

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

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A food agenda beyond SNAP

THE BATTLE OVER CUTS to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in the debt-ceiling talks has obscured an effort by anti-hunger groups to boost SNAP benefits and other nutrition programs in the upcoming farm bill and make changes to child-nutrition programs, including school meals.

While Democrats, including Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow, have made cutting nutrition programs a red line in both the debt-ceiling talks and the farm bill, the anti-hunger agenda to “improve” nutrition benefits (to use the advocates’ verb) is likely to put a new wrinkle in the farm-bill debate. The anti-hunger agenda may also bring new pressure to reauthorize the child-nutrition programs that have not been updated since the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, championed by first lady Michelle Obama, became law in 2010.

More than 1,000 leaders of anti-hunger groups from around the country gathered in Washington in early May for the National Anti-Hunger Policy Conference, which was cosponsored by the Food Research & Action Center, a nationwide organization of anti-hunger advocates; Feeding America, the nation’s largest network of food banks; and the CACFP Forum, the support group for the Child and Adult Care Food Program. It was their first in-person conference since 2020, although another 600 advocates attended the meeting virtually.

After two days of sessions on the nutritional needs of low-income Americans, the leaders sent attendees to Capitol Hill armed with the admonition that they need to be on offense, not just playing defense on nutrition policy. They also told virtual attendees to visit local congressional offices. All were armed with four sheets of proposals that organizers called “leave behinds” when they met with members of Congress or their staffs.

The farm-bill sheet called on Congress to protect SNAP’s structure and funding but also to include a series of bills already introduced by members to increase benefits. Those bills call for changing the basis to set SNAP benefits from the Thrifty Food Plan to another Agriculture Department calculation called the Low-Cost Food Plan. Advocates urge boosting benefits for older Americans so they don’t have to choose between food and medicine. They also call for raising the SNAP minimum monthly benefit (currently \$23) and easing access to SNAP for college students. The bills also propose ending SNAP time limits for able-bodied adults without dependents and ending the prohibition on using SNAP benefits

to purchase hot prepared foods from food retailers.

Finally, the bills would eliminate the five-year waiting period for legal permanent immigrants to access SNAP and other federal programs, allow tribal populations to participate in both SNAP and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, and move the current food-stamp block-grant programs for Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands into the regular SNAP program.

While SNAP’s presence in the farm bill gets a lot of attention, it’s also expected to reauthorize The Emergency Food Assistance Program, which allows the Agriculture Department to buy food for distribution to food banks, pantries, soup kitchens, and emergency shelters. The anti-hunger agenda calls for doubling the TEFAP purchasing authorization to \$500 million per year, adjusted for inflation, and increasing budgets for storage, distribution, and transportation, particularly in rural areas. Advocates also aim to ease access to the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, which now distributes food boxes to about 760,000 older adults.

The farm bill would also reauthorize the senior farmers’ market nutrition program, which provides vouchers/coupons to low-income seniors to purchase fresh produce at farmers’ markets

and other direct-to-consumer venues, as well as the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program, which increases low-income consumers’ benefits to purchase fruits and vegetables and provides produce prescriptions to SNAP/Medicaid participants.

Outside the farm bill, the anti-hunger agenda includes universal free school meals, maintenance of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children to cover all mothers and children to age 5 who apply, and federal tax credits for low-income families.

It’s unclear whether Republicans will consider any of this aggressive agenda. Rep. Jahana Hayes, the ranking member on the Agriculture Nutrition Subcommittee, recently complained that House Republicans have not held any hearings on nutrition even though those programs make up 85 percent of farm-bill spending. Rep. Brad Finstad, the subcommittee chairman, called Hayes’s comments “public fodder” and assured her that the full committee will take up nutrition issues in June. □

Contributing Editor Jerry Hagstrom is the founder and executive editor of The Hagstrom Report, which may be found at www.HagstromReport.com.



A volunteer working at a Houston food bank in 2020