

# Slashing Food Stamp Funding: US Congress Moves to cut billions in Food Aid

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The US House of Representatives passed a bill Thursday that would slash food stamp funding by nearly \$40 billion over ten years, kicking four million people off the program next year.

While the White House and congressional Democrats have said they will not accept the bill in its present form, its passage sets the baseline for a deal by the Democrats, who also favor significant cuts in food aid to the poorest Americans.

On Friday, the House also passed a bill that would link continued government operations to the removal of funding for the Obama administration's Affordable Care Act, setting the stage for a potential government shutdown on October 1. The aim of both parties is once again to whip up a crisis atmosphere in which to implement vast cuts to social spending over popular opposition.

The food stamp bill would cut \$39 billion from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) over ten years. It would force adults between 18 and 50 to either work or attend work training to reapply for benefits, and would also institute drug testing for recipients.

The bill would also force food stamp recipients without children to work, train or volunteer for at least 20 hours per week to continue receiving assistance. This would make food stamp recipients the equivalent of indentured servants, forced to work for free in order to eat.

In addition to the four million eliminated from food stamps next year, three million more would be denied access each subsequent year, according to figures from the Congressional Budget Office.

The bill passed largely along party lines, with 217 Republicans voting for the bill, and 15 Republicans joining all Democrats in voting against it.

"Conspicuously missing from the debate is the impact that cutting these programs will have on needy people and communities," Dan Reyes, coordinator for the Delaware Food Bank's Coalition to End Hunger, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "These cuts would be incredibly damaging," he added.

One in seven Americans receives food stamps, up from 9 percent of the population in 2008 to nearly 15 percent in 2012. The program helps feed 48 million people. However, according to Reyes, the demand is far higher. "One in four Delawareans utilizes the Delaware food bank each year," he said, half of whom are children.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) wrote, "Those who would be thrown off the program include some of the nation's most destitute adults, as well as many low-income children, seniors, and families that work for low wages." The CBPP added that SNAP kept 4.7 million people out of poverty in 2011 alone.

"Hunger is a silent epidemic that people are afraid to talk about," said Reyes, who said the Delaware food bank helps "a lot of seniors, a lot of the working poor and single mothers."

Obama said he would veto the bill in its present form. However, this is thoroughly hypocritical given Obama's own policies. The Democratic budget passed in the Senate earlier this year cuts over \$4 billion from the food stamp program, on top of cuts that are already scheduled to take place as a result of the expiration of the 2009 Recovery Act. A family of three can expect to see a \$20 to \$25 a month reduction in SNAP benefits as a result. There are no proposals from the Obama administration or either house of Congress to forestall this reduction in benefits.

In justifying cutting food stamps, House Republicans pointed out that their proposals for linking assistance to draconian requirements are entirely in line with welfare reforms implemented by Democratic President Bill Clinton in 1996. While Obama postures as an opponent of Republican austerity, his latest budget proposal would slash \$400 billion from Medicare and other health care programs and \$130 billion from Social Security.

The food stamp program has traditionally been part of the farm bill, which has been regularly reauthorized every five years. In July, House Republicans split up the bill's farm assistance and nutrition programs into separate bills, in preparation for their plans to gut the food stamp program.

The share of food stamp recipients who are working has risen significantly. Nearly one third of SNAP recipients were working in 2010, up from less than 20 percent two decades before. Of those who do not work, the vast majority are disabled, elderly, or underage.

"There is a growing institutionalization of food insecurity," said Reyes, who noted that "over 75 percent of the jobs created this year are part-time." He said, "If you were to work two part-time jobs in Delaware you'd make \$27,000 per year, while the living wage for a family of three in the state is \$53,000. A significant portion of the working poor do not even qualify for SNAP and are forced to go to food banks."

Nearly three quarters of households participating in SNAP include children, and over 91 percent of SNAP benefits go to households with incomes below the federal poverty line, already set at the abysmally low level of \$19,530 annually for a family of three.

In addition to the drastic impact on the most vulnerable sections of society, Reyes warned about the economic impact of cutting food stamps. "SNAP is one of the most direct stimuluses in an economic downturn; for every \$5 spent on SNAP, \$9 are generated for the local economy," he said.

"Unlike a bank bailout, this goes directly to the people in need," he added. The day before the House voted to cut food stamps, the Federal Reserve board announced that it would continue to pump \$85 billion into the financial system every year. "That money," he said, "is not going to help poor people but the very financial institutions which have a record of mishandling the economy."

Also this week, *Forbes* published its list of the richest 400 Americans, whose wealth increased this year by 17 percent, from \$1.7 trillion to over \$2 trillion. The additional money amassed by these individuals *in just one year* is nearly eight times the amount that the House plans to cut from food stamps, causing devastation for millions of people.

The fact that programs that keep millions of people out of poverty are on the chopping block, while unlimited amounts of cash are made available to the handful of multibillionaire financial parasites, is an expression of the irrationality of the capitalist system, which sacrifices the needs of the vast majority of society for the direct enrichment of the financial elite.

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