

November 16, 2022

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Senate Majority Leader
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Republican Leader
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senate Majority Leader Schumer and Republican Leader McConnell:

We—the undersigned national faith-based organizations representing various religious organizations, denominations, and faith traditions—are united in our commitment to reduce hunger and improve nutrition for all. Our diverse values and holy scriptures instruct us to ensure that everyone may live with dignity and the opportunity to realize their full potential. We join together to care for those who are poor and vulnerable, including nearly 40 million Americans facing hunger.

We are deeply concerned about the crisis of hunger in Puerto Rico that has been exacerbated by recent and ongoing natural disasters, limited funding and policy inflexibilities that prevent programs to adequately respond to increases in need, and decades of unfair exclusions from federal programs that perpetuate inequity and injustice for the people of Puerto Rico.

To address this unacceptable situation and alleviate the unjust hardships endured by the people of Puerto Rico, we request \$1 billion in supplemental funding for emergency nutrition assistance for Puerto Rico and the inclusion of S.4967 Puerto Rico Nutrition Assistance Fairness Act in the upcoming 2023 Omnibus Appropriations Act, which will provide Puerto Rico with federal benefits equity and inclusion into the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Puerto Rico is home to 3.2 million U.S. citizens who deserve federal benefits parity, including participation in SNAP. The Puerto Rico Nutrition Fairness Act would finally afford access to the nutrition benefits provided to Americans in the states. Over the past forty years, Puerto Rico's exclusion from the program has exacerbated poverty and food insecurity for low-income families, children, the elderly, veterans, our most vulnerable citizens, and those most in need.

In 1981, Congress moved from the food stamp program to SNAP, excluding Puerto Rico by locking them into a capped federal block grant known as the Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP). This reduced Puerto Rico's nutrition aid by twenty-five percent, an immediate and painful loss of assistance on the island. Puerto Rico's ability to respond to significant changes in the need for aid is severely limited by the block grant. Economic downturns, natural disasters, or pandemics like COVID-19 go tragically unanswered for months without Congress's particular

intervention. Following Hurricane Maria in September 2017, people in Puerto Rico waited six months to receive additional nutrition aid. The country has experienced heightened and unprecedented levels of food insecurity due to supply chain shortages, inflation, and the Ukrainian war. All these factors have increased the cost of groceries and other goods for individuals and families in Puerto Rico.

Unlike SNAP, the federal block grant does not effectively respond to increasing needs and prohibits access to disaster SNAP in emergencies. Given the capped funding, benefits fluctuate as enrollment increases or special Congressional appropriations are fully expended. Puerto Rico's NAP beneficiaries face stricter eligibility requirements, so NAP participants are historically poorer than those receiving SNAP in the states. Puerto Rico's families, children, elderly, and veterans live in uncertainty and are forced to make hard decisions about food purchases and nutrition.

The disparity continues to increase between benefits in the states and Puerto Rico. For example, beginning in October 2022, a single-person household can receive a maximum benefit of \$281 per month under SNAP. The same household's maximum benefit in Puerto Rico would be \$165 under NAP. A recent report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on Puerto Rico's transition into SNAP projects a two billion dollar increase in nutrition aid for the island, bridging a gross disparity for monthly benefits between the states and the territory that averages 42% today. The report also estimates that the transition will occur for seven to ten years, creating an urgency to begin the process immediately. There are no immediate costs to including the Puerto Rico Nutrition Assistance Fairness Act in the Omnibus bill.

Our values and traditions compel us to honor the dignity of every person. No matter a person's circumstance, no one deserves to go hungry. For far too long, the people of Puerto Rico have endured unequal treatment and the indignity of unfair policies that have worsened the problem of hunger. Puerto Rico and its U.S. citizens deserve equity and inclusion in the SNAP program, and the time to act is now. We thank you for your consideration and support of this request.

Sincerely,

MAZON, a Jewish Response to Hunger
Alliance of Baptists
Ameinu
Bread for the World
Church World Service
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces
Franciscan Action Network
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Hindus for Human Rights
Islamic Relief USA
Jewish Women International
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Council of Churches
Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies
New York Jewish Agenda

Pax Christi USA
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice
United Church Outreach Ministry (UCOM)