Don’t sever public assistance that helps sustain health

JUN 16, 2021

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Work requirements for those using public-assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) can negatively affect the recipients’ health outcomes and limit their ability to find stable jobs, says a resolution presented at the June 2021 AMA Special Meeting.

“Food insecurity is associated with higher risk of chronic diseases, including diabetes, obesity, depression and hypertension. We need to make sure that all families have access to nutritional food options rather than erect bureaucratic hurdles to these programs,” said AMA Trustee Thomas J. Madejski, MD.

The barriers have the potential to especially restrict coverage for anyone with chronic medical conditions, including mental illness and substance-use disorders. This is especially critical in light of the pandemic-related job losses in the millions. Many recipients register for public assistance programs only after losing a job and more than 80% report finding new employment within a year after starting to receive SNAP benefits, says the resolution.

With those facts in mind, the AMA House of Delegates adopted new policy to:

- Support elimination of work requirements used as eligibility criteria in public assistance programs, including SNAP and TANF.
- Work with state medical societies to encourage states to establish express-lane eligibility programs that use eligibility data from the maximum number of express lane agencies feasible—which include SNAP, TANF and other programs as described by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services—to facilitate enrollment in Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program.
Say no to lifetime food-stamps ban

Under federal law, anyone convicted of a drug-related felony is ineligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Yet being eligible for SNAP and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) upon release from prison reduced the risk of someone’s returning to prison within a year by up to 10%, says research cited in a separate resolution presented at the AMA Special Meeting.

As of 2019, three states and territories had a lifetime ban, 24 states modified the ban on SNAP to exclude only people convicted of a drug-related felony and 25 states repealed the ban altogether. Being able to access SNAP benefits has been linked to improved health and more preventive health checkups, the resolution says.

To address the obstacles the federal law creates to these benefits, delegates adopted policy to “oppose any lifetime ban on SNAP benefits imposed on individuals convicted of drug-related felonies.”

Read about the other highlights from the June 2021 AMA Special Meeting.