Assessing transportation barriers among the Able-Bodied Adult Without Dependents (ABAWDs) population in Illinois

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Executive summary
Part One

Work requirements for recipients of government assistance programs (GAPs) have long been a fixture of conservative public aid policy. Improvements in national and state unemployment rates have facilitated the enactment of welfare-to-work programs, specifically targeting the able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) population.

As per the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), an ABAWD is a person between the ages of 18 and 49 who has no dependents and is not disabled [1]. For certain GAPs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), ABAWDs must comply with work requirements or qualifying activities for at least 80 hours per month to continue receiving benefits.

If the ABAWD does not fulfill the work requirements, they may only receive SNAP for 3 months within a 3-year period and are subject to the time limit. State's experiencing labor surpluses or unemployment rates above 10% may be eligible for an ABAWD waiver exempting ABAWDs from the time limit, as per the list of Labor Surplus Areas published by the Department of Labor (DOL) [2].
Executive summary

Part Two

Although the data provided by DOL to USDA-FNS is critical in assessing each State's economic outlook and labor conditions, there are other pieces of information that are not taken into consideration when granting an ABAWD waiver and exempting an ABAWD from the work requirement. Namely, transportation, undiagnosed mental health issues, and non-traditional dependent care data should be factored heavily into the waiver-granting process.

There should be more interagency collaboration between the previously mentioned agencies and the Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) when granting and assessing waiver requests. The data collected from these agencies would capture the nuances of each state's ABAWDs and create a more holistic picture of this complex population.

The following report focuses on Illinois' SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) program and is based on research conducted during my time as a Hunger Fellow for the Illinois Hunger Coalition. I focused primarily on the transportation barriers faced by the ABAWD population in Illinois, predominantly featuring the Chicago and Cook County areas. My intention was to create a report that highlighted and offered solutions for the transportation issues found in Illinois.
Brief history of ABAWDs & work requirements policy

Part One

ABAWDs have long been the subject of debate in social policy circles dating back to more than 400 years ago. According to a recent New York Times article Who's Able-Bodied Anyway by Emily Badger Margot Sanger-Katz, English lawmakers utilized the ABAWD terminology to better classify the deserving versus undeserving poor [3].

As per Badger and Sanger-Katz, there were poor people who were "physically incapable of supporting themselves" versus those who did not have such impairments. The article goes on to describe how community members - church wardens and parish overseers - were the ones determining who merited an exemption based on extrinsic factors preventing that person from working.

Today, those exemptions could include living in a labor surplus area, being chronically homeless, or being pregnant, among others [4]. This community-based exemption assessment model is no longer in existence and has been replaced by a DHHS-led task-force of frontline caseworkers.
Brief history of ABAWDs & work requirements policy

Part Two

Entrusting DHHS staff with the responsibility of classifying and exempting potential ABAWDs is a task that exacerbates arbitrary notions of who deserves public aid versus who does not. This means that DHHS staff continue complying with objective rules that were originally based on subjective viewpoints held by those with the decision-making power.

Community members, like those mentioned above, are better positioned to identify who is in need of an exemption due to their daily face-to-face interactions with ABAWDs. Frontline DHHS staff do not have the administrative capacity to sit out in the community and make these determinations themselves, which is why a community-based format would better serve ABAWDs.

Regardless of who is making the judgment call on the exemptions, polls have shown a general consensus with regards to work requirements across party lines. Public opinion surveys show that a nationally-representative sample of adults agree with ABAWDs being subject to work requirements [5].
That survey, administered jointly by the American Enterprise Institute and the Los Angeles Times in 2016, reflected that 87 percent of people said "it’s better to require people to seek work or participate in a training program if they are physically able to do so."

| Q13 | Some welfare programs have different requirements to qualify for benefits. Which one of the following do you think is generally the better approach? |
| --- | ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~ |
| Total | Poverty | Not Poverty |
| Requiring poor people to seek work or participate in a training program, if they are physically able to do so, in return for benefits, OR | 87% | 81% | 91% |
| Sending benefits to the poor without asking for any effort in return? | 9 | 13 | 7 |
| Don’t know (VOL.) | 3 | 6 | 1 |
| Refused (VOL.) | * | * | * |

*Figure 1 - Question from the American Enterprise Institute-LA Times Survey on Attitudes toward the Poor, Poverty, and Welfare in the United States (August 2016)*

Almost twenty years after the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which codified work requirements for ABAWDs into law, the sentiment of opposing free riders of GAPs is still alive and well.
ABAWD policy shortcomings

Part One

In November 2017, Illinois was granted a waiver from USDA-FNS exempting ABAWDs living in specific counties that met the waiver requirements [6].

DuPage County was the one locality that did not qualify for the waiver, and as such was mandated to comply with the policy beginning January 2018. DuPage County would have served as an insightful case study given its small size of ABAWDs relative to other counties whose ABAWD caseload nears the tens of thousands.

However, given the timeframe of the fellowship, I did not have enough time to analyze this county's ABAWD E&T program. Nevertheless, I was able to analyze other sources of information based on other state's E&T programs to discuss the overall effectiveness and outcomes of the ABAWD policy.

A major takeaway from my research at the Illinois Hunger Coalition on ABAWD policy can be summarized in the following way: work requirements do not create jobs, nor do they require employers to hire ABAWDs searching for jobs [7].
Assuming that the imposition of work requirements will translate into meaningful and sustainable employment for ABAWDs is a considerably harmful and incorrect presumption to make.

ABAWD policy does not provide incentives for employers to hire ABAWDs relative to non-ABAWDs. Even if an ABAWD is seeking and willing to work, there is no guarantee that they will find employment aligned with the requirements they need to fulfill.

Finding long-term employment for ABAWDs is further hindered by non-visible and non-physical barriers. Although such barriers include having a prior felony conviction, undiagnosed mental health disorder, and needing supportive services like language interpretation, [8] I decided to focus my research on the most overwhelming barrier: having unequal and inequitable access to transportation.
Transportation barriers affecting ABAWDs

Part One

ABAWDs face a host of transportation-related barriers that hinder their ability to attain and maintain long-term employment. A study conducted in Ohio's Franklin County found that approximately 60% of ABAWDs residing in this locality lack a valid driver's license and more than 40% do not have access to reliable public transportation [9].

Although I was not able to get Illinois-specific data on this issue, my conversations with providers of EPIC in the Cook County area revealed a similar trend [10].

EPIC stands for Employment opportunities, Personalized services, Individualized training, and Career planning. [11]

Because EPIC is a pilot project funded by the USDA and is still in the research-collection phase, providers were only allowed to discuss an overview of the program without giving specific details that could affect the experimental nature of the project [12]. A report about EPIC will be released after the project's end in 2019.
Transportation barriers affecting ABAWDs

Part Two

Table 3. Characteristics of pilot participants at enrollment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CA</th>
<th>DE</th>
<th>GA</th>
<th>IL</th>
<th>KS</th>
<th>KY</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>VT</th>
<th>VA</th>
<th>WA</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average age (years)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (%)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black or African American (%)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian (%)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaskan Native (%)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (%)</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>White (%)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>57</td>
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<td>No race reported (%)</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Hispanic (%)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>Speak English as primary language (%)</td>
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<td>96</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Married or cohabiting (%)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
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<td>Average household size</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Living in household with children (%)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without a high school diploma (%)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Currently employed (%)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently or ever employed</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: SNAP E&T Random Assignment System (January through September 2016 data)
Note: Pilot participants consist of all treatment and control group members that completed a baseline enrollment registration.

Table A.4. Illinois pilot summary

**Intervention: EPIC**

- The EPIC pilot provides job training and education services to SNAP recipients based on their needs and backgrounds, career interests, and local labor market demand. At program entry, participants choose among a number of training opportunities. Across the state, 24 community-based organizations (CBO) are responsible for delivering training to EPIC participants; training is intended to lead to industry credentials or certificates. Training can last from 6 to 20 weeks, depending on the type of training and the provider. Service duration is also based on the skills training but could range from three months to one year. In addition, EPIC participants have access to paid work experience, supportive services (transportation), and 90 days of post-placement services.

**Target populations**

- Unemployed and underemployed (working 20 hours a week or less) SNAP recipients with low skills and/or limited work experience
- SNAP recipients working more than 20 hours per week, still eligible for SNAP benefits, requiring skill improvements

**Target number of pilot participants and enrollment period**

- 5,000 over 14 months

**Type of State E&T program**

- Mandatory and voluntary (based on geographic location and exemption from SNAP work requirements)

**Location of pilot**

- Seven LWIAS, covering 33 counties
- Mixture of urban, rural and small towns, across the State

**Major partners and providers**

- Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) (partner)
- Southern Illinois University Center for Workforce Development (SIUCWD) (partner)
- 24 CBOs (providers)

Transportation barriers affecting ABAWDs

Part Three

A key point of concern for EPIC providers were the transportation vicissitudes their program participants faced. Although EPIC participants received transportation subsidies to ride the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) trains and buses, this financial aid would end after the E&T program's completion date.

That is, participants would have to find their own way to get to their location of employment and could not rely on the short-term fare help provided by EPIC program staff.

This becomes a greater point of concern when considering that most EPIC programs were in close proximity to public transportation nodes but actual employment hubs that served the major E&T focus areas - manufacturing and construction - are outside of accessible and equitable public transportation [13].

A visual provided by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) highlights this dissonance between job centers and transportation accessibility.
Transportation barriers affecting ABAWDs

Part Four

Source: Local employment and transit availability (CMAP 2017)
Transportation barriers affecting ABAWDs

Part Five

As evidenced by the map from CMAP, if you are a commuter from the southern portion traveling north to the manufacturing hubs, there is lower transit availability in both your home region and the region where you are employed. This is seen by the areas shaded in white. This is sharply contrasted by the areas shaded in teal, which display high numbers of local employment and high transit availability.

However, my conversations with EPIC providers in the Chicago Cook County area suggested that a significant number of ABAWDs live outside of this area and were mostly congregated in the southern and western sides of the county. This situation demonstrates that for individuals who do not have a car or an otherwise consistent and reliable form of transportation, keeping a job and abiding by the work requirements is an unsurmountable challenge.

Policies like the ABAWD work requirement, which strive to move participants towards self-sufficiency, need to assess the structural inequality present at the heart of transportation infrastructure. It is not enough to mandate that ABAWDs find employment or else risk losing their public assistance without striving to make transportation solutions work for the people who need it the most.

Page 12
Exploring alternative solutions to transportation barriers for ABAWDs

Part One

Despite the structural barriers present within the system, external solutions exist to ease the transportation burden ABAWDs face. The Job Access and Reverse Commute Program (JARC) was implemented as part of the wave of welfare reform projects taking part during the Clinton administration in the mid-1990s [14, 15].

The focus on job access and reverse commute came as a result of a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report which found several key points of tension supporting the need for equitable and inclusive access to transportation among welfare recipients [16].

Two specific findings still ring true today despite the GAO report being more than twenty years old:

1. 70 percent of entry-level jobs in manufacturing, retail, and wholesale sectors were located in the suburbs. Of these employers, only 32 percent were within one quarter of a mile of a transit stop. Some of the jobs that were transit accessible were only served by commuter rails, which can be too expensive for low-income wage earners.

2. Shifts in entry-level jobs were typically nonpeak hours. The added travel time of this spatial and time mismatch was an additional impediment to work, given that most welfare recipients are single mothers of young children in day care.
Exploring alternative solutions to transportation barriers for ABAWDs

Part Two

As represented by the CMAP visual above, the sectors with the highest availability of jobs for ABAWDs are located in the northern suburbs that do not have the same accessibility as jobs located in the urban core.

The jobs-transit conundrum results in a vicious cycle of ABAWDs losing jobs and benefits due to an inability to arrive at the place of employment. The visuals below detail the companies that received JARC funding and how these utilized program grants to create initiatives to facilitate workers' commuting needs [17].

The Walgreens model was particularly important because the company purchased four passenger buses to transport workers with disabilities - which make up 37% of the Walgreens workforce in the Anderson, South Carolina facility - to and from the distribution center.

Although JARC is not an exhaustive solution because workers with disabilities still have to figure out how to get home from the pickup location, it is a step forward in ensuring that those unable to independently get to work can still make a living without having their progress deterred by a lack of transportation.
Exploring alternative solutions to transportation barriers for ABAWDs

Part Three

A 2008 report by the Brookings Institution poses a critical question about the sustainability of programs like JARC:

*Is JARC simply a Band-Aid® applied to transit systems that do not provide adequate employment access or service coverage? [18]*

Programs that are dependent on government funding cycles are not the solution to the general transportation problems mostly impacting the low-income and often marginalized working class. While overhauling the transportation system of cities across the United States may not be a feasible option, states should take it upon themselves to ensure that low-wage workers - especially those depending on GAPs - have an affordable and respectable way of getting to their place of employment.

This class of workers cannot simply rely on a private vehicle, especially considering that vehicle costs - in addition to housing expenses - can claim up to 70% of working families' household income [19]. Transportation planning, specifically transportation investments, should more readily consider transportation access and connectivity of low-income workers to their places of employment as a way to promote equity and move the needle in favor of the working class.
Conclusion & Recommendations

Part One

Under the Trump administration's directive, work requirements for ABAWDs are slowly making their way into each GAP. While at first SNAP was the only GAP with a work requirement for ABAWDs, recently Medicaid and the Department of Housing and Urban Development announced that both would be imposing work requirements for ABAWDs in order to qualify for public assistance [20, 21].

These policies are consistent with the self-sufficiency mantra that welfare reform programs aspire their participants achieve. Such policies, however, fall short given the structural inequality and persistence of poverty that prevent participants from being truly self-sufficient.

Instead of imposing work requirements that only serve to cause more trouble for a segment of the population already struggling to make ends meet, GAPs should work to understand how to make public aid programs more people-centered.

It is not enough to mandate work requirements for a population that has been consistently left out of the labor force due to systemic barriers impeding their progress.
Conclusion & Recommendations

Part Two

Further, work requirements have shown to worsen outcomes for those affected by the policy, especially those who lose their public assistance and have less money to purchase food, medicine, and secure stable housing.

Future policy solutions should do away with work requirements and substitute these for improved access to vocational training for the formerly incarcerated, expanding dependent care programs for families with limited disposable income for private dependent care, and provide public transportation solutions that are demand-driven in areas with transit deserts and gaps.

If we are to make self-sufficiency a goal, then we must ensure that the foundations for social mobility are freely and adequately available to all.
References


References


10. See slide 2 in Transportation Barriers: Analyzing the transit challenges faced by SNAP Employment & Training participants PowerPoint Presentation.
References


The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) oversees the Employment Opportunities, Personalized Services, Individualized Training, Career Planning (EPIC) pilot serving SNAP participants in seven of the state's 26 Local Workforce Investment Areas (LWIA) that span all five of the State's Department of Human Services regions.


15. The job access projects were to develop new or expanded transportation services for welfare recipients and other eligible low-income individuals (those with incomes at or below 150 percent of the poverty line) to jobs and other employment-related services. The reverse commute programs transport individuals to suburban employment centers from urban, rural, and other suburban locations for all populations. Specifically, grants fund reverse commute bus, train, carpool, or van services.


References


