

SNAP Policy and the Realities of Rural Working Families: Implications for Practitioners

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Abstract

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the nation's major food safety net that helps millions of Americans combat poverty and food insecurity, is critical for the health and well-being of rural low-income families. Federal policies that guide family work supports are most effective when informed by the daily realities and experiences of low-income families. This study analyzes changes to SNAP that were proposed, but not adopted, in the Farm Bill of 2018 to illuminate unintended consequences and hardships that would result if the policy provisions were adopted. Family-level impact is highlighted through giving voice to mothers who participated in the Rural Families Speaks research project as they convey the unique realities of rural, low-income families; thereby promoting increased understanding of rural low income families' experiences and support needs. To foster an increase in the number and diversity of work supports for rural, low-income families we describe existing replicable effective Extension programs that are targeted to improve family quality of life while aligning with Extension's mission and leveraging its presence in rural communities.

Keywords: food insecurity, SNAP, low-income, rural, Extension programs

Introduction

Federal policies that guide family work supports and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the nation's major food safety net that helps millions of Americans combat poverty and food insecurity (USDA FNS, 2018a), are critical for the health and well-being of rural low-income families. To maximize program effectiveness, it is important that policies that guide programs are informed by the daily realities and experiences of low-income families. Increased understanding of rural low-income families' experiences can also offer ways to improve Extension and other community-based programming that can foster family health and self-sufficiency.

In 2018, a proposed Farm Bill that included stricter work provisions threatened the security of rural, low-income families. Although the Bill did not pass with these provisions, efforts continue to reduce or restructure public benefit programs such as SNAP (Rosenbaum & Neuberger, 2020). In this paper we examine the impact of proposed policies on rural, low-income families and offer suggestions for policy improvement and education and outreach in communities.

Extension has a long history of supporting rural families with research-based educational programming and resources to include nutrition-related education to improve their quality of life. Family nutrition and food resource needs have been major areas of engagement that span home food conservation education during World War I (National Institutes of Food and Agriculture, n.d.) to present-day food and nutrition education programs. Extension's current food and nutrition education efforts include the delivery of SNAP-Ed: nutrition and food resource management education with an emphasis on nutritious food selection, purchase, and preparation. Extension's SNAP Outreach provides education on the food assistance program as a means to enhance low-income families' ability to access nutritious food. Recent developments include Extension's involvement in SNAP Education and Training programs. Given Extension's long-standing involvement and investment in community engagement in the areas of health, nutrition, and well-being (Walsh et al., 2018), changes in food assistance policy are of particular interest to Extension personnel. Practitioners serving rural communities are likely to be similarly interested.

The overarching goal of this paper is to highlight experiences of mothers who participated in the Rural Families Speak about Health (RFSH) project to understand potential implications of proposed changes in the Farm Bill. Specifically, we share vignettes of mothers' experiences and highlight work supports we identified as essential to the well-being of low-income families. Additionally, we share examples of Extension programs that are responsive to the needs of low-resource families that may serve as models for other organizations to emulate.

Background

SNAP and Proposed Work Requirements in the 2018 Farm Bill

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) was born during the Great Depression and matured over the ensuing decades as a nutrition assistance safety net for U.S. households (LeBlanc et al., 2007). SNAP is effective in increasing household food expenditures and serves as an important source of purchasing power (LeBlanc et al.). SNAP, operated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), is periodically reauthorized and revised in legislation to address the nation's agricultural production. This legislation is commonly known as the Farm Bill.

The discussion of the Farm Bill in this paper focuses on the provisions of H.R. 2 as proposed prior to the passage of Public Law 115-334 (2018). Hereafter, we use the term "Farm Bill" to refer to the bill as it was originally proposed. Before H.R. 2 was passed, the House and Senate debated the inclusion of stricter eligibility guidelines and work requirements (with associated sanctions). The proposed changes placed SNAP participants at risk of losing their SNAP benefits, which in turn would have significant economic and health consequences for families (Carlson & Keith-Jennings, 2018).

Eligibility Guideline Proposals

Provisions in the Farm Bill presented a number of challenges for rural, low-income families, the first of which was eligibility guidelines. To qualify for categorical eligibility (H.R. 2, Sec. 4006), program requirements stipulated the receipt of either cash assistance or ongoing and substantial services in combination with income that did not exceed 130% (200% for older adults and disabled) of the federal poverty level. This provision limited states' flexibility to implement categorical eligibility at higher income limits. Families with incomes at 200% of the poverty level would be excluded from receiving SNAP, yet they would struggle financially with incomes well below the state median income. For example, 200% of the 2020 federal poverty level for a family of two is \$34,480, compared with the 2019 median household income of \$54,602 in North Carolina, a largely rural state (United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts North Carolina).

Family Resources Changes

In addition, energy assistance payments made to the utility provider on a family's behalf (e.g., from a utility assistance program) were to be newly considered as money income, except when an older adult is a household member. In that case, counting energy assistance payments would have created "phantom income." Working adults and young families would not receive benefit from energy assistance as it would be offset by a reduction in food assistance resulting in lower

overall economic resources to meet family needs. The treatment of energy assistance as “money income” is significant given that SNAP “assumes that families will spend 30% of their net income on food” (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2019, p. 3). Other provisions put transportation at risk, allowing one vehicle per driver with a \$12,000 maximum value. Reliable transportation is key to maintaining employment (Bird et al., 2011), and limits on personal vehicles may be particularly detrimental for rural low-income families who often face long commutes and limited public transportation.

Work Requirement Modifications

However, perhaps the most significant changes eroding the safety net in the Farm Bill that Congress debated were the potential new work requirements. The Farm Bill stipulated that adults aged 16 to 59 must (a) work, (b) participate in employment and training, or (c) participate in a work program, or any combination of these three for a minimum of 20 hours a week beginning in fiscal year 2021; the minimum hours increased to 25 for fiscal year 2026 and thereafter. By contrast, current “General Work Requirements” include qualifying activities such as “registering for work” (USDA FNS, 2019). Thus, individuals who are disconnected from work are also barred from access to nutrition assistance at a time when income is lacking and they are least able to support their nutrition needs. Ostensibly, disconnected workers will search for work or participate in a work program, but it is not yet clear how states will implement the mandate to “offer minimum services in employment and training so that every covered individual may meet the work requirements” (H.R. 2, Subsection a of 2015, p. 27).

State Flexibility Barriers

Although the aforementioned work requirements were not included in the enacted legislation H.R.2 Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (Public Law 115-334), SNAP remains under scrutiny. In fact, the Trump Administration’s proposed 2021 budget would cut funding by \$180 million over 10 years and includes work requirements very similar to those that were rejected at the passage of Public Law 115-334 (Rosenbaum & Neuberger, 2020). Therefore, it is reasonable to anticipate discussion about imposing stricter work arrangements will likely resurface at the five-year mark when the Farm Bill expires and Congress must update, debate, and pass a new Farm Bill. Importantly, the rule that was proposed modified the conditions under which states can seek waivers to be available only in areas with more than 6% unemployment (Womack, 2019). As an indication of an ongoing inquiry about SNAP, the USDA recently advanced proposals to limit categorical eligibility to households that receive TANF benefits that meet a newly created definition of “ongoing and substantial” and to limit the types of non-cash benefits which can confer categorical eligibility. Such stipulations would engender additional state reporting requirements (USDA 2019, July 24).

Anecdotes and Misguided Policy

As another indication of the assessment of SNAP, the USDA announced a “Survey of SNAP and Work” to examine, among other things, employment status and length of detachment from the workforce (USDA, 2019). There is also a strong focus on anecdotal accounts of unwarranted access to SNAP benefits (Davis, 2018). Clearly, SNAP as the nation’s largest safety net to mitigate food insecurity is at the nexus of policy examinations. Thus, it is important to illustrate the crucial role SNAP plays in addressing food insecurity among rural, low-income families.

As the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities report suggests, if the 2018 Farm Bill had infused SNAP with even stricter work requirements, it is unlikely that the program would improve employment status or the well-being of rural, low-income families (Dean et al., 2018). Several specific provisions in the Farm Bill were poised to undermine family well-being. Taken together, these SNAP provisions suggest that the Farm Bill legislation failed to account for the labor force engagement of low-income, rural families.

Rural Families and Work

As shown by the Rural Families Speak (RFS; 1998-2008) and the Rural Families Speak about Health (2008-2018) studies (for more details, see Mammen & Sano, 2018), expectations for low-income mothers in rural areas to become economically self-sufficient through employment can be difficult to achieve. However, while many of the mothers in the RFS/RFSH studies were successful in finding work, or always had worked (Bauer & Braun, 2002), there are a number of challenges beyond being employed that can place rural, low-income mothers at risk for losing SNAP benefits. For example, Fletcher et al. (2010) reported that low-income rural families faced barriers arising from a complex relationship among constrained financial resources, limitations due to physical health, and a lack of access to or an inability to own and maintain a reliable vehicle. In this paper, we share experiences of and barriers faced by four rural, low-income working mothers who participated in RFSH to illustrate family-level impacts at the intersection of policy and rural contexts, and to identify key work supports.

The Present Study

The present study has three aims. The first aim is to give voice to rural low-income mothers as a mechanism to highlight the impacts of policies on families in the context of mothers’ employment challenges while prioritizing their child’s well-being. We draw upon IRB-approved Rural Families Speak about Health (RFSH) research conducted by 15 land grant universities across the United States. The rural, low-income mothers who participated in this study recounted their experiences to describe and illustrate the strong labor force attachment and the precarious

work situations for rural families. For the second aim, we extrapolate meaning from the vignettes to discuss work supports likely to facilitate the mothers' ability to engage in work while meeting family demands. In our third aim, we review examples of Extension programs, developed through partnerships, that may serve as models for other organizations in developing programs responsive to the needs of low-resource families.

Method

Procedure

The current study presents data from semi-structured interviews from the multi-state research of the Rural Families Speak about Health (RFSH; 2014-2019) studies that investigated multilevel factors affecting rural, low-income families. RFSH examined changing federal and state policies and their influence on rural, low-income families' lives (for study methods, see Mammen & Sano, 2018). RFSH participants were mothers who (a) were 18 years of age or older, (b) had at least one child under the age of 13, and (c) whose income was at or below 185% of the federal poverty line, (d) and lived in small rural communities as designated by USDA's Rural-Urban Continuum Codes. RFSH employed mixed methods: Mothers completed a quantitative survey with a sub-set selected to participate also in a subsequent qualitative semi-structured, in-person interview.

Participants

For the current study, we selected a purposive sample of RFSH mothers who participated in face-to-face interviews. We share vignettes of four mothers' experiences, who at the time of interview lived in Illinois, Massachusetts, and Minnesota. Key demographic characteristics of the mothers appearing in the vignettes are provided below. Pseudonyms are used to protect the participants' confidentiality.

Results

Aim 1: Rural Employment Landscape

To address the first aim, this section is organized by selected mothers and their employment experiences to illustrate how legislation often misses the mark for their rural realities.

Lucy's Reality: Work Schedule Volatility Creates Family Life Volatility

First, stable employment can be challenging for rural, low-income families. Indeed, RFS/RFSH researchers discovered quite a bit of job volatility when examining the mothers' employment

patterns over time (Bauer et al., 2007; Bauer et al., 2009; Berry et al., 2008; Sano et al., 2010). With limited resources, some mothers addressed these struggles through changing jobs and/or staying out of the workforce to care for their children (Berry et al., 2014). In addition to job volatility, the current study found work schedule volatility.

For example, Lucy, a single mother of one, was a manager at a fast food restaurant. Lucy and her young daughter lived with Lucy's grandmother who provided childcare while Lucy worked. Lucy explained how her constantly fluctuating work schedule made it difficult to spend time with her daughter and also get enough sleep:

My work schedule's been really like crazy like I'll work at 4:30 in the morning till 3:00 in the afternoon one day and the next day I'll work 3:00 in the afternoon till 1:00 in the morning. So I try to spend as much time with her as possible, but if I'm home during naptime or if I'm home, like if I don't have to get up so early and I can do it after she goes to bed, then I do. But it's not happening so often anymore.

When asked how she was coping, she replied that she was actively looking for a new job.

I just need something that's more set scheduling. I mean I don't care if I have to be there at 4:30 in the morning, but I need a set schedule. So I'm actively looking for a new job and hoping that I can find something within similar pay range, um and we'll see how that goes. So but for, for the moment, I just do what I can. I sleep when I can, and I try to not let my lack of sleep affect my lack of patience.

Lucy's experience demonstrates that many mothers are faced with difficult decisions when managing fluctuating work schedules and need care for their children. Without set schedules, mothers may need to constantly patch together care for their children. Continually having to arrange for childcare due to working nonstandard shifts can take a toll on the well-being of mothers and their children.

Ella's Reality: Restrictive Work Schedules Conflict with Raising a Family

Many of the rural mothers' jobs involved nonstandard and/or unpredictable work hours. In the 24/7 economy, service industry jobs are not conducive to raising a family, leaving parents to work at night, work opposite shifts to manage childcare, or bring their children to their jobs (Presser, 2003). Conflict between work and family responsibilities has increased continually in the United States and has numerous negative physical and mental health implications (Davis et al., 2017). In the RFSH Project, mothers spoke consistently about their restrictive work schedules. Ella's experience is a prime example. Ella, a married mother of two, had held many jobs including house cleaning, newspaper delivery, and now retail. Although Ella strived to work around her family's schedules, in the past she had resigned to bringing her children with her to deliver newspapers while her husband worked nights:

... it was 1 o'clock in the morning you had to go pick up your papers. And I got done with the papers by 3 o'clock in the morning so I never had to worry about anything during the day 'cause it was nighttime... [The boys] helped me actually deliver papers. They thought it was pretty cool.

Ella hoped that a new retail job would ensure that one parent was always home with the children: *[I'll work] 6 AM to 2. So he can sleep during the day while the kids are in school and they don't have me working on weekends so I don't have to worry about a babysitter on the weekends... We can sleep all night if we have... well he can on his days off.*

Ella's example illustrates the tradeoffs of shift work—earning a paycheck without childcare expenses at the cost of sleep and associated physical, psychological, and academic consequences (e.g., Dewald et al., 2010). To offset childcare expenses, some parents chose to work during opposite shifts, a strategy known as tag-team parenting (Hattery, 2001). A downside, however, is that the lack of couple time can be detrimental to marital stability (Davis et al., 2008; Presser, 2003).

Gloria's Reality: Seasonal Work Causes Financial Instability

Some of the RFSH participants' husbands had seasonal work common in rural communities, such as agricultural and construction work, making the family budget during the winter months especially tight. Gloria, a married mother of three, explained that although she worked full time year-round, her husband was laid off from his construction job every winter. To compensate for lost income, she worked extra hours in the winter:

I get paid every two weeks and I put up to one hundred and twenty, one hundred and thirty hours... I have because he has been out of work; he has been without a good job. ...Thank God that...since I started working there that I have not stopped working.

Despite Gloria's additional work efforts, the seasonal loss of income challenged the family's food security, prompting reliance on the local food bank during the winter months:

...it depends on the time of the year, December for instance, we have much less to eat in December, January, February...and even March...because he doesn't work...I'm the only one working and....they give us a bunch of stuff, meat, fruits...beans, rice... I think all that is good because for instance for all the people that move, like these months when they are laid off. Since December, he's had only a few hours of work.

Gloria's reality—and other mothers' similar realities—was that they have a burden of striving to make up hours that are lost during the off-season but, despite their efforts, may be unable to recover that lost income.

Maybeth's Reality: Rural Jobs Limit Economic Self-Sufficiency

Although the rural, low-income mothers who participated in the RFSH study worked, the types of jobs did not enable many mothers to meet fully their families' economic needs. These rural mothers tended to work in low-wage jobs, often in the retail and service industries, at less than full-time status, making them ineligible for benefits (Bauer & Dolan, 2011). As such, these employed mothers were unable to be economically self-sufficient and needed assistance to try to make ends meet. Maybeth's experience illustrates this reality.

Maybeth was a self-employed, married mother of five who worked part time as a barber. She worked only when her husband was off work to watch the children due to the prohibitive cost of childcare:

I'm self-employed, and I only work on Saturdays because I can't afford daycare....it would make no sense, all the money I made would go to daycare so, why work you know? So... I just work on Saturdays and...my mother, I could probably beg her to do a day during the week but, with the kids, I have two kids in one school, one kid in another school, they get all dropped off at different times and pick-ups, it really is a hassle if she were to come.

Even with the additional income from her part-time job, Maybeth's family struggled to pay for their basic needs:

Umm, you have to put less gas in the car and you have to put less food on the table, and you have to, when things are on sale in the grocery store and you have a little extra money you buy things, but during those periods of time unfortunately you have to...you put money on the credit cards, you, umm, wait for your taxes to come in and then you have extra money, so those are some of the mechanisms that we use in order to help us get through the month.

Maybeth's reality highlights the difficult tradeoffs of finding a job that is conducive to tag-team parenting due to the high cost of childcare and of working enough hours to get by.

Vignette Conclusions

As recounted by the mothers' voices in the vignettes above, although employed, the quality of many rural mothers' jobs not only did not fully meet the family's economic needs but also imposed financial, health, and social costs. Mothers worked variable hours, lost sleep, worked multiple jobs each with limited hours and low pay, bent work around a spouse's ability to provide childcare, and in some cases took children to work with them or included them in work activities. Thus, to assist rural families who are eligible for, and at risk of losing, SNAP benefits,

we must examine whether they have sufficient resources to fulfill the proposed work requirements and/or consider alternative approaches.

Aim 2: Essential Work Supports Illuminated by Vignettes

To address the second aim, we extrapolate from the mothers' employment experiences to highlight approaches likely to meet demonstrated family work support needs. Identified needs discussed are childcare, work-family policies and practices, and job training opportunities.

Improve Childcare

The childcare challenges faced by the low-income, rural mothers who participated in the RFSH study solidify the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities' position that it is expensive and difficult to find quality, dependable care (Kratras et al., 2004). Additionally, in many states like Oregon, there are child care deserts, limiting available options for childcare (Pratt et al., 2019). Past policymakers did not fully recognize mothers' childcare needs when designing the requirements for recipients of SNAP benefits (Manoogian et al., 2015). Increasing the availability of subsidized childcare in rural communities is critical for mothers' employment and, in turn, family health. Quality childcare availability is as important as broadband availability and warrants similar funding support.

Improve Work-Family Policies and Practices

Second, developing workplace policies and practices that improve job quality and employees' ability to manage work and family responsibilities is another way to support low-income families. Work and family policies in the United States are limited and unequal, particularly across social classes, with those most in need of work-family support often being the least eligible (Davis & Stamps Mitchell, 2009). Manoogian et al. (2015) stated that work and family policies that acknowledge the commitment of low-income, rural mothers to their children and create supportive employment options for them are needed. Rural employers should consider increasing workplace benefits, such as schedule flexibility and paid sick leave that will allow rural, low-income employees to more successfully manage work and family responsibilities. Employers should be informed of the return-on-investment (ROI) for implementing family-responsive policies, with improvement in employee morale, retention, and productivity (Barbosa et al., 2015; Glass & Finley, 2002). For example, implementing a stable schedule program in a retail clothing store increased sales by 7%, yielding nearly \$3 million in increased revenues; the ROI was high, with the company only spending about \$32,000 to implement stable scheduling (Williams et al., 2018). Investing in employees will likely decrease the job volatility among rural residents and, in turn, decrease the possibility of losing SNAP benefits due to work sanctions.

Increase Job Training Opportunities in Rural Communities

A third recommendation is to increase and improve job-training opportunities in rural communities. RFSH mothers were constrained by narrow categories of unskilled employment opportunities across a limited number of local employers. To improve the quality of life for rural families there is a need for “workforce development strategies ...(to) create well-educated and skilled individuals whose qualifications meet the requirements of the contemporary company” (Perdue, 2017, p. 28). It is critical for these workforce development strategies to provide pathways to employment that pay a living wage and include benefits such as health care and paid time away from work. The quality of employment has been failing workers with 1 in 6 of 155 million workers earning the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) in 2018 (Conway, August 17, 2020). The EITC program supports low wage earner families. Clearly, there is a need for an increase in family earning power. The current researchers suggest that more relevant training programs are possible when rural employers, social service agencies, community colleges, and Extension collaborate in helping adults and families with limited resources.

Aim 3: Increase Partnerships with Extension

For our third aim, we describe existing Extension programs that are targeted to improve family quality of life while aligning with Extension’s mission and leveraging its presence in rural communities. Extension is skilled in developing programs tailored to the needs of low-resource audiences. Extension is well-positioned to serve rural communities and limited resource families given its geographic footprint with state and county-based offices across the nation. Extension has a long history in rural communities, is a consummate partner, and has earned its place as a trusted ally and source of education and information. For example, Extension and public libraries have found synergy in their missions to provide nonformal educational opportunities for adults, particularly in rural communities in which Extension and public libraries are often uniquely present organizations promoting lifelong learning (Peich & Fletcher, 2015). In Iowa, Extension and the state library services effectively partnered to deliver financial education (Peich & Fletcher).

Skill Up Tennessee Program. A strong example of Extension’s ability to contribute to the employability of rural residents is found in the Skill Up Tennessee program. This is the University of Tennessee (UT) Extension’s SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) program. SNAP E&T is a partnership between USDA and states to provide training and employment services to eligible SNAP participants. The purpose of the program is to help eligible SNAP participants gain the knowledge, skills, and support they need for successful employment. The ultimate goal is self-sufficiency (UT Extension Skill Up Tennessee, 2019).

In Tennessee, the program is administered by the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development through a partnership with the Tennessee Department of Human Services. UT Extension provides Skill Up Tennessee as a SNAP E&T partner. Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Extension agents build local partnerships and conduct work readiness training. In addition to providing education, Extension acts as a “convener” and provides a bridge between partnering agencies and organizations who serve eligible audiences.

Eligible participants gain access to soft skill development and other training opportunities such as adult education and short-term certifications, along with supportive services to help them overcome barriers and achieve success. Participants are paired with a Career Navigator to help them determine their employment goals and the steps needed to get there. Various educational opportunities, such as soft skills classes and vocational training, are available at no cost to participants. Extension FCS agents in 78 counties have been trained, and the program is offered statewide through the program staff and partners. Seventy-six Extension educators partnered with 100 community organizations to recruit and pre-register 582 individuals. Early program results show that of the individuals recruited, 480 met eligibility qualifications for participation in Skill Up Tennessee. Of the 480 enrolled, 105 participated in multi-session work readiness trainings. Additionally, 173 enrolled in vocational/technical training with 16 completing the training and earning a certificate. Three enrollees participated in Adult Education. A total of 35 enrollees gained employment with 30 of those continuing their participation through post-employment job retention services. Skill Up Tennessee is an ongoing program. It is anticipated that additional program participants will continue to move through the system, completing training and certificate programs.

More In My Basket Program. Although physical topography can present challenges, rural families often wrestle with perceptions that present barriers equal or greater than physical obstructions. North Carolina State University developed the More In My Basket (MIMB) program to address documented perception barriers (USDA, n.d.) surrounding access to the SNAP program. The MIMB program was designed and developed to address a specific problem and proved to be effective for improving attitudes and knowledge and dispelling myths concerning SNAP (Bird & McClelland, 2017). MIMB is a partnership program with USDA and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services; it is designed for delivery by educators. In North Carolina, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension agents deliver the program in various venues using curricula developed for group/workshop settings, booth outreach, or individual consultations.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational workshops moved to virtual delivery. MIMB participants improve their knowledge about SNAP and its eligibility guidelines, their awareness of inaccurate beliefs about SNAP, knowledge of the electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card, knowledge concerning the availability of application completion assistance, awareness of

potential eligibility status, and value of seemingly modest SNAP benefits. A MIMB workshop was offered in 38 counties with 558 complete pre- and post-surveys measuring the five program objectives. Upon initial contact with MIMB, many of the respondents (470) indicated they had had food insecurity over the 12 months preceding the intervention, reporting skipped meals (15.5%), cutting the size of meals (24.9%), and feeling hungry (12.3%) because they couldn't afford food (Bird & McClelland, 2017), which underscores the need for access to SNAP. However, these respondents were not participating in SNAP. Post-program responses showed significant differences indicating improved knowledge regarding SNAP (Bird & McClelland). The most notable changes were associated with the awareness of inaccurate beliefs and information about SNAP (61.3% increase) and knowledge concerning SNAP application completion assistance (73.3% increase). Early Rural Families Speak investigations documented the prevalence of food insecurity among the Rural Families Speak families (Sano & Richards, 2011), further underscoring the need for a multi-prong approach, including broad access to SNAP, tailored programs designed to educate and reduce barriers concerning SNAP enrollment, and targeted employment support programs as illustrated by the UT Skill Up program.

Extension Partnerships Conclusion

The authors recognize that Extension in each state is uniquely organized to address the concerns identified as important by its stakeholders while maximizing the utilization of resources. The program models mentioned here are illustrative rather than prescriptive with the goal of inspiring new approaches to persistent problems.

Discussion

The aims of this paper were to (a) share experiences of mothers who face multiple barriers beyond their control to maintaining SNAP eligibility for their families, (b) extrapolate from the vignettes family work support needs, and (c) showcase effective exemplar Extension programs that help to address barriers experienced by working parents. Numerous provisions proposed in the Farm Bill of 2018 would have restricted SNAP participation, placed additional burden on SNAP recipients, and indicated an increase in the cost of program administration at the state agency level. It is foreseeable that the provisions proposed in the Farm Bill would have been burdensome and may even have acted as a barrier to rural, low-income individuals' ability to provide sufficient nutritious food for themselves and their families. The Rural Families Speak and Rural Families Speak about Health studies show rural, low-income mothers strive to work in the face of sparse employment options and with limited work supports, such as public transportation and childcare. Instead of making nutrition support contingent on work requirements that are difficult to accomplish in rural localities, a more beneficial approach would focus on (a) the development of work support infrastructures (childcare, transportation); (b) the implementation of employee benefits shown to help workers maintain employment and stable

household income, such as paid sick leave, vacation time, and flexible work schedules; and (c) education and training that leads to skill-based or knowledge-based employment. A selected set of solutions were highlighted to improve the employment conditions and quality of life for similarly situated low-income, rural mothers. The specific programs featured in this study are just a few of the many approaches available to improve the quality of available and attainable work. The authors recognize that the specific needs and resources available across geographic areas will differ and any solution crafted must respond to those differences to be effective. Yet, the programs highlighted in this study are flexible and adaptable to local environments.

Strengths and Limitations

The study is qualitative in nature and uses case studies of mothers who shared their lived experiences. The sample is small and was purposively selected. The results are specific, as intended, to low-income, rural mothers employed in jobs on the fringes of the economy. A strength of this paper is focusing less on breadth and more on depth, so that the real experiences of mothers are not lost in sweeping generalizations. Due to space limitations, we were only able to provide a few examples of the myriad experiences from the Rural Families Speak about Health (RFSH) project. Future revisions to the Farm Bill need to be responsive to the range of experiences and lives affected by this bill. Similarly, our goal was not to summarize characteristics and effectiveness of existing Extension programs; rather, our goal was to provide more detailed descriptions of existing promising programs to support families to inform future programs and policies.

Overall Conclusion

Extension holds a unique position in rural communities as a trusted ally and source of information. Extension has expertise also in acting as a convener for the purposeful connection of agencies, organizations, groups, and individuals. We provided one such example with UT Extension's SNAP Education and Training Program. Extension is also skilled in developing tailored interventions to educate, change attitudes, and motivate behavior as illustrated by North Carolina's More In My Basket program. As demonstrated in this paper, Extension is a multi-dimensional partner with the ability to contribute added value to agency or organization efforts. We encourage policy makers, organizations, and agencies to connect with their state's Extension program to explore partnerships to advance the well-being of rural families and communities.

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