



Executive and Congressional | 2021 Policy Agenda

For over 40 years, the Capital Area Food Bank has been the backbone of the Greater Washington region's hunger relief infrastructure, serving as the largest provider of food to organizations throughout the nation's capital, the two largest counties in Maryland, and Northern Virginia. Throughout this time, we have responded to several crises— none more significant than the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on data released by Feeding America in May 2020, the food bank estimates that our region has seen a 48 to 60 percent increase in the number of individuals experiencing food insecurity through the end of 2020; this equates to nearly 600,000 people in Greater Washington struggling to put food on the table.

Although we are on track to distribute the food for nearly 50 million meals by the end of fiscal year 2021, we are asking for the support of policymakers to help meet the surge in demand. It will take all of us— across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors—to holistically support the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities. The requests below represent our agenda and recommendations as to how the federal government can take steps to reduce the burdens of hunger and poverty over the coming year.

Executive Summary

Below is an overview of the food bank's requests for the 117th Congress and executive branch of the federal government.

In the last decade, the Food Bank has distributed nearly **368 million meals** to the Metropolitan Washington region. It is clear that we must do more for our clients than simply provide food.

INCREASE THE MAXIMUM SNAP BENEFIT BY 15 PERCENT

As one of the most effective anti-hunger programs in history, SNAP is designed to ease hardship and respond rapidly to economic downturns. Unfortunately, the methodology to determine benefit levels has not been updated since the 1970s, and both the depth and breadth of food insecurity in the region is worsening. Within our service area, there are now 200,000 to 250,000 more individuals struggling to access their next meal than in 2019. It is clear our clients in the region are in need, as food insecurity rates have skyrocketed and unemployment numbers have more than doubled.¹

This crisis has compounded existing inequity. In fact, the Census Pulse Survey concluded that within our region, food insecurity is twice as high in households of color than in white households, and more than one-third of residents without a high school degree did not have enough to eat within the last seven days.²

*We request that Congress enact an increase of 15 percent in the maximum SNAP benefit; this expansion would amount to about \$25 more per person in food assistance per month, or just under \$100 per month for a family of four.*³ If enacted, this expansion would alleviate food insecurity among

¹ United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Databases, Tables and Calculators by Subject," https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LAUDV114789400000003?amp%253bdata_tool=XGtableandoutput_view=dataandinclude_graphs=true.

² United States Census Bureau, *Household Pulse Survey Data Tables*, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/data.html>.

³ Stacy Dean et al., "SNAP Benefit Boost Would Get Needed Food Aid To The Poorest Participants, Who Have Been Left Out," *Center for Budget and Policy Priorities*, September 16, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-benefit-boost-would-get-needed-food-aid-to-the-poorest->



households experiencing the greatest need, and it would increase the benefit for more than 16 million people—greater than the emergency allotments granted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).⁴

EXPAND SNAP ELIGIBILITY TO COLLEGE STUDENTS AND VETERANS

The SNAP program has incredible reach to support those experiencing poverty and hunger. Nearly two-thirds of all recipients are children, elderly, or disabled, and it is estimated that more than half of all beneficiaries are currently employed.⁵ Despite the program’s success, and the extensive role it plays in the lives of our clients and in the economies of our communities, the government can still amend its rules to better respond to the needs of groups that are often left out of such anti-hunger programs:

COLLEGE STUDENTS

In late 2018, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released the findings of the first federal report on college student hunger. It estimated that more than 30 percent of college students may struggle with food insecurity, and that more than 2 million at-risk students potentially eligible for SNAP are not utilizing benefits on an annual basis.⁶ If the GAO’s estimates are correct, an estimated 127,000 college students in our region were struggling with food insecurity before the pandemic.⁷ Currently, students enrolled half-time or more are not eligible for SNAP unless they meet specific exemptions. *We request that Congress take steps to help students who are working to better themselves and their future by:*

- *Expanding SNAP eligibility to low-income students who are former servicemembers, in foster care, or experiencing homelessness;*
- *Lowering the 20-hour per-week work requirement to 10 hours; and*
- *Requiring the Department of Education to notify low-income, Pell Grant-eligible students of their SNAP eligibility.*

We believe this policy change would provide important support for students seeking to reverse the constraints of intergenerational poverty by obtaining a college degree.

SERVICEMEMBERS

As with many Americans, military families typically rely on two incomes. In moments of crisis and economic downturn, these households are forced to choose paying rent or making mortgage payments overpaying for food, utilities, or medical bills. The pandemic has caused particular hardship among our servicemembers. In a survey of military families in May 2020, the COVID-19 *Military Support Initiative’s Pain-Point Survey* found that 17 percent of military spouses either lost

[participants#:~:text=The%20House%2Dpassed%20Heroes%20Act,many%20households%20face%20severe%20hardship.](#)

⁴ Stacy Dean et al., *op cit*.

⁵ “Policy Basics: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),” *Center for Budget and Policy Priorities*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/policy-basics-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

⁶ United States Government Accountability Office, “Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits,” December 2018, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/696313.pdf>.

⁷ United States Census Bureau, “2014-2018 ACS 5-Year Estimates,” <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/technical-documentation/table-and-geography-changes/2018/5-year.html>.



their job or suffered a significant reduction in hours worked due to the pandemic.⁸ This can put lower-ranking military personnel, especially in larger households, in a state of food insecurity. Unfortunately, the military's monthly basic allowance for housing (BAH) nearly universally disqualifies servicemembers and their families living off base from receiving SNAP, because a technical nuance counts BAH as income.⁹ *We request that BAH, like other comparable housing subsidies, be excluded from income eligibility determinations for SNAP.*

PREVENT THE USDA "COMMODITIES CLIFF" AND EXPAND FOOD PURCHASING POWER

Feeding America estimates that in January 2021, food banks across the country will see a "commodities cliff," where 50 percent of foods normally sourced from the USDA will not be available.¹⁰ This is expected to come as the pandemic continues to cause record demand for emergency food that is up to 60 percent higher than the year prior. The cliff will occur as a result of a number of programs ending by the end of 2020:

- The trade-related Food Purchase and Distribution Program that provided \$1.2 billion and \$1.4 billion of food purchases in FY2019 and FY2020, respectively;¹¹
- \$400 million in The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) funding for state agencies through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act;¹²
- \$4.5 billion through the Farmers to Families Food Box Program; and¹³
- \$450 million in TEFAP entitlement funding through the CARES Act.¹⁴

We request that the USDA exercise its authority to purchase at least \$600 million more worth of food through TEFAP bonus allocations for the remainder of the federal FY21. The food bank estimates this amount will ameliorate the harm from the commodities cliff and position the USDA to continue supporting food banks through FY22.

PROVIDE ECONOMIC STIMULUS PAYMENTS TO VULNERABLE GROUPS EXCLUDED FROM THE CARES ACT

⁸ "Pain Points Poll Demographics," *Blue Star Families*, https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PPP-Wks1-10_Wrap-up_Part-1.pdf.

⁹ Frances Tilney Burke and Angela Rachidi, "Many low-income military families need SNAP, but can't overcome an eligibility hurdle," *Military Times*, May 9, 2020, <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/many-low-income-military-families-need-snap-but-cant-overcome-an-eligibility-hurdle/>.

¹⁰ *USDA Commodities 'Cliff' Food Update: Planning for Current and Future Projections*, Presentation; Feeding America: October 26, 2020.

¹¹ "The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP): Background and Funding," *Congressional Research Service*, January 8, 2020, [https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R45408.html#:~:text=Commodity%20Food%20Support,Entitlement%20Commodities,\[P.L.%20115%2D334\]](https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R45408.html#:~:text=Commodity%20Food%20Support,Entitlement%20Commodities,[P.L.%20115%2D334]).

¹² United States Department of Agriculture, "Additional Information on FY20 Funding Sources for TEFAP," <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tefap/additional-information-fy-2020-funding-sources>.

¹³ Laura Reiley and Greg Jaffe, "A \$4.5 billion Trump food program is running out of money early, leaving families hungry and food assistance charities scrambling," *The Washington Post*, December 8, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/12/08/trump-farmers-to-families-food-box-program-strapped/>

¹⁴ "Food Banks and Other Emergency Feeding Organizations: Federal Aid and the Response to COVID-19," *Congressional Research Service*, June 25, 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46432>.



In late March, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act included direct stimulus payments to millions of Americans in the face of skyrocketing unemployment and widespread public health concerns. Unfortunately, certain groups were excluded from receiving these rebates of up to \$1,200 each, including immigrants, college students, and adult dependents with disabilities.

IMMIGRANTS

All eligible individuals living in a household with a spouse, child, or dependent without a Social Security number were excluded from the payment.¹⁵ This approach in the CARES Act omitted an estimated 15 million individuals in immigrant families, many of whom work in industries—such as hospitality, health care, and labor—that cause them to face regular exposure to COVID-19.¹⁶ *We request that Congress provide future stimulus payments to all immigrant families who did not have the opportunity to benefit previously.*¹⁷

TAX DEPENDENTS: COLLEGE STUDENTS AND ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES

The CARES Act also left out a number of low- to modest-income groups, including college students, adult dependents, and adults with disabilities. *We request that future rounds of federal stimulus provide these groups the economic stimulus rebates they deserve.*

EXTEND UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE BENEFITS IN CARES ACT

By extending periods of relief and providing additional benefits, the CARES Act enabled a number of improvements to the unemployment insurance program that supports individuals affected by pandemic-related economic shifts.¹⁸ Through the end of 2020, the provisions in the CARES Act will support a range of people who have lost work during the pandemic. As of October 2020, more than 170,000 individuals in our service area were benefiting from extended periods of unemployment benefits.¹⁹ *We request that extended time frames and additional unemployment compensation benefits be provided through the duration of this crisis.*

“I was working in a restaurant when the pandemic started. I didn’t have any source of income without my job. The money that unemployment insurance provided helped me not to worry about necessary expenses while I wasn’t working. This safety net made the pandemic a lot less painful for me than it could have been.” -Joussell Lopez, Alexandria, Virginia, Client Leadership Council | Class of 2020-2021

¹⁵ Chuck Marr et al., “Future Stimulus Should Include Immigrants and Dependents Previously Left Out, Mandate Automatic Payments,” *Center for Budget and Policy Priorities*, May 6, 2020, https://www.cbpp.org/research/economy/future-stimulus-should-include-immigrants-and-dependents-previously-left-out#_ftn1.

¹⁶ Jeffrey F. Passel and D’Vera Cohn, “U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Total Dips to Lowest Level in a Decade,” *Pew Research Center*, November 27, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2019/03/Pew-Research-Center-2018-11-27-U-S-Unauthorized-Immigrants-Total-Dips-Updated-2019-06-25.pdf>.

¹⁷ These groups include adults who do not have SSNs, even in instances where their children or spouse has an SSN; undocumented children; and individuals who have met the standard necessary for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals but have not yet obtained an SSN. *Chuck Marr et al., op.cit.*

¹⁸ “Policy Basics: Unemployment Insurance,” *Center for Budget and Policy Priorities*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/economy/policy-basics-unemployment-insurance>.

¹⁹ United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, *op. cit.*



EXPAND WIC ELIGIBILITY TO AGE 6

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) serves as a lifeline for low-income families by providing nutritious foods, nutrition education, breastfeeding support, and referrals to health care and social services for pregnant women, new mothers, infants, and children under the age of 5.²⁰ The program has grown to be a vital component of the food safety net, as it is estimated that “more than half of all infants and more than a quarter of young children, pregnant women, and postpartum women (who are eligible) participate.”²¹ The program supports a healthy foundation up until age 5, at which point policymakers presume children will enter public school and then begin to receive school breakfast and lunch. For some children, however, this creates a gap in coverage between their 5th birthday and their enrollment in kindergarten. *We request that Congress close this “WIC gap” by extending WIC eligibility to age 6.*

EXERCISE USDA DEMONSTRATION AUTHORITY AND ENHANCE INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION TO INCREASE USAGE AND EFFICACY OF SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAMS

The U.S. government’s agencies administer many anti-poverty and anti-hunger programs intended to alleviate the impacts of economic hardship. In particular, the USDA – although often thought of as an agricultural and farming-oriented entity – dedicates the majority of its resources to alleviating hunger and food insecurity for those in need. More than two-thirds of the department’s annual outlays of nearly \$150 billion are used to operate the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the agency within USDA that oversees WIC, SNAP, the school meals program, and at least six other anti-hunger programs.^{22 23} SNAP alone served 43 million Americans as of April 2020.

With this reach and scale, the USDA is uniquely positioned to enact innovative, interagency solutions that would unify basic support services across housing, healthcare, income support, education, disability, and utility assistance. In fact, it has already created a template for doing so by taking on several initiatives that have knocked down administrative silos and improved the quality of our social welfare system’s response, including:

- **Categorical eligibility**, which streamlines application and income standards between programs such as SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and school meals;
- **Combined application projects**, which enable data sharing between the USDA and the Social Security Administration to ensure eligible disabled beneficiaries are also receiving SNAP and other programs; and

²⁰ United States Department of Agriculture, “WIC Program Total Participation”, July 10, 2020, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/27wilatest-7.pdf>.

²¹ Michael Martinez-Schiferl, “WIC Participants and Their Growing Need for Coverage,” *Urban Institute*, April 2012, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/25306/412549-WIC-Participants-and-Their-Growing-Need-for-Coverage.PDF>.

²² United States Department of Agriculture, “USDA, FY2021 Budget Summary,” <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/usda-fy2021-budget-summary.pdf>.

²³ These programs include: Child and Adult Care Food Program; Commodity Supplemental Food Program; Farmers Market Nutrition Program; Disaster Assistance; Food Distribution on Indian Reservations; Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program; National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs; Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program; Summer Food Service; TEFAP; USDA Foods; and WIC.



- **Direct certification**, which automatically provides free school meals to families receiving SNAP, Head Start, Medicaid, or TANF.

The USDA's continued innovation, collaboration, and leadership among agencies and programs can help millions of Americans in need improve their lives. *We request the USDA reimagine its role, and act not only as the chief anti-hunger agency, but also as the chief convener of federal agencies such as Housing and Urban Development, Education, Health and Human Services, and the Social Security Administration. By doing so, it will continue to break down barriers and build up a social safety net that enhances the interconnectedness of basic necessities such as housing, food, and health insurance.*