



June 16, 2022

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow, Chairwoman
The Honorable John Boozman, Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senators Stabenow and Boozman,

Thank you traveling to Arkansas for a Field Hearing to gather perspectives of stakeholders regarding the Farm Bill. We look forward to working with you and your staff as you consider changes to this law that is so critical to millions of Americans, including the 1 in 5 Arkansas children who experience food insecurity. As you know, one of the most important policies addressed in the Farm Bill is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, established in 1977, works to call attention to the challenges faced by families and to change public policy in ways that can help every child in our state grow up healthy and meet their full potential. SNAP is a lifeline for Arkansas families, and it's also an economic driver for farmers, retailers, and tens of thousands of essential workers in our state.

SNAP in Arkansas

SNAP is the nation's – and our state's – most important and effective anti-hunger program. It has grown when Arkansans needed it to, most recently when the pandemic and its economic crisis were at their worst. During that time, Congress made many temporary improvements to SNAP to take advantage of the program's ability to deliver benefits quickly in response to job and income losses, including by authorizing emergency allotments and certain eligibility and administrative changes. These changes have either already ended or will expire when the Public Health Emergency ends. In Arkansas, the emergency allotments are no longer in place. In Fiscal Year 2021:

- About 1 in 9 Arkansas residents (346,200 in fiscal year 2021) were helped by SNAP.
- Almost 74 percent of Arkansas SNAP participants are in families with children.
- Almost 41 percent are in families with older adults or a person with a disability.

- More than 42 percent are in working families.
- 49 percent of participants have incomes at or below the poverty line.

SNAP Supports Working Arkansas Residents

Most SNAP participants who can work do so. Among SNAP households with children and at least one working-age, non-disabled adult, three-quarters work while receiving SNAP. And almost 90 percent work in the year prior to, or the year after, receiving SNAP. This reflects that joblessness is often a temporary condition for SNAP participants.

Many SNAP participants are essential frontline workers. The jobs most common among SNAP participants include essential frontline service or sales jobs like cashiers, cooks, or home health aides. These jobs typically pay low wages, have schedules that change frequently with little input from the worker, and don't offer benefits such as paid sick leave. SNAP benefits supplement low wages to help workers better afford food, and can help workers if they lose a job, providing the support they need to find work again. Prior to the pandemic (2017), in Arkansas, these were the most common jobs for working Arkansans participating in SNAP:

- 6,900 cashiers – about 1 in 4 - participated in SNAP while working.
- 6,800 nursing, psychiatric and home health aides – about 1 in 3 – participated in SNAP while working.
- 5,500 cooks – about 1 in 4 – participated in SNAP while working.
- 3,800 hand laborers and freight, stock, and material movers – about 1 in 5 – participated in SNAP while working.

The labor market for SNAP participants was disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. The majority of jobs lost during the pandemic were in industries that pay low wages, with the lowest-paying industries accounting for 30 percent of all jobs but 59 percent of the jobs lost from February 2020 to October 2021.

Recently Updated Benefits Will Help Reduce Food Insecurity and Poverty

USDA recently revised the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) based on a Congressional directive from the bipartisan 2018 Farm Bill to better reflect current dietary guidance and how low-income families shop for and prepare meals. The revised TFP resulted in a modest but meaningful increase to SNAP benefits that will reduce poverty, decrease food insecurity, improve health outcomes for children, and improve access to healthy foods.

What is the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP)? The TFP is a market basket of food, the cost of which represents the amount of money a household is estimated to need to purchase a nutritious diet assuming they take significant steps to stretch their food budget. It is the basis for determining SNAP benefit levels.

How did SNAP benefits change under the revised TFP? Without the TFP update, average SNAP benefits would have been about \$4.25 per person per day. Under the revised TFP this average

SNAP benefit is now \$5.45, a modest but significant \$1.20 per day increase. (These figures do not include temporary, pandemic-related increases.)

What is the impact of the revised TFP for SNAP participants?

- **Reduced poverty.** The revised TFP will lift about 2.4 million people, including more than 1 million children, above the poverty line. It will reduce the severity of poverty for another 20.5 million people, including 6.2 million children.
- **Reduced food insecurity.** Research shows more adequate SNAP benefits can help reduce food insecurity. This can have long-term beneficial impacts, such as supporting economic mobility and reducing health care costs.
- **Improved health for children.** Studies have found that increased SNAP benefit levels (during the Great Recession) were associated with a number of positive child health outcomes, including healthier weight and fewer school days missed due to illness.
- **Increased access to healthy foods.** The revised TFP reflects current dietary guidance and includes a greater variety of fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and seafood than in the past—foods which tend to be more expensive. Multiple studies suggest increased benefit levels will help households better afford a healthy diet.

SNAP Needs to Continue to Improve

As you considering changes to SNAP to help reduce food insecurity in Arkansas, we hope you will consider:

- **Eliminating or greatly increasing the SNAP asset limit.** States have flexibility to remove or eliminate the asset limit, and most have. Arkansas has not. We're one of only nine states that have kept SNAP's overly restrictive asset limit, making it more for low-income Arkansans to save for emergencies while also keeping SNAP benefits. The federal asset limit hasn't kept up with inflation since it was established in the late 1970s. If it had, it would be more than \$8,000 today, as opposed to \$2,500 for most families.
- **Ensure that Compact of Free Association (COFA) migrants can become eligible for SNAP benefits.** COFA migrants, including the Marshallese here in Arkansas, are barred from SNAP eligibility, even though they're lawfully residing in the United States. COFA migrants have a unique immigration status as a result of longstanding treaties with the United States. But unlike most other lawfully residing immigrants, they weren't allowed access to SNAP because of an oversight in federal law. This exacerbates hunger in the Marshallese community, a population that already is more likely to experience food insecurity. In fact, a recent study from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences found that among 67 pregnant Marshallese women who were surveyed, 84 percent reported being food insecure. This is a simple fix in SNAP law and would be similar to a change in health policy in 2020 that allowed COFA migrants to become eligible for Medicaid.
- **Eliminate SNAP's three-month time limit for unemployed workers.** Many non-elderly adults without children in their homes can receive benefits for only three months every three years, unless they are working at least 20 hours a week or can document they are

unable to work. Studies have repeatedly shown that the time limit does not increase employment or earnings, but it does cut off people from the benefits they need to afford food.

- **Ensure program operations and oversight keep pace with technology.** The pandemic forced SNAP to adapt quickly to new circumstances. State application and certification systems must remain accessible and efficient by the smart use of technology.
- **Redesign SNAP performance measures to be more human-centered.** SNAP's current performance measurement system emphasizes preventing improper payments. States and USDA have a rigorous measurement system in place for this critical work. Currently information is not available to policymakers or the public about how well SNAP is working in terms of the *human* experience of accessing benefits, such as equitable access and effective delivery.

We applaud these recent changes and hope you will consider continuing improvements to SNAP as you consider the Farm Bill over the next year. Again, we're grateful that you're conducting a Fielding Hearing in Arkansas, and for your willingness to hear the concerns of advocates like us. If you have any questions or comments, please let me know by email at lkellams@aradvocates.org or by phone at (479) 445-8750.

Sincerely,

Laura Kellams
Northwest Arkansas Director
Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families