

Testimony by
Stacy Dean, USDA Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services
and
Cindy Long, Administrator of USDA Food and Nutrition Service
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Thank you, Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Committee for the invitation to join you today to talk about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Farm Bill. I am Stacy Dean, the Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services at USDA; and I am joined today by our Food and Nutrition Service Administrator Cindy Long.

As the nation's largest anti-hunger program, SNAP is critical in advancing USDA's goal of providing all Americans safe and nutritious food. It is also foundational in our efforts to tackle food and nutrition insecurity as well as advance equity.

My testimony will touch on where we have been and where we are heading — the impact and importance of SNAP, the pandemic response, the work we have done and have underway to build back better to an even stronger program, including the Thrifty Food Plan update, supporting opportunity through SNAP Employment and Training, and a focus on nutrition security, to name a few.

As you prepare for the next Farm Bill, it is worth stepping back to reflect on the impact and power of SNAP. SNAP is the most far-reaching, powerful tool available to ensure that all Americans can afford healthy food — it's a lifeline for tens of millions of Americans in every part of the country. It reduces poverty and food hardship, and participation by young children has been linked to better long-term health, education, and employment outcomes.

Unlike most other federal nutrition and anti-poverty programs, which focus on specific groups like seniors or children, SNAP serves a very diverse range of people. About 70 percent of SNAP participants are children, elderly, or adults with disabilities. The program supports households in major cities and across rural America. While all households must demonstrate that their income is low enough to qualify for a benefit, their circumstances differ. And SNAP is responsive to their differing circumstances, for example by supplementing the wages of low-income workers, supporting seniors struggling to make ends meet on fixed income, and helping parents afford healthy food for their children.

One of SNAP's core strengths is its entitlement structure, which enables it to adapt as economic conditions change. By design, SNAP expands to meet increased need and contracts when the need abates, providing food to people and communities where and when it is needed most. SNAP cushions the blow for families when a parent loses a job, sees their hours cut, or is temporarily unable to work due to illness or natural disaster.

SNAP benefits are used at local grocers, injecting demand into the economy. When a household uses SNAP benefits to put food on the table, it also benefits the store and the employees where they bought the food, the truck driver who delivered the food, the plant that processed it, and the farmers who produced it. A 2019 USDA study found that in a slow economy, every dollar in additional SNAP benefits leads to an increase of \$1.54 in the overall economy.

Pandemic Response

As it's designed to do, SNAP responded to the sudden increased need caused by the economic fallout in the early days of the pandemic, including rising unemployment and

increased need for food. SNAP participation increased from 37 million to 43 million people in just three months, underscoring the program's power in its ability to expand to meet families' needs during times of great hardship.

Congress recognized that the scope of the hardship caused by the pandemic was unprecedented and took steps to further strengthen SNAP by temporarily increasing SNAP benefits as well as ensure that eligible households could access the program while states were transforming service delivery to respond to public health concerns. In fact, Congress went to great lengths to ensure that SNAP could be as responsive as it has been by adapting and bolstering the program to respond to pandemic conditions at least four times. One of the most significant enhancements that Congress provided was the option for states to provide eligible households with temporary SNAP Emergency Allotments (EAs), which are additional benefits to help households weather the pandemic-related economic shocks. Congress also temporarily increased SNAP benefits by 15 percent for all households and expanded SNAP eligibility for low-income college students. Through your support, USDA has also had authority to adapt programs to serve struggling families safely and additional resources to address unmet needs. Congress also provided other significant aid during the pandemic, include expanded unemployment insurance and housing supports. The official measure of food security, collected through a partnership between the Census Bureau and USDA, showed that the food security rate held steady between 2019 and 2020. While we have not had the chance to study this, many are suggesting that a strong safety net was critical to protecting people from increased hunger and hardship during a time we would have otherwise expected to see a substantial increase.

USDA also worked to expand the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot, which allows SNAP participants to shop and pay for their food online, expanding the same shopping options available

to all consumers to those paying with EBT cards. This enhancement has opened up significant new food shopping opportunities for individuals living in food deserts and had a particularly positive impact on those living in rural areas. Now more than 97 percent of SNAP households have access to online purchasing across 49 states and Washington, D.C.

Together, we have taken bold action to help Americans get back on their feet — these efforts have made a huge difference and underscore how powerful the federal nutrition programs can be in responding to hunger and hardship. A strong safety-net works and we have a lot to learn from the experience of the past few years.

In addition to ensuring that SNAP is adapting and responding as needed to the pandemic, USDA has been working on many fronts to strengthen SNAP for the future. I want to share some of the major efforts we have undertaken to strengthen SNAP in the long-term.

Looking Beyond the Pandemic

Thrifty Food Plan

As directed by Congress in the 2018 Farm Bill, USDA conducted a data-driven re-evaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan which serves as the basis for calculating SNAP benefits. The resulting update is the first time the purchasing power of the plan has changed since it was introduced in 1975, reflecting notable shifts in the food marketplace and consumers' circumstances over the past 45 years. The reevaluation concluded that the cost of a nutritious, practical, cost effective diet is 21 percent higher than the previous Thrifty Food Plan. That translates to a modest increase of \$1.19 per person per day, or 40 cents per person per meal — helping to put healthy food within reach for millions of Americans.

When the Public Health Emergency (PHE) and pandemic-related benefit supplements end, most participants will see their benefits decrease. But the benefit levels participants will return to, will be at a level that affords them access to a healthy diet, thanks to the modernized TFP, which is an investment in our nation's health, economy, and security.

Supporting Opportunity through SNAP Employment & Training

SNAP is an important work support and is designed to provide an incentive for participants to seek employment and increase their earnings. The overwhelming majority of SNAP participants who can work do so, and those who need assistance in entering the workforce can receive training and support services through state SNAP Employment & Training — or E&T — programs.

In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress took important steps to improve the quality of SNAP E&T programs, emphasizing the use of evidence-based practices, like case management and work-based learning. The Farm Bill also underscored the importance of matching participants with the right services and partnering with state workforce systems to align programs with the needs of participants and employers. Congress gave us clear direction that E&T programs should not just be bigger; they should be better.

The final rule implementing these bipartisan changes became effective in March 2021. The final rule strengthened E&T by ensuring that states use evidence-based strategies to help participants get the skills employers need, increased the use of case management services for E&T participants, and allowed E&T funds to be used for subsidized employment and apprenticeships. The rule also encourages states to build high quality programs and holds states accountable for participant success in E&T programs.

We are working with states to strengthen E&T through the lens of continuous improvement. By learning what works, we are integrating promising and evidence-based practices that will better the program for all participants. We still have a lot of work to do, and we welcome your continued partnership along the way as we seek to strengthen and improve these opportunities.

Transitioning Out of Pandemic Operations

As I've noted, Congress acted quickly to provide USDA with important temporary authority during the pandemic. This allowed SNAP to adapt to help states respond to the sudden increased need while minimizing public health risks. Those operational flexibilities, along with extra benefits through Emergency Allotments, will end when the federal Public Health Emergency (PHE) ends. We are working with states now to assess and build their readiness and capacity to return to traditional program rules and we continue to review the full array of existing flexibilities that states may utilize in order to streamline program operations.

We will also work with states to ensure that all households that count on both the core program and temporary benefits understand how their benefits will change as authorities expire, so that they can manage the transitions with knowledge and confidence.

Nutrition Security — Supporting Nutrition for the Nation

At USDA, we are committed to tackling both food and nutrition insecurity. Nutrition security means having consistent and equitable access to healthy, safe, and affordable food. It builds on and complements USDA's long-standing efforts to address food security. However, it is different in two distinct ways. It recognizes that we are not all maintaining an active, healthy

life, and it emphasizes taking an equity lens to our efforts. USDA is prioritizing nutrition security in four ways by:

- Providing meaningful nutrition support from pregnancy to birth and beyond;
- Connecting all Americans with healthy, safe, affordable food sources;
- Developing, translating, and enacting nutrition science through partnership; and
- Prioritizing equity every step of the way.

I have already talked about USDA's reevaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan to ensure that it reflects the realistic cost of a basic, healthy diet, which is fundamental to ensuring that SNAP provides meaningful support. This has strengthened SNAP and its role as one of our most powerful tools to promote nutrition security, since families simply cannot achieve a nutritious diet, even a cost-conscious diet, without sufficient resources. In fact, previous research found that nearly 9 out of 10 SNAP participants struggled to achieve a healthy diet, with the cost of healthy food cited as the most common roadblock.

SNAP Nutrition Education — or SNAP-Ed — also plays a key role in helping people lead healthier lives on a limited budget. SNAP-Ed teaches people how to make their SNAP dollars stretch, shop for, and cook healthy meals, and stay physically active. Evidence shows positive impact of SNAP-Ed nutrition education. For example, according to a 2019 study among 56 land-grant universities implementing SNAP-Ed, results showed that 40 percent of participants ate more fruits and vegetables and drank fewer sugar-sweetened beverages, and 35 percent of participants moved more and sat less.

Building Back Better

The public health crisis has placed unprecedented stress on American households, leaving in its wake millions of families struggling to make ends meet. This has been, and continues to be, an uncertain time, with impacts that will last for years to come.

Still, our goal couldn't be clearer: to come out of the other end of this pandemic in a better place than where we began. SNAP is a powerful and effective tool to address hunger and hardship. Yet, we must continue to look for ways to strengthen the program and ensure it is working for those it is intended to serve. I have already touched on a number of priority areas and want to share a few more that we are already exploring at FNS:

- Working towards parity for the people of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and American Samoa;
- Working to reduce barriers for vulnerable groups including seniors, individuals with disabilities and low-income college students;
- Bolstering program integrity by strengthening USDA oversight and data collection, minimizing improper payments and administrative errors, and enhancing fraud detection;
- Supporting food sovereignty and self-governance for Tribal Nations;
- Modernizing SNAP payment and shopping options, building on the successful expansion of SNAP online purchasing with a focus on smaller, independent grocery stores;
- Exploring avenues to reduce burdens on families, streamline enrollment, and improve the participant experience to ensure our programs are open and accessible to all who are eligible; and

- Assessing how well SNAP addresses equity and disparities in who experience food insecurity and addressing any shortcomings.

The upcoming Farm Bill will be an important opportunity for Congress to build on the remarkable success of SNAP to date. I know that Members of the Committee are already considering areas for improvement and we look forward to working together with you on this effort.

While nutrition assistance is critical, it is simply not enough to address the needs of struggling individuals, families, and communities. The pandemic has laid bare critical gaps in our safety net, highlighting the opportunity and urgency to lay the foundation for a recovery that is more equitable and just for all Americans. That is why the Biden Administration is calling for a comprehensive approach for investing in the American family to ensure that our recovery is inclusive and expansive by proposing, for example, expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit, and expanding access to affordable, high-quality childcare. These investments will strengthen the economy and our society from the bottom up and the middle out by building systems that lift up working families.

Thank you, Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Thompson, and every Member of the Committee for your leadership and commitment to helping Americans put food on the table for their families and for your partnership as we continue this critical work. This Committee has a long history of bipartisan support for USDA's federal nutrition programs and I look forward to working with you to advance our shared goals. Thank you again for the opportunity to join you today.