

# Let's Protect SNAP and Health Equity: A Primer for Health Departments and Public Health Professionals to Take Action

## **STANDING UP FOR OUR PRINCIPLES BY STANDING UP FOR SNAP**

Access to nutritious, affordable food is a basic health need and human right.

For over 50 years, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has helped people in the US avoid hunger and malnutrition, and stay out of poverty. In 2015 alone, SNAP helped 45 million people in the US to eat, including children, people temporarily struggling to make ends meet during downtimes, people paid so little that they can't afford to eat, and seniors or people living with disabilities who earn fixed or low incomes. Today, Congressional Republicans and the President propose drastic cuts and changes to the program, and instead gave wealthy people tax cuts.

As public health professionals, we're uniquely positioned to advocate against these devastating changes: without food, people cannot work, let alone prosper; without food, children cannot learn, let alone thrive. SNAP is all that separates many Americans from frequent hunger and childhood malnutrition. We believe that all people — especially children and at-risk adults — should be able to eat regardless of their income. Let's use our voices to protect SNAP for all children and adults!

This resource, produced by Public Health Awakened, is intended to help health department staff and other public health professionals protect health and equity in the face of drastic changes to SNAP.

In here, you will find:

- An introduction: why SNAP works, and how Republicans propose to change it
- Action steps for health departments as organizations and public health professionals as individuals
- Tips for talking about the proposed changes to SNAP
- Evidence for why public health should take action
- Details of why proposed changes to SNAP are misguided
- Details about Republicans' proposed changes to SNAP

## SNAP helps millions of people and families access food and avoid poverty

Today, 45 million people in the US can afford to eat because of SNAP, a program that aims to alleviate hunger and malnutrition, and helps people stay out of poverty ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016](#)). These include families with children, which make up 7 out of 10 people who SNAP helps to feed ([Econofact, 2017](#)). Also, people who work — more than 80% of people using SNAP work in the year before or the year after receiving it, with even higher rates for families with children ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2013](#)).

Currently, anyone who qualifies for SNAP can get access to food through the program ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016](#)). The federal government pays 100% of the cost of SNAP benefits, and splits the cost to administer the program with states ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016](#)). Funding for the program can increase or decrease as more or fewer people need coverage, such as during times of economic downturn or during disasters.

In 2015, SNAP helped people affected by wildfires in California, severe weather and tornadoes in Missouri, severe storms and flooding in South Carolina and Wyoming, and severe snow storms in Massachusetts — that kind of rapid response may change with Congressional Republicans' proposals ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016](#)).

People who identify as liberals, conservatives, and moderates all use SNAP — and each group was as likely as the others to report using it ([Pew Research Center, 2013](#)).

## Republican plans would drastically cut SNAP and force unreasonable choices

Instead of strengthening the current SNAP program, Congressional Republicans and the President are suggesting enormous cuts and changes to it. Proposals being considered would drastically reduce how many at-risk children and adults can afford to eat by ending the federal government's commitment to fully funding SNAP based on need, regardless of changes in how many people are eligible, economic cycles, policy changes, or disasters ([Urban Institute, 2012](#)). The proposals would take away food from people who depend on it. Instead of saving money, they would shift the burden from the federal government to states or even the people who use the programs.

See the last section of this resource, "Nuts and Bolts: What are Republicans Proposing?" for specifics on how SNAP is funded and proposed changes to that funding.

### Where are We in the Process?

Changes to SNAP could happen through 2 main routes: federal budgets and the Farm Bill. While we need to watch both these routes, the immediate threat is the Farm Bill.

#### Farm Bill

The US House and Senate have begun the process of developing and passing a new Farm Bill, which needs to be reauthorized before September 30, 2018. Congressional Republicans are likely to propose both cuts to SNAP and more stringent work requirements (SNAP already has work requirements).

The [House Agriculture Committee](#) will release its version of the reauthorization in March or April 2018. The committee will then mark up the bill, pass a final version, and send it to the full House for a vote (likely in the Spring). The [Senate Agriculture Committee](#) is likely to start its process then, with votes in the full Senate and reconciliation with the House Bill by September.

#### Federal Budgets

- Over the last 6 years, including in 2017, a House budget committee approved but was unable to implement: 1) significant cuts to SNAP — more than \$150 billion over 10 years — and 2) changing SNAP structure into what is known as a "block grant" program ([Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016](#)). For context, it would have cut 20% from \$74 billion the federal government contributed to SNAP in 2015.

- The House's proposed changes would have to go through through many committees and processes in the House and Senate, and be signed by the President, before they could be enacted.
- Separately, in February 2018, the President proposed cutting nearly \$200 billion in SNAP funding over 10 years and replacing benefits with a box of non-perishable food that could include foods like shelf-stable milk, pasta, peanut butter, meat, and canned fruits and vegetables ([Vox, 2018](#)).

Visit [Food Research & Action Center](#), [The New York Times tracker](#), [Kaiser Health News](#), or [Trump Tracker](#) to get the latest information about the status of legislation to modify SNAP and the Farm Bill.

## Health Departments: Take Action to Stop These Changes!

Educate your community about potential health impacts of proposed changes to SNAP for your state — or more locally if you can access that data.

For example, using [Kaiser Family Foundation](#) and [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#) identify the number of people in your state covered by SNAP — describing available numbers of children, seniors, people living with disabilities, people just out of the reach of poverty, and people who work. Or cite info on [SNAP use by Congressional district](#). Use local data and stories to highlight how undoing SNAP would undercut health for individuals and families.

Encourage your health department to speak publicly about proposed changes to SNAP.

Talk in your jurisdiction about proposed changes to SNAP, and use your platform at the health department to publicize the message.

Mobilize professional associations and advocates to take a position and provide them with data.

Work with professional associations like national, state, and local chapters of the American Public Health Association or the National Association of City and County Health Officials to communicate the impacts of the proposals. Provide local advocacy organizations with data, helping them understand how to request data from the health department as necessary, so they can make the case to protect SNAP.

Hold workshops for community members.

Host public workshops to help people understand SNAP and how changes may affect them.

## Public Health Professionals: Take Action to Stop These Changes!

Inform the public — repeatedly and often.

Write letters with health colleagues through professional organizations like the [American Medical Association](#) and [American Public Health Association](#) to inform people about how pending decisions would change health and equity. This brief can be a starting point.

Get proactive — call for strengthening SNAP.

Read the evidence, join the discussion, and look to partner with other groups or agencies in advocating to strengthen instead of dismantling SNAP. Put another choice on the table.

## Tips for Talking About Proposed Cuts to SNAP

Start with values — for example, you can say:

“Access to nutritious, affordable food is a basic health need and human right.”

“Many people who work even more than full time — such as in food service, retail, and health care — are paid so little that they qualify for food assistance or SNAP. This may be the only way they can afford to feed themselves or their families.”

“Most of us agree on the basic principle that we all should be able to eat. All children should have food and people with disabilities, seniors, and people in great need should get food assistance that is essential to helping them live.”

“SNAP embodies these principles. And it works well.”

Here are some key points you can make about what SNAP looks like today:

- There is bipartisan thinking that SNAP works well — it helps tens of millions of children, seniors, people living with disabilities, and people struggling to make ends meet who otherwise could not access healthy food.
- We can all agree that helping people who can work get good-paying jobs and succeed is a good goal, but more rigid and restrictive SNAP work requirements won't help us get there.
- SNAP currently responds rapidly to changing needs in states — including economic downturns and disasters.
- SNAP already gives states authority over aspects of the program, within federal standards. To ensure people across all 50 states have coverage, the federal government pays 100% of the cost of benefits and sets standards, including for benefit levels. Meanwhile, states still have options in how they administer SNAP, coordinate with other human services programs, and — within the federal standards — in setting some of the rules about who is eligible for the programs; for example, around what a household can earn within federal guidelines and still qualify for benefits.
- SNAP gets money into the economy. In a weak economy, every \$1 in SNAP benefits generates \$1.70 in economic activity. And it is accurate in its payments — it has one of the lowest rates of any federal program for errors with over- or under-payments.
- There can always be improvements. We should strengthen, not gut, SNAP.
- The proposed cuts to SNAP would:
  - Harm the nation's health — and that is not okay.
  - Make things worse for millions of people struggling to be able to eat.
  - Cap the amount of money coming into states, instead of responding to changing needs.
  - Save the federal government money at the expense of state budgets. Currently the federal government pays 100% of SNAP benefits. These proposals would shift that burden to states that then have to decide whose benefits to reduce or terminate, find a way to pay for services, or tell people who use the program that *they* will have to shoulder the cost themselves instead. It hurts people most at risk in our states for no good reason. The proposed changes would do all this to give tax cuts to wealthy individuals.
  - Be costly — in money and in health.

## Evidence for Why Public Health Should Take Action

Proposed changes to SNAP would lead to:

- Millions of people forced into poverty and unable to pay bills.** Nationally, the program reduces the poverty rate by 5-10% in a typical year ([University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015](#)). SNAP helps an estimated 10 million people out of poverty, with 1 in 3 preschoolers depending on SNAP for food ([Brookings Institute, 2017](#)). Program participation makes it less likely that people fall behind on paying for utilities, rent, or mortgage ([Brookings Institute, 2017](#)).
- Millions of children, older adults, and people with disabilities at risk of going hungry.** Nearly 16 million US households either ran out of money for food, skipped meals, or went hungry because they couldn't afford to eat ([Econofact, 2017](#)). Particularly at risk are low-income families with kids and single parents — the President's proposed cuts alone would make experiences of "food insecurity" described here a new reality for an estimated 11 of every 1000 low-income, single-parent families ([Econofact, 2017](#)). In addition, more than one-quarter of people helped through SNAP are seniors or people living with disabilities ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016](#)).
- More people skipping medical care and getting ill.** Families with children and that participate in SNAP are 28% less likely to be forced to trade off between paying for medical care or other basic needs, like food ([Children's HealthWatch, 2012](#)). SNAP makes it less likely that people skip a necessary visit to a doctor or hospital ([Brookings Institute, 2017](#)), which is important for people who tend to disproportionately experience diet-related health conditions ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016](#)).
- Wider disparities in access to food across states.** Under Congressional Republican proposals, states could use funding for food assistance instead to replace funding for other purposes like employment and training — people would go hungry so states could manipulate their budgets ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017](#)). Certain states also stand to lose the most. They include: New Mexico, Louisiana, West Virginia, Mississippi, District of Columbia, Oregon, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Delaware ([US Department of Agriculture, 2017](#); [US Census, 2016](#)). They have the most SNAP use per person in 2017, and many people who are unemployed with relatively little education, which makes jobs harder to find in general.
- Long delays in getting food to people who experience disasters.** If SNAP were changed to a block grant and the President's budget does not protect disaster relief, states would take several months — not days or weeks — to get emergency food help to people in fires, floods, severe storms, and other disasters ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017](#)).
- Cuts in who is eligible, benefits, or states paying more money in the long run.** States would need to: a) find more money, or b) change who is eligible, cut benefits, or do both. An estimated 10 million people could have access to food taken away between 2021 and 2026, on average, or states could cut an average of \$40 or more per person a month ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017](#)).
- More fraud.** Over 99% of SNAP payments are to eligible program participants ([US Department of Agriculture, 2013](#)). Monitoring responsibility that the federal government takes on right now would shift to states that may be less able to provide oversight against fraud ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017](#)).

## The Proposed Changes to SNAP are Misguided

The rationale for radically changing SNAP does not stand up to scrutiny. Historically, there have been 2 main and misguided criticisms, the first of which is a current Republican focus:

First, critics suggest that the program is a handout and people are “trapped in the program with no way to get out” ([US House of Representatives Committee on the Budget, 2016](#)) and that more stringent work requirements would help. That is incorrect — the program already imposes strict income, asset, and work requirements ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016](#)). Many states have additional mandatory employment and training requirements. Most people using SNAP who can work, do work — more than 80% work in the year before or the year after receiving SNAP, with even higher rates for families with children ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2013](#)). Furthermore, people can only use SNAP benefits to pay for eligible groceries, and do not receive cash. Benefits cannot be used on alcohol, cigarettes, vitamins, non-food grocery items like household supplies, and hot foods ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2013](#)).

Second, critics suggest that states cannot meet local needs. States *already have* options, which contribute to varying SNAP participation rates across states. In 2012, participation ranged from 100% of eligible people actually receiving SNAP in places like Maine and Oregon, to as few as just over half of eligible people in Nevada, Hawaii, the District of Columbia, and California ([US Department of Agriculture, 2015](#)). States have options in how they administer SNAP, coordinate with other human services programs, and in setting who is eligible for the programs — such as what people in a household can earn and still qualify for benefits — as long as it’s within the federal limit ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016](#); [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017](#); [University of Wisconsin-Madison Institute for Research on Poverty, 2015](#)). For example, states can ask to waive certain federal requirements if it’s in the program’s best interest — changes that, historically, made more people eligible for benefits. However, states cannot increase income thresholds above federal limits. See this US Department of Agriculture report for [how each state exercises its options](#).

Moreover, SNAP gets money into the economy. Estimates are that in a weak economy, every \$1 increase in SNAP benefits generates about \$1.70 in economic activity through food that people buy and the ripple effects of those purchases, like needing more people to work as cashiers, stock shelves, transport food, and other related aspects ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016](#)).

SNAP has been shaped over time, both through the Farm Bill and other legislation. Congress renegotiates the US Farm Bill every 4 or 5 years, which since the 1970s also has included SNAP and earlier versions of it ([Econofact, 2017](#)). During the 1980s under President Reagan, a number of major cutbacks to SNAP were put in place; many of those were reversed soon after due to severe hunger problems ([US Department of Agriculture, 2014](#)). The 1990s saw additional restrictions, such as putting a time limit on how long certain adults can participate in the program ([US Department of Agriculture, 2014](#)).

In reality, cuts to SNAP are being proposed at the same time as tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy — the 1%, the 0.1%. Since those tax cuts mean an out-of-balance budget, many Republicans are suggesting taking away funding from programs like SNAP for people who earn low incomes so that the rich can become richer.

## Nuts and Bolts: What are Republicans Proposing?

Currently, the federal government pays 100% of the cost for SNAP benefits, and splits the cost to administer the program with states. In 2015, the federal government spent \$74 billion on SNAP.

In recent years, Republicans have proposed 3 types of changes to SNAP, the first 2 of which are being considered now: budget cuts, limiting eligibility, and changing it into a block grant program:

- 1) Trump's current budget proposal and recent Republican budget proposals each have included drastic cuts to SNAP's budget — 20% or more (\$150 to \$200 billion over 10 years). This would dramatically cut the number of people receiving assistance and/or reduce the benefits they receive.
  
- 2) The Farm Bill Reauthorization being introduced in the House Agriculture Committee is likely to include more stringent work requirements that would make many people ineligible for SNAP. And though these proposals did not make it into the final 2014 Farm Bill, the most recent, the House's version of that bill would have ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2013](#)):
  - Limited SNAP benefits to 3 months out of every 3 years for people between ages 18 and 50 who aren't raising children — this includes people who live in high-unemployment areas. This provision would have cut off at least 1.7 million impoverished people in nearly every state.
  - Given states large financial rewards for cutting their SNAP caseloads by removing parents and their children (as young as 1 year old) from the program if they can't find at least half-time employment. Millions of low-income adults and children live in households whose food assistance would have been at risk under this provision.
  - Eliminated SNAP benefits for 2.1 million people — mostly low-income working families and seniors — in households with incomes or assets modestly above federal limits.
  - Let states drug test all SNAP applicants (including children) for controlled substances and make ineligible anyone testing positive.
  - Substantially reduced funding for nutrition education for SNAP households (-\$308 million over ten years), and capped funding for employment and training services for SNAP recipients.
  
- 3) Republicans in the House, on the budget committee, and the President are proposing to make SNAP into a "block grant" program, which is a form of a "cap". It's noteworthy that the Republican chairperson of the House Agriculture Committee, which drafts the Farm Bill, and the Senate chairperson oppose the use of block grants for SNAP ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017](#)). The Republican chairperson said a block grant "is not the answer" and "SNAP seems to be working".

Under a block grant, instead of states getting a flexible amount of money each year that responds to what individuals and states need, they would get a set amount of money. This would severely limit states' abilities to support people and families that are paid too little or have trouble making ends meet, particularly during times of economic downturn or during disasters.

History of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program offers a cautionary tale of the harms that can happen after switching federal programs to capped funding under block grants, which has left states with less money to support their residents and ultimately taken away services from families ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017](#)).

*For an electronic version of this document and access to hyperlinks, visit: [PublicHealthAwakened.com](http://PublicHealthAwakened.com)*

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