

SNAP/Farm Bill 2018 Legislative Priorities

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) ensures that families have food on their table and children have the nutrition they need to grow and thrive. SNAP offers the chance to succeed in life no matter where we start.

As Congress prepares to reauthorize the Farm Bill, Children's HealthWatch and the Center for Hunger-Free Communities recommend the following protections and improvements to SNAP policy based on both research and work with families with young children.

SNAP Structure

Congress must protect the existing structure of SNAP. The structure of SNAP is one of its key strengths, allowing it to respond economic downturns, when disasters strike or need increases. SNAP is one of our nation's only programs designed to rapidly respond to rising need making it a crucial support for many families and individuals when they fall on hard times. Any structural changes to the program would [harm](#) the people it serves, including low-income families, children, senior citizens, and people with disabilities.¹ Any changes to the structure that will mean cuts to benefits that will result in cuts to local communities because every \$1 spent on SNAP means \$1.72 in economic activity.

SNAP Calculation

Congress should increase the SNAP benefit by basing it on the calculation for the Low Cost Food Plan. According to the [Institute of Medicine](#), the current SNAP allotment fails to reflect the real cost of a healthy diet. Key to achieving this goal is using an updated and realistic market basket of foods by setting benefit amounts based on the cost of the USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans (the current market basket was last updated in 2006). Switching to the Low Cost Food Plan to drive the annual calculation of the maximum SNAP benefit [would raise the financial value of the benefit](#), putting a [healthy diet](#) within reach for families who receive SNAP.^{2,3,4}

Congress should improve the calculation of shelter costs. The current SNAP calculation limits the deduction families can take for their shelter costs leading to an inaccurate accounting of the support families need. By rethinking and potentially removing the cap on shelter costs the SNAP calculation would provide a [more accurate accounting of families' real expenses](#), especially in areas with high housing costs.⁵

Congress should create a more graduated and coordinated decline in benefits across programs. SNAP has a logical phase-down of benefits as income increases. Still, there is [evidence](#) that when people abruptly lose all SNAP benefits at the top end of income eligibility, they do not have enough time to adapt to new income realities and may report that they experience food insecurity despite higher wages. Congress should allow states to offer all households leaving SNAP for employment that pays sufficiently to end their program eligibility an appropriate extension of their SNAP benefits at the pre-existing level to help them navigate pay lags and adjust household food budgeting.

Retaining Broad Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE). BBCE provides states the ability to allow households to become eligible for SNAP because they qualify for cash or non-cash means tested benefits and enables states to confer SNAP eligibility to meet asset and income limits. This policy gives states the ability to address the needs of their residents. It has afforded access to SNAP for working families across the country as they seek to increase income and build assets while also having resources necessary to feed their children.

Congress should increase eligibility limits and remove asset tests. More than 80% of families with children who receive SNAP include adults who worked in the year prior to or after receiving SNAP. However, many low-income families still struggle to provide enough food for their families [even when employed](#) because, in some states,

employment puts them over the income limit for SNAP. SNAP calculations should encourage progress toward economic independence, such as savings for emergencies, by removing limits on savings (known as asset tests) and accounting for temporary income increases (e.g. holiday overtime or seasonal work).⁶

SNAP and People with Disabilities

Congress should allow families of children with special health care needs (SHCN) to qualify for the medical deduction even if they do not meet the strict disability criteria for SSI. Households participating in SNAP who have a family member receiving federal or state disability benefits are able to deduct the monthly cost of medical expenses over \$35 when calculating net income for SNAP benefits. Allowing families of children with SHCN whose health care needs are above average but do not rise to the level of disability benefit qualification to qualify for the medical deduction would increase their monthly benefit; a higher benefit would help [to offset some of the additional costs faced by families raising a child with SHCN](#).⁷

Heat and Eat

Congress should continue to allow states to streamline coordination between SNAP and energy assistance, known as “Heat and Eat”. Research shows energy assistance, like SNAP, improves the health of young children.⁸ Particularly in high energy cost seasons, families depend on assistance to afford utilities and food. Retaining heat and eat for the states currently participating in the program will continue to provide important supports for these families and creates more efficiency for state and local administrative offices.

SNAP and Active Military

Congress should enact legislation to exclude the Basic Allowance for Housing as income for the determination of SNAP eligibility and benefit levels for families who have an active duty service member. For [active military](#) families living off base or in privatized on-base housing, the Basic Allowance for Housing is counted as income in the determination of eligibility for SNAP and [may prevent or reduce eligibility for SNAP](#). However, the Basic Allowance for Housing is currently excluded as income for calculating income taxes and eligibility for other government programs, including WIC.^{9,10}

Administrative Workforce

Congress should mandate staff training and infrastructure improvements to improve SNAP processes. Although accessibility to participation in SNAP has improved, the relationship between front-line caseworkers and applicants could be more positive and effective. Front-line caseworkers are often a client’s first encounter with a system meant to help them; therefore, they have the best opportunity to provide effective and appropriate assistance. Training front-line staff in trauma-informed care and implementing trauma-informed approaches within Employment and Training programs will improve SNAP administrative processes and client experiences.

SNAP Recipients are Experts

Congress must learn from current SNAP recipients for SNAP to be optimally effective and efficient. In order to make effective changes in the program, members of Congress and their staff need to meet with and invite testimony from [people who participate in SNAP](#). Participants can provide accurate descriptions of what changes to the program would mean for them and their families in their everyday life.¹¹

Employment and Training Programs

Congress should encourage development and implementation of SNAP Employment and Training Programs that both provide opportunities for sustainable employment with adequate wages and are tailored for local labor market. While SNAP is not a work program, it does offer supports for many people searching for employment. By

coordinating efforts with the Department of Labor, SNAP Employment and Training Programs should be improved so people who chose to participate in the program are able to access stable employment.

***Children's HealthWatch** is a non-partisan network of pediatricians, public health researchers, and policy and child health experts committed to improving children's health in America. We interview families with infants and toddlers in urban hospitals across the country about the economic hardship they are facing, in an effort to help inform public policies and practices that can give all children equal opportunities for healthy, successful lives.*

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***The Center for Hunger-Free Communities** is a research, advocacy, and policy center that engages in multi-faceted research and action with the goals of developing innovative, empirically tested solutions to the challenges of hunger and economic security. The Center works in partnership with private and public organizations, researchers, and the community.*

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¹ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: [Block Granting SNAP would Abandon Decades Long Federal Commitment to Reducing Hunger](#)

² Institute of Medicine: [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Examining the Evidence to Define Benefit Adequacy](#)

³ Children's HealthWatch: [Treatment Plan for Hunger](#)

⁴ Children's HealthWatch: [The Real Cost of a Healthy Diet](#)

⁵ Federal Reserve Bank of Boston: [Cliff Effects and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#)

⁶ Children's HealthWatch: [Punishing Hard Work: The Unintended Consequences of Cutting SNAP Benefits](#)

⁷ Children's HealthWatch: [Nurturing Children: Solutions to Alleviate Hardships and Barriers for Families of Children with Special Health Care Needs](#)

⁸ Frank DA, Neault NB, Skalicky A, Cook JT, Levenson S, Meyers AF, Heeren T, Cutts DB, Casey PH, Black MM, Berkowitz C. Heat or Eat: The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program and Nutritional and Health Risks Among Children Less than 3 Years. *Pediatrics*. 2006;118;1293-1302

⁹ Public Health Nutrition: [Prevalence of food insecurity among military households with children 5 years of age and younger](#)

¹⁰ National Commission on Hunger: [Freedom from Hunger – An Achievable Goal for the United States of America](#)

¹¹ Witnesses to Hunger: [Ending Poverty and Hunger – Recommendations from Members of Witnesses to Hunger](#)