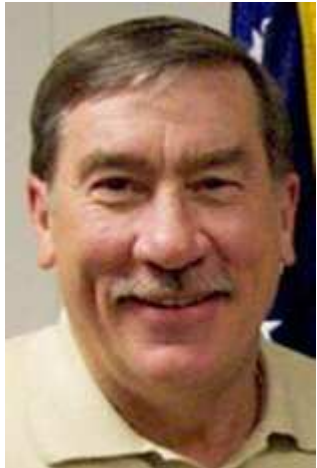




Viewpoint: Cutting SNAP benefits puts the burden of balancing the budget on the shoulders of the poor

MLive/Kalamazoo Gazette opinion By **MLive/Kalamazoo Gazette opinion**

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Don Gilmer

MLive file photo

The following is a letter to the editor that was sent to the Kalamazoo Gazette.

BY DON GILMER

Throughout my career as a lawmaker, state budget director and county administrator, I have worked to find ways to make our government more efficient, weed out waste and reduce costs for Michigan taxpayers.

But in doing so, I adhered to a guiding principle of mine, one shared by many of my colleagues from both political parties, to ensure that the least among us don't bear the brunt of balancing the budget

That principle now appears to be in jeopardy. While families across Michigan continue to struggle, Republican leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives has proposed cutting \$40 billion from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps and called the Food Assistance Program in Michigan). These cuts would eliminate basic food assistance for up to 6 million Americans nationwide, including poor jobless adults in areas with high unemployment, children, working poor families, seniors, and even veterans.

SNAP, the nation's most important anti-hunger program, has provided a vital lifeline for unemployed workers and their families during Michigan's long recession and the recovery. Three-quarters of Michigan households receiving food assistance are in poverty and one-third are living in deep poverty, with incomes at half the poverty level. And more than 40 percent of those receiving benefits in our state are children.

In all, the program helps 1.8 million people in Michigan, including more than 730,000 children get enough food to eat.

While Michigan's economic future is getting brighter, our unemployment rate still remains at a dismal 8.8 percent.

As if the proposed cuts aren't harsh enough, the House Republican plan would deny food assistance to people who want to work but cannot find a job or training program. Proponents have mischaracterized these cuts as "work requirements," but as so many Michigan families know, the issue is not about willingness to work, it is about finding an available job.

Among SNAP households with at least one working-age, non-disabled adult, more than half work while receiving SNAP — and more than 80 percent work in the year before or the year after.

While I have always looked to find ways to save taxpayer dollars, taking food assistance away from children because their parents cannot find a job is not the place to start.

SNAP has a significant impact on reducing poverty and improving the well-being of children. Despite its very basic benefit levels, an average of less than \$1.50 per person, per meal, SNAP kept 4.7 million people, including 2.1 million children, out of poverty nationwide in 2011.

The fact is, SNAP participation has grown because it has responded as it was designed to—to help families in tough economic times. Its growth is temporary and it is not contributing to the nation’s long-term fiscal problems. SNAP is helping many Michigan families feed their children until they can get back on their feet.

Instead of ending food assistance for Americans still trying to find work or barely getting by with the jobs they have, Congress should give them a helping hand by focusing its energy on creating jobs that pay livable wages. That would do more than anything to reduce the need for food assistance.

Don Gilmer is a former republican state representative from Augusta, former budget director under Gov. John Engler and former Kalamazoo County administrator.

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