Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

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Congress Must Strengthen Farm Bill to Fight Unfolding Hunger Crisis

Statement of Sharon Parrott, President, on failed Senate Agriculture Committee farm bill vote

A child hunger crisis is unfolding in plain sight: it's very likely that more than 1.5 million children nationwide have lost food assistance in the wake of unprecedented SNAP cuts in last year's Republican reconciliation law. While the farm bill considered by the Senate Agriculture Committee today would take a step in the right direction in addressing some of the fallout from the SNAP cuts enacted last year, it doesn't do enough for people losing the help they need to afford groceries, and it makes even deeper future cuts to SNAP. Protecting families in the short term shouldn't take food off families' plates in the future. Congress must improve this proposal and pass bipartisan legislation this year that addresses the current crisis without making deeper SNAP cuts down the road.

The stakes are high: more than 4.5 million people across the country have already lost food assistance since the reconciliation law's cuts were enacted last July. That's the steepest decline in SNAP participation in nearly three decades. The SNAP cuts are already causing children far more harm than most expected, despite Republican claims during last year's debate that they would be protected. Across the U.S., these cuts are taking away food assistance from eligible families. And without SNAP, these families are skipping meals and choosing between buying groceries and paying for other essentials like rent.

A main culprit of this crisis is the provision — set to take effect in about a year in all but a handful of states — that requires most states to pay between 5 and 15 percent of SNAP costs for the first time in the program's history, shifting billions of dollars of costs onto states. The too-hasty implementation and dramatic financial implications are leading states to create access barriers to basic food assistance in an effort to lower their error rate. Notably, wrongly turning away an eligible household does not count as an error, while providing somewhat more or less in benefits to a family eligible for SNAP does.

Without a delay to this cost shift, states will have to make hard budgeting decisions in their upcoming legislative sessions, which start in January. States that are unable or unwilling to pay their share of SNAP costs will have to drop out of the program *entirely*, ending SNAP for children, seniors, parents, workers, veterans, and people with disabilities alike.

States on a bipartisan basis have said they need more time to bring down their error rates — and some have acknowledged that ending SNAP in their state is a potential option.

The impact of this massive cost shift has already caused millions of people to lose the food assistance they need to feed their families. Even more people will lose SNAP once states must begin paying billions of dollars in benefit costs for the first time. Without federal action, SNAP may soon no longer exist as a nationwide program available to people in all 50 states.

The farm bill proposed by Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Boozman includes a one-year delay in the cost shift, to October 1, 2028. While the original proposal failed to give states more time to lower their costs by reducing errors, the committee adopted an amendment to give states an additional year to see error rate reductions resulting from their intensive work to lower their error rates and reduce their costs, an additional step in the right direction.

The amendment also provides additional funding for emergency food providers, a positive development and a recognition that the Republican reconciliation law is driving up emergency food needs. But more funding for emergency food is not a substitute for ensuring that SNAP is available and accessible for the families who need it.

Here's how the proposal falls short of what people across the U.S. need to afford groceries, despite its improvements.

First, it would cut SNAP deeper in future years to pay for the one-year cost shift delay, even as Republicans press for billions of dollars in additional farm relief without offsetting savings. It actually *raises* the amount some states will have to pay in SNAP benefits in the future, increasing the risk that some states will opt out of participating in SNAP. Addressing this unfolding crisis shouldn't lead to even deeper food assistance cuts in the future.

Second, it provides only a one-year delay in a provision where too-hasty implementation is causing millions of children to lose food assistance. A longer pause that gives states more time to lower their error rates and prepare for the new costs would let states reassess their steps to lower error rates and undo unwarranted access barriers that are taking food assistance away from eligible people who need it. Congress already gave some states a two-year delay in paying the cost shift — those with the highest error rates — and the Boozman farm bill preserves that preferential treatment. *All* states need more than just one additional year to responsibly reduce their errors and budget for these new costs.

Third, the proposal fails to delay the imminent 50 percent cut to federal funding for SNAP administrative costs, which takes effect in less than two months on October 1. Some states have already failed to backfill for this federal funding cut, which will force them to try to improve their SNAP programs' accuracy with *fewer* resources. That will raise the risk of more staffing shortages, backlogs, and people waiting months without benefits. Delaying this cut to administrative funding is critical to restoring food assistance for eligible families who are losing food assistance solely because they can't get through on overloaded phone lines, and because understaffed states can't keep up with additional red tape. It's also important for accomplishing what policymakers say they want: improved program administration and fewer payment errors.

When Congress returns this fall, policymakers must work on a bipartisan basis to advance legislation that addresses the unfolding crisis without making deeper cuts to food assistance in later years. Recognizing the current hunger crisis and the need to delay the cost shift for all states is an important first step, but Congress can do better. Children and families deserve more.

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