

# FORUM

## Cutting off food assistance to the poor? Really??



**Rob Schofield**  
Guest Columnist

There have been a lot of cold and heartless acts committed by North Carolina political leaders in recent years that were directed against people in need. The decision to tear down the state's middle-of-the-pack unemployment insurance system and the ongoing refusal to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act stand out, of course.

The former imposed what were likely the biggest cuts in unemployment insurance in U.S. history and the latter literally causes scores of premature deaths each month in North Carolina amongst the hundreds of thousands who remain uninsured.

But when it comes down to just the plain old spiteful and contemptuous treatment of one's fellow human beings, it will be tough to outdo the eleventh-hour legislation rammed through during the final days of the 2015 session to cut off food assistance to 100,000 or more down-on-their-luck people.

In case you missed it in all of the hubbub that surrounded the closing days of the General Assembly, consider the following amazing facts about the legislation in question:

Under current federal law (something that is, itself, an outrageously stingy component of mid-1990s "welfare reform"), so-called "able-bodied" adults between 18 and 50 without children can only receive SNAP benefits (aka Food Stamps) for 90 days unless they are working at least 20 hours per week or are participating in a qualified work training program.

The federal law does, however, wisely allow an exception in places in which states request a waiver of the requirement because of lack of available jobs.

In North Carolina, where large swaths of the state remain mired in Great Recession level unemployment, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has applied for and received several such waivers – the most recent of which was submitted in July of this year for 77 counties.

The bill in question, which currently sits on Gov. McCrory's desk awaiting action, would forbid DHHS from seeking any such waivers in the future.

If fully signed into law, as many as 105,000 people would see their benefits cut off.

These benefits provide an average of something on the order of \$30 per week in food assistance – all of which is paid by the federal government.

In other words, if the bill is approved by the governor, North Carolina could cut off food assistance to as many as 105,000 people in the 77 hardest hit counties of the nation's fifth hungriest state]. The new rule would go into effect next year. (It should be noted that the same bill (House Bill 318) also includes highly controversial and destructive changes that would limit the ability of local governments to accept and make use of foreign identification cards – something that's especially useful for local law enforcement officers

in communities with significant undocumented populations.

**Targeting slackers?**

According to conservative defenders of the food benefits proposal, the legislation is necessary to spur unemployed workers to get off their duffs and find work. This is from an editorial in the Charlotte Observer:

"Earlier this month, state lawmakers decided to try a little more tough love on those who had the gall to be unemployed, requiring that they show evidence of five contacts a week with potential employers instead of two. All the provision did was create more paperwork for those trying to find a job, as well as employers who had to process unnecessary applications.

The rationale for lawmakers then and now is the same: The jobless need a shove to look for work. 'I think you're going to see a lot of them go and get that 20-hour-a-week job, or they're going to enroll in some sort of higher education to improve their job skills,'" Sen. Norman Sanderson, a Republican from Pamlico County, said of the ban on SNAP waivers."

Sanderson's comments were echoed by other conservative lawmakers in both houses who advanced the usual explanation – namely, that the availability of food assistance without a work requirement for "able bodied" individuals provided an incentive for idlers to sit back and take it easy.

A representative of the McCrory administration – which was apparently already in the process of moving to enforce a version of the work requirement statewide before the General Assembly acted – advanced a similar explanation earlier this month. McCrory spokesperson Rick Martinez told the conservative John Locke Foundation (which employs his wife, Donna) that "the purpose of the waiver is not to cut folks a break. We believe in work."

**Or ignoring the reality on the ground?**

Obviously, the central problem with this approach is that it ignores common sense and the reality on the ground. Simply put, 100,000 North Carolinians aren't sitting around not looking for work because they can get a few bucks per week to buy a little bit of food. If there were jobs available – even lousy, part-time jobs – these people would obviously be much better off working than merely receiving SNAP benefits. (And if a few hundred people were somehow milking the system for such a pathetic benefit, all one can say is "God forbid!")

The reality, however, is that such opportunities are simply not available. As Patrick McHugh of the Budget and Tax Center reported recently:

"The change is particularly hard to square with the fact that high unemployment is still a problem across much of North Carolina. This week's local labor market data shows that 72 counties have actually seen their unemployment rates



Illustration by Ron Rogers for the Chronicle

increase since January 2015. All but nine of the state's 100 counties have more people looking for work than job openings, so there are going to be people who are desperately looking for a job but still can't find one.

"A total of 81 counties continue to have more unemployed workers than before the start of the Great Recession. Of those counties, 59 could have received the waiver that was just eliminated, which is determined by counties' unemployment rate relative to the national average.

"While adults receiving SNAP and able to work can also engage in volunteer activities or skills training, these opportunities are hard to come by in many rural communities. In fact, the SNAP Employment & Training Program aimed at providing skills training for those receiving food assistance, offered fewer than 500 training slots statewide—that's far less than the 85,000 to 105,000 people who will be cut off from food assistance after three months if they can't find work or a volunteer opportunity."

Ironically and even weirdly given this latest conservative crusade, the harsh reality of hunger is not something that escapes our state leaders. Just last September, Governor McCrory announced that he had ordered the Executive Mansion to be lit in orange light in recognition of September as "Hunger Action Month." Meanwhile, in February of this year, House Speaker Tim Moore helped spearhead a food drive at the General Assembly to combat hunger.

And yet, despite this universally acknowledged and horrific failure in one of the most prosperous nations the world has ever known (failing to feed all of its people), the very men with the power to really attack the problem now prepare to take state policy in the precise opposite direction of where it needs to go.

Add in the fact that forbidding future waivers of the 90-day limit will place the state squarely behind the eight ball when the next recession hits and takes employment below its already anemic levels and the current action becomes that much more unfathomable.

**Going forward**

With most of the rest of October to decide what to do about the bill in question, let's hope that Governor McCrory takes his time, listens to the better angels of his nature and dusts off his veto stamp. Unfortunately, given his past actions on such issues and the bill's inclusion of unrelated anti-immigrant red meat – a matter that's even drawn the attention of Democratic presidential frontrunner Hillary Clinton [12] – such an outcome may, sadly, be wishful thinking.

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## Voices of Our Sisters conference will recognize women beyond the month of October



**Delores McCullough**  
Guest Columnist

Summer has ended and we have entered a period of fall. Our energy will be refused, allowing us to pause and consider what we see around us. The leaves are turning to radiant colors; they will fall to the ground, bearing the nakedness of the trees. The cools days and cold nights that come with winter will

allow us to pause and reflect on who we are – where we have been – and where we might go.

This is a season of transformation – change. This is an opportunity to reflect on ourselves and the source of our being.

Inspired by Kathy Findley's book "Voices of Our Sisters," Women of Promise Ministry is taking the opportunity to recognize women beyond the month of October. The Voices of Our Sisters conference seeks to lift ancient biblical voices from the pages and echo them into the 21st century.

Contemporary sisters will creatively perform vignettes, giving voice to silent cries from over 2,000 years ago.

Anyone who has experienced heartache and suffering will be inspired by the conference as it offers voices of despair, anguish, fear, shame, resentment, emptiness, regret, bitterness, sorrow, suffering, sadness and anger. Today's sisters will allow you to eavesdrop on ancient women lives; hear their cries of distress and listen to their mourning songs, as tears fall on the driest seasons of their lives.

These women's stories will raise consciousness about the issues and concerns affecting women today. This is an opportunity that stems from biblical history, and it is an opportunity for women to come together to support one another and raise their consciousness. Being aware of the story is not enough. You have to be conscious of your own inner voice and your story as it relates to these biblical stories.

This is an opportunity to enter their lives and see their faith. Hopefully, you will leave the conference with your own life redefined. So plan to leave encouraged and "to get in touch with the feelings of your own faith; find words to express your deepest emotions; and allow yourself to hum, if not sing aloud, the music of hope."

Women of Promise Ministry will present "Voices of Our Sisters" vignettes 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturday, Nov. 14 at the Bridger Field House, 499 Deacon Blvd., Third Floor, Winston-Salem. Lunch will be provided. Registration and tickets may be obtained at the following link: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/voices-of-our-sisters-tickets-18942907747>

Rev. Delores McCullough is an ordained minister and executive director and founder of Women of Promise Ministry. She provides workshops and conferences to serve as a catalyst in the lives of women, focusing on their needs and empowering them to uncover dormant gifts, refine skills, find comfort and empower others. Contact her at [womenofpromise@gmail.com](mailto:womenofpromise@gmail.com)