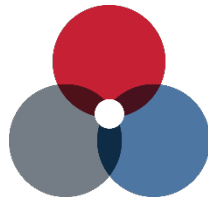




Ohio Works First Program Considered Last During COVID-19

By: Sarah Hudacek
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August 23, 2021



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Public benefits programs must be effective in both times of prosperity and times of economic downturn. [Community Solutions recently wrote](#) that it's likely COVID-19 recovery will deepen the divide between low-income and middle-class Americans. As we look to the scheduled end of the Public Health Emergency Declaration in December 2021, it's vital to continue support to families receiving public assistance as temporary COVID-19 aid ends.

In 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ohio's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance program, called Ohio Works First (OWF), was relatively unresponsive to the economic recession compared to food assistance programs. Most public benefits programs are countercyclical to the economy – meaning that when the economy thrives, enrollment in benefits programs is low, and when the economy is struggling, enrollment in benefits increases. However, OWF barely expanded caseloads in spring and summer 2020 and quickly returned to pre-pandemic levels by the end of the year.

The structure of TANF creates barriers for the program to be a safety net for Ohioans in need. As [Community Solutions has written in the past](#), the set amount of federal funding Ohio receives through the TANF block grant, as well as federal rules regarding work requirements, time limits, and other matters, somewhat limits the state's ability to serve every needy Ohioan with TANF federal funds alone.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) received an influx of emergency funding to help state programs meet increased need. TANF programs did not see equal amounts of funding, and the funding that was received came in spring 2021, almost a year after the onset of the pandemic.

To support the SNAP program, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, passed in March 2020, allowed states to [suspend the SNAP three-month time limit](#) for benefits for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs), allowed states to provide [emergency allotments \(EAs\)](#) to SNAP households to increase their monthly benefit amount, and created the [Pandemic-EBT](#)

[\(P-EBT\) program](#), which provided meal replacement benefits to households whose children were eligible for free or reduced lunches at school, but whose schools were closed at any point during the 2019-2020 school year. The P-EBT program was later [extended through summer 2021](#).¹

In contrast, the only TANF funding authorized through COVID-19 relief packages was the Pandemic Emergency Assistance Fund, established by the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, which provided \$33.9 million² to Ohio to provide non-recurrent, short-term benefits – lasting less than four months – to needy Ohioans, meaning these funds could not be used to expand the OWF program³. Because of the restrictions placed on these dollars, it's likely these dollars were used to fund Ohio's Prevention, Retention and Contingency (PRC) program, a diversion program that offers short-term help to families for car repairs, rent, home maintenance, and other expenses that might otherwise lead to a family falling deeper into poverty.

Ohio Works First Data

In both 2019 and 2020, the yearly average payment to Ohio Works First enrollees was just over \$210 per month, which works out to about \$2,520 per year. If a three-person family makes 50 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) – the maximum income possible while still being eligible for OWF – the average cash payments delivered through OWF would only bring a family to \$742 per month, or \$13,380 per year, which is about 62 percent of the federal poverty level for a family of three in 2020. According to the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 2019, only 6.8 percent of Ohio Works First recipients had income outside of cash assistance payments.⁴

As Tables 1-3 illustrate, the total number of Ohio Works First enrollees in both 2019 and 2020 was less than 1 percent of Ohio's population. In 2019, the Census Bureau's American Community Survey estimated Ohio's statewide poverty level at 13.1 percent – meaning 13.1 percent of Ohio's population had an income below the federal poverty level. Given that in 2019, 0.78 percent of Ohio's entire population was enrolled in OWF, it's estimated that only 6 percent of all Ohioans in poverty were enrolled. It's important to note that not all Ohioans in poverty are eligible for OWF. The poverty rate calculates Ohioans at 100 percent FPL or less, and OWF eligibility is set to 50 percent FPL. OWF is also only available for families with children who meet income requirements.

¹ States are Using Much-Needed Temporary flexibility in SNAP to Respond To COVID-19 Challenges. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2021, June 3). <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/states-are-using-much-needed-temporary-flexibility-in-snap-to-respond-to>

² Administration for Children & Families, Office of Family Assistance, Pandemic Emergency Assistance Fund Allotment - States (n.d.). <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ofa/State-pandemic-emergency-assistance-fund-allotment-Table.pdf>

³ Office of Family Assistance, TANF-ACF-PI-2021-02 (The Pandemic Emergency Assistance Fund) (2021). Administration for Children & Families, Office of Family Assistance. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/policy-guidance/tanf-acf-pi-2021-02>

⁴ Administration for Children & Families, Characteristics and Financial Circumstances of TANF Recipients Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 (n.d.). https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ofa/fy19_characteristics_final.pdf

Table 1: Total OWF Recipients	Average Total OWF Recipients	Percentage of Ohio Population
2019	91,393	0.78%
2020	96,374	0.82%

Table 2: Adult Recipients in Ohio	Average Total OWF Adult Recipients	Average Total OWF Recipients	Percent of Yearly Average OWF Recipients	Percentage of Ohio Population
2019	8,743	91,393	9.5%	0.07%
2020	10,827	96,374	11.2%	0.09%

Table 3: Child Recipients in Ohio	Average Total OWF Child Recipients	Average Total OWF Recipients	Percent of Yearly Average OWF Recipients
2019	82,650	91,393	90.43%
2020	85,713	96,374	88.94%

Comparison to SNAP

In contrast to TANF cash assistance, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, is an entitlement program. Each year, the federal government fully funds the cost of SNAP benefits provided to individuals, even if program enrollment fluctuates. The state must only help cover the cost of administering the program.

Because of the flexibility of SNAP funding to adjust based on the number of needy individuals, SNAP enrollment numbers are reactive to changes in the economy: as the economy goes up, SNAP enrollments go down. By the same token, as the COVID-19 pandemic stalled jobs, education and food access, SNAP enrollment went up.

Eligibility for SNAP benefits is set at a much higher level than OWF eligibility. To be eligible for SNAP, a household's gross monthly income must be at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level, and a household's net monthly income must be less than or equal to 100 percent of the poverty level.⁵

⁵ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2019). (issue brief). Policy Basics: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Retrieved from <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

Table 4: Total Ohio Recipients	Average Total SNAP Recipients	Percentage of Ohio Population
2019	1,333,940	11.4%
2020	1,483,686	12.7%

Table 5: SNAP Adult Recipients in Ohio	Average Adult Recipients	Yearly Average Total Recipients	Percent of Yearly Average Recipients	Percentage of Ohio Population
2019	759,280	1,333,940	56.92%	6.5%
2020	844,772	1,483,686	56.94%	7.2%

Table 6: SNAP Child Recipients in Ohio	Average Child Recipients	Yearly Average Total Recipients	Percent of Yearly Average Recipients
2019	574,660	1,333,940	43.08%
2020	635,333	1,483,686	42.82%

Table 7: Average SNAP Payment by Year	Average SNAP Payment
2019	\$125.42
2020	\$185.67

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

In April 2020, when the full force of COVID-related layoffs and shutdowns began, there was an increase in OWF caseloads among both adults and children. In June 2020, rolls peaked at 104,404, about 15,000 above pre-pandemic levels.⁶ Using pre-pandemic numbers as a baseline, in January 2020, 91,111 Ohioans were enrolled and in February 2020, 90,145 Ohioans were enrolled. By December 2020, caseloads were back to pre-pandemic levels, at 90,483 Ohioans enrolled. This was well before a vaccine was widely available, public health orders were lifted or many jobs were restored. Over April, May and June 2020 when pandemic shut-downs were in full effect, OWF caseloads increased just 16 percent.

SNAP, by comparison, expanded to include 300,000 additional enrollees in just one month, between March 2020 and April 2020, and as of May 2021, was still 200,000 above pre-pandemic caseloads. Unlike OWF caseloads, SNAP rolls increased 23 percent to accommodate higher need due to the pandemic, and SNAP expanded to include these additional enrollees just

⁶ Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Caseload Summary Statistics Report June 2020 (n.d.). <https://jfs.ohio.gov/pams/Caseload-Summary-Report-June--2020.stm>

one month after COVID-19 shut downs caused widespread job loss and left many Ohioans in need.

In spring 2020, County Job and Family Services offices made emergency relief funding available through PRC. In normal times, PRC provides short-term help to low-income families to help with emergent needs, such as one-time rental assistance, auto repair expenses, and disaster assistance, among others.⁷

The PRC emergency relief in early 2020 allocated one-time payments to families with children who made less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. In Hamilton County, \$3 million to fund \$500 payments to families was exhausted just five hours after applications were opened.⁸ In Montgomery County, \$1.2 million of funding for payments of up to \$1,000 was exhausted in less than two days.⁹ In Franklin County, \$1.5 million in funding for \$500 payments was spoken for in just 24 hours.¹⁰

The high demand for these PRC payments shows that low-income Ohioans were struggling at the onset of pandemic shut-downs and could have benefited from a more responsive and substantial cash assistance program.

County-Level Data

Ohio Works First is not the safety net that Ohioans need. OWF leaves out many families in poverty. Under the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) entitlement program, the predecessor to TANF, direct cash assistance made up the single largest use of federal funding in every state. Under TANF, however, many states spend less than one-fifth of their TANF funds on cash assistance. Ohio spends just over 20 percent of its TANF funds on the Ohio Works First program.¹¹

In Tables 8A and 8B, the sharp decline in enrollment numbers in Ohio Works First between June 2020 and May 2021 show how quickly OWF caseloads returned to pre-pandemic levels, even as the federal public health emergency remained in effect and many Ohioans continued to

⁷ Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Fact Sheet: Prevention, Retention and Contingency (2021). <https://jfs.ohio.gov/factsheets/prc.pdf>

⁸ Coronavirus notebook: \$500 checks go fast. (2020, April 7). Cincinnati Business Courier. <https://www.bizjournals.com/cincinnati/news/2020/04/07/coronavirus-notebook-500-checks-go-fast-virtual.html>

⁹ Balduf, J. (2020, April 9). Coronavirus: Applications cut off for low-income families seeking short-term help. Dayton Daily News. <https://www.daytondailynews.com/news/local/coronavirus-applications-cut-off-for-low-income-families-seeking-short-term-help/P4rypxdrCZPJ5g3atiX5XN/>

¹⁰ Kovac, M. (2020, April 3). \$1.5 Million in Franklin County coronavirus assistance exhausted in 24 hours. The Columbus Dispatch. <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20200403/15-million-in-franklin-county-coronavirus-assistance--exhausted-in-24-hours>

¹¹ Safawi, A., & Schott, L. (2021). (rep.). To Lessen Hardship, States Should Invest More TANF Dollars in Basic Assistance for Families. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Retrieved from <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/to-lesser-hardship-states-should-invest-more-tanf-dollars-in-basic>

struggle. SNAP caseloads, however, have changed little since June 2020, offering the assistance that Ohioans still need as the economy recovers.

Table 8A: Number of OWF Recipients for Counties with ACS Poverty Rates Greater Than 15.0%					
County	June 2020: Number of Adult Recipients	May 2021: Number of Adult Recipients	June 2020: Number of Child Recipients	May 2021: Number of Child Recipients	Number of Individuals Below 50% FPL¹²
Adams	1	0	279	293	2,042
Ashtabula	126	44	921	739	9,414
Athens	162	80	578	476	9,600
Brown	5	4	354	297	2,503
Clark	86	67	1,357	1,295	9,084
Coshocton	28	4	342	276	2,142
Crawford	21	17	343	284	2,725
Cuyahoga	2,020	1,031	11,082	8,818	97,780
Fayette	15	4	274	242	2,040
Franklin	1,574	806	10,944	8,864	89,757
Gallia	77	43	406	302	1,945
Guernsey	15	8	327	306	2,985
Hamilton	2,136	1,425	8,696	6,790	60,107
Hardin	9	0	184	156	1,661
Harrison	15	14	113	103	980
Highland	20	7	372	339	3,821
Jackson	14	12	388	378	2,904
Jefferson	94	38	625	501	5,454
Lawrence	12	3	606	571	4,056
Lucas	1,039	300	5,404	3,843	38,024
Mahoning	1,159	800	3,675	2,893	15,617
Marion	54	65	619	661	4,840
Meigs	25	11	238	251	1,985
Monroe	11	9	42	47	945
Montgomery	530	254	4,729	3,996	38,753
Morgan	3	3	110	103	1,145
Muskingum	162	123	1,223	1,134	5,561
Noble	2	0	69	51	477
Perry	18	15	425	425	2,989
Pike	61	39	433	428	2,489
Ross	<i>(Included in South Central)</i>				4,784
Scioto	9	7	1,084	954	7,482

¹² U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2019 5-year estimates

South Central (Hocking, Ross and Vinton)	149	138	1,546	1,436	(See individual county data)
Trumbull	369	214	1,865	1,542	14,328
Vinton	(Included in South Central)				1,020
Washington	0	0	219	230	3,134

Includes only counties with a 15.0% poverty rate or higher. June 2020 numbers used for comparison because OWF case numbers in 2020 were highest in June.

Table 8B: Number of SNAP Recipients for Counties with ACS Poverty Rates Greater Than 15.0%					
County	June 2020: Number of Adults¹³	May 2021: Number of Adults¹⁴	June 2020: Number of Children¹⁵	May 2021: Number of Children¹⁶	Number of Individuals Below 50% FPL¹⁷
Adams	3,670	3,631	2,151	2,146	2,042
Ashtabula	10,974	11,221	7,018	7,098	9,414
Athens	6,247	6,142	3,331	3,201	9,600
Brown	3,567	3,719	2,306	2,440	2,503
Clark	13,330	12,812	10,808	10,281	9,084
Coshocton	3,644	3,704	2,138	2,287	2,142
Crawford	3,989	4,217	2,432	2,691	2,725
Cuyahoga	135,295	136,682	91,215	93,000	97,780
Fayette	2,621	2,623	1,663	1,795	2,040
Franklin	90,287	90,462	88,989	89,251	89,757
Gallia	4,347	4,056	2,629	2,454	1,945
Guernsey	3,665	3,747	2,124	2,178	2,985
Hamilton	63,422	62,108	58,177	55,183	60,107
Hardin	1,988	2,107	1,513	1,530	1,661
Harrison	1,415	1,425	817	852	980
Highland	4,189	4,116	2,573	2,564	3,821
Jackson	4,203	4,154	2,514	2,423	2,904
Jefferson	8,506	8,283	5,195	5,140	5,454
Lawrence	8,438	8,546	4,620	4,471	4,056
Lucas	45,350	40,285	35,102	32,290	38,024
Mahoning	29,109	28,179	20,041	19,356	15,617

¹³ Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Caseload Summary Statistics Report June 2020 (n.d.).

<https://jfs.ohio.gov/pams/Caseload-Summary-Report-June--2020.stm>

¹⁴ Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Caseload Summary Statistics Report May 2021 (n.d.).

<https://jfs.ohio.gov/pams/Caseload-Summary-Report-May-2021.stm>

¹⁵ Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Caseload Summary Statistics Report June 2020 (n.d.).

<https://jfs.ohio.gov/pams/Caseload-Summary-Report-June--2020.stm>

¹⁶ Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Caseload Summary Statistics Report May 2021 (n.d.).

<https://jfs.ohio.gov/pams/Caseload-Summary-Report-May-2021.stm>

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2019 5-year estimates

Marion	6,721	6,301	5,121	4,669	4,840
Meigs	3,178	3,076	1,740	1,591	1,985
Monroe	1,110	1,123	707	704	945
Montgomery	45,744	45,251	36,755	35,775	38,753
Morgan	1,493	1,518	770	801	1,145
Muskingum	10,214	10,399	5,966	6,080	5,561
Noble	921	914	562	522	477
Perry	3,885	3,959	2,424	2,485	2,989
Pike	4,469	4,507	2,757	2,796	2,489
Ross	<i>(Included in South Central)</i>				4,784
Scioto	12,658	12,443	6,598	6,614	7,482
South Central (Hocking, Ross and Vinton)	13,973	13,999	8,389	8,565	<i>(See individual county data)</i>
Trumbull	18,509	19,589	12,886	13,890	14,328
Vinton	<i>(Included in South Central)</i>				1,020
Washington	4,800	5,124	2,860	3,074	3,134

Includes only counties with a 15.0% poverty rate or higher. June 2020 numbers used for comparison because OWF case numbers in 2020 were highest in June.

The number of Ohioans left out of the OWF program can be starkly seen when examining county by county data, where many counties have fewer than 10 adult recipients, even in the midst of a pandemic.

Table 9: Counties with Less Than 10 Adult OWF Recipients		
Issuance County	June 2020: Number of Adults¹⁸	May 2021: Number of Adults¹⁹
Hancock	9	2
Hardin	9	0
Preble	9	2
Scioto	9	7
Auglaize	8	1
Darke	8	0
Ottawa	8	8
Morrow	7	0
Warren	7	0

¹⁸ Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Caseload Summary Statistics Report June 2020 (n.d.). <https://jfs.ohio.gov/pams/Caseload-Summary-Report-June--2020.stm>

¹⁹ Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Caseload Summary Statistics Report May 2021 (n.d.). <https://jfs.ohio.gov/pams/Caseload-Summary-Report-May-2021.stm>

Champaign	6	9
Brown	5	4
Geauga	5	2
Ashland	4	2
Tuscarawas	4	1
Van Wert	4	1
Carroll	3	3
Morgan	3	3
Noble	2	0
Adams	1	0
Clinton	1	0
Defiance/Paulding	1	2
Wood	1	3
Wyandot	1	0
Fulton	0	1
Henry	0	1
Putnam	0	1
Washington	0	0

Table 10: Counties with Highest Adult OWF Enrollments			
Issuance County	June 2020: Number of Adults²⁰	May 2021: Number of Adults²¹	City
Hamilton	2,136	1,425	Cincinnati
Cuyahoga	2,020	1,031	Cleveland
Franklin	1,574	806	Columbus
Mahoning	1,159	800	Youngstown
Summit	1,062	920	Akron
Lucas	1,039	300	Toledo
Stark	676	228	Canton
Montgomery	530	254	Dayton
Trumbull	369	214	Youngstown

²⁰ Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Caseload Summary Statistics Report June 2020 (n.d.). <https://jfs.ohio.gov/pams/Caseload-Summary-Report-June--2020.stm>

²¹ Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Caseload Summary Statistics Report May 2021 (n.d.). <https://jfs.ohio.gov/pams/Caseload-Summary-Report-May-2021.stm>

Table 11: Counties with Fewer Than 100 Child OWF Recipients		
Issuance County	June 2020: Number of Children²²	May 2021: Number of Children²³
Fulton	95	86
Van Wert	94	89
Geauga	85	71
Wyandot	73	80
Holmes	69	37
Noble	69	51
Putnam	60	67
Henry	46	47
Monroe	42	47

Table 12: Counties with Highest Child OWF Enrollment			
Issuance County	June 2020: Number of Children²⁴	May 2020: Number of Children²⁵	City
Cuyahoga	11,082	8,818	Cleveland
Franklin	10,944	8,864	Columbus
Hamilton	8,969	6,790	Cincinnati
Lucas	5,404	3,843	Toledo
Summit	5,399	4,784	Akron
Montgomery	4,729	3,996	Dayton
Mahoning	3,675	2,893	Youngstown
Stark	3,210	2,373	Canton

²² Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Caseload Summary Statistics Report June 2020 (n.d.). <https://jfs.ohio.gov/pams/Caseload-Summary-Report-June--2020.stm>

²³ Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Caseload Summary Statistics Report May 2021 (n.d.). <https://jfs.ohio.gov/pams/Caseload-Summary-Report-May-2021.stm>

²⁴ Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Caseload Summary Statistics Report June 2020 (n.d.). <https://jfs.ohio.gov/pams/Caseload-Summary-Report-June--2020.stm>

²⁵ Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Caseload Summary Statistics Report May 2021 (n.d.). <https://jfs.ohio.gov/pams/Caseload-Summary-Report-May-2021.stm>

Conclusion

Not all states' cash assistance programs remained as inflexible during the pandemic as Ohio's. In Minnesota, March 2020 Executive Orders from Governor Tim Walz waived work requirements, requirements for in-person visits to prove continued eligibility, and time limits. Some Minnesota county offices began to accept verbal consent for applications over the phone, rather than requiring paper forms.²⁶

Delaware, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Washington and Wisconsin also suspended time limits during the COVID-19 pandemic. Delaware increased every household's benefits to the maximum level, Maryland increased benefits to \$100 per household member per month for up to six months, and Pennsylvania gave one-time grants to cash assistance recipients equal to two months of cash benefits.²⁷

Ohio could have taken the same steps, but instead, only relaxed work requirements during the pandemic.²⁸ While the federal government can unilaterally expand SNAP benefits and remove program requirements that pose barriers for some recipients, only states can choose to relax TANF cash assistance requirements and expand benefits for their own cash assistance programs in times of economic crisis, with the agreement of the federal government. As one of only a small number of cash assistance programs available to low-income Ohioans, Ohio Works First can't be left out when building a strong, interconnected safety net for Ohioans when they need it most.



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²⁶ Goldstein, A. (2021, August 1). Welfare rolls decline during the pandemic despite economic upheaval. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/08/01/welfare-roles-during-the-pandemic/>

²⁷ Goldstein, A. (2021, August 1). Welfare rolls decline during the pandemic despite economic upheaval. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/08/01/welfare-roles-during-the-pandemic/>

²⁸ Goldstein, A. (2021, August 1). Welfare rolls decline during the pandemic despite economic upheaval. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/08/01/welfare-roles-during-the-pandemic/>