Flexibilities,” WVCBP, February 2022.

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

Source: Survey conducted by the WVCBP



Between September 2023, the last month before the time limits went back into effect, and December 2023, nearly 600 Mingo County ABAWDs lost their SNAP benefits because they could not meet onerous work reporting requirements. Some should have qualified to be exempt from the requirements. This loss had a broader community impact beyond just those 600 individuals, costing the county nearly \$101,000 in lost SNAP benefits in just three months.⁶ This amount had an economic multiplier impact of over \$151,000—money that left families, retailers, and the county economy nearly overnight.⁷ This loss was unnecessary as all 600 people in Mingo County could still have access to food benefits if not for the 2018 state law that said the county could no longer receive an exemption due to chronically high unemployment rates.

September 2023 – December 2023

600 Mingo Co. ABAWDs
 LOST THEIR SNAP BENEFITS DUE TO WORK REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

\$101,000
 LOST BY MINGO COUNTY IN SNAP BENEFITS DUE TO THIS CUT

\$151,000
 RESULTING ECONOMIC IMPACT COST TO THE STATE OF WEST VIRGINIA

6. Ibid.

7. WVCBP 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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Implementing the ABAWD time limit correlates with a downward employment trend in Mingo County. Between January and September 2023—before the SNAP time limit went into effect—the average monthly growth in employment was one-half percent. In the months after implementation, job growth was negative by one-half percent. Statewide employment data was much flatter over the same period. Similar studies show no clear correlation between work reporting requirements and employment. These data and our survey imply that while relatively few people could retain SNAP benefits due to these requirements, losing the benefits did not increase work.

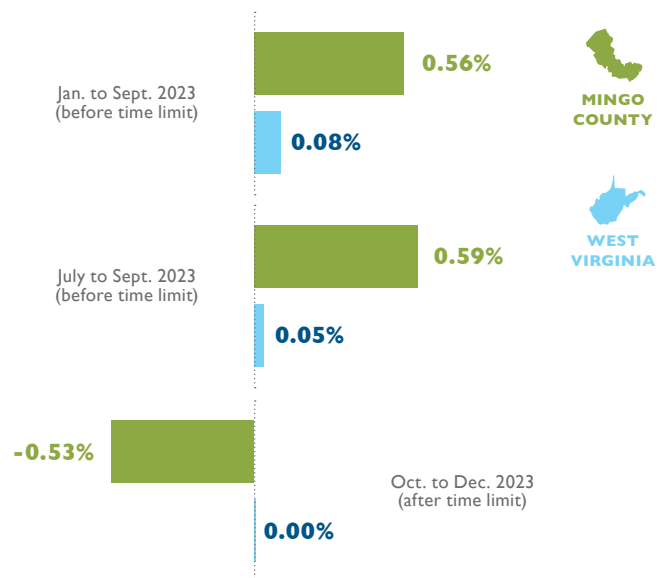
The impact in Mingo County goes beyond individuals and its economy. Charitable food providers mitigate these harmful trends and feed their communities when hunger increases. Christian Help in Mingo County is one such provider. In the fall of 2022, before SNAP time limits were enacted, they served an average of 131 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 Mingo County felt the impact immediately. Christian Help jumped to serving an average of 292 people per month in fall 2023—over double the number of people served just one year prior. The change from month to month in 2023 was significant, peaking at 375 people in December 2023.⁸ Another charitable food provider in Mingo County, Breeden Church of God, experienced a similar trend. In the fall of 2022, they served an average of 315 meals monthly. By fall 2023, the number of meals they served spiked 20 percent to an average of 375.⁹



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

FIGURE 2
IMPLEMENTATION OF TIME LIMITS FOR ABLE-BODIED ADULTS WITHOUT DEPENDENTS (ABAWDS) IN MINGO COUNTY HAD NEGATIVE CORRELATION WITH EMPLOYMENT CHANGE IN EMPLOYMENT IN MINGO COUNTY AND WEST VIRGINIA, JANUARY TO DECEMBER 2023

Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics



8. Christian Help Mingo food pantry statistics, September to December 2022 and 2023.

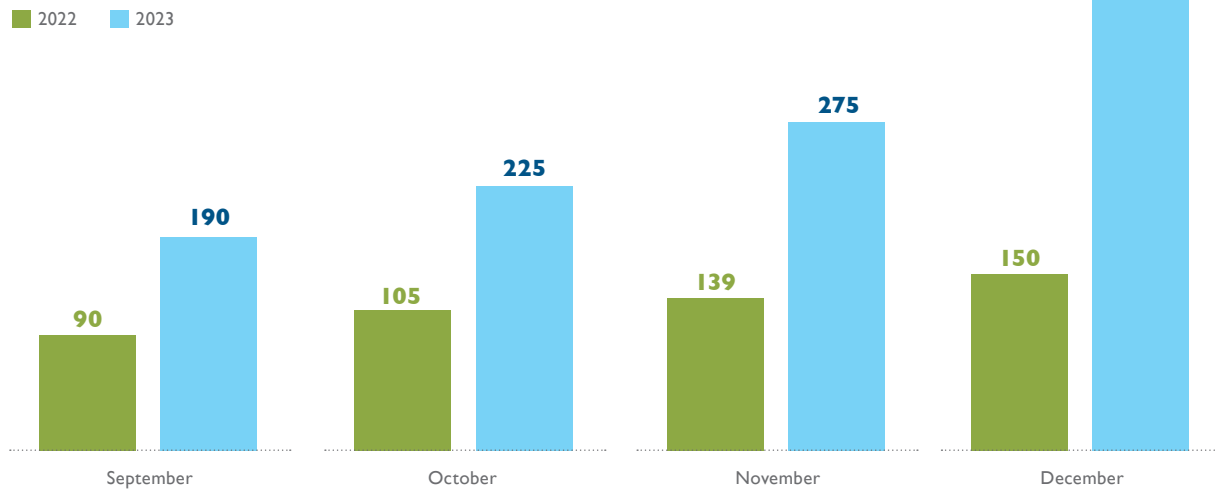
9. Breeden Church of God food pantry statistics, August 2022 to December 2023.

Increase in meals provided due to the impact of ABAWD time limits by the charity Christian Help between January 2022 and October 2023



FIGURE 3
RELIANCE ON CHARITABLE FOOD PROVIDERS HAS INCREASED SINCE END OF SNAP FLEXIBILITIES
NUMBER OF PERSONS SERVED AT CHRISTIAN HELP IN MINGO COUNTY, SEPTEMBER THROUGH DECEMBER 2022 AND 2023

Source: Christian Help Food Pantry



Decision-makers must alleviate hunger in Mingo 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.