

Alaska State Legislature

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Sponsor Statement House Bill 67 Welfare Work Requirements

HB67 reinstates the commonsense federal work requirement that will help Alaskans escape the welfare trap. The number of Alaskans dependent on food stamps has more than doubled in the last 15 years, growing from nearly 38,000 enrollees in fiscal year 2001 to more than 83,180 in 2016. More than 216,700 Alaskans received public assistance this past year. That is roughly 30% of Alaskans. Currently there is a 60-day backlog for those who have applied for food stamps. This is unacceptable.

In 1996, Congress passed bipartisan welfare reform legislation, which required able-bodied childless adults on food stamps for more than 90 days to work, train, or participate in volunteer activities. The studies are clear. Requiring this small amount of effort has a positive effect on individuals and communities. Individuals with mental and other disabilities can go years, or in some cases their entire lives, without taking the first step toward receiving a proper diagnosis and becoming eligible for services that would have a profound effect on their life and their ability to contribute to their community.

Unfortunately, Alaska has chosen to waive this commonsense requirement, leading to a government-created dependency on the food stamp program by Alaskans who can work and choose not to, or who should be pursuing a diagnosis of their condition, and who are not currently empowered to do so. Reinstating the federal work requirement following the 90 day grace period, will empower individuals to volunteer in their communities, to pursue work opportunities as they come available, or to pursue exemptions based on receiving a diagnosis for a qualifying condition. These are all good things that will improve the lives of individuals and improve our communities.

Studies have shown that with no work requirements, the vast majority of able-bodied childless adults on food stamps report no earned income – meaning they are not working at all. Work changes lives. The welfare reforms of the 1990s moved millions of Americans back into the labor force and boosted the American economy in the process. Welfare caseloads were greatly reduced, employment rose, and poverty rates dropped. States with commonsense work requirements have restored dignity and pride to the lives of people who previously felt trapped in the cycle of poverty.

The positive results of these reforms have been proven recently in states where they have been implemented. After Kansas restored these commonsense work requirements in 2013, the state began tracking the impact of those changes. By linking data from their welfare agency to wage and employment data, they were able to get a comprehensive view of the impact on tens of thousands of able-bodied adults.

The result: more employment and higher incomes. Most went back to work, finding jobs in more than 750 different industries – everything from healthcare to construction to public safety, and everything in between. Their incomes increased by an average of 127%.

Less time on welfare means less time out of work. Endless welfare benefits do not help people escape government dependence. Instead, welfare traps individuals and families in the cycle of poverty, sometimes for generations. The income and pride that come from working restores hope to those who feel hopeless and frees up resources for the vulnerable among us who truly need long term assistance.

HB67 is a commonsense solution for an increasingly unsustainable program. Requiring able-bodied Alaskans on long-term food stamps to work, train or volunteer, in order to receive welfare benefits will increase employment, raise wages, and reduce the strain on limited state resources. The sense of self-worth that comes from an honest day's work is not something that can be doled out in the form of government assistance. I ask my colleagues to join me in supporting this bill and help put more Alaskans back to work.