

Testimony of Sam Schaeffer
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Before the House Committee on Agriculture
The Power of Work: Expanding Opportunity through SNAP
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Good morning Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Craig, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the value of SNAP Employment and Training, or “SNAP E&T”, and how nutrition benefits coupled with job training can address both short term hunger and long term self-sufficiency while stimulating the economy. My name is Sam Schaeffer and I lead the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) which provides jobs for individuals returning from incarceration. In 30 cities across 12 states, CEO guarantees immediate daily pay and advanced training to help every participant get a quality full time job. When more people are employed in quality jobs, we create a foundation for strong businesses and an economy where everyone can thrive.

The SNAP E&T program helps meet the needs of individuals with barriers to employment - not just formerly incarcerated people, but hundreds of thousands of others experiencing hardship. Through SNAP E&T 50/50, organizations such as CEO that provide E&T activities are reimbursed up to 50 percent of the cost of delivering these services to SNAP recipients if the services are initially paid for by non-federal dollars.

After release, more than 8,000 motivated people choose to walk through a CEO front door in states like Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Michigan and North Carolina every year. For context, more than 500,000 individuals nationally return from prison annually. It's a time of hope and renewal. Yet most people will have difficulty covering the costs of basic needs such as food and a home. Add on expenses for transportation or new clothes for job interviews and it's virtually impossible to achieve long-term stability without some support. Recent reports show that individuals with prior incarceration are twice as likely to experience food insecurity¹ and 60 percent of people who have been incarcerated are persistently unemployed up to a year after their release.²

Recognizing this gap and the need for high quality training, Congress strengthened SNAP E&T in the 2018 Farm Bill by allowing paid training opportunities as an allowable activity under SNAP E&T for the first time. This provision benefits the people we serve at CEO, along with thousands more struggling financially to make ends meet. It means people can receive SNAP and also take part in an apprenticeship or work a transitional job to hone their skills - often their first job. Those food benefits offer a lifeline, while E&T services become a bridge to lasting independence.

¹ Prison Policy Initiative, “Food Insecurity is Rising, and Incarceration Puts Families at Risk,” <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/02/10/food-insecurity/>.

Just Leadership USA, “Building the Table,” <https://jlusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/jcc-landscape-report.pdf>.

² Prison Policy Initiative, “New Data on Formerly Incarcerated People's Employment Reveal Labor Market Injustices,” <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>.

This approach works. Independent evaluations show that CEO participants are 48 percent more likely to be employed after three-years.³ Further, CEO also couples work-based learning with opportunities to earn advanced credentials, such as a commercial drivers license. At CEO, participants who couple a transitional job with an advanced credential increase their earnings post E&T participation by 30 percent.

There are many employment social enterprises beyond CEO doing this work and connecting individuals to various high demand industries. For example, our peers in Nebraska, No More Empty Pots, offer access to a paid culinary training program and nutrition resources at their coffee shop, grocery store and greenhouse; New Moms in Illinois employs and trains young new mothers in manufacturing at their candle company; and Crossroads Campus in Tennessee helps disconnected youth enter the workforce with paid job training internships in retail, pet grooming, and shelter pet care. Employment social enterprises add value to our economy; for every dollar spent by the social enterprise, the return on investment was \$2.23 for society as a whole.⁴

This flexibility in offering paid E&T training alongside other components is why since 2023 CEO, working with REDF and Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI), has helped train 97 organizations serving an estimated 10,000 individuals nationally on how to access the E&T program.

Recommendations

The Farm Bill holds the solutions to some of the most urgent issues in our country. When we provide pathways to employment we improve public safety and add to our economy.⁵ Today we ask the Committee to include two bipartisan fixes to further strengthen E&T.

The first is the bipartisan *Training and Nutrition Stability Act* to ensure SNAP E&T operates as Congress intended. As people engage in paid E&T, their SNAP benefits quickly shrink and often disappear altogether. This leaves them vulnerable before a full time job begins and is in conflict with the design of SNAP E&T which intentionally pairs quality upskilling and food benefits.

The U.S. The Department of Agriculture directs states to administer work-based learning programs that move participants promptly into employment, have sustained interactions with industry, are aligned with a curriculum, and emphasize employer engagement in the execution of training. Abruptly ending access to SNAP and SNAP E&T for training participants disrupts the partnerships between SNAP E&T programs and local employers invested in the outcome of work-based learning for the development of their workforce.

Research shows that subsidized employment and transitional job interventions increase one's earning potential both in the short (\$1,123) and long term (\$600) and contribute to lower

³ Center for Employment Opportunities, "Impact Research," <https://www.ceoworks.org/impact-research>.

⁴ Rotz, Dana, Nan Maxwell, and Adam Dunn, Mathematica, "Economic Self-Sufficiency and Life Stability One Year after Starting a Social Enterprise Job," <https://redfworkshop.org/resource/mathematica-jobs-study/>.

⁵ U.S. Chamber of Commerce, "The Workforce Impact of Second Chance Hiring," <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/data-deep-dive-the-workforce-impact-of-second-chance-hiring-3/>

proportions of individuals receiving public benefits long-term.⁶ There are thousands of people in workforce programs who are at risk of losing SNAP and SNAP E&T due to their temporary income from SNAP E&T itself - an unintended consequence of the 2018 change that included paid work-based learning as an allowable component in the program. The bipartisan *Training and Nutrition Stability Act* would fix this “Catch 22” by not counting temporary earned income from federal workforce training programs in benefit eligibility.

Finally, the bipartisan *RESTORE Act* would ensure individuals with felony drug convictions are eligible for SNAP and SNAP E&T. North Carolina Conservatives for Criminal Justice Reform and the Drug Policy Alliance report that removing this ban can break cycles of incarceration. For example, individuals recently released after drug-related incarceration are 10 percent less likely to recidivate when granted full access to benefits like SNAP during their reentry transition.⁷ This is supported by CEO’s experience. One former participant Yasmeen relayed that even though she was committed to turning her life around, it was difficult to pursue employment at CEO without SNAP access.⁸ Altogether, ten percent of our North Carolina participants annually are unable to access SNAP and SNAP E&T due to this restriction.

These bipartisan solutions are vital to the program’s effectiveness. SNAP and SNAP E&T provide support to millions of Americans and when we reduce benefits it has consequences for individuals, communities, and the economy at large. We thank the Chair and members of the committee for including both of these fixes in the Farm Bill in the last Congress. We respectfully urge you to pass a comprehensive, bipartisan Farm Bill this Congress with these two fixes.

I thank members for their time and we will conclude with the following reflections from my colleague, William Lewis:

Good morning, everyone. My name is William Lewis. I'm a Senior Site Supervisor at the Center for Employment Opportunities, where I lead participants from our Detroit and Pontiac offices through transitional job training. However, my journey with CEO did not begin as staff. I started as a participant.

After serving over 20 years in prison, I came home determined and hopeful, but without any clear idea of how to obtain vital necessities like a home, a job, and the chance to start over. Thankfully, with the support of my family, access to SNAP benefits, and the strong SNAP Employment and Training program at CEO, I found what I was missing and the path to a great career.

My brother made sure I got off to a good start by buying me a laptop, clothes for work and job interviews, and a used car to commute to work. My aunt let me live with her rent-free while I completed job training at CEO. I also earned \$64 a day as a participant in CEO’s paid training

⁶ US DHHS, “Evidence Snapshot Subsidized Employment and Transitional Jobs,” <https://acf.gov/opre/report/evidence-snapshot-subsidized-employment-and-transitional-jobs>.

⁷ Yang, Crystal, American Economic Review, “Does Public Assistance Reduce Recidivism?” http://www.law.harvard.edu/programs/olin_center/papers/pdf/Yang_920.pdf.

⁸ Center for Employment Opportunities, “When the Punishment Doesn’t Fit the Crime,” <https://www.ceoworks.org/blog/when-the-punishment-doesnt-fit-the-crime>.

program so I could buy my hygiene products and other daily necessities. And, because CEO's life skills instructor helped me apply for SNAP benefits, I could buy food and not be even more of a burden to my aunt, a retired school teacher living on a fixed income. What's more, my SNAP benefits gave me something that is of immeasurable value to me. Being able to shop for my food and pay for it just like everyone else gave me a sense of independence, self-respect, and dignity, which was as vital to my mental and emotional well-being as the food I purchased was for my body.

Unfortunately, because of how the E&T program is currently written, the \$64 a day I earned as a participant in CEO's training program required that my SNAP benefits be cut by more than half. Consequently, I was forced to struggle that much more every day to make ends meet and hope that my CEO training and hard work would pay off in the long run. Thankfully, it did.

Nevertheless, what happened to me is not unique. Almost everyone who participates in a paid SNAP E&T training program like CEO's and is receiving SNAP benefits will face the same challenge I did. Therefore, as Congress considers the reauthorization of the Farm Bill this year, I hope lawmakers will incorporate the Training & Nutrition Stability Act into this essential bill and let people who desperately need the help get these benefits and keep their food security as they work hard toward their employment goals.

The combination of SNAP benefits and the SNAP E&T program allows people to think beyond their next meal and focus instead on skill development and opening doors to long-term employment. At CEO, about half of our participants are working their first job ever with us. They gain essential skills like project management and equipment operation while receiving guidance and constructive feedback to help them build good work habits in a structured and supportive environment. Through our advanced training pathways, many participants earn commercial driver's licenses, IT support certifications, and other professional accreditations.

My story, and so many others like mine, are perfect examples of how SNAP benefits in conjunction with a SNAP E&T paid training is a truly effective and efficient use of tax dollars. Together, they provide people with food security and stability as they work to acquire the skills and training needed to obtain long-term, full-time employment and build a stronger, productive future for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Because I was able to participate in the SNAP E&T paid training program offered by CEO, while also receiving SNAP benefits, it took less than nine months for me to transition from incarceration to provide for my own needs, assisting my children and grandchildren when they need me, and to be a productive member of my community. Now I will never need those essential government programs again.

If you remember one thing about our participants, know that, if asked they'll say SNAP and paid training are among the most important tools they have in their reentry journey. It's hard to name any two programs that, when combined, are a more efficient use of government funds.

We thank members of the Committee for this opportunity to testify.