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The case for a boost to SNAP

HOW TO CONTINUE the federal boost to unemployment benefits isn't the only pressing matter for Congress to deal with via the next coronavirus relief and stimulus package. Members must also include a boost to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

As Haley Kottler, campaign director of Kansas Appleseed, told reporters Wednesday in a call organized by the Food Research & Action Center, "Families are going to be hit with a financial crisis like we haven't seen."

Research by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and *The New York Times* shows that more than 6 million people enrolled in SNAP in the first three months of the coronavirus pandemic, an unprecedented rate of increase. About 43 million people now get SNAP benefits. That number is bound to go up, especially if Congress lowers the unemployment benefits it's been funding.

The average SNAP benefit is \$127 per month, or \$1.40 per meal. In past economic crises, Congress increased SNAP benefits. This year, Republicans have agreed to some flexibilities in SNAP eligibility but have successfully opposed an increase in benefits.

The House-passed HEROES bill has a 15 percent increase in the maximum SNAP benefit amount and a raise in the minimum benefit

from \$16 to \$30 per month. But as Senate Agriculture Committee ranking member Debbie Stabenow said, the GOP's HEALS Act is "stunningly silent on food assistance."

The nation's major anti-hunger groups—the Alliance to End Hunger, Bread for the World, CBPP, Feeding America, the Food Research & Action Center, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, and Share Our Strength—have denounced the proposal.

"Congress should not adjourn without increasing SNAP benefits," the groups said in a statement. "The recently released HEALS Act is an unconscionable failure in our federal response to the COVID-19 hunger crisis. SNAP benefits are one of the fastest, most effective forms of economic stimulus, and increasing SNAP benefits helps families afford adequate, nutritious food. Congress must strengthen SNAP benefits in the final COVID-19 package to address food hardship and support economic recovery."

The anti-hunger groups have made the case mostly on humanitarian grounds, citing reports of increases in food insecurity, especially for the elderly and minorities. But since Republicans seem unmoved by that argument, they're starting to emphasize the economic benefits of SNAP. As FRAC President Luis Guardia noted this week,

"During an economic downturn, each \$1 of SNAP benefits generates between \$1.50 and \$1.80 in economic activity. The funds are spent quickly and turn over in the economy, having proven positive impacts on the entire food chain."

Lisa Davis, a senior vice president at Share Our Strength, added, "Money spent at local grocery stores and markets leads to more jobs, wages, and local economic activity in the community. They support local farmers and agriculture. And they provide a quick return on investment; while other stimulus programs put dollars in pockets where they may be saved or spent slowly, the vast majority of families spend their benefits before the month ends."

Republicans prefer food-distribution programs like the

Farmers to Families Food Box program, under which the Agriculture Department is issuing \$3 billion in contracts to buy fruits and vegetables, dairy products, and cooked pork and chicken to be handed over to food banks and other nonprofits for distribution. Many Americans are going to food banks, but Feeding America, the network of food banks, has said increasing SNAP benefits will have much more impact.

There's no indication how the issue of nutrition assistance will be resolved. Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee

Chair John Hoeven of North Dakota said in an interview that negotiations over food assistance will be left up to Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and other congressional leaders. Hoeven added that he is open to more food assistance as long as the money does not come from the \$20 billion Republicans have included for agricultural assistance.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Monday that Senate Republicans added "a tax credit for expensive dinners and lunches, but no money for food stamps or nutrition assistance." Stabenow noted that "Senate Republicans might be able to ignore the hunger crisis in our country, but right now, there are too many Americans who can't ignore the pain of an empty stomach. The Republican agriculture proposal is a nonstarter unless it boosts food help for our families."

Pelosi and Stabenow seem determined that a SNAP boost will be included in the coronavirus aid package. But Democrats gave up on the SNAP benefit increase in previous aid packages. It's needed now more than ever, and it shouldn't get sacrificed again. □



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