

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 29, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Senate Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer,

Thank you for your bipartisan effort to respond to the health and economic impact of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). As you prepare for a fourth economic relief package, we respectfully request that you address the needs of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants.

SNAP is the nation's first line of defense against hunger and is proven to help lift millions of American families and children out of poverty. The latest estimate by the Census Bureau found that SNAP lifted 3.4 million people out of poverty in 2018 including 1.5 million children. Given the unprecedented disruption to the economy, income and employment with more than 17 million Americans filing unemployment benefit claims, an expanded and strengthened SNAP can serve as a buffer for families who are now at risk of food insecurity and are struggling to make ends meet during this national health crisis.

The hardship many families are experiencing as a result of the pandemic is evident in what we are seeing from the frontlines. Food banks are reporting that an additional 17.1 million people could experience food insecurity, a 46 percent increase from the 37 million who were food insecure prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. And school meal sites are being forced to close because their staff have tested positive for the coronavirus, making it harder for kids in need to access meals. Charitable food organizations are exhausting every resource and cannot do this alone. For every meal served by food banks, SNAP provides nine. SNAP is a powerful tool that can immediately help to alleviate the hardship on families who have been directly impacted by COVID-19.

In addition, families are experiencing dual challenges of food insecurity and being told to buy additional food stocks in order to stay home and adhere to social distancing guidelines. Already, the current SNAP benefit level is not sufficient to meet the needs of families and individuals impacted by COVID-19. The average SNAP benefit per person is about \$1.40 per meal per day, barely enough to buy one full meal, especially in high-cost regions of the country. Because the benefit amount is so small, most SNAP households barely make it to the end of the month. Studies have shown that SNAP households redeem more than half of their benefits within the first week of receiving benefits and over 75 percent of the benefit is used by the end of the second week. By increasing the purchasing power of SNAP households, families can safely access food and adhere to the social distancing requirements by allowing them to purchase more food during a trip to the grocery store.

Increasing SNAP benefits is one of the most effective ways to help low-income families and stimulate the economy during times of strain. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic

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Research Service estimates that every \$1 billion invested in SNAP supports 13,600 jobs and approximately \$32 million in farm revenue, and increases the GDP of the United States by \$1.54 billion. We can avert the risk of poverty and food insecurity among American families and children while improving our chances for an economic rebound by investing in SNAP.

Specifically, we write to request that the next relief package include the following provisions:

- Increase the maximum SNAP benefit for all recipients by increasing the thrifty food plan by at least 15 percent to all households, which is equivalent to another \$25 per person per month, or a little under \$100 per month in food assistance for a family of four.
- Increase the monthly minimum SNAP benefit from \$16 to \$30 to all households. This will go a long way in helping older Americans, single persons, and family households keep food on the table.
- Suspend the harmful rules proposed by USDA that would weaken SNAP eligibility and benefits at time when Americans need SNAP assistance.
- Provide additional options and investments to support delivery for SNAP participants.

This economic approach is not new to Congress. At the height of the Great Recession in 2009, the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act helped prevent large increases in poverty by increasing the maximum SNAP benefit. In order to mitigate the inevitable disruptions that the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to bring, Congress must make a similar investment in SNAP to help feed families and strengthen our economy.

Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,

/s/ Jeffrey A. Merkley
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

/s/ Christopher S. Murphy
Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator

/s/ Sherrod Brown
Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

/s/ Richard Blumenthal
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/s/ Cory A. Booker
Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

/s/ Jack Reed
Jack Reed
United States Senator

/s/ Ron Wyden
Ron Wyden
United States Senator

/s/ Brian Schatz
Brian Schatz
United States Senator

/s/ Tammy Baldwin
Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

/s/ Kamala D. Harris
Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator

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/s/ Jeanne Shaheen

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

/s/ Amy Klobuchar

Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

/s/ Tim Kaine

Tim Kaine
United States Senator

/s/ Dianne Feinstein

Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator

/s/ Edward J. Markey

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

/s/ Catherine Cortez Masto

Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator

/s/ Bernard Sanders

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

/s/ Tammy Duckworth

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

/s/ Chris Van Hollen

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

/s/ Robert P. Casey, Jr.

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

/s/ Mark R. Warner

Mark R. Warner
United States Senator

/s/ Martin Heinrich

Martin Heinrich
United States Senator