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# Coronavirus (COVID-19) and SNAP

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the first line of defense against hunger for people in the United States. SNAP benefits help low-income people put food on the table. Participants include seniors, children, people living with disabilities, and low-wage workers and their families. Nearly half of the people who receive SNAP are children.<sup>i</sup>

A very important feature of SNAP is that it is designed to respond to changes in need, making it very well suited to respond to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>ii</sup> The federal government can also augment SNAP as needed with programs such as Disaster SNAP (D-SNAP) and Pandemic SNAP (P-SNAP). D-SNAP is historically allocated in response to natural disasters, while P-SNAP would help with the devastating long-term consequences of COVID-19.

The Family First Coronavirus Relief Act includes “response waivers,” exceptions to SNAP rules during the pandemic and post-pandemic period. For example, the legislation allows:

- SNAP flexibility for low-income jobless workers: It suspends work and work training requirements for SNAP during this crisis.
- SNAP flexibilities in a public health emergency: It allows states to request special waivers from the Secretary of Agriculture to provide temporary, emergency Coronavirus SNAP (CR-SNAP) benefits to existing SNAP households up to the maximum monthly allotment, and it gives the Secretary broad discretion to provide much more flexibility for states in managing SNAP caseloads.

Over and above these necessary steps, Bread for the World calls for the following to support the most vulnerable people:

## Increase the maximum monthly SNAP benefit by 15 percent.

- When unemployment is increasing quickly, raising benefit levels has proven to be effective in reducing widespread food insecurity. The American Recovery Act of 2009 (ARRA) temporarily increased SNAP benefits by about 15 percent through 2013. The dollar amounts were modest: a single person received an additional \$24 a month, while a family of four received an additional \$80.<sup>iii</sup> Nonetheless, the increases reduced the hunger rate among SNAP households.<sup>iv</sup>

## Temporarily increase the minimum SNAP benefit from \$16 to \$30 to encourage higher rates of senior participation.

- Seniors have low SNAP participation rates compared to other demographic groups.<sup>v</sup> Research shows that one reason more eligible seniors do not participate in SNAP is that they assume—often inaccurately—that they only qualify for the minimum benefit, which has been fixed at \$16 since 2016.<sup>vi</sup> Low participation is particularly alarming now since seniors are at higher risk of serious illness or even death from the COVID-19 illness. Nutrition is a priority area; investments in nutrition protect the health of people of all ages.



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## Give states temporary flexibility to suspend SNAP administrative rules that weaken their response to the crisis.

- For example, states need permission to provide additional “out of school” SNAP benefits to families whose children normally receive free or reduced-price meals at school. These additional benefits should be allowed as a substitute for school breakfast, school lunch, and/or summer food service for as long as public health officials recommend social distancing.

States should also be allowed to exempt participating households from other requirements that delay or complicate providing services to children, such as application process rules or time limits.

The COVID-19 economic recovery package must build on the Family First Coronavirus Relief Act and include the 15 percent boost in benefits to ensure families have access to adequate resources during the pandemic.

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### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “Chart Book: SNAP Helps Struggling Families Put Food on the Table,” November 7, 2019. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/chart-book-snap-helps-struggling-families-put-food-on-the-table>

<sup>ii</sup> Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, “FNS Program Guidance on Human Pandemic Response,” <https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/pandemic>

<sup>iii</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “SNAP Benefit Boost in 2009 Recovery Act Provided Economic Stimulus and Reduced Hardship,” March 31, 2015. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-benefit-boost-in-2009-recovery-act-provided-economic-stimulus-and>

<sup>iv</sup> Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Report No. (ERR-116) 52 pp. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=44839>

<sup>v</sup> National Council on Aging, “SNAP and Senior Hunger Facts.” <https://www.ncoa.org/news/resources-for-reporters/get-the-facts/senior-hunger-facts/>

<sup>vi</sup> National Council on Aging, “SNAP Shots: Debunking the \$16 Benefit Myth.” <https://www.ncoa.org/wp-content/uploads/SNAPshots-16-dollar-myth.pdf>