



## Stop Imposing Chaos on America's Working Families

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Families need stability.

By stability, I don't mean some outdated, unobtainable Leave-It-to-Beaver fantasy where Dad works at the same job for 30 years and Mom is always waiting with a wholesome snack when the kids arrive home from school in the middle of the afternoon. Instead, I'm talking about a much more basic type of stability: **the security to plan for the week and month ahead, which is essential to keeping a family functioning and healthy.** I'm talking about knowing *when* Mom or Dad is going to be at work, knowing that *someone* can watch the kids, and having enough money on hand to make sure there's food in the house for that after-school snack.

For low-income families in today's U.S. economy, just knowing when the next work shift is coming has become a guessing game, as so-called "staffing-optimization software" encourages managers in many workplaces to impose havoc on the schedules of service workers – who are disproportionately women and very often mothers. Many workers learn their schedules just one week in advance, or even the very day before they are supposed to show up! What is more, if the software suddenly detects that business is slower than expected, workers can be sent home without pay after they arrive for scheduled shifts, losing wages they were counting on receiving.

After public outcries, some employers – most notably Starbucks – are now stepping up to reform these scheduling practices. For firms that need more of a push, **a proposed new *Schedules That Work Act* is now under consideration in Congress.** This legislation would help working families in several key ways:

- Employers would be required to provide flexible, stable, or predictable schedules to workers upon request and without retaliation.
- Employers would be required to give employees two weeks' notice of any changes in work schedules – thus allowing working parents to plan child care ahead and avoid arranging or paying for child care they cannot use.
- Employers would be required to pay at least four hours' wages if an employee arrives for a shift only to be sent home. This would put money in parents' pockets and make their paychecks a bit more stable from month to month. Predictable earnings are critical for low-income families, because fluctuations in pay can cause loss of eligibility for important public social supports such as Food Stamps and Head Start.

Although the Schedules That Work Act would help millions, businesses aren't the only ones that need to provide much more predictability and stability to working families. Government programs are, in fact, often a source of instability for parents, rather than a help as they purport to be. What follows are two examples of ways in which vital public programs can go awry simply because of poor scheduling decisions by policymakers.

Most workers receive weekly or biweekly paychecks. Food Stamps, by contrast, are often meted out just once a month, causing many poor families to run low on food at the end of the month, according to recent research. States could make things better by, instead, disbursing half of a family's Food Stamps allotment at the beginning of the month to allow for bulk purchases, and then providing the rest of the allocation in weekly installments, so that families still have money for daily groceries at the end of the month. An added advantage of such a reformed payment plan would be to prevent stores in low-income areas from using predatory pricing to take advantage of monthly boom-bust cycles in poor families' ability to pay.

Many U.S. states further disrupt family stability when they require mothers or fathers to come to administrative offices every couple of months to re-apply for ongoing programs such as child care subsidies. Poor working parents, like all working parents, find it hard to make it to such frequent work-day meetings, so it is little surprise that research reveals that such requirements can lead to inappropriate disruptions in services families need. Consider what it means when a vital child care subsidy, for example, is unnecessarily interrupted. Children have to be pulled out of care, disrupting the schedules of working parents, as well as the child's relationship with their caregiver. States can easily improve the situation by requiring recertification only every six months. Research studies have demonstrated that this is often enough to identify problems, but not so frequent as to create new difficulties for all concerned.

The bottom line is straightforward. Employers and public policymakers can take clear steps to enhance stability for American families. We do not need to twist twenty-first century society to fit some stereotypical 1950s Hollywood utopia. What we do need to do is create a business and policy environment that allows all working parents, not just the professional class, to predict their pay, benefits, and schedules. America's working families deserve nothing less.