**2023 FARM BILL COMMENT TEMPLATE**

**PLEASE EMAIL ON YOUR LETTERHEAD (IF AVAILABLE) TO:** **FarmBill2023@ag.senate.gov**

**Deadline to submit is March 31**

[Date]

United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

328A Russell Senate Office Building

Washington, D.C. 20510

**Re: Priorities to End Hunger in the 2023 Farm Bill**

Dear Senate Agriculture Committee Members:

On behalf of [your organization] and the community members we serve, we appreciate the opportunity to share 2023 Farm Bill recommendations to improve the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and systemically tackle hunger in the United States. The 2023 Farm Bill provides a key vehicle to strengthen SNAP and make it an even more effective food safety net for consumers that struggle with lower incomes.

Despite highly successful federal and state interventions to prevent even greater hunger during the COVID-19 crisis, overall food insecurity in California remains nearly double[[1]](#footnote-1) the pre-pandemic levels[[2]](#footnote-2) (18.2% vs. 9.9%) with deep inequities for communities of color. As of October 11, a shocking and unacceptable 24.2% of Black, 32.1% of Latinx, and 17.6% of Asian families with children reported food insecurity,[[3]](#footnote-3) all much higher than the 13.8% for White households with children.

This means that nearly 1 in 5 Californians, with significant inequities for low-income communities of color, are living with the toxic stress and trauma of not knowing where their next meal is coming from, even if they eventually manage to eat. Within this population, a staggering number of Californians report food insufficiency, the worst and most extreme form of hunger. The most recent estimates from December 2022 are that 2,750,000 adults, and approximately 768,000 children, actively lack enough to eat right now.[[4]](#footnote-4)

And in 2023, California is facing an even deeper hunger crisis. With the signing of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023 and ending of the federal Public Health Emergency on May 11, 2023, two critical programs that helped to mitigate hunger over the last three years come to an end.

SNAP recipients will receive their last Emergency Allotments on March 26,[[5]](#footnote-5) 2023, which have been boosting SNAP benefits since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the highly effective Pandemic-EBT program that has been providing food benefits to children will end after the 2022–23 school year. This will intensify widespread hardship throughout California. With the skyrocketing cost of groceries and a stumbling economy, reducing people’s ability to purchase food will not only cause hunger but place enormous pressure on California’s food banks — which have already been stretched thin since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, these two programs accounted for ⅓ of the food safety net in California, or 3 billion meals.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Food Insecurity and the impact of SNAP benefits:**

SNAP is an effective program that promotes food security, generates economic activity, and fosters well-being. SNAP responds quickly to increases in need, whether due to recessions, natural disasters, or pandemics. Significant gaps in SNAP benefit adequacy and equitable access, however, undermine its positive impacts. Indeed, SNAP benefits average a mere $6 a person a day.

SNAP remains the most effective anti-hunger program we have in the United States. During the pandemic, SNAP has responded efficiently and effectively to the food needs for many low-income households. SNAP serves people of all ages and all types of communities—rural, urban, and suburban. Four in five SNAP households (81%) have a child, a person aged 60 or older or a person with disabilities.[[7]](#footnote-7) SNAP also has positive economic impacts. Each $1 In SNAP during a downturn generates between $1.50 and $1.80 in economic activity that is felt throughout the food chain—from farmers and ranchers, food manufacturers and truckers, to grocers and store employees.[[8]](#footnote-8) And SNAP is an important support for workers who are paid low wages and for those looking for work. Most SNAP participants who can work do so.

The detrimental and lifelong consequences of childhood poverty and resulting hunger are well documented. The toxic stress of living in poverty has negative, life-long impacts on a child’s brain development. When children live in poverty, they endure hardships that impair their ability to thrive,[[9]](#footnote-9) and it impacts their capacity to learn, develop, and thrive as children and throughout their lives.[[10]](#footnote-10) Children are less likely to succeed in school and at home, and poverty increases the likelihood that childhood impairments will result in adult dependency on safety net services.[[11]](#footnote-11) Ultimately, poverty damages a child’s chance for economic security as an adult and fuels an intergenerational cycle of poverty: children who are born in poverty are three times as likely to be poor at age 40 than children not born in poverty.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Thanks to USDA’s evidence-based review and revision of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) – based on a directive in the bi-partisan 2018 Farm Bill - SNAP experienced one of the most meaningful increases in benefit amounts in decades. In October 2021, the SNAP benefit increased by 21 percent due to USDA’s long overdue and evidence-based revision to the Thrifty Food Plan.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This is a significant improvement; however, hunger continues to affect too many people in the U.S. In 2021, more than 33.8 million Americans lived in households that struggled against food insecurity[[14]](#footnote-14) and more than one in six Americans turned to the charitable food sector for help.[[15]](#footnote-15) In early February 2023, the U.S. Census Bureau PULSE survey found that 11.4% of respondent households reported they *“*sometimes” or “often” do not have enough to eat in the past seven days.[[16]](#footnote-16)

We must build on the success of the TFP revision by ensuring the SNAP benefit amount is further increased to mirror current food costs and the reality of food preparation for low-income families.[[17]](#footnote-17) The current average SNAP benefit per meal does not meet the average cost of a meal, particularly in these times when inflation is high making the affordability of basic food inaccessible. In addition to building on the improved TFP, the calculation of the SNAP benefit amounts desperately needs to be revised in an equitable way that meets the real needs of working families.

[OPTIONAL: STORIES FROM YOUR COMMUNITY OF HUNGER/HARDSHIP]

Specifically, we urge Congress to:

**Calibrate SNAP benefit amounts to a more realistic food plan**, As previously proposed in the Close the Meal Gap Act by Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and Representative Alma Adams, substitute the USDA Thrifty Food Plan for the Low-Cost Food Plan as the basis for SNAP benefits.

In addition, increase the minimum SNAP monthly benefit amount, which currently is only $23; take into account all of a household’s excess shelter costs in determining their SNAP benefits; and streamline states’ use of a Standard Medical Expense Deduction. These changes can ease the untenable choices too many families with children have to make between paying for food or paying for shelter and that too many older adults and people with disabilities have to make between paying for food or paying for medicine..

**End SNAP time limits as previously proposed in the Improving Access to Nutrition Act** by Representative Barbara Lee. It would eliminate three-month time limits on SNAP eligibility for certain working-age adults who cannot document sufficient hours of work. The current law provision takes food off the table of unemployed and underemployed people. The proposal is a long overdue and permanent law change that will promote food security and equity for Americans with low incomes.

**Repeal the lifetime ban on individuals with a past felony drug conviction from receiving SNAP in the Making Essentials Accessible and Legal (MEAL) Act** by Representative Steve Cohen. Access to nutrition is a basic human right. Moreover, access to nutrition can make a difference in successful transition for formerly incarcerated people reentering communities and making new starts.

**Improve SNAP access for low-income college students** by dropping the extra work requirements that full-time college students face in qualifying. This was previously proposed in The *Enhance Access to SNAP Act (EATS Act)* by Senator Kristen Gillibrand and Representative Jimmy Gomez. The regular SNAP student rules are difficult for state agencies to administer, and are confusing for students to understand. The Government Accountability Office estimated in 2018 – well before the pandemic -- that 57 percent of college student who were likely food insecure and potentially income-eligible for SNAP (representing more than 1.8 million students) do not receive benefits.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**Eliminate SNAP policies that disproportionately harm immigrant communities**. This includes, as proposed in the Lift the Bar Act previously offered by Representative Pramila Jayapal, removing the 5-year residency waiting period in SNAP that most documented immigrant adults face.

Additional improvements would extend equitable SNAP access for tribal members and residents of Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana.

**Permanently end the prohibition on use of SNAP benefits to purchase hot prepared foods** from food retailers. The proposed change, in the SNAP Plus Act championed by Rep. Grace Meng would afford SNAP customers broader choices available to other food shoppers.

**Improve The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)** so that food bank shoppers can access more nutritious, culturally responsive food with dignity, and make all TEFAP flexibilities permitted during the pandemic permanent. Raise the minimum income eligibility threshold for TEFAP to 250% in order to maximize participation by low-income populations, and increase the authorization for TEFAP administrative grants for Storage and Distribution to $400 million per year and $15 million per year for TEFAP Infrastructure Grants.

**Increase access and enhance the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)** so seniors can access more nutritious, culturally responsive food with dignity and expand to disabled persons by increasing the income guidelines. Apply an automatic across-the-board medical deduction to the income of all CSFP applicants, and create a pilot project to serve people with disabilities through CSFP. Expand food bank commodities and product selection by including additional food options such as fresh or frozen alternatives.

It is urgent that the 2023 Farm Bill protects and strengthens SNAP and other federal nutrition programs. You can find more about these priorities at the following links:

* Food Research & Action Center (<https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Priority-SNAP-Legislation_R3.pdf>)
* Feeding America (<https://feedingamericaaction.org/learn/legislation-watch/farm-bill/>)

Thank you again for seeking input on 2023 Farm Bill priorities.

Sincerely,

[your organization]

1. Diane Schanzenbach, Northwestern University, Institute for Policy Research. Visualizing Food Insecurity: <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/state-food-insecurity.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. USDA, Household Food Security in the United States in 2019. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/99282/err-275.pdf?v=1730.7> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Diane Schanzenbach, Northwestern University, Institute for Policy Research. Visualizing Food Insecurity: <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/state-food-insecurity.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Stanford University, California Data Lab. California Pulse Survey: <https://stanford-datalab.github.io/covid-19-ca/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. California Department of Social Services, All County Welfare Directors Letter, February 2, 2023: <https://cdss.ca.gov/Portals/9/Additional-Resources/Letters-and-Notices/ACWDL/2023/CL_02-02-23.pdf?ver=2023-02-13-095208-110> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. California Association of Food Banks, CalFresh Emergency Allotments & Pandemic-EBT Are Ending: <https://www.cafoodbanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2023_Emergency-Allotments-PEBT_Factsheet.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See “Characteristics of U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2020,” USDA, November 2022, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/Characteristics2020-Summary.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Patrick Canning and Brian Stacy, “The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Economy: New Estimates of the SNAP Multiplier,” USDA Economic Research Service, July 2019, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/93529/err-265.pdf?v=2789.4> (relevant research summarized at Table 1, p.7) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “Family Poverty, Welfare Reform, and Child Development.” Greg J. Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn Source: Child Development, Vol. 71, No. 1 (Jan. - Feb. 2000), pp. 188-196. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1132232>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Duncan, G and Magnuson, K. 2011. The Long Reach of Childhood Poverty. <http://www.stanford.edu/group/scspi/_media/pdf/pathways/winter_2011/PathwaysWinter11_Duncan.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Barton, Paul E, and Richard J Coley. The Family: America's Smallest School. Policy Information Report, Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 2007, and Berliner, David C. Poverty and Potential: Out-of-School Factors and School Success. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cuddy, E., Venator, J. and Reeves, R. 2015. In a land of dollars: Deep poverty and its consequences. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/in-a-land-of-dollars-deep-poverty-and-itsconsequences/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. USDA, SNAP, and the Thrifty Food Plan. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/thriftyfoodplan> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh, USDA Economic Research Service, September 2022, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/104656/err-309.pdf?v=5832.6> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Poonam Gupta, Julio Salas, and Elaine Waxman, “Two Years into the Pandemic, Charitable Food Remains a Key Resource for One in Six Adults,” Urban Institute, May 2022, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Two%20Years%20into%20the%20Pandemic%2C%20Charitable%20Food%20Remains%20a%20Key%20Resource%20for%20One%20in%20Six%20Adults.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See “Week 54 Household Pulse Survey: February 1 - February 13,” U.S. Census Bureau, February 22, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2023/demo/hhp/hhp54.html> (based on data reported at Food Sufficiency and Food Security Table 1) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Inflation has hit low-income households particularly hard. Food prices in the US are up 7.9% over last year in February 2022. Forbes, “Food Inflation Will Hit Millions Hard” <https://www.forbes.com/sites/eriksherman/2022/03/29/food-inflation-will-hit-millions-hard/?sh=708d13aa32d6> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits, Government Accounting Office, GAO-19-95 December 2018 <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-95> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)