
Rosenbaum: Executive Action on Food Assistance Strengthens Federal Response to Hunger

CBPP today released a statement from Dottie Rosenbaum, Senior Fellow and Interim Program Area Lead for Food Assistance, on the President's new executive order that includes changes in food assistance:

The President's [executive order](#) to address food hardship is a strong response to families' immediate hardship during the COVID crisis and takes an important step, consistent with congressional direction from the 2018 Farm Bill, to re-evaluate the adequacy of SNAP benefits in helping low-income Americans afford an adequate diet. It wisely reflects both a recognition of the need for quick action and a longer-term commitment to helping the millions of low-income families that struggle to put food on the table.

The COVID crisis has sparked an alarming growth in food hardship, disproportionately among households with children and communities of color. More than 29 million adults report that their household didn't get enough to eat sometimes or often in the last seven days, according to the most recent Census survey, from mid-December. This figure has risen by 7 million since late August and is about four times the most comparable pre-pandemic estimate.

The executive order aims [to improve two features](#) of COVID-related federal relief efforts already in place. First, it increases food assistance benefits provided through the new Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) program, which replace the free or reduced-price meals that millions of children ordinarily receive in their schools or child care centers. These children will receive about a 15 percent increase in P-EBT benefits. For families whose children are at home full time rather than at school or child care due to the pandemic, this increase represents about \$100 more for food purchases over two months for a family with three children.

Second, it seeks to improve emergency SNAP benefits authorized under the March 2020 Families First Act so they reach the households with the most trouble affording an adequate diet, consistent with SNAP's core purpose of alleviating hunger and malnutrition. These emergency allotments (EAs) are providing substantial food assistance to many households, but they miss 37 percent of SNAP households; those missed are the households that have the lowest incomes and are at the highest risk of food insecurity. At least 12 million individuals in SNAP households aren't receiving EAs, including more than 5 million children (nearly half of them under age 6), about 1 million households with elderly members, and 600,000 households with people with disabilities.

The poor targeting of the emergency benefits is due to a Trump Administration policy that did not allow states to provide EAs to households that already receive the maximum SNAP benefit because they have no disposable income available to purchase food. President Biden's executive order directs the Agriculture

Department to work with the Justice Department to review the Trump Administration policy. The timing of any changes and the amount of EAs that households would receive is unclear.

The 15 percent SNAP benefit increase enacted in late December provides about \$27 per person per month to all SNAP households, including those who do not receive EAs, for January to June 2021. While this is an important step, the Biden Administration's approach to targeting more assistance to the lowest-income households would do more than that increase alone to respond to the elevated rates of food insecurity during the current crisis.

Lastly, the executive order directs the Agriculture Department to move quickly on a provision of the 2018 Farm Bill mandating a re-evaluation of SNAP benefit levels, which fall short of what many participants need to purchase and prepare a healthy diet. Roughly half of all households participating in SNAP are still food insecure, meaning they lack consistent access to enough food to support an active, healthy life. Even those who achieve food security often find it hard to stretch their limited resources far enough to purchase and consume a healthy diet. And studies found that temporary benefit increases during the Great Recession increased households' food spending and improved food security.

Benefits are inadequate for many households because the Thrifty Food Plan, an estimate of the cost of a market basket of foods upon which SNAP benefits are based, has not been adequately updated over time to reflect the [actual cost](#) of a nutritious diet. It currently assumes that families need less than \$200 a month, or about \$40 a week, per person for food. The 2018 Farm Bill directed the Agriculture Department to re-evaluate the Thrifty Food Plan by 2022 and every five years thereafter, which gives the Department an opportunity to reset the plan in line with current dietary guidelines and basic parameters of what families typically eat. That, in turn, would help ensure that over the longer term, SNAP benefits better respond to households' food needs.

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