

## **Priorities for Action: Responding to Growing Hunger Due to COVID-19**

*August 2020*

The COVID-19 crisis has shined a spotlight on the gaping holes in our nation's safety net. [MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger](#) has been firing on all cylinders to ensure that all Americans can feed themselves and their families with dignity. Grounded in our strong foundation of Jewish values, MAZON continues to call attention to the disparate impact of COVID-19 on the populations whose food insecurity challenges have long been overlooked — including military families, veterans, Native Americans, older adults and LGBT older adults, college students, single mothers, and those in rural and remote communities.

### **Top-Line Messages:**

- Nearly 40 million Americans struggled to put food on the table before COVID-19. COVID-19 is exacerbating their hardship, and it has swelled the number of food insecure Americans to a stunning 80 million.
- Food pantries and distribution sites are vital emergency resources for families struggling with food insecurity in America, but charity cannot address the full scope of hunger, and it was never designed to do so.
- The disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on Black and other communities of color is the latest evidence that pervasive and systemic racism exacerbates the challenges they already face in America.
- The most meaningful and effective way to help millions of Americans facing food insecurity is to strengthen the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), our nation's most effective defense against hunger.
- Expanding SNAP access and increasing benefits will ensure that people can get the food they need, with dignity and choice.
- Boosting SNAP will also stimulate the economy and contribute to a faster national recovery. Economists estimate that during a recession, every SNAP dollar generates between \$1.50 and \$1.80 in economic activity.
- Congress must act immediately to:
  - Boost SNAP benefits and indefinitely suspend harmful rule changes to help all Americans facing hunger;
  - Remove barriers to nutrition programs for military families;
  - Ensure that Tribal Nations can adequately respond to food insecurity among their citizens;
  - Acknowledge the subtle, yet insidious, racism that has influenced anti-hunger policy and ensure that access, eligibility, and distribution of nutrition benefits are no longer subject to such influences;

- Address the acute needs of older adults, including an increase to the minimum SNAP benefit; and
  - Enable more college students to get support from programs like SNAP.
- It is appalling that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is still trying to appeal a federal injunction to advance its ideologically-driven rule change to restrict SNAP for almost one million Americans in need of assistance.

Read on to learn [more about SNAP](#), as well as MAZON's specific concerns related to [veterans](#), [military families](#), [older adults and LGBT older adults](#), [women and single mothers](#), [Native Americans](#), [college students](#), [K-12 students](#), [those living in rural and remote communities](#), [Americans in Puerto Rico](#), and [Black and other people of color](#).

## Policy Updates:

- On July 27th, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell introduced the **Health, Economic Assistance, Liability Protection, and Schools (HEALS) Act**, which would provide \$1 trillion in federal aid, but notably does nothing to address the growing crisis of widespread food insecurity in this country. MAZON released a [statement](#) rejecting the bill and calling on the Senate to immediately boost SNAP.
- On May 12th, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the **Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act**, which provides economic relief for those affected by COVID-19, including a temporary boost to SNAP benefits for the millions of Americans facing food insecurity. MAZON released a [statement](#) expressing relief that this legislation strengthens SNAP, as well as frustration that it fails to address the long-overlooked challenges of hunger among military families. The HEROES Act also fails to address the problems arising for college students who were receiving SNAP prior to the pandemic, who are now unable to access SNAP due to school closures and loss of work study or campus employment. MAZON supports provisions that aim to:
  - Boost SNAP maximum benefits by 15% through September 30, 2020;
  - Increase the SNAP minimum benefit to \$30 through September 30, 2020;
  - Suspend three harmful SNAP rule change proposals;
  - Extend the Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) program through the summer; and
  - Temporarily allow SNAP to be used to buy hot foods.
- In April, Congress passed the **Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act**. MAZON released a [statement on April 21](#), imploring Congress to prioritize SNAP for all who need it.

- In late March, Congress passed the **Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act**. MAZON released a [statement on March 25](#), expressing concern that while the bill included important provisions to stimulate the economy and provide some relief for families, healthcare workers, businesses, and others, it omitted urgently-needed benefit increases to SNAP.
- In mid-March, Congress passed the **Families First Coronavirus Response Act**. MAZON released a [statement on March 16](#) lauding this as a critical first step to ensure that all Americans can access the life-saving nutrition assistance they need. MAZON supported provisions that:
  - Authorize the “Pandemic-EBT” program, allowing USDA to approve state agency plans for temporary emergency standards, so that families can receive assistance when a school is closed for at least 5 consecutive days;
  - Provide additional funds for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), assistance to U.S. territories, home-delivered services to older adults, congregate feeding programs, and Native Americans;
  - Protect students’ access to school meal benefits during school closures by creating a nationwide waiver authority, which allows school officials to distribute food in various settings across all nutrition programs;
  - Provide SNAP flexibility for low-income jobless workers suspending the work and work training requirements for SNAP during this crisis; and
  - Provide additional SNAP flexibilities in a public health emergency.

[Learn more about the federal policy responses to COVID-19 that MAZON is tracking.](#)

## Background Information about SNAP:

- Eligible households with one or two members qualify for at least a **minimum SNAP benefit of \$16 per month** in fiscal year 2020. Approximately 20% of households with an elderly individual received only this minimum benefit in 2018. Even before COVID-19, researchers were estimating that SNAP benefits fall about \$11 short per person of the weekly cost of a nutritious meal plan that SNAP is based on.
- To determine SNAP eligibility and benefit amount, a household’s income and resources are measured against three tests — gross monthly income (before deductions), net income (after deductions), and assets. Households that include an older adult or someone with a disability can have assets up to \$3,500 and all other households can have assets up to \$2,250. **SNAP households are expected to spend about 30% of their net income on food**, so families with

no net income receive the maximum benefit. For all other households, the monthly SNAP benefit equals the maximum benefit for that household size minus the household's expected contribution.

- The **national average SNAP benefit for a family of 4 is \$465/month**. In Fiscal Year 2018, the average SNAP recipient received about \$127 per month (or about \$4.17 per day, or \$1.39 per meal).
- When a person receives SNAP, those benefits are used to buy food from groceries and other sellers, which simultaneously **stimulates the economy**. And this happens very quickly — according to USDA, 80% of SNAP benefits are redeemed within two weeks of receipt; 97% are spent within a month.
- Economists estimate that during a recession, every SNAP dollar generates between \$1.50 and \$1.80 in economic activity, which means that **SNAP has a 150-180% return on investment**.
- From February to May, SNAP enrollment grew by 17% due to COVID-19 — illustrating the urgent need for food assistance throughout the country in rural, suburban, and urban communities. Approximately **1 in 8 Americans now receive SNAP to buy their groceries**.

## Concerns Related to Specific Populations

### Veterans

- Approximately 1.3 million low-income veterans received SNAP benefits, and about 7% of veterans lived in households that receive SNAP before the outbreak of COVID-19. For far too long, many veterans have been struggling without the assistance of federal nutrition programs, in part due to stigma, shame, and lack of information.
- 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 veterans who are women.
- 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, which is becoming increasingly difficult due to COVID-19.

- Enrolling eligible veterans in SNAP helps to prevent costly diet-related chronic health conditions and heads off a cycle of economic hardship that can lead to a downward spiral, sometimes tragically resulting in veteran suicide.
- Particularly in the wake of COVID-19, 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 unique 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; food pantries that are now overrun and overwhelmed because of COVID-19.
- COVID-19 has intensified challenges and hardships already faced by struggling military families: spouses who are no longer able to work or must reduce hours because of restrictions/closures, lack of access to subsidized school meals, and limited childcare options. Furthermore, there is an added strain placed on families of National Guard members who are activated to assist with the pandemic response.
- 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 programs like SNAP. Now more than ever, all military families must be able to access SNAP so that they do not have to turn in desperation to food pantries simply because they cannot get the government assistance they need.

### Older Adults and LGBT Older Adults

- We know that many people age into poverty and are in need of government assistance from programs like SNAP and Meals on Wheels. Millions of low-income older adults 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.

- MAZON is particularly concerned about protecting LGBT older adults, who often face high rates of social isolation, poverty, and lack of access to culturally competent services. MAZON was proud to be the motivating force behind [new qualitative research](#) that reveals the persistent challenges and barriers to accessing the charitable food assistance network for this population.
- At the very least, the Administration must enforce existing nondiscrimination rules and ensure that emergency care and relief are delivered based on need — not bias. No one should be turned away from services because of their sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity.
- Policymakers must leverage SNAP in key ways to enable older adults to put food on the table while remaining safely isolated. This must include encouraging more states to participate in SNAP Online Purchasing, expanding SNAP's Restaurant Meals Program (RMP), and funding state agencies to reimburse retailers for grocery delivery fees.
- Policymakers must continue to provide robust funding to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Administration for Community Living for assistance programs, and increase the supply of shelf-stable meals, frozen meals, and other nutrition services. All necessary equipment must be provided to program staff and volunteers to deliver meals safely — this includes masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer.
- Policymakers must continue to allow flexibility in service models for congregate and home-delivered meals to respond to COVID-19. Service providers must be allowed 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 guidance and training for nutrition program staff and volunteers.

## Women and Single Mothers

- We know that women are being 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 before COVID-19, 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.

### Native Americans

- Native Americans, especially those residing on rural and remote reservations in Indian Country, face unique challenges in responding to COVID-19, in part due to longstanding and ongoing disparities, which have created economic and health inequities. High rates of unemployment and poverty, limited access to healthcare and fresh and traditional foods, among other barriers have resulted in high rates of food insecurity and diet-related health conditions including obesity and diabetes. With nearly one in four Native American households experiencing food insecurity and underlying health conditions, many tribal citizens find themselves more vulnerable to COVID-19.
- Congress must increase flexibility, access, and funding for the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). Robust funding for FDPIR must cover administrative costs, reimbursement of emergency food purchases, and allow Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) to procure food locally and regionally.
- Policymakers must also temporarily allow individuals to receive both SNAP and FDPIR during the same month to account for the increase in participants and food costs during the pandemic, and provide parity and eligibility for tribal governments and ITOs in The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

### College Students

- With the closure of higher education institutions due to 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 who are most susceptible to COVID-19.

- Many college students already suffered from food 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.
- Policymakers, including all state and local agencies, must create and clearly communicate ways for students to apply and be approved for benefits remotely. At the very least, students who were receiving SNAP prior to COVID-19 must be able to receive benefits without having to meet SNAP student and work requirements that are no longer feasible due to job losses and school 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 connected to the federal nutrition programs.

## K-12 Students

- Nearly 22 million students in the U.S. 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.
- As COVID-19 has forced 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.
- 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, and throughout the summer months.
- At the very least, Congress must extend the Pandemic -EBT (P-EBT) program through summer and until schools reopen so that low-income families will not

lose out on food assistance their children would be receiving if schools were open.

## Rural & Remote Communities

- Approximately 15% of rural households struggle with food insecurity on a regular basis, and COVID-19 has made the situation much worse. These communities often face challenges including lack of transportation, few grocery stores with healthy food, less opportunity for well-paying jobs, and limited 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 and beyond COVID-19. This must include approving state plans for emergency SNAP assistance for families with children who lose access to school meals due to school closures, as well as allowing states to increase SNAP benefits for all who need it during the COVID-19 emergency and until the economy can fully recover. This will help families put food on the table and also increase local economic activity.
- Congress must continue to provide robust funding for TEFAP and the Community Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) for rural emergency food providers as well as relax administrative requirements.
- Policymakers should continue to expand 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.

## 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, those in Puerto Rico are denied access to SNAP and must rely on a separate program called the Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP), which is extremely limited in scope and structure.
- Congress must provide robust funding to address nutrition needs in Puerto Rico — while some aid has been approved for Puerto Rico along with American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands, it is far from enough to mitigate the immediate need, nevertheless to mitigate the damage created by joblessness and income losses resulting from COVID-19.

- In the long term, policymakers must address the flawed structure of NAP and move Puerto Rico back to SNAP so that Americans on the island can access adequate benefits and the program can function effectively in response to economic hardship and natural disasters, as SNAP was designed to do.

### Black and Other People of Color

- Recent data from the Census Bureau data reveals 40% of Black households, 36% of Hispanic households, and 22% of white households are facing food insecurity. This means that during COVID-19, Black and Hispanic families are nearly twice as likely to be facing hunger as white families.
- This is a staggering statistic, but sadly, Black and other communities of color have always been disproportionately impacted by food insecurity and poverty in the U.S. According to USDA, 21% of all food insecure households in the U.S. were Black households in 2018, although only about 12% of the population was Black.
- Higher rates of unemployment and economic hardship among Black and other communities of color lead to exacerbated hunger and poverty. We must also acknowledge and address that communities of color face more significant threats to their health and well-being without adequate access to needed resources.
- In our fight to end hunger, we at MAZON commit to confronting the longstanding racism that infects the beliefs, policies, and institutions that limit opportunity, allow discrimination, and perpetuate inequalities.

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