



Washington, DC | 2021 Policy Agenda

In the District of Columbia, Feeding America estimates that the food insecurity rate will have reached 14 percent by the end of 2020. This is a nearly 30 percent increase since 2018 in the number of individuals who will struggle to access their next meal.¹ Within the District, the Capital Area Food Bank projects that the number of food insecure individuals will reach almost 112,000, which accounts for nearly one-fifth of our clients throughout the Washington metropolitan region.² Although we are on track to distribute food for more than 13 million meals in the nation's capital during our current fiscal year, we are asking for the support of policymakers to reduce the level of food insecurity. The requests below represent our agenda and recommendations as to how the District government can reduce the burdens of hunger and poverty over the coming year.

Executive Summary

2021 will provide policymakers with the opportunity to enact changes that determine the pace of recovery, the strength of the rebuild in our region, and the immediacy of the impact on those in need. Below is an overview of the food bank's requests for the District.

In the last decade, the Food Bank has distributed just over 115 million meals in Washington, DC. It is clear that we must do more for our clients than simply provide food.

GIVE SNAP A RAISE: INCREASE THE MINIMUM BENEFIT

SNAP has proven to be one of the most effective anti-hunger programs in the United States. The program is designed to ease hardship and rapidly respond to economic downturns. Unfortunately, it has been documented that SNAP benefits are insufficient to meet individuals' dietary health needs.³ This can be especially true in Washington, DC, which is estimated by the Council for Community and Economic Research to have the sixth-highest cost of living in the United States.⁴

Although the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has issued guidance allowing states to provide the maximum SNAP benefit (emergency allotment) to all households not already receiving the maximum through the end of December 2020, it is unclear how long USDA will allow states to exercise this authority.⁵ What's more, we do not anticipate emergency

¹ The Impact of Coronavirus on Food Security," Feeding America, October 20, 2020, <https://www.feedingamericaaction.org/the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-food-insecurity/>.

² Since 2011, Feeding America, the nation's network organization of over 200 food banks, has been using public data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics to assess levels of food insecurity across the nation. Its calculations, which are based on the statistical relationships between food insecurity and its determinants [poverty, unemployment, median income, demographic and household characteristics, food prices, etc.], are released in an annual report called Map the Meal Gap. In May 2020, Feeding America released county-level projections of food insecurity over the course of the coming year based on three possible scenarios of increasingly dire changes to unemployment and poverty rates as a result of the pandemic; this data point is reflective of these projections.

³ Steven Carlson, "More Adequate SNAP Benefits Would Help Millions of Participants Better Afford Food," *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, July 30, 2019, <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/7-30-19fa.pdf>.

⁴ "Quarter 1, 2019 Cost of Living Index Released," *The Council for Community and Economic Research*, <http://coli.org/quarter-1-2019-cost-of-living-index-released/>.

⁵ United States Department of Agriculture, Memorandum, April 21, 2020, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNAP-COVID-EmergencyAllotmentsPhase2Guidance.pdf>.



allotments will be permitted through late spring, given the anticipated timelines of vaccine distribution. ***Therefore, we request the District of Columbia increase the minimum SNAP benefit from \$30 to \$45 a month to prepare for the absence of federal emergency allotments, and in response to the ongoing effects of the pandemic.***

ENFORCE AND ADMINISTER THE “BREAKFAST AFTER THE BELL” MODEL

Since 2010, DC has mandated that schools increase student school meal participation by requiring a practice called “Breakfast After the Bell.” This practice allows for breakfast to be served within the regular school day through extended breaks or direct meal delivery into the classroom. This service model has been demonstrated to reduce stigma and increase participation in the school breakfast program—and when students eat breakfast, academic and behavioral performance improves.

In 2018, the Healthy Students Amendment Act was passed due to less-than-optimal implementation of this model across schools throughout the District; this legislation incorporated additional oversight to certify that schools were taking the steps required to allow students to eat breakfast within the scheduled school day. Unfortunately, participation is still not at the levels required by law. ***We request that the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) administer more transparent guidelines and enforcement mechanisms for schools that are still operating under traditional breakfast models, and offer technical assistance to schools having difficulty with implementation.***

INCREASE SNAP ACCESSIBILITY FOR RESIDENTS WITH PHYSICAL OR TRANSIT-ORIENTED LIMITATIONS

Although SNAP has made great strides since its inception, there are still opportunities for the District of Columbia to further modernize the program, so that all participants are able to utilize benefits in the manner most suitable for their preferences, limitations, cultural preferences, or locations. ***We request the Council formally enact the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program, and we request that the Economic Security Administration continue to enable all eligible retailers for the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot.***

AMEND THE QUALIFIED SUPERMARKET TAX INCENTIVE TO BETTER INCENTIVIZE DEVELOPMENTS IN WARDS 7 AND 8

In 2017, the DC Policy Center estimated that 11 percent of the nation’s capital was considered to be a food desert.^{6 7} The lack of reasonable proximity to healthy and nutritious foods is certainly concentrated in Wards 7 and 8, where an estimated 150,000 residents only have access to three grocery

“There are only two grocery stores in Ward 8. If you don't have transportation, it can be really difficult to access proper nutrition. The quality and accessibility of the food east of the river is lesser than it is elsewhere in the District. We have limited options for fresh fruits and vegetables, and they are sold at much higher prices here. In all honesty, something should have been done about this long ago.” -Marvena Alston, Washington, D.C. Client Leadership Council | Class of 2020-2021

⁶ Randy Smith, “Food access in DC is deeply connected to poverty and transportation,” *DC Policy Center*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/food-access-dc-deeply-connected-poverty-transportation/>

⁷ In the DC Policy Center analysis [cited in footnote 14], the author based the characterization of a food desert on the John Hopkins’ Center for A Livable Future’s definition, but amended to better reflect the geographic and demographic landscape of DC; defined as: an area where: the walking distance to a supermarket or grocery store is more than 0.5 miles; over 40 percent of households have no vehicle available; and the median household income is less than 185 percent of the federal poverty level for a family of four.



stores.⁸ The DC Council took action in 2000 and 2010 through the FEED DC Act, which offered tax incentives to “qualified supermarkets” that establish a presence in areas with lower food access throughout the District. Although the intent of the legislation was sound, the methodology used to determine where in the District a “qualified supermarket” could establish itself was not targeted enough to have a significant impact in the areas of greatest need. *We request that the process of drawing new zones, and of developing a new methodology for creating those zones, is subject to transparent and open public input that includes the voices of those most affected by food insecurity.*

ESTABLISH A UTILIZATION COMMISSION AND INITIATE OUTREACH CAMPAIGN TO ACTIVATE FEDERAL RESOURCES AND PROGRAMS

Estimated revenue in the District is expected to decline by more than \$1 billion between fiscal years 2020 and 2022, while simultaneously, an entirely new population finds itself facing the harsh realities of food insecurity and economic strife.⁹ With less revenue to fund health and human services, and the timeliness and depth of congressional stimulus uncertain, *we request the mayor take two steps:*

- 1. Establish a Utilization Commission of experts and policymakers to make recommendations as to how best federal social welfare resources can be used; and*
- 2. Immediately initiate a coordinated outreach campaign to increase the public’s understanding and awareness of benefits they need and deserve, specifically as it relates to the timeliness of economic impact payments (EIP) and Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT).*

INCORPORATE FOOD SECURITY METRICS INTO STRATEGIC PLANNING AND AGENCY PRIORITIES¹⁰

The District’s comprehensive planning apparatus sets the direction of agencies and investments through the tone and template laid out in strategic planning documentation. The food bank requests that DC underscore the urgency of food insecurity by incorporating the issue into all relevant administrative outlets, agencies, and regulations so that the issue of hunger is considered and prioritized as resources are being allocated and disbursed. *Specifically, we request that the Sustainable DC 2.0 Plan be amended to emphasize food insecurity. The document currently focuses mostly on food waste and urban farming. In addition, we request that agency leads utilize Table 3 within the full policy recommendation document to guide the incorporation of food security metrics into yearly departmental planning.*

EXPAND THE DC EARNED INCOME TAX CREDIT TO IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

DC, in addition to 28 states and Puerto Rico, builds upon this tax credit, which has been proven to reduce poverty, encourage work, support the cognitive development of children, and disproportionately benefit

⁸ Randy Smith, *op. cit.*

⁹ States Grappling With Hit to Tax Collections,” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, November 6, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/states-grappling-with-hit-to-tax-collections>.

¹⁰ We recommend that the county use our [Food Security Playbook](#) as a resource to identify various metrics for inclusion.



communities of color.^{11 12} The DC EITC, based on the federal EITC, precludes immigrant workers who pay their fair share of taxes from receiving this benefit, unjustly penalizing these residents. ***We request that the Council enhance the DC EITC's impact by allowing all residents with Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITIN) to receive the credit.***¹³ As of 2015, the Economic Security Project estimated that 5,390 families would receive nearly \$5 million if DC were to expand the EITC to ITIN filers.¹⁴

PILOT FREE SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM WITH HIGHER POVERTY THRESHOLD FOR ELIGIBILITY

Eligibility standards for free and reduced-price school meals are set by the USDA. In order to benefit, income for a family of four must be below \$48,470 a year (185 percent of the federal poverty guidelines).¹⁵ These standards are applied uniformly across the country, regardless of the estimated cost of living in a given district or county. In DC, the cost-of-living-index is the sixth highest of any other metropolitan area in the country, nearly 160 percent higher than the national average.¹⁶

As a result, thousands of families in the District are spending their money on school meals when those resources could be dedicated to housing, medical bills, school supplies, or overdue expenses. ***We request that DC Public Schools enact a three-year pilot program to provide free and reduced-price meals to eligible families with incomes between 185 to 300 percent of the federal poverty guidelines. We request that the Chancellor of DC Public Schools, along with the Council, facilitate a holistic public input process to decide which schools to include in a pilot.***

¹¹ Chuck Marr et al., "EITC and Child Tax Credit Promote Work, Reduce Poverty, and Support Children's Development, Research Finds." *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, October 1, 2015, https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/eitc-and-child-tax-credit-promote-work-reduce-poverty-and-support-childrens#_ftn1.

¹² Chuck Marr et al., *op. cit.*

¹³ ITIN holders include undocumented workers, student visa holders, some family members of workers with employment visas, and some survivors of domestic violence.

¹⁴ "End the tax penalty against immigrant workers," *Community Change*, p. 1, April 2020, https://www.economicsecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/emp_ITIN_EITC.pdf.

¹⁵ Department of Agriculture, "Child Nutrition Programs Income Eligibility Guidelines," p. 16052, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-03-20/pdf/2020-05982.pdf>.

¹⁶ Quarter 1, 2019 Cost of Living Index Released," *op. cit.*