

Nutrition Security Priorities for the 2023 Farm Bill

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) urges the following recommendations be implemented in the 2023 Farm Bill to mitigate hunger in the US, while simultaneously improving nutrition security.

Chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and stroke are the leading causes of death and disability in the United States.¹ Chronic disease not only impacts quality of life, but also has negative impacts on productivity, health care costs, and military readiness.^{2,3,4} One of several behavioral risk factors for chronic disease development is poor nutrition, and it is mediated by systemic and structural factors that inequitably impact certain subpopulations.

There are differences in accessing nutrient rich food items that vary by income and race and/or ethnicity. The inability to afford and access nutritiously dense food disproportionately impacts communities that are Black, Indigenous, Latine, and/or low-income.⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this grim reality and widened existing inequities.⁶ In 2020, 60 million individuals relied on the charitable food system, our nation's network of emergency feeding programs, compared to 40 million in 2019.⁷ For Black and Latine households who experience food insecurity, rates rose to more than two times that of white households.⁸ The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the largest of fifteen federal food assistance programs, saw an unprecedented 12% rise in caseloads.⁹

Unfortunately, the pandemic is not the only factor influencing the affordability of food. Consumers are experiencing the largest annual increase in the cost of groceries since 1981, with overall food prices increasing 13.1%.¹⁰ This overall increase includes a 38% increase in eggs, 16.6% increase in chicken, and 9.3% increase in fresh produce.¹¹

If wages continue to lag inflation prices, consumers will be forced to make significant cuts to their budget to afford necessities, such as food. While all consumers feel the burden, 33% of Black and Latine adults indicate they are having serious challenges affording food, compared with 21% of white adults; for Indigenous people, the number is even higher at 40%.¹² As adults and children in food insecure households are at greater risk of developing chronic disease, it is imperative to address both food and nutrition security at the federal level in order to support greater health equity across our communities.^{13,14,15}

The 2023 Farm Bill is a critical opportunity for Congress to address long-standing nutritional inequities, strengthen the food system infrastructure, and lower the burden of healthcare costs for millions of Americans.

CSPI's Top Priorities:

Increase purchasing power for nutritious foods

- At a minimum Congress should protect the update to the Thrifty Food Plan, and at best replace it with the Low-Cost Food Plan as the basis for SNAP allotments. The Low-Cost Food Plan is closer to the amount that low- and moderate-income families report needing to spend on food.¹⁶
- **Strengthen the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program by increasing overall funds to \$3 billion to continue national expansion in-store and online, reducing or eliminating the match requirement for more equitable distribution of funds and scalability, and allocating \$3 billion over five years to support integrating incentives directly onto the SNAP card to optimize redemption and reduce stigma.**

Improve the healthfulness of retail food environments

- **The USDA should explore ways to further improve retail environments to include stronger stocking standards to increase availability of foods in-store and online that align with the latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans.**
- Improve access to SNAP grocery delivery by reimbursing direct market operations and smaller, independent retailers for SNAP delivery and service fees, while requiring larger retailers and their e-commerce vendors to waive delivery and service fees for SNAP orders, so that fees are not passed on to SNAP participants wherever they shop.
- Require online SNAP authorized retailers to adhere to a granular set of privacy safeguards for limiting what kinds of data can be collected from individuals and how that information can be used and shared with third parties. USDA should establish a uniform privacy policy with clearly stated specific data and consumer protections.

Invest in research to strengthen food and nutrition security

- **Continue the momentum, first established in the 2008 Farm Bill, by investing \$100 million in state-based nutrition security demonstration projects including:**
 - Allowing hot prepared foods to be purchased through SNAP.
 - Increasing the value of benefit allotments at 150%, 175%, and 200% of the Thrifty Food Plan.
 - Subjecting authorized SNAP retailers to stricter requirements with respect to stocking healthful foods.
 - Implementing innovative marketing strategies such as product placement and promotions to increase purchase of healthful foods in authorized SNAP retail stores.

- Combining fruit and vegetable incentives with sugary beverage reduction strategies at the point of purchase.
 - Integrating SNAP-Ed into research projects.
 - Improving the enrollment process, such as through integrated benefits applications across multiple programs.
- **Establish a metric for measuring and reporting the impact of SNAP participation on nutrition security, on parity with food security.**
 - **Provide regular reports on aggregate level, SNAP purchase data to give insight into affordability of foods, the timing of purchases within a monthly benefit issuance cycle, and the types of products typically purchased with SNAP funds. The last time USDA did a study on foods typically purchased by SNAP households was from 2011 data from one leading grocery retailer.¹⁷**

Increase nutrition security within the charitable food system

- **Increase TEFAP Farm to Food Bank (FTFB) funding to at least \$25 million annually. In addition, remove the state match requirement within the TEFAP FTFB program and allow for the purchase of food. The FTFB supply chain is a key opportunity to fight hunger and increase nutritious donations while cutting food waste.¹⁸ The current funding is not enough to support the full extent of FTFB opportunities in each state.^{19,20,21} Allowing funds to be used for purchasing food and eliminating the match requirement can better support the participation of smaller producers and less resourced states.²²**
- Increase The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) funding by indexing TEFAP to the Low-Cost Food Plan. Currently, the annual TEFAP appropriation is calculated based on changes to the Thrifty Food Plan. However, the Low-Cost Food Plan is more closely aligned with the amount that low- and moderate-income families report needing to spend on food and would allow the charitable food system to better meet clients' needs.
- **Adopt culturally-responsive nutrition guidelines for all USDA Food Distribution Programs. Comprehensive nutrition guidelines are currently absent from USDA Food Distribution Programs. Requiring guidelines would correct current nutritional quality disparities among USDA programs and ensure the charitable food system is receiving health-promoting, culturally appropriate food that would better address the needs of the populations served.^{23,24,25}**
- Require the Nutrition Facts Panel (NFP) and ingredient list for all USDA Foods (except fresh produce) available through TEFAP to be displayed on the USDA's Web-Based Supply Chain Management system. Currently, the NFP and ingredient list are not

available online when selecting USDA Foods, making it impossible to assess the nutritional profile of foods prior to ordering them. As food banks across the country are working hard to source and distribute nutritionally dense foods, it is critically important to have access to this nutritional information at the point of purchase.²⁶

Reduce barriers for eligibility in SNAP

- Provide authorization and funding for American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Puerto Rico to transition from the Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP) to SNAP. Allow for flexibility guided by each territory's administration, such as allowing for culturally appropriate purchases and local food purchasing requirements.
- Expand SNAP eligibility for college students, such as by making permanent the pandemic-era expanded college student eligibility. Expanded access ensures that college students have consistent access to food and nutrition during times of economic uncertainty.

CSPI also supports strengthening nutrition security through:

- Repealing the arbitrary three-month time limit for SNAP participation for abled-bodied adults without dependents. Many adults face barriers to working or documenting work of at least 20 hours per week and removing the time limit would increase access to the program²⁷, thereby improving nutrition security for many families.
- Allowing for automatic triggers of the successful COVID-19 waivers during emergencies. These allowed states to temporarily waive various components of SNAP operations to facilitate access to the program, including by extending certification periods and relaxing reporting and interview requirements.²⁸
- Eliminating the ban on SNAP for individuals with prior drug felony convictions, both increasing nutrition security and reducing recidivism.
- Authorizing the standard medical deduction in every state for seniors and people with disabilities and eliminating the cap on the excess shelter deduction. In 2019, households with older adults received \$120 in SNAP benefits on average compared with \$279 in average benefits for households without older adults.²⁹ Elderly SNAP recipients living alone receive an average of \$104 per month. For non-elderly adults with disabilities, the average benefit was \$177 a month for multi-person households and a meager \$107 for individuals living alone.³⁰ This is an average of \$32 a week in SNAP and can present challenges to affording nutritious food. Standardizing deductions to cover out-of-pocket housing and medical expenses would allow them to receive a greater benefit.
- Eliminating the five-year waiting period for lawfully present immigrants to access SNAP.

- Increasing state agencies' capacity to administer Disaster SNAP (D-SNAP) and food distribution and collect data during disasters.
- Allowing for simultaneous participation in SNAP and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).
- Allowing tribal nations to carry out SNAP by granting the USDA Food and Nutrition Service the requisite 638 authority to provide tribes with the authority to administer SNAP.³¹ This change recognizes tribal sovereignty and allows indigenous communities to expand the reach of SNAP in their own communities.
- Increasing funding to expand FDPIR's self-determination projects, enabling more tribes to source food directly for FDPIR. In addition, include more tribal-specific indigenous foods to allow for more culturally appropriate options.
- Requiring the USDA to evaluate the impact of the changes to FDPIR and TEFAP made through the 2018 Farm Bill. Evaluations would give insight into the current nutritional quality of USDA foods and whether TEFAP's FTFB and FDPIR's self-determination pilot projects have increased nutritional quality and cultural appropriateness of, and client satisfaction with the programs, and could provide a basis for further changes and improvements.
- Adding fresh produce to the USDA Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) and providing infrastructure grants for distribution. Many food banks supplement the CSFP packages with fresh produce to meet seniors' nutritional needs.^{32,33,34} USDA should ease this burden on food banks by adding fresh produce to food packages and providing infrastructure grants to help food banks distribute the produce.

For more than 50 years, CSPI has been an influential force in the fight for a better food system. CSPI leverages our unique expertise to support passing policies that increase access to nutritious food, support healthy food and beverage choices, and ensure a healthy diet for all consumers.

For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

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