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# Protecting Access to SNAP for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care: Critical Strategies for State Implementation

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Young people play an important role in shaping our society and contributing to their families, their communities, and our collective future. Policies that promote their health, wellbeing, and stability can help ensure young people are able to pursue and achieve their goals and set us all up for success. Unfortunately, in a step backward last year, the budget reconciliation bill added significant hurdles for young people accessing the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), our nation's single most important anti-hunger program which helps millions of individuals and families buy groceries every month. As states look to implement the law, it is critical they look for opportunities to help young people access SNAP — particularly young people who have experienced the greatest systemic barriers.

Young adults have high rates of food insecurity, and not knowing where their next meal will come from is especially common among those who have experienced foster care or been involved in the juvenile justice system. One longitudinal survey found that 30 percent of young people in foster care were food insecure at ages 19, 21, and 23. Meanwhile, many young people who are eligible for SNAP do not access it. A survey of young people in California's Transitional Housing Placement-Plus program, which serves former foster youth and out-of-home probation youth, found that just 23 percent of youth were receiving SNAP at program exit, despite at least 50 percent of non-parents and at least 67 percent of parents being eligible.

For young people aging out of care, SNAP benefits act as a buffer against the economic and health

impacts of food insecurity, allowing youth who have experienced foster care to afford groceries so they can prepare nutritious meals and grow into healthy adults able to pursue their goals.

Recognizing the compounding challenges young people aging out of care face, the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023 included important provisions to increase access to SNAP, exempting youth aging out of foster care from time limits and work requirements in SNAP. Subsequent United States Department of Agriculture implementation guidance to states also included support to ensure implementation of protections for youth to access the benefit. This policy solution increased access to food for young people.

The budget reconciliation bill last year rolled back these protections. Specifically, young people aging out of foster care and young people experiencing homelessness who do not have children will now be subject to SNAP's "Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs)" time limit and work requirements unless they qualify for an exemption, such as disability, medical unfitness, pregnancy, caregiving, or student status.

This reversal will cause direct harm to young people aging out of care. As a young person who has experienced foster care who participates in CSSP's CARES initiative shared, "Even when the cost of food is going up — literally — they are setting us up for failure."

We owe young people aging out of care the supports they need to ensure they are healthy and able to pursue their goals without the fear of going hungry. While these protections for young people have

been repealed, state agencies can still implement strategies to limit the harm. Specifically, states can:

- **Leverage discretion allowed in current regulations to exempt young people from time limits and work reporting requirements.** Under current regulation 7 CFR § 273.24 (c)(2) states have discretion to exempt certain individuals from the work requirement if they experience barriers that lead to “unfitness.”<sup>1</sup> Recognizing that young people aging out of foster care or experiencing homelessness may experience food insecurity at disproportionate rates, states can include young people with these experiences in this exemption category.
- **Implement strategies to ensure young people engaged in postsecondary education and training programs are exempt from the work requirement and time limits.** Under SNAP’s current rules, students enrolled at least half-time may still be eligible if they meet one of the student exemptions under 7 CFR §273.5(b) – such as working 20 hours per week, participating in work-study, caring for a child in certain situations, participating in a SNAP Education and Training program (E&T), are participating in certain programs run by the state for individuals with low income that improve employability and have elements of SNAP E&T programs. Agencies should implement policy to ensure screening processes assess for these exemptions.
- **Require state agencies to improve access for young people by implementing best practices for screening and reducing eligibility verification processes.** Young people applying for SNAP may be connected with other public systems including Medicaid. States should use available eligibility information for other programs to expedite verification. Further, eligibility processes are often driven by standard forms and required questions. Agencies should ease the burden of gathering additional documentation and revise these processes, including by allowing caseworkers and diverse professionals working with young people to attest to information as necessary.

- **Clearly communicate and work with community-based organizations to ensure young people are aware of the SNAP requirements and relevant exemptions to the requirements.** Requirements for receiving SNAP and maintaining eligibility can be complicated and confusing. Agencies should work with young people and community-based organizations to ensure information is communicated regularly, is easy to understand, and that additional support is available to support young people in navigating the verification process.

For more detail and recommendations related to these strategies to support state implementation, please see the related [brief](#), and the [accompanying advocacy guide](#), developed in partnership with Food Research & Action Center, iFoster, National Homelessness Law Center, Think of Us, and Youth Law Center.

## Suggested Citation

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<sup>1</sup> Under 7 CFR § 273.24 (c)(2) states have discretion to exempt individuals “unfit for employment” from the work requirement. CSSP uses this term to reflect the technical language in regulation.