

April 10, 2013

The Honorable Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

As leaders in the fight against hunger in America, we are dismayed by the Congressional gridlock in Washington and are increasingly concerned about preservation of our nation's safety net. Therefore, we are turning to you to ask you to use your Executive Powers to address several issues of concern in order to move closer to your goal of eliminating childhood hunger in the United States by 2015.

Attached please find a Memorandum which outlines a variety of steps that your Administration could take to strengthen federal nutrition programs. None of these proposed actions requires Congressional action.

In addition, we hope that you will continue to fight against harmful cuts to our nation's safety net and advocate for restoration of SNAP benefits which are due to expire on November 1, 2013.

Finally, though it would require legislation, we hope that as part of immigration reform, you will consider including a provision to reduce the current five year restriction on immigrant access to SNAP for all qualified immigrants including adults who are legal permanent residents, battered immigrants and humanitarian parolee immigrants.

All signers of this letter are from the northeast section of the country. The suggestions were prepared with the help of NERAHN, the Northeast Regional Anti-Hunger Network, representing the six New England States and New York.

We gratefully appreciate your attention to these matters.

Inquiries about these recommendations can be sent to:

Connie Rizoli
Public Policy Director
Project Bread – The Walk for Hunger
145 Border St.
East Boston, MA 02128-1903
connie_rizoli@projectbread.org
617-239-2508

Sincerely,

The NERAHN Coalition

Connecticut

Lucy P. Nolan
End Hunger Connecticut!
Hartford, CT

James P. Horan
Connecticut Association for Human Services
Hartford, CT

Nancy L. Carrington
Connecticut Food Bank
East Haven, CT

Maine

Donna Yellen
Preble Street Maine Hunger Initiative
Portland, ME

Massachusetts

Ellen Parker
Project Bread – The Walk for Hunger
Boston, MA

Justin Pasquariello
Children's HealthWatch
Boston, MA

Betsy Comstock
Facing Hunger in America
Concord, MA

Andrew Morehouse
The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts
Hatfield, MA

Patricia Baker
Massachusetts Law Reform Institute
Boston, MA

Julie LaFontaine
The Open Door
Gloucester, MA

New Hampshire

Erika Argersinger
Children's Alliance of NH
Concord, NH

Gale Hennessy
New Hampshire Community Action Association
Manchester, NH

Gale Hennessy
Southern New Hampshire Services, Inc.
Manchester, NH

New York

Mark Dunlea
Hunger Action Network of NYS
New York, NY

Linda Bopp
Hunger Solutions New York
Albany, NY

Joel Berg
New York City Coalition Against Hunger
New York, NY

Margarette Purvis
Food Bank For New York City
New York, NY

Paule Pachter
Long Island Cares, Inc.—The Harry Chapin Food Bank
Hauppauge, NY

Nicole Doniger
Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty
New York, NY

Stewart Desmond
West Side Campaign Against Hunger
New York, NY

Rhode Island

Andrew R. Schiff

Rhode Island Community Food Bank

Providence, RI

Dr. Kathleen Gorman

URI Feinstein Center for a Hunger Free America

Kingston, RI

Vermont

Marissa Parisi

Hunger Free Vermont

South Burlington, VT

John Sayles

Vermont Foodbank

Barre, VT

MEMORANDUM

TO: President Barack Obama
FROM: The Northeast Regional Anti-hunger Coalition
RE: Proposed Executive Action to Strengthen Federal Nutrition Programs
DATE: April 10, 2013

OVERVIEW

Below please find several recommendations for strengthening a variety of federal nutrition programs. All of these actions can be taken without any Congressional action. The list has been compiled with input from over fifty anti-hunger advocates in the six New England states and New York. In these tough economic times, we encourage you to take a strong leadership role in advocating for the hungry in America.

Improving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

1. Urge the Secretary of the USDA to use his authority to allow the Thrifty Food Plan to be redefined and re-budgeted as an adequate plan with a higher SNAP allotment amount.

The Thrifty Food Plan should include practical lists of foods, provide the variety called for in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and recognize that not all families have adequate facilities and time for food preparation. Many SNAP families currently report running out of benefits the second or third week of the month, partly due to the fact that the SNAP benefit allotment is based on the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), which is outdated, impractical and inadequate. A recent Institute of Medicine report¹ comprehensively reviewed the research on the TFP and found that it includes impractical lists of foods, lacks the variety called for by the USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans, underestimates food waste, costs more than the allotment in much of the country, and unrealistically assumes too many factors, such as adequate cooking facilities and time for food preparation, food availability and affordability, and adequate, affordable transportation. Half of all American children will receive SNAP at some point during childhood; this underscores how crucial SNAP benefit adequacy is to the health and well-being of the nation.

2. Urge USDA to allow states options that reduce churn, such as relying on available databases to confirm key eligibility factors, waiving interviews at recertification and extending certification periods.

Increasingly more states focus on data collection of payment accuracy and initial application processing timeliness, because those are the two key indicators that USDA uses to measure state performance on administration of the program. However, many SNAP households prematurely lose benefits at recertification for “procedural” reasons, such as when households send in verifications after missing a SNAP deadline as well as when the state agency loses the

¹ “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Examining the Evidence to Define Benefit Adequacy.” *Institute of Medicine*. January 2013. http://www.iom.edu/~media/Files/Report%20Files/2013/SNAP/SNAP_RB.pdf

verifications due to inadequate filing systems or lack of document imaging. Further, state agencies often terminate SNAP benefits when they do not get a verification of certain eligibility factors that the state could actually confirm through reliable databases, but the state instead relies on paper documentation. Since many of these low-income households remain income eligible, they often reapply within 30 to 90 days after losing benefits. This “on and off” phenomenon creates a “churn” of applications in the system, resulting in more work for state agencies, contributing to caseworker overload, and straining agency resources. Equally important, interruption in SNAP benefits creates substantial stress for applicants who must go without food benefits while they reapply.

Specifically, we encourage the Administration to direct USDA to give the “churn factor” serious consideration by requiring states to collect reapplication data (as has been done proactively by some states), and working with states to implement improvements that would decrease churn including extending certification, approving more tele-claim recertification pilots, and approving more state waivers of interview at recertification. We also encourage the Administration to direct USDA to adopt policies that encourage states to use reliable data sources (for example, unearned income databases) for verification of key eligibility factors over paper documentation. These proposals would protect vulnerable families from falling off benefits and decrease administrative costs for state agencies.

3. Urge USDA to establish policies that ensure SNAP households receive all income deductions for which they are eligible.

USDA’s SNAP characteristics data confirms that most households woefully underclaim key income deductions that would more accurately reflect the household’s available income and could increase their SNAP benefit including dependent care, all homeownership costs and medical expenses. Underutilization of income deductions stems from: SNAP application forms that fail to describe deductions and/or elicit client information about the scope of each deduction; challenges clients and state agencies face in securing third-party documentation; and federal waivers that diminish the fiscal penalty on states that fail to screen for or assist households with establishing deductions – thus reducing incentives for payment accuracy.

We urge the Administration to direct USDA to work with states to improve on-line and paper forms to elicit more complete information on income deductions, allow waivers that enable states to accept self-declaration of certain out-of-pocket medical expenses that are difficult to verify, and decline waivers of underpayments errors for states with low utilization of deductions.

4. Urge USDA to maximize access to SNAP benefits for seniors by enforcing its agreement with the Social Security Administration (SSA) that requires the SSA to provide SNAP application assistance to Social Security applicants.

Under federal SNAP law, SSA is required to inform and directly assist SSI and Social Security applicants and recipients with the filing of a simplified SNAP application at Social Security district offices. Currently, SSA has a Memorandum of Understanding with USDA to provide this service and USDA reports that it spends between \$12M to \$20M annually to reimburse SSA for these activities. We are concerned that SSA is not uniformly following through on its obligation

to provide SNAP information and application assistance to SSI individuals and not working with states who wish to build Combined Application Projects.

Specifically, we urge the Administration to direct USDA to take steps that ensure SSA meets its legal obligations, including collecting data from SSA showing the number of SSI and Social Security recipients state-by-state that are helped with applying for SNAP. We urge the Administration to direct USDA and SSA to develop simplified methods to transmit electronic information to state agencies on SSI individuals seeking to apply for SNAP. Finally, we urge the Administration to support SNAP outreach initiatives to reach low-income Social Security recipients through data-matching of Social Security recipients enrolled in Medicare Savings Plans and the Low Income Subsidy.

5. Urge USDA to incentivize SNAP outreach projects targeted to newly unemployed households and households on the cusp of loss of their Unemployment Insurance.

Newly unemployed families and individuals are the least familiar with the SNAP program and the most likely to delay in accessing nutrition benefits, to the detriment of their families' and their own health and well-being. Loss of Unemployment Insurance (UI) exacerbates the household's financial instability, especially for families with children and older workers who struggle to get back into the workforce. Pennsylvania and Nevada engage in data exchanges to identify UI claimants on the cusp of loss of their UI, and then assist them in enrolling in SNAP. The Administration should direct USDA to promote data-sharing models both for UI exhaustees, and to identify UI claimants with low benefit rates and encourage them to apply for SNAP before their UI runs out. USDA could also consider models that allow UI claimants to file SNAP applications at the same time as their UI claim and allow states to utilize common eligibility information in making a determination (e.g. identity, SSN, immigrant status, residence) - taking into consideration the different household configurations between these two programs.

6. Urge USDA to make administrative adjustments to facilitate the development of sustainable SNAP-based Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model.

Numerous CSA pilots encounter challenges regarding logistics, financial sustainability, nutrition education, payments and processing, EBT equipment, and connectivity. USDA should ease the 14 day rule to allow SNAP recipients to participate within a CSA's normal business model. This would remove the financial burden from the farmer and lift the dependence on annual grant funding to subsidize CSA operations. In addition the FNS application process for farms to accept SNAP should be eased. The current FNS policies are designed for traditional retail stores and do not include CSAs as a category/FNS retailer store type.

USDA should also encourage FNS to expand its policies governing the administration of funding for EBT equipment to include non-profits and CSAs. It should also expand funding beyond landline terminals to enable connectivity when electrical and phone lines are not available.

Improving Child Nutrition

1. Urge USDA to permanently suspend the protein and grain portion size maximums in school lunches

In working to implement the new meal patterns, school food service personnel have discovered that under the new protein and grain maximums, an elementary student cannot choose a sandwich each day of the week, no matter how healthy and filled with vegetables, because serving two slices of bread each day would put this student over the weekly grain limit. We feel that this is an excessive constraint on the effort of school food service personnel to make sure every child eats lunch each day. USDA should however, retain the weekly calorie ranges currently in effect in the NSLP of the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010. The calorie ranges and limits on sodium and fats are already ensuring a healthier meal with an emphasis on fruits and vegetables.

2. Urge USDA to streamline the application for child care centers to participate in Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

If 25 percent or more of the children in a for-profit child care center qualify for free or reduced price meals in any given month, that child care center should be allowed to run the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) for an entire year before having to re-qualify. The small size of rural child care centers often means that the difference between a center being eligible or ineligible to participate in CACFP could be only a few children. Enrollment in child care centers fluctuates often, making eligibility month-to-month unpredictable. The requirement that centers must meet the 25 percent threshold every month creates an administrative burden for child care providers, and means that some months, the center will not be able to take advantage of CACFP and the reimbursements and resources the program offers.

3. Urge USDA to enable Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) meal sites to have more flexibility about location

USDA Food and Nutrition Service should remove the requirement for congregate meals at all SFSP mobile meal sites. These innovative summer meals programs, which operate out of book mobiles, school busses, and vans, could reach many more low income children in isolated areas if they could make more stops to distribute meals without having to gather a group of children together to “congregate” while they ate their meals. Lack of transportation to congregate meal sites is an immense challenge for Summer Food Service Programs, especially in rural areas. Small populations also mean fewer summer activity programs that could double as meal sites are operating in rural states. Waiving the congregate meal requirement would give Summer Food sponsors the flexibility they need to reach many more children in need during the summer months.

4. Enable USDA to use new ways to determine free/reduced price eligibility

USDA Food and Nutrition Service should allow states (perhaps as part of a pilot project) to use tax income data or Census tract data as the means of determining the percentage of free/reduced price eligible children in school/program attendance areas, instead of requiring applications with personal income information from individual families. We believe that reducing the stigma of requiring individual families to apply would significantly increase the participation of low-income children in school meal programs. Relieving school meal programs of the burden of collecting and managing individual applications would also increase efficiencies and reduce costs in school meal programs, allowing school food service staff to focus on preparing healthy meals for students, rather than running application campaigns each year—campaigns that inevitably miss many children suffering from hunger and malnutrition.