

**House Agriculture Committee**

**A 2022 Review of the Farm Bill: Stakeholder Perspective on Non-SNAP USDA  
Nutrition Programs**

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**Written Testimony:**

**Dr. Jessie Gruner**

Director of Community Innovations  
Pinnacle Prevention

## Introduction

Thank you, Chairman Scott, members of the committee. I am honored to have the opportunity to provide testimony on non-SNAP USDA Nutrition Programs. My name is Jessie Gruner, I am the Director of Community Innovations at Pinnacle Prevention, an Arizona-based nonprofit dedicated to cultivating a just food system and opportunities for joyful movement.

We have been administering USDA nutrition programs statewide in Arizona for over 5 years. Today, I want to share with you our experiences and recommendations around GusNIP, the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, and the Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program.

## GusNIP

I would like to start off with GusNIP, or the SNAP incentive program. Here in Arizona, we offer our nutrition incentive program, or as we brand it Double Up Food Bucks Arizona, at multiple outlets, including farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, mobile markets, corner stores, as well as grocery stores. We started this program with FINI funding in 2016 with only 6 farmers market sites. Six years later, we are now in our 3rd round of GusNIP funding from USDA and we have grown our Double Up program to over 75 locations.

From our experience we want to share the value and importance of being able to have an adaptable program model that we can tailor based on the needs of our diverse communities, including urban, rural, and indigenous. The ability to tailor the incentive program has allowed us to spread across the state, particularly in areas that do not have access to a farmers' market.

Because of the success of the program, we were able to achieve a state-wide policy win securing recurring program investment from the state's general fund with strong bipartisan support, which shows how much people love and believe in this program.

In our model, we prioritize locally-grown produce. This prioritization has had a tremendous economic impact with small producers and has increased local spending on these products by more than 10-fold at our Double Up sites. Not only are families taking home more healthy, seasonal, local food, this program has become a consistent, reliable source of revenue for local farmers, some of whom take home half of their daily market sales from Double Up Food Bucks.

We did not get to where we are today alone. Thanks to collaborations with other states and strong technical assistance, we were able to find new and innovative solutions and had an abundance of resources available for us to use. The 2018 farm bill created a national Nutrition Incentive Program Training, Technical Assistance, Evaluation, and Information center, known as the Nutrition Incentive Hub. Today we would like to voice our support for ensuring current farm bill efforts continue to include technical support and assistance, which is critical for implementing and evaluating nutrition incentive programs.

The program is currently designed with a dollar-for-dollar match requirement. While in Arizona we were successful in securing state match funding, the current match structure inhibits our ability to expand our program, particularly in the grocery sector which has a much higher SNAP volume and utilization rate. An alternative match structure would allow us to truly meet the needs of our communities, especially in places where individuals must travel between 50 and 100 miles to access a grocery store. We ask the committee to consider a lower or percentage-based approach to match or removing this component.

Finally, we know that USDA is making tremendous strides to increase access to online SNAP for small vendors. We want to ensure that these efforts continue. The pandemic has resulted in new innovations in online and grocer delivery models, and we would like nutrition incentive models to be competitive in this space. We need more investment and flexibility to make this happen, especially for farmers and small business operations. To keep pace with efforts in modernization, we need to be thinking 10-20 years down the road with funding and support provided for the integration of GusNIP programs into SNAP EBT processing technologies.

## Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program

Next, I would like to talk about the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, which provides low-income seniors with coupons that can be exchanged for locally-grown produce at farmers' markets, roadside stands, and CSA programs. The Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program is a tiny, but mighty program. It is so much more than just food and can be part of the solution for reducing senior isolation. While the program provides nourishment for seniors and an additional source of revenue for small food producers, it is also a connection point for seniors. Food is the way that seniors are connecting with each other. Through this program they get to connect with the farmers, they get to see their neighbors, and they get to interact with their communities.

In some of our senior housing centers, our program was the only source for fresh food during the pandemic. In one of our rural mountain communities, a low-income housing site had a bus that would typically bring the seniors to the farmers market to spend their coupons. During the pandemic, in order to protect their safety, they weren't able to bring the seniors to the market. And seniors were really mourning that loss. Luckily, the Senior Farmers Market Program allows up to 50% of the funds to be used on CSAs or bulk food purchases. This flexibility allowed us to take produce from producers at the farmers market to the seniors when they couldn't leave their homes. We also had kids send in pictures they drew to include in the produce bags, and it was a beautiful way to bring connection to seniors during a really isolating time. We know that isolation was exacerbated by COVID-19, but isolation both preceded the pandemic and will continue to be a challenge seniors face.

Because this program is something that seniors look forward to, a 1-time benefit is not enough to meet the need and maximize the program's potential benefits. Increasing the maximum amount seniors receive annually would allow more flexibility in program structure, such as a monthly benefit during the market season. For example, seniors could receive a \$100 benefit broken down over a monthly period across the market season. More touchpoints can help build relationships between seniors and farmers, and strong customer relationships often lead to increased food literacy, understanding of local availability, and better access to community resources.

We also desperately need an investment in the administrative allocation for this program. Administrative costs are capped at 10 percent, which means the amount of dollars that can be used for personnel time is really limited, making it hard to reach the communities that need the most support and assistance, especially in rural areas. Additional flexibility and investment in administrative dollars would help meet seniors where they are at and would result in a greater ability to provide equitable access to the program.

One final point, we recognize that WIC FMNP is the sister program to SFMNP and falls under Child Nutrition Reauthorization. We would like to see the same flexibility offered under farm bill to be offered for WIC FMNP, including bulk purchasing and CSA purchasing

## Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program

Finally, I would like to briefly mention the Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program. While we have not been the direct recipients of a Community Food Project, we work with smaller food producers to help them submit proposals for CFPs. We see community food projects as the low-hanging fruit that helps to build capacity for the really small community organizations and producers to be able to apply for larger programs and projects, such as building their capacity to scale up to apply for GusNIP programs. It helps organizations test innovation at a smaller regional level. If we want to be able to meet the challenges that are facing the future of our local, regional, and national food systems, we have to provide space and resources for idea incubation and continue to center small community food projects and socially disadvantaged producers.

In many cases, the Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program is farmer's and organization's first introduction to USDA programs. As one of the lowest entry points, we see an opportunity to make this program as easy as possible for applicants. Providing strong technical assistance, simplifying the application process and reporting requirements, and removing or reducing the match requirement would help streamline entry for farmers and organizations and make it easier for them to equitably participate.

## Closing

I would like to conclude my statement by saying that our participation in these incredibly important programs has allowed us to be responsive to food system needs in unprecedented ways and times here in Arizona. It's allowed us to be more adaptive in linking and leveraging multiple efforts across USDA as a whole to benefit farmers and provide nutrition security to families. Thank you for the time to share our experiences with you today.