MAZON Priorities for Action – Responding to COVID-19

March 2020

MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger is closely monitoring the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the subsequent economic impact. We have very real concerns that the tentative response by the Administration has already affected those who rely on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), school meals, and other programs to feed themselves and their families. The failure of the federal government to quickly offer additional benefits is exacerbated by the cruel barriers to SNAP actively pursued by leaders at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). At MAZON, we know that there are many populations and communities who already face barriers to food security — including veterans, military families, students, seniors, women, Native Americans, and people in rural and remote communities — and surely the current crisis will burden them in unique ways.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a national health emergency, but also a time of urgent concern for those who are most vulnerable in our country. Those at economic risk are facing dire consequences right now. We call on the Administration, Congress, and states to work together to increase and expand access to federal nutrition assistance for food insecure Americans in the wake of this crisis.

A democratic society must respond in a time of crisis with both wisdom and compassion. We must provide for the needs of those unable to provide for themselves. Nearly 40 million Americans struggle to put food on the table on a regular basis, and COVID-19 will exacerbate their struggles and add to the numbers of Americans at risk of food insecurity.

The overwhelming majority of food assistance in this country has historically come from — and must continue to come from — federal programs, especially in times of crisis.

- The federal government must take the initiative to adopt measures that prioritize the needs of low-income and food insecure Americans to prevent further hunger and hardship during this pandemic. This must include boosting SNAP benefits by 15% and raising the average monthly SNAP benefit from $16 to $30.
- Policymakers must act quickly to ensure that those who face food insecurity every day are not disproportionately affected by lapses in access to federal nutrition programs.
- The Administration must immediately suspend its proposed and finalized rule changes to restrict SNAP for millions of Americans — certainly for the duration of this pandemic and indefinitely during this time of economic distress and long-term recovery.

Charity Alone is Not Enough

- Charity is often a vital first line of defense for families that struggle with food insecurity in America. It is also, unfortunately, inadequate in meeting the daily needs of millions of Americans who struggle with food insecurity, now more than ever.
• While some community-based service providers are exploring tactics like grab-and-go food packages, they will not be able to address the full scope of need. Charitable organizations will continue to play a vital role in addressing hunger and poverty, but the overwhelming majority of food assistance has historically come from — and must continue to come from — federal programs.

• The federal government plays the most crucial role in ensuring that people have access to adequate resources to feed themselves and their families through its nutrition safety net programs, particularly SNAP.

POLICY PRIORITIES FOR SPECIFIC POPULATIONS:

K-12 Students
• As the COVID-19 pandemic forces school closures around the country, millions of children are not only missing vital instructional time; many are also losing critically needed breakfast, lunch, and snacks that they usually receive through school nutrition programs.

• Nearly 22 million students in this country depend on free or reduced-price school meals as a key source of their daily nutrition. We know that eating regularly and well is a vital prerequisite for keeping children healthy, and during this national health crisis, support to make this possible is critical.

• Particularly for children in rural and remote communities, policymakers must utilize every tool at their disposal to ensure that children can access food that they otherwise would be getting at school. This must include waiving the congregate feeding requirement to allow schools to distribute food in any number of settings across all child nutrition programs.

Veterans
• Approximately 1.3 million low-income veterans currently receive SNAP benefits, and about 7% of veterans live in households that receive SNAP. However, too many veterans are struggling without the assistance of federal nutrition programs, in part due to stigma, shame, and lack of information. In fact, a recent study showed that among veterans who are eligible for assistance from SNAP, only 1 out of 3 currently participate in the program. Additional research shows particularly high rates of food insecurity among post-9/11 veterans and women veterans.

• The Administration must do more to engage veterans who receive care and services from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), as well as those who do not receive care through the VA system. We must work together to do all we can to connect veterans at risk of food insecurity to available assistance from SNAP.

• Enrolling eligible veterans in SNAP helps to prevent costly diet-related chronic health conditions and heads off a cycle of economic hardship, which can lead to a downward spiral that sometimes tragically results in veteran suicide.

• Policymakers must prioritize funding for veteran SNAP outreach and enrollment initiatives. This is a critical element in addressing the nutritional and health needs of all veterans — those within and outside the VA system. We must all work together to increase the capacity of the VA, veteran service organizations, and community partners like MAZON to ensure that no veteran goes hungry.

Military Families
• Due to errors in federal statutes for eligibility, currently serving military families who struggle to put food on the table face barriers to accessing
both SNAP and child nutrition programs. Sadly, these military families have been quietly struggling for years, often turning to food pantries that operate on or near every military installation in the country.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to intensify the challenges and hardships already faced by struggling military families: for spouses who are no longer able to work or have to reduce hours because of restrictions/closures, when childcare is no longer available, for the added strain placed on families of National Guard members who are activated to assist with the response to the coronavirus.
- Policymakers must prioritize excluding the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) as counted income in the determination of eligibility and benefits for all federal nutrition assistance programs to ensure that junior enlisted service members with larger households are able to access federal nutrition benefits. Now more than ever, they must have access to SNAP so that they do not have to turn in desperation to food pantries because they cannot get the government assistance they need.

**Seniors**

- We know that as people get older, they often age into poverty and are in need of government assistance from programs like SNAP and Meals on Wheels. Seniors are also more likely to be adversely affected by COVID-19 and those who struggle with food insecurity have few resources to help them weather a health crisis — particularly one that by its nature requires isolation.
- Policymakers must provide additional funding to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS) Administration for Community Living to expand senior meals programs, and to replenish and increase the supply of shelf-stable meals, frozen meals, and/or other nutrition services being made available through these programs. All necessary equipment must be provided to nutrition program staff and volunteers to deliver meals safely — this includes masks, gloves, hand sanitizers, etc.
- Policymakers must ensure that HHS’s Administration for Community Living has the authority to allow flexibility in meal service models for congregate and home-delivered meals to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Service providers must be able to order additional personnel and transportation to accommodate expanded home-delivery of meals as congregate sites are closed to reduce health risks to staff, volunteers, and recipients.
- Policymakers must provide timely COVID-19 emergency preparedness guidance and training for nutrition program staff and volunteers.

**Women**

- We know that women will be particularly impacted by the COVID-19 crisis because the feminization of poverty is a persistent reality playing out every day in communities across the country. Even on a good day, women face heightened barriers to food security and economic stability due to a variety of longstanding issues ranging from employment discrimination to caregiving responsibilities to long-term effects of the wage gap.
- With a stunning 40% of single mothers in the U.S. currently struggling to afford food for their families, these women are now facing new pressures to patch together plans to keep their children safe and fed in the wake of school closures, limited childcare options, income loss, and other challenges.
- We must address the various circumstances and systemic challenges that push millions of low-income women to need the safety net in the first place. These issues are intersectional, and our government’s response must be comprehensive. Any discussion about poverty and food insecurity must
acknowledge the realities of working families, particularly single mother households, including high costs of childcare, lack of paid leave, and limited access to affordable healthcare.

**Tribal Nations**

- Tribal Nations face unique challenges in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic due to historical and ongoing disparities affecting Native Americans, including limited access to health care, high unemployment, and high rates of food insecurity and underlying health conditions, including diet-related diseases. Nearly 25% of all Native American households are food insecure, and sadly, most reservations are located in remote areas with little access to fresh and nutritious food.
- Policymakers must provide additional support for the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) to ensure tribes can adequately respond to food insecurity among their citizens during this crisis.
- Congress must establish an Emergency Tribal Food Assistance Fund and enhance FDPIR for food, administration, and infrastructure, along with providing administrative flexibility.

**College Students**

- As higher education institutions are closing to slow the community spread of COVID-19, we must remember that college students are essential to the service industry as medical personnel, delivery workers, and public safety staff; they are caretakers for those most susceptible and vulnerable to COVID-19.
- Many college students already suffered from food and housing insecurity before the current crisis — now those same students are facing even greater barriers to survive. It is important to dispel the myth that college students are exclusively teenagers who live in dorms and can go stay with their parents for a while. They are also student parents who are trying to keep a semblance of normalcy for their children. They are men and women who support their families — parents, children, and others — while trying to keep up with their studies.
- Colleges are not just classrooms — they are also dining facilities, employers, broadband access points, and for some students, campus is their only safe space and environment during the day. We must consider the far-reaching impact of campus closures.
- As the crisis prolongs, students' finances will be drastically affected, and many students will likely become newly eligible for SNAP. This is a critical moment to ensure that all eligible college students are immediately connected to the critical federal nutrition programs.
- Policymakers, including all state and local agencies, must create and clearly communicate ways for students to apply and be approved for benefits remotely.

**Rural & Remote Communities**

- Approximately 15% of rural households struggle with food insecurity on a regular basis, and COVID-19 could increase this figure given the significant challenges these communities often face. These challenges include a lack of transportation, fewer grocery stores with healthy food, greater geographic distances, less opportunity for well-paying jobs, and limited healthcare infrastructure.
- Policymakers must provide additional funding and grant waiver authority to USDA to evaluate and modify the federal nutrition programs and policies to meet the unique needs of rural and remote communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.
• Congress must direct USDA to approve state plans for emergency SNAP assistance for families with children who lose access to school meals due to school closures, as well as to issue nationwide school meal waivers and SNAP waivers in states that could result in increased benefits during the COVID-19 emergency.
• Congress must continue to provide robust funding for The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the Community Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) for rural emergency food providers as well as relax administrative requirements.
• The government should explore expanding USDA’s online purchasing pilot program for SNAP to all states so that rural households can use SNAP to purchase food online during times when it is unsafe to do otherwise.
• Federal nutrition program benefits must be increased during the COVID-19 emergency to respond to the economic downturn and long-term recovery, and to increase local economic activity.

Americans in Puerto Rico
• Puerto Rico continues to face devastating poverty and food insecurity in the wake of Hurricanes Maria and Irma, recent earthquakes, and now the COVID-19 pandemic could make the situation much worse. Furthermore, Puerto Ricans are denied access to SNAP and must rely on a unique program called the Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP), which is extremely limited in scope and structure.
• While Congress has approved $100 million in nutrition aid for Puerto Rico along with American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands, this is far from enough to mitigate the immediate need, nevertheless to mitigate the damage created by joblessness and income losses resulting from COVID-19.
• Congress must approve an additional $1.27 billion in emergency NAP funds, as requested by Governor Wanda Vázquez Garced.
• In the long term, policymakers must address the flawed structure of NAP and move Puerto Rico back to SNAP so that people on the island can get adequate benefits and the program can function effectively in response to economic hardship and natural disasters, as SNAP was designed to do.