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AFTER LINKING WORK TO FOOD STAMPS, MAINE SEEKS SAME WITH MEDICAID

State aims to reduce enrollment and raise incomes; critics say jobs are hard to come by in rural areas

By Jennifer Levitz
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Maine wants to do to Medicaid what it did to food stamps: link the health program for low-income people to work requirements in the hope of reducing enrollment, raising incomes and prioritizing resources for children, the elderly and disabled.

The state is among several that plan to seek federal approval to apply work rules to able-bodied adults without dependents in its Medicaid program, which serves 270,000 people. To make the case, Maine officials say they will point to their record with food stamps.

In late 2014, Maine, under Republican Gov. Paul LePage, began requiring that able-bodied adults without dependents must work, undergo training or volunteer in order to receive the food assistance. Many people in that category didn't meet the mandate – and enrollment for that group plunged 90 percent to 1,279 by this past January, according to the state.

Meanwhile, the policy led to higher wages for the group, including those who left the food stamp program, [the state concluded](#), based on state wage and employment records in the year after the work requirements began.

"It absolutely demonstrated the value of prioritizing employment," Maine Health and Human Services Commissioner Mary Mayhew said in an interview.

But Maine's approach is drawing criticism from advocates for the poor, who say jobs, volunteer positions and transportation to either of them can be hard to come by in rural pockets with persistent unemployment. They say those losing the assistance turn to charities instead, increasing demand at food banks.

One in four food-pantry users said they had lost their food-stamp benefits in the past year, according to a statewide study co-released in February by Maine's largest hunger-relief agency, Good Shepherd Food Bank. Nearly a third blamed recent Maine policies, including the work requirement and a separate asset test imposed on some recipients.

"We are starting to see more and more people relying on especially the food pantry for more than just emergency assistance but as a means of long-term survival," said Jan Bindas-Tenney, advocacy director for Preble Street, a Portland, Maine, group that distributes food to the needy.

Maine is one of a number of states where Republican leaders – despite sputtering attempts in Washington to overhaul health care – are moving ahead [to tighten eligibility for Medicaid](#), which is funded by the federal and state governments, as the Trump administration signals it is open to changes.

Maine didn't expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, but it had broadened eligibility years ago. While the program has been reduced under Mr. LePage, it still serves more than 20 percent of Maine's population, according to state figures.

Kentucky is seeking federal permission to require many Medicaid recipients to work, while Arizona is considering a similar approach. Maine expects to submit its request for a Medicaid work or vocational-training requirement in the coming days, a state spokeswoman said.

Work requirements linked to food stamps, a federal program administered by the states that is known formally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, are more common.

Under federal rules, able-bodied adults between ages 18 and 49 without dependents are limited to three months of food stamps in any three-year period – unless they work at least 80 hours a month or meet certain education, training or volunteer criteria. The estimated 4.6 million recipients get about \$168 a month on average in food-stamp benefits, according to the U.S. Agriculture Department.

The work requirements stem from the welfare overhaul that President Bill Clinton signed in 1996, but the federal government broadly allowed states to waive the work rules during the recession. Currently, 33 states still offer at least a partial waiver, while 17 states, including Maine, don't.

A handful of the states have tracked wages of food-stamp recipients required to work and say the rules point to success, although critics say more data is needed.

In Kansas, the enrollment of nondisabled adults without dependents has fallen 70 percent from fall of 2013, when the state reinstated work requirements, Kansas Department for Children and Families Secretary Phyllis Gilmore said in written testimony to Congress last month. Meanwhile, the number of those working nearly tripled after the labor mandate kicked in, she said.

"Kansas is sending the message that we prioritize employment, rather than paying individuals not to work," she said.

Karen Siebert, who works with Harvesters-The Community Food Network, a regional food bank serving northeastern Kansas and parts of Missouri, said the able-bodied adult can include vulnerable groups such as the homeless who face challenges in obtaining job skills or employment.

"There are concerns with what is happening with some of these folks losing their benefits," she said.

Some food-stamp recipients describe the obstacles to getting a job. In northern Maine, Misty Hafford said she qualified for food stamps only recently, after a monthslong job search complicated by a criminal record for driving under the influence.

"It's not that people don't want to work – I swear I have filled out 30 applications in this town," said Ms. Hafford, who is 33, lives in Presque Isle and said she is 17 months into recovery from opioid and alcohol addictions. She said her luck changed when she received help landing part-time work at a Sav-A-Lot discount grocery store. This week she secured a second job in commercial cleaning.

"I think it's a good idea for people like me who are of sound mind" to work, she said. "But I don't think there is enough commitment by the state to look at whether a person is able."

Ms. Mayhew, Maine's Health and Human Services commissioner, said linking work to assistance helps beneficiaries and Maine companies seeking to fill vacancies – amid statewide unemployment of 3.2 percent.

"There are thousands of jobs in Maine, many that do not require a high level of skill but employers are struggling mightily to recruit employees," she said. "All these efforts are also about supporting a workforce that is really working."