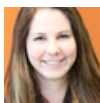


# It's Time to Strengthen the Food Safety Net



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*Americans are going hungry, yet Congress hasn't updated the food safety net in over a decade and has been slow to act to the COVID-19 crisis. It is critical Congress responds immediately, from streamlining enrollment to expanding SNAP benefits so Americans can focus on keeping their families safe instead of wondering where their next meal will come from.*

Americans across the country are desperate for food. Over 10,000 cars lined up for food distribution in San Antonio—at a food bank that has seen their weekly clientele double from 60,000 people to 120,000 people. In Miami, a 1.5-mile-long line waited to pick up a bag of food at a drive-through food bank.<sup>1</sup> In Phoenix, the number of people lining up for food tripled. In

Massachusetts, food pantries increased distribution by 849%. A recent survey found that 40% of households are experiencing moderate to high levels of food insecurity.<sup>2</sup>

Further, food insecurity has a disproportionate impact on families of color, people with disabilities, women, and children. Over 40% of households of mothers with children age 12 and under are food insecure, leaving the most vulnerable population—children—at risk for hunger. Latino, black, and rural households are all more likely to suffer from food insecurity.<sup>3</sup>

The federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is responsible for providing food and nutrition support to low-income families in need. After the onset of the coronavirus crisis, it saw a 164% increase in traffic to its webpage from February to March alone. But with tens of millions of newly unemployed individuals and more families struggling to make ends meet as this pandemic continues for the foreseeable future, our food safety net will need to do far more than it has ever done. Unfortunately, it is woefully underprepared for this onslaught of need.

In this report, we examine issues with our current food safety net and lay out six policies to strengthen it and increase access to the millions of Americans going hungry during the COVID-19 crisis.

## **Problem: The food safety net is outdated and ineffective**

Before this crisis, nearly 40 million Americans were food insecure. Now, more than 1 in 5 households report being food insecure.<sup>4</sup> With the overwhelming demand for food, the food safety net is crumbling. Feeding America, a network of 200 food banks across the country, is reporting a 64% decrease in donations.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, some of the nation's largest farmers are forced to dump milk, eggs, and other crops due to plummeting demand from restaurants and schools and reduced capacity to store food in the interim.<sup>6</sup>

There are significant disparities in access to food across America. In 2017, the national average for food insecurity was 12.3%, yet 22.5% of African American households and 18.5% of Hispanic households were food insecure. One-in-four black teens are food insecure. Rural counties make up 63% of all US counties but represent 795 counties with the highest rates of food insecurity. The top five food-insecure states are in the South.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, the federal government has done little to provide support. For years, Republicans have worked to undermine access to SNAP by imposing punitive work requirements and restricting personal choice in buying food by replacing traditional benefits with “government-purchased non-perishable food boxes.” President Trump's FY2019 budget proposed more than \$213 billion in cuts to SNAP, a nearly 30% cut in the program, underscoring decades of attempts to restrict access to food assistance by the Republican

party.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in response to the nationwide public health and economic crisis, totaling almost \$2 trillion in federal relief spending. The law temporarily removed barriers to receiving food assistance, like work requirements, and created the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) to give SNAP dollars to households with children who normally receive free or reduced-price meals at school. Both measures are intended to help families maintain access to the benefits they already receive. While they are important changes, they do little to expand access for new families in need. Given there are now more than 33 million newly unemployed Americans seeking unemployment insurance (UI), Congress must do more to expand and promote access to the food safety net.

## **Families are going to struggle with food insecurity The food safety net in America wasn't designed in mind.**

Food assistance is a critical anti-poverty measure. Beneficiaries get \$56 in value from every \$1 the government spends.<sup>9</sup> Food assistance also helps spur the economy; research shows that every dollar in new SNAP benefits spurred \$1.74 in economic activity during the last recession.<sup>10</sup> SNAP benefits are also an incredibly quick way to help families—about 80% of benefits are redeemed within two weeks of receipt and about 97% are spent within the month.<sup>11</sup> Despite the clear return on investment and the necessity of food security for survival, SNAP and other food safety net programs have not been modernized in decades. The country's outdated food safety net has resulted in a huge failure to get food to those in need during this crisis.

## **Solution: 6 ways to modernize the food safety net**

Americans should never be worried about where their next meal is coming from—particularly when staying home is critical to the safety of the nation and millions of Americans are out of a job. We need to modernize the food safety net so it reaches more people, provides better support, and protects vulnerable Americans from future economic shocks. Here are six ways to do that:

### **1. Establish a Farm to Table Food Fund**

As farmers are forced to dump food, restaurants are closed, and Americans are going hungry, Congress should establish a Farm to Table Food Fund to give states the flexibility to help their

citizens. Local and state governments would be able to tap this fund to bolster the food safety net. Here are three possible ways these local governments could use the funding:

- Support the food supply chain by increasing personal protective equipment (PPE) in critical warehouses or distribution sites so they can remain open. Many dairy processing plants have closed or limited their production, forcing farmers to dump milk.<sup>12</sup> States and localities should be able to use this fund to purchase and provide more PPE as well as contribute to hazard pay for frontline employees.
- Purchase food directly from farms to distribute to food banks in at-risk communities. While the Trump Administration has given \$3 billion to buy food directly from farmers, that is not enough to solve the crisis. For example, farmers in Florida grow produce they sell to restaurants across the country. Without restaurants purchasing the food, farmers have been forced to burn millions of pounds of food.<sup>13</sup> Local governments should buy that food and work with state and local entities to develop a large-scale distribution plan for households in need.
- Pay restaurants, schools, hotels, and convention centers to store food in their kitchens to give time for distribution. Right now, a lot of food can't be stored on-site at food banks because of a lack of refrigeration. Businesses and other entities can fill that gap until the food can be distributed into the community. The FEED Act, introduced by Rep. Mike Thompson (D-CA) and Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA), addresses this shortfall by allowing state and local governments to partner with restaurants and nonprofits to feed communities and ensures full federal reimbursement for meals served.<sup>14</sup>

## **2. Streamline enrollment in safety net programs**

Safety net programs operate in a complex web of overlapping eligibility criteria between several state governmental agencies. Further, there are more than 60 federal safety net programs with their own application and eligibility criteria, and not all of them are accessible online or on a mobile device.<sup>15</sup> These complex application processes often have onerous criteria that reduce the number of people who can access critical services. This complexity defeats the purpose of having safety net programs—we need to better support Americans in need, not drive them away from help.

Within the last few months, over 33 million Americans have filed for UI benefits in the past few weeks either online, over the phone, or in person. The government needs to streamline enrollment so that when someone files for UI benefits, they are automatically supported in enrolling in other programs for which they are eligible. To accomplish this, Congress must:

- Require states to offer safety net applications for programs like SNAP and WIC online, or over the phone. With stay-at-home and shelter-in-place orders applying to large swaths of the country, Congress must require all states to offer accessible options, instead of requiring hardcopy forms.<sup>16</sup>
- Create a grant for states to build a single web-based platform for recipients to assess eligibility for safety net programs. Only 3 out of 10 safety net program applications are mobile phone friendly, making applications in the age of social distancing unnecessarily complicated. This fund should be used for states to modernize and streamline applications.

### **3. Boost the number of food kitchens in every community**

Congress can easily and quickly increase the number of food pantries around the country with a few simple rule changes. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides federal reimbursement funds for every meal served. However, no reimbursement fund exists for community or adult meals served, meaning school kitchens operating as community kitchens or food pantries during the coronavirus are left on the hook for meals served to any adults. Hungry families are turning to local schools for food assistance across the country at a level school districts have never seen before.<sup>17</sup> Congress should make two changes to better support these essential resources helping communities across the country:

- Enact an NSLP national waiver, allowing schools to recoup funds for all meals served to all families in need. This waiver needs to apply retroactively to any community meals served during March and April when schools used available resources to meet community need before any federal guidance was issued.
- Pay restaurants and schools to act as food kitchens for their community. With schools and restaurants closed, the dairy industry lost its major customer base: Half of the nation's cheese and two-thirds of American-produced butter are used by restaurants.<sup>18</sup> If those traditional pathways reopen to provide emergency food services to their communities, it would put Americans back to work and provide food to those who need it from people they trust.

### **4. Expand SNAP**

The average SNAP benefit per person per meal is \$1.29, which does not give at-risk Americans the flexibility to purchase healthy foods or purchase in bulk to prepare for a pandemic.<sup>19</sup> In fact, recent analysis found that SNAP does not cover the cost of meals for low-income individuals and families in 99% of US counties.<sup>20</sup> That's because the plan that determines the SNAP benefit size has not been revisited since 2006.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the coronavirus crisis and the advent of social distancing are incompatible with SNAP administration. EBT cards can

only be used at physical grocery stores, making online food purchases impossible. They can also only purchase specific food items, meaning other household items, such as soap or disinfectant are ineligible, despite being absolutely critical to promoting household safety and wellness during a pandemic. To expand SNAP, Congress must:

- Increase SNAP benefits by 15%, as the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and members of Congress have proposed until unemployment is back down to average 2019 levels. That would amount to about \$25 more per person per month, or just under \$100 per month in food assistance for a family of four.<sup>22</sup> It's critical to tie this benefit increase to an economic indicator, ensuring that access to food assistance isn't prematurely phased out while people are still hungry.
- Allow Americans to use their SNAP dollars online for grocery delivery. The 2014 farm bill created a pilot online SNAP program and, since then, over 15 states have been approved. Every state should utilize this pilot program and states should expand their state-approved retailers to include local options.<sup>23</sup>
- Allow SNAP dollars to be used on hot food, cleaning supplies, and hygiene products. During such a unique time, the federal government should do everything to give Americans more flexibility to survive this crisis. For example, Congressman Jimmy Panetta (D-CA) and Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) introduced legislation that would allow individuals to use SNAP dollars at participating restaurants to help families get hot, prepared food and support the restaurant industry.<sup>24</sup>

## **5. Establish a federal food guarantee for every child**

During the previous relief package, Congress created the Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), which gave families with children who receive free school lunches the equivalent benefit, about \$5.70 per day, through SNAP dollars.<sup>25</sup> That's an important provision, but unfortunately, there are eligible children whose parents aren't on SNAP. So, these families have a difficult time receiving those food dollars.<sup>26</sup> Further, only 22 states have started providing P-EBT benefits.<sup>27</sup> Congress should ensure that no child goes hungry by doing the following:

- Mandate that funding for food assistance is distributed within ten days. There are thousands of families that have yet to receive any food assistance during this crisis, and kids cannot wait months for meals.
- Increase the benefit allotment for each child. Schools benefit from bulk purchasing, so they can provide healthy meals for much cheaper. An individual family purchasing food cannot provide the same two healthy meals at only \$5.70 a day, causing parents to ration food or forgo other critical needs.<sup>28</sup>

- Build P-EBT into the food safety net permanently as an automatic stabilizer. This way, any time schools are closed unexpectedly, families won't be left hungry.
- Provide increased flexibilities to P-EBT, including allowing states to give families gift cards to grocery stores, operate grab-and-go food stations for a week's worth of meals, or deliver food directly to eligible family's homes.<sup>29</sup> This would allow states to respond more quickly, instead of trying to produce more EBT cards and implement a new program.

## **6. Create a federal food preparedness plan**

It is conceivable that, in the coming months, a second wave of COVID-19 could overlap with a natural disaster. In fact, a recent report warns that 23 states could see moderate to major flooding this spring and abnormally warm waters in the Gulf of Mexico are fueling concerns about an extreme hurricane season.<sup>30</sup> Usual disaster strategies—evacuation shelters, an influx of aid workers, and buffet-style food for the displaced—become impractical, and even dangerous, in providing food to Americans during COVID-19. Congress should act now by doing the following:

- Direct FEMA, USDA, and other relevant agencies to develop a national food preparedness plan to ensure we can respond to multiple emergencies at once and keep our country fed. For example, the plan should include how critical aid workers from multiple government agencies will be tested regularly to ensure they're not spreading COVID-19 during their response to a natural disaster.
- Prepare an emergency job recruiting and training program that can be deployed in a timely manner. According to the previous head of FEMA, Craig Fugate, "We already have sizable workforces idle in these communities. Unlike in 2017, when the three hurricanes hit and we were at the top of the economy... so getting emergency workers was...near impossible, today's a target-rich environment."<sup>31</sup> These trained workers can be used to safely deliver food to seniors and families impacted by natural disasters and limit the spread of COVID-19.

## **Conclusion**

More than 50 million families are going to struggle with food insecurity during this pandemic. The food safety net in America wasn't designed with a crisis of this scale in mind, and Congress needs to act to protect the most vulnerable among us, from children to people with disabilities to communities of color. SNAP has been a bedrock safety net program for decades. This disaster has demonstrated how out-of-date the program truly is. It's time to expand and modernize SNAP to ensure no American goes hungry in this crisis and move our safety net into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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