

April 15, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader McCarthy and Minority Leader Schumer:

Thank you for your diligent work on the COVID-19 relief packages. We appreciate the opportunity to provide recommendations for the fourth package and thank you in advance for your consideration of these priorities.

Representing more than 107,000 registered dietitian nutritionists, nutrition and dietetic technicians, registered, and advanced-degree nutritionist researchers, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics is the largest association of food and nutrition professionals in the United States and is committed to improving the nation's health through food and nutrition across the lifecycle.

The coronavirus has significantly changed the lives of all Americans. From social distancing measures and school closings, to food supply disruptions and loss of jobs, the pandemic has instigated an unprecedented economic situation. Congress has moved quickly to provide funding and flexibilities to communities to address the economic and safety challenges during the onset of the pandemic. Yet, more work is needed to manage the prolonged situation and subsequent recovery.

More than 16 million people have applied for unemployment benefits since the beginning of the pandemic and that number is estimated to continue to rise, making it difficult for Americans to keep food on the table. The Academy is particularly concerned about the racial and economic disparities the pandemic has illuminated. Federal nutrition programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and school meals are not only the first line of defense against food insecurity, they are also effective ways to introduce money into the local economy. These

programs allow low-income families to access healthy food while also supporting essential local jobs in grocery stores and schools.

The Academy urges Congress to act now to ensure access to healthy food and protect jobs for those on the frontlines feeding their communities, including Academy members. We respectfully request that the fourth COVID-19 relief package not only provide provisions to manage the immediate impact of the pandemic, but also look to recovery. The Academy requests the package to include the following provisions:

Invest in SNAP.

- Boost the maximum SNAP benefit by 15 percent;
- Increase the monthly minimum SNAP benefit from \$16 to \$30; and
- Place a hold on proposed rules that would weaken SNAP eligibility and benefits.

Food insecurity significantly impacts the health and well-being of individuals and is a risk factor for negative psychological and health outcomes.¹ It also increases the prevalence and severity of diet-related disease, such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke and some cancers.^{2,3,4} These disease states put individuals at greater risk of complications from the coronavirus.

Research demonstrates that SNAP reduces health care utilization and costs.^{5,6,7} For example, a national study reveals that SNAP participation is associated with lower health care costs.⁸ On average, low-income adults participating in SNAP incurred health care costs nearly 25 percent lower over 12 months, including those paid by private or public insurance, than similarly situated adults not participating in SNAP.

¹ Hartline-Grafton, H. (2017). *The Impact of Poverty, Food Insecurity, & Poor Nutrition on Health and Well-Being*. Washington, DC: Food Research & Action Center.

² Franklin B. Jones, A., Love, D., Puckett, S., Macklin, J., & White-Means, S. (2012). Exploring mediators of food insecurity and obesity: a review of recent literature. *Journal of Community Health*, 37(1), 253-264.

³ Berkowitz, S. A., Karter, A. J., Corbie-Smith, G., Seligman, H. K., Ackroyd, S. A., Barnard, L. S., Atlas, S. J., & Wexler, D. J. (2018). Food insecurity, food “deserts,” and glycemic control in patients with diabetes: a longitudinal analysis. *Diabetes Care*, 19, 171981.

⁴ Gregory, C. A., & Coleman-Jensen, A. (2017). Food insecurity, chronic disease and health among working-age adults. *Economic Research Report*, 235. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

⁵ Gregory, C. A., & Deb, P. (2015). Does SNAP improve your health? *Food Policy*, 50, 11-19.

⁶ Berkowitz, S. A., Seligman, H. K., Rigdon, J., Meigs, J. B., & Basu, S. (2017). Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participation and health care expenditures among low-income adults. *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 177(11), 1642-1649.

⁷ Seligman, H. K., Bolger, A. F., Guzman, D., Lopez, A., & Bibbins-Domingo, K. (2014). Exhaustion of food budgets at month’s end and hospital admissions for hyperglycemia. *Health Affairs*, 33(1), 116-123.

⁸ Berkowitz, S. A., Seligman, H. K., Rigdon, J., Meigs, J. B., & Basu, S. (2017). Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participation and health care expenditures among low-income adults. *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 177(11), 1642-1649.

SNAP improves child, adult and senior health outcomes, including physical and mental health.⁹ The program increases the probability of self-reporting “excellent” or “good health,”¹⁰ lowers the risk of poor glucose control for people with diabetes¹¹ and has a protective effect on mental health.¹² SNAP also helps reduce stress for struggling individuals and families worried about finances, which is significant given the high correlation of stress with poor health outcomes¹³ and the level of stress that Americans are under during this unprecedented situation.

Lastly, SNAP households typically spend their monthly benefits quickly, making SNAP a particularly effective stimulus in providing quick support to local economies. Every dollar in SNAP benefits helps generate more than \$1.70 in economic activity.

Extend the Pandemic-Electronic Benefits Transfer through the summer.

As the prolonged stay-at-home orders, job loss and economic decline impact families’ ability to access food, it is imperative to prioritize efforts to provide food while maintaining social distancing. Many Academy members are on the frontlines, serving children meals daily, but schools cannot shoulder the burden alone. As the virus continues to spread, we must have alternative solutions for children to access food through the summer and extending the P-EBT benefit timeline is the solution.

Invest in recovery efforts for school nutrition and child care programs.

- Support school nutrition and child care programs that continue to serve their communities despite a significant decrease in revenue; and
- Provide \$2.6 billion to school nutrition programs to account for the maintenance of staff and benefit expenditures incurred during school closures despite a significant decrease in revenue from lower meal participation.

School nutrition programs and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) child care centers rely on reimbursement from meal service to pay for expenses. Many of these institutions across the country have maintained or incurred more expenses than normal while seeing a significant decrease in revenues from lower meal participation during school and business closures. For example, nationally, schools have been estimated to serve just 20% of their meals as compared to the same time last year while maintaining labor costs. This unanticipated loss of revenue has

⁹ Hartline-Grafton, H. (2017). SNAP and Public Health: The Role of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Improving the Health and Well-Being of Americans. Washington, DC: Food Research & Action Center.

¹⁰ Gregory, C. A., & Deb, P. (2015). Does SNAP improve your health? *Food Policy*, 50, 11-19.

¹¹ Mayer, V. L., McDonough, K., Seligman, H., Mitra, N., & Long, J. A. (2016). Food insecurity, coping strategies and glucose control in low-income patients with diabetes. *Public Health Nutrition*, 19(6), 1103-1111.

¹² Leung, C. W., Epel, E. S., Willett, W. C., Rimm, E. B., & Laraia, B. A. (2015). Household food insecurity is positively associated with depression among low-income Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program participants and income-eligible nonparticipants. *Journal of Nutrition*, 145(3), 622-627.

¹³ Juster, R-P., McEwen, B. S., & Lupien, S. J. (2010). Allostatic load biomarkers of chronic stress and impact on health and cognition. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 35(1), 2-16.

forced programs to tap into fund balances and draw upon lines of credit. In order to sustain these essential feeding programs while protecting jobs (many held by Academy members) and precious education resources, funding must be provided to make programs financially solvent and to maintain the integrity of essential food security programs as the recovery process begins.

Invest in school kitchen equipment grants.

- Provide \$200 million in school kitchen equipment grants to prepare schools for future emergencies.

Thousands of school nutrition professionals have served as frontline workers in their communities, providing food to children during the COVID-19 pandemic school closures. These workers already work under stressed conditions, with three out of five districts reporting the need for new equipment.¹⁴ Providing additional funding can help ensure schools are prepared to serve healthy, nutritious foods when schools return, particularly if they are unable to invest in upgrades as a result of financial stress from the pandemic. Increased funding can help schools acquire adequate equipment to be prepared for future emergencies.

Increase benefits for fruit and vegetable purchases through WIC.

- Increase the average WIC cash-value benefit to increase access to fruits and vegetables while supporting efforts to minimize food waste.

With shortages of WIC items on the shelf, increased cash value benefit (CVB) value will ensure WIC participants have sustained access to nutritious foods throughout the public health emergency. There is also concern that farmers will continue to be impacted by the pandemic with the decreased outlets for produce. By providing more purchasing power for fruits and vegetables, we can support efforts to reduce food waste and support farms.

Provide personal protective equipment for community food providers.

- Provide \$200 million in PPE for school nutrition, charitable food network and senior meal providers.

Academy members in schools, food pantries and senior delivery programs have expressed concern for the safety of their staff and clients given the lack of resources and safety guidance. Community food providers must be provided with the proper supplies and equipment to keep themselves safe, as well as prevent the spread of COVID-19. Funds and supplies should be provided to manage the current pandemic, and provisions and specific guidance should be made to prepare these community workers for future emergencies.

¹⁴ USDA operations study. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/CNOPS-II-SY%202015-16.pdf>. Accessed on February 20, 2020.

Allow for flexibilities in SNAP-Ed for the COVID-19 response.

SNAP-Ed providers, many of whom are Academy members, reach large numbers of low-income households at risk for COVID-19 due to pre-existing conditions. These workers are well positioned to assist in SNAP and P-EBT enrollment. However, they are unable to do so due to operational challenges under existing statutory authority. A nationwide waiver with no match requirement should be provided to allow SNAP-ED to support SNAP enrollment efforts, including P-EBT and other food assistance programs designed for families and communities. Additionally, adequate resources should be provided for increased need to enhance and highlight best practices, resources and case studies that showcase innovative approaches in a virtual environment.

Invest in The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

- Provide an additional \$500 million in TEFAP food; and
- Provide an additional \$500 million in TEFAP storage and distribution funding.

Many Academy members work in food banks across the country where demand for food has skyrocketed. Although the \$850 million dollar investment through the first set of COVID-19 spending packages was a good start, food banks estimate that it will not be enough to meet the ever-growing need.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide recommendations for the fourth package and thank you for your consideration of these priorities.

Sincerely,



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Vice President
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cc: Chairman Pat Roberts, Senate Agriculture Committee
Ranking Member Debbie Stabenow, Senate Agriculture Committee
Chairman Bobby Scott, House Education & Labor Committee
Ranking Member Virginia Foxx, House Education & Labor Committee
Chairman John Hoeven, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies

Ranking Member Jeff Merkley, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture,
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Chairman Sanford Bishop, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural
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Ranking Member Jeff Fortenberry, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture