



Written Testimony by Foundation for Government Accountability in Opposition to SB 95

Too many Americans are trapped in failing welfare programs and the problem is getting worse. Nationwide, the number of people dependent on government has exploded, largely due to state and federal expansions. But Kansas has bucked the national trend and become a beacon of reform, a model for the nation whose reforms are being replicated in statehouses across the country and now in Washington, D.C.

The SOAR Act attempts to reverse the gains Kansas has made over the last four years. This bill is predicated on the false promise that trapping more individuals and families in government dependency will somehow, eventually, help them leave poverty. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Kansas cannot afford to undo the gains made on welfare reform. Just four year ago, Kansas bucked the welfare-expansion trend and implemented common-sense work requirements and time limits for able-bodied adults without dependents on food stamps.

The requirement is simple: if you're an able-bodied adult in your prime working years and have no children or other dependents to care for, and you're mentally and physically fit for employment, then you have to work, train, or volunteer on at least a part-time basis. Let me remind you of our success:

With no welfare work requirement or time limit, just one in five able-bodied adults on food stamps worked at all. Nearly 93 percent of them were in poverty, most in severe poverty. Since implementing work requirements and time limits, the number of able-bodied adults on food stamps has dropped by more than 75 percent.

But today, these individuals are better off. They have gone back to work, finding employment in more than 750 different industries. Their incomes rose by an average of 127 percent per year. That higher income more than offset the food stamps they lost, leaving them better off, but also increasing economic activity and bringing in new resources for other state priorities. Better still, the average income among working able-bodied adults is now above the poverty line.

Work matters. It is the single greatest predictor of poverty—more so than education, race, sex, or other demographic factors. Work creates worth. That's why it's troubling that this bill seeks

to make possible the reinstatement of the policy to waive work for able-bodied childless adults on welfare.

This bill also suspends and in some cases eliminates the time limit for some individuals receiving cash assistance, child care subsidies, or other types of welfare. Research shows that long-term welfare caused severe damage. The less time these able-bodied adults spend on welfare, the quicker they can get back into the workforce once they are freed from welfare and the more money they will make. Kansans deserve lives of independence and self-sufficiency that our welfare reforms currently provide.

Finally, this bill seeks to weaken program integrity and increase administrative costs by using “voice authorization” for some welfare eligibility requirements. There may be considerable costs associated with developing and implementing new IT upgrades to allow the recording, storage, and retrieval of this new requirement—especially given the short time-frame this bill calls for implementation. There may also be considerable costs required by the federal government after such a system would be up and running—current rules require mailing out written copies and notices after any voice authorization.

But setting aside those concerns, there remains a concern that this will weaken program integrity. Although the bill calls on the Secretary to design rules to help prevent identity theft and impersonation, it will be nearly impossible to prevent all fraud that may result from this bill. Even the federal government acknowledges that states can only mitigate the potential for fraud under this type of system, not eliminate it. This is troubling because every dollar spent on welfare fraudsters is a dollar that can’t be used to fund benefits for the truly needy.

Audits from around the country show the problem with program integrity in general, particularly on the identity verification side. Arkansas, for example, recently identified more than 20,000 individuals using high-risk identities. These were individuals who had given the state a Social Security Number that was linked to multiple people, sometimes four, five, six people at a time, or one that didn’t match the name or date of birth, or sometimes one that was completely faked.

Kansas is already taking steps to protect resources for the truly needy by ensuring only those eligible are receiving benefits. This bill would make those efforts harder.

In Kansas, anti-poverty efforts should focus on freeing people from welfare completely instead of simply reforming the welfare experience itself. That means putting a clear focus back on protecting resources for the truly needy and moving able-bodied adults out of the welfare trap and back into the workforce as quickly as possible. Kansas has become a national model for other states and for Congress. Unfortunately, this bill undermines the progress made and attempts to push us back to a time when success was measured not by improving lives, but by how many people were dependent on government. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.