

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

May 6, 2020

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

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

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

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

We appreciate your initial efforts to provide additional resources and flexibilities to the Supplemental Nutrition Program (SNAP) and other critical federal nutrition programs. Given the devastating economic impact of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, many individuals in Maryland and across the country are struggling to meet their basic food needs – and we must do more. We write today to request that you include important food assistance priorities in the next COVID-19 relief legislative package considered by Congress.

SNAP plays a critical role in our nation's social safety net and helps protect families, especially women, young children, and seniors, from poverty and hunger. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic began, one in 10 Maryland households struggled with food insecurity and 650,000 residents participated in SNAP. This crisis and its corresponding economic fallout have only exacerbated these existing problems. Approximately 380,000 unemployment claims were filed in Maryland from March 15 to April 25. A statewide stay-at-home order and the closure of non-essential businesses have left many of our state's residents out of work and struggling to pay their bills and meet basic needs. Many Marylanders have turned to their local food banks and SNAP for assistance.

In order to ensure that SNAP recipients are able to afford the food they need, we request that you increase the maximum SNAP benefit for all recipients by increasing the thrifty food plan by at least 15 percent to all households and increase the monthly minimum SNAP benefit from \$16 to \$30 for all households. A 15 percent increase to the maximum benefit is equivalent to an additional \$25 per person per month. Currently, the average SNAP benefit per person is \$1.40 per meal each day – which is not enough to purchase a meal, especially in a high-cost state like Maryland. These additional funds are particularly important to allow individuals to purchase additional food in order to limit their number of trips to the grocery store during this public health crisis.

We also believe it is imperative that the next bill prevents any harmful regulatory actions related to SNAP from going into effect. Unfortunately, last year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture put forward three rules that would weaken SNAP eligibility and benefits. The first would effectively end waivers that prevent SNAP benefits from being terminated for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents in areas with elevated unemployment, which would result in 6,300 Marylanders losing their eligibility. The second would eliminate broad-based categorical eligibility flexibilities that encourage work and saving among low-income households, and if implemented, could result in 74,800 Maryland residents losing their SNAP benefits. The final rule would eliminate state flexibility to set their own Standard Utility Allowance using state-based and current energy cost information. These rules would needlessly cut off SNAP benefits for tens of thousands of Marylanders and should never take effect, but this is especially the case during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis has had a profoundly negative impact on low-income and underrepresented college students. These students face many challenges during normal times, but this public health emergency is having a disproportionate impact on them. We must ensure that food insecurity does not add another burden. As you know, most college students enrolled half-time or more cannot receive SNAP. We request that you expand SNAP eligibility to certain college students, specifically students who receive the maximum Pell Grant award, are in foster care, a veteran of the Armed Forces, or are classified as an unaccompanied youth who is homeless.

Finally, we ask that you extend the SNAP recertification period from 12 to 36 months for households with members who are elderly, disabled, or enrolled in Medicaid or the Medicare Savings Program. We know that there are circumstances under which SNAP-eligible individuals have their SNAP coverage lapse in the event they do not complete their recertification in a timely manner, which is always problematic, but especially during this crisis. Individuals and families are impacted when they lose their benefits unexpectedly and it also adds to state and county caseloads when individuals need to reapply.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of these requests. We look forward to working with you to ensure that the next COVID-19 relief package includes these critical priorities.

Sincerely,

/s/ Chris Van Hollen

Chris Van Hollen
U.S. Senator

/s/ Steny H. Hoyer

Steny H. Hoyer
Member of Congress

/s/ C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger

C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger
Member of Congress

/s/ John P. Sarbanes

John P. Sarbanes
Member of Congress

/s/ Anthony G. Brown

Anthony G. Brown
Member of Congress

/s/ Jamie Raskin

Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress

/s/ David Trone

David Trone
Member of Congress

/s/ Kweisi Mfume

Kweisi Mfume
Member of Congress