

Food Access, Nutrition, and Public Health

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The Promise of a New Farm Bill

If it seems like everyone is talking about the farm bill, there are good reasons. New farm bills are proposed, debated, and passed once every five years, sometimes longer, and they shape virtually every aspect of our food and agricultural systems. Many programs authorized by the most recent farm bill, the Agricultural Act of 2014, will expire in September 2018. For this reason, and despite everything else competing for attention on Capitol Hill, Congress is working to pass a new farm bill this year.

The farm bill grew out of Depression-era policies designed to keep farmers out of bankruptcy, ensure a reliable food supply, and protect against soil loss in the wake of the Dust Bowl.

Today, farm bills continue to evolve the body of laws that authorize and fund a broad array of food and agriculture programs. The 2014 Farm Bill included twelve separate titles covering a wide variety of issues including Depression-era carryovers like commodities, conservation, and crop insurance programs, the country's largest nutrition safety net program, and new support for expanding local food and biofuel markets.

With all this and more combined into one piece of legislation, even the most passionate supporters of farmers, eaters, and the environment struggle to make sense of how the pieces fit together. Even though most Americans agree on basic goals such as a safe and nutritious food supply, an honest living for farmers, a healthy environment, and a guarantee against hunger, the legislation itself is so complex and specialized that it can be hard to know where to begin. For most Americans, there is a gulf between caring about these goals and understanding how to champion solutions through the farm bill.

TITLES OF THE 2014 FARM BILL

- I. Commodities
- II. Conservation
- III. Trade
- IV. Nutrition
- V. Credit
- VI. Rural Development
- VII. Research and Extension
- VIII. Forestry
- IX. Energy
- X. Horticulture and Specialty Crops
- XI. Crop Insurance
- XII. Miscellaneous

Click to learn more about each title in FBLE's background library.



The Farm Bill Law Enterprise

The Farm Bill Law Enterprise (FBLE) helps bridge this gulf between public goals and policy solutions. FBLE is a national partnership of law school programs working toward a better farm bill that reflects the long-term needs of our society. Our members' expertise in the laws and policies of food, agriculture, public health, and the environment make it possible to cut across special interest and partisan boundaries. Beyond our diverse research backgrounds, our work is driven by our shared beliefs that the farm bill should advance economic opportunity and stability, public health and nutrition, public resources stewardship, and principles of fair access and equal protection.

This publication belongs to a collection of reports based on the collaborative research of FBLE members.

- ▶ **Diversified Agricultural Economies** addresses the barriers facing small, medium-scale, diversified, beginning, female, and minority farmers and ranchers. It sets goals and makes recommendations to create opportunities for these producers by improving access to markets, insurance, credit, and land.
- ▶ **Food Access, Nutrition, and Public Health** focuses on the farm bill's nutrition safety net for low-income families, the elderly, people living with disabilities, and unemployed Americans. It sets goals and makes recommendations to improve food access, nutrition, public health, infrastructure, and economic development.
- ▶ **Productivity and Risk Management** focuses on the farm bill's commodities, conservation and crop insurance programs that govern the complex interactions between large-scale production agriculture, the risks presented by both weather and market volatility, and natural resources protection. It sets goals and makes recommendations to better align production with the stewardship of resources like water, the health and productive capacity of soils, and the vitality of rural communities.

Writing a new farm bill is a momentous opportunity, but much also depends on how the law gets implemented.

Implementation depends on the agency rulemaking process, Congress's budgeting and annual appropriations, and the decisions and priorities made by USDA leadership. FBLE will monitor implementation of the new farm bill and keep readers informed on our website, FarmBillLaw.org. The website contains a wealth of resources, including background materials that go in depth on every title of the farm bill, tools for tracking the farm bill's progress through Congress, and information on getting involved in the legislative process. Finally, FBLE's blog is a great place to get timely and trenchant analysis from FBLE's members.

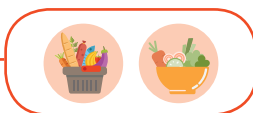


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In the United States—the world’s leading food producing country—15.6 million households experience food insecurity. The farm bill provides a nutrition safety net for low-income families, the elderly, people living with disabilities, and unemployed Americans. Programs in the 2014 Farm Bill’s Nutrition Title provide money for households to buy food, money for charitable food organizations and tribes to distribute food, nutrition education, and support for healthy foods and food access. They include, among others, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI), Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP), The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP). Taken together, the Nutrition Title programs account for an estimated 80 percent of the 2014 Farm Bill’s spending, and SNAP is the largest of these programs.

SNAP is the nation’s largest and most important anti-hunger food assistance program. It is the nation’s “first line of defense” against food insecurity, serves as the foundation of America’s nutrition safety net, and aims to improve food

access by providing monthly cash benefits via a debit card that can only be spent on food. Although SNAP is often perceived as a program primarily benefitting urban populations, the program is just as important for rural populations. Rural communities face unique health and development issues. In addition to the nutrition and food access challenges faced by the rest of the country, rural communities have less access to health networks and healthcare providers, and people living in these communities have greater rates of chronic diseases. Rural areas also have higher proportions of their households with senior and child residents receiving SNAP than does the nation as a whole.

By improving food access, nutrition, public health, infrastructure, and economic development, the farm bill is a critical safety-net for Americans across the country. This report focuses on goals and recommendations, including specific legislative changes, tailored to advancing these objectives within the next farm bill. The recommendations in this report seek to strengthen the farm bill’s nutrition and rural development programs to continue improving the food security and health of the country’s



most vulnerable populations. The full report is part of a series. When considered in total, the reports offer a wide-ranging suite of ideas for the future of American agriculture and American eating. Other reports in the series address Diversified Agricultural Economies, and Productivity and Risk Management. Given its expansive breadth, the farm bill offers a

unique opportunity to address the myriad challenges facing low-income households, rural communities, and agricultural producers. These challenges may seem diffuse, but are entwined through the complex workings of our food and agriculture system. This report, like the others in this series, demonstrates how the farm bill can improve the lives of all Americans.

Goal I



Protect and strengthen SNAP as our nation's most vital and successful nutrition assistance program

The next farm bill provides opportunities for Congress and the USDA to continue improving food security, food access, nutrition, and public health outcomes for millions of people across the United States, and also to stimulate local economies. An optimal SNAP program would enroll 100% of SNAP-eligible Americans, reduce food insecurity, and support healthy diets and rural communities. SNAP is of critical importance to millions of Americans, has a proven track record as an economic safety net providing crucial relief to households in times of need, and plays an important role strengthening local economies. Even so, the program faces opposition, including challenges from members of Congress and the current administration. The next farm bill should protect and strengthen food assistance programs to help achieve an optimal SNAP program that is responsive to

changing economic climates and ensures the country's most vulnerable populations have access to nutritious food, while providing important stimulus for local economies, especially in rural areas.



Key SNAP Recommendations for the Next farm bill

Maintain SNAP's current structure and ability to adapt to changes in economic conditions

SNAP is successful in part because of its quick responsiveness to real-time need. In fact, despite its expansive scope, SNAP is one of the most responsive federal aid programs due to the fact that it allows enrollment and benefits levels to change quickly as a household's needs change. If a household experiences an unexpected decrease in income that meets SNAP thresholds, it becomes automatically eligible for SNAP benefits. Under the current entitlement structure, eligible individuals typically receive benefits within 30 days of applying and, in emergencies, can receive benefits within 7 days. Particularly for the millions who work in low-wage, high turnover jobs, SNAP serves as a crucial buffer during periods of widespread underemployment or unemployment. For SNAP to continue its success in providing food assistance for those in need, it is imperative that it retain its ability to respond to economic changes at both the individual and the national level. In the next farm bill, Congress can help do so by maintaining the current funding structure and administration of SNAP and by reauthorizing the program as an entitlement.



Expand SNAP to address food insecurity and revitalize local economies

Although SNAP has helped reduce severe food insecurity in the United States, the amount of benefits are still insufficient for low-income families to afford an adequate, nutritious diet, even when taking into account that SNAP benefits are intended to be a contribution toward a household's food costs, but not to cover the costs entirely. On average, SNAP households receive \$253 per month and the average SNAP benefit per person is about \$125 per month, or about \$1.40 per meal. Recent studies show that healthier food is more expensive than unhealthier food and estimate that healthier food costs about \$1.50 more per day. This price discrepancy burdens poor households, placing them at greater risk of consuming unhealthier diets. SNAP claims to address this issue by tying benefits to the cost of the USDA's Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), a diet plan that purports to reflect the minimal cost of adequate nutrition, but is

known to under-estimate this cost. Increasing SNAP benefits is an effective way to alleviate food insecurity and represents an efficient use of federal dollars that stimulates local economies. SNAP dollars go directly back into local economies, with every \$1 of SNAP benefits generating approximately \$1.73 of economic activity. Given SNAP's effectiveness and efficiency, Congress should allocate additional funding to increase SNAP benefits to better help alleviate food insecurity, increase food expenditures, and improve diet quality among low-income Americans, while also injecting more money into local economies in need.

Additional SNAP Recommendations

- Improve SNAP Access and Efficiency through Technology
- Remove Ineffective Barriers to Food Access that Impose High Administrative Burdens

Goal II



Improve public health and increase access to healthy, nutritious foods, especially for vulnerable populations and rural communities

Diet is the leading contributor to premature

death in the United States and diet-related diseases are extremely expensive to treat. According to multiple recent studies, the four leading diet-related diseases—diabetes, cancer, coronary heart disease and obesity—carry annual costs of over \$850 billion collectively. Higher fruit and vegetable consumption is significantly associated with decreased all-cause mortality and cardiovascular mortality, and possibly also with reduced cancer mortality. It is also associated with decreased risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and several types of cancer.

However, studies have shown that healthier diets are more expensive, which contributes to the fact that many low-income households spend their limited resources on energy-dense foods that are low in nutrients. At the same time, individuals in lower socioeconomic groups are disproportionately burdened when it comes to diet and diet-related diseases. They experience



the highest rates of obesity and non-communicable disease and the lowest rates of fruit and vegetable consumption. Low-income individuals facing food insecurity also experience a wide range of negative health consequences, including elevated risks of diabetes, depression, pregnancy complications, and chronic disease.

Against this backdrop of the exceptional costs of poor diet and its disproportional effect on low-income populations and communities of color, the next farm bill presents a unique opportunity to address diet-related health challenges facing millions of households. By integrating a health orientation into traditional food access programs, the next farm bill can support initiatives that improve both food security and long-term health outcomes for participants.

Top Public Health and Food Access Recommendations for the Next Farm Bill

Strengthen food assistance programs that promote healthy choices among SNAP participants

While a major goal of SNAP is to increase participants' food security, the USDA also envisions the program as a tool to promote healthy diets among SNAP recipients. To that end, SNAP includes a number of programs that help low-income households not only have access to food, but also have better opportunities to purchase nutritious foods. The Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) Grant program funds projects that aim to increase SNAP recipients' purchases of fruits and vegetables. It focuses on point-of-purchase incentives to encourage nutritious food purchases and supports new technologies for SNAP dollar redemption programs. The 2014 Farm Bill established FINI to support programs that incentivize SNAP participants to increase their fruit and vegetable consumption. FINI awards funds to local, state, and national organizations to run projects that allocate grants to retailers to provide SNAP recipients with additional benefits when they spend their SNAP dollars on fruits and vegetables. The Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP)

awards grants to states to provide vouchers for low-income seniors to purchase eligible foods at farmers' markets, roadside stands, and CSAs. The target population includes individuals over the age of sixty with household incomes less than 185 percent of the federal poverty guidelines—or yearly income of \$21,978 for an individual. Low-income seniors are especially vulnerable to poor nutrition and diet-related diseases. By providing these vouchers, SFMNP aims to improve the nutritional status of this vulnerable population.

Congress should use the next farm bill as an opportunity to strengthen both FINI and SFMNP, two successful programs in the 2014 Farm Bill that promote healthy choices among vulnerable low-income populations. By devoting additional resources to these programs, Congress can better ensure that low-income households receive food assistance that helps improve nutrition and long-term health outcomes.

Improve health outcomes of low-income individuals living with serious diseases by establishing a Food Is Medicine pilot

Increasing evidence demonstrates that proper nutrition not only helps prevent a number of diseases, but is an essential part of treatment and management of serious illness. Chronically ill people living in low-income households face extreme challenges accessing foods recommended by health professionals. These medical challenges are compounded when the household is food insecure, as there is an added urgency to procure food that is not merely adequate for satiety, but necessary to help ill individuals with recovery.

Medically appropriate food, also known as medically-tailored food or therapeutic food, is defined as meals or food packages designed by a Registered Dietitian or other nutrition professional to be appropriate for someone with one or more specific health conditions and special health-related dietary needs. The provision of medically appropriate meals or food packages has been shown in small studies to be effective at improving clinical outcomes, reducing



the number and length of hospitalizations, and affecting lifestyle behaviors such as medication adherence and substance use. Congress should establish a Food is Medicine Pilot in the next farm bill to connect individuals to nutritious food that is medically appropriate for their health conditions. Congress should provide funding to community-based nutrition resource organizations to provide medically-appropriate meals or food packages to low-income people living with serious health conditions. To assess the Food is Medicine Pilot's impact and to inform future discussions on its expansion and improvement, the pilot should also rigorously

evaluate the impact of providing therapeutic nutrition on these individuals' health outcomes and healthcare costs. The Food is Medicine Pilot program is an opportunity to reduce healthcare costs while improving health outcomes for low-income individuals living with very complex and costly diseases.

Additional Public Health Recommendations

- Identify and Scale Successful SNAP-Ed Programs
- Improve Rural Public Health



**Farm Bill Titles
Covered in This Report:**

- **Nutrition (IV)**
- **Rural Development (VI)**

This report explores existing farm bill programs that support food access, nutrition, and public health, particularly for the nation's most vulnerable populations. It focuses on Title IV (the Nutrition Title) and Title VI (the Rural Development title), and proposes recommendations to preserve the structural integrity of nutrition and rural development programs while also improving the programs to increase access to nutritious foods and improve public health outcomes. The next farm bill offers Congress the opportunity to provide those most in need with access to basic and fundamental nutritional resources and economic opportunities. Part I recommends that Congress protect and strengthen the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—our country's most vital nutrition safety net. Part II identifies opportunities to improve public health and increase access to healthy, nutritious foods, especially for vulnerable populations and rural communities.

Introduction



The farm bill, under its expansive umbrella, has the potential to address challenges that seem diffuse but are entwined through the complex workings of our food and agriculture system. These challenges affect the daily lives of every individual. Food insecurity still plagues 41 million Americans almost a decade after the Great Recession.¹ Multiple diet-related diseases persist at epidemic proportions, driven at least in part by inaccessibility of health-promoting food options. These and similar challenges are addressed in this report. Meanwhile, the average American farmer nears 60 years old,

and the new generation who would take their place must first overcome capital constraints and access market channels to supply the fresh, affordable and sustainably-raised products that customers demand. These and other challenges faced by small, beginning, female, and minority producers are addressed in a companion report, *Diversified Agricultural Economies*. A distinct set of challenges emerges from the commodity segment of the agricultural sector, which produces most of the nation's agricultural products, but whose bountiful productivity can mask persistent challenges to natural resources



stewardship and the vitality of rural communities. To tackle these challenges, a companion report, *Productivity and Risk Management* seeks a better return on the public's investment in the farm bill's commodities, conservation, and crop insurance programs.

Food Insecurity in the United States

The U.S. is the largest and most efficient producer of food in the world,² with large and streamlined food processing facilities, distribution channels, and consumer markets.³ Advances in technology have produced faster germinating seeds, higher crop yields, and more efficient harvests.⁴ The development of robots, temperature and moisture sensors, aerial imaging via satellites and drones, and GPS technology in agriculture has allowed farmers to better understand and adapt to changes in weather and growing conditions.⁵ With these advanced tools, the U.S. has higher productivity than ever before.

Yet, even remarkable technology and bountiful production do not guarantee that all Americans have enough to eat or even that we grow what Americans need to achieve a balanced diet. At present, 15.6 million households in the U.S.—comprising about 12.3 percent of the U.S. population⁶—experience food insecurity.⁷ Food insecurity is defined as a “household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.”⁸ At first glance, it may seem difficult to understand how such persistent food insecurity can exist alongside abundant food production. For example, it may seem counterintuitive that food insecurity rates are often high in rural communities where most food is produced.⁹ To take another counterintuitive example, in the late 1990s, the general economy improved according to traditional metrics, but requests for emergency food assistance rose nationwide.¹⁰ This phenomenon illustrates how single indicators, such as household income, national economic climate, or national food

production levels, do not alone determine the cause or prevalence of food insecurity.¹¹ Rather, food security is a structural problem. It is determined by a combination of complex factors such as employment, education, income, household size, individual experiences, regional demographics, economic and physical access to food, and access to food assistance programs.¹² Identifying effective solutions to food insecurity is difficult, especially because each of these factors is addressed via different legislative tools. For instance, food access and nutrition are supported by farm bill programs and other legislation,¹³ while labor, employment, and the economy are regulated elsewhere.¹⁴

A. The Costs of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity disproportionately affects certain groups, including low-income households, black and Hispanic households, households headed by a single parent, and all households with children.¹⁵ In addition, households in rural areas are disproportionately affected—followed closely by households in major metropolitan areas—compared to those in suburban areas or metropolitan areas outside principal cities.¹⁶

It is not only individuals and households that bear the costs of food insecurity. Food insecurity also significantly impacts society as a whole. Multiple recent studies have estimated that domestic food insecurity costs the U.S. over \$160 billion annually—an estimate which does not include the cost of food assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).¹⁷ These studies considered a combination of factors such as lost economic productivity per year, rising costs of poor education outcomes linked to lack of nutrition, avoidable healthcare costs, and the cost of charity to keep families fed.¹⁸

It is critical to understand the demographics of food insecurity in order to formulate solutions. These data help illustrate the high costs of food insecurity at both the national and at the household level. They shed light on food



insecurity's long-lasting and ripple effects and its disproportionate impact on poor households, households of color, households with children, and rural and major urban households. They illustrate the often unconsidered macro-level societal costs associated with food insecurity, further underscoring the need to address this critical issue.

B. History of Food Assistance and the Farm Bill

Farm and food assistance programs were first linked in the Great Depression as a means to solve independent but related problems.¹⁹ Persistently low prices and the devastation wreaked by the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression bankrupted many farmers, while at the same time job losses in the cities led to widespread food insecurity and the need for emergency food support.²⁰ For the first time, in the 20th century, the issue of food insecurity emerged as a social concern.²¹ As widespread hunger gripped communities across the nation during the Great Depression, it came to the forefront of national politics.²² As a result, the federal government took action to address food insecurity for the first time.²³

A food stamp program included in the Agricultural Adjustment Act, known today as the first farm bill, absorbed commodity surpluses as a way to stabilize farm prices while addressing widespread food insecurity.²⁴ The program allowed needy American families to “buy” stamps worth more than their purchase price, directing the surplus food to needy American families.²⁵ The program ended after World War II, but Congress resurrected a food stamps program in the early 1960s as part of the War on Poverty.²⁶ Food stamps as we know them today—which have since been renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—date to 1977 and have been part of the farm bill since that time.²⁷ This food assistance program has grown in size and scope since its reintroduction. In 2017, SNAP provided \$63.7 billion in benefits to over 42 million people.²⁸

Reauthorized approximately every five years, the farm bill provides a nutrition safety net for low-income families, the elderly, people living with disabilities, and unemployed Americans. The 2014 Farm Bill's Nutrition Title is divided into three subtitles covering SNAP, Commodity Distribution Programs, and Miscellaneous programs. Programs in the Nutrition Title provide money for households to buy food, money for charitable food organizations and tribes to distribute food, nutrition education, and support for healthy foods and food access. They include, among others:

- SNAP,
- Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI),
- Nutrition Programs,
- The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP),
- Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR),
- Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP),
- Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP),
- Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI), and
- Food and Agriculture Service Learning Program.²⁹

Some of these programs, such as FDPIR and TEFAP, provide food assistance to low-income populations. Other programs, such as SFMNP, FFVP, and FINI aim to increase access to healthy foods like fruits and vegetables. Taken together, the Nutrition Title programs account for an estimated 80 percent of the 2014 Farm Bill's spending, and SNAP is the largest of these programs.³⁰

C. SNAP

SNAP is the nation's largest and most important anti-hunger food assistance program.³¹ It is the nation's “first line of defense” against food insecurity and serves as the foundation of America's nutrition safety net.³² SNAP aims to address food insecurity and improve food access by increasing the food purchasing power of



low-income households. It does so by providing monthly cash benefits via a debit card that can only be spent on food. In addition to reducing food insecurity, SNAP also aims to help improve diet quality and nutrition of SNAP participants. This is the intent of programs such as SNAP Nutrition Education (SNAP-Ed), FINI, and SFMNP.³³

SNAP benefits are meant to be supplementary, not to cover a household's entire monthly food budget. To qualify for SNAP, applicants must meet the eligibility and income requirements tied to the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) and mandated by Congress.³⁴ Under federal rules in Fiscal Year 2018, to qualify for SNAP benefits, a three-person household must have a gross monthly income at or below 130 percent of the poverty line (about \$26,600 a year), its net monthly income must be less than or equal to the poverty line (about \$20,400), and its assets must not exceed \$2,250 for households without an elderly or disabled member and \$3,500 for those with an elderly or disabled member.³⁵ Childless adults who are not disabled can receive only three months of benefits, unless they work at least 20 hours per week or participate in a qualifying workfare or job training program.³⁶ States may seek temporary waivers from this time limit for areas with high unemployment.³⁷

SNAP participation follows poverty patterns in America. As poverty increases, SNAP eligibility and participation increase. SNAP has been especially important in recent years, as participation rose from 2006 (26 million individuals) to its peak levels in 2012 (nearly 47 million) following the Great Recession.³⁸ As poverty decreases, reliance on SNAP decreases as well.³⁹ Currently, 42 million Americans—or 13 percent of the population—depend on SNAP benefits to purchase food each month.⁴⁰ About 44 percent of SNAP recipients are children,⁴¹ and in about 60 percent of SNAP households with an able-bodied adult, at least one household member is employed in the months they receive SNAP benefits.⁴²

Despite the program's use by children, the elderly and working adults, opposition to SNAP based in myths has persisted. Some of the opposition to SNAP and similar programs stems from unrepresentative anecdotes about over-enrollment and abuses in the current program (such as stories of individual SNAP recipients using benefits to buy luxury food items).⁴³ Others take issue with the current system's administration by presenting misleading accounts of widespread fraud.⁴⁴ Such stories paint SNAP and other food assistance programs as inefficient, fraudulent, or riddled with free-riders abusing the program. More recently, 42 states were caught falsifying their SNAP error rates to win SNAP bonus funds.⁴⁵ In that case, it was state administrators—and not recipients—causing the problem.

The reality is that SNAP households and non-SNAP households purchase similar foods, spending about 40 cents of every food expenditure dollar on basic items such as meat, fruits, vegetables, milk, eggs, and bread, another 40 cents on a variety of foods such as cereal, prepared foods, dairy, rice, and beans, and the remaining 20 cents on sugar-sweetened beverages, desserts, salty snacks, candy, and sugar.⁴⁶ In addition, SNAP fraud only affects approximately 1.3 percent of total disbursed benefits.⁴⁷ Of course, this figure still represents a high number in absolute terms, and there is always room for improving administrative efficiencies to speed up application requests, improve case-tracking, and alleviate problems with disbursements, but it is inaccurate to paint SNAP as an inefficient and fraud-ridden program.⁴⁸

In fact, SNAP is an effective and efficient program.

Not only does SNAP benefit individual households and the broader economy by helping families get back on track during tough economic times, it also serves as an economic multiplier. SNAP dollars go directly back into local economies, with every \$1 of SNAP benefits generating approximately \$1.73 of economic activity.⁴⁹ Researchers estimate that each \$1



billion increase in SNAP benefits creates or maintains 18,000 full-time jobs, including 3,000 farm jobs.⁵⁰

These are impressive figures, but SNAP is more than numbers and figures. The program intimately impacts Americans' daily lives. Bryan Parker from Oklahoma is one of the 42 million Americans who benefits from SNAP. Parker is a hard-working 51-year-old veteran. In his testimony before the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee in September 2017,⁵¹ Parker explained that the stability he experienced for most of his life was abruptly disturbed when he lost his job.⁵² Although he continued applying for a new position, the loss of his job and inability to get a new one caused Parker to develop anxiety and depression.⁵³ He tried to maintain his life without the aid of others, selling his car and eventually his house.⁵⁴ After moving into a cheap motel, he faced daily struggles from unemployment.⁵⁵ As Parker told the Committee, "A man can endure a lot of pain and suffering, but the one thing that is impossible to ignore is hunger."⁵⁶

Because of SNAP, Parker did not have to make the difficult decision between a safe place to sleep or food to eat.⁵⁷ SNAP helped provide Parker with food, and thus, the stamina he needed to attend interviews and enroll in a culinary trade program.⁵⁸ After completing the 16-week culinary program, Parker can build a lasting career and will no longer need SNAP benefits.⁵⁹ Parker credits SNAP for his optimism about the future. He dreams of one day opening a food truck that will become popular enough to grow into a brick and mortar restaurant.⁶⁰

As Parker explained to the Committee, "everyone needs to eat, not just the employed, or the wealthy, or the middle class. Everyone needs food. . . SNAP helps those in need to be one step [closer] to self-sufficiency."⁶¹ Like Parker, many SNAP recipients are experiencing a temporary hardship, and are eager to stabilize their situations. SNAP remains a vital support for millions of Americans like Parker.

D. Support for Rural Communities

Rural communities face unique health and development issues. In addition to the nutrition and food access challenges faced by the rest of the country, rural communities have less access to health networks and healthcare providers, and people living in these communities experience higher rates of chronic diseases. Rural households also have higher proportions of seniors and children receiving SNAP than do households in urban and suburban areas.⁶² In spite of the federal government's decades-long effort to support rural economies, rural communities face persistent unemployment and poverty. The rural poverty rate was 18.1 percent in 2014, 3 percent higher than in urban areas, with most areas showing only modest recovery since 2008.⁶³ Rural areas were also hit particularly hard by the financial crisis in 2008, with unemployment rates reaching 10 percent.⁶⁴ While the employment rate appears to be recovering at a comparable pace across urban and rural areas,⁶⁵ U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports suggest that actual employment has decreased in rural areas.⁶⁶ The employment rate has improved due to stagnant or slight negative population growth as adult populations migrated to urban areas, likely to look for employment opportunities.⁶⁷

Early farm bills mostly supported farmers and rural communities, but this emphasis shifted as most Americans now live in urban areas. Today, nutrition programs account for a majority of farm bill spending. At the same time, rural development programs have taken a backseat even though a thriving food system depends on successful farmers and rural communities. Although many perceive SNAP as a program primarily benefitting urban populations, the reality is that SNAP is just as important for rural populations.⁶⁸ In absolute numbers, more individuals in urban areas participate in SNAP, but poverty and food insecurity rates are proportionally higher in rural areas, where job creation remains below pre-2007 levels. For this reason, rural areas have a higher proportion of households receiving SNAP than metropolitan



and micropolitan (small city) areas.⁶⁹

In addition to the support provided in the Nutrition Title and SNAP, Congress has sought to address these unique rural issues via the farm bill's Rural Development Title (Title VI). Since its inception in the first farm bill, Title VI has provided an important source of support for the changing needs of rural communities. Recognizing the unique challenges facing rural communities, the Rural Development Title enables flexible, innovative, and alternative ways to support rural public health, education, businesses, and local and regional economic development. These include, for example, addressing outdated water and broadband infrastructure essential for ensuring rural communities have access to healthcare, education, and opportunities for economic development.⁷⁰ The 2014 Farm Bill provides technical assistance and financing for the construction of and improvements to rural water and waste disposal systems, such as drinking water and wastewater systems, solid waste facilities, and storm drainage for areas with less than 10,000 residents, facilitating

safe drinking water and sanitary waste disposal systems that are vital to public health and the economic vitality of rural America.⁷¹ Title VI also supports programs to bring rural communities broadband access in line with the rest of the country, which will facilitate telemedicine and distance learning, thus enabling access to healthcare and educational opportunities for rural communities.⁷² Finally, as technology and consolidation move jobs out of agriculture, the farm bill also attempts to stimulate economic development of rural areas through the creation and growth of new rural businesses, including hospitals and healthcare clinics, via business development grants, loans, and other investment programs.⁷³

By improving food access, nutrition, public health, infrastructure, and economic development, the farm bill is a critical safety-net for Americans across the country. The recommendations in this report seek to strengthen the farm bill's nutrition and rural development programs to continue improving the food security and health of the country's most vulnerable populations.

GOAL I



Protect and strengthen SNAP as our nation's most vital and successful nutrition assistance program

The next farm bill provides opportunities for Congress and the USDA to continue improving food security, food access, nutrition, and public health outcomes for millions of people across the U.S., as well as to stimulate local economies.⁷⁴ An optimal SNAP program would enroll 100 percent of SNAP-eligible Americans, reduce food insecurity, and support healthy diets and rural

communities. SNAP is critically important to millions of Americans, has a proven track record as an economic safety net that provides crucial relief to households in times of need, and plays an important role strengthening local economies.⁷⁵ Even so, the program faces opposition, including challenges from members of Congress and the current administration.⁷⁶ Current members



of Congress have offered several proposals to change the nature and scope of the program in order to reduce participation in SNAP, including suggestions to end SNAP as an entitlement program,⁷⁷ eliminate waivers for time limits, and prohibit states from expanding SNAP eligibility.⁷⁸ The Trump Administration has also proposed cutting SNAP funding by \$214 billion over the next 10 years and overhauling delivery of benefits away from electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards and instead delivering SNAP benefits via food boxes.⁷⁹

The next farm bill should protect and strengthen food assistance programs to help achieve an optimal SNAP program that is responsive to changing economic climates and ensures the country's most vulnerable populations have access to nutritious food, while providing important stimulus for local economies, especially in rural areas.

RECOMMENDATION



Maintain SNAP's current structure and ability to adapt to changes in economic conditions

SNAP succeeds in part because of its responsiveness to real-time need. In fact, despite its expansive scope, SNAP is one of the most responsive federal aid programs due to the fact that it allows enrollment and benefits levels to change quickly as households' needs change.⁸⁰ If a household experiences an unexpected decrease in income that meets SNAP thresholds, it becomes automatically eligible for SNAP benefits.⁸¹ Under the current entitlement structure, eligible individuals typically receive benefits within 30 days of applying and, in emergencies, can receive benefits within 7 days.⁸² Particularly for the millions who work in low-wage, high turnover jobs, SNAP serves as a crucial buffer during periods of widespread underemployment or unemployment. SNAP is often the only form of income assistance that

struggling households receive from the federal government.⁸³ Further, benefits last only as long as they are needed; recipients must reapply for benefits every 6 to 12 months and report any changes in income or economic circumstances, ensuring that SNAP dollars flow only to those in need.⁸⁴

SNAP's countercyclical structure means enrollment increases during recessionary times when more families face the threat of poverty and decreases during economic recoveries.⁸⁵ For instance, when unemployment increased 93 percent during the latest financial crisis from 2007 to 2011, SNAP participation grew by 70 percent over the same period as more families needed help with food purchases.

Once the economy recovered and the unemployment rate fell in 2014, SNAP participation and spending began to fall.⁸⁶ For SNAP to continue its success in providing food assistance for those in need, it is imperative that it retain this ability to respond to economic changes at both the individual and the national level. In the next farm bill, Congress should maintain the current funding structure and administration of SNAP, most importantly by reauthorizing the program as an entitlement.

Another benefit of SNAP's flexibility as an entitlement program is how it allows the program to support communities suddenly affected by crises such as natural disasters and public health emergencies. For example, when Hurricane Harvey devastated portions of Texas in late August 2017, FNS approved the operation of Disaster Nutrition Assistance Programs (D-SNAP)⁸⁷ in 39 counties.⁸⁸ Texas's Health and Human Services Department estimated that it would disburse over \$160 million in benefits to over 600,000 households affected by Harvey.⁸⁹ Existing SNAP recipients in counties that received a presidential declaration of disaster automatically received an additional two months of supplemental disaster benefits to increase their monthly benefits up to the maximum monthly allotment for their household size.⁹⁰ In the 29 counties that received a Presidential Major Disaster Declaration, August



SNAP benefits were reissued to replace food that had been purchased prior to the storm.⁹¹ Although households cannot typically use SNAP benefits to purchase hot or prepared foods, all SNAP recipients received a waiver to purchase hot foods and hot food products from SNAP retailers throughout the state of Texas until October 31, 2017.⁹² Similar measures were taken in response to Hurricane Irma in Florida in September 2017.⁹³ Such quick responsiveness to real-time need is possible because of the program's current entitlement structure and is essential for the program to achieve its goals.

Despite SNAP's proven effectiveness in timely responding to need, Congress periodically considers converting the program's basic structure from an entitlement program into an annual "block grant" disbursement.⁹⁴ In the late 1970s, the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) defined block grants as programs "by which funds are provided chiefly to general purpose governmental units in accordance with a statutory formula for use in a broad functional area, largely at the recipient's discretion."⁹⁵ In other words, states receiving block grants have tremendous leeway in how they spend federal money. Such broad discretion stands in contrast to categorical funding programs, which are limited to serve specific purposes for targeted groups and require reporting to the federal agency in charge.⁹⁶

Currently, the federal government pays the full cost of SNAP benefits and splits administrative costs with all 50 states that operate the program.⁹⁷ Block granting SNAP would instead provide a lump sum of funds for each state to administer SNAP on its own.⁹⁸ For six consecutive years, House Republican Budget Resolutions have proposed converting SNAP into a block grant program alongside \$125 billion in overall cuts, in addition to the \$214 billion cut proposed by the Trump Administration.⁹⁹ Block granting SNAP would therefore result in less federal oversight of SNAP, reduce parity across states, allow states to divert funding from SNAP to other programs or to meet budget deficits, curtail

SNAP's ability to respond to need in real time, and likely result in decreased overall funding for the program.

Proponents claim that block grants are more efficient than entitlement programs, as they reduce reporting requirements to the federal government and provide local decision-makers more flexibility to determine how to best serve their constituents.¹⁰⁰ However, states already have significant discretion in administering SNAP under the current structure—including decisions over eligibility criteria, work requirements, application processes, and coordination with other programs.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, federal oversight ensures an additional layer of parity among states and accountability for states to run efficient and transparent processes and ensure that funds are spent on SNAP. It is not clear that moving administration to the state level would reduce administrative burdens; in addition, any reduced administrative burdens would come at the expense of the regional parity, transparency, and accountability that federal oversight brings.

Proponents of block granting also claim that it is a cheaper alternative to entitlement programs. Indeed, by their very nature, block grants are an instrument to cut federal spending. By allocating a finite amount of money per year to a state for a particular program, the federal government effectively caps its own spending and makes the state responsible for any additional spending required to fully service its need. It also permits states to divert that money for other purposes. Both of these eventualities result in overall funding cuts to the program and therefore fewer benefits for households in need, undermining a program with proven results.

Block granting would disproportionately harm recipients living in states with budget shortfalls, as these states may be more likely to shift block grant funds away from food assistance toward other state-run programs. The decision to divert funds may not necessarily reflect the cash-strapped state's preference, but rather its desperation. Worse, many of these states have some of the most vulnerable populations, which



would compound the negative outcomes of block-granting.

The cost of SNAP is already falling as the economy improves. Under the current structure, SNAP spending as a share of GDP has been decreasing and is projected to fall further.¹⁰² As the economy improves, the Congressional Budget Office projects that the number of participants will fall by 2 to 4 percent each year over the next ten years, from 45.8 million in fiscal year 2015 to 33.1 million by 2026.¹⁰³ Indeed, since peaking in December 2012 following the financial crisis, the number of SNAP recipients have already declined by 4 million people—or 9 percent—through 2017 as the economy recovers.¹⁰⁴

Historical experiences with block granting in other programs provide insight into the impacts of replacing entitlement programs with block grants. The most well-known example is the 1996 bipartisan welfare reform bill,¹⁰⁵ which replaced the entitlement program Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with a block grant program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and set its annual budget at \$16.5 billion.¹⁰⁶ Despite several economic shifts since then, Congress has failed to increase the TANF budget in the past twenty years.¹⁰⁷ Adjusted for inflation, TANF's budget is a third lower today than it was in 1996¹⁰⁸ and the result is that “TANF provides a greatly weakened safety net that does far less than AFDC did to alleviate poverty and hardship.”¹⁰⁹

Furthermore, after the 1996 welfare law states began to redirect a substantial portion of their federal TANF funds to other purposes, frequently to free up funds for purposes unrelated to low-income families or children.¹¹⁰ Cases like this are unfortunately not limited to TANF. Of the thirteen major block-granted programs launched in housing, health, and social services, eleven have faced significant funding cuts—and resulting participation declines—since inception.¹¹¹ Poor Americans and struggling local economies cannot afford a similar decline in the rate of SNAP participation or funding, making block granting a weak model for SNAP.

In addition to its critical role supporting households in need in real time, SNAP also functions at a macro level to stabilize and stimulate the economy in response to economic downturns. Threatening program benefits therefore not only jeopardizes SNAP recipients, but also local economies. Studies have shown that SNAP is the federal government's “most effective” economic stimulus program, boosting the economy by \$1.73 for every \$1.00 of benefits spent.¹¹² These benefits to local economies are built into SNAP: as benefits increase, local economic stimulus necessarily increases, and in real time. Approximately 97 percent of SNAP benefits are spent within the same month they are issued,¹¹³ providing an immediate influx of capital into local stores and businesses. This monthly injection of capital is especially beneficial in areas with high poverty and unemployment rates.¹¹⁴

Declining benefits therefore harm not only vulnerable populations but also local economies. Congress should maintain and strengthen SNAP as a robust tool that provides ongoing monthly stimulus to local communities when and where it is needed the most.

LEGISLATIVE OPPORTUNITY

Reauthorize SNAP as an entitlement program

It is imperative that Congress preserve SNAP as an entitlement program. The current entitlement structure is the best way to ensure SNAP remains responsive to changes in need, allowing enrollment to fluctuate quickly in response to economic changes—including sudden job losses and natural disaster relief. Shifting the program to a block grant would likely curtail funding and reduce benefits, threaten SNAP's ability to respond immediately to economic fluctuations and to serve the populations most in need, threaten local economies, and reduce transparency, accountability, and attempts at parity among states, which are some of SNAP's greatest assets.



RECOMMENDATION



Expand SNAP to address food insecurity and revitalize local economies

Although SNAP has helped reduce severe food insecurity in the U.S., the amount of benefits is still insufficient for low-income families to afford an adequate, nutritious diet, even when taking into account that SNAP benefits are intended to be a contribution toward a household's food costs, but not to cover those costs entirely.¹¹⁵ Families with no net income receive the maximum SNAP benefit. For all other households, the monthly SNAP benefit equals the maximum benefit for that household size minus the household's expected contribution of 30 percent of net income. On average, SNAP households receive \$253 per month and the average SNAP benefit per person is about \$125 per month, or about \$1.40 per meal.¹¹⁶

Recent studies show that healthier food is more expensive than unhealthy food and estimate that healthier food costs about \$1.50 more per day.¹¹⁷ This price discrepancy burdens poor households, placing them at greater risk of consuming unhealthy diets. SNAP purports to address this issue by tying benefits to the cost of the USDA's Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), a diet plan that claims to reflect the minimal cost of adequate nutrition but is known to underestimate this cost.¹¹⁸ Even under the USDA's own models, it is not possible to meet recommended daily allowances for key nutrients such as potassium and Vitamin E under the TFP, nor is it possible to meet recommended daily sodium limits.¹¹⁹ The TFP also assumes an amount of time for food preparation that is unrealistic for many if not most working families, as well as skills and facilities beyond many recipients' capacity.¹²⁰ The TFP is intended for temporary and emergency use.¹²¹ Tying SNAP benefits to the TFP is therefore inadequate and highlights the often acute difficulty SNAP recipients face accessing adequate amounts of healthy food.

To afford food, food-insecure households report limiting expenses by restricting the use of lights and air conditioning, reducing their laundry, and limiting spending on gasoline for driving.¹²² They report juggling different expenses, paying for some services, such as electricity, heat, or water, one month and then giving them up the next month in order to pay for others.¹²³ They may skip medication purchases to pay for food, and report relying on credit cards to cover expenses when monthly income is insufficient, increasing high-interest debt.¹²⁴ SNAP recipients may also live and pool their income with extended family members to afford housing, despite frequent shortages of space and resources.¹²⁵ Such trade-offs and attempts to stretch benefits indicate current benefit levels are insufficient to meet the needs of recipients. These difficult trade-offs are also associated with worse dietary patterns, including under-consumption at the end of the month when benefits run out, increased long-term cognitive stress, and worse health outcomes.¹²⁶

LEGISLATIVE OPPORTUNITY

Increase SNAP benefit amounts

Congress should increase SNAP benefits to better help alleviate food insecurity, increase food expenditures, and improve diet quality among low-income Americans, while also injecting more money into local economies.¹²⁷

Through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Congress temporarily increased SNAP benefits by 13.6 percent.²¹¹ As a result, four-member households received an average benefits increase of \$80 per month.²¹² A USDA study found that this increase in benefits was associated with increased participation rates and increased food security among recipients.²¹³ The study concluded that a permanent increase in SNAP benefits could sustain these trends and better help families avoid food insecurity.²¹⁴ In addition to improving food insecurity among households in need and helping these households afford healthier food, increasing SNAP benefits is also an extremely efficient use



of federal dollars that can help revitalize local economies.

Despite SNAP's proven track record and the known advantages of increasing benefits, several current proposals aim to cut SNAP funding significantly over the next ten years.¹²⁸ Under some of these proposals, low-income working families that have gross incomes above 130 percent of the poverty line—which is \$31,980 for a family of four—but have high spending on childcare, rent and other deductible expenses, would lose their eligibility through the elimination of the Broad Based Categorical Eligibility rule.¹²⁹ Furthermore, benefits would be capped based on household size to families of six, penalizing larger and extended families.¹³⁰ The Trump Administration's budget proposal would also cut funding to SNAP by shifting costs to states. The proposal would adjust the state-federal partnership in providing benefits by establishing a State match for benefit costs.¹³¹ The budget also would allow states to cut SNAP benefit levels to “manage their costs.”¹³² In other words, the proposal would turn SNAP into a matching program, and if states could not afford to match costs, they could lower benefit levels.

Much of the savings from those cuts would accrue to the federal government, which would have to make fewer matching payments. Because most states are *already* struggling to balance their current budgets and state revenue growth was weaker than expected in 2017, many states would likely cut SNAP.¹³³ Twenty-eight states that have budget shortfalls in the current fiscal year have already cut services, used reserves, or increased taxes.¹³⁴ The states are in no position to absorb the costs of SNAP.

For this reason, cutting SNAP benefits would undermine SNAP's success as a program that provides benefits based on need rather than one's residency.¹³⁵ SNAP was established as a bipartisan federal commitment to ensure low-income Americans have enough to eat, regardless of the state where they live.¹³⁶ Allowing states to cut benefits would leave millions of Americans food insecure and would lead to increased regional

disparities in food insecurity and poverty.¹³⁷

Increasing SNAP benefits is an effective way to alleviate food insecurity and an efficient use of federal dollars that stimulates local economies. Given SNAP's effectiveness and efficiency, Congress should increase SNAP benefits. At the very least, Congress should protect SNAP from budget cuts that would undermine its mission. It should strengthen SNAP to ensure that it continues to be a vital and effective safety net for millions of Americans and an economic stimulus for local communities.

RECOMMENDATION



Improve SNAP access and efficiency through technology

Improving technology systems used in benefits administration demonstrably increases access to SNAP, lowers administrative costs, and increases efficiency, permitting more SNAP funding to aid recipients. Despite unprecedented SNAP caseload growth during the Great Recession, many state SNAP programs nevertheless managed to increase overall participation rates while decreasing administrative costs.¹³⁸ This improvement is especially impressive given that nearly all state governments faced budget shortfalls during the Great Recession, as tax receipts dropped while assistance program enrollment expanded.¹³⁹ The rise in participation rates is largely due to concerted state and federal efforts to streamline administration and modernize technology systems.

With the help of federal guidance and funding, many states have conducted upgrades to technology for many purposes including modernizing outdated benefits computer systems; streamlining difficult application procedures for applicants; assisting with lack of staff and increased caseloads; and capturing data to inform decision-making, among other upgrades. Many states have also invested in



effective technology and service upgrades such as online case management systems, 24/7 call centers, and electronic case filing and document scanning.¹⁴⁰

Successful technological improvements have included making benefits applications available online rather than in paper form; providing online “screeners” that allow an applicant to provide basic information and receive an estimated eligibility determination and benefit amount; tracking workload and case management across staff; and implementing document imaging systems that digitally store an applicant’s required documentation so that it does not become lost and can be shared across programs. Many states have implemented “lobby management” technologies, which streamline the client experience within a SNAP center by creating different queues for differing transaction types and efficiently dividing caseloads. These advancements allowed many states to manage more efficiently an increase in caseloads without hiring additional staff.¹⁴¹ In addition, new technologies for SNAP can also often be used for the administration of other benefits, such as Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and TANF, providing additional cost savings.

Investments in administrative improvements and IT upgrades for SNAP often require substantial capital investment, the cost of which is shared by both federal and state governments. FNS generally reimburses states for half of the administrative costs, and states are obligated to fund the other half.¹⁴² In addition, USDA awards \$48 million annually in bonus payments to “best” and “most improved” state performers in four categories.¹⁴³ The four categories include payment accuracy; case and procedural error rate (measuring SNAP applications that were improperly denied, suspended or terminated); program access (measuring states’ success in reaching eligible low-income individuals); and application processing timelines (for states that most quickly process the highest fraction of SNAP applications within federal guidelines).¹⁴⁴ These awards should incentivize best practices, but in practice they have been significantly abused, with

states falsifying rates in order to receive funds.¹⁴⁵ Thus, there is significant need for improvement in the administration of these programs.

The 2014 Farm Bill required states to invest federal bonus payments exclusively into new or upgraded technology systems, administration programs, or programs to prevent fraud and abuse.¹⁴⁶ States have used these federal bonus funds to make a variety of program improvements. For example, Mississippi used a federal bonus to automate its internal filing system in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.¹⁴⁷ Utah created a virtual call center and online application to streamline its administrative structure.¹⁴⁸ Applicants have the option to complete their initial certification and recertification interviews through the call center, rather than traveling in person to SNAP offices. Customers also have the option to apply for benefits online, through Utah’s updated SNAP website, which includes a screening tool to help applicants determine if they are eligible for benefits.¹⁴⁹

USDA also awards \$5 million annually in “SNAP Process and Technology Improvement Grants” to pay 100 percent of the cost of state and local initiatives that improve access and streamline the application process.¹⁵⁰ The grants are awarded on a competitive basis; states must apply, and grants are awarded to proposals that best target technology improvements.¹⁵¹ The size of the grants ranges from \$6,000 to more than \$1.5 million.¹⁵² Process and Technology Improvement grants have been used for a range of different projects. For example, Washington was awarded \$1.5 million to develop an app for mobile devices that will provide SNAP clients and applicants with the ability to upload documents and review and update their case information.¹⁵³ Florida was awarded more than \$400,000 to improve its EBT card replacement and customer reporting programs, which allowed the state to streamline its SNAP administration and minimize errors such as mishandled changes in recipients’ addresses.¹⁵⁴

In these examples, funds from the bonus program and federal grants enabled states to engage



in projects that would not have been possible without additional funding, and which allowed states to experiment with different methods for increasing participation rates while lowering administrative costs. Overall, these investments significantly improved technology processes, improved SNAP administration, and saved costs even while enrollment increased.

Technology improvements have also been vital in significantly limiting fraudulent SNAP disbursements and uses. The 2014 Farm Bill provided \$7.5 million for states to create or improve technology aimed to prevent, detect, and prosecute trafficking (the sale of SNAP benefits for cash or other goods).¹⁵⁵ In large part due to these federal efforts, SNAP maintains one of the lowest fraud and error rates, including both over- and under-payments, of any federal program.¹⁵⁶ In fact, less than one percent of SNAP benefits are awarded to ineligible households.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, when Congress enacted the Improper Payments Act in the early 2000s to reduce improper payments by federal agencies, SNAP was among the few programs that had already met the newly imposed standards.¹⁵⁸

One example of an improved technology that reduced SNAP fraud was the transition from food stamp coupons to electronic benefits transfer (EBT) cards. Coupons were much more easily trafficked than EBT cards. Additionally, computer systems are able to monitor patterns of SNAP transactions that could indicate fraud and alert state authorities to such anomalies for further investigation. In addition, under the current quality control program, states take a sample of SNAP cases (totaling 50,000 cases nationwide per year) and review the accuracy of their eligibility and benefit decisions.¹⁵⁹ Federal officials then re-review a subsample of these cases to ensure accuracy in the error rates.¹⁶⁰

The states' program integrity efforts have been very successful—contributing to SNAP's low fraud and error rates, highlighting the benefits of investing in technology to improve SNAP efficiency. In 2014, the overpayment error rate for SNAP was 2.96 percent and the underpayment error rate

was 0.69 percent, which is undesirable.¹⁶¹ The net loss to the federal government was therefore only 2.27 percent.¹⁶² SNAP's low error rates are likely attributed to its quality control program, which is considered one of the most rigorous payment error measurement systems of any public benefit program.¹⁶³ These data illustrate SNAP's low rates of waste, fraud, and abuse, due in large part to successful technology systems supported by federal programs and funding.

The few SNAP errors that do occur overwhelmingly result from mistakes—not dishonesty—by recipients, eligibility workers, data entry clerks, or computer programmers.¹⁶⁴ In fact, household fraud (that is, intentional misrepresentation of eligibility) and trafficking account for only 1.3 percent of the total SNAP program per year.¹⁶⁵ In addition, trafficking rates have decreased significantly since EBT cards were introduced and the advent of computer programs that can easily monitor SNAP transactions for patterns that suggest abuse. USDA has reported declines in the rate of trafficking from 4 percent to 1 percent of SNAP benefits over the last 15 years as a result of such programs.¹⁶⁶

Congress should reform the federal bonus program and streamline data coordination processes via technological improvements to decrease administrative costs while improving access to SNAP for all who are eligible. Although it requires an initial investment, this reform would ultimately reduce inefficient spending and program waste.

LEGISLATIVE OPPORTUNITY

Increase funding for technology improvements to ensure SNAP remains an efficient program and to efficiently manage case loads

In the next farm bill, Congress should reform the state bonus programs by expanding the number of states eligible to receive the bonus funds. Doing so would ensure that a greater percentage of states are incentivized to compete



for lucrative federal resources and would reduce the incentive for fraud by making the funds more widely available. For example, at present, only eight states receive annual grants for high participation rates.¹⁶⁷ This number should be expanded to better incentivize a larger number of states. Furthermore, within the federal bonus structure itself, payments should be changed to reflect top priorities and incentivize SNAP program improvement. Currently, \$24 million is allocated for payment accuracy bonuses, compared to only \$12 million for states with high program access.¹⁶⁸ The current incentive structure therefore prioritizes payment accuracy over program access. Program access should be prioritized in state bonus programs. Congress may also consider specific incentives for states with the lowest participation rates in order to target the worst-performing states, which may also be those most in need of additional funding. Changes to the bonus system would have the added benefit of strengthening SNAP overall by allowing many states to use the funds to make critical program improvements, particularly in terms of technological advancement and program access, which have historically had a significant impact on improving the administration, access to, and efficiency of SNAP.

The next farm bill should also increase the amount of grants that allow states to make technological improvements, and thus lower administrative costs. The SNAP Process and Technology Improvement Grant, for instance, allows state and local SNAP administrators to expand the use of technology to improve both efficiency and client access.¹⁶⁹ However, every year the \$5 million in grant funding is distributed to only five to ten states and localities, and some awards are for less than \$100,000.¹⁷⁰ Congress should provide annual independent federal grants to the states to be used exclusively for modernization initiatives that have a proven track record, such as call centers and updated online portals.

Congress should also increase funding for states to upgrade technology that will allow them to cross-reference big data in real-time. Some

states have invested in technology to consolidate cross-program data and increase detection. For example, Utah developed software—known as “eFind”—that pools applicant data across state and federal databases to verify eligibility and detect discrepancies (e.g., Motor Vehicles, Social Security Administration, Child Support, Unemployment Insurance, state tax records, consumer credit checks, etc.).¹⁷¹ Prior to the change, eligibility workers needed to query each database separately, which could involve separate links, usernames, and passwords for each match. Federal funding for fraud-detection technology that can streamline state and federal data in real-time would better detect fraud and strengthen the integrity of SNAP. Federal investment can make SNAP a more effective and efficient program.

Reforming bonus programs and streamlining data coordination processes via improved technology are efficient investments of federal dollars that would achieve several goals simultaneously. These investments would reduce administrative burdens on states, better detect fraud, and increase access to SNAP for eligible participants. Although they require initial federal investment to get off the ground, they will ultimately result in cost savings, greater program efficiency, and reduced waste.

RECOMMENDATION



Remove ineffective barriers to food access that impose a high administrative burden

Unless exempted, under program time limits certain SNAP recipients must find jobs within three months or be denied food assistance.¹⁷² This rule applies to able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs): unemployed individuals who are 18 to 49 years old, are not disabled, and have no dependents. The rule limits ABAWDs to three months of SNAP benefits in any 36-month period, when they are not employed or in a work



or training program for at least 20 hours per week.¹⁷³ However, under this rule states are not required to offer individuals a work or training program, and in fact most do not.¹⁷⁴ The three-month rule applies regardless of whether the SNAP recipient is actively searching for a job or willing to participate in a work or training program but has none available to him or her.¹⁷⁵ Various factors, including economic conditions, educational level, and geographic location, among others, can make finding and maintaining employment a difficult, if not impossible, task. As a result, the rule has been described as “one of the harshest” in SNAP.¹⁷⁶ Although often described as a work requirement, in practice the rule actually functions as a time limit on benefits, effectively punishing individuals who are willing to work but cannot find a job or do not have a work or training program available to them.¹⁷⁷ In addition, this rule is among the most administratively complex and error-prone in SNAP.¹⁷⁸ For all of these reasons, several states have sought to repeal the rule.¹⁷⁹

The rule does allow states to request temporary waivers from ABAWD time limits for areas with particularly high unemployment.¹⁸⁰ Since the rule’s enactment in 1996, every state except Delaware has requested a waiver,¹⁸¹ and in a typical year, over one-third of the country is waived.¹⁸²

A waiver may be applied statewide, or tailored to particular counties and cities.¹⁸³ For example, while Massachusetts’s statewide waiver expired at the end of 2015 as its economy improved, local waivers remained in effect in towns such as Pittsfield and Lowell, which recovered from the recession at a much slower pace than other parts of the state.¹⁸⁴ The waivers help ensure that ABAWDs living in economically depressed areas still have access to food assistance during times of economic downturn. These waiver programs have been targeted despite their critical importance, with lawmakers attempting and failing to eliminate the ABAWD waiver program during the 2014 Farm Bill reauthorization.

The ABAWD time limit is harsh, administratively

burdensome, and does not appear to make an appreciable difference on the work status of ABAWDs. Eighty-two percent of SNAP households with at least one able-bodied adult include at least one person who works.¹⁸⁵ In addition, only 4 percent of SNAP households that included at least one person who worked in the year before starting to receive SNAP did not include at least one person who worked in the following year.¹⁸⁶ This research suggests that SNAP does not disincentivize work. At the same time, SNAP-eligible ABAWDs, while generally motivated to find work, represent a population that is particularly susceptible to both poverty and unemployment.¹⁸⁷ The U.S. Government Accountability Office has noted that ABAWDs “are more likely to lack basic skills such as reading, writing, and basic mathematics than other [SNAP] participants. In addition. . . mental health issues, substance abuse, and homelessness are more prevalent among ABAWDs than other participants.”¹⁸⁸ ABAWDs also tend to have less education: more than 25 percent of ABAWDs on SNAP lack a high school diploma.¹⁸⁹ These factors place this group at a significant disadvantage vis-à-vis employment prospects. As a result, many ABAWDs face chronically low wages and struggle to secure long-term employment. This group experiences an average gross income that is only 29 percent of the federal poverty level—about \$3,400 per year for a single individual—which is just over half as much as the average SNAP recipient’s yearly income (57 percent of the federal poverty level).¹⁹⁰ The percentage of ABAWDs on SNAP also increased more than any other demographic group during the Great Recession, though ABAWDs constitute only around 10 percent of all SNAP recipients.¹⁹¹

LEGISLATIVE OPPORTUNITY

Eliminate time limits for ABAWDs

Congress should eliminate time limits for ABAWDs. Imposing a harsh time limit on this already vulnerable population leaves ABAWDs food insecure, unemployed, and with no improved prospects for job training. Indeed, the time limit currently results in thousands of ABAWDs losing their benefits each year.¹⁹²



Although waivers are a helpful support, about two-thirds of the country is not subject to a waiver any given time. It is important to support ABAWDs rather than put more obstacles in their path to success. In addition, the time limits impose a substantial administrative burden, resulting in substantial resources being devoted

to a harsh time limit that applies to only 10 percent of SNAP recipients. Congress should therefore eliminate time limits for ABAWDs, which would simplify the administrative process and expense and would better support this vulnerable population.

GOAL II



Improve public health and increase access to healthy, nutritious foods, especially for vulnerable populations and rural communities

Diet is the leading contributor to premature death in the U.S., responsible for 678,000 deaths in 2010 alone.¹⁹³ Diet-related diseases—heart disease, cancer, cerebrovascular disease and diabetes—are the first, second, fourth and seventh leading causes of death, respectively.¹⁹⁴ In addition, diet-related diseases are extremely expensive to treat. According to multiple recent studies, the four leading diet-related diseases—diabetes, cancer, coronary heart disease and obesity—carry annual costs of over \$850 billion collectively.¹⁹⁵

Higher fruit and vegetable consumption is significantly associated with decreased all-cause mortality and cardiovascular mortality, and possibly also with reduced cancer mortality.¹⁹⁶ It is also associated with decreased risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and several types of cancer.¹⁹⁷ However, studies have shown that healthier diets that include fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains are more expensive than less healthy diets (which contain refined grains,

added sugars, and saturated fats).¹⁹⁸ Healthier diets are estimated to cost over \$1.50 more per day, which contributes to the fact that many low-income households spend their limited resources on energy-dense foods that are low in nutrients.¹⁹⁹ These figures are even more significant because the average individual SNAP benefit per person amounts to about \$1.40 per meal.²⁰⁰

At the same time, individuals in lower socioeconomic groups and racial-ethnic minorities are disproportionately burdened when it comes to diet and diet-related diseases.²⁰¹ These groups experience the highest rates of obesity and non-communicable disease and the lowest rates of fruit and vegetable consumption.²⁰² Low-income individuals facing food insecurity also experience a wide range of negative health consequences, including elevated risks of diabetes,²⁰³ depression,²⁰⁴ pregnancy complications,²⁰⁵ and chronic disease.²⁰⁶



While the Nutrition Title of the farm bill has long sought to improve food access and food security among low-income households through programs such as SNAP, there has been markedly less focus on the health outcomes of the populations served.²⁰⁷ Recently, however, the USDA has taken strides to better supplement food access initiatives with healthy diet goals.²⁰⁸ Objective 4.2 of the 2014-2018 USDA Strategic Plan, for instance, focuses specifically on encouraging “healthful diets through state-of-the-art, science-based nutrition guidance and information, and strong nutrient standards and nutrition education.”²⁰⁹

Addressing nutritional challenges, particularly among low-income, racial-ethnic minorities, and senior populations, is central to improving our nation’s public health and is currently under-addressed.²¹⁰ Against this backdrop of the exceptional costs of poor diet and its disproportional effect on low-income populations and communities of color, the next farm bill presents a unique opportunity to address diet-related health challenges facing millions of households. By integrating a health orientation into traditional food access programs, the farm bill can support initiatives that improve both food security and long-term health outcomes for participants. Establishing new programs and expanding current programs will require some additional initial investments, but these expenses could be offset in part by broader savings through improved health outcomes and lower healthcare costs.²¹¹

Discretionary, Mandatory, and Baseline: A Primer on Farm Bill Funding

Congress writes the farm bill according to established federal budget rules and procedures. Chief among these rules is the process for “capturing” budget baseline, wherein the Congressional Budget Office projects the costs of all existing farm bill programs as if they were extended for ten years. This becomes the “baseline” pool of money available to write the new farm

bill. Adding to this baseline is possible, but unlikely.

All farm bill funding is not created equal. Some programs receive mandatory funding through the farm bill. Mandatory funding is not contingent on annual appropriations because the farm bill already says how much funding to provide each year. A subset of mandatory spending is baseline funding. Baseline means that a program already has built-in funding going forward and Congress does not have to find new funding to keep the program in a new farm bill. Many of the largest farm bill programs, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the federal crop insurance program, and the major conservation programs, have baseline funding.

However, programs with mandatory spending but no baseline face an uphill battle as Congress writes a new farm bill because Congress must find “new” money to support them. At least 39 farm bill programs have mandatory funding but no baseline. These programs, which include the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives Program and the Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program, have received over \$2.8 billion since 2014. Generally, the cutoff between mandatory and baseline funding is \$50 million per year. Programs receiving \$50 million in the last year of the current farm bill are considered part of the baseline and thereby achieve a more permanent status within the farm bill.

Finally, some programs receive authorization in the farm bill but depend on discretionary spending through the annual appropriations process. Authorization tells the agency what the program can and should do, but does not guarantee that there will be any money to carry out that mission. Initiatives like the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Individual Development Accounts and USDA’s share



of the Healthy Food Financing Initiative received authorization in the 2014 Farm Bill but have received little or no funding through the subsequent appropriations.

For more information about farm bill funding, including a list of programs with mandatory funding but no baseline, see Jim Monke, Cong. Research Serv., R44758, *Farm Bill Programs Without a Budget Baseline Beyond FY2018* (2017).

RECOMMENDATION

Strengthen food assistance programs that promote healthy choices among SNAP participants

While a major goal of SNAP is to increase participants' food security, the program is also a tool to promote healthy diets among SNAP recipients.²¹² To that end, SNAP includes a number of programs that help low-income households not only access food, but also have better opportunities to purchase nutritious foods.²¹³

The 2014 Farm Bill established the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) Grant program to fund projects that aim to increase SNAP recipients' purchases of fruits and vegetables.²¹⁴ FINI focuses on point-of-purchase incentives to encourage nutritious food purchases and supports new technologies for SNAP dollar redemption programs.²¹⁵ It awards funds to local, state, and national organizations to run projects that allocate grants to retailers to provide SNAP recipients with additional benefits when they spend their SNAP dollars on fruits and vegetables.²¹⁶ In 2017, USDA awarded 32 grants totaling \$16.8 million to three categories of projects.²¹⁷ One-year pilot projects were awarded up to \$100,000, multi-year community-based projects lasting 4 years or less were awarded up to \$500,000, and multi-year large-scale projects lasting 4 years or less were awarded more than \$500,000.²¹⁸ Twenty-three states have utilized

FINI grants to create "double-up" programs at over 575 sites benefitting 3,380 farmers.²¹⁹ Double-up programs double the value of SNAP benefits spent on fresh fruits and vegetables at participating markets and grocery stores.²²⁰

The Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) awards grants to states to provide vouchers for low-income seniors to purchase eligible foods at farmers' markets, roadside stands, and CSAs.²²¹ The target population is individuals over the age of sixty with household incomes less than 185 percent of the federal poverty guidelines—or yearly income of \$21,978 for an individual.²²² Low-income seniors are especially vulnerable to poor nutrition and diet-related diseases.²²³ By providing these vouchers, SFMNP aims to improve the nutritional status of this vulnerable population.²²⁴ The SFMNP was modeled on the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP), which Congress established in 1992 to provide locally grown fruits and vegetables to WIC participants as well as to expand sales at farmers' markets.²²⁵ Eligible foods under SFMNP include fruits, vegetables, honey, and fresh-cut herbs.²²⁶ In 2015, 52 states, territories and federally recognized Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) participated in SFMNP, serving over 800,000 low-income seniors.²²⁷ Eight states do not participate in SFMNP.²²⁸ The seniors served in SFMNP purchased produce from 20,000 farmers at approximately 7,000 farmers markets, roadside stands, and CSAs in 2015.²²⁹ The 2014 Farm Bill provided about \$20 million in funding each year to administer SFMNP.²³⁰ The annual amount of benefits varied widely across participating states, from \$15 to \$50, but on average, each individual senior received only \$32 in total benefits through SFMNP for all of 2015.²³¹

Congress should use the next farm bill as an opportunity to strengthen both FINI and SFMNP, two successful programs in the 2014 Farm Bill that promote healthy choices among vulnerable low-income populations. By devoting additional resources to these programs, Congress can better ensure that low-income households receive food assistance that helps improve nutrition and long-term health outcomes.



LEGISLATIVE OPPORTUNITY

Increase funding for the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) grant program

FINI's double-up programs have been linked to significant increases in produce purchases of up to 50 percent, and decreases in food insecurity by SNAP participants up to 27 percent.²³² FINI programs not only help SNAP recipients stretch their benefits, but also create positive economic benefits for local economies. The uptick in fruit and vegetable purchases has had a positive impact on local farmers, with one-half to three-quarters of farmers reporting increased profits and many even citing double-up programs as a main factor in their ability to enlarge the scope of their farming operations.²³³ FINI represents a cost effective opportunity to address food insecurity simultaneously with improving nutrition, while also creating important economic benefits for local farmers and economies. Congress should reauthorize and provide increased mandatory funding for FINI in the next farm bill to capitalize on these opportunities.

ADMINISTRATIVE OPPORTUNITY

Improve information and technology sharing across FINI projects

In addition to funding, Congress should improve FINI by enhancing information-sharing practices among the different FINI pilots and projects. At present, each FINI project is largely independent in terms of implementation and technology design, resulting in dozens of projects that each bear significant start-up, infrastructure, and development costs.²³⁴ A formal information and technology sharing process could improve efficiency while limiting the amount of time, labor, and money expended by new and developing FINI programs.²³⁵ With fewer resources needed for administrative and infrastructure costs, FINI projects could allocate more benefits to recipients and devote more resources to promoting fruit and vegetable purchases among SNAP recipients.

LEGISLATIVE OPPORTUNITY

Expand the senior farmers' market nutrition program and increase benefits to seniors

Given the low average benefit in SFMNP of just \$32 per senior per month, the variation in benefits across locations creating disparities in benefits among seniors, and the acute vulnerability and importance of nutrition to the seniors, Congress should increase funds to SFMNP. Low-income seniors are a particularly vulnerable demographic for food insecurity and nutrition challenges.²³⁶ In fact, the elder population is the single largest demographic group at disproportionate risk of inadequate diet and malnutrition.²³⁷ Nutritional status is a critical determinant of health, quality of life, morbidity, and mortality for the elderly.²³⁸ Their increased risk of malnutrition decreases the likelihood of being able to age in their own homes and remain part of their community, and increases the need for costly long-term care or home healthcare.²³⁹

Even minimal increases in mandatory funding can make significant differences in the lives and nutrition of the seniors participating in this program. Setting a federal minimum benefit for SFMNP, which states are then free to exceed, would establish a crucial standard. The farm bill should also eliminate the benefits cap of \$50 per senior. Expanding SFMNP also presents an opportunity to stimulate local economic growth and rural development, and support farmers and local businesses.

Increasing demand for fresh, local foods is only half of the equation; the farm bill should also make a permanent commitment to programs that increase supply. See FBLE's companion report, *Diversified Agricultural Economies*, to learn how the Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program (FMLFPP) can help bridge that gap.



RECOMMENDATION

Identify and scale successful SNAP-Education programs

A lack of nutrition education poses a significant barrier to improved diets and healthy eating,²⁴⁰ especially among the nation's most vulnerable populations.²⁴¹ To help address this challenge, the farm bill authorizes Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Education), a state-led, voluntary nutrition education program that seeks to promote healthy food choices and physical activity for SNAP participants.²⁴² SNAP-Education works with community organizations and schools to provide educational programming of various types, including nutrition classes and workshops and even school gardens.²⁴³ To receive federal funding, states must first create an implementation plan for SNAP-Education programs, submit a budget proposal, and match any requested federal funding.²⁴⁴ In many cases, states contract with private or public agencies to implement SNAP-Education programs, including land-grant universities, food banks, and public health departments.²⁴⁵ States' SNAP-Education budgets vary, with many states receiving less than \$1 million in federal funding per year, while others have received more than \$20 million annually.²⁴⁶

Several SNAP-Education programs have met with great success at helping SNAP recipients make healthier food choices.²⁴⁷ One evaluation of the New York State SNAP-Education program found that food and nutrition behavior changes resulting from the program are likely to improve future health and reduce healthcare costs, and have high cost effectiveness.²⁴⁸ An evaluation of a California SNAP-Education program found notable improvements in fruit and vegetable consumption.²⁴⁹ A USDA study found that the children's nutrition education programs studied resulted in increased daily fruit and vegetable consumption at home by a quarter- to a third-cup, and that the senior's nutrition education program studied resulted in increased consumption of about a half-cup of fruits and vegetables daily.²⁵⁰ The most

successful children's intervention employed a variety of methods to educate students while simultaneously engaging parents and caregivers through take-home materials addressing concerns about providing healthy foods on a limited budget.²⁵¹ However, certain interventions saw more success than others,²⁵² highlighting the key point that additional program improvements and evaluations could better improve outcomes for participants.²⁵³

LEGISLATIVE OPPORTUNITY

Allocate additional funding for successful SNAP-Education programs

Congress should devote more resources to successful SNAP-Education programs in the next farm bill, with a focus on identifying effective nutrition education projects with proven track records that can be scaled up or replicated elsewhere at efficient costs. Better funded and better designed education programs have positive diet and health benefits for SNAP participants, including children and seniors, and therefore may even have the potential to help lower the risk of chronic health problems such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.²⁵⁴ Congress can help these successful programs to extend their reach to help improve the diet and health outcomes of SNAP recipients nationally, which may result in cost savings.

Congress should make funds available not only for implementation of SNAP-Education programs but also for increased tracking and evaluation of the effectiveness of existing programs.²⁵⁵ The most effective programs should also be awarded federal grants that will allow them to scale up and broaden their geographic coverage.²⁵⁶ These effective SNAP-Education programs should be replicated in other states not only to ensure they are available to as many SNAP recipients as possible, but also to ensure federal funds are spent on programs that work. These awards would also incentivize states to improve the effectiveness of their SNAP-Education programs and provide effective SNAP-Education models for other states.



During previous and current farm bill reauthorizations, the issue of restricting SNAP purchases in order to improve health outcomes of SNAP recipients has been debated. This report does not take a position on the issue, but the following chart summarizes the pros and cons of restricting purchases of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) with SNAP benefits.

PROS	CONS
Public spending should align better with public health for ethical and economic reasons. Increasing scientific evidence shows the negative health effects of SSBs specifically.	USDA should not single out certain foods as good or bad, healthy or unhealthy.
Excluding SSB is necessary for SNAP to achieve its fundamental objectives of addressing obesity in addition to hunger.	Implementation of SSB restrictions would increase complexity and costs of SNAP.
Restricting SSB purchases would decrease SSB consumption, obesity, and other diet-related diseases among SNAP participants.	Restricting SSB purchases may be ineffective in changing consumption patterns among SNAP participants.
Public opinion, including that of SNAP participants, supports restrictions on purchasing SSB using SNAP.	Restrictions may cause SNAP participants to feel stigmatized and embarrassed, which could cause a decline in SNAP participation.
Excluding SSB from SNAP may improve the public image of and support for the SNAP program.	Excluding SSB from SNAP presents an unwarranted restriction on free choice.

For more information about the debates surrounding restrictions on SNAP purchases, see Marlene B. Schwartz, *Moving Beyond the Debate*, 52 AM. J. PREV. MED., S201 (2017).



RECOMMENDATION

Improve rural public health

In addition to the Nutrition Title, the Rural Development Title (Title VI) also contains programs critical to the public health of rural communities. As discussed previously, rural communities experience distinct disadvantages vis-à-vis health outcomes, access to nutrition and healthcare, and economic development. Rural communities have less access to health networks and healthcare providers, reduced physical access to food (as a result of having to travel significant distances to access grocery stores), and higher rates of chronic diseases, unemployment, and poverty.²⁵⁷ Rural populations are also declining as the population migrates to more urban areas in search of greater economic opportunity.²⁵⁸

In addition, rural households have higher proportions of their senior and child residents receiving SNAP than do urban and suburban households.²⁵⁹ Although SNAP is often perceived as a program primarily benefitting urban minority populations, the reality is that SNAP is just as important for rural populations.²⁶⁰ In absolute numbers, more individuals in urban areas participate in SNAP, but poverty and food insecurity rates are proportionally higher in rural areas, where job creation is not yet back to pre-2007 levels. Rural areas also have a higher proportion of households receiving SNAP than metropolitan and micropolitan (small city) areas.²⁶¹

The Nutrition Title and Rural Development Title provide important sources of support to ensure these communities can adapt and compete in the global economy, which in turn helps ensure the effectiveness of other farm bill programs in rural areas. In particular, rural communities need updated telecommunication technologies to achieve these goals. “Broadband,” which refers to high-speed internet access and advanced telecommunications services,²⁶² is necessary for economic development, education, employment,

and healthcare. Essential service providers such as health centers, hospitals, schools, and businesses rely on modern broadband services. Rural areas lag behind urban and suburban areas in broadband deployment due to higher cost of serving sparsely populated areas or areas that are heavily forested or mountainous.²⁶³ According to the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) 2018 Broadband Deployment Report, 30.7 percent of Americans in rural areas lack access to broadband, compared to only 2.1 percent of Americans living in urban areas.²⁶⁴ Federal assistance is needed to ensure that rural communities can live with the same standards and opportunities available in more urban areas of the country.

In response to the lagging deployment of broadband in many rural areas, in 2001 and 2002 Congress and the Bush Administration initiated pilot broadband loan and grant programs within the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) at the USDA.²⁶⁵ Rural Utilities Programs provide a variety of loans and grants to build and expand broadband networks. The farm bill has also played an important role in establishing these RUS loan and grant programs. For example, the 2014 Farm Bill amended the Rural Electrification Act of 1936, which traditionally provided electricity and telephone lines to rural areas, to provide funding for broadband, distance education, and telehealth services through the Telecommunications Infrastructure Loans & Loan Guarantees Program.²⁶⁶ Telehealth or telemedicine refer to the use of telecommunications technologies “to support and promote long-distance clinical health care, patient and professional health-related education, public health and health administration.”²⁶⁷

The Farm Bill also reauthorized the Access to Broadband Telecommunication Services in Rural Areas Program and established loan and grant programs, such as the Gigabit Network Pilot Program, to support construction of broadband facilities in underserved rural areas.²⁶⁸ Rural communities are increasingly relying on telemedicine or telehealth to deliver healthcare due to the less dense populations in



these areas, making broadband a critical tool to delivering healthcare to rural communities. The next farm bill presents Congress with an important opportunity to reauthorize and fund these critical Title VI broadband programs.

LEGISLATIVE OPPORTUNITY

Maintain rural broadband loan and grant programs to enable access to telemedicine services

Funding for Rural Development Title broadband loan and grant programs should be, at minimum, maintained at current levels, and ideally increased. Access to the internet is essential for employment, education, and receiving medical care.²⁶⁹ Because geographic distances between patients and providers are primary barriers to healthcare access in rural areas, the use of technology, via telemedicine, is an important tool to expand access to and improve the quality of healthcare for populations living in rural communities.²⁷⁰ Telemedicine services can reduce travel burdens for patients and mitigate shortages of healthcare professionals in rural areas.²⁷¹ Reliable access to broadband is essential to implementing technologies to improve healthcare access.²⁷²

Rural Development Title programs have an opportunity to make a significant impact in bringing rural communities' broadband access in line with the rest of the country. For example, recent Rural Development Titles included a new Rural Gigabit Network Pilot Program, incentivizing network providers to provide "ultra-high speed service" to more rural residents through grants, loans, or loan guarantees.²⁷³ Although the 2014 Farm Bill authorized \$10 million for each year FY2014-2018 for the pilot program, Congress never appropriated any funds for the program.²⁷⁴ Access to broadband and modern telecommunications systems is a critical step to ensuring rural communities have the tools to access healthcare and compete in an increasingly global and networked economy. Congress should therefore reauthorize these programs and provide mandatory funding in

the next farm bill.

RECOMMENDATION



Improve health outcomes of low-income individuals living with serious diseases by establishing a Food Is Medicine pilot

Increasing evidence demonstrates that proper nutrition not only helps prevent a number of diseases, but is an essential part of treatment and management of serious illness.²⁷⁵ Chronically ill people living in low-income households face extreme challenges accessing foods recommended by health professionals. These medical challenges are compounded when the household is food insecure, as there is an added urgency to procure food that is not merely adequate for satiety, but necessary to help ill individuals with recovery.

Medically appropriate food, also known as medically-tailored food or therapeutic food, is defined as meals or food packages designed by a Registered Dietitian or other nutrition professional to be appropriate for someone with one or more specific health conditions and special health-related dietary needs. Such health conditions include chronic illnesses such as cancer, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, renal disease, chronic heart failure, Multiple Sclerosis, and Alzheimer's. Research attests that the provision of medically appropriate food can have a significant impact on health outcomes and may lower costs of care for individuals living with chronic illness.²⁷⁶ In particular, the provision of medically appropriate meals or food packages has been shown in small studies to be effective at improving clinical outcomes, reducing the number and length of hospitalizations, and affecting lifestyle behaviors such as medication adherence and substance use.²⁷⁷

In one study, the provision of medically



appropriate meals to people at acute nutritional risk living with a serious chronic disease led to significant decreases in overall mean monthly healthcare costs and inpatient costs, as well as reduced cost and frequency of hospital admissions and length of hospital stays compared to a control group.²⁷⁸ In another study, improvements in health outcomes occurred when medically-tailored meals and snacks were provided to patients with HIV and/or type 2 diabetes.²⁷⁹ The provision of medically-tailored food was associated with an increase in food security among participants, and decreases in depressive symptoms, binge drinking, diabetes distress, and the need to sacrifice food for healthcare or healthcare for food.²⁸⁰ The same study showed evidence of increased consumption of fruits and vegetables, increased adherence to antiretroviral therapy for participants with HIV, and increased diabetes self-management for participants with type 2 diabetes.²⁸¹

The entities providing the medically-tailored food in these studies were community-based nutrition resource providers, such as meal-delivery programs and food banks that had the capacity to design and distribute therapeutic meals and food packages. The farm bill provides a significant opportunity to support this vital safety net of nutrition resource providers, as they provide a specialized and much-needed service for some of the most vulnerable members of their communities; capitalize on compelling early data on health outcomes and healthcare costs and add to the body of research on the impact of therapeutic nutrition on disease; and connect low-income individuals living with

chronic disease to the critical nutrition resources they need.

LEGISLATIVE OPPORTUNITY

Institute a Food is Medicine pilot program that supports and rigorously evaluates the provision of medically-tailored food to low-income people living with certain serious diseases

Congress should establish a Food is Medicine Pilot in the next farm bill that aims to improve health outcomes and lower healthcare costs of seriously ill, low-income individuals. The pilot would connect individuals to nutritious food that is medically appropriate for their health conditions. Congress should provide funding to community-based nutrition resource organizations to provide medically-appropriate meals or food packages to low-income people living with serious health conditions. To assess the Food is Medicine Pilot's impact and to inform future discussions on its expansion and improvement, the pilot should also rigorously evaluate the impact of providing therapeutic nutrition on these individuals' health outcomes and healthcare costs.

The Food is Medicine Pilot would be a critical and innovative step toward improving the health of some of the most vulnerable populations by facilitating access to healthy and medically-appropriate food. This innovative program is an opportunity to reduce healthcare costs while improving health outcomes for low-income individuals living with the most complex and costly diseases.



ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Food Security Status of U.S. Households in 2016*, U.S. DEP'T OF AGRIC., ECON. RES. SERV., <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx> (last updated Oct. 4, 2017).
- ² DOUG O'BRIEN ET AL., *HUNGER IN AMERICA: THE DEFINITIONS, SCOPE, CAUSE, HISTORY AND STATUS OF THE PROBLEM OF HUNGER IN THE UNITED STATES 3* (2004), <http://www.hungercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Hunger-in-America-Americas-Second-Harvest.pdf>.
- ³ *Id.*
- ⁴ *Agricultural Technology*, U.S. DEP'T OF AGRIC., NAT'L INST. OF FOOD & AGRIC., <http://nifa.usda.gov/topic/agriculture-technology> (last visited Mar. 22, 2018).
- ⁵ *Id.*
- ⁶ *Food Security Status of U.S. Households in 2016*, *supra* note 1.
- ⁷ The term “food insecurity” is often used alongside the term “hunger.” Hunger refers to an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity. It is a “potential consequence of food insecurity, that because of prolonged, involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation.” This report will refer exclusively to food insecurity, while recognizing the significant consequences of hunger and the need for more adequate methods to measure hunger nationally. *Definitions of Food Security*, U.S. DEP'T OF AGRIC., ECON. RES. SERV., <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security/> (last updated Oct. 4, 2017).
- ⁸ *Id.*
- ⁹ FEEDING AMERICA, *RURAL HUNGER FACT SHEET* (2017), <http://www.feedingamerica.org/assets/pdfs/fact-sheets/rural-hunger-fact-sheet.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ DOUG O'BRIEN ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 17.
- ¹¹ *Id.* at 3.
- ¹² *Id.* at 3, 17.
- ¹³ Agricultural Act of 2014, Pub. L. No. 113-79, 128 Stat. 649.
- ¹⁴ *Summary of the Major Laws of the Department of Labor*, DEP'T OF LABOR, <http://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/majorlaws#wageandhour> (last visited Mar. 22, 2018).
- ¹⁵ *Key Statistics & Graphics*, U.S. DEP'T OF AGRIC., ECON. RES. SERV., <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics/> (last updated Oct. 4, 2017).
- ¹⁶ *Id.*
- ¹⁷ See e.g., *f\$160 Billion: The Health Costs of Hunger in the United States*, BREAD FOR THE WORLD INST., <http://hungerreport.org/costofhunger/> (last visited Mar. 22, 2018); CTR. FOR AM. PROGRESS, *HUNGER IN AMERICA: SUFFERING WE ALL PAY FOR* (2011), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/reports/2011/10/05/10504/hunger-in-america/>.
- ¹⁸ CTR. FOR AM. PROGRESS, *supra* note 17. To analyze the cost burden of domestic hunger, the study used the Federal Food Security Module, the standard for measuring food deprivation. This module is conducted by the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Commerce's Bureau of the Census annually as a supplement to the Current Population Survey.
- ¹⁹ *Food Distribution: FDD - History and Background*, U.S. DEP'T OF AGRIC., FOOD & NUTRITION SERV., <https://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/fdd-history-and-background> (last visited Mar. 22, 2018).
- ²⁰ *Id.*
- ²¹ O'BRIEN ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 4.
- ²² See generally, JANET POPPENDIECK, *BREADLINES KNEE DEEP IN WHEAT: FOOD ASSISTANCE IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986); DOUG O'BRIEN ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 4.
- ²³ O'BRIEN ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 4.
- ²⁴ *The History of SNAP*, SNAP TO HEALTH, <http://www.snaptohealth.org/snap/the-history-of-snap> (last visited Mar. 22, 2018).
- ²⁵ *Id.*
- ²⁶ *Id.*
- ²⁷ *A Short History of SNAP*, U.S. DEP'T OF AGRIC., FOOD & NUTRITION SERV., <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap> (last visited Mar. 22, 2018).
- ²⁸ U.S. DEP'T OF AGRIC., FOOD & NUTRITION SERV., *SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM PARTICIPATION AND COSTS*, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/pd/SNAPsummary.pdf> (last updated Mar. 9, 2018).



²⁹ In addition to SNAP, several other supplemental nutrition programs address food insecurity in the U.S. These include, for example, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Each of these programs addresses unique issues of food insecurity for different populations, but they are authorized by independent legislation (not the farm bill) and so are not addressed here.

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