

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

May 5, 2020

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

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

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

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leader McCarthy,

Thank you for your ongoing efforts to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our nation's health and economic security. As you develop and negotiate the next legislative package to respond to this crisis, we urge you to prioritize the needs of participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), known as FoodShare in Wisconsin. Specifically, we ask that you include provisions important to the state of Wisconsin to ensure that SNAP continues to play a role in enhancing families' food security and supporting our nation's economic recovery.

In these challenging times, more and more families in Wisconsin and across the country are struggling to put food on their tables. As of this writing, over 30 million Americans have filed unemployment claims in the past six weeks,¹ and Wisconsin's unemployment rate has skyrocketed from 3.5 to an estimated 27 percent as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.² SNAP is one of our nation's most important safety nets to lift children, families, and seniors out of poverty, and during this crisis, the program will continue to be a vital line of defense against hunger and malnutrition. In fact, since Wisconsin declared a public health emergency on March 12, our state has reported an over 120 percent increase in FoodShare applications compared to the prior six week period. As we face historic economic and social disruption during this pandemic, we must bolster the SNAP program and ensure access for those Wisconsinites who need food assistance.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, our state's institutions of higher learning have closed their campuses and switched to distance learning for the remainder of the academic year. College students who otherwise qualify for SNAP typically have a 20-hour per week work requirement to be eligible for the program, but many are now unable to continue working their on-campus jobs. Wisconsin, along with many other states, sought flexibility from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to temporarily waive this barrier. Unfortunately, USDA stated that it doesn't have the statutory authority to grant these waivers, which has resulted in a large number of college students losing access to FoodShare. In the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (PL 116-127), Congress worked to suspend certain work requirements for SNAP. This crisis has only exacerbated student food security concerns, and it is important for college students to have the same

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/30/economy/unemployment-benefits-coronavirus/index.html>

² https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/govt-and-politics/state-projects-27-unemployment-rate-due-to-covid-19/article_0defc618-4e78-5c0b-ade4-4c2e1276545e.html

flexibility as other SNAP recipients with food assistance needs. As such, we urge you to ensure parity for college students and suspend these work requirements in the next COVID-19 package.

It is imperative that in this critical moment, assistance through one federal program does not cancel out benefits from another program, including for newly unemployed individuals, service members, and Native American families. Under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (PL 116-136), Congress increased Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation benefits to bolster existing unemployment insurance (UI) payments. Unfortunately, though the CARES Act specifically excludes these additional payments from counting as income in determining eligibility for Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), the legislation did not specifically exclude these payments from impacting eligibility for other means-tested programs, including SNAP. Wisconsin applied for a waiver to disregard these benefits in considering SNAP eligibility, but USDA denied this request. The state has estimated that this will impact over ten thousand Wisconsinites, many of whom will see significantly reduced SNAP benefits or will be ineligible for the program altogether. We have also heard from our constituents that existing SNAP policies, which count service members' Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) as income for the purpose of SNAP eligibility, present a significant barrier for low-income military families to obtain the benefits they need.

And similarly, we must take action to ensure that all Wisconsin families in need, including Native families, are able to access FoodShare benefits. Currently, Native American families enrolled in the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) program are unable to co-enroll in SNAP. FDPIR is limited to the distribution of shelf-stable food items, and SNAP benefits would allow families to purchase a wider variety of fresh foods that fit their dietary needs. One in four Native Americans and Alaskan Natives are food insecure nationwide,³ and in Wisconsin, 21 percent of the state's Native population was under the poverty line in 2019, compared to 11 percent of the overall population.⁴ It is critical that we address these serious food security gaps and allow Native communities to co-enroll in both programs to access the healthy, nutritious foods they need. We urge you to address these issues in upcoming legislation so that Wisconsinites are not pushed off or prevented from enrolling in important assistance programs, including SNAP, when they need help the most.

Further, increasing SNAP has been proven to be one of the quickest and most effective ways to stimulate the local economy and put dollars directly in the hands of families and workers. The USDA estimates that every additional dollar in new SNAP benefits generates between \$1.50 and \$1.70 in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) during a recession.⁵ ⁶ In addition, studies show that these benefits are seen rapidly, as over half of SNAP dollars are used by participants in the first week and approximately 80 percent are used in the first two weeks.⁷ It is vital for the next package to increase the maximum SNAP benefit for all households by raising the Thrifty Food Plan by at least 15 percent, which will make a significant difference for families' food and economic security during this crisis.⁸ A SNAP benefit increase was last enacted in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA; P.L. 111-5) after the Great Recession and was instrumental in preventing hunger and malnutrition while strengthening our nation's economic rebound.⁹

We also ask that you take action to support seniors participating in SNAP, specifically by increasing the minimum SNAP benefit from \$16 to \$30. This relatively low-cost measure would make a significant

³ <http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/DocServer/2017-PWNA-NPRA-Food-Insecurity-Project-Grow.pdf?docID=7106>

⁴ <https://talkpoverty.org/state-year-report/wisconsin-2019-report/>

⁵ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2019/july/quantifying-the-impact-of-snap-benefits-on-the-us-economy-and-jobs/>

⁶ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/economy/the-financial-crisis-lessons-for-the-next-one>.

⁷ <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ARRASpendingPatterns.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=1269>.

⁹ <https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/114th-congress-2015-2016/reports/49958-ARRA.pdf>.

difference in the food security of the 1.8 million participants, mostly seniors, who receive this small monthly amount.¹⁰ And in addition, it is important to ensure that seniors and other at-risk and potentially homebound individuals are still able to access food assistance during this crisis. We encourage you to ensure that states and stakeholders seeking to expand access to online SNAP purchasing and home delivery are granted the flexibilities and resources they need to protect all SNAP participants during the pandemic.

Furthermore, we urge you to delay implementation of three USDA rules published in 2019 that, if implemented, would push over a hundred thousand Wisconsinites off the SNAP program and reduce benefits for many others.¹¹ These rules 1) eliminate state flexibility to waive certain SNAP work requirements for able-bodied adults without dependents; 2) limit broad-based categorical eligibility (BBCE), which is the pathway through which tens of thousands of children in Wisconsin receive free and reduced school meals; and 3) strip states of flexibility in setting their own Standard Utility Allowance (SUA) for energy costs, which will disproportionately impact colder states like Wisconsin. Implementing these harmful proposals at any time would hurt families in need, but it would be downright cruel to do so during this public health and economic crisis.

Finally, there is also significant uncertainty about how quickly and comprehensively our nation's economy will recover and lost jobs will return once the outbreak is under control. For this reason, it is important to link any increase in benefits or delay of proposed rules to employment and economic indicators that would demonstrate sustained recovery, rather than to an arbitrary expiration date or to the end of the declared public health emergency (PHE). Setting an economic "trigger" for these improvements, which would follow the precedent set by ARRA after the Great Recession, will ensure that Wisconsin families won't have their food assistance taken away while they still rely on these critical resources.

Thank you for your attention to these important priorities to support Wisconsinites in need of food assistance during this crisis. The economic wellbeing and health of our kids, families, and seniors depends on your leadership.

Sincerely,



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Gwen Moore
Member of Congress



Ron Kind
Member of Congress



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress

¹⁰ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/the-case-for-boosting-snap-benefits-in-next-major-economic-response-package>

¹¹ https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/101368/estimated_effect_of_recent_proposed_changes_to_snap_regulations.pdf