



April 9, 2018

Administrator Brandon Lipps  
Food and Nutrition Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
3101 Park Center Drive  
Alexandria, VA 22302

**Re: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Requirements and Services for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents**

Dear Administrator Lipps,

The National Association of County Human Services Administrators (NACHSA) wishes to comment on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPRM) (RIN 0584-AE57) published in the Federal Register on February 23, 2018 regarding the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) requirements and services for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs).

An affiliate of the National Association of Counties (NACo), NACHSA represents county directors of county human services programs. In ten of those states, NACHSA members administer and their county government assists in financing the SNAP program on behalf of the state. Nearly one-third of all SNAP recipients reside in those states.

**Overall Comments**

County directors view SNAP as the foundational national program to reduce food insecurity. As individuals and families enter the program, county staff work to transition them back into the workforce. Given the current eligibility restrictions, counties are well-aware of the importance of moving ABAWD clients who are able to do so into gainful employment as soon as possible. As they work with those individuals, the assistance provided under SNAP is essential to reducing food insecurity. Without that assistance, it becomes more difficult for individuals to pursue employment.

Given that SNAP is essential to reducing food insecurity, NACHSA is concerned that the general tenor of the ANPRM itself implies that more must be done to further restrict the use of state and county waivers to support able-bodied individuals.

SNAP works as intended. During the great recession in the late 2000's, enrollment in the program increased as more families became eligible. With the economy recovering, millions found work and have left SNAP, no longer needing the support. The federal budget for SNAP has decreased accordingly. The ABAWD program is no different. Fewer individuals qualify, given the economic recovery.

Yet, NACo notes that in 2016, 60 counties had unemployment rates over 10 percent, the qualifying rate at a state level for an ABAWD waiver. In fact, 515 counties in 37 states had unemployment rates above the highest statewide unemployment rate of 6.7 percent in 2016. These county-level data demonstrate that unemployment remains a local issue best addressed when federal and state governments partner with counties to address their residents' needs.

Our comments below urge greater - not lesser - flexibility in waivers to allow ABAWDs to receive SNAP benefits as they find jobs. Our comments also urge greater support and flexibility in administering SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) programs. Those two tenets re-emphasize and support the goal of ensuring that individuals do not go hungry while they find job training and employment opportunities. NACHSA's specific comments are outlined below.

### **Increase County Waiver Flexibility**

Rather than disallowing or further restricting ABAWD waivers, USDA should work with states and counties to remove the time limits of three months of receipt of SNAP benefits over three years all together and enhance the SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) program. Also, as noted above, county economies and labor force markets vary within a state. Because of those dynamics, states should continue to have the ability to request sub-state waivers to address local needs.

Additionally, if a state chooses not to apply for a waiver, despite a poor economy and high unemployment within a county or region, we urge that USDA consider allowing affected counties to apply directly for a waiver in order to meet their communities' needs.

### **Enhance SNAP E&T Programs**

NACHSA shares USDA's goal to reduce employment barriers for ABAWDs. To do so, counties urge changes to law or administrative rules to make subsidized employment programs eligible for SNAP E&T funds. During the great recession of the late 2000's, counties worked successfully with private employers and non-profit entities to place hundreds of thousands of individuals in jobs through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

Those efforts not only moved families off of TANF and SNAP but the subsidies assisted employers in the short term.

With respect to ABAWDs specifically, the three-month time frame for ABAWD's does not always align with the availability of employment or training opportunities. Increased SNAP E&T resources and eligibility timeframes will give counties more flexibility in working with ABAWDs to move them into training and employment. Moreover, SNAP E&T program requirements differ for ABAWDs. For example, while job search activities count under the broader program, those activities do not count as qualifying activities for ABAWDs, adding an additional barrier in meeting current requirements.

### **ABAWD Work Requirements Must Match Job Realities**

The current ABAWD work requirements do not always align with the job market opportunities available to them. Given the fact that the first jobs ABAWDs find are often part-time and on an 'as-needed' basis, the individual may not be able to meet the 20 hours per week requirement if the employer does not require that number of hours of work from them to meet the needs of their business. That 20 hour requirement is compounded if the ABAWD falls short of meeting the 80 hours required in a given month. Under the current, inflexible rules, the entire month is counted against their three-year window.

Matching jobs with an ABAWD's skill set is just one factor toward achieving self-sufficiency. Public transportation or a reliable car and affordable housing are among the other pressures faced by our clients. Those factors and lack of transitional supports can make it challenging for ABAWDs to consistently meet the stringent requirements. Moreover, as ABAWDs become employed, some will continue to need SNAP benefits. NACHSA urges that the USDA, through administrative action or legislation, expand beyond 90 days the ability for counties to provide transitional support for newly-employed individuals. Such supports not only helps the individual to stabilize their employment but also assists the employer and the community long term.

### **ABAWD Administrative Processes Must Focus on Outcomes**

The ANPRM asks if there should be additional or different reporting requirements for ABAWDs. Under the TANF program, counties have urged that the policy focus be placed on outcomes instead of process measures. NACHSA urges USDA to take the same approach under SNAP. The current process-oriented policy detracts case workers from the goal of assisting ABAWDs in finding work related activities and diverts scarce resources from working on the outcomes – finding a job, increasing income, and retaining employment. Administrative funds would be better spent on investing in SNAP E&T, including subsidized jobs, and increasing food security.

NACHSA thanks the USDA for the opportunity to comment in advance of a proposed rule. We stand ready to work with the Department to improve the SNAP program so that it

supports all eligible individuals and families and moves them into gainful employment whenever possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Cathy Senderling-McDonald", enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

Cathy Senderling-McDonald

President, National Association of County Human Services Administrators

Deputy Executive Director, County Welfare Directors Association of California