

Statement of Tom Vilsack, Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Before the House Committee on Agriculture
September 17, 2014

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the Committee, for the chance to present to you on the important opportunity provided in Section 4022 of the Agricultural Act of 2014, relating to state pilot projects to reduce dependency and increase work effort under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Public debate about the issue of work and its relationship to Federal assistance can be contentious, with strongly-held and widely divergent viewpoints. But there is much we can agree on. I believe we would all agree that working can make a huge difference to people—meaningful work with meaningful pay has a positive impact on individuals, their families, their communities. We want to provide a safety net so that those who are in tough economic circumstances are able to put food on the table; at the same time, we also want to help people move towards self-sufficiency the right way – by helping them to secure and maintain jobs that pay well. These pilot projects offer us the chance to partner with states to develop and test strategies to help SNAP participants find jobs and increase their earnings.

On August 25, 2014, I announced \$200 million for up to ten, three-year SNAP employment and training pilot projects, along with a rigorous independent evaluation of those projects. We at USDA see the pilots, which were authorized and funded under the new Farm Bill, as an important step in building on our current work helping to move people towards self-sufficiency through gainful employment. Towards that end, we are looking for a robust set of proposals from states that test a wide range of strategies, including targeting individuals with low-skills and major barriers, participants who are

currently working in low-wage or part time jobs, and able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs). As a whole, we intend to test pilots in both urban and rural settings, test a variety of approaches such as education, rehabilitative services, and rapid attachment to work, as well as both mandatory and voluntary participation in E&T activities. We want to test approaches that have shown promise with other populations, such as work-based learning strategies like pre-apprenticeship programs that lead to Registered Apprenticeship programs, and career pathway systems that include accelerated learning. We are also interested in testing programs that integrate basic education with on-the-job training. Importantly, we expect to see collaboration within state governments - human services agencies, workforce development agencies, and economic development agencies, working together as part of this effort. These partnerships will be critical to connecting participants and training programs with in-demand jobs and careers. To help connect SNAP participants with and prepare them for available employment opportunities, we also incorporated elements of the job-driven checklist—laid out in Vice President Biden’s “Ready to Work” job-driven training report—into the selection criteria.

A critical component of these pilots will be to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of various practices, which will inform program implementation across the country. We hope to find and evaluate strategies that work in rural communities, as well as in urban settings. We need to know which populations may respond to lighter-touch interventions, compared to those who may require more extensive services to be successful. In short—we need to know what works, how it works, who it works for, where it works—we need to know the results of these projects so that we can use this knowledge to better support work through SNAP Employment & Training programs across the country.

This is an exciting opportunity, but these pilots are just one tool. I would like to take a moment to talk about the existing, core SNAP Employment and Training Program and my commitment to helping states improve and enhance SNAP E&T programs in order to respond to the needs of SNAP participants, in part by considering the needs of employers. SNAP participants are an extremely diverse group, and

so, a diversity of approaches is needed. Most SNAP participants who can work already do work, but may need additional skills or experience to help them get or keep good jobs. Others were recently employed, but have lost their jobs—they may need help to get back on their feet. Still others have been out of the workforce for a number of years—these people tend to face the most significant barriers to employment, including low educational attainment, homelessness, substance abuse issues, and mental health concerns. Some are veterans, looking for employment now that they have returned home from serving their country.

As you may know, with the exception of exempt populations including children, the elderly, individuals with disabilities, and individuals caring for young children, all SNAP recipients are subject to work requirements such as registering for work, taking a job if offered, not quitting a job without good cause, and participating in an E&T program component if mandated by the state. While USDA provides \$90 million in 100 percent federal funds to states annually, and also reimburses states 50 percent for additional spending on E&T activities, some states do not spend their full allocation, and five states draw down the bulk of the 50/50 funding. I have made the use of these funds a priority, and have urged state agencies to join me in identifying ways to leverage resources in order to more effectively connect SNAP participants with employment opportunities.

USDA has also engaged actively with federal partners such as the Department of Labor, Department of Education, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Commerce, Department of Health and Human Services, and others to learn from them and identify opportunities to work across programs and agencies towards our mutual goal of helping Americans find jobs and increase their earnings. And, we have recently elevated our commitment to this important component of SNAP by establishing an Office of Employment and Training, building our expertise in the area of workforce strategies, and working with partners to better integrate and align programs and services provided by state and local workforce investment boards.

Finally, we are clear that in this area, there is no room for failure. As we are all aware, able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) are subject to time limits on participation—3 months of eligibility for SNAP benefits in a 36 month time period—if they are not working or participating in an E&T program at least 20 hours a week. These individuals can be a challenging population to serve. Providing effective services to this population is most critical.

I am passionate about the opportunity to improve people's lives by connecting SNAP participants with the resources and opportunities they need to build better futures for their families.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today, and I look forward to any questions you may have.