

# WASHINGTON, DC 2024 Policy Agenda



For over 43 years, the Capital Area Food Bank has served as the backbone of the region's hunger relief infrastructure. In FY23, the Food Bank distributed more than 58 million meals to neighbors in need across the DMV. However, we know that ending hunger takes more than good food today; advocating for policies and programs that enable long-term food security, financial empowerment, and health equity is an essential aspect of our commitment to building brighter futures. The following policy priorities— informed by data, community partners, and those we serve—represent impactful interventions that the Food Bank will advocate for in 2024 to end hunger and its root causes.



## Utilize the Food Access Fund to Increase Grocery Store Access in Wards 5, 7, and 8

Many neighborhoods in the District, particularly those east of the Anacostia River, continue to struggle with access to full-service grocery stores. As a result, many of our clients and neighbors have little access to healthy, affordable food. CAFB worked very closely with the Deputy Mayor's Office of Economic Development to see through the creation of the Food Access Fund in FY22; this included a three-year, \$58.67 million capital investment to incentivize restaurants and grocery stores to break ground in Wards 7 and 8. To date, the fund has invested more than \$24 million in food access points, but the vast majority of recipient businesses are restaurants rather than grocery stores. **We request that the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development continue to support the Food Access Fund but prioritize the inclusion of full-service grocery stores in future rounds of funding.**



## Ensure Administrative Funding for Summer EBT

During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) operated the Pandemic-Electronic Benefits Transfer (Pandemic EBT) program. Pandemic EBT allowed states to issue benefits cards to children who otherwise would have accessed free or reduced-price meals at school but were precluded from doing so, either because of COVID-related closures or closures during the summer months. This program was one of many authorized to respond to the effects of the pandemic, yet even accounting for that more robust safety net, studies showed Pandemic EBT reduced food insufficiency among SNAP households and the share of families in SNAP households where children experienced very low food security.

When the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency ended, so did Pandemic EBT. However, beginning in summer 2024, states will have the ability to operate Summer EBT, which is a new, permanent program Congress authorized in December 2022. Under Summer EBT, states will be able to provide \$40 per month during the summer to all students eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. However, unlike during Pandemic EBT, states now need to commit to a 50% match of administrative funding to be eligible to participate in Summer EBT. **We request that the District budget administrative funding in an amount sufficient to meet the 50% match requirement and commit to doing so each year moving forward.**



## Fund the No Senior Hungry Omnibus Act of 2021

The District of Columbia has a rate of senior hunger higher than all but two states: more than 11 percent of seniors in the District struggle to access their next meal. The No Senior Hungry Omnibus Amendment Act of 2021 became law in March 2023 but was not funded in DC's FY24 budget. The Act calls for the creation of an interagency taskforce and a communications plan to shape a District-wide response to this problem and requires District agencies to make several administrative changes to improve participation in SNAP and other public benefits programs among seniors. **We request that the District fully fund the No Senior Hungry Omnibus Amendment Act of 2021's local obligations to drastically reduce food insecurity among this population.**



## Improve Client, Agency, and Food Bank Experience Through The Emergency Food Assistance Program

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) is a federal program administered by the USDA to help alleviate food insecurity through the provision of free emergency food assistance. Through the program, the USDA purchases a variety of surplus agricultural commodities and distributes funds to states based on various metrics of need. States lean heavily on food banks to oversee the delivery and administration of commodities to smaller recipient agencies throughout their respective regions.

Based on our experience administering this program across three states and after leading an extensive effort to survey other multi-state food banks across the country, we made a series of recommendations to amend TEFAP to make it more streamlined, accessible, and beneficial for neighbors, partner agencies, and food banks. In 2023, we began to engage with Maryland's Department of Human Services and Virginia's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to discuss our findings and recommendations and will be working with DC Health, the new administering agency of TEFAP in DC, to align program functions and requirements across our service area in 2024.

### Increase Client Access

TEFAP's authorizing language and commensurate federal regulations require states to ensure that beneficiaries are "needy." Each state takes its own approach to assessing whether a client fits this criterion, often by calculating their percentage of poverty threshold or enrollment in social safety net programs; this equates to varying degrees of eligibility across states, for the same federal program. **We request that DC increase the neighbor income eligibility threshold to at least 200 percent of the federal poverty guideline and remove or loosen other restrictive requirements to increase access to and eligibility for the program.**

### Streamline Administrative Reporting Requirements

States have a significant amount of latitude to oversee, audit, and monitor TEFAP administration by food banks and participating agencies. However, based on conversations with food banks across the country, this degree of latitude results in widely different programmatic requirements, deadlines, technologies, and outcomes across the country. **We request that DC set standards for reporting, site reviews, and audits that are streamlined and uniform with other states in the DMV and Mid-Atlantic USDA Region.**

### Diversify Commodity Offerings and Allow for Food Bank Input

Food banks have very little autonomy over the types and quantities of food provided for distribution. This can make administration difficult, given that food banks are consistently adhering to nutrition ratio standards, ordering for a range of cultures and dietary needs, and offering a range of products to supplement other services and food items. Additionally, although food banks must abide by the administrative and operational requirements put forth by states within the state distribution plan, food banks often have little input into said plan. **We request that DC continue to incorporate practices to diversify commodity offerings that reflect the cultural and dietary needs of clients and continue allowing for requisite food bank input into its state distribution plan.**



### Provide Universal School Meals to DC Students

School meal programs have long been associated with a variety of positive outcomes, from improved attendance rates and standardized test scores to reduced overall food insecurity, and they were a vital component of the national response to COVID-19. Throughout the pandemic, federal waivers allowed all DC students to receive free meals at school. When those national flexibilities ended in the summer of 2022, students and families were forced to revert to completing forms and navigating the administrative processes of demonstrating their eligibility.

To ensure continued access to free meals at school, in January 2023, Councilmember Henderson introduced the Universal Free School Meals Amendment Act of 2023. As proposed, this bill would provide free school breakfast, lunch, and after-school snacks to all students at public, charter, and certain private schools in DC. **We were encouraged by the outpouring of support for the bill at a public hearing in November 2023 and call upon the Council to pass and fund the Universal Free School Meals Amendment Act of 2023 to ensure all students have access to free meals at DC schools every day.**



### Fund the Give SNAP A Raise Amendment Act of 2022

SNAP has proven to be one of the most effective anti-hunger programs in the United States. The program puts additional financial resources into the pockets of low-income individuals and households, supplementing monthly food budgets and reducing food insecurity by as much as 30%. During the pandemic, the federal government increased the average and maximum monthly benefits for SNAP recipients through “emergency allotments,” which provided at least 95 additional dollars each month to meet the nutritional needs of participating individuals and households. These increases were estimated by one study to have reduced child poverty by approximately 14% in states that made emergency allotments available to residents.

The Give SNAP a Raise Amendment Act of 2022 alleviates the SNAP gap in the District and incentivizes eligible households to participate in the program by providing a locally-funded increase of benefits for all recipients. The Act, which became law in March 2023, was funded only on a temporary basis between January 1 and September 30th, 2024. **We request that the District provide ongoing, non-lapsing funding for the Give SNAP a Raise Amendment Act of 2022 to increase the efficacy of the program and better align benefits with rising costs of living.**



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