

Feeding the hungry during the COVID-19 crisis

One of the side-effects of the COVID-19 crisis has been to highlight the importance of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known by its former name: Food Stamps, even though the current administration tried to reduce its reach by allowing states to set work requirements for able bodied adults without dependents (ABAWD) (<https://tinyurl.com/yyau4sep>).

Some states had already begun to implement stricter requirements for this program change when the coronavirus epidemic hit in late winter and states began to close schools and businesses to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV2, the virus that causes the disease COVID-19. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) included language that allowed states to temporarily suspend these ABAWD requirements to make SNAP benefits available to a wide number of Americans who found themselves out of work.

The FFCRA also allowed states to provide families with the maximum monthly benefit. In the past, as family income increased, the SNAP benefit decreased.

Before the closure of schools to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV2 many children from low income families qualified for free or reduced-price school lunches. With the closure of all schools, this source of nutritional food became unavailable.

The FFCRA “allows states to submit requests to provide meal replacement benefits through SNAP, known as ‘Pandemic EBT’ (for electronic benefit transfer), for households with children who attend a school that’s closed and who would otherwise receive free or reduced-price meals” (<https://tinyurl.com/y4wbylhq>). Most states and territories chose to participate in this programs.

The value of the program is its quick response to reductions in family income. During the present crisis, it often takes less than a week from the time people fill out their SNAP application to their receipt of the EBT card; the benefits no longer come in the form of a book of stamps that are redeemed at the grocery store checkout register, but are automatically loaded onto the EBT card and can be used just like a credit or debit card, though it can be used only for approved items.

According to a July 19, 2020 New York Times article, “Amid a Deadly Virus and Crippled Economy, One Form of Aid Has Proved Reliable: Food Stamps” by Jason DeParle, “More than six million people enrolled in food stamps in the first three months of the coronavirus pandemic, an unprecedented expansion that is likely to continue as more jobless people deplete their savings and billions in unemployment aid expires this month” (<https://tinyurl.com/y5d6e7y2>).

The surge in the use of SNAP benefits has included urban low income neighborhoods, suburban working class areas, as well as rural agricultural communities and has been a lifesaver for many.

But even with the wide reach of the often-contested SNAP program, hunger remains a critical issue during this pandemic and may become more serious if the \$600 per week unemployment bonus and extra FFCRA benefits are cut off between the time this article is being written and the time you read it.

That is where volunteer food supply programs like Feeding America come into play. Feeding America seeks to recover part of the billions of pounds of food that goes to waste in America every year and make that food available to hungry people across this land.

Feeding America “work[s] to get nourishing food – from farmers, manufacturers, and retailers – to people in need. At the same time, we also seek to help the people we serve to build a path to a brighter, food-secure future” (<https://tinyurl.com/y6mpyudf>). They carry out their work through a network of 200 food banks and 60,000 food pantries and meal programs.

At this time, it is likely impossible to imagine the twists and turns we will have to face as we work ourselves to the other side of this pandemic. We may yet see a greater level of hunger than we have observed to date.

We need to work together—farmers, workers, the unemployed, governments, companies, and charitable and volunteer organizations—to ensure that no one dies of hunger during this pandemic.

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