



Ending Barriers to Support: Five Arguments Against Work Requirements

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Over the past two and a half decades, policymakers have tied a growing number of our social supports to work in the wage labor force. These “work requirements” take away public assistance from anyone who does not demonstrate that they have worked a certain number of hours a week in the labor market. These policies harm families. When CSSP interviewed families to hear how they were faring during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, we spoke to parents and caregivers like Evan, a father of an elementary-aged son in Michigan. Evan had a job but still needed support to put food on the table, so he turned to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Yet when he applied, Evan went through a “four-month span where every week... I had to turn in a check stub, or proof of verification to work, they were asking for things all the way back

to 2018...It got overwhelming.” In trying to navigate SNAP’s work reporting requirements, Evan had to jump through countless hoops designed to prevent him from receiving aid. Ultimately, the stress wore Evan down and he gave up trying to get the support he needed.

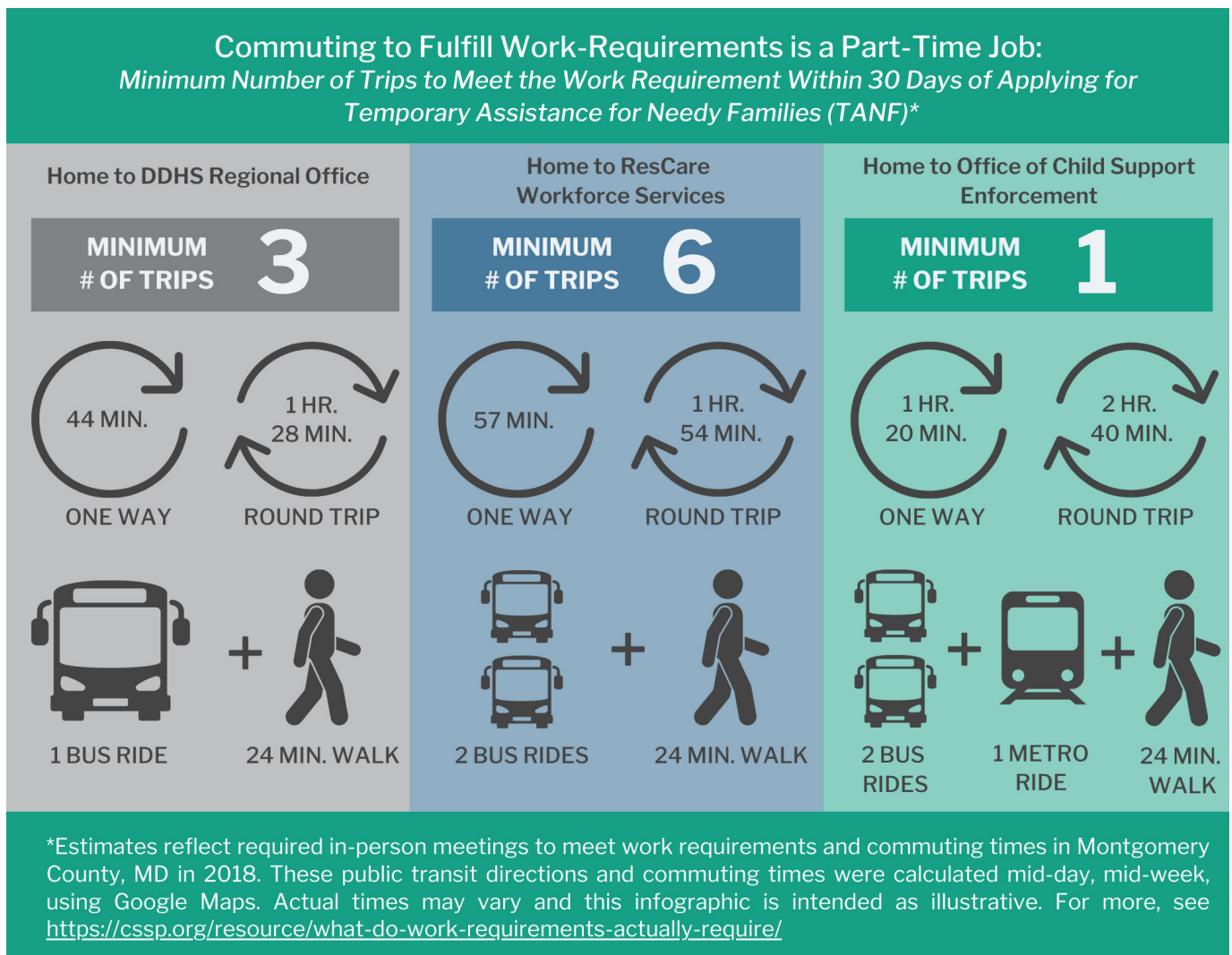
Far from being unique, Evan’s experience is all too common and is reflected both in other families’ direct accounts and in the research literature. Safety net programs should ensure that everyone can get support when they need it, yet harsh and cumbersome work requirements put obstacles in the way of much-needed assistance. As some legislators seek to [expand work requirements in critical programs](#), here are five things everyone should know:

- **Work requirements perpetuate a narrow definition of “work” that devalues the importance of caregiving.** Caring for children and other family members is one of the [most important contributions](#) anyone can make to society. Though we all benefit from the care that Evan and so many caregivers provide, in the United States care work is devalued, leaving the costs of caregiving to be borne by individual families. As this care work occurs outside of the labor market and is unpaid, it is often not considered to be “real work,” which reflects historically racist and sexist ideas of what kind of [labor matters](#). By requiring parents and caregivers who need help making ends meet to work outside the home, work mandates perpetuate these harmful ideas and discount the fact that these adults are already providing valuable unpaid labor.
- **Work requirements don’t encourage wage work, but instead prop up an exploitative labor market.** Proponents of work mandates falsely claim that these requirements are necessary to incentivize people to work in the labor market and to improve economic security. However, this claim ignores key aspects



of our economic reality. [Several studies](#) show that work requirements don't encourage work because, like Evan, most public benefits participants are already part of the labor force. The minority who are not engaged in the labor market are either engaged in care work, attending school, or facing other barriers to work such as illness or disability. For example, one study of SNAP and Medicaid participants found that **81%** of those without disabilities and without young children had worked in the past year. These findings are notable because these are the adults who proponents of work requirements falsely depict as lacking a work ethic and as undeserving of support. What these legislators disregard is the reality that for too many people, the jobs they have do not pay enough to cover the cost-of-living, are rife with ongoing [gender- and race-based discrimination](#), and adopt workplace practices that make it hard for parents to work and care for their families.

- **Work requirements create administrative barriers to benefits, even for those who are working in waged labor.** Complying with work requirements takes more than just having a job; it takes being able to navigate the [Byzantine bureaucracy](#) built around documenting compliance. People seeking assistance spend hours on the phone with caseworkers, traveling to numerous appointments, and filling out duplicative paperwork. As Evan recounted, when he tried to apply for SNAP food benefits for his family, he spent four months submitting documents and entangled in red tape before he finally gave up. These efforts came on top of juggling caregiving for his son and, of course, going to his actual job. According to CSSP's research on [work requirements for cash assistance in Maryland](#), simply traveling to different offices is as time-consuming as a part-time job for applicants relying on public transportation. Meeting the logistical complexities of work requirements takes enormous patience and skill to navigate, and it requires this of people who have the fewest resources. Moreover, the [consequences](#) of problems with paperwork or miscommunications with caseworkers are steep. Families' benefits are often reduced or disrupted—taking away vital resources that families rely on to meet their basic needs. Even those who



are supposed to be exempt from work rules, such as people with disabilities, must jump through these hoops to prove they qualify for exemptions. The bureaucratic barriers also carry a high price tag for states and the federal government. A [Government Accountability Office analysis](#) of proposed Medicaid work requirements estimated administrative costs of under \$10 million to over \$250 million over one to three years.

- **Work requirements deny families much needed assistance, undermining the health, dignity, and well-being of all families.** With all these restrictions and burdens, it is no surprise that work reporting requirements in [Medicaid](#), [SNAP](#), and TANF have resulted in thousands of families losing health insurance, food benefits, and cash assistance. This includes many people who were already meeting the work requirement and those who are supposed to be exempt, including people struggling with poor health, domestic violence, disabilities, and other circumstances. Instead of improving well-being, work mandates increase [hospitalizations and food insecurity](#) for young children and their families. This is the exact opposite of what a safety net should do. While some claim that these restrictions dignify families through work, nothing could be further from the truth. In the words of one mother participating in California’s TANF program, work requirements make them feel “diminished,” like they “are not a person just like everyone else.” Work requirements do not dignify, they dehumanize.
- **Work requirements are rooted in anti-Black racism and slavery.** The dehumanization of work requirements is not coincidental. As CSSP’s research has shown, a direct connection can be traced between modern [work requirements and slavery](#). The narratives that work requirements perpetuate—that caregiving for one’s own family is not valuable, that people need to be forced to work for their own good, and that a person’s well-being and worth depend on work—were popularized during and after slavery to justify a racialized system exploiting the labor of Black families. First tried and tested against Black people, these harmful ideas are now deployed against everyone in the name of upholding “work.”

A healthy society depends on strong public investments, whether through public schools and libraries, roads and infrastructure, or safety net programs that help people meet the basic costs of living. Instead of doubling down on work requirements that devalue caregiving and harm families, policymakers should commit to building a system of social supports that values everyone irrespective of market labor, ensures easy access to services, and treats everyone with dignity and respect.

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