

# FORUM

## Just in time for the holidays: N.C.'s hunger problem is set to get worse



**Tarza Mitchell**  
Guest Columnist

As many of us plan and prepare for family gatherings and celebratory meals in the upcoming holiday season, here's a startling and disturbing fact to consider: Only a handful of U.S. states have higher hunger rates than North Carolina. The weak and uneven economic recovery hasn't reduced hunger in our communities. The share of North Carolinians who don't have a consistent supply of food has actually not budged since 2009, evidence of the state's large job shortage and boom in low-wage jobs that make it difficult to buy food.

Next year, this harsh reality will get even worse for many North Carolinians who are very poor and struggle to find work in communities where job opportunities are scarce. That's when, thanks to the recent action of the General Assembly and Governor McCrory, a three-month time limit for food assistance returns for childless, non-disabled adults.

As a point of reference, the average income of the people who will lose their food assistance is just \$2,236 ... per year.

In the federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), there is a general

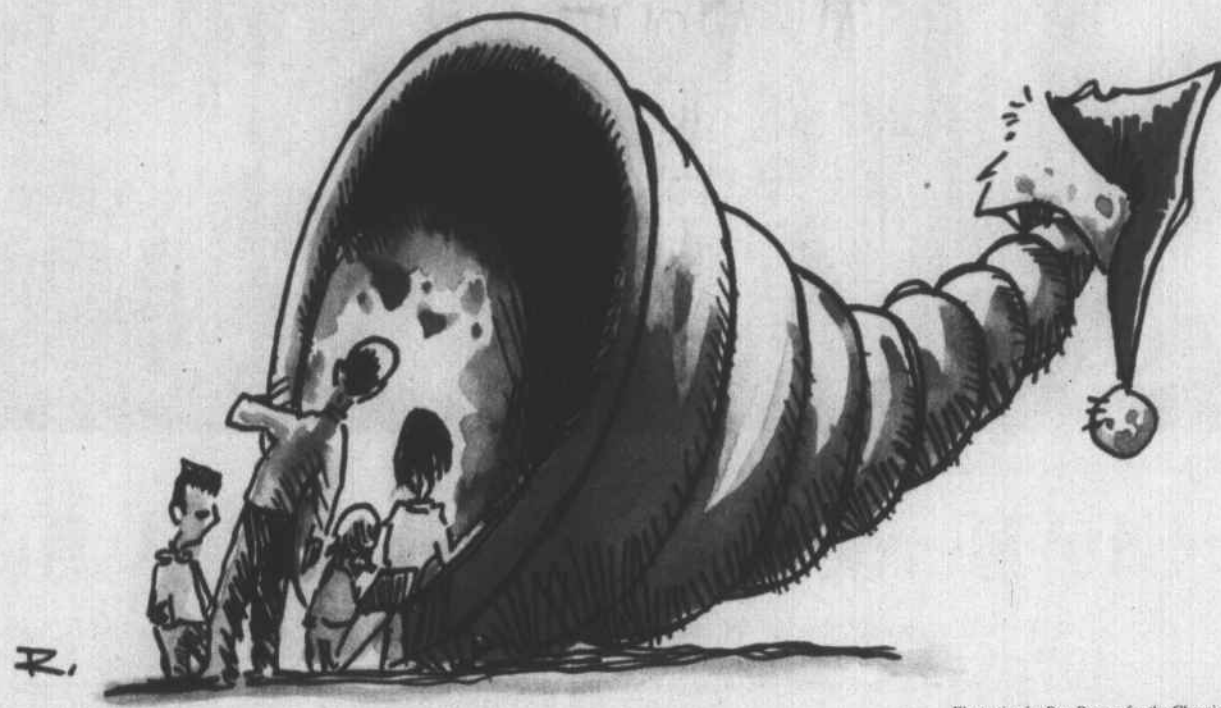


Illustration by Ron Rogers for the Chronicle

three-month limit on benefits for childless adults aged 18-50 who don't have a disability or aren't raising children. And while those who work, volunteer, or participate in a qualified job-training program for 20 hours a week or more are also exempt from the three-month limit, meeting such a requirement is extremely difficult right now—especially in areas that have faced persistently high unemployment levels.

Given the poor economic climate, states can waive the work requirement for areas in which jobs are scarce. Unfortunately, with the recent passage into law of House Bill 318, North Carolina will unnecessarily restrict food aid for up to 105,000 childless adults who live in jobs-deprived

areas—regardless of how hard these individuals are looking for work.

For 23 of the state's 100 counties lucky enough to have improving labor markets, the time-limit will go into place next January. The remaining 77 counties qualified for a year-long waiver but the governor and legislature permanently banned state waivers after next summer. Now, the three-month time limit will return by July 2016 for those 77 counties.

Proponents of the waiver ban claim that the return of the three-month time limit will encourage people to work. But, of course, the SNAP time limit is not a test of one's willingness to work. It applies regardless of whether these individuals are actually able to find employment or training

opportunities. No matter how hard they're looking for a job, if they don't find one in three months, their food assistance is gone. Even if they are working for 19 hours a week, they would lose the help in putting food on the table as well.

Let's put perspective on how difficult it truly is to find work in North Carolina. Right now, 80 of the state's 100 counties have more jobless workers than job openings. Proponents of the SNAP waiver ban ignore this economic reality and the fact that job opportunities are especially limited for these individuals who tend to need retraining, industry credentials, or development of basic job skills like reading and writing.

The folks who lawmak-

ers cut off from benefits in high unemployment areas include veterans, people who are homeless, and under-employed workers who simply can't find a full 20 hours of work each week. Very few qualify for any other help besides food assistance.

What makes this policy change even harsher is that the state leaders who approved the waiver ban failed to develop a plan to provide skills training opportunities or alternative work options to all individuals subject to the time limit. Some states commit to providing every childless adult receiving food assistance with either a work slot or skills training. Sadly, however, North Carolina is not one of those states. There are less than 1,000 SNAP employment

and training slots in our state but the policy change could make it harder to put food on the table for up to 105,000 low-income North Carolinians.

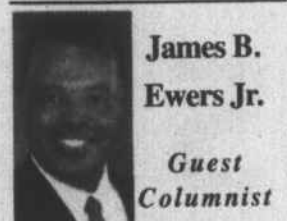
In addition to spreading hunger, the cutoff will harm local economies as well—both now and in the future. Food assistance provides jobless workers with the modest, but critical support to purchase food that in turn allows them to spend at local grocery stores and retail outlets. The stabilizing effect of food assistance has been well documented and supports economic stabilization in downturns and struggling communities.

The bottom line: At a time when jobless workers far outnumber available jobs in North Carolina, imposing further cuts to basic food assistance is the wrong approach to fighting hunger and will make life harder for North Carolinians who already face difficult tradeoffs between food and other essential needs.

The holiday season is not only a good time to reflect on our own personal journey but also the policy decisions that state leaders have made over the last year—especially the decisions that make vulnerable people worse off. Let's hope the cutoff in food assistance is one that gets reconsidered very soon.

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## College students, take advantage of opportunities



**James B. Ewers Jr.**  
Guest Columnist

many more opportunities available to them.

It is always rewarding to see how students have taken these opportunities and parlayed them into successful careers. Even in these less than favorable economic times, companies are still finding their way onto college campuses to recruit students.

Certainly, college in and of itself, will not make you successful. There must be some drive and determination that students must have. Determination and aspiration usually go a long way in helping students reach their goals.

Students should take advantage of the opportunities that colleges and universities give them.

For example, when college recruiters

Recently a colleague and I had a conversation about today's college students. We both agreed that there are

are on campus, students must see this activity as an opportunity. Going to see a company representative in a pair of blue jeans and sneakers is unacceptable. The appropriate attire for men is suits and ties and for women, dresses and pantsuits. Talking with the office of career services or one of your professors will help to prepare you for the interview.

Yet there are always students who don't heed the advice and act to the contrary. Why is it that there is a group of students who believe doing their assignments at the last minute will produce their best work? Some students unfortunately are always late for class. For example they will walk in at 8:20 a.m. for an 8:00 a.m. class and think nothing of it. Lastly, some students will walk out of class before the class ends with no prior warning to the professor. Those students who are in college for the right reasons will be successful. Will it take hard work and perseverance? Yes it will, because nothing in life worth having is easy. This was true in my day and it is true today.

It is important that we who have been through the academy help college students

to understand that success is not at the "drive-thru" window. It cannot just be ordered up and put in a bag. If it were that easy there would be a lot more successful people out here.

It requires a commitment to hard work, delayed gratification coupled with unbending and unwavering goals. While we have heard this time-honored expression before, the race is not won by the swift but by those who endure to the end.

The finish line is there for today's college students, and I believe they will get there.

### Listed below are some strategies that may help.

- \*Find a mentor to help you in your college experience.
- \*Become involved in college life. Join a club or an organization.
- \*Set monthly and/or semester goals.
- \*Seek out an older and wiser college graduate for wisdom and advice.

\*Become a member of a study group. It will help you with your academic studies.

\*Get an internship for the summer as these practical experiences will help you immensely.

\*Find out more about your professors and how they became successful.

\*As a college student, you should realize that your competition is sitting right next to you. Give your best effort each day.

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## ObamaCare improves health of Black America



**Benjamin Chavis**  
Guest Columnist

Black Americans continue to face serious disparities in education, employment, and in economic development. While over 45 million black Americans have made some type of progress during the past seven years of the Obama Administration, there is still much more to be done to end the vast racial and socioeconomic differences between blacks and whites in the United States.

One challenge, however, where there has been significant improvement is

the issue of healthcare insurance coverage for Black Americans as a direct result of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). More popularly known as ObamaCare, this federal legislative achievement by President Barack H. Obama did not happen without conservative opposition and controversy. But the growing health benefits to all Americans because of ObamaCare, and in particular for Black Americans, is undeniable.

During President Obama's recent weekly address to the nation, he detailed the quantitative progress and qualitative impact of the Affordable Care Act. President Obama stated, "For decades, too many working Americans went without the security

of health insurance — and their financial well-being suffered because of it. We've begun to change that. As the Affordable Care Act has taken effect, we've covered 17.6 million Americans. Since 2010, the uninsured rate has decreased by 45 percent. And for the first time, more than 90 percent of Americans are covered."

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services posted the following list of achievements of the ACA with specific reference to black America:

\*Last year, an estimated 6 in 10 uninsured African-Americans qualified for Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Plan (CHIP), or lower costs on monthly

premiums through the Health Insurance Marketplace.

\*Many shoppers found coverage for less than \$50 a month and nearly 7 in 10 found coverage for less than \$100.

\*7.8 million African-Americans with private insurance now have access to preventive services like mammograms or flu shots with no co-pay or deductible

\*More than 500,000 African-American young adults between the ages of 19 and 26 who would have been uninsured now have coverage under their parents' plans.

\*If all states took

advantage of new opportunities to expand Medicaid coverage under the Affordable Care Act, 95 percent of eligible uninsured African-Americans might qualify for Medicaid, CHIP, or programs to help lower the cost of health insurance coverage in the Marketplace. [North Carolina has not expanded Medicaid.]

Not having health insurance will not only cause you to suffer financial harm, but also the status of your health will be put in increased jeopardy and difficulty.

My sister, Dr. L. Francine Chavis of the Granville Health System in our hometown of Oxford, North Carolina, stated, "Because of the ACA, I

now see many more African-American patients at a point where medical care can help them immeasurably. Having health insurance coverage, many for the first time, is an important factor."

We, therefore, will have to make sure that our elected officials in Congress are adequately informed about the critical positive difference that ObamaCare has made and is making to sustain and improve the health of black America. We should oppose all those who want now to repeal the Affordable Care Act.

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