

S. HRG. 118-123

FARM BILL 2023: NUTRITION PROGRAMS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

February 16, 2023

Printed for the use of the
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry



Available on <http://www.govinfo.gov/>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

53-639 PDF

WASHINGTON : 2024

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

DEBBIE STABENOW, Michigan, *Chairwoman*

SHERROD BROWN, Ohio	JOHN BOOZMAN, Arkansas
AMY KLOBUCHAR, Minnesota	MITCH McCONNELL, Kentucky
MICHAEL F. BENNET, Colorado	JOHN HOEVEN, North Dakota
KIRSTEN E. GILLIBRAND, New York	JONI ERNST, Iowa
TINA SMITH, Minnesota	CINDY HYDE-SMITH, Mississippi
RICHARD J. DURBIN, Illinois	ROGER MARSHALL, Kansas
CORY BOOKER, New Jersey	TOMMY TUBERVILLE, Alabama
BEN RAY LUJAN, New Mexico	MIKE BRAUN, Indiana
RAPHAEL WARNOCK, Georgia	CHARLES GRASSLEY, Iowa
PETER WELCH, Vermont	JOHN THUNE, South Dakota
JOHN FETTERMAN, Pennsylvania	DEB FISCHER, Nebraska

ERICA CHABOT, Majority Staff Director
CHU-YUAN HWANG, Majority Chief Counsel
JESSICA L. WILLIAMS, Chief Clerk
FITZHUGH ELDER IV, Minority Staff Director
JACKIE BARBER, Minority Chief Counsel

C O N T E N T S

Thursday, February 16, 2023

	Page
HEARING:	
Farm Bill 2023: Nutrition Programs	1
STATEMENTS PRESENTED BY SENATORS	
Stabenow, Hon. Debbie, U.S. Senator from the State of Michigan	1
Boozman, Hon. John, U.S. Senator from the State of Arkansas	3
WITNESSES	
Dean, Stacy, Deputy Under Secretary, Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC	5
Long, Cindy, Administrator, Food and Nutrition Service Program, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC	5
APPENDIX	
PREPARED STATEMENTS:	
Dean, Stacy	40
DOCUMENT(S) SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD:	
Boozman, Hon. John:	
SNAP Review, document for the Record	56
QUESTION AND ANSWER:	
Dean, Stacy:	
Written response to questions from Hon. John Boozman	64
Written response to questions from Hon. Michael F. Bennet	85
Written response to questions from Hon. Kirsten E. Gillibrand	90
Written response to questions from Hon. Cory Booker	95
Written response to questions from Hon. Ben Ray Luján	96
Written response to questions from Hon. Raphael Warnock	100
Written response to questions from Hon. Peter Welch	102
Written response to questions from Hon. John Fetterman	106
Written response to questions from Hon. John Hoeven	108
Written response to questions from Hon. Joni Ernst	109
Written response to questions from Hon. Cindy Hyde-Smith	110
Written response to questions from Hon. Tommy Tuberville	113
Written response to questions from Hon. John Thune	117
Long, Cindy:	
Written response to questions from Hon. Michael F. Bennet	253
Written response to questions from Hon. Ben Ray Luján	253
Written response to questions from Hon. Cindy Hyde-Smith	255

FARM BILL 2023: NUTRITION PROGRAMS

Thursday, February 16, 2023

U.S. SENATE
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10 a.m., in room 328A, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Debbie Stabenow, Chairwoman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Stabenow[presiding], Klobuchar, Bennet, Gillibrand, Smith, Durbin, Booker, Luján, Warnock, Welch, Boozman, Hoeven, Ernst, Hyde-Smith, Marshall, Tuberville, Braun, Grassley, Thune, and Fischer.

STATEMENT OF HON. DEBBIE STABENOW, U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF MICHIGAN, CHAIRWOMAN, U.S. COM- MITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

Chairwoman STABENOW. Well, good morning. Let me call the hearing of the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry to order. Now I would simply say that my eyes are on you, from anyplace in the room here, up on the portrait.

[Applause.]

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you, John, for coming in and speaking last night, Senator Boozman, and for everyone. It is a little weird, I just have to tell you, sitting here. It is an honor.

I want to welcome our Deputy Under Secretary Stacy Dean and our Administrator, Cindy Long. Thank you so much for joining us for this really important hearing. We are fortunate to have you here today as we review the farm bill nutrition programs in preparation for the 2023 Farm Bill.

Last week our hearing covered the farm safety net. Today our fifth farm bill hearing covers the family safety net. These critical programs help people afford their groceries, make healthier choices, find work, benefit farmers and our entire food economy, and they lift millions of Americans out of poverty.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), helps more than 40 million children, seniors, working adults, veterans, and people with disabilities buy food to feed their families. These are our friends, our neighbors, and relatives who deserve to be able to put food on the table, even when they are going through a hard time. Like the single mom of two in Macomb County who just lost her job and does not know how she is going to pay for rent and feed her kids. Or the retired couple in Gladwin, Michigan, who lives on a fixed income and worries about covering the cost of their

medication and the healthy diet they need to manage their diabetes.

SNAP reduces food insecurity by 30 percent, and it provides needed benefits to more than one million of our Nation's veterans. Studies show that families who participate in SNAP are healthier than eligible people who do not, reducing health care costs by as much as \$5,000 per person per year.

Every parent will tell you that a hungry child cannot learn, and we know that eligible children who participate in SNAP have better educational outcomes and future participation in the work force.

SNAP is one of the most responsive and effective economic tools we have at our disposal. Every dollar spent in SNAP increases the GDP by \$1.50, making SNAP the fastest way to stimulate the economy during an economic downturn, particularly in our rural communities.

SNAP is also countercyclical. Just as we spend on farm programs, and the spending increases when commodity prices are low, spending in SNAP increases during economic downturns. As the economy improves and families no longer need SNAP, SNAP spending decreases. We witnessed the program expand and contract based on need during and after the Great Recession, and most recently during the pandemic.

Just yesterday, the Congressional Budget Office released their updated budget projections which show the economic challenges that still exist and that families are still hurting as a result.

It is also important to remember that for an individual, for a person, SNAP is a modest form of help. The average benefit is only about \$6.00 per person per day—\$6.00—for all of their meals combined. I am sure there is at least one person in this room right now who has spent more than that on their morning coffee.

The bipartisan work we accomplished in the 2018 Farm Bill directed a long overdue reevaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan. Not since 1975 have we updated the assumptions on which SNAP is made. This update increased the average SNAP benefit by less than \$2.00 per day, a modest increase but one that is estimated to lift 2.4 million people, including 1 million children, out of poverty.

The 2018 Farm Bill also expanded opportunities and partnerships through the SNAP Employment and Training Program, or SNAP E&T as we call it, including increased funding, new public-private partnership options, and adding evidence-based comprehensive case management and supervised job search components to E&T. Additionally, the 2018 Farm Bill invested in SNAP technology improvements and strengthened the SNAP quality control system.

As we turn to the 2023 Farm Bill, I look forward to strengthening health outcomes in SNAP through programs like SNAP Nutrition Education and the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program that we call Double Up Bucks. We should continue to support individuals in finding long term employment through SNAP E&T while rejecting harsh work requirements that only serve as barriers to Americans getting temporary help that they need.

SNAP, and other nutrition programs that we will consider today like the Emergency Food Assistance Program, or TEFAP, the Com-

modity Supplemental Food Program, and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, weave the fabric of a proven safety net for American families—a safety net we must preserve and protect.

While it is not the topic of today's hearing, I want to commend the USDA for announcing their efforts to update the WIC food package as well as their proposed rule to make school meals more nutritious through thoughtful, common-sense policies.

I look forward to hearing important feedback from our stakeholders that we will be doing through our subcommittee, and with that, I am going to turn to my Ranking Member, Senator Boozman.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN BOOZMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM
THE STATE OF ARKANSAS**

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Madam Chair, and congratulations on the portrait. We had a great event last night. It was the who's who of agriculture from throughout the country that was here to celebrate. The Chairwoman allows us to have farm groups in the hearing room to meet with, so now, if you are not present you will still be present, looking down, making sure that I behave while we are visiting with these groups.

Chairwoman STABENOW. That is right.

Senator BOOZMAN. As I meet with Arkansans, food insecurity is an all-too-familiar experience in rural and urban parts of my State. Thankfully, the nutrition programs that this Committee authorizes, programs I have been proud to support, are there to provide help. I have long advocated for domestic and international food assistance programs. In fact, some of the most meaningful accomplishments the Chairwoman and I achieved in the 117th Congress were related to feeding hungry people.

As we work our way through the titles of the farm bill, it is important for this Committee to review our nutrition programs and make sure they are working as intended and being implemented properly by USDA, like every other farm bill program.

Many do not realize this, but the nutrition title is, by far, the costliest title in the bill. Yesterday's CBO baseline projection shows that farm bill nutrition programs—not the entire farm bill but the farm bill nutrition programs—will cost more than \$1.2 trillion over 10 years, which is greater than 80 percent of the total cost of the bill. In fact, according to CBO, we will spend more on SNAP from 2023 to 2033 than we have in the previous two decades combined. Since the last farm bill, the cost of the largest of these programs, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, has grown by more than 94 percent, from \$65 billion annually in 2018, to an expected \$127 billion in 2023.

The pandemic and inflation drove some of these cost increases, but let there be no doubt that the largest driver was a decision by the leadership of the Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services mission area to abandon 40 years of precedent and increase SNAP benefits by 21 percent to record high levels, levels that are unsustainable. Some will cynically point to the provisions to update the Thrifty Food Plan in the 2018 Farm Bill as the basis for USDA's action, but Congress never agreed to permit a quarter of a trillion-dollar spending increase. As the Government Account-

ability Office (GAO) recently documented, FNCS used a sloppy process with an accelerated schedule. USDA knew the outcome it wanted and then backed into it. Because of these actions, FNCS's political appointees have made passage of the 2023 Farm Bill much more difficult because they showed a lack of good judgment and gross abuse of discretion. By leaning on the scales, they chose to disrupt the delicate balance of the farm bill coalition and severely eroded the trust that is crucial to legislate and to govern.

When one program constitutes more than 80 percent of the spending in the next farm bill, and thereby effectively crowds out the ability to make crucial investments in every other title, is there really any room left for farmers in the traditional farm bill coalition?

As a reminder, SNAP is intended to supplement a beneficiary's monthly grocery budget. It was not created to serve as the beneficiary's monthly grocery budget. SNAP is available to anyone who qualifies because it is an entitlement program. There are no participation caps. There are, however, specific requirements to receive benefits. One of those requirements is related to work.

To qualify for benefits, participants must work 20 hours a week or be in job training. I think most would agree that 20 hours a week is equal to part-time work. For nearly three years, SNAP participants have been exempted from work requirements. It is time for this exemption to end and it is time for USDA to get serious about enforcing work requirements. States should no longer be allowed to game the system. Jobs, good jobs, are plentiful. There are more than 11 million jobs open across the country, equivalent to nearly two job openings for every unemployed person. Approximately five million of those job openings are in 25 States and territories that are not enforcing work requirements. This job gap pushes labor costs higher, slows supply chains, delays our economic recovery from the pandemic, and importantly, is a large contributor to the historic inflation facing our Nation.

Why is the Biden Administration not promoting work? As study after study proves, work equals dignity. A culture of dependence weakens our communities and our country. SNAP is a valuable program, but it should lead to self-reliance, not generational dependence.

As someone who has consistently supported SNAP, WIC, and school nutrition programs, I cannot overstate how damaging FNCS's conduct has been. I am deeply disappointed in its appointed leadership. This is why oversight is so necessary, because at the end of the day what FNCS has done has weakened the program it supposedly was trying to help. That, unfortunately, will be the legacy of this decision.

Madam Chair, I request inclusion in the hearing record the report conducted by the GAO on the Thrifty Food Plan, the GAO determination that USDA failed to submit the Thrifty Food Plan food basket increase to Congress as a rule as required by the congressional Review Act, and the updated baseline released by CBO yesterday, which shows an increase in SNAP outlays from 2023 to 2032 by \$93 billion dollars, likely in large part due to USDA having the ability to increase the cost of the food basket under the Thrifty Food Plan again in 2027 and 2031.

Chairwoman STABENOW. So ordered, without objection.

[The document can be found on page 119–252 in the appendix.]

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. Again, I thank the Chairwoman very much for holding this really important hearing and look forward to our witnesses. Thank you.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you so much.

We will now turn to our Deputy Under Secretary Dean, and we are so glad to have you with us, both of you with us. Ms. Stacy Dean is Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Prior to this role, she served as Vice President for Food Assistance Policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. She earned her undergraduate and master's degrees from the University of Michigan—and I will not hold that against you as a Michigan State University grad. We are so glad to have you here.

Let me also introduce Mrs. Cindy Long, who serves as Administrator for the Food and Nutrition Service Program at USDA. She most recently served as Acting Administrator for FNS and as Deputy Administrator for Child Nutrition Programs.

Welcome to both of you, and we will ask you to proceed.

**STATEMENT OF STACY DEAN, DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY,
FOOD, NUTRITION, AND CONSUMER SERVICES, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, WASHINGTON, D.C.**

ACCOMPANIED BY CINDY LONG, ADMINISTRATOR, FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE PROGRAM, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Ms. DEAN. Thank you so much, Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Boozman for giving us the opportunity to be here with you today. You introduced us so I will not take my time doing that. I will flag that Administrator Long and I were both remarking, we started our work on Federal nutrition programs when Chairman Lugar was leading the Committee, and we went through and had a story about all of the chairs, and look forward to adding you to our storied list. It is wonderful to be here.

At my role at USDA, I had the privilege to see the farm bill's nutrition programs in action across our country, in big cities and small rural towns, Tribal communities, job training centers, grocery stores, farmers markets, and food banks. I have seen firsthand the critical role our programs play in helping reduce poverty, supporting the local economy, and promoting food and nutrition security.

As we look ahead to how to strengthen our Federal nutrition programs we at USDA are looking at how best to advance food and nutrition security, modernize the programs, particularly with respect to delivery, steward them with integrity, and integrate an equity lens into our work.

Secretary Vilsack has charged us to help all Americans achieve not only food security but also nutrition security. Nutrition security means having consistent and equitable access to healthy, safe, affordable food essential to health and well-being. SNAP, the cornerstone of the farm bill's nutrition title, is one of the most effective tools for helping low-income households achieve nutrition security. The Chairwoman did a far better job than I, but it reduces poverty

and food hardship. It is a lifeline for its 41 million participants. About four out of five households include either a child, an elderly individual, or an individual with a disability.

By infusing food dollars into the economy, SNAP also benefits retailers, grocery store employees, truck drivers, food manufacturers, and, of course, the hard-working farmers who grow and produce our food.

As it is designed to do, SNAP participation expanded early in the pandemic in response to sudden increased need. Congress also took action to strengthen SNAP even more by providing a temporary boost to benefits and providing new flexibilities that enabled the program and the States running it to adapt to evolving and uncertain conditions. As that temporary help and flexibility now ends, we will return to a new normal, and in that new normal SNAP participants will receive a stronger benefit that has been adjusted to reflect our assessment of the current cost of a budget-conscious healthy diet, a directive from the 2018 Farm Bill.

We are also working to modernize program delivery and strengthen integrity. Our program integrity efforts include enhancing fraud detection, conducting more robust oversight and data collection, and minimizing improper payments and administrative errors. To modernize our programs we are working to make it easier for those who are eligible to enroll and participate. We are also expanding online shopping with a focus on smaller, independent retailers, so SNAP participants, no matter where they live, can access the same services available to all shoppers.

We are strengthening SNAP employment and training programs, consistent with the 2018 Farm Bill. Congress directed us to work with States to implement evidence-based practices, match participants with the right services, and partner with State work force systems, all to help participants gain the skills employers need in today's economy.

Finally, we are focused on increasing equity across our programs. For example, we are expanding the reach of The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), into underserved areas, including remote, rural, Tribal, and low-income communities, so that communities that have long faced systemic barriers to participating in this program and opportunity can have reliable access to food when they need it most.

Our equity efforts also include furthering Tribal involvement in our nutrition programs, and these include the 2018 Farm Bill's historic self-determination projects for our Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, which supports Tribal food sovereignty by allowing Tribes to procure their own food for their people from Tribal producers. We are providing Tribal communities with new resources to develop and deliver culturally tailored nutrition education.

It is worth noting that through our food and nutrition security efforts we are also working to support another of Secretary Vilsack's key goals, and that is the support of more and better markets and improving the resilience of U.S. agriculture. Specifically, we are working to strengthen connections between farmers, ranchers, and our nutrition programs. The upcoming farm bill is an im-

portant opportunity to build on the remarkable success of our Federal nutrition programs, and we stand ready to work with you.

Thank you, and I really do look forward to our conversation today. We both do.

[The prepared joint statement of Ms. Dean and Mrs. Long can be found on page 40 in the appendix.]

Chairwoman STABENOW. Well, thank you very much. We will begin questions now, and I appreciate very much both of you responding.

First let me say that, let us talk a little bit more about the Thrifty Food Plan update because this was a conscious effort put into the farm bill because there had not been an update since 1975 on the basic assumptions on which we provide help in terms of the food programs. Things like how people prepare food and costs and other things have not been looked at, and certainly there have been many, many changes since 1975. This was an effort to do a real analysis.

Challenges, questions raised by GAO that we would like you to respond to, but also the results provided really a modest but meaningful increase to benefit millions of people across the country, as I indicated, about \$2.00 a day because of the comprehensive update of assumptions that were made in 1975.

At this point could you talk about how the USDA conducted the review and more about what this really means to real people, because rather than big numbers, I mean, we are talking about what this means to an individual person, individual family, as they are trying to get some help to be able to feed their family.

Ms. DEAN. Thank you. We appreciate the opportunity to talk about the reevaluation. I just want to say we do stand by the process. It was a sound process. It was robust and evidence-based, and as you say, resulted in the first increase in real purchasing power of the benefit in over 45 years. That amount ended up being 40 cents per person per meal. There is this, of course, an aggregate. It was a significant increase, but it also very clearly put healthy food within reach for tens of millions of Americans.

Just to comment briefly on the process, as you pointed out, the farm bill language directed us to reevaluate and essentially update our estimate of the cost of a budget-conscious healthy diet. It was very specific to do that update with four particular criteria: current prices, the new dietary guidelines, the nutrients in food, and to consider the foods that Americans eat, what types of foods they buy. The idea was to balance all of those things, or to optimize them, within our existing Thrifty Food Plan model.

I think it is really important that everyone here understand we did not take the approach from 2020 and rebuild it from the ground up. We took the model that had been the basis for the Thrifty Food Plan going back decades and updated it for the four parameters which you all directed us to do. We have deep expertise on the Thrifty Food Plan within the Department, both at FNS, ERS, and ARS, so we worked with our colleagues there.

It was a very robust effort. I would argue it was a very conservative effort. GAO pointed out several areas where there was evidence but it was not, in our minds, clear and convincing evidence

to make a change, and the areas that they suggested, had we made a change, would have increased the Thrifty further.

We just wanted to follow the four specific areas and update where there was clear and compelling evidence, and the primary place where there was evidence, and GAO commended our change there, was to use new price data. Instead of using households' recollection of how much they pay, we actually have the ability to pull the scanner data and price data right off of the store shelves. That change was the primary result in why benefits increased, although there were a few others. Again, as you said, it resulted in a modest per-household change but it did put healthy food within reach for millions of struggling Americans.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much, and I think it is also important to note that just as in the increases that come in the commodity title or crop insurance because of conditions and so on, it is built into the baseline every time. Now this is built into the baseline. This is not something that has to be newly paid for ever year. Correct? Because that was a 40-some-year look-back, as opposed to now year-by-year, you have basically a reset so that as it moves forward this becomes something very modest and built into the baseline. Is that correct?

Ms. DEAN. That is exactly right. You directed it, so it is current law and built into the baseline.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you. Let us talk for a minute—actually, I am out of time, so I am going to wait and come back, if I have an opportunity to talk about the Double Up Bucks program, which I think has been very successful in helping people eat healthier foods. Looking forward to that, but I am going to turn it to Senator BOOZMAN.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

When the 2018 Farm Bill was done what was the CBO score for Thrifty Food?

Ms. DEAN. I believe—I cannot recall whether CBO gave it no score or a—

Senator BOOZMAN. It was not scored. It was not a cost. That was the congressional understanding, that it would be at no cost. I am sure USDA provided input to CBO concerning it, and so again, we had a no-cost score and yet this cost \$250 billion.

I guess the question is, who identified the Thrifty Food plan re-evaluation as a means to increase the SNAP benefit levels?

Ms. DEAN. Senator, I think that is not how the sequence occurred. We went about undertaking the evaluation, again—

Senator BOOZMAN. Who is “we”?

Ms. DEAN. Sorry. FNCS. The Secretary and I worked with the team in providing direction. We set forth, and I believe we accomplished a sound, evidence-based process to update the Thrifty relative to those four criteria. When the team set about doing it they found they could not update it without incurring a cost in terms of reflecting current price data, the new DGAs, and the food consumption and nutrients.

Senator BOOZMAN. I have got Section 4002. You mentioned the four criteria. Cost is not part of this.

Ms. DEAN. I am sorry?

Senator BOOZMAN. Cost is not part of this.

Ms. DEAN. That is correct.

Senator BOOZMAN. Okay. Again, you have got a CBO score of zero, congressional intent zero, USDA's help in regard to what was going on is zero, and yet you increased it \$250 billion without any congressional interaction whatsoever.

In response to the findings of GAO, USDA indicated that the TFP reevaluation could have increased SNAP benefits by even a larger amount. What was the maximum increase that could have been applied in the reevaluation and how was it determined to cap the increase at a quarter of a trillion dollars?

Ms. DEAN. Again, Senator, that is not how we approached the question. The question was to solve for what is our best estimate of a healthy budget-conscious diet. Had we, for example, allowed a wider array—for example, when we were pulling the scanner data and the prices for different categories of food it was the lowest-cost food in each category. If we had allowed all foods in a particular category then that would have increased the cost. We were very mindful that the word “thrifty” is a part of the plan, and it is intended to be a low-cost—

Senator BOOZMAN. You felt like you had the authority to go ahead and do the higher categories if you wanted to.

Ms. DEAN. No. I think the law makes clear that we were meant to design, and for the past 45 years have had a low-cost budget. We made decisions in keeping with where we have been for the past four decades. You just asked me a hypothetical and I gave you a hypothetical answer.

Senator BOOZMAN. Well, for the past 40 years or whatever it has been cost neutral.

Ms. DEAN. Prior updates have been cost neutral, but they have not been done with the directive of the statute.

Senator BOOZMAN. It is my understanding that USDA recently hired a new SNAP director, Catherine Buhrig.

Ms. DEAN. Yes.

Senator BOOZMAN. There are questions as to whether she will relocate to Washington, DC, from Pennsylvania. SNAP is one of the largest entitlement programs in the Federal Government. What is her official duty station? Is her position officially a remote duty station? If so, can you explain how Ms. Buhrig will operate a program that spends more than \$100 billion annually?

Ms. DEAN. We are delighted to have Cathy Buhrig join us. She has been the SNAP director for Pennsylvania for many years. She is an incredibly talented and experienced leader. All of our national office SES work out of our Braddock Road office in Alexandria, and she will be there consistent with her other peers.

You asked a very detailed question so we can get back to you on that.

Senator BOOZMAN. Her duty station is going to be there? She is not working remotely?

Ms. DEAN. No. I mean, I will say some staff do telework, or if she is traveling she will need to be working from another location. Yes, she will be working out of Braddock Road, our Braddock Road office in Alexandria.

Senator BOOZMAN. Okay. thank you, Madam Chair.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Ernst.

Senator ERNST. Yes, thank you, Madam Chair and Ranking Member Boozman, and thank you, Under Secretary Dean, for being here today and for your testimony.

The Department of Defense recently updated its statistics on military eligibility which show that, unbelievably, 77 percent of young people aged 17 to 24 are ineligible to serve in the military, and the leading disqualifier for service is obesity. This is a grave national security concern, and we really do have to do better to achieve those healthy outcomes for our young people.

Included in the 2018 Farm Bill was a program that I had championed. It is the Healthy Fluid Milk Incentives program. The 2020 to 2025 dietary guidelines for Americans had noted that 90 percent of Americans do not meet the U.S.-recommended dairy consumption. Do you support this approach of encouraging SNAP households to purchase healthy but under-consumed foods such as milk and also other nutrient-dense dairy products like cheese and yogurt to remind people of the nutritional value?

Ms. DEAN. Yes, Senator. We are very pleased with the progress that we have been making on the Healthy Fluid Milk Incentives program. It has recently been awarded to a new contractor, Auburn, and they are making great progress, and we hope to learn quite a bit of what they are incentivizing and then the details of how it works at the register. We feel like there is some stickiness, and if we can pull those two things together ideally we can take lessons learned there for future work.

Senator ERNST. Very good. It is something that I am continuing to work on for this upcoming farm bill, and, of course, to help alleviate some of the concerns coming from DoD and obesity that is rampant with our youth.

I want to tag on a little bit with what the Ranking Member was saying. A lot of us are very shocked at the CBO score that came out, and the CBO had raised its cost estimate for SNAP by \$93 billion over the next 10 years. I do believe it is important that we are providing critical assistance to those citizens that are most vulnerable, but we also have an obligation to ensure that these Federal funds are not abused and that they are not taken advantage of. We have seen just a shocking level of fraud throughout the SNAP program.

As we are considering ways to cut back governmental spending we do have to maintain program integrity and carefully analyze both recipient and retailer trafficking and fraud. What regulatory safeguards can we provide to prevent fraud and ensure that the government funds are utilized for the truest intentions of the SNAP program?

Ms. DEAN. Well, Senator, let me just say the Secretary and myself and Administrator Long share your commitment to nutrition security because it is, in fact, national security. I think the first pathway there is to make sure all of our benefits are offering meaningful support that meets the need, which is why we are making some of the critical changes in SNAP, WIC, and school meals. I just wanted to flag back on that.

You are absolutely right that stewarding the program with integrity is a core goal, both in the act, obviously, for this Committee, and for USDA. The appropriations that we received both in 2022

and 2023 actually provided a significant increase in staffing for FNS resources that had fallen to a historic low while our programs had gotten larger, while many more stores had joined the program. We just needed more capacity in order to oversee the programs with, I think, the intention and direction that you are discussing.

We will continue to do that, and I am happy to loop back with you if we identify an area where we need more resource or authority.

Senator ERNST. That is good because we want to make sure that those dollars are being used for those families that truly do need this.

Another area that I am concerned about is that able-bodied adults without dependents make up more than 10 percent of the households who receive SNAP benefits. What are your beliefs about the ability of these individuals to work 20 hours a week, given that there are two jobs available for every person seeking jobs out there?

Ms. DEAN. Well, the group that you talk about, known sometimes in our program as ABAWDs, or the childless adults, just to make sure we are all on the same page, when the public health emergency ends in May—I am sorry. Let me step back.

Congress temporarily suspended the work requirement that applies to that population during the public health emergency, so that policy will be changing in May, when the public health emergency ends. As a result of the time limit being suspended that population's participation in the program did grow.

What we know about that requirement—and I think was originally set up and intended to support work, to promote work—it is not having that result. There are multiple studies that show that it does not result in increasing employment and, in fact, results in increasing food hardship amongst the group.

As designed it is not working. The White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, the strategy document called on Congress to reevaluate and take a look at that rule to see if it could be reconfigured to meet its intended purpose, which is to support and promote work, not increase food insecurity.

Senator ERNST. Yes, I appreciate that answer, and we do need to get back to getting those able-bodied adults off of the program and focusing again on the families that truly do need this assistance. We are under extreme constraints with our budget and appropriations, and we need to find a way to make sure that those dollars are going as far as we can with the people that actually need that assistance and programs. Thank you very much.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Welch is next.

Senator WELCH. Thank you very much. You know, the Ranking Member mentioned that the food program is the biggest expense, and Senator Ernst, you were talking about having to make sure the dollars are well spent. I am a strong supporter of nutrition. It was a huge, huge benefit for my families and the kids. Any program that we have in government should always be reviewed to make certain that it is working properly and effectively.

It is the case in Vermont that our farmers love being able to put food on the table of the kids and families. I mean, when I talk to farmers they are really proud that they are feeding America.

No. 1, to each of you, what suggestions do you have about making the nutrition program stronger? When I say stronger, to meet the needs of folks, and it has to be accountable. We cannot substitute just an immense amount of paperwork and call that accountability, because that essentially, in many ways, will get things much more difficult for people who do need it.

I will start with you, Ms. Dean.

Ms. DEAN. Thank you, Senator. I appreciate that opportunity. I mean, in this moment of review it is important, I think, to step back. I am trying to remember. More than half of our participants have incomes below 50 percent of the poverty line, meaning they live in deep poverty when they come to SNAP and they seek its help. Senator, you are right in reminding us to remind ourselves of who is using this program, and it is primarily households with very low income.

That having been said, a large number of households on the program are earners. Their earnings are so low that they need SNAP benefits to supplement, or senior citizens and individuals with disabilities, for example, with a Social Security benefit that is too low to allow them to eat healthily.

We are pleased that SNAP can supplement their income, and as you are saying, more money at the grocery store which is more money in the food economy back to those Vermont farmers.

Senator WELCH. Well, and another observation that I had in Vermont is that many of these food programs, including at schools, there is an enormous amount of community participation from local folks who find this a really wonderful way to contribute to the community. There is a lot of volunteer effort that goes into it, everything from the delivery of meals to the school lunch program. Can each of you comment on that?

Ms. DEAN. Yes, absolutely. Maybe I will ask Administrator Long to talk about one of our most wonderful community enhancements in school food, which is Farm-to-School, obviously a cherished Vermont—

Mrs. LONG. Yes, absolutely. I would certainly agree with you, Senator, that bringing local foods into schools—

Senator WELCH. Are you on the microphone? I am not sure.

Mrs. LONG. I am. Sorry. Can you hear me now?

Senator WELCH. Yes.

Mrs. LONG. Thank you. I would certainly agree with you, Senator, that bringing local foods into schools really is a way to pull the community together. Thanks to the support of Congress we have had a longstanding Farm-to-School program that was recently renamed for Senator Leahy. We have been able to fund over 1,000 projects that have made those connections between schools and communities and their local producers, and it can be transformative.

I will also just quickly flag that that has been a longstanding program, in place a little over a decade, and at USDA we have recently made other efforts to support local food being even more present in schools. Our sister agency, the Agricultural Marketing

Service, has been providing funding to States. I believe we funded over 30 States to date, for them to assist schools and local producers in making those connections.

Senator WELCH. Yes, no, I would be very interested in working with the folks on that Farm-to-School because I think all of us are really supportive of that local agricultural component that is really near and dear to our communities.

Talking about the kids at school, you know, I was at St. Albans and there are like 80 percent of the kids who are eligible. It is really astonishing because it is a statement about our economy as much as anything else, in the way people are living. It is an incredible burden on the schools too because they are taking on so much more responsibility for so many different areas. I think that is not just true in Vermont. It is true all around the country. There is this additional benefit of the socialization of kids, eating at lunch rather than being on their devices. Has there been any study of what the social benefits are of the food security for the kids at school?

Mrs. LONG. Well, I think there are a number of studies that show the benefits of the school meals program, including the nutritional benefits. Kids who eat school meals are more likely to consume fruits and vegetables and milk than their peers who do not participate in the program.

You know, you certainly mentioned the value of a community sitting down and eating together and socializing. That is something that we have certainly seen has been beneficial from something called the Community Eligibility Provision, which is a program within the School Lunch Act that allows lower-income communities to serve healthy meals to all kids, and it really does encourage increased participation, it reduces stigma, and it does significantly reduce that administrative burden that you were referring to earlier.

Senator WELCH. Thank you very much. I am over my time. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Marshall.

Senator MARSHALL. Well, thank you, Madam Chair, and let me just clear my voice just for a second here with some delicious whole milk, the greatest drink known to mankind, known to humankind.

My big concern with these new WIC guidelines coming out is they are decreasing by eight quarts the milk per month for breastfeeding women. I just remember my grandmother, the greatest nutritionist of all time, saying that milk was so important for breastfeeding moms. Guess what? As an obstetrician I learned the same thing. I am concerned about the WIC guidelines. I am concerned about the fact that whole milk is not in schools. The skim milk just simply does not have the good taste. We are going to have a generation of men and women with osteoporosis a decade sooner than a generation where we were all raised on milk, whole milk. By the way, did I mention it is good for absorbing fat-soluble vitamins A, D, and K?

Senator WELCH. You are leaving out chocolate.

Senator MARSHALL. Chocolate milk, yes, it is better than no milk, but the whole milk is the key. Okay. So on to SNAP.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Let me just note that you did not share this with the whole Committee.

Senator MARSHALL. The milk? I tried to get it in here but they would not let me, Madam Chair. They would not. I would love to.

Okay. On to SNAP. I want to make it clear I want every person in America that is in need that they get food. I do not want kids going hungry, that nutrition is so important, you know, from pre-conception to pregnancy, it is also important.

The SNAP budget is impacted by inflation, just like families back home are. We have groceries that are up at least 18 percent over the past two years. Our food inflation, since January 2021, is up 20 percent, but the SNAP benefits have gone up 50 percent.

I guess my question for you, Madam Secretary, is why are SNAP benefits outpacing inflation, and where was the congressional authority to increasing spending beyond inflation?

Ms. DEAN. Senator, first let me say we agree with you on increasing dairy consumption, and we actually believe the WIC food package alignment is to the dietary guidelines. We are trying to make the package more responsive to what parents are looking for, more flexible, more options. Cheese, yogurt, yogurt in container sizes that parents want, which we think will increase overall redemption of the dairy benefit. The proposed rule is out. Comments due on Tuesday, so please give us your comments.

With respect to SNAP, I think there are a couple of layers in there, so thank you for giving me the opportunity. SNAP benefits are adjusted each year on October 1st to reflect food inflation, so that the program does not lose purchasing power each year. Almost all of our food programs do that, and we really thank Congress for building in that automatic adjuster so that the purchasing power does not decrease. That was one of the changes.

The other change would, of course, be the Thrifty Food Plan adjustment that we talked about earlier in the hearing, where because our estimate of the cost of a healthy budget-conscious diet went up by 21 percent, that translated into increased SNAP benefits. That was also part of the increase. We did that reevaluation at the direction of Congress, from the 2018 Farm Bill.

The rest of, if it is okay with you we will take a look with your staff and sort out whether participation or other factors were part of those increases.

Senator MARSHALL. Great. I just want to emphasize that mainly because of inflation, SNAP was spending \$65 billion a year in 2018–2019 frame to \$110 billion. Inflation for groceries impacts everybody, including the Federal Government.

I want to turn just for a second to some of the States are not following the requirements for exceptions to getting SNAP, the working requirements. In fact, 18 States are currently using waivers, despite their unemployment being below six percent. Ten percent of SNAP recipients are able-bodied adults without dependents. Why is the USDA not enforcing the law? Why are we letting these States get away with this waiver when they do not qualify for it?

Ms. DEAN. Well, I probably did not say it clearly earlier, but Congress suspended the three-month time limit, or the able-bodied adult work requirement, for the duration of the public health emergency. That is what is going on now, and we have been working

fairly aggressively with States to ensure that they are reinstating the law when that time limit suspension is over.

The rule is incredibly complicated, and we often see individuals who should be exempt from it falling prey to it. You know, just let me spend a moment underscoring this rule applies to veterans, homeless individuals, a 19-year-old who has just aged out of foster care and might struggle to find work.

Senator MARSHALL. Right. Again, we have to prioritize who gets the funding for the food. I do not want anyone to go hungry, but when we have seven million able-bodied men between the ages of 25 and 45 that are not working potentially qualifying for SNAP benefits, it just does not seem fair that there are people on the other end of the spectrum that truly, truly need the help, when there are so many open jobs in this Nation. I think it is time to get rid of the waivers. Thank you.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Booker. Oh, excuse me. Senator Klobuchar just walked in. You are bumped. I am sorry. We keep moving in the Committee. I apologize. I apologize.

Senator BOOKER. I will always be happy to be bumped by Senator Klobuchar.

Chairwoman STABENOW. I want to thank all of our members, including the Chairman of the Judicial Committee, who are going back and forth and back and forth. I appreciate it. Senator Klobuchar, you are next.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. All right. Thank you. First of all, thank you for your good work. Minnesota has a long history, way back to Hubert Humphrey was involved in nutrition programs, and we care a lot about them.

Under Secretary Dean, I want to thank you for your visit to our State in October of last year to see a SNAP employment and training site with county commissioners and the Minnesota Department of Human Services staff, and I understand you had a chance to see first-hand the collaborative work being done with the State and local government to support SNAP E&T (Employment and Training). Can you discuss in more detail how the Minnesota program helps participants overcome barriers to employment and just about how great the program is in Minnesota, basically? That is my question.

Ms. DEAN. Well, Senator Klobuchar, you are right. It is a great program, and I think it responds to the questions that I have gotten from a couple of members about we have got SNAP participants who are un-or under-employed, and we have got vacant, open jobs. Now not all SNAP participants are qualified for the open jobs, but there are plenty who are, and there are also plenty who, with a little bit of help and a little bit of skill-building could go from being a SNAP participant who is unemployed to someone who is employed.

The program in Hennepin County is phenomenal. Basically there is an organization in the County who is buying houses up for foreclosure, takes the houses on, and then working with journeymen carpenters, SNAP participants or other individuals as a part of this work force training program are trained by these skilled carpenters, plumbers, electricians on how to do construction, because

there is a huge demand for skilled construction workers in Minneapolis. It is a booming city.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Oh, throughout our State.

Ms. DEAN. Right. Here we have individuals who might not be skilled or ready for that job but they are getting robust training. Several of the individuals are also ex-offenders, so they had some issues they had to work through with getting a driver's license, in some cases learning to drive, dealing with some of the barriers that they have to work, and the program offered them an afternoon a week to do that.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you. Just to move to the rural part of our State, could you talk about how USDA will support expansion of SNAP Online to small and independent retailers who may face challenges implementing SNAP Online? It is not just rural but it would be particularly helpful there, I think.

Ms. DEAN. Thank you for that. In March 2020, we had about 30,000 SNAP participants redeeming benefits online through a pilot we were operating at the time. Now there are four million households who are able to shop online. This has been an incredible revolution in the program.

Interestingly enough, it is only about 180 retailers, in many cases representing thousands of outlets who are on board with us, and about half of them are small and independent grocers.

It is our absolute priority to focus on supporting small and independent grocers, whether they be in the city or rural, to be able to join. They do not have payment platforms, they may not have a staff of accountants and technologists to help them stand up the work, so we have given a grant to the National Grocers Association to work directly with those retailers to help bring them on board.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Thanks. Last question. Food banks in our State, like Second Harvest Heartland, have seen a 40 percent reduction, about seven million fewer pounds in Federal commodities in the last year. While USDA recently announced another \$943 million in purchases, it likely will not be able to fill the gap. The program has to remain responsive to access supply, increased demand. Could you be able to speak to the USDA's plans to ensure consistent access to food for our country's food banks, whether through the regular TEFAP spending or through the CCC purchases?

Ms. DEAN. Thank you for lifting up this amazing community of partners across the country who help ensure that our neighbors are fed. We know that food banks are struggling. They face the same food inflation that we have talked about earlier, supply chain difficulty, and all the while families are still showing up, seeking their help. The Secretary is absolutely committed to the Emergency Food Network and actually announced \$1.5 billion in additional funds on top of what Congress provides to bring our total support for the program to about \$2 billion for Fiscal Year 2023.

We will continue to monitor how our partners are faring, and while I cannot speak for the Secretary or commit what he will do with CCC, I know this is a deep interest and concern to him.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Senator Grassley.

Senator GRASSLEY. Thank you, Madam Chairman and Senator Boozman.

SNAP has historically reflected the health of the economy. When employment rates decrease, SNAP participation rates decrease. In his State of the Union message, Biden rightfully touted 3.4 percent unemployment, a 50-year low.

Now, SNAP participation is at more than 41 million people, 12 percent higher than it was in February 2020. The cost of Federal nutrition assistance has increased 300 percent, from \$63 billion in 2019 to \$149 billion in 2022. As the current Ranking Member of the Budget Committee I intend to stress the importance of budget and spending decisions being made so we can work toward putting in place a budget process that works.

Yesterday, CBO released their latest report on the Federal budget outlook. They project that growing Federal spending and borrowing leave us with an annual budget deficit of \$2.9 trillion by 2033, and we have to start tackling that issue right now.

Most relevant to today's hearing, CBO says that total spending on SNAP will exceed \$1.2 trillion over the next decade. That is a staggering statistic, especially considering that when we were developing the last farm bill that applicable number was 664. Our people's confidence in SNAP is undermined when this Administration usurps Congress' power of the purse and very unilaterally increases the program's cost by hundreds of billions of dollars without any concern to the fiscal impact and the impact on inflation.

Before I ask question I am going to kind of sum up a philosophy I have. I do not know how it is shared by other people. February 2020, we had X number of money and people on food stamps. Then we had to intervene and spend a heck of a lot of money before the pandemic. I assume if you do something because you have a pandemic, you have an emergency, that when that emergency is over you go back to what is normal, and normal would be February 2020, plus inflation, plus the number of people that have increased in population. That figure that came out of the Budget Committee is nothing similar to that today, with what they were projecting, with the reality of if you did not have the pandemic. The pandemic cannot be used as an excuse to ramp up Federal spending.

My question to you, Under Secretary, what role do you think the increase in food and nutrition spending has contributed to food inflation for middle-class families that do not qualify for SNAP?

Ms. DEAN. Well, if I can offer a friendly amendment on your principle, I would argue a program's share of GDP, a share of the economy. You were talking about actual real spending, which I appreciate. I think a share of the GDP is probably a better marker, and I do expect that SNAP will return back as we see participation fall in response to a stronger economy. That does take longer amongst low-income households. We saw that after the Great Recession too, right? They are often first fired, last hired, and when the economy recovers it does not always include everyone equally. It will just take a little longer, I would imagine, for participation to abate, but we expect to see that.

In terms of the broader question you asked, that might be a better question for Office of Chief Economist, and I will check in with them. It is important to remember that while SNAP spending is ex-

traordinarily important to the households who receive it, benefits modest though they are, it is actually a relatively small share of the overall ag economy and food economy, and we can get that to you, sir.

Senator GRASSLEY. I am glad to hear your rebuttal to what I said, but did I interpret you right that you do expect the food stamp spending to get back to a level of February 2020, plus inflation, plus increase in population?

Ms. DEAN. Yes, although probably not as quick—I would say I think that will take a while to tell because not all households are equally sharing in the economic recovery. That will be the issue.

Senator GRASSLEY. Okay. Do I have time for one more question?

Chairwoman STABENOW. We are happy to have you ask a question and have a short answer, so thank you.

Senator GRASSLEY. Okay. I have got a long introduction to my next question, but I have got to go immediately to my question, but it deals with the error rate. In your time as Under Secretary, what have you done to lower the error rate, and why do we not have an error rate update since 2019?

Ms. DEAN. Briefly, Congress suspended the QC system in a way that resulted in us not being able to publish error rates for 2020 or 2021. We will for Fiscal Year 2022, and I will tell you in candor I expect that it will be higher than it was the last time we had an error rate, partly because of how much change has been going on during the pandemic with respect to operations. We have been aggressively addressing this issue with States, and I am happy to followup with your office.

Senator GRASSLEY. Thank you, Madam Secretary.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much.

Senator GRASSLEY. Thank you.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Yep, thank you very much. Senator Gillibrand.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Thank you. I am very interested in Senator Grassley's questions. I am very interested in SNAP and what it was before the pandemic, what happened during the pandemic, and what it is going to be after the pandemic. Anecdotally what I heard in New York was that SNAP before the pandemic helped, but it was so little. It was like, how much a meal a day, \$2.00?

Ms. DEAN. \$2.00 per meal.

Senator GILLIBRAND. It is \$2.00 per meal. It did not actually cover the cost for most families. This is for Senator Grassley. My understanding was it just did not do enough. It was good and great and one of the most generous things we do here in Congress, but it did not do enough to address child poverty. What happened for most families in New York, the fourth week in every month kids had to have low-quality foods, high carb, high fat, high salt. Cheap food, and so it increased chronic obesity.

What we did during the pandemic is we fixed a bunch of the problems with the SNAP program. We made it really easy to get, we made it easier to qualify, we streamlined everything, and we made it more generous, and it helped. It actually helped people get out of poverty and addressed hunger in a way we have never addressed hunger, because we had this urgency to help people who all lost their jobs.

In answer to your question, what I would like them to come up with is what was it before the pandemic, what was the usage during the pandemic, and what changes did we make to the program that actually helped people systemically, and then assess who needs to be helped still, is there an increase in uptick, is the benefit rich enough or not rich enough, is it still too little? Then give us an estimate of what would it take to address hunger in families that need it and then answer your question. Because I do not think SNAP was working that well before the pandemic, and we fixed a lot of problems during the pandemic, which is why a lot of advocates want to continue what we did during the pandemic because it fixed stuff.

I want to give you a much clearer answer to your question because I want to solve hunger. You are exactly right because if we were doing everything right in 2020, it would not make sense to be increasing massively. I think the biggest problem is we were not doing everything right in 2020, and you and I should look at what we can fix together, what the numbers should be, and what aspirationally we can grow over time, because I think you asked the exact right questions. Thank you, Senator Grassley, for your interest in SNAP.

I want to talk a little bit about, just for the record, Senator Grassley has to leave, but I want to talk about what SNAP does, what the weaknesses are, what needs to be fixed. One of my concerns is that it does not reach the right people and it is too hard to access so a lot of hungry people stay hungry because they cannot access it.

In Fiscal Year 2020, there were 2.5 million New Yorkers participating in SNAP. Over 850,000 of them were children. Reducing child poverty has been one of our greatest goals in this body and in this Committee and in Congress overall. The increase in SNAP benefits from 2021 through the Thrifty Food Plan update were long overdue—this is the main thing I wanted to address for Senator Grassley—and it uplifted over two million people above the poverty line, including one million children. Poverty was reduced from an additional 20 million people, including 6 million children.

SNAP is vital to our constituents and all of our constituents in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Participation in SNAP has been shown to lead to improved health outcomes, lower medical costs, improved education, economic security, and self-sufficiency.

Under Secretary Dean, in your opinion, how vital is it to Congress to protect SNAP from potential cuts that would result in economic fallout if benefits were lowered for Americans as a consequence of the 2023 Farm Bill? I would like you to use this opportunity to explain what did we fix during the pandemic that needed fixing, including what I just mentioned, the Thrifty Food Plan? What should the actual benefits be if it was a dream scenario, and why? Give us your dream and why. Then let us make the case that these changes are important for this Committee to look at holistically, not just an example as to what we used to spend and what we are spending today, because I think that is the wrong conversation. I think the conversation is, are we meeting the needs of our constituents or are we not?

Ms. DEAN. Thank you, Senator Gillibrand. While you were speaking to Senator Grassley I worried I had not been clear in my answer to him on the necessary adjustments as a share of GDP. We will correct the record to make sure if I misspoke.

As you point out very eloquently, SNAP is a lifeline to the families that receive it—seniors, children, individuals with disabilities. It is a modest benefit and yet it is the difference between having enough money to purchase a healthy diet and not having enough money at all to feed your kids or to feed your family. Cuts that would reduce eligibility or lower benefits are deeply concerning to me in the abstract because we know how many families are really living on the edge and what a lifeline this benefit is.

During the pandemic, you are right, this was a moment of extraordinary—it was an unbelievable challenge in our country, and Congress equipped USDA and the States with a tremendous flexibility to respond. A couple of things happened. One is there was a really quick move to online shopping. That is an example of a feature of the program that needs to continue to be strengthened, access to food.

Senator GILLIBRAND. The ability to use SNAP online?

Ms. DEAN. I am sorry. Yes, to allow SNAP to be online ordering and purchasing of benefits.

There were eligibility restrictions that were eased for college students, for individuals subject to this three-month time limit, where the expectation of working during the pandemic would not have been sensible. There was an easing of the paperwork and office visit requirements, because, of course, one could not go to the office, and we saw that households were able to access the benefits.

I do want to say, the time when States had to shut down and radically change operations, we saw participation grow by several million people, in part due to their incredibly heroic efforts, but in part due to the flexibilities you offered them. They may not all make sense moving forward but we have learned a lot about how to deliver this program to rural areas, individuals for whom getting to the office is a challenge, and for whom the massive quantities of paperwork we historically demand, do we need it all still? Do we need to go back to where we were?

You are right. We do not want to return exactly to February, any of us, right? We have learned about a different way of doing things. I do not want as many Zoom calls as I have had, but it is a way for me to connect with people in a profoundly different way than I did before. I hope we bring that spirit forward.

Senator GILLIBRAND. In answer to Senator Grassley's question and in answer to my question, I would like you to write a letter to the Committee about what was SNAP before, who it served and how it served, what SNAP did during the pandemic, who it served and how it served, and what, going forward, you would like to retain from the pandemic, what you do not need, and how many people you think it is going to reach with those changes, and therefore a budget. It has to be all written out in detail to answer his question authoritatively.

Last, Madam Chairman, I would like to submit a question for the record about moving Puerto Rico from NAP to SNAP, because it is so unfair that the Americans who happen to live in Puerto Rico do

not get the full SNAP benefit and are capped. Even as more people are added to the program there is no more money to feed more kids. I would like a full answer about what is happening in Puerto Rico today, who has access to it, who does not have access to it, and the destructive impact of NAP, and why it should be moved to SNAP.

Ms. DEAN. Yes, ma'am. The short answer is the Administration supports all the territories having—

Senator GILLIBRAND. I need it for the Committee, because this is not something that—they do not have a lot of Puerto Ricans, necessarily, in their State. I have a lot, but they are all Americans, and they deserve the same benefit. Thank you.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. You have important homework assignments.

Ms. DEAN. Yes, I do.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Very important.

Senator GILLIBRAND. I am sorry. I have school-aged kids.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Senator Hyde-Smith.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you, Madam Chairman, and thank you, witnesses, for being here today. This is most helpful.

One of my concerns, for Deputy Under Secretary Dean, is that I would like to talk about school lunch and breakfast programs in a different way. I am very concerned about the recent reports that cities are opting to remove animal protein from school meals. That is very concerning for me. Some might argue that this topic would be better suited for a child nutrition reauthorization hearing, not a Title IV Farm Bill hearing, but I disagree with that. This topic falls under the Committee's jurisdiction, and we need to talk about it.

For years, popular media has attacked animal agriculture and have suggested that we cut back on livestock production and related food products in the name of mitigating climate change. These suggestions are very misleading, and climate activists love to blow the livestock sector's contribution to greenhouse gas emissions completely out of proportion and disregard the essential nutritional benefits of animal protein. This sentiment is creeping into our school systems, where it has the potential to irreparably harm the most vulnerable in our society, our children.

I read that, for example, that Edinburgh, Scotland, recently became the first European city to commit to eliminating meat from schools, hospitals, and nursing homes. I know that is another country, but similar initiatives are underway in the United States, in some of our Nation's largest school districts. In recent years, large public-school systems in the Northeast have announced Meatless Monday and Vegan Friday initiatives. School systems on the West Coast are doing the exact same thing. It is apparent that animal-sourced foods are the most complete and bioavailable sources of protein, are full of vitamins and nutrients such as vitamin B-12, zinc, iron, and all of which are essential for healthy development in children. I recognize that Americans have the right to make their own dietary choices, and I want that to happen, but we have to consider what is in the school meals we provide to underserved children who, in most cases, do not get to choose for themselves.

The health and well-being of American children should not be sacrificed at the altar of climate activism.

What is the USDA's response to these initiatives and can you explain whether schools that implement these initiatives are still in compliance with the dietary guidelines for Americans?

Ms. DEAN. Thank you, Senator, for the question. We are happy to take it. As you know, Federal law, I think, establishes standards and a framework for the school meal program but districts have a lot of flexibility on how they implement.

I am actually going to ask Administrator Long to jump in with some thoughts, given her expertise here.

Mrs. LONG. Yes, absolutely. One thing I think that is important to point out is that USDA directly purchases between 15 and 20 percent of the food that ends up on the plate in the schools, and those purchases cross a variety of types, and I will stress animal proteins are quite well represented in the foods that we purchase, and those are domestically purchased foods and provided to schools.

As the Deputy Under Secretary mentioned, school meal regulations and requirements really provide a broad framework for communities and local schools to make choices, such as the ones you alluded to. Some schools and communities also use that flexibility to make choices to highlight locally produced items, that could include a range of foods and produce produced by local farmers. The choices do ultimately come down to the local communities and the local schools.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you, and I would just ask that you track that and make sure that it is staying in proportion to what we need.

Thank you, Madam Chairman. I think my time is about out.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Booker.

Senator BOOKER. Thank you to the Chairwoman and the Ranking Member.

I want to highlight something about SNAP eligibility, an issue that is a little broader. We have addressed it other of my committees. During the 1990's, we had this very big war on drugs that caused a lot of harm to people who have paid their debt and reentered society. On the Small Business Committee, in a bipartisan way, we said that those folks who are entrepreneurs should not be ineligible for SBA programs. In a bipartisan way in the Judiciary Committee we addressed other eligibilities for people who had paid their debt to society.

However, right now, still, we have a ban on people who have drug crimes, and have paid their debt, have served their time, they still cannot receive SNAP benefits. Hunger and food insecurity are significant challenges that formerly incarcerated individuals face after release. The SNAP ban is not just one obstacle that diminishes their prospects of having a good life but it actually increases the chance that they will recidivate. It is us being penny wise and pound foolish.

Individuals already face challenges who have been formerly incarcerated in housing, employment, health care. To exclude them from programs like SNAP actually compounds their difficulties and again increases that risk of recidivism. It is my hope that we can

come together, as we have on other committees, in a bipartisan way and fix this mistake.

I request unanimous consent to put into the record this letter from a long list of groups, nonpartisan, bipartisan groups from multiple States represented by people on this Committee, asking for us to correct this mistake and actually save taxpayers money by reducing recidivism.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Ordered, without objection.

[The document can be found on page 56 in the appendix.]

Senator BOOKER. Thank you very much.

Ms. Dean, I want to thank you for being here, and I want to let you know that I think we are in the midst of one of the greatest nutrition crises our country has ever seen. Right now half of our population in America is diabetic or pre-diabetic. Every month in the United States of America diabetes causes 13,000 new amputations, 5,000 new cases of kidney failure, 2,000 cases of blindness, every month in America, and it is not something that is just affecting older people. It is stunning to me that we now have 25 percent of our teenagers are pre-diabetic or have type 2 diabetes. My colleague, Joni Ernst, mentioned the profound reality that 77 percent of young people ages 17 to 24 are ineligible even to serve in the military. Much of this can be attributed to the alarming fact that ultra-processed foods now comprise two-thirds of the calories that children and teens eat.

In this farm bill I believe it is imperative that we scale up the nutrition programs that we know are working, that are evidence-based, that are making a difference to people's health and well-being. We know that we can do better. We have clear evidence to that fact.

One program I know that is working, and we need to scale up, is the GusNIP program. While we know that this program provides life-changing benefits—I have seen it myself in communities, helping people get off their prescription drugs, which cost taxpayers often money, helping people improve their lifestyle and their well-being—this program is a power incentive and benefit for farmers. We know that this will help those farmers who are growing fruits and vegetables for the local community.

Can you please talk about that aspect, how this pro-farmer program, GusNIP, helps folks?

Ms. DEAN. Thank you, Senator. I am happy to do that. First let me say the Administration supports the repeal of the ban on ex-offenders with a drug conviction, so thank you for lifting up that important issue.

With respect to GusNIP, it gives me the opportunity to underscore our approach on nutrition security, which really has four components: making sure that our benefits are meaningful, increasing access to healthy food, collaboration with thousands of partners across the country to promote better health and nutrition, and integrating equity across all of those pillars. GusNIP does exactly all of that, in addition to building stronger connections between our Federal nutrition programs and local producers and local markets. I appreciate it. That is quite a tee-up you gave me there.

GusNIP, essentially the way it works, and the Chairwoman flagged it in Michigan, Double Up Bucks is one of the most popular

forms, where a SNAP participant would go to a farmers market, say, "Here is \$20 in my SNAP benefits," and receive \$40 in tokens.

Senator BOOKER. If you can, in the seconds I have left—

Ms. DEAN [continuing]. directly into farmers' pockets.

Senator BOOKER. That is, yes. You are seeing it fundamentally empower our local farmers.

Ms. DEAN. Increase fruit and vegetable intake, yes.

Senator BOOKER. Increase fruit and vegetable intake. I really appreciate that. I have got another question I am going to put into the record about how SNAP ED can be redesigned so that it can start to reach more of the 90 million low-income Americans that we need to reach, and I am hoping I can get that for the record.

Ms. DEAN. Terrific, and we share that goal.

Senator BOOKER. Thank you so much. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much.

Senator Thune, you always manage to time it right when it is your turn to ask questions, so kudos to your staff or whoever is keeping track of things as you juggle your schedule. Senator Thune.

Senator THUNE. That makes my staff happy and my colleagues very annoyed.

[Laughter.]

Senator THUNE. Thank you, Madam Chair and Ranking Member Boozman, for holding today's hearing to consider the nutrition programs in the farm bill. I also want to thank our USDA panelists for appearing before the Committee today.

Let me just, if I can, direct this, Deputy Under Secretary Dean, to you. SNAP benefits are generally provided in 1 monthly allotment. The data suggest a correlation between the consumption of SNAP benefits and outcomes like academic performance. For example, research indicates that student performance tapers the farther SNAP recipients get from the date of their SNAP benefit transfer.

I am reviewing whether Congress should look at how to provide States the authority to distribute SNAP benefits in two allotments per month for recipients who would like to receive their benefits in two installments instead of one lump sum payment. I believe this could help improve program outcomes by incentivizing healthy food purchase and boosting educational performance among recipients. It could also help ease demand on grocery stores and make it harder for grocery price hikes that could be aligned with the dates of SNAP benefit distribution.

The question is do you agree that program outcomes could improve if SNAP recipients have the option to receive split issuance rather than only once a month, and then any other ideas you would have for improving SNAP outcomes?

Ms. DEAN. Thank you, Senator Thune. I read the research that you are talking about and I just want to flag that, of course, that was done before our adjustment to the Thrifty Food Plan where we now really are much more confident that the benefit is adequate to purchase and cover the costs, or supplement the costs of a healthy diet throughout the month. It would be interesting to see what the issues are there.

You are flagging a provision of the law that Congress passed, I believe it was in the 2008 Farm Bill, to prohibit splitting issuance

into more than one allotment. I think the concern there was the impact on participants, and stores, the issue of potentially the increased cost of shopping, particularly in rural areas, say if a household has to drive a long way to a store, disrupting household budgets, the cost of issuing twice—States would be charged twice by their processors—and potentially a visit to emergency food.

Now with the benefit being perhaps our current estimate of an adequate level, and if one could address some of those concerns maybe by giving households the option to choose, it seems interesting to explore whether shifting the issuance—I guess my answer is I do not know. I would want to talk more with your staff about it. Congress did make the decision to prohibit it out of concern of what the impact on households would be, which I know is something you would want to address.

Senator THUNE. Yes, and I think I would like to continue that discussion with you on that subject.

Both Congress and the executive branch have implemented processes to serve as checks and balances on Federal spending. Your biography notes that you served as a budget analyst at the Office of Management and Budget, and given your experience I am sure you understand the important role that OMB plays in overseeing the outlay of tax dollars.

According to the Government Accountability Office, the Thrifty Food Plan, or TFP, reevaluation you oversaw allowed plan costs to increase beyond inflation for the first time, resulting in a 21 percent increase in SNAP benefits. I guess the question is what input did OMB provide as USDA made TFP changes that are expected to cost approximately \$250 billion more over 10 years?

Ms. DEAN. The process of the reevaluation was done by a very technical team within USDA. We did consult with OMB along the way, and they did provide us some economic analysis support throughout. Ultimately OMB was very supportive of the change, again, directed by Congress, and it was the first adjustment in purchasing power for low-income households in over 45 years. I think they shared with us the confidence that this would put healthy food within reach for millions more households, and we are pleased with the impact it had on poverty.

Senator THUNE. Just to confirm, they did sign off. OMB signed off on that, approved it?

Ms. DEAN. I do not know that sign-off is a technical term, sir, so we would probably want to check on it. We absolutely collaborated with them throughout the process. I am happy to get you the official phrase.

Senator THUNE. Okay. That would be helpful. I mean, it is a quarter of a trillion-dollar increase, a unilateral decision made by an agency. It seems like they would obviously want to be engaged in that.

I see my time has expired, Madam Chair, so thank you.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Now I will turn to Senator Durbin, who on Thursdays, I know, juggles between chairing Judiciary, which is so very important as well, and being here. We are really happy that you were able to make it today. Thank you so much.

Senator DURBIN. Thank you, Madam Chair and Senator Boozman. It is an honor to be here. It is true that I spend most of my time in the Judiciary Committee on Thursdays. I am happy I could join you today.

We have a rich tradition in the Judiciary Committee to honor Chairs. We asked the Chairman to submit an 8x10 black-and-white photograph, which is then mounted on a store-bought frame on the wall. I am looking forward to the day I receive that honor. I want to congratulate you on your own. I think the portrait is beautiful.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. I look forward to coming to your photo or portrait unveiling, whichever it is.

Senator DURBIN. Well, we do not have an official unveiling. Seriously, it is beautiful.

Second, I would like to make a plea, and I do not know if this is appropriate. Since Senator Marshall is promoting whole milk for nursing mothers, I once visited the Guinness Brewery in Dublin, and they have a policy of giving to nursing mothers one glass of Guinness a day. They think that is very healthy, and with rosy-cheeked Irish children I think they must be right. If he is allowed to bring whole milk, can we ask the Irish Embassy for their help?

Chairwoman STABENOW. We will certainly consider it. That is a possibility.

Senator DURBIN. Thank you. On a more serious note, I thank the team from the USDA. Illinois has operated a program for more than 20 years providing health care services to 8,000 elderly and disabled in community-style apartments, who prefer those to nursing homes. These supportive living facilities provide meals to these frail, low-income individuals across our State through SNAP. What they do is pool the benefits of the people who are receiving these meals to lower their bills and spare them from going out to shop. This program worked well. No financial wrongdoing, and that has been confirmed by the USDA over 20 years. Accessible health and nutrition, giving Mom and Dad more independent living options in a creative way. They are not asking for more. They are taking what they are legally entitled to and pooling it into an effort to have community meals.

Suddenly, a few years ago, the U.S. Department of Agriculture decided these facilities were institutions. Nothing had changed in Illinois, no statutory definition of institution, and these facilities provide three meals a day for two decades with no complaint from anybody. The surprise was that the USDA decision to terminate SNAP benefits for the people who, if they moved back home in isolation, would still qualify. If they left the community apartment living environment and went to their own homes there would be no question about the SNAP benefits.

Ms. Dean, do you agree that this situation arose not because Illinois or these facilities did anything wrong but because the USDA changed its mind after 20 years?

Ms. DEAN. Senator, first I appreciate you bringing up the senior living facilities in Illinois. It has been a really innovative home-based and community care setting, and you are right to bring it to the attention of others.

The situation occurred because USDA improperly allowed the institutions—

Senator DURBIN. For how long?

Ms. DEAN. Many years.

Senator DURBIN. Twenty years. That is it?

Ms. DEAN. Sorry?

Senator DURBIN. That is the reason?

Ms. DEAN. Yes. We are now working very closely with Illinois and your office to explore other options in order to continue to see if there is a way for the Federal Government to support these facilities, and offering the great care that you describe.

Senator DURBIN. Thank you for that. Senator Duckworth and I added a provision, working with Senator Stabenow, in the last farm bill to extend the status quo. CBO added a new surprise when we made this suggestion. Keeping the status quo now somehow costs money and must be scored. Nothing had changed in Illinois in 20 years. USDA terminated SNAP for these residents last December 31st—terminated SNAP. The State was forced to obtain a temporary Medicaid waiver to partially replace the shortfall of SNAP funds.

I do not get it. These are people, seniors, disabled people, eligible for SNAP, who were taking their check and pooling it with others that they are living with so they could have a community meal, and all of a sudden this is illegal, after 20 years. We need a solution and I hope you can assure me that you will work with me in finding one.

Ms. DEAN. In earnest, sir, yes.

Senator DURBIN. Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Fischer.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Our nutrition programs play an important role in helping families navigate difficult times. Unfortunately, we know perhaps the biggest economic challenge facing Americans is inflation. In particular, families have been hit hard by inflation at the grocery store.

Since President Biden took office, the food-at-home price index is up 19.6 percent. Grocery prices for many family staples have skyrocketed. For example, chicken breast prices are up 32 percent, milk up 21 percent, ground beef up 21 percent.

As we have a discussion about our nutrition programs ahead of the next farm bill I think it is important we also recognize how inflation and policies that have contributed to it impact the ability of families to put nutritious meals on the table.

Ms. Dean, as you know our food banks and local food pantries play a critical role in helping to provide for families in need. In Nebraska, the Food Bank of Lincoln and the Food Bank for the Heartland rely on the Emergency Food Assistance Program, TEFAP, along with philanthropic support to distribute food to local food pantries and families in need.

Since the 2018 Farm Bill we have also seen some innovative programs outside of TEFAP designed to aid food banks, such as the Farmers to Families Food Box Program, which has been quite successful in my State of Nebraska.

Could you discuss lessons learned from the Farmers to Families Food Box Program or other initiatives that have helped food banks

to better service their partners? How could these lessons apply to TEFAP as we think about the upcoming farm bill?

Ms. DEAN. Thank you, Senator. I really appreciate that question. You are exactly right that our food banks are incredible assets in the communities that they serve, and we really want to do what we can to support them as they feed our neighbors.

There were many lessons but I will take away two particularly from that endeavor that we wanted to carry forward. One is it is very clear that there are thousands of organizations throughout the country that are working to serve individuals in their community who were able to step in and they were part of the community that distributed those Farmers to Families food boxes. They may not actually be connected to the emergency food network that USDA supports through TEFAP. We wanted to find a way to continue to harness their power in their communities and to see if they were interested to bring them in to the emergency food system.

That is why the Secretary launched what we are calling Reach and Resiliency grants to each State to explore how to expand the emergency food network into communities, particularly rural and remote, that may not have been well served by it before. That is one lesson.

The other is that offering food banks and our local community partners prepacked boxes was a really interesting innovation that worked and saved labor and volunteer hours. We have incorporated that into a prepacked fruit and vegetable box that has become popular amongst our food banks as an item to order.

So we will continue to integrate lessons learned so that we can strengthen, strengthen the program and the network. I would just say we work very collaboratively with them, driven by what they say they need.

Senator FISCHER. That is good to hear. Thank you.

In your statement you noted that Congress had provided the option for States to suspend certain quality control requirements during COVID. I was in touch with food banks all across the State during those difficult times when we saw people isolated, when we saw numbers increase of the usage of food banks, while, at the same time, a decrease in volunteer service at those facilities. So it was a hard time, a challenging time to maneuver through.

USDA could not establish national-or State-level payment error rates for two years during that time. However, you noted USDA did continue to analyze trends that it is not surprising to see elevated error rates during such a challenging and complex time but that it is incumbent upon USDA to address this with States.

My question is, States still have a variety of options on how to administer SNAP. How is USDA working with States to ensure program integrity?

Ms. DEAN. First, I will say while Congress did suspend the quality control system during the early part of the pandemic we kept corrective action plans in place. We kept that, meaning States that were struggling with error rates, that we have a formal agreement with them and steps they are supposed to take. Those all remained in place. We remained very much engaged with States on making sure that they were monitoring and taking action to reduce errors.

It is also true that during the pandemic States lost staff. They had to shift their mode of operations, and remote services made administration of the program more challenging. When I say it is not acceptable but it is also true that States would be challenged on precision accuracy it was time in our country where we were leaning in to providing assistance and we would hold States to take that direction.

That having been said, stewarding the program and managing Federal taxpayer dollars is incredibly important. We work with States on assessing their operations, taking a look at whether they have practices or, as you point out, options that might be making their program more error prone. It could be their forms design, the way their call centers are structured. We are very actively engaged with them, and we put them in touch with peers, who may look similar and have important lessons learned on how to provide access while improving payment—

Senator FISCHER. Have you found any examples where there are one or two things that seem to be happening across States? You said to put them in touch with their peers. Have you found examples where the challenge, the problem, the issue seems to be prevalent?

Ms. DEAN. Staffing has been a challenge across many States. Then I also think the amount of paperwork that they are asking for States. They need it to assess eligibility but it also means that, let us say, if you asked for six weeks of pay stubs when Federal rules allow you to ask for 4, that you are now looking for more paper, you have got more things to sift through.

Those are examples. There are also—I am trying to think—options where targeting longer phone interviews with households that might be more complex cases and spending less time on a household that is pretty straightforward, perhaps a senior with stable income, they have lived in the same place for a long time. You would not want to spend the same amount of time on those households. Helping engage with them there on balancing their work.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you very much. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Smith.

Senator SMITH. Thank you, Madam Chair and Ranking Member Boozman. I want to just thank Senator Fischer for your questions and your focus on food banks. My guest at the State of the Union was Allison O'Toole, who leads the largest food bank in Minnesota, and I appreciate you highlighting how important that is, so thank you.

Colleagues, this is such an important hearing. I have appreciated being able to be here and listen to the give-and-take and the questions. I am going to just take a moment to remind everybody here about who are the people that we are talking about. Two-thirds of SNAP recipients are families with children. A third are families with older adults or people with disabilities. Under Secretary Dean, I really appreciated your conversation with Senator Klobuchar about how we can overcome the barriers that working people face as they are going back to work, and relying on SNAP is a really important resource for them. Hennepin County in Minnesota is a great model of that, so thank you for that.

Many people relying on SNAP are folks that live in rural communities. Nearly 175,000 rural Minnesotans do not have enough to eat. Food Shelf data from 2022 in Minnesota showed that some of the biggest increases in Food Shelf visits occurred in rural Minnesota.

I just think it is important to ground ourselves in who it is that we are talking about here, and it is helpful to me, as I think about what we need to focus on in this Committee.

I want to dig in a little bit on what we can do to connect people who rely on SNAP to healthy food, how it connects them with local producers, and especially farmers markets, a little bit about what Senator Booker was getting at, and Senator Welch as well.

You have EBT cards, that are basically debit cards for SNAP recipients to use to pay for their groceries, and each year millions of dollars of Federal benefits are spent at farmers markets in Minnesota, so that shoppers can buy their food there. Of course, it is complicated, right, because individual farm stands cannot necessarily set up the technology to act to accept EBT cards. What happens at a lot of farmers markets is that there is a central booth where people can exchange the benefits on their card for tokens that they can then use at vendor stands. This works pretty well for shoppers and for vendors. I am hearing from farmers markets in Minnesota that there is some worry that this might go away, that there might be some change in the system. Of course, we want to make it easier, not harder, for producers to accept SNAP.

I am going to just ask you, can you talk a little bit about how SNAP can reinforce and support local producers and what the USDA is doing to help vendors and farmers and farmers markets have the equipment and technology they need to process SNAP benefits.

Ms. DEAN. Yes, thank you, Senator, and I am happy to followup with you to learn more so we can directly respond to that particular concern. Generally we are taking a number of steps to try to make it easier for farmers to accept payments electronically. As you point out, or I think you were sort of suggesting, you have to go into a farmers market, to a central office, swipe your card for a fixed amount, and then you get tokens, and then the farmers have to go back to the central office at the end of the day and cash out. That puts some friction in the system, both for the farmers and SNAP participants.

We are really trying to support farmers to make it easier for them to accept payment electronically. We have provided an e-commerce platform, basically sort of the back-end payment software. We are providing an app to farmers to try to move away from the tokens but a more electronic, and not just at farmers markets but also roadside stands. We have recently provided a grant to the National Association for Farmers Markets Nutrition Program organization to help be the bridge between us and individual farmers markets to support them in this shift.

We welcome ideas for more that we can do. This is an absolute commitment on our end to bring in more markets and make electronic payment easier.

Senator SMITH. Great. Thank you. I really appreciate that, and we will continue this conversation because it is good to remove as

much friction as we can from the system to the benefit of the producers and also the customers.

Ms. Long, I have a quick question about the food distribution program on Indian reservations, the DPIR—these ridiculous acronyms. People living on Tribal lands often live in food deserts. They are many miles from a grocery store. That means they are not going to be able to take their EBT card into a store. One of the things that we do instead is allow them to receive a monthly food package. The question is what is in that package, and is the food in that package, does it meet the health and cultural needs of Native people. For example, many Native people are lactose intolerant, and so having milk in that package is not going to work.

I know that you all are focused on this, and I appreciate this, through the work you are doing with the Equity Action Plan. Ms. Long, in the 2018 Farm Bill we authorized a pilot program to explore how the food distribution program could include food that is culturally appropriate and also, hopefully, procured directly by Tribes. Can you tell us what we have learned from that program?

Mrs. LONG. Yes, thank you. I would be happy to. Just to summarize, we have utilized the resources provided in the farm bill. We have, I believe it is currently nine projects that are underway under that 638 process, where Tribal nations are responsible for directly procuring food and providing it to their members. I am also very happy to say that we just recently reopened that process and allowed more applicants. That period just closed, and we are quite confident that given the quality of the applications we received we are going to be able to fully utilize the resources that have been provided to expand the use of that option.

Senator SMITH. That is great. Madam Chair, I look forward to continuing work on that as well. Thank you.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Braun.

Senator BRAUN. Thank you, Madam Chair and Ranking Member Boozman.

I am on the Agriculture Committee, Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. I am on a committee called Budget Committee, which sadly has been relegated into almost a useless appendage here in the Federal Government. We have not done a budget that we have adhered to in decades. Agriculture is dear to me because I come from an agriculture community, have been involved with it as a tree farmer, row crop.

I look at how we spend money in the farm bill, and 82 percent of it is for nutrition, 11 percent would be for safety net programs with crop insurance, commodity supports, and conservation roughly 4 percent. It begs a question in that we do not do budgets anymore in ag, like maybe defending our country ought to be things that we do well. You have to live within your means.

I would like to point out while you have opportunities like this, we currently are borrowing nearly 30 percent of what we spend annually. It was closer to 20 percent when I got here. That is not a good business plan for the long run. I am mostly preaching at this point. I am going to be interested to see how the farm bill has turned into a nutrition bill, and it is all part of the issue. You find out here, Senator Thune pointed to it earlier, that the Thrifty Food

Plan increased by over 21 percent, and it is now going to shove the farm bill into over a \$1 trillion trajectory over the next 10 years.

I think for anybody listening out there it is unsustainable, and the hallmark of our country and for places where it works well you live within your means. The economy, when you are knocking it out of the park, grow between 2.5 and 3 percent in recent times. That is generally done with a little lighter regulation and tax incentives to the productive side of the economy that makes sure you are at least generating revenues that this place needs to live upon. Those are at record levels currently, I think due to the tax framework that was put into place.

I think you have got to look at each part of our Federal Government, and one that is probably most practical, farmers who participate to the tune of about 11 percent in the farm bill, they are the ones that produce the food that becomes our nutrition.

What guidelines are we using within the Ag Department on the simple issue of food insecurity? I think the benchmark is that we try to get that under 10 percent. We have not done that in 20 years. That is almost similar—we have balanced the budget in 20 years. I think twice as many folks are under the SNAP program. Why are we not reaching that goal when we are spending tons of money more and seem to be going the opposite way? Help me understand that.

Ms. DEAN. Thank you, Senator, for the question, and thank you for your leadership on the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, which I think the objective was to tackle both this issue and, of course, the deep connections between diet-related disease and health. We are both seeking to address people's needs today with food insecurity, but also make an investment in the future in better health by stronger Federal nutrition programs.

I mean, I think you ask a really important question, and to some extent I think the answer is a little outside of Federal nutrition. Certainly we are making changes to the Federal nutrition programs to ensure that our support is meaningful and to push the needle on that issue of food insecurity that you raise. It is also the case that I think some of our programs are being asked to do too much. I think SNAP benefits are covering a whole food budget when households are supposed to contribute their income, but their income is strapped because they are a working family that cannot afford childcare, their health insurance might be out of reach for them, or they are living in a State that has not offered Medicaid coverage. The refundable Child Tax Credit is no longer there for them.

I think during the pandemic we saw where investments in the safety net bolstering workers and unemployed workers can make a profound difference with respect to poverty and food insecurity, and it is other parts of our critical safety net that need shoring up so that household income is not drawn away from meeting their food needs for other purposes.

Senator BRAUN. You even brought up a few more things that we try to do through the Federal Government, and there is a need for it and I do not deny that. Somehow when you look at the macro figures I mentioned a little bit ago—the economy grows at three percent a year when you are knocking it out of the park—things

cannot grow here at rates beyond that because you are borrowing from future generations. If we do not get better at finding, like we do on Main Street—when I confronted 1908 and 1909, I thought I had a lean business, it was not hard to find savings of five, even up to 10 percent. That is not even in our vocabulary now, and what is in our vocabulary is that we borrow money from future generations for good causes. If we are going to look to the Federal Government to be there in a way that people are going to believe it and not delivering results where you cannot get food insecurity under 10 percent when we have been trying so hard, spending so much money, maybe we need to look inside. Are we running things like most other places would have to, to make those tradeoffs to get a better result? Keep working hard at it. Thank you.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Warnock.

Senator WARNOCK. Thank you, Madam Chair, and congratulations on the celebration we had, so well deserved, for you last night. I look forward to working with you over the next two years.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you.

Senator WARNOCK. I am struck just by the reality of my sitting here. Five years ago, when the farm bill was reauthorized, as it is every five years, I was actually here, but I was outside protesting and dealing with the issue of food insecurity in the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr., in whose pulpit I still preach, in an act of civil disobedience. I actually got arrested protesting some of the cuts around food insecurity in the farm bill. It is good to be here and to have a voice, and to be sitting at the table to help write the bill.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Well, we are so pleased that you are here.

Senator WARNOCK. Thank you so much. When I think about the urgency of our work, I think about those times and this time, I think about Nia from Dallas, Georgia. She is a disabled mother of four on food stamps who wrote into my office last year asking for Congress to increase funding for nutrition programs. She said, "What I would usually spend for a month of food only lasts about 2 weeks. It is hard to tell your kid that Mommy cannot buy that this month. It costs too much."

This idea of children being hungry in the wealthiest nation on the planet for me speaks to the hurt of the gospel that I try to preach and embody every week. I am a Matthew 25 Christian. Jesus said, "Inasmuch as you have done it, unto the least of these you have done it also unto me."

I think for me it is always the moral question in how do we center the concerns of ordinary people, like Nia, which it occurs to me is Swahili for "purpose." What is our purpose in this moment? I think it is to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

Today, in America, Federal law, in some instances it seems to me, informed and supported by a view of the faith that sees it as a weapon rather than a bridge, is denying food assistance to returning citizens, returning citizens who were previously convicted of a drug-related felony, including nonviolent offenders and those who have served their time, at a time when we understand much more than we did 30 years ago, 40 years ago, about drug use, the

ways in which huge swaths of our population, whether we are talking about poor, urban Black folks or poor white people in rural communities engaged in self-medication and dealing with this illness.

People convicted of a drug-related felony are being denied, having paid their price, paid their debt to society, being denied food assistance. The Biden administration, Ms. Dean, has proposed to eliminate this restriction. Why is this a high priority for the Administration, and who would be helped?

Ms. DEAN. Thank you, Senator, and thank you for slowing things down and reminding us of why these Federal nutrition programs are the best.

The Biden administration supports enthusiastically repealing the ban, which is a State option, because it worsens food hardship, as you just said. When an individual is leaving incarceration we want to support successful reentry. Denying food undermines that fundamental goal.

Senator WARNOCK. Reentry rather than recidivism.

Ms. DEAN. Exactly.

Senator WARNOCK. Am I right that people will find a way to eat?

Ms. DEAN. Yes, and the NIH did a study that showed that this group is overwhelmingly economically insecure. They are food insecure. A third reported, in a survey, that they had missed food for an entire day.

In order to meet our food security goals, our successful reentry goals, and, of course, drug offenses, individuals convicted of drug offenses it is a much higher rate of conviction amongst African Americans than whites so it meets our equity goals as well.

Senator WARNOCK. I am sad to say that my State of Georgia, while many States have lifted these barriers, my State of Georgia still requires people with drug felony convictions to complete all of their probation and all of their parole requirements to receive nutrition assistance. Georgia, as you may know, has the highest rate of correctional supervision in the country. We have got a huge part of the population under supervision, and until they complete all the requirements, basic food insecurity is the problem of these returning citizens.

Do you think that it would be easier for these folks to find a job and stay on the right path if they had access to basic nutrition with food benefits and do not have to wonder how they will pay for their next meal?

Ms. DEAN. Yes, sir, I do.

Senator WARNOCK. Thank you so much.

Ms. DEAN. Thank you.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Hoeven.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you, Madam Chair, and again I want to add my congratulations as well to the portrait. It really is fantastic. I thank both you and the Ranking Member for holding this important hearing. Secretary, Administrator, thanks to both of you for being here.

Secretary, would you agree that we want to make sure that people who need help having access to adequate food receive it, and at the same time we want to make sure that the program is as

cost-effective as possible, and that we want to always have incentives to get people to self-sufficiency? Would you agree with that?

Ms. DEAN. Yes, sir.

Senator HOEVEN. Okay. Then in that process how do tools like the National Accuracy Clearinghouse for SNAP help USDA meet those goals, and what can we do to make sure that we are meeting the need but reducing instances of waste, fraud, and abuse in the nutrition programs?

Ms. DEAN. I think the National Accuracy Clearinghouse, or as we call it the NAC, sometimes will serve both of those goals. The USDA is setting up a nationwide platform to work with States to ensure that individuals are not dually enrolled. If someone is applying in Maryland, the State will have the ability, through this platform, to check whether they are enrolled in SNAP somewhere else in the country. That prevents dual participation, which is a program integrity goal, but it is also a program service and access goal because there may be someone who lived in D.C. who moved to Maryland who told D.C., "Please disenroll me," and that did not happen by the time they were seeking to enroll in Maryland.

We hope that through the NAC we will be able to facilitate the swift disenrollment of someone from one State before they seek participation in another. The research that we have overwhelmingly shows that is where we have the experience of, again, this issue of friction. Someone trying to, as someone moves across State lines, the experience of dual participation fraudulently is extremely rare, but this tool will help us to prevent that.

Senator HOEVEN. Are there other programs or steps you are taking to make sure you are meeting the need by also doing it as cost-effectively as possible?

Ms. DEAN. I would think online shopping is a good example of that, meaning where SNAP participants can purchase food through an online platform that grocers offer. That is a terrific access tool. We also need to take steps to identify and determine if that exposes us to more risk in terms of theft or trafficking in the program. We are both offering that new option as a customer service enhancement but then working to track and identify any security risk there.

Senator HOEVEN. Again, I think any time you can help people that need it but also create incentives for self-empowerment, and then make sure you are delivering those programs as cost-effectively as possible—and that is a win, and you have to have all of those focuses together. You are hearing that, of course, in his hearing, I think, pretty clearly.

Ms. DEAN. Well, and if I may, sir, I think the changes that Congress directed us to take with our SNAP employment and training program does exactly that as well. We have been encouraged to work with States to reorient them and design them to be more evidence-based, work force-based programs. We can identify individuals on SNAP who need better employment and connect them to those good, high-quality jobs.

Senator HOEVEN. Yes. The other thing I want to bring up is really prior to the increase in August 2021, to the Thrifty Food Program, those types of changes or increases had typically been done through Congress on a bipartisan basis. In this case there was a

very significant increase, which was done by USDA unilaterally. Even GAO came back and said that should have been done through a rule process. Shouldn't those kinds of changes be done by Congress, and how do you intend to approach that in the future?

Ms. DEAN. Senator Hoeven, the Secretary of USDA, for decades, has had the authority to assess the Thrifty Food Plan. The 2018 Farm Bill actually directed him, by 2022, to reevaluate it with respect to four particular criteria, and to do it every five years thereafter. We pursued that reevaluation and the change to the Thrifty and the subsequent change to SNAP at congressional direction. We stand by our process. It was a robust, data-driven endeavor, and it resulted in increasing SNAP benefits by 40 cents per person per meal, which we think puts healthy food within reach of millions of households.

Senator HOEVEN. You think that should be done by administrative fiat rather than congressional action?

Ms. DEAN. No, sir. I am sorry. Let me respond to that specific question. It is a congressional directive now. We are required to do it every five years, according to the change.

Senator HOEVEN. I am asking whether you are going to come back and consult with Congress in that process or do it unilaterally.

Ms. DEAN. We learned a lot about the process and how to do it best this go-around. We will absolutely pursue continuous improvement and are eager to consult with you all.

Senator HOEVEN. I would think that would be something that Congress would certainly want to consider in the next farm bill, in terms of how that process is performed going forward.

Thank you both for being here. I appreciate it.

Chairwoman STABENOW. Thank you very much. Senator Boozman.

Senator BOOZMAN. Ms. Long, you were at FNS in 2018, provided technical assistance. Correct?

Mrs. LONG. I worked in FNS in 2018, yes.

Senator BOOZMAN. Yes, 2018. What was your understanding of the cost of the Thrifty Food update?

Mrs. LONG. You know, Senator, at that time I was the associate administrator for the child nutrition programs and so I simply was not involved in the conversations.

Senator BOOZMAN. Well, you would say, though, that since it scored zero, right—is that correct?

Mrs. LONG. My understanding is that it—

Senator BOOZMAN. The cost was supposed to be zero. Okay?

Mrs. LONG. I understand that it scored a zero. Correct.

Senator BOOZMAN. Yes, exactly. That was with USDA input. That was with congressional input. The entire farm bill scored at \$867 billion. You spent \$250 billion unilaterally. Congress had no intention of you doing that. None. If you understood that that was going to happen then you should have alerted Congress, because it is not just \$250 billion. What we are understanding now, with your ability in the future, we are talking about another \$90 billion. A third of a trillion dollars with an \$867 billion bill. I mean, how can we trust you going forward to give us good advice?

The other problem, too, is because of this tremendous expenditure we are looking at a base of \$1.5 trillion. You know, what you are going to do is crowd out our ability to use funds because you have already spent them on other programs. This is far-reaching, it is a big deal, and it sounds like OMB was not involved either. We can find out. We will be glad to do that. It sounds like this was a very, very small group, no consultation, spending a quarter of a trillion dollars from this Committee, the House Committee. That is totally unacceptable. Like I say, the big thing is that is going to really limit, I think, our ability to help the other programs, which I desperately want to do. Thank you.

Ms. DEAN. Ranking Member?

Chairwoman STABENOW. Let me just say, let me just conclude. We have such wonderful bipartisan support on the Committee but we, with all due respect, have a difference on how we approach this. I just, first of all, want to say that whether commodity programs go up or down or SNAP goes up and down, those moneys are not traded. They are totally separate programs, totally separate. If we cut SNAP it does not add money to the commodity title. If we add money to the commodity title it does not affect SNAP.

I will say this, having been deeply involved in writing that farm bill in 2018, we do not know why CBO scored it the way they did, but the reality is that we put in place a policy to do a thorough update that had not been done since 1975. It is written right in the farm bill, and that is what happened. I mean, the Trump administration chose not to do that, because this was 2018, chose not to proceed. The Biden administration came in and then chose to proceed, which I am very glad that they did. There may be some disagreements on how that was done or whatever, but I would just say in terms of the directive, it was a directive in the farm bill.

I know we are going to have important discussions about all of this, but I think it is important to say that we passed a farm bill that required that to happen.

Senator Brown, who is not able to be with us today, he is in Ohio because there was a train derailment and he needed to be there. He cares deeply about these issues. He is a member of our Nutrition Subcommittee. I just wanted to acknowledge that he had called and felt very bad that he was not able to be here with us today as well.

It has been a very important discussion. We have a lot of work to do together. I strongly support the farm safety net, and as Senator Boozman was talking about, we have got a lot of work to do to address the farm safety net. I also strongly support the family safety net. I know we do, in general. We have just got some work to do together as we figure out how we are going to proceed on all of this and the numbers.

I thank everybody for being here. The record will remain open for five business days, and the meeting is adjourned. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:08 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

FEBRUARY 16, 2023

**Statement by
Stacy Dean
Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services
U.S. Department of Agriculture**

**Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Washington, D.C.**

February 16, 2023

Thank you, Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, and Members of the Committee for the invitation to join you today to talk about Nutrition in the Farm Bill. I am Stacy Dean, the Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services at USDA, and I am joined today by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Administrator, Cindy Long.

I have the privilege to talk with families who use our programs as well as those who operate them. I routinely hear how important the federal nutrition programs are to struggling families and communities. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in particular—by helping families put food on the table—supports families’ basic wellbeing and overall health, especially during tough times. Coming out of the pandemic and inspired by the recent historic White House Conference and National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition and Health, USDA is focused on how we can strengthen and leverage our programs to reduce hunger and hardship in America and help people live healthier lives – fulfilling the goal President laid out as part of the National Strategy. We are deeply committed to that work and look forward to engaging with Congress on opportunities to advance these goals through the Farm Bill.

My testimony will touch on where we have been since the last Farm Bill and where we are heading today. I will cover the impact and importance of SNAP and our food distribution programs, the pandemic response, and our work to build even stronger programs, including by ensuring benefit levels better reflect the current cost of eating healthfully on a tight budget, supporting opportunity through SNAP Employment and Training, promoting nutrition security, and combatting benefit theft, among other topics.

I want to start by anchoring ourselves in USDA’s core strategic goal in this space. Building on and complementing our longstanding efforts to address food security, we are working to advance food and nutrition security. Nutrition security means having consistent and equitable access to healthy, safe, affordable food essential to health and well-being. One way to think about the two concepts is that food security focuses on ensuring that everyone has enough to eat, while nutrition security ensures that everyone has nutritious food to eat that contributes to their overall health.

The stakes are high. Poor nutrition is a leading cause of illness in the United States, associated with more than half a million deaths per year. There is a strong association between

food insecurity and poor nutrition, with individuals who report being most food insecure also at a higher risk of developing diet-related diseases like obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. Recognizing that structural inequities make it hard for many people to eat healthy and be physically active, we are emphasizing equity in all our efforts to ensure all Americans have access to the nutrition they need. While FNS programs support individuals and families of all backgrounds and at all life stages, we are especially committed to promoting nutrition security among eligible children and underserved populations.

Our work to advance nutrition security is driven by four pillars:

- (1) Providing meaningful nutrition support from pregnancy to birth and beyond – for example, by delivering SNAP benefits that allow households to afford a healthy diet, by providing high-quality nutrition education to SNAP-eligible populations through SNAP-Ed and by proposing science-driven updates to the foods prescribed to participants in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) to support healthy growth and development.
- (2) Connecting all Americans with healthy, safe, affordable food sources – this includes our work to increase SNAP participants’ access to more foods through farmer’s markets, as well as incentive programs that encourage SNAP participants to purchase nutritious foods, such as the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP), which focuses on increasing fruit and vegetable consumption and the Healthy Fluid Milk Incentive (HFMI), which aims to increase consumption of low-fat milk.
- (3) Developing, translating, and enacting nutrition science through partnerships with health professionals, the food and retailer industry, and other key stakeholders; and
- (4) Prioritizing equity every step of the way.

Through our food and nutrition security efforts, we are also working to support another of Secretary Vilsack’s key goals: supporting more and better markets and improving the resiliency of U.S. agriculture. USDA is on a mission to ensure today’s markets work better for both family farmers and the communities they feed. A great example of how we’re working together on this front with our colleagues across USDA is through our work to strengthen connections between farmers, ranchers, and USDA nutrition programs through investments in local and regional food system infrastructure and markets.

For example, the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is managing a new program called the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) program that provides funds to states, tribes, and territories to purchase food from local and underserved farmers for food banks, pantries, and other nutrition assistance programs. As of the start of the year, AMS has awarded nearly \$375 million to 48 states, 4 territories, and 24 tribes to support these efforts. At the same time, USDA

entered into an additional 33 agreements amounting to over \$151 million to use the same approach to provide local foods to schools. This effort opens up hundreds of new market opportunities for small and mid-sized operations to improve their bottom line. The purchase of products from local farmers and growers not only supports the local economy, but also allows for products like fruits and vegetables that are harvested at their peak, providing consumers the benefit of seasonal varieties and fresh flavors. We work closely with our colleagues at AMS and with FNS program operators in the emergency food and school food systems to maximize these programs for all involved.

These are ambitious goals. But we believe by setting our sights on ensuring our food assistance programs support nutrition security, agricultural producers, and resilient food systems, we will drive towards meaningful change and a healthier population.

Let me now turn to review where we are with respect to the major program areas covered by the nutrition title of the Farm bill: SNAP, the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).

SNAP'S IMPACT AND IMPORTANCE

As our largest federal nutrition program, SNAP is foundational to USDA's efforts to tackle food and nutrition insecurity and to advance equity. As you begin work on the next Farm Bill, it is worth reminding ourselves of SNAP's impact. SNAP is the most far-reaching, powerful tool available to ensure that all Americans can afford healthy food—it's a lifeline for tens of millions of Americans in every part of the country. It reduces poverty and food hardship, and participation by young children has been linked to better long-term health, education, and employment outcomes.

SNAP serves a very diverse range of people. About 70 percent of SNAP participants are children, older adults, or adults with disabilities. The program supports households in major cities and small towns across rural America. While all households must demonstrate that their income is low enough to qualify for a benefit, their circumstances differ. For low-income workers, SNAP helps supplement their food budgets so they can afford to put healthy food on the table on their low wages. For seniors, SNAP supports those who are struggling to make ends meet on a fixed income. And for parents, SNAP helps them afford healthy food for their children, so their children can grow and thrive.

One of SNAP's core strengths is its structure, which enables it to adapt as economic conditions change. By design, SNAP expands to meet increased need and contracts when the need abates, providing food to people and communities where and when it is needed most. SNAP cushions the blow for families when a parent loses a job, sees their hours cut, or is temporarily unable to work due to illness or natural disaster. As our economy continues to

recover from the pandemic, USDA projects that SNAP participation will decline by over 1 million participants between FY 2023 and FY 2024.

SNAP benefits are used at grocery stores, injecting demand into the economy. Not only does SNAP help households put food on the table, but it has a multiplier effect that is powerful and proven. SNAP supports countless retailers across the country where participants buy food, but SNAP also helps the grocery store employees who stock the shelves, run the bakery, and check you out, plus the truck drivers who deliver those products to stores. Let us also not forget that those dollars then in turn support the manufacturing plants, our local food distribution and aggregation centers, and of course the hard-working farmers who produced the food in the first place. A 2019 USDA study found that in an economic downturn, every dollar in additional SNAP benefits leads to an increase of \$1.54 in gross domestic product.¹ That is why so many economists value SNAP as an economic stimulus tool.

The benefits of SNAP also extend to people's health and well-being. Research has shown that participation in SNAP reduces food insecurity and allows families to have healthier diets. There is a strong correlation between food insecurity and chronic health conditions among all age groups, from children to seniors. SNAP helps reverse this trend by enabling families to purchase healthier diets and freeing up financial resources to be used for other necessities such as medical care. A recent study found that—for seniors eligible for both Medicare and Medicaid—participating in SNAP was associated with fewer inpatient hospital admissions and lower health care costs.²

PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Exactly as it's designed to do, SNAP responded to the sudden shift in economic conditions caused by the economic fallout from the pandemic, including rising unemployment and increased need for food. SNAP participation increased from 37 million to 43 million people in just 3 months, underscoring the program's power and resiliency in expanding to meet families' needs during times of great hardship.

Recognizing that the scope of the hardship caused by the pandemic was unprecedented, Congress acted quickly to bolster nutrition assistance in five legislative packages. Key SNAP provisions included increasing SNAP benefits for all households; providing additional benefits to help households weather the pandemic economy; expanding SNAP eligibility for low-income college students; providing additional resources for the emergency feeding network; and providing USDA with authority to protect SNAP access during the period of increased need by

¹ USDA Economic Research Service: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Economy: New Estimates of the SNAP Multiplier, USDA ERS, July 2019: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=93528> (accessed 2/2/23)

² Seth A. Berkowitz, Deepak Palakshappa, Joseph Rigdon, et al. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Health Care Use in Older Adults: A Cohort Study. *Ann Intern Med.*2021;174:1674-1682. [Epub 19 October 2021]. <https://doi.org/10.7326/M21-1588> (accessed 2/9/23)

offering states flexibilities to adapt program administration and operations. With the authorities and resources provided by Congress, and working with our partners in State, Tribal, U.S. Territories, and local government, USDA has leveraged every tool at our disposal to meet the moment.

The official measure of food security, collected through a partnership between the Census Bureau and USDA, showed that the food security rate held steady between 2019 and 2021. We actually saw the prevalence of food insecurity decline among households with children between 2020 and 2021. While it will take some time for researchers to fully assess the impact, many are suggesting that a strong safety net—including nutrition assistance and other pandemic aid such as expanded unemployment insurance and housing supports—was critical to protecting people from increased hunger and hardship during a time in which we would have otherwise expected to see a substantial increase. That stands in contrast to the surge in food insecurity we saw during the Great Recession of 2007-2009.

USDA also acted quickly to expand participant access to more retailers through the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot, which allows SNAP participants to shop and pay for their food online. Today, more than 99 percent of SNAP households have access to online purchasing across 49 states and Washington, D.C. We expect that Alaska will implement online purchasing soon, making online purchasing available in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. In addition to affording those paying with EBT cards the same options as other consumers, many living in food deserts and families working multiple jobs with little time to spare now have access to more retail options through SNAP online shopping, and the positive impacts have been particularly strong in rural areas. In November 2022, nearly 4 million SNAP households shopped online, which is more than a hundred-fold increase from March 2020, when about 35,000 SNAP households shopped online.

Together, we have taken bold action to help Americans get back on their feet—these efforts have made a remarkable difference, which underscores how powerful the federal nutrition programs can be in quickly responding to hunger and hardship. A strong safety net works, and we have many positive lessons to build on from the past few years.

As we look ahead, Emergency Allotments will end in all States, after February benefits are paid, in March, and certain programmatic flexibilities provided will end when the federal Public Health Emergency (PHE) ends in May. We are working closely with states now to assess their readiness and build their capacity to transition to traditional program rules, and we continue to review the full array of existing flexibilities that states may utilize to streamline program operations. Many states are ready for this transition, but for others, the shift will be operationally difficult. We are committed to helping states navigate the end of the PHE and changes to SNAP to ensure their smooth transition to normal program operations with minimal disruptions in benefit access.

While there's no doubt that families will experience challenges when the remaining pandemic benefit supplements end, we are also collaborating with states and external partners to ensure that households that have counted on temporary benefits understand how their benefits are changing, so that they can manage the changes with knowledge and confidence.

In addition to ensuring that SNAP is adapting and responding as needed to the pandemic, USDA has been working on many fronts to strengthen SNAP for the future. I want to share some of the major efforts we have undertaken to strengthen SNAP in the long-term, many of which stem from Congress' direction in the last Farm Bill.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2018 FARM BILL

Thrifty Food Plan Reevaluation

In 2021, in the midst of the pandemic and economic turmoil that closed schools and left millions out of work and struggling to put food on the table, USDA conducted a reevaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), which serves as the basis for determining the value of SNAP benefits. As directed by Congress in the 2018 Farm Bill, USDA used the latest available data and an evidence-based process to update the Plan to reflect the cost of a practical, cost-effective, nutritious diet in today's market.

Based on Congress' directive, USDA reevaluated the TFP to reflect the four elements specified in the statute: the latest dietary guidance, the most recently available data on current food prices, food composition data, and consumption patterns. USDA took a careful and considered approach, with evidence-based documented decisions, using the same mathematical TFP model used in all previous reevaluations, but with updates to the underlying data and an evaluation of the underlying assumptions of the model. We made updates only when the body of scientific evidence was clear and convincing to do so.

The reevaluation was a scientific and data-driven approach that concluded that the cost of a nutritious, practical, budget-conscious diet is 21 percent higher than the previous TFP. That resulted in the first permanent increase to the purchasing power of SNAP benefits since the TFP was first introduced in 1975, reflecting notable shifts in the food marketplace and consumers' circumstances over the past 45 years. The increase translates to a modest increase of \$1.19 per person per day, or 40 cents per person per meal more than what they would otherwise have received—helping to put more American farmer produced healthy foods within reach for millions of Americans. The Urban Institute found that the increase to SNAP benefits resulting from the TFP reevaluation lifted 2.3 million people out of poverty, reducing overall poverty by 4.7 percent and child poverty by 8.6 percent.

A recent General Accounting Office (GAO) report contained eight recommendations for improving the TFP re-evaluation process, focused primarily on project management, peer review

guidelines, documentation, and transparency. We have already begun integrating some suggestions from the report into our ongoing work related to the TFP as part of our commitment to continuous process improvement. However, we have significant concerns about several of GAO's conclusions, which appear to stem from a fundamental difference of perspective regarding what the 2018 Farm Bill directed for the re-evaluation. We stand by our 2021 re-evaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan — the sound process, the scientific findings, and the resulting positive impact on tens of millions of Americans in need.

Another tool the Biden-Harris Administration has employed to ensuring families have the tools and resources they need to put food on the table during the pandemic is Emergency Allotments. This is a temporary increase in benefits that provided all SNAP households an additional benefit of at least \$95 per month. When Emergency Allotments end nationwide in March, participants will see their SNAP benefits decrease—some will see very sizeable reductions. While the change will be disruptive, benefit levels will return to a level that will allow them to afford a healthy diet, due to the TFP reevaluation.

Strengthening SNAP Employment & Training

SNAP is an important work support, and the program is designed to provide incentives for participants to seek employment and increase their earnings: for each additional dollar SNAP participants earn, their benefits decline by only 24 to 36 cents. That ensures that workers see an increase in their total resources (SNAP and earnings) when they bring home additional income. The overwhelming majority of SNAP participants who can work do so, and States may provide training and support services to those who need assistance in entering the workforce through state SNAP Employment & Training—or E&T—programs.

In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress built on efforts in the 2014 bill and took important steps to improve the quality of SNAP E&T programs, emphasizing the use of evidence-based practices like case management and work-based learning. The 2018 Farm Bill also underscored the importance of matching participants with the right services and partnering with state workforce systems to align programs with the needs of participants and employers. Congress gave us clear direction that E&T programs should not just be bigger, but they should be better.

The final rule implementing these bipartisan changes—which became effective in March 2021—strengthened E&T by ensuring that states use evidence-based strategies to help participants obtain the skills employers need, increasing the use of case management services for E&T participants and allowing E&T funds to be used for subsidized employment and apprenticeships. The rule also encourages states to build high quality programs and holds states accountable for participant success in E&T programs.

USDA and States want to build stronger E&T programs that truly help SNAP participants get a job, keep their job, or get a better job, and we are working to provide the support and

resources to help them do that. For example, in December we hosted a SNAP E&T National Forum with 350 attendees from 51 States and territories. The National Forum was designed to bring together E&T stakeholders from across the country to learn from one another and share best practices. That type of peer learning complements the in-depth technical assistance FNS has provided to States through our SNAP to Skills project and our work with 142 E&T providers in 31 States through our SNAP E&T National Partnership grants.

Earlier this year, I had the chance to travel to Minnesota to see the Hennepin County Department of Community Corrections and Rehabilitation's Construction Pathway Program, where participants work and learn on site at the direction of the journeyman union carpenters. They are taught proper tool usage, problem solving, and construction techniques consistent with code, all while being paid a livable stipend. I also had the chance to see a house that the group's Community Productive Day Program, supported with SNAP E&T funds, rehabbed in North Minneapolis. The program focuses solely on formerly incarcerated individuals and provides county-directed work experience. Each Friday of the program is dedicated to addressing barriers participants face to stable and livable employment—they help people obtain drivers' licenses, work through child support issues, and tackle other challenges that could otherwise derail their progress.

It is proof that we have come a long way in SNAP E&T and we are committed to continuing to strengthen the program with our continued work with states and Governors across the country. By learning what works, we are integrating promising and evidence-based practices that will better the program for all participants. We still have a lot of work to do, particularly with respect to bringing promising programs to scale, and we welcome your continued partnership along the way as we seek to strengthen and improve these opportunities.

Protecting Program Integrity

Ensuring strong program integrity is—and will continue to be—an ongoing priority for FNS. We have a critical obligation to pursue program integrity as stewards of taxpayer dollars. Consistent with Congressional direction in the 2018 Farm Bill, USDA is working to strengthen oversight and data collection, minimize improper payments and administrative errors, and enhance fraud detection.

National Accuracy Clearinghouse (NAC)

The 2018 Farm Bill required USDA to establish a National Accuracy Clearinghouse (NAC) to prevent simultaneous benefit issuance to the same individual by more than one State. Duplicate participation occurs most often when people move from one state to another and forget to notify their SNAP state agency, or when the state agency doesn't properly process the notification. The NAC will result in a more seamless experience for participants who move from state to state and need to disenroll in one state to apply in another, while also catching and

preventing the rare but egregious instances of individuals attempting to steal from SNAP by intentionally enrolling in multiple states. We are working closely with external experts on design and deployment of the NAC and will leverage security technology to safeguard SNAP participants' personally identifiable information and to stand up the NAC in a way that improves program integrity and customer service. At this time, we expect that an initial group of States will begin implementing the NAC this summer, with all States fully implementing by 2027.

We are committed to successful nationwide implementation of the NAC and take seriously our responsibility to do so in a way that safeguards SNAP participants' personally identifiable information, minimizes burdens on participants, and avoids delays in benefit determinations.

SNAP Quality Control

SNAP payment accuracy is an ongoing priority for FNS. SNAP payment accuracy measures both under and over payments to eligible households. Accurate payments mean better customer service for SNAP clients, and we are committed to maintaining program integrity as stewards of taxpayer dollars.

Congress provided States with the option to suspend certain Quality Control (QC) requirements during the pandemic through June 2021, allowing states to focus on increased caseloads due to the economic challenges of the pandemic. During this period, FNS encouraged state agencies to continue conducting QC reviews, but because the data for FY 2020 and FY 2021 were incomplete, FNS could not establish national or state-level payment error rates for either year. Data for FY 2022 reflects the first full fiscal year of QC reviews since the pandemic began. FNS will publish the FY 2022 payment error rates by June 30, 2023, as required, and preliminary State-reported QC data indicate that payment errors were elevated during this time, likely reflecting significant operational challenges associated with the pandemic.

Even while QC requirements were suspended, FNS has continued to actively review QC data to analyze trends and provide technical assistance to support their error-reduction efforts. Although it's not surprising to see elevated error rates during such a challenging and complex time, it is incumbent upon us at USDA to address this, and we are working aggressively to support States to do so. We are striving for better real-time information to allow FNS and States to identify issues and analyze the root causes quickly and then act to address them in a timely manner.

LOOKING AHEAD

SNAP is a powerful and effective tool to address hunger and hardship in America, and we are obligated to continue to strengthen the program and ensure that it works for those it is meant to serve. I have already touched on several priority areas and want to mention a few others that we are focused on at USDA.

Combatting SNAP Benefit Theft

USDA is working with our State and Federal partners to protect participants from benefit theft and combat a recent uptick in EBT card “skimming.” Skimming is when thieves place an illegal device on an ATM or a retailer’s card-swiping machine to copy SNAP EBT card information. Criminals then use the information to make fake EBT cards and steal benefits from victims’ accounts. Card skimming can happen to anyone who uses a credit, debit, or an EBT card, but it hits SNAP households particularly hard, as they rely on their benefits to feed their families. Losing SNAP benefits can be devastating for victims and we will not tolerate benefit theft in our programs. Card skimming is different from fraud or payment error, it is a deplorable crime committed by individuals with no connection to SNAP. It is also an evolving crime, which means we must both tackle the current security threat as well as prepare for the future.

Congress recently took a major step forward with the enactment of a provision in the FY2023 Consolidated Appropriations Act to ensure that victims of SNAP card skimming or other similar fraudulent methods can get their SNAP benefits replaced by requiring states to replace these stolen benefits and allowing them to use federal funds to do so through fiscal year 2024. We greatly appreciate the leadership and partnership of this Committee and the bipartisan effort in Congress that led to this new law to help prevent skimming and support SNAP participants who fall victim to these horrible theft schemes by no fault of their own. The law also charges USDA with developing regulations requiring States to take additional card security, fraud prevention, and detection measures that will prevent these fraudulent schemes, including card skimming and cloning. We have already disseminated guidance to states so they can submit their plans for replacing these stolen benefits under the new law and we are working to implement other provisions of the new law quickly. We look forward to continuing to partner with Congress to secure the SNAP program for the families who rely on it and to guard taxpayer dollars.

Expanding SNAP Online Shopping and Improving Customer Experience

As I already mentioned, USDA has worked closely with States and other partners to rapidly expand the availability of SNAP online shopping. More than 175 retailers—representing thousands of actual stores—now offer SNAP online shopping to participants. As we committed to in the National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, we will continue working to modernize SNAP payment and shopping options, building on the successful expansion of SNAP online purchasing with a focus on smaller, independent grocery stores. USDA recently awarded \$5 million to the National Grocers Association Foundation to guide retailers—especially small, independent stores—through the process of standing up SNAP online purchasing.

Not only does SNAP online purchasing increase convenience for participants, it also promotes equity by expanding benefit redemption options for those who live in rural areas,

where brick and mortar SNAP-authorized stores may be limited. Through the grant and our partnership, we aim to give all stores an opportunity to offer SNAP online – and give all SNAP participants the flexibility to buy groceries from home.

In the coming weeks, we intend to announce the selection of five states participating in the SNAP Mobile Payments Pilot. This pilot is an opportunity to provide the same cutting-edge technology and services to SNAP participants that are available to all other customers and the general public. We will test, in five states, the ability for SNAP participants to receive and use their benefits with participating retailers who accept payment via a mobile device, such as a phone, to truly transform the customer experience. This has the potential to improve access, reducing the length of time it takes for participants to access their benefits once approved. It also has the potential to reduce fraud, by using more secure payment methods compared to outdated magnetic stripe technology. We will conduct an evaluation of this pilot to learn about successful rollout strategies and the impact of mobile payment on access, cost, and fraud prevention, ensuring that Congress can use this information to make informed decisions about the future of SNAP.

Promoting Nutrition Security through SNAP

As highlighted above, the TFP reevaluation has strengthened SNAP and its power to promote nutrition security, since families simply cannot achieve a nutritious diet, even a cost-conscious nutritious diet, without sufficient resources. In fact, previous research found that nearly 9 out of 10 SNAP participants struggled to achieve a healthy diet, with the cost of healthy food most commonly cited as a roadblock. Other ways that USDA promotes nutrition security through SNAP include SNAP Nutrition Education (or SNAP-Ed) and SNAP incentive programs.

SNAP Nutrition Education

Last year we celebrated the 30th anniversary of SNAP Nutrition Education — or SNAP-Ed. SNAP-Ed provides evidence-based programming to promote healthy choices, help participants use SNAP dollars to shop for and cook healthy meals, and encourage physical activity.

In response to the Biden Administration’s Executive Orders related to food security and racial equity, as well as the Department’s focus on nutrition security, USDA recently made several significant changes to SNAP-Ed that were designed to strengthen its impacts on public health and health equity. These changes include: establishing a new National Program Evaluation and Reporting System; developing new resources to ensure equity in SNAP-Ed program access, service delivery, and funding distribution; encouraging maximum flexibility in the use of policy, systems, and environmental change approaches within the SNAP-Ed

guidelines; and establishing a new Nutrition Education Branch dedicated to SNAP-Ed for the first time in the history of FNS.

SNAP Incentive Programs

Incentive programs encourage SNAP recipients to purchase healthy foods by providing a coupon, discount, gift card, bonus food items or extra funds when they buy specific foods, such as fruits and vegetables. Research shows that incentive programs are effective in promoting healthy eating by increasing SNAP participants' purchasing power. For example, in one study, SNAP participants who received fruit and vegetable incentives consumed 26 percent more fruits and vegetables per day than nonparticipants.

USDA encourages SNAP retailers to participate in one or more of the SNAP-based incentive initiatives, which include:

- The Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP), focused on increasing fruit and vegetable consumption;
- The Healthy Fluid Milk Incentive (HFMI), which aims to increase consumption of low-fat milk; and
- State, nonprofit and retailer-initiated SNAP incentives that promote foods aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Recognizing the powerful opportunity to leverage incentives to support health, the Biden-Harris Administration—as part of the Food Systems Transformation effort--invested nearly \$85 million in incentives for SNAP participants to purchase healthy fruits and vegetables.

That includes \$25 million for the Electronic Healthy Incentive Projects—or eHIP. Through these projects, states will test SNAP incentive delivery through State electronic benefit transfer (EBT) systems, with the goal of reducing administrative costs and allowing incentive dollars to reach more SNAP participants.

We stand ready to work with you on expanding these effective models to promote healthy eating and bolster SNAP participants' purchasing power.

Building on Progress in SNAP Employment & Training (E&T)

COVID turned the labor market on its head, accelerating deep fundamental changes to how, where and what we do for work. Some entry-level jobs in sectors like retail, hospitality, and food service disappeared while health care, transportation, and infrastructure sector employers still face enormous skilled workforce gaps. SNAP E&T is one part of the workforce development system, and we are working with our SNAP E&T partners to ensure that every worker has the skills they need so they are not left out of the economic recovery.

We need to continue to focus on bridging the gap between the people looking for jobs and the jobs available today, which requires connecting people with the skills they need to successfully secure and maintain those positions and building connections with employers in high-demand industries. We also need to design SNAP E&T to address the specific barriers and challenges faced by our program participants, whether that's transportation, childcare, access to education, or other challenges. I know that strengthening SNAP's role as a work support is a priority we share, and I hope to work with Members of the Committee to build on the progress we've made to date in SNAP Employment & Training.

Supporting the Emergency Feeding Network

The experience of the past few years has shown that there is significant demand for emergency food through the food bank, food pantry and shelter system and that federal resources play a critical role in supporting the thousands of community organizations around the country who help to feed their communities.

One of USDA's critical household emergency food distribution programs is the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). First authorized in 1981, TEFAP is designed to support the emergency feeding network by providing USDA Foods through our state agency partners. We also want to make sure that any individual facing an emergency food need has access to this critical safety net including in remote, rural, tribal, and other underserved communities. That's why FNS is investing \$100 million in TEFAP Reach and Resiliency Grants to expand the reach of the emergency food system in underserved areas including remote, rural, Tribal, and low-income communities—supporting communities that have long faced systematic barriers to opportunity and providing them with reliable, equitable access to food when they most need it. By improving partnerships and the infrastructure that powers emergency food distribution, we are striving to reach more people, ensure they receive high-quality, nutritious food, and support a stronger food system for those who have been historically underserved.

Throughout the pandemic, emergency food providers have been resilient leaders in our collective efforts to combat food and nutrition insecurity. The Administration has responded with historic levels of support to emergency food systems. As described earlier in my testimony, we are also testing innovative new methods to support emergency food providers while also supporting local food procurement. These necessary investments focus on additional food purchases, improving infrastructure, supporting health and nutrition, and lifting local food systems—all while promoting access and equity.

As we move out of the worst of the pandemic, and the administration has recently announced that the COVID-19 national emergency and public health emergency declaration will end this spring, we want to work with Congress to assess the reach of our TEFAP foods into the emergency food system, how we might support local food procurement and local food systems

through purchases for emergency food systems, and how best to calibrate the support that's needed to maintain and strengthen our robust emergency food system.

Working with Tribal Communities and Investing in FDPIR

USDA is committed to furthering Tribal involvement and engagement in all nutrition assistance programs – supporting food sovereignty and ensuring Tribal communities are equitably served in federal programs was another key element in the National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. We recognize the important role of Tribes and Tribal organizations in ensuring American Indian and Alaska Native households have access to nutrition assistance, and we are working with our Tribal partners to explore opportunities to advance Tribal sovereignty with respect to FNS programs. Through the historic FDPIR Self-Determination Demonstration Projects Congress authorized in the 2018 Farm Bill, USDA is able to support Tribal food sovereignty by allowing tribes to enter into contracts with farmers, growers, and producers to procure their own food to feed their people.

The demonstrations provided Tribes with an opportunity to better align the FDPIR food package with their dietary preferences and traditional foods, and to purchase foods from Indigenous producers. Of the \$12 million received by FNS to date, approximately \$6 million has been utilized by eight participating tribes to purchase local, traditional foods, including bison, ground beef, Alaskan Halibut, Alaskan Cod, wild rice, and a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables among other products, from local farms. We are offering all tribes currently participating in the pilot the opportunity to extend their projects as well as offering additional tribes the opportunity to join the pilot. Last October, USDA announced the solicitation for a second round of proposals to join the demonstration project, which remained open through the end of January 2023.

Another way USDA is working to support Tribal food sovereignty is through nutrition education. Tribal leaders have made it clear that nutrition education funds need to flow directly from the Federal government to Tribal nations. And, they need to be more flexible to support Indigenous traditions. USDA requested, and Congress provided, an annual increase of \$4 million to support nutrition education and is accepting proposals from FDPIR Tribes to develop and expand these efforts locally. We are working closely with FDPIR programs and other federal agencies to facilitate partnerships with stakeholders across Indian Country, including in health care and SNAP-Ed, to develop and deliver in a more accessible way culturally appropriate nutrition education at a scale that reaches both FDPIR clients and the broader eligible community.

FNS also regularly engages in consultations with Tribal leaders about nutrition program policies and regulations that may have Tribal implications. Additionally, we have made significant progress in increasing Indigenous and culturally appropriate food offerings in WIC, the Child Nutrition programs, and the Food Distribution Programs. For example, our recently

proposed update to the school meal nutrition standards includes flexibility for schools serving primarily American Indian and Alaska Native students to replace grains with vegetables, and specifically acknowledges traditional foods as allowable components of a reimbursable meal.

We look forward to continuing and strengthening these efforts as well as our broader commitment to be a better partner to tribal governments who are operating federal nutrition programs.

CONCLUSION

Thank you, Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, and every Member of the Committee for your leadership and commitment to helping Americans put food on the table for their families and for your partnership as we continue this critical work. We appreciate our work together and this opportunity to update the Committee. I look forward to working with you to advance our shared goals in the upcoming Farm Bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to join you today.

###

**DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE
RECORD**

FEBRUARY 16, 2023

REVIEW

OPEN



Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program as a health intervention

Jerold Mande^a and Grace Flaherty^b

Purpose of review

In 2020, obesity prevalence among US children reached 19.7%, impacting about 14.7 million children and adolescents. Food insecurity among children is also a public health concern but has largely decreased or remained stable over the past decade, reaching 6.2% of US households with children in 2021. Given food insecurity and obesity's interconnected nature and their negative consequences on children's health, it is of interest to assess the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program's (SNAP's) impact on childhood food security, dietary quality, disease risk, and health outcomes.

Recent findings

Evidence suggests that SNAP participants, including children, struggle to meet key dietary guidelines and perform poorly on key health indicators when compared with income-eligible and higher income nonparticipants. Children participating in SNAP were more likely to have elevated disease risk and consume more sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), more high-fat dairy, and more processed meats than income-eligible nonparticipants. However, research suggests that federal food assistance programs with more stringent nutrition standards – the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) – improve dietary quality, increase birth weight and gestation periods, and reduce childhood obesity, infant mortality and healthcare costs.

Summary

After reviewing the evidence on SNAP's impacts on food insecurity, dietary quality, and health as well as research on the health impacts of other more successful federal food assistance programs, we provide three policy recommendations to strengthen SNAP's effectiveness as a health intervention for children and families.

Keywords

diet quality, food insecurity, health intervention, nutrition assistance, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

INTRODUCTION

Obesity and diet-related disease are a growing public health crisis for both adults and children, with significant disparities by race and ethnicity. Childhood food insecurity is also a public health concern and is closely tied to diet-related disease and overall child health. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest federal food assistance program and is of interest for its potential to further alleviate food insecurity among children while also improving health outcomes.

BURDEN OF OBESITY, DIET-RELATED DISEASE, AND FOOD INSECURITY

From 2017 to 2020, for children aged 2 to 19 years, the prevalence of obesity in the United States was 19.7% and impacted about 14.7 million children and adolescents [1^a]. Obesity prevalence was 26.2% among Hispanic children, 24.8% among non-

Hispanic black children, 16.6% among non-Hispanic white children, and 9% among non-Hispanic Asian children [2]. Obesity increases a child's risk for adverse diet-related health conditions, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and certain cancers [3]. Among adults, from 2017 to 2020, obesity prevalence was 41.9%, a record high [3]. Obesity

^aHarvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and ^bBaillit Health Purchasing, Needham, Massachusetts, USA

Correspondence to Jerold Mande, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 655 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, USA.
Tel: +1 617 850 2578; e-mail: jmande@hsph.harvard.edu

Curr Opin Pediatr 2023, 35:33–38

DOI:10.1097/MOP.0000000000001192

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives License 4.0 (CCBY-NC-ND), where it is permissible to download and share the work provided it is properly cited. The work cannot be changed in any way or used commercially without permission from the journal.

Population health

KEY POINTS

- Childhood obesity and diet-related disease are growing public health concerns. Childhood food insecurity is also an important public health concern but has been decreasing over the past decade, thanks in large part to federal policy efforts.
- Research suggests that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has positive impacts on child health by reducing food insecurity and providing economic benefits to families, but SNAP participants are still struggling more than income-eligible and higher income nonparticipants to meet key dietary guidelines.
- Research on other federal food assistance programs suggests that making diet quality a SNAP core objective, applying more stringent nutrition standards to SNAP authorized retailers, and pairing incentives for purchasing fruits and vegetables with restrictions on unhealthy foods and beverages would improve participants dietary patterns and metabolic health.

prevalence was 49.9% among non-Hispanic black adults, 45.6% among Hispanic adults, 41.4% among non-Hispanic white adults and 16.1% among non-Hispanic Asian adults [3]. In 2017–2018, 93.2% of adults had less-than-optimal metabolic health [4*]. Diet-related chronic diseases are among the leading causes of death in the United States, and research during the coronavirus 19 (COVID-19) pandemic showed that diet-related chronic diseases were associated with higher risk of COVID-19 infection and two-thirds of COVID-19 hospitalizations [2,5*].

Food insecurity and very-low food insecurity among households with children decreased from 2020 to 2021. Food insecure households, as defined by USDA, are those that had difficulty at some time during the year providing enough food for all members because of a lack of resources [6]. Very-low food insecurity is a more severe range of food insecurity, wherein the food intake of some household members was reduced, and normal eating patterns was disrupted at times during the year because of limited resources [6]. In 2021, 6.2% of households with children were food-insecure (compared with 7.5% in 2020) and 0.7% had very low food security (compared with 0.8% in 2020) [7*,8*]. Food insecurity is associated with a host of short-term and long-term health consequences for children, including infant mortality, fetal epigenetic changes, suboptimal development and function, increased hospitalizations and healthcare use, disrupted or under use of prescribed medications, poorer management of chronic diseases and poor diet quality [9–19].

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM BACKGROUND

SNAP is a federal program with the potential to impact childhood food insecurity, obesity, and diet-related disease simultaneously. SNAP provides food-purchasing assistance to low-income Americans. SNAP is the largest federal food assistance program, serving 41.5 million people in fiscal year (FY) 2022 at an expenditure of \$140 billion [20]. The most recent data on SNAP household characteristics found that in FY 2019, 41% of participating SNAP households included children [21]. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) pays the full cost of SNAP benefits and shares half of the administration costs with states, which operate SNAP. To be eligible to receive SNAP benefits, an individual or household must have a gross income of less than 130% of the federal poverty standard, net income less than 100% of the federal poverty standard, and assets must fall below certain limits [22]. Households deemed eligible for SNAP benefits receive an electronic benefit card (EBT), which is loaded with benefits monthly. Households may use EBT cards at an authorized retailer, of which there are more than 247 000 [23]. SNAP participants may use EBT benefits to purchase food and allowable beverages but may not be used to purchase alcoholic beverages, tobacco, paper goods, and other nonfood items [24]. Heated and hot prepared foods are not considered staple foods and are also not eligible for purchase, except in some areas under certain circumstances [25]. On average, SNAP participants received an estimated \$217.88 per month per person in regular SNAP benefits in FY 2021 [26]. Each household's monthly benefit amount is based on the household's net income, so that if a household's net income after deductions is zero, the household receives the maximum SNAP benefit, and the benefit reduction rate is 30% (meaning the monthly benefit is reduced by 30 cents for each dollar of net income) [27]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress provided all SNAP recipients the maximum benefit. The maximum SNAP benefit is tied to the cost of the USDA's Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), a diet plan intended to provide adequate nutrition consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and which was updated in 2021 as directed by Congress, increasing SNAP benefits by 21% [28,29].

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM'S IMPACT ON CHILD HEALTH

Research suggests that SNAP has positive impacts on health by reducing food insecurity and lifting individuals out of poverty. Research has shown that SNAP meets its goal of reducing hunger and food

insecurity among participants, including children [30,31^{**}]. Participation in SNAP has been shown to reduce the incidence of low-birth weight among newborns by 7% for whites and 5–11% for blacks [32]. Research on the relationship between SNAP purchasing power and children's health and health care utilization found that a 10% increase in SNAP purchasing power increases the likelihood a child had a preventive check-in in the past year by 8.1%, increases the likelihood that children had any doctor's visit in the past 12 months by 3.4%, and is associated with a 22% reduction in the number of school days missed because of illness [33]. Research has shown that children receiving SNAP are less likely than low-income nonparticipants to be in fair or poor health or underweight, and their families are less likely to make tradeoffs between paying for health care and paying for other basic health needs, like food, housing, heating, and electricity [34,35]. Reductions and cut offs in SNAP benefits because of increased income have also been associated with poorer child health [36].

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE AND DIET QUALITY

Although SNAP effectively alleviates food insecurity for children in terms of caloric, macronutrient, and micronutrient intake, SNAP participants are still struggling more than income-eligible and higher income nonparticipants to meet key dietary guidelines.

The average USDA Healthy Eating Index (HEI) score among Americans is 58 (out of a possible 100), suggesting that the majority of Americans have suboptimal diets [37]. However, while other USDA food assistance programs, such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP), significantly improve diet quality, research suggests that SNAP does not.

The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) has frequently been used to assess Americans' dietary quality and health, including by income and SNAP participation status. A study using 2011–2016 NHANES data found that, on average, SNAP participants had lower total HEI scores than income-eligible and higher income nonparticipants (55, 57, and 60 points, respectively) [38^{**}]. SNAP participants scored lower for total fruits, whole fruits, total vegetables, and added sugar components [38^{**}]. Adults participating in SNAP had a higher prevalence of obesity than matched income-eligible nonparticipants (44 versus 38%) [38^{**}]. Children participating in SNAP had a higher prevalence of

elevated blood pressure compared with higher income nonparticipant children (9 versus 7%) [38^{**}]. In terms of disease risk, a higher percentage of SNAP participants than either income-eligible or higher income nonparticipants had very high or extremely high-disease risk (31 versus 27%, and 26 and 11% versus 8 and 7%, respectively) [38^{**}].

A study of 1999–2008 NHANES data found that children who received SNAP benefits had standard diets, consuming 43% more SSBs, 47% more high-fat dairy, and 44% more processed meats than income-eligible nonparticipants [39].

A study of 1999–2014 NHANES data found that between 2003 and 2014, SNAP participants had less improvements in diet quality using American Heart Association (AHA) diet scores than both income-eligible nonparticipants and higher income individuals [40]. Disparities in diet quality persisted for most foods and nutrients and worsened for processed meats, added sugars and nuts and seeds [40].

In addition to NHANES, sales data have also been used to assess foods purchased using SNAP benefits. Sales data obtained from a large supermarket chain in the northeastern United States from April 2012 to April 2014 revealed that customer transactions paid at least partially with SNAP benefits included lower spending on fruits, vegetables, and poultry, and higher spending on SSBs, red meat, and convenience foods than transactions that did not involve SNAP [41]. A USDA study assessed the content of SNAP purchases in 2011 from a leading retailer and found that soft drinks were the number 1 purchase in terms of share of expenditures by SNAP households and the number 2 purchase by non-SNAP households [42].

LESSONS LEARNED FROM OTHER FEDERAL FEEDING PROGRAMS

In contrast to SNAP, other USDA feeding programs targeting children perform better with respect to diet quality. The NSLP, SBP, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the WIC Program all apply nutrition standards based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) in 2010 established stronger nutrition standards for the NSLP and SBP, which significantly improved dietary quality. Specifically, the HHFKA regulations required schools to increase the amount of fruits and vegetables served and limit starchy vegetables; serve only low-fat or fat-free milk; and serve more whole grains [43]. The HHFKA also established standards for food and beverage products sold in schools outside of the breakfast and lunch programs, which eliminated most sugary beverages and reduced the

Population health

sugar and calorie content of food products for sale [44]. Following the changes, the USDA found that the nutritional quality of NSLP lunches increased significantly between school year 2009–2010 and school year 2014–2015 [45**]. Evaluations found that students consumed more fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and fewer starch vegetables than before the HHFKA, without contributing to increases in food waste or reductions in program participation [45**,46]. The mean total HEI-2010 score for NSLP lunches increased 41% – from 57.9 to 81.5 out of a possible 100 [45**].

Unlike SNAP, which does not limit food or non-alcoholic beverage purchases, WIC purchases are limited to different food packages for different groups of participants. Research has shown that WIC lowers Medicaid costs for participating women, and WIC participation is associated with longer gestation periods, higher birth weight, and lower infant mortality [47,48]. The WIC food packages were revised in 2009 to align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans more closely and to introduce incentives for the purchase of fruits and vegetables, which research showed was associated with a 17.5 and 27.8% increase in fresh and frozen vegetable purchases (respectively) and a 28.6% increase in fresh fruit purchases [49]. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the USDA analyzed WIC data from 56 states and territories from 2010 and 2018 and found that 31 WIC agencies reported significant declines in obesity among children aged 2–4 years [50]. Between 2010 and 2018, overall obesity prevalence among WIC participants aged 2–4 years decreased from 15.9 to 14.4% [50].

POLICY INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

There are three evidence-based policy changes that lawmakers should consider, and that pediatricians could support, to strengthen SNAP's effectiveness as a health intervention for children and families, build on the successes of WIC, CACFP and the NSLP and SBP, and help ensure that every child reaches the age of 18 at a healthy weight. First, policymakers should make diet quality a core SNAP objective and define and report on nutrition security. SNAP's current core objectives (food security and fiscal integrity) should be continued and supplemented with an additional, congressionally mandated focus on diet quality and healthy nutrition. Adding a diet-quality component to SNAP's current core objectives could be accomplished through the next Farm Bill (the omnibus, multiyear law that governs U.S.

agricultural and food programs), an executive order, or a voluntary internal policy change at USDA. Once this core objective is in place, the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) should include nutrition security in its annual reporting of US food security. Nutrition security should be defined using an evidence-based metric such as USDA's HEI (e.g. nutrition security defined as HEI of 80 or higher, nutrition insecurity at HEI between 80 and 60, and very low nutrition security defined as HEI below 60). In addition, the USDA should report on any policy changes that have been made to improve diet quality and nutrition, the impact of USDA policies on diet quality and healthy eating, and any additional authorities that the USDA has identified it needs in order to improve diet quality, nutrition, and healthy eating.

Second, policymakers should strengthen requirements for SNAP-authorized retailers to promote healthier retail food environments, especially for large retailers such as Walmart, Kroger, and Amazon. SNAP-authorized retailers are currently required to either stock three units of three different varieties for each staple food category (vegetables or fruits; dairy products; meat, poultry, or fish; breads or cereals) on a continuous basis or a store must have more than 50% of its total gross retail sales from the sale of staple foods [44]. Despite these requirements, research shows that SNAP authorized retailers offer comparatively fewer fresh fruits and vegetables, whole-grain foods and low-fat dairy products in lower income communities than retailers in higher income communities [51–55]. SNAP retailers should be prohibited from in-store (brick and mortar and on-line) marketing of unhealthy foods such as sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) (e.g. endcap displays and favored placement, including for online purchases).

Third, policymakers should support healthy purchases in SNAP by pairing incentives for purchasing fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods with restrictions on unhealthy foods and sweetened beverages. Today, soft drinks are top commodity typically purchased by SNAP households [42]. Evidence suggests that restricting SSB purchases in SNAP could reduce the calories consumed from SSBs by 15% and reduce negative health consequences including obesity prevalence and diabetes [56]. A separate study of the impact of restricting SSBs on children's health found that if SSBs were substituted with fruit juice and milk, the restriction would be expected to reduce obesity prevalence among SNAP participants by 6.2 percentage points [57**]. A randomized controlled trial found that pairing incentives for purchasing more fruits and vegetables with restrictions on the purchase of less nutritious foods (e.g. SSBs, sweet baked goods, candies) improved diet quality, reduced

consumptions of SSBs and sweets, and increased fruit intake compared with individuals who made purchases with no restrictions or incentives [58].

A survey of public attitudes towards policies to improve the nutritional impact of SNAP, including SNAP participants, found that 82% of respondents supported providing additional benefits to SNAP participants that can only be used on healthful foods, 69% of respondents supported removing SNAP benefits for SSBs, and of the 46% of respondents who initially opposed removing SSBs, 45% supported removing SNAP benefits for SSBs if the policy also included additional benefits to purchase healthful foods [59].

Multiple-expert, nonpartisan bodies have supported one or more of these recommendations, including the National Commission on Hunger; the Bipartisan Policy Center; Healthy Eating Research; and the Report of the 50th Anniversary of the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health [60–63]. They also build on the recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans; the CDC; the National Academy of Medicine; and the WHO [64–67].

HOW PEDIATRICIANS CAN LEVERAGE THESE LEARNINGS

Pediatricians can act to improve SNAP's efficacy as a health intervention by urging the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) to advocate for the three aforementioned policy recommendations in its legislative priorities. They can also advocate individually and with their local colleagues to their Senator & Representative to make these changes in the 2023 Farm Bill. Pediatricians can become involved with their state SNAP-Education (SNAP-Ed) program (SNAP-Ed is USDA's largest nutrition-education and obesity-prevention program) and seek to have our three recommendations implemented at the state level using SNAP-Ed funds.

CONCLUSION

SNAP has demonstrated its benefit as an economic support for children and families to reduce food insecurity and allow for greater spending on other vital expenditures, such as healthcare. However, research suggests that there is an opportunity to improve its efficacy as a health intervention for children and families, in line with other federal food assistance programs.

Acknowledgements

Nourish Science (<https://nourishscience.org/>) for funding writing and open access.

Financial support and sponsorship

None.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READING

Papers of particular interest, published within the annual period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- of outstanding interest

1. Bryan S, Afari J, Carroll MD, et al. NHR 158. National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2017–March 2020 Pre-pandemic Data Files. Hyattsville, MD, 2021.
2. Mokdad AH, Ballesteros K, Echko M, et al. The State of US Health, 1990–2016. *JAMA* 2018; 319:1444.
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Adult Obesity Facts | Overweight & Obesity. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html>. [Accessed 02 September 2022]
4. O'Hearn M, Lauren BN, Wong JB, et al. Trends and disparities in cardiometabolic health among U.S. adults, 1999–2018. *J Am Coll Cardiol* 2022; 80:138–151. This study investigates US trends in optimal cardiometabolic health from 1999 to 2018.
5. O'Hearn M, Liu J, Cudhea F, et al. Coronavirus disease 2019 hospitalizations attributable to cardiometabolic conditions in the United States: a comparative risk assessment analysis. *J Am Heart Assoc* 2021; 10:1–27. This study estimates the absolute and proportional COVID-19 hospitalizations in US adults attributable to four major US cardiometabolic conditions, separately and jointly, and by race/ethnicity, age, and sex.
6. USDA ERS - Definitions of Food Security. Available at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/definitions-of-food-security/>. [Accessed 17 September 2022]
7. Coleman-Jensen A, Rabbitt MP, Gregory CA, Singh A. Household food security in the United States in 2021. 2022. This report provides statistics on food security in US households throughout 2021 based on Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data collected in December 2021.
8. Coleman-Jensen A, Rabbitt MP, Gregory CA, Singh A. Household Food Security in the United States in 2020, 2021. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=102075>. [Accessed 02 September 2022] This report provides statistics on food security in U.S. households throughout 2020 based on Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data collected in December 2020.
9. Geraghty AA, Lindsay KL, Alberdi G, et al. Nutrition during pregnancy impacts offspring's epigenetic status-evidence from human and animal studies. *Nutr Metab Insights* 2015; 8(Suppl 1):41–47.
10. Pascoe JM, Wood DL, Duffee JH, Kuo A. Mediators and adverse effects of child poverty in the United States. *Pediatrics* 2016; 137:e20160340.
11. Augusto ALP, de Abreu Rodrigues AV, Domingos TB, Salles-Costa R. Household food insecurity associated with gestational and neonatal outcomes: a systematic review. *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth* 2020; 20:1–11.
12. Drennen CR, Sharon M, Coleman MS, et al. Food insecurity, health, and development in children under age four years. *Pediatrics* 2019; 144:e20190824.
13. Berkowitz SA, Seligman HK, Choudhry NK. Treat or eat: food insecurity, cost-related medication underuse, and unmet needs. *Am J Med* 2014; 127:303.e3–310.e3.
14. Berkowitz SA, Basu S, Meigs JB, Seligman HK. Food insecurity and health care expenditures in the United States, 2011–2013. *Health Serv Res* 2018; 53:1600–1620.
15. Peltz A, Garg A. Food insecurity and health care use. *Pediatrics* 2019; 144:e20190347.
16. Herman D, Atulani P, Coleman-Jensen A, Harrison GG. Food insecurity and cost-related medication underuse among nonelderly adults in a nationally representative sample. *Am J Public Health* 2015; 105(10):e48–e59.
17. Gundersen C, Ziliak JP. Food insecurity and health outcomes. *Health Aff* 2015; 34:1830–1839.
18. Laraia BA. Food insecurity and chronic disease. *Adv Nutr* 2013; 4:203–212.
19. Hanson KL, Connor LM. Food insecurity and dietary quality in US adults and children: a systematic review. *Am J Clin Nutr* 2014; 100:884–892.
20. Text - H.R.2471-117th Congress (2021-2022): Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022 | Congress.gov | Library of Congress. Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bills/117/congress/house-bill/2471/text>. [Accessed 02 September 2022]
21. United States Department of Agriculture. Percentage of participating SNAP households with children (FY 2018). Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/SNAP-State-characteristics>. [Accessed 02 September 2022]

Population health

22. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. A quick guide to SNAP eligibility and benefits. Available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/a-quick-guide-to-snap-eligibility-and-benefits>. [Accessed 02 September 2022]
 23. United States Department of Agriculture. Where can I use SNAP EBT? Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailer-locator>. [Accessed 02 September 2022]
 24. United States Department of Agriculture. What can SNAP Buy? Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/eligible-food-items>. [Accessed 02 September 2022]
 25. United States Department of Agriculture. Retailer eligibility - prepared foods and heated foods. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailer-eligibility-prepared-foods-and-heated-foods>. [Accessed 02 September 2022]
 26. United States Department of Agriculture. SNAP Data Tables. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>. [Accessed 02 September 2022]
 27. United States Department of Agriculture. SNAP eligibility. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility>. [Accessed 02 September 2022]
 28. United States Department of Agriculture. USDA modernizes the thrifty food plan, updates SNAP Benefits. Available at: <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2021/08/16/usda-modernizes-thrifty-food-plan-updates-snap-benefits>. [Accessed 02 September 2022]
 29. United States Department of Agriculture. SNAP and the Thrifty Food Plan. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/thriftyfoodplan>. [Accessed 02 September 2022]
 30. Ratcliffe C, McKernan S-M. How much does SNAP reduce food insecurity? 2010. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/44206966_How_much_does_SNAP_reduce_food_insecurity. [Accessed 2 September 2022]
 31. Mabli J, Ohls J, Dragoset L, et al. Measuring the effect of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participation on food security. *Mathematica Policy Research Reports*. 2022. Available at: <https://ideas.repec.org/p/npr/mprres/69d901432c7e46779666a240a0974a5d.html>. [Accessed 2 September 2022]
- This study uses survey data between October 2011 and September 2012 to assess how household food security and food expenditures vary with SNAP participation and examines how the relationship between SNAP and food security and between SNAP and food expenditures vary by key household characteristics and circumstances.
32. Almond D, Hoynes HW, Schanzenbach DW. Inside the war on poverty: the impact of food stamps on birth outcomes. *Rev Econ Stat* 2011; 93:387–403.
 33. Bronchetti ET, Christensen G, Hoynes HW. Local food prices, SNAP purchasing power, and child health. *J Health Econ* 2019; 68:102231.
 34. Joyce KM, Breen A, de Cuba SE, et al. household hardships, public programs, and their associations with the health and development of very young children: insights from Children's HealthWatch. *J Appl Res Child* 2012; 3:2–24.
 35. Children's Health Watch. The SNAP Vaccine: Boosting Children's Health. Available at: <https://childrenshealthwatch.org/the-snap-vaccine-boosting-childrens-health/>. [Accessed 02 September 2022]
 36. de Cuba SE, Chilton M, Bovell-Ammon A, et al. Loss of SNAP is associated with food insecurity and poor health in working families with young children. *Health Aff (Millwood)* 2019; 38:765–773.
 37. United States Department of Agriculture. HEI Scores for Americans. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/hei-scores-americans>. [Accessed 2 September 2022]
 38. United States Department of Agriculture. Indicators of Diet Quality, Nutrition, and Health for Americans by Program Participation Status, 2011–2016. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/indicators-diet-quality-nutrition-and-health-americans-program-participation-status-2011>. [Accessed 30 December 2021]
- This study uses NHANES data to examine the relationship between SNAP participation and indicators of diet quality, nutrition and health by comparing SNAP participants with income-eligible and higher income nonparticipants, by age and gender.
39. Leung CW, Blumenthal SJ, Hoffnagle EE, et al. Associations of food stamp participation with dietary quality and obesity in children. *Pediatrics* 2013; 131:463–472.
 40. Fang Zhang F, Liu J, Rehm CD, et al. Trends and disparities in diet quality among US adults by supplemental nutrition assistance program participation status. *JAMA Netw Open* 2018; 1:e180237–e1180237.
 41. Franckle RL, Moran A, Hou T, et al. Transactions at a Northeastern super-market chain: differences by supplemental nutrition assistance program use. *Am J Prev Med* 2017; 53:e131–e138.
 42. United States Department of Agriculture. Foods Typically Purchased by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Households. 2016. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/foods-typically-purchased-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap-households>. [Accessed 02 September 2022]
 43. United States Department of Agriculture. Nutrition standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. Final rule. *Fed Regist* 2012; 77:4088–4167.
 44. United States Department of Agriculture. National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program: Nutrition Standards for All Foods Sold in School as Required by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. Final rule and interim final rule. *Fed Regist* 2016; 81:50131–50151.
 45. United States Department of Agriculture. School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-and-meal-cost-study>. [Accessed April 2019]
- This report presents findings from the School Nutrition and Meal Cost study, the first comprehensive, nationally representative study of the school meal programs since the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act reforms were implemented.
46. Cullen KW, Chen TA, Dave JM. Changes in foods selected and consumed after implementation of the new National School Lunch Program meal patterns in southeast Texas. *Prev Med Rep* 2015; 2:440–443.
 47. Aruoch S, Cackley AP. Savings achieved by giving WIC benefits to women prenatally. *Public Health Rep* 1995; 110:27–34.
 48. Khanani I, Elam J, Hearn R, et al. The impact of prenatal WIC participation on infant mortality and racial disparities. *Am J Public Health* 2010; 100(Suppl 1): S204–S209.
 49. Andreyeva T, Luedicke J. Incentivizing fruit and vegetable purchases among participants in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. *Public Health Nutr* 2015; 18:33–41.
 50. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available at: obesity among young children enrolled in WIC. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/obesity-among-WIC-enrolled-young-children.html#highweight>. [Accessed 02 September 2022]
 51. Shannon J. What does SNAP benefit usage tell us about food access in low-income neighborhoods? *Soc Sci Med* 2014; 107:89–99.
 52. Ridgely S, Leone AF, Kim H, et al. Food Deserts in Leon County, FL: Disparate Distribution of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Accepting Stores by Neighborhood Characteristics. *J Nutr Educ Behav* 2012; 44:539–547.
 53. Laska MN, Caspi CE, Pelletier JE, et al. Lack of healthy food in small-size to mid-size retailers participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota, 2014. *Prev Chronic Dis* 2019; 12:150171.
 54. Caspi CE, Pelletier JE, Harnack L, et al. Differences in healthy food supply and stocking practices between small grocery stores, gas-marts, pharmacies and dollar stores. *Public Health Nutr* 2016; 19:540–547.
 55. Racine EF, Batada A, Solomon CA, Story M. Availability of foods and beverages in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program–authorized dollar stores in a region of North Carolina. *J Acad Nutr Diet* 2016; 116:1613–1620.
 56. Baou S, Seligman HK, Gardner C, Bhattacharya J. Ending SNAP subsidies for sugar-sweetened beverages could reduce obesity and type 2 diabetes. *Health Aff (Millwood)* 2017; 33:1032–1039.
 57. Choi SE, Wright DR, Bleich SN. Impact of restricting sugar-sweetened beverages from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program on Children's Health. *Am J Prev Med* 2021; 60:276–284.
- This study uses National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey data and a microsimulation model to assess expected impact of restricting sugar-sweetened beverage purchases with SNAP benefits on children's daily sugar-sweetened beverage consumption, total calorie intake, BMI, incidence of dental caries and obesity prevalence.
58. Harnack L, Oakes JM, Elbel B, et al. Effects of subsidies and prohibitions on nutrition in a food benefit program: a randomized clinical trial. *JAMA Intern Med* 2016; 176:1610–1619.
 59. Long MW, Leung CW, Cheung LWY, et al. Public support for policies to improve the nutritional impact of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). *Public Health Nutr* 2014; 17:219–224.
 60. N. Commission on Hunger. Freedom from hunger: an achievable goal for the United States of America. 2015.
 61. Bipartisan Policy Center SNAP Task Force. Leading with nutrition: leveraging federal programs for better health. 2018. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/leading-with-nutrition-leveraging-federal-programs-for-better-health/>. [Accessed 3 September 2022]
 62. Healthy Eating Research. Strengthening the Public Health Impacts of SNAP: Key Opportunities for the Next Farm Bill. 2021. Available at: <https://healthyeatingresearch.org/research/strengthening-the-public-health-impacts-of-snap-key-opportunities-for-the-next-farm-bill/>. [Accessed 3 September 2022]
 63. Final Report on the 50th Anniversary of the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health: Honoring the Past, Taking Actions for our Future. 2020. Available at: <https://sites.tufts.edu/foodnutritionandhealth2019/>. [Accessed 3 September 2022]
 64. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015-2020. "Cut Down on Added Sugars." 2015. Available at: https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-10/DGA_Cut-Down-On-Added-Sugars.pdf. [Accessed 3 September 2022]
 65. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Get the facts: sugar-sweetened beverages and consumption. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/data-statistics/sugar-sweetened-beverages-intake.html>. [Accessed 03 September 2022]
 66. Glickman D, Parker L, Sim LJ, et al. Committee on Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention; Food and Nutrition Board; Institute of Medicine. Accelerating progress in obesity prevention: solving the weight of the nation. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2012.
 67. World Health Organization. Taxes on sugary drinks: why do it? 2017. Available at: <http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/260253/WHO-NMH-ND-16.5Rev.1-eng.pdf>. [Accessed 3 September 2022]

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

FEBRUARY 16, 2023

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

Farm Bill 2023: Nutrition Programs

February 16, 2023

Questions for the Record

Ms. Stacy Dean

Ranking Member John Boozman

1. Which person decided the Thrifty Food Plan re-evaluation would be conducted on an accelerated timeline?

USDA Response

In the bipartisan, 2018 Farm Bill, Congress required USDA to conduct a re-evaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP). The statute indicated the re-evaluation to be complete by 2022. President Biden issued an Executive Order on January 22, 2021, prompting USDA to prioritize the TFP re-evaluation because ensuring the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit amounts reflect the true and current cost of a nutritious, economical diet was an important way to provide American families with resources and to help stabilize the economy in the midst of COVID. USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) conducted a science-based re-evaluation of the TFP using the latest available data, as directed by Congress.

2. While you worked at the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), you testified before the House Agriculture Nutrition Subcommittee for a hearing on "The Future of SNAP," on March 28, 2017. This testimony described a paper commissioned by CBPP, your then-employer, regarding a SNAP benefit increase. This paper studied the impact of "a roughly 20 percent increase in the Thrifty Food Plan," which is nearly identical to the 21 percent increase that resulted from USDA's TFP re-evaluation. It does not seem coincidental that a paper CBPP requested made the same suggested increase that resulted after you began your role as Deputy Under Secretary at the Food Nutrition and Consumer Services (FNCS). Please explain how this paper was used in the TFP re-evaluation process.

USDA Response

USDA's reevaluation of the TFP was a robust, data-driven analysis based on the four factors in the Farm Bill:

- Current food prices,
- Food composition data
- Consumption patterns, and
- Dietary guidance.

The cited paper—titled "The Relationships Among SNAP Benefits, Grocery Spending, Diet Quality, and the Adequacy of Low-Income Families' Resources," published in June 2016, and authored by economics professors Patricia M. Anderson of Dartmouth College and Kristin F.

Butcher of Wellesley College¹—examines the potential impact of increasing SNAP benefit amounts on households' food spending and how it would affect diet quality. The cited paper was not considered in USDA's reevaluation.

3. The March 28, 2017 testimony also stated that "Such a significant increase may not be feasible in the 2018 Farm Bill." Please explain how your understanding of the process and that statement changed between that testimony and the 2021 TFP re-evaluation.

USDA Response

Leading up to the last Farm Bill, some stakeholders were calling for Congress to use it as an opportunity to make an update to the SNAP program so that SNAP benefit levels would be tied to the Low-Cost Food Plan rather than the Thrifty Food Plan. Making this change would have required a statutory change. The section of testimony from which the question quotes was an effort to summarize the growing evidence which suggested SNAP benefits were insufficient to meet the program's core goal, while acknowledging that it would be difficult for then-Chairman Conaway to mandate such a change given the fiscal constraints under which the 2018 farm bill was crafted.

4. The paper commissioned by CBPP also stated that "boosting SNAP benefits would raise...the nutritional quality of the food purchased." It has been more than a year since the SNAP benefits have increased as a result of the TFP update. What evidence is there now to support that claim with SNAP participant purchases?

USDA Response

A modernized TFP is more than a commitment to good nutrition – it's an investment in our nation's health, economy, and security. Putting healthy food in reach for low-income families helps prevent disease, supports children in the classroom, reduces health care costs, and more.

The modernized TFP puts healthy foods and beverages in reach for low-income families by supporting a practical, cost-conscious, nutritious diet. For example, the 2021 TFP includes more fish and red and orange vegetables to reflect the latest dietary guidelines. The 2021 TFP also includes more convenient foods like baby carrots and pre-cooked, canned beans and soups to reflect what Americans purchase and eat.

Research published by the Urban Institute found that the increase in SNAP benefits resulting from USDA's re-evaluation of the TFP reduced poverty rates by nearly 5% in the fourth quarter of 2021 after the re-evaluated TFP took effect. The Urban Institute also found that the TFP re-evaluation alone reduced child poverty by 8.6%.²

The evaluation of the Summer EBT demonstration—which provided a SNAP-like benefit to low-income households with children in the summer, when children lose access to school meals—is also instructive. The evaluation showed that providing Summer EBT not only cut the most severe form of childhood food insecurity by one-third, but also that households receiving

¹ [HHRG-115-AG03-Wstate-DeanS-20170328.pdf \(house.gov\)](#), pg. 5-6.

² [Effect of the Reevaluated Thrifty Food Plan and Emergency Allotments on SNAP Benefits and Poverty: Urban Institute](#). August 2022.

Summer EBT ate more healthfully. Children receiving Summer EBT ate about 13% more fruits and vegetables, 30% more whole grains, and 10% more dairy.

FNS' FY 2023 Research and Evaluation Plan includes substantial investments to investigate how the increase in SNAP benefits resulting from the TFP reevaluation has affected SNAP households.

5. While you worked at CBPP, did you advise Members of Congress or their staff about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) when Congress considered the 2018 Farm Bill?

- a. If so, did you advise those Members of Congress or their staff during this time about any legislative provisions on the Thrifty Food Plan?
- b. If yes, please describe your interactions with Congress on behalf of CBPP as they pertain to the Thrifty Food Plan during the 2018 Farm Bill.

USDA Response

Prior to serving as the Deputy Under Secretary of Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNCS), I was employed at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) as the Vice President of Food Assistance Policy for over 20 years. As a nationally recognized expert in Federal nutrition programs, I was often asked to provide Congressional staff of both parties with technical information related to how proposed legislation and policies would impact access to Federal benefit programs, benefit levels and eligibility, program administration and integrity, and integration of Federal nutrition programs with other programs such as Medicaid.

6. In responding to GAO, USDA commented that the TFP reevaluation could have increased SNAP benefits by more than the figure it settled on. Please specify the highest amount USDA considered raising SNAP benefits under its TFP re-evaluation and explain the rationale for this highest figure.

USDA Response

Importantly, USDA did not approach the TFP re-evaluation by considering a set range of possible changes and selecting an amount within that range. Rather, USDA optimized the same mathematical model that was historically used to calculate the TFP, subject to the four Congressionally-mandated criteria:

- Current food prices,
- Food composition data
- Consumption patterns, and
- Dietary guidance.

Fundamentally, USDA took a conservative approach to the TFP re-evaluation. USDA used the same mathematical model used in each of the previous re-evaluations and made updates to the model's data sources and constraints *only* when there was clear and convincing evidence to do so. The GAO report highlights areas where evidence could have supported larger increases, but USDA concluded the evidence was not sufficiently clear and compelling.

7. Please identify each USDA agency or office that formally approved USDA's evaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan. In addition, identify the official for each agency or office that provided their approval of the TFP.

USDA Response

Experts within FNS' Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP) prepared the 2021 TFP report, and it was formally cleared through the following USDA offices: the FNS Administrator's Office, the FNCS Under Secretary's Office, USDA's Office of the General Counsel, and the Office of the Secretary. We also drew upon broader USDA expertise in key areas, including consultation with economists from the Economic Research Service (ERS) on methods for calculating food prices, and nutrition scientists from the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) on the food composition datasets used in the development of food categories used in the model.

8. Please identify each non-USDA agency that formally approved USDA's re-evaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan.

USDA Response

The bipartisan Farm Bill passed in 2018 specifically directed USDA to update the TFP by 2022 and tasked us with examining four specific components: current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance. As was the case in all previous re-evaluations, no other Federal agency formally approved USDA's re-evaluation.

9. Please explain the role of the Office of Management and Budget in the Thrifty Food Plan update. During the hearing, you said you "[consulted] with OMB along the way," and that they "provided economic analysis throughout," but did not necessarily "sign off." Did OMB give formal approval of USDA's TFP re-evaluation?

USDA Response

USDA consulted with OMB during the re-evaluation process, and we presented our model and methodology to them. The model was largely similar to the model used previously, and any changes were detailed in the methods section of the TFP 2021 report. Consistent with past practice, OMB did not formally approve USDA's re-evaluation.

10. Based on CBO's understanding of Congress' direction, CBO scored the reevaluation of the TFP at \$0.00. Yet, your process resulted in an increase of hundreds of billions of dollars. I understand that despite numerous requests from our staff, you never indicated you were increasing the size of the program, especially by such a significant amount. Did the disparity in your increase and that predicted by CBO give you pause or did you find it of no concern? Do you believe the full power of such decisions rests in your hands, without consultation of Congressional intent?

USDA Response

Through the Food and Nutrition Act, Congress provides USDA with the authority to set the TFP, and that authority has been in place for decades. The Food and Nutrition Act also links SNAP benefit levels to the cost of the TFP. The TFP was introduced in 1975, and each of the subsequent TFP updates over the next 45 years have been cost neutral as a matter of Administrative policy. Previously, the timing and frequency of updates were done at the Secretary's discretion. In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress *directed* USDA to re-evaluate the TFP on a specific timeline—by 2022 and at 5-year intervals thereafter—based on four specific elements. USDA conducted a careful, considered re-evaluation of the TFP based on these four factors, consistent with the timeframes directed by Congress.

11. Deputy Under Secretary, your testimony states that you used “the same mathematical TFP model used in all previous reevaluations, but with updates to the underlying data and an evaluation of the underlying assumptions of the model.” Please explain in detail what the assumptions were in the original model and what assumptions you made that contributed to this 21% increase.

- A. Did statute direct you to make these new assumptions? If not, what scientific basis did you have for making these assumptions?
- b. Do you agree that underlying assumptions can dramatically change the outcome of any scientific or mathematical process? Did you discuss these assumptions with any of my colleagues or did you also assume that Congress had no role in your decision to spend hundreds of billions of dollars?

USDA Response

As directed by the bipartisan 2018 Farm Bill, USDA re-evaluated the TFP based on four specific factors: current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance. In conducting the re-evaluation, USDA utilized the same TFP model used in all previous updates and only made updates to the model's data sources and constraints consistent with the four specified components. Where there was insufficient evidence to support changes to the existing assumptions, USDA kept the model as it was in 2006 (when the TFP was last re-evaluated), and those assumptions carried forward to the 2021 edition.

The 120-page [Thrifty Food Plan, 2021 Report](#) describes the changes made and the corresponding rationale for each (beginning on page 32), and the accompanying [online supplement](#) contains all additional data and information necessary to replicate the analyses and reproduce the model.

The most significant methodological change driving the increased cost of the TFP was updating the source for food price data to the strongest available data—moving from food price data reported by households to retailer-provided scanner data. Another driver was the incorporation of updated dietary guidance from the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025 and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM). For example, the 2021 TFP includes more fish and red and orange vegetables, to reflect the latest dietary guidelines.

Additionally, USDA met the Farm Bill directive to reflect current “consumption patterns,” by ensuring the model inputs reflected the forms of foods households typically purchase. For example, the price of beans considers all forms of beans. Most households purchase canned beans rather than dry beans, so the amounts and prices for beans in the model reflect that.

12. Deputy Under Secretary Dean, in your response to questions, you stated that the SNAP benefit is adequate to purchase and cover the cost of a healthy diet. What are your beliefs on the fundamental purpose of SNAP? Should it be supplemental or cover the entire grocery budget for participants?

USDA Response

The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) is USDA's estimate of a cost-conscious, healthy diet. Congress designed SNAP to supplement the income households have available for food up to the cost of the TFP, to support their ability to buy that diet. By design, SNAP benefits decrease as a participant's income rises.

13. Catherine Buhrig, a new SNAP director, is currently based at FNS' office in Alexandria, Virginia. Does Ms. Buhrig work under a telework agreement? What is the maximum number of days per work Ms. Buhrig is permitted to telework under this agreement? *(Please provide a copy of this telework agreement.)*

USDA Response

All FNS Senior Executive Service positions are designated as telework-eligible, including this position, and must report to their assigned facility or duty station a minimum of two days per pay period in accordance with OPM Governmentwide telework policies and USDA Telework and Remote Work Program (Departmental Regulation DR 4080-811-002).

14. For each of the SES (career and political) please provide:

- a. Duty Station of record where employees regularly perform their official duties (per their SF-50)

USDA Response

Please see the table below for information requested in Question 14(a) relative to each SES member at FNS.

Title	Location of Record
Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services	Washington, DC
Administrator	Alexandria, VA
Assistant Administrator	Alexandria, VA
Chief Financial Officer (CFO)	Alexandria, VA
Assistant Chief Information Officer	Alexandria, VA

Deputy Administrator, Office of Policy Support (OPS)	Alexandria, VA
Deputy Administrator, Child Nutrition Programs (CNP)	Alexandria, VA
Deputy Administrator, Supplemental Nutrition and Safety Programs (SNAS)	Alexandria, VA
Associate Administrator, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	Alexandria, VA
Deputy Administrator, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP)	Alexandria, VA
Chief Operating Officer (COO)	Alexandria, VA
Deputy Administrator, Retailer Operations and Compliance (ROC)	Alexandria, VA
Associate Administrator, Regional Operations and Support (ROS)	Chicago, IL
Regional Administrator, Mid-Atlantic Region (MARO)	Robbinsville, NJ
Regional Administrator, Mountain Plains Region (MPRO)	Denver, CO
Regional Administrator, Midwest Region (MWRO)	Chicago, IL
Regional Administrator, Northeast Region (NERO)	Boston, MA
Regional Administrator, Southeast Region (SERO)	Atlanta, GA
Regional Administrator, Southwest Region (SWRO)	Dallas, TX

Regional Administrator, Western Region (WRO)	San Francisco, CA
--	-------------------

b. Employee designation: telework, remote, or remote exception

USDA Response

In accordance with OPM regulations and USDA Telework and Remote Work Program (DR 4080-811-002) all Senior Executive Service employees are telework-eligible. Please see table below.

Title	Employee Designation
Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services	Telework-eligible
Administrator	Telework-eligible
Assistant Administrator	Telework-eligible
Chief Financial Officer	Telework-eligible
Assistant Chief Information Officer	Telework-eligible
Deputy Administrator, Office of Policy Support	Telework-eligible
Deputy Administrator, Child Nutrition Programs	Telework-eligible
Deputy Administrator, Supplemental Nutrition and Safety Programs	Telework-eligible
Associate Administrator, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program	Telework-eligible
Deputy Administrator, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion	Telework-eligible
Chief Operating Officer	Telework-eligible
Deputy Administrator, Retailer Operations and Compliance	Telework-eligible

Associate Administrator, Regional Operations and Support	Telework-eligible
Regional Administrator, Mid-Atlantic Region (MARO)	Telework-eligible
Regional Administrator, Mountain Plains Region (MPRO)	Telework-eligible
Regional Administrator, Midwest Region (MWRO)	Telework-eligible
Regional Administrator, Northeast Region (NERO)	Telework-eligible
Regional Administrator, Southeast Region (SERO)	Telework-eligible
Regional Administrator, Southwest Region (SWRO)	Telework-eligible
Regional Administrator, Western Region (WRO)	Telework-eligible

- c. If telework, how many days per pay period does the SES report to the National Office at Braddock Road or the Regional Office location; if remote or remote exception, what is the requirement for days to report to either Braddock Road or the Regional Office location?

USDA Response

In accordance with OPM regulations and USDA Telework and Remote Work Program (DR 4080-811-002) all Senior Executive Service employees are telework-eligible and are required to report to the assigned facility or duty station a minimum of two days per pay period.

- d. For those National office employees hired within the last year, whether they currently reside in the Washington DC locality area, and if not, by what date they are required to relocate.

USDA Response

In accordance with OPM regulations and USDA Telework and Remote Work Program (DR 4080-811-002) all Senior Executive Service employees are telework-eligible and are required to report to the assigned facility or duty station a minimum of two days per pay period.

15. Arkansas is home to a sizable community of migrants from the Republic of the Marshall Islands, a strong U.S. ally. According to World Bank data, more than one third of the children of the RMI suffer from such severe malnutrition that they “are at risk of cognitive and physical limitations that can last a lifetime.” The comprehensive bilateral agreement that governs U.S. assistance to the Marshall Islands – our Compact of Free Association – expires in September of 2023. I understand that negotiations on Compact renewal are progressing.

a. Deputy Under Secretary Dean, can you please tell the Committee how FNS is helping USDA in addressing the severe malnutrition in the Marshall Islands in the Compact renewal, given its expertise in nutrition science?

b. I see that the compact negotiations are being run out of the White House, under the leadership of Ambassador Joseph Yun as Special Presidential Envoy for Compact Negotiations. Is the USDA part of the negotiation process given the current problem with malnutrition in the RMI?

USDA Response

USDA currently provides health and nutrition assistance to the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) pursuant to Public Law 108-188. In FY 2023, the RMI received USDA assistance of \$574,000 total for food and administrative funds - \$519,827 for foods, and \$54,173 for administrative funds.

In addition, under the Federal Programs and Services Agreement, disaster relief in the form of USDA Foods can be provided to the RMI for use in a Presidential Disaster Declaration and in situations of distress. USDA understands that the United States provides grant and other assistance under the Compact, as amended, and defers to the Departments of State, the Interior and Health and Human Services for additional information.

USDA stands ready to engage with the Special Presidential Envoy for Compact Negotiations and the negotiating team at an appropriate time in the negotiations process.

16. The Child and Adult Care Food Program has separate standards for whole grains than the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. It is my understanding that granola bars, for example, are permitted in the SBP to meet the grain requirement, but in CACFP, they are considered a dessert. Please explain the evidence behind and reasoning for this disparity.

USDA Response

Thank you for your question, which relates to the proposed school meal standards that seeks in part to align certain meal pattern requirements in CACFP with the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Programs. Because the proposed rule is currently open for public comments, we encourage all interested parties to submit comments, which will inform the final rule.

17. The estimated FY2023 FNS budget totals nearly \$150 billion. This is a significant amount of money. Have you returned to normal operations with employees in the office? What is the maximum allowable amount of telework for FNCS employees?

USDA Response

All FNS facilities are open with staff reporting in accordance with their approved telework agreements. FNS employees who are designated as telework-eligible must report to a facility a minimum of twice per pay period.

18. During the pandemic, the flexibilities left nutrition programs open to fraud and other mischief. In Minnesota, there was significant program abuse in the summer food service program. At what point was FNS aware of this problem, both at the national office and the regional offices? Please explain the response of the regional office, which was significantly delayed.

USDA Response

Ensuring the integrity of Federal funds granted to institutions administering and operating Child Nutrition Programs is of the utmost importance to USDA. There are a number of processes and tools in place at both the State and Federal levels to safeguard against fraud and minimize the misuse of program funds.

The Minnesota Department of Education shared with FNS their suspicion that Feeding Our Future and other sponsors were engaged in fraud and program abuse in their administration of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). The Minnesota Department of Education removed the organization Feeding our Future from CACFP and SFSP due to suspected fraudulent activity that occurred in 2020 and 2021. Legal cases are pending as the U.S. Department of Justice and other Federal authorities continue investigating the matter. FNS also held a listening session with the Minnesota Department of Education in January 2023 regarding “lessons learned” and how to prevent fraud in these programs. Due to the active litigation and ongoing investigation, our comments must be limited to publicly available information and we are unable to discuss further.

The President's FY 2024 Budget also includes a proposal to further strengthen program integrity in CACFP through data analysis and mining to identify potentially concerning meal claims earlier in the oversight process.

19. SNAP authorized retailers who change ownership are sometimes lost in the shuffle and end up having a lapse in SNAP service. How are you working to ensure retailers are able to continue serving their communities during ownership transfers?

USDA Response

In order to prevent changes in retail ownership from affecting communities' access to food, USDA allows store owners to begin the SNAP retailer application process 30 days before they take ownership of a store. FNS' Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance (ROC) also requests that incoming owners share the sale date of the store so ROC can take informed actions to best help the incoming store owner. The President's FY 2024 Budget also proposes state-of-

the-art investments in SNAP retailer management systems that would help USDA support retailers experiencing a change in store ownership to maintain SNAP authorization.

20. USDA has granted more than \$20 million in funds to the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) over the last two years. FRAC also conducts a significant amount of lobbying efforts on nutrition programs. Please explain the nature of your relationship with FRAC, as both a grantee and in their lobbying work.

USDA Response

In Fiscal Year 2022, USDA awarded FRAC a \$20 million competitive grant to undertake a Community Innovation and Outreach Program (CIAO) which will test the effectiveness of community outreach strategies in increasing WIC participation, especially among underserved populations. \$15 million of the \$20 million awarded to FRAC is required to be used for subgrants.

In Fiscal Year 2023, USDA awarded FRAC a \$2 million competitive grant to conduct and support research on expanding equitable access to the Federally funded child nutrition programs.

21. In Earle, Arkansas, we saw a retailer's SNAP authorization wrongfully terminated. While we were able to fix that issue, I worry that other retailers in rural areas will face similar treatment. What is USDA doing to ensure that the check-ins are conducted correctly and not unfairly punishing stores?

USDA Response

Particularly in rural America, SNAP plays an important role in ensuring low-income Americans can access healthful food. Thank you for your leadership on this front.

USDA takes our role as a steward of taxpayer dollars seriously and works to balance this responsibility with our responsibility to retailers who are following program requirements.

The due process safeguards built into retailer monitoring and enforcement allow retailers to respond to and appeal sanctions they believe have been assessed in error. In the case of the retailer in Earle, Arkansas, the process played out and the sanction decision was overturned during the administrative review phase.

We have added staff and are continuously looking to improve our processes.

22. The 2014 Farm Bill directed USDA to update the stocking requirements for SNAP in both variety and number of items. What is the status of the rule on variety for the SNAP stocking requirements?

USDA Response

Since 2017, language prohibiting implementation of a final rule codifying the 2014 Farm Bill change that requires stores to stock seven varieties of foods in each of the four staple food groups in order to meet the most common retailer eligibility criteria, has been included in each annual appropriations bill. As a result, USDA was required to fall back to the requirement that stores stock only three varieties in each of the four staple food categories. USDA published a revised

proposed rule in 2019 to address the challenges associated with stocking seven varieties in each staple food category. A final rule has not yet been published.

23. USDA recently published its Proposed Rule on School Meal Standards. Persistent labor shortages and supply chain issues have further limited the availability of highly specialized K-12 menu options and the capacity for our school nutrition professionals to meet current rules, much less additional rules. Please explain how you will work with both food manufacturers and schools to ensure that these standards are realistic in both nutrition standards and timeline.

USDA Response

USDA and the Biden-Harris Administration are deeply committed to strengthening nutrition in school meals to give kids a healthy start, and we are equally committed to doing that in a way that is workable and provides schools with the support they need to succeed. School meals are the main source of nutrition for millions of children every school day, and so we know when we move the needle on nutrition, even a little, the impacts can be profound.

School nutrition professionals have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic and beyond to ensure that children maintain access to healthy meals. And USDA has done—and will continue to do—everything in our power to support them. USDA has provided schools and states with billions of dollars in additional resources and significant flexibilities and will continue to support them so they can serve the most nutritious meals possible.

USDA issued a “bridge rule” last year setting interim standards for sodium, whole grains, and milk, which is currently in place for schools. If we had not acted, when pandemic meal-pattern flexibilities ended, schools would have had to meet requirements for milk, whole grains, and sodium that were more stringent than schools had to meet in recent years—and in the case of sodium—ever. The transitional standards set by USDA provide schools and industry with certainty and a realistic path forward for the next two school years as they transition from pandemic operations.

It also gave USDA the time and space to engage extensively with a broad range of stakeholders. We held more than 50 listening sessions with a diverse range of stakeholders with different perspectives—school nutrition professionals, as well as nutrition experts, parents, industry partners, and from Congress.

Based on feedback from our school meal partners and the latest nutrition science, FNS is proposing incremental updates to the school meal standards in a few key areas. We heard loud and clear from schools that they are still facing tremendous challenges and need stability and time to make any changes, and the proposed rule builds in plenty of time for planning and implementation.

We encourage all interested stakeholders to submit formal comments to help us refine the final rule, with the goal of updating meal standards in a way that moves the needle for children’s health, is workable, and provides schools and industry with the stability that they need.

Meal standards are just one piece of the effort to strengthen school meals, and it will take a collective effort to support schools going forward. We are also investing in child nutrition through the Healthy Meals Incentives, additional Farm to School funds, Team Nutrition Training Grants and technical assistance, and School Equipment grants.

We are also working with industry to ensure schools can access great products they will need to meet the final standards. In September 2022, USDA launched the \$100 million Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative to support schools in serving nutritious and appealing school meals. This first part of this effort will support the development and sharing of best practices used by schools.

The second part of the Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative—the School Food System Transformation Grants—focus on strengthening the K-12 school food marketplace by supporting innovative solutions to stimulate the availability of and access to nutritious school food products. The grants will also expand manufacturing and purchasing capacity at the local and regional level and increase equitable access to healthy food products in schools and communities.

Well-nourished children will be more successful in and out of the classroom and will have better health outcomes. We will continue to listen to and work with all our school meal partners to support the growth, health, and well-being of children.

24. It has come to my attention recently that a growing number of food banks and anti-hunger organizations are partnering with private sector companies to deliver food to eligible CSFP and TEFAP participants in their communities who cannot make it to their local food bank or pantry. Is the agency aware of this trend and what are your thoughts on these delivery partnerships?

USDA Response

Emergency feeding organizations continually seek to innovate and improve their ability to serve in-need populations, and USDA supports innovations that improve customer access. USDA released guidance in 2020 reiterating that—for both CSFP and TEFAP—State agencies have the discretion to allow private sector/for-profit companies to deliver USDA Foods when certain regulatory and program requirements are met and the agencies explain the requirements to ensure third-party delivery systems comply with program regulations.

Partnering with private companies for delivery can be a useful strategy for CSFP and TEFAP program operators to increase program access or better serve participants. However, when States do so, they must ensure program requirements are met. For example, operators must ensure that the third-party entity will adhere to program rules—like providing for safe storage and transportation of food, maintaining thorough records, and safeguarding the privacy of program participants. For-profit delivery services are not permitted to carry out eligibility determinations and may not charge program participants for their services.

25. USDA and the Biden Administration have consistently advocated for increased competition through executive orders. There are only two main companies who process EBT for SNAP and

WIC. How is USDA working to decrease regulatory burden and engage more companies in EBT processing for nutrition programs?

USDA Response

USDA shares the concerns about the lack of competition in EBT processing and the effect it could have on system stability, cost, and lack of innovation. In 2020, a new vendor joined the EBT processing industry and USDA provided extensive technical assistance to ensure a successful launch.

In addition, USDA has hosted a series of EBT Modernization Roundtables, funded through the American Rescue Plan Act. These roundtables provide an opportunity for advocates, States, EBT industry stakeholders, and the retailer community to inform the conversation on long-term SNAP payment opportunities. USDA is working to modernize EBT processing to adopt more secure card payment technologies and align SNAP with the commercial sector, which may provide opportunities for increased competition.

26. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) call for increased consumption of milk and dairy products by nearly 90% of Americans, and the guidelines repeatedly recommended dairy foods as key for healthy dietary patterns. Ensuring Americans meet DGA recommendations was a pivotal component of the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. How will reducing access to milk and dairy help WIC participants meet the Dietary Guidelines recommendation to increase the amount of dairy these families consume? How do you expect the changes in milk and dairy in the WIC food package to affect participation rates?

USDA Response

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) plays a vital role in supporting the health of low-income pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children. As recommended by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), to improve the nutritional quality of the WIC food packages, align with the Dietary Guidelines, and provide a better balance of foods, USDA proposed a variety of changes to the WIC food packages, including dairy foods like milk and yogurt. The proposed changes ensure that participants can access an appropriate, supplemental quantity of nutritious foods that provide key nutrients lacking in the diets of many pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and young children.

Dairy plays a significant role in the WIC Food Packages. NASEM found that the current food packages provide milk in amounts of up to 128% of the recommended daily amount of dairy. The proposed rule adjusts these quantities so that the food packages instead provide up to 96% of the recommended amount of dairy through milk (noting that other dairy foods, like yogurt may also be provided), as recommended by NASEM and reflecting the supplemental nature of the program. USDA anticipates that, taken in their entirety, the proposed changes would result in WIC participants redeeming more of their dairy benefits at a higher rate.

In addition, after many years of declining participation, WIC participation is now rising across all eligible categories – women, children and infants. As participation in WIC increases across

these eligible groups, we would expect that dairy redemptions in these populations would increase.

27. Congress passed updated summer meals programs at the end of 2022 in order to fill gaps in rural and hard-to-reach areas. One way of addressing these gaps is through the Meals-to-You demonstration project that USDA launched in 2019. Please describe the impact of the Meals-to-You program and how this program reached children and families in rural areas. What will you do to ensure that a meal delivery option like Meals-to-You is available to children and families in the future? How do you plan to promote this program and other innovative initiatives that seek to combat child food insecurity?

USDA Response

We applaud Congress—under this Committee’s leadership—for taking historic action last year to address the summer hunger gap—by creating a new, permanent Summer EBT program for low-income families, and by allowing states to provide “grab and go” or delivery meals to children in certain rural areas during the summer.

Since summer 2010, USDA has partnered with States, Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs), local program operators, and an institution of higher learning to operate several types of summer demonstration projects, including the Meals-to-You meal delivery demonstration. The Meals-to-You project tested the concept of providing meals by mail to households with children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. In summer 2022, Meals-to-You successfully served 7,800 children in four States.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328) permanently authorized a non-congregate meal service option through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) or the National School Lunch Program Seamless Summer Option (SSO). For summer 2023, States may approve sponsors to provide non-congregate meal service in eligible rural areas. To best meet the needs of a community, non-congregate meal service can include meal delivery services similar to Meals-to-You, home delivery by staff or volunteers, or a variety of grab and go models.

USDA will continue to promote the range of options available to provide nutritious meals to children in need year-round. Summer feeding programs rely on collaborative and innovative efforts to reach children in need, and we will be working closely with program partners and a wide range of stakeholders to support implementation of non-congregate meal service in rural communities starting this summer, and we welcome your feedback along the way.

28. The Department of Defense’s recent data show 77% of youth aged 17-24 are ineligible to serve in the military, with the leading disqualifier being obesity. This is a grave national security concern. Aside from nutrition education, how do our federal nutrition programs address the obesity epidemic in the U.S.? What health outcomes have resulted from the changes in child nutrition program meal standards since 2010?

USDA Response

Thank you for raising the issue of obesity and the importance of nutrition security—not just to children’s health, but to our nation’s security. Children without consistent access to the nutrition

they need are at a higher risk for diet-related chronic diseases including obesity. Child nutrition programs serve nearly 30 million children on a typical day,³ and for many of those children, school breakfast and lunch make up about half of the food they eat in a given school day.⁴ Through the National School Lunch Program, National School Breakfast Program, and the and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) program, children receive nutritious meals and snacks that are high in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and lower in added sugar and sodium.

We recently proposed updates to program nutrition standards in the school meals programs to reflect the latest nutrition science and move the needle for children's health. We know that schools continue to face significant supply chain and labor challenges, and we have done and will continue to do everything in our power to support them. But it is still vital—and our statutory responsibility—to continue to make progress, and we are committed to doing so in a way that is workable for schools and for industry.

A study published last year in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that school meals are the healthiest meals kids receive on a given day.⁵ And as stated above, for many children, school breakfast and lunch make up about half of what they eat every day. We also know that students' access to nutritious meals makes a difference for their success in the classroom. So when we move the needle on nutrition in school meals, we can expect to see meaningful impacts for millions of children. While any parent knows that it is not easy to change eating habits and schools face hurdles to improving nutrition, the future payoffs of even incremental changes are extraordinary.

You asked about the impact of meal standard changes stemming from the bipartisan Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. A 2019 USDA study found that school meals became significantly more nutritious after the 2012 nutrition standards were implemented. They featured more vegetables, whole grains, and dairy than before—and less refined grains and empty calories. Similarly, the average Healthy Eating Index—or HEI—scores went up quite a bit after the 2012 meal standards were implemented. For school lunch, the HEI score went up by 24 points—from 58 to 82 out of 100; the score for school breakfast went up by 21 points.⁶

The changes in the meals translated to meaningful outcomes. Importantly, we saw that schools that served healthier meals had school meal participation rates 10 percentage points higher than schools that served less healthy meals. And research shows that kids who ate lunches from

³ See FNS Child Nutrition Tables, available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>. Accessed March 31, 2023.

⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, Final Report Volume 4: Student Participation, Satisfaction, Plate Waste, and Dietary Intakes by Mary Kay Fox, Elizabeth Gearan, Charlotte Cabili, Dallas Dotter, Katherine Niland, Liana Washburn, Nora Paxton, Lauren Olsho, Lindsay LeClair, and Vinh Tran. Project Officer: John Endahl. Alexandria, VA: April 2019, p. 154 and p. 192.

⁵ Liu J, Micha R, Li Y, Mozaffarian D. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021;4(4):e215262. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.5262

⁶ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study: Summary of Findings* by Mary Kay Fox and Elizabeth Gearan, Mathematica Policy Research in partnership with Abt Associates, Inc. Project Officer: John Endahl. Alexandria, VA: 2019

school were more likely to consume milk, fruits, and vegetables and less likely to consume desserts, snack items, and non-milk beverages than kids who brought lunch from home.

The work we are doing in school meals is just one example. In WIC—one of our most effective public health programs—in addition to updating the food packages to reflect the latest nutrition science, we are working to expand the program’s reach to serve more eligible children and families with resources Congress provided in *the American Rescue Plan Act*.

Evidence is clear that WIC participation is associated with fewer infant deaths, fewer premature births, and increased birth weights—and reduced health care costs. It also leads to better health and academic outcomes for children and is one of the most powerful public health interventions available to reduce stark racial disparities in maternal and child health outcomes.

We also seek to expand access to healthy and nutritious foods through initiatives like the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP), which provides incentives to SNAP participants to purchase fruits and vegetables. USDA is also expanding healthy incentive initiatives with a new Electronic Healthy Incentives Project (eHIP). eHIP will test the delivery of incentives through States’ electronic benefit transfer (EBT) systems, which could reduce administrative costs and increase efficiency, allowing more incentive dollars to reach SNAP participants.

29. The SNAP online purchasing pilot provides a new shopping option for recipients in need of food assistance. Some retailers operating in an Internet-only capacity, or those that do not have a brick-and-mortar presence, are experiencing roadblocks with the FNS SNAP authorization process and consequently are not able to offer this shopping option to recipients. How many retailers designated as Internet-only are currently authorized for SNAP online purchasing? What is FNS’s plan and timeline for allowing additional Internet-only retailers into the SNAP online purchasing pilot?

USDA Response

Internet-only firms may offer new shopping options for SNAP recipients and, while no such retailers have been authorized to accept online SNAP payment to date, USDA has been working closely with the first such retailers.

This process is resource and time intensive because internet-only firms present novel and complex authorization and program integrity issues, and because these retailers are generally unfamiliar with program rules. In alignment with our program integrity responsibilities and our commitment to providing SNAP participants with broad access to eligible food, we have been moving ahead deliberately to ensure that these firms meet SNAP eligibility criteria, and that we carefully consider and address heightened integrity concerns.

USDA stands ready to work with Congress to ensure we strike the right balance as we move forward.

30. FNS does not provide the documents and other information that its program specialists and section chiefs review and rely upon in deciding whether to charge SNAP retailers with trafficking and other program violations to retailers and their attorneys during administrative proceedings. All such information is provided during judicial review proceedings.

- a. Why does FNS not do so?
- b. Would you consider doing so (subject to an NDA or other protective order)?

USDA Response

USDA provides investigative reports when on-site investigations are conducted, and the full set of suspicious EBT transactions and store visit information, including photographs, when an investigation is initiated based on a holistic look at the store's transactions. Information that would reveal the Agency's investigative techniques, however, is not provided to SNAP retailers or their attorneys. Releasing information of that nature would undermine enforcement and program integrity efforts.

USDA is committed to providing SNAP retailers with the tools they need to understand and follow program rules. Training materials and videos are readily available, and USDA regularly shares important program reminders in multiple languages. Preventing violations from happening in the first place is the best outcome for SNAP participants and retailers.

31. FNS's Administrative Review Branch does not hold evidentiary hearings or permit discovery during SNAP retailer proceedings.

- a. Why not? Will it commence doing so like other USDA agencies (e.g. National Appeals Division)?
- b. Does FNS place the burden of proof on SNAP retailers charged with trafficking and other program violations to rebut the allegations in the charge letter? If so, why?
- c. How is that equitable given that retailers do not have the records that the agency relies upon in making administrative determinations that resulting in the term or permanent disqualification of SNAP retailers?

USDA Response

The USDA FNS Administrative Review process follows the provisions of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, and SNAP regulations which outline the administrative review process.

Store owners suspected of committing Program violations receive a letter of charges outlining the suspected violations. Store owners have due process rights, including but not limited to, the ability to respond to the charges outlined in the letter. Any such response from the store owner is considered before a determination is rendered.

Subsequently, if the store owner disagrees with the Agency's determination, they may avail themselves of the opportunity for administrative review. At this time, the retailer may submit additional information for consideration, if they so desire. After administrative review, aggrieved store owners may avail themselves of judicial level review, which consists of a trial de novo meaning a court will decide questions of fact and law anew. In a trial de novo, retailers may submit new evidence for the Court's consideration.

32. Representatives of SNAP-authorized small groceries and convenience stores, including Young's Grocery in Earle, Arkansas, have asked senior USDA and FNS officials what they can

do to avoid trafficking charges when they observe SNAP beneficiaries redeeming substantial amounts of SNAP benefits (e.g. more than \$35-40) at one time or using their EBT cards multiple times the same day or within 48 hours.

- a. What has been the FNS response?
- b. What can those retailers do to avoid receiving trafficking charges in those instances?

USDA Response

SNAP retailers are partners in ensuring that SNAP participants utilize benefits to purchase eligible food. SNAP retailers are responsible for ensuring that all employees are properly trained to follow SNAP rules. USDA provides extensive training materials and information to assist retailers in establishing good business practices. Inventory, sales, and other standard business records can verify the legitimacy of any SNAP transactions that occur in a particular store. We also encourage retailers to report suspected trafficking.

33. What data, analysis, and other support does FNS have for the reliability of the patterns of SNAP transactions flagged by FNS's ALERT systems?

- a. How does FNS know that these transactions are evidence of trafficking in SNAP benefits?
- b. What percentage of transactions flagged by the ALERT system as suspicious are investigated by FNS program specialists and section chiefs prior to charging SNAP retailers with trafficking?
- c. What percentage of SNAP retailers charged with trafficking based on patterns of suspicious transactions (e.g. flagged by ALERT) are permanently disqualified from SNAP?

USDA Response

The Anti-Fraud Locator using Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) Retailer Transactions (ALERT) system is a fraud detection system designed to monitor and track electronically conducted retail transactions by SNAP recipients in authorized meal program and retailer locations. ALERT facilitates management of the program by providing transaction-level information to Federal personnel responsible for SNAP retailer management and compliance. ALERT identifies retailers for further investigation, but the actual cases are investigated by retailer compliance staff. The case is not made or decided by ALERT—ALERT is merely an analysis tool to help compliance staff evaluate data.

SNAP retailers are critical partners in operating the program and ensuring program integrity, and most are compliant with program rules. In fiscal year 2022, only 3% of authorized SNAP retailers were the subject of initiated compliance investigations and less than 1% were the subject of a permanent disqualification for trafficking. In fiscal year 2021, USDA identified, through ALERT and other means, 27,862 firms as potential compliance violators and conducted 11,273 investigations of authorized retail firms to determine compliance with program requirements. In FY2021, 1,595 retailers were permanently disqualified from SNAP.

34. How many trafficking civil money penalties did FNS issue since October 1, 2018? Why so few?

USDA Response

A trafficking civil money penalty (TCMP) may be assessed instead of permanent disqualification if: (a) a firm requests consideration of a TCMP within 10 days of receipt of a letter charging them with trafficking, and (b) a firm submits documentation proving that an effective compliance program was established prior to when the violations occurred.

Since October 1, 2018, 16 trafficking civil money penalties have been assessed. The *Food and Nutrition Act of 2008*, as amended, limits the conditions under which a TCMP may be assessed. Specifically, section 12(b)(3)(B) of the Act requires that, in order to assess a civil money penalty in lieu of disqualification, the Secretary needs substantial evidence that the relevant store “had an effective policy and program in effect to prevent violations,” including evidence that neither the ownership nor the management of the firm were aware of, approved of, or benefitted from the trafficking.

35. Why does FNS require retailers to respond in 10 days and not provide extensions of time?

USDA Response

Section 14(a)(3) of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, requires stores that disagree with USDA action to respond within ten days of the date they were notified of an adverse action. In some circumstances, extensions can be provided to allow stores to provide additional information.

36. Why does FNS not review SNAP training materials prepared by retailers interested in ensuring their eligibility for a trafficking CMP?

a. Do FNS officials visit stores, talk with owners and employees, or talk with SNAP beneficiaries prior to or after SNAP retailers are charged with trafficking and other program violations? If not, why not?

b. Does FNS provide warnings to SNAP retailers after an undercover investigation reveals that a store sold SNAP-ineligible items? If not, why does FNS not provide the retailer with the opportunity to take corrective action and re-train employees (as state WIC agencies do when most WIC violations are discovered)?

USDA Response

When a store owner applies for SNAP authorization, they sign and certify understanding of their responsibility to train all employees about SNAP rules. USDA provides SNAP store owners with detailed training materials and periodically sends reminder notices to all SNAP authorized stores.

Store owners with questions may reach out to FNS through the SNAP Retailer Service Center, or by email to FNS. When a store that is charged with trafficking timely requests a TCMP and submits the required documentation of training and store compliance policies, that information is reviewed to determine whether a TCMP is warranted in lieu of permanent disqualification.

Store visits are an integral part of the SNAP authorization, reauthorization, and compliance process. These visits are conducted to assess store eligibility and inform FNS as to the store's business operations. Store visits are conducted in alignment with requirements in the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended.

Finally, minor violations uncovered during an investigation do result in warning letters which remind retailers of their training responsibilities and point to available training materials. In fiscal year 2021, 784 stores received warnings regarding violations requiring the attention of store owners.

Document Requests

Please provide:

1. Any copy of a document or form indicating that each USDA agency or office approved the TFP.
2. A copy of documentation indicating the approval of the TFP by non-USDA agencies.
3. A copy of the current telework agreement for Catherine Buhrig, the new FNS SNAP Director, based in Alexandria, VA.
4. Any decision memoranda prepared by FNS or the USDA, Office of the Secretary, relating to the TFP.
5. Documentation or email messages showing the highest amount or figure that USDA considered increasing SNAP benefits as a part of its reevaluation of the TFP.
6. A copy of briefing materials or PowerPoint presentations prepared by FNS or the USDA, Office of the Secretary, relating to the TFP.
7. A copy of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request and responsive records for the following FOIA requests sent to USDA: 2021-FNS-05455-F.

USDA Response

See enclosed documents.

Senator Michael F. Bennet

1. Today, virtually every American has a smart phone, and more and more Coloradans are using it daily to buy goods and services. But in the year 2023 they still can't use SNAP on their phone. According to Nourish Colorado, an organization that connects farmers and ranchers with communities in need of healthy food, this doesn't just hurt families, but our farmers markets and local grocery stores who increasingly accept mobile payments.

- a. How can we modernize SNAP to be used on our cell phones, making it more accessible for families and food vendors?

USDA Response

Households may now apply for SNAP benefits using a mobile application in many States. Bringing modern payment options to SNAP participants, enhancing program integrity, and

supporting American farmers and businesses that expand food access for SNAP participants are USDA priorities, and we appreciate the bipartisan Congressional support for these efforts. Mobile payments are widely considered a safe, secure, and convenient way to pay for groceries. Bringing modern payment options to SNAP participants also has potential to improve customer service and prevent fraud.

As directed by the 2018 Farm Bill, USDA recently announced the selection of five States—Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, and Oklahoma—to operate mobile payment pilots.

These pilots will help USDA test mobile payment technology in SNAP – allowing people to input their EBT card information onto a mobile device and purchase food with SNAP benefits using their cell phone, tablet, or smart watch, instead of using a physical EBT card. We are working with State agencies as well as EBT processors, mobile wallet providers, retailers, and others to support a successful rollout in the pilot States. The selected pilot States will also work with USDA and other stakeholders to develop mobile-friendly software that streamlines SNAP transactions at the point of sale. Once up and running, the States will train and educate SNAP recipients on how to use the new tools. Through the pilots, we will also gain insight into whether mobile payment allows faster delivery of SNAP benefits than card delivery by mail, and the impact of utilizing mobile payments on fraud, such as EBT card skimming or card cloning.

2. What are the effects of the end of the public health emergency on individuals – college students in particular since as many as one-third of college students will face food insecurity at some point in their college careers – and what is USDA doing to make sure those who are still eligible for nutrition assistance continue to receive SNAP benefits and do not fall through the cracks?

a. In what ways can USDA ensure that college students have greater access to SNAP and face fewer barriers (such as work requirements)?

USDA Response

USDA is committed to ensuring that all Americans, including eligible college students, get the help they need to access healthful, affordable food. College students enrolled at least half-time are only eligible for SNAP benefits under certain exemptions, such as working at least 20 hours a week in paid employment. USDA is providing guidance to State agencies to clarify who qualifies under the existing student exemptions and how to screen for those exemptions. USDA has also provided guidance and resources, such as a sample notice, to State agencies to prepare for the end of the temporary student exemptions after the Federal public health emergency (PHE) is lifted. As part of the annual SNAP outreach memo, USDA has included student outreach as a priority area and shared strategies that State agencies can use to identify potential SNAP-eligible students. We are working with the Department of Education (ED) to conduct outreach to students and institutions of higher education to notify them about the end of the temporary student exemptions and look forward to continuing work with ED to identify ways to improve access to SNAP for eligible students through targeted outreach.

It is important to keep in mind that existing SNAP student rules are based on the traditional idea that college students are temporarily low-income but have family resources to support their basic needs. However, that is not the case for many students today. According to data from the

National Center for Education Statistics, three-fourths of college students now have at least one “non-traditional” characteristic, such as being financially independent from their parents or having dependent children.

USDA welcomes the chance to work with Congress to explore potential changes to student policy in the upcoming Farm Bill.

3. The State of Colorado has now invested upwards of \$1 million in building the necessary technology to be able to place the state’s produce incentive Double Up SNAP incentive directly on to the SNAP EBT card, reducing stigma, easing administrative burden, and making the program much easier for food vendors and retailers to offer. As Colorado builds the infrastructure, there is a significant increase in interest and demand for the incentive program. Nourish Colorado’s SNAP shopper listening sessions showed that bringing Double Up to more locations was a top priority for the state.

In 2023, Nourish Colorado’s existing budget for the program only covers 45% of the requested incentives from current partners, not including projected new partners. EBT integration, along with additional investment in GusNIP, will make it easier for more Colorado retailers to participate in SNAP incentives, particularly in small and rural retail settings where technical assistance is more limited and there is a significant need for technology upgrades. EBT integration can therefore increase program reach to more SNAP participants across the state.

- a. How will USDA support Colorado’s EBT integration of GusNIP and how can Congress use the 2023 Farm Bill to continue this work?

USDA Response

USDA supports improved access to fruits and vegetables through expanded SNAP healthy incentive initiatives. SNAP is expanding healthy incentive initiatives with a new \$25 million Electronic Healthy Incentives Project, or eHIP, to test the delivery of incentives through States’ existing EBT infrastructure. As you suggested, EBT integration could reduce administrative costs, streamline participation, and increase efficiency. This year, USDA will select up to three States to receive funding and support to run eHIP for SNAP participants in their State.

Incentive programs encourage SNAP recipients to purchase healthful foods by providing bonus food items or extra funds when they buy specific foods, such as fruits and vegetables. These projects improve food and nutrition security by making it easier for SNAP households to access the healthful foods we all need for optimal health and wellbeing.

FNS looks forward to working with Congress to strengthen SNAP incentive programs as part of the 2023 Farm Bill process.

4. According to the Colorado Department of Human Services, thieves use skimming devices to clone EBT cards. Unlike credit or debit cards, there are no consumer protections for EBT cards. In 2022, Skimmers attacked the accounts of 243 Colorado families, resulting in more than \$215,000 in stolen SNAP funds. The Consolidated Appropriations Act provided temporary relief to Colorado households that fall victim to skimming theft. Hunger Free Colorado and the

families they work with across the state depend on the temporary consumer protections that will end in 2024 to feel safe and secure.

- A. What can USDA do to ensure that a permanent solution is in place to prevent skimming theft, and ensure that households that lose their SNAP benefits through no fault of their own can have their benefits replaced in the future?

USDA Response

USDA is fully committed to combating card skimming, card cloning, and other fraudulent methods, which can be devastating for victims who rely on their benefits to feed their families. The 2023 Omnibus spending bill signed into law in December allows States to replace stolen SNAP benefits using Federal funds under certain circumstances through September 2024. USDA is working quickly to implement this new law and is committed to supporting States throughout this process.

USDA is working with our State and Federal partners, as well as retailers, EBT processors, law enforcement, and other industry experts to protect SNAP benefits. This includes exploring more secure payment technologies to protect SNAP recipients from becoming victims of theft. FNS has already issued guidance to States on how to reimburse victims, verify theft claims, and collect data to better understand this emerging issue. USDA has started approving State plans, so that States can begin reimbursing families whose much-needed benefits have been stolen.

Over the next year, USDA will also work on new regulations to prevent SNAP benefit theft from occurring in the first place, by making EBT cards more secure. The Department is also exploring long-term technological solutions, such as chip card technology and mobile payment pilot projects, that will provide enhanced benefit security.

USDA stands ready to work with Congress as you consider how to address this issue.

5. According to the USDA ERS, the Consumer Price Index for food eaten at home increased 11.8% from December 2021, compared to December 2022. For 2023, food prices are expected to grow more slowly, but still increase above historical average rates.

- a. With food prices high right now, and forecasted to continue growing by about 8% for food-at-home, what would the impact of reducing SNAP benefits mean to SNAP participants, SNAP retailers, and local economies, with a particular focus on children because about half of those who participate in SNAP are children?

USDA Response

We know that food inflation has taken a bite out of families' budgets, and we are grateful that Congress designed most of USDA FNS' programs to protect the purchasing power of participants. In SNAP, families' benefits adjust annually for the cost of food.

When Congress considers potential changes to SNAP, it is important to keep in mind who this program serves. SNAP is a lifeline for tens of millions of Americans in every part of the country and it serves a diverse range of people. About 70 percent of SNAP participants are children, older adults, or adults with disabilities. By enabling families to afford healthful food for their children, this program helps parents ensure their children grow and thrive. SNAP participation

by young children has been linked to better long-term health, education, and employment outcomes.

Not only does SNAP help families put food on the table, the program also acts as an economic stabilizer by injecting demand into the economy. SNAP benefits are used at grocery stores, benefiting those stores' employees as well as the truck drivers and distribution centers who deliver the food, the manufacturing plants who process it, and the hard-working farmers who produce it.

6. A USDA FNS study found that only about 2% of SNAP participants purchase most of their groceries at stores, including small grocery stores in rural or underserved areas across Colorado. Smaller, independent grocers can often find the onboarding process to become a SNAP retailer overwhelming and difficult.

a. What would a technical assistance center for small grocers look like, and how could that impact local communities that serve SNAP participants?

USDA Response

USDA operates the SNAP Retailer Service Center (RSC), a resource that provides subject matter expert assistance for store owners who are submitting a SNAP retailer application or are already authorized. The experts working at the RSC support multiple languages and have access to the store's SNAP retailer application and any requests that FNS has made of the store owner, to make the process easier.

Additionally, USDA is working diligently to bring smaller, independent grocery stores on board the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot. As of January 2023, approximately 49 percent of the retail banners that have launched SNAP online purchasing are single stores or small chain stores. We are prioritizing smaller retailers and farmers as we continue to develop our plan for how to best deploy the resources Congress provides to support online SNAP shopping. In December 2022, USDA awarded funds to the National Grocers Association Foundation to stand up the SNAP EBT Modernization Technical Assistance Center. The Center will provide guidance and technical expertise to retailers as they move through the implementation process.

7. Unfortunately, misinformation, limited access to technology and transportation, and other barriers to access mean that not all eligible persons who would benefit from SNAP apply. SNAP Outreach programs allow trusted community organizations to increase access to SNAP by combatting stigma and providing information and application assistance. Currently the federal match for SNAP Outreach programs is 50%, which organizations like Hunger Free Colorado report is a barrier to reaching all eligible persons in their state.

A. How can SNAP Outreach be strengthened to ensure that all eligible persons can access the program?

USDA Response

USDA estimates that 82 percent of eligible people received SNAP benefits in FY 2019.

However, variation in SNAP participation persists across States. USDA is committed to ensuring that eligible households are aware of and able to access SNAP.

In FY 2022, USDA released the first annual outreach priorities memo to State agencies, encouraging States to consider pursuing outreach efforts focused on especially vulnerable populations, such as college students, veterans, and older adults. The FY 2022 memo provides recommended strategies that State agencies can employ to reach these priority populations.

Federal reimbursement for SNAP outreach activities is limited to 50 percent by statute. USDA looks forward to working with Congress to identify additional ways to strengthen SNAP outreach.

Senator Kirsten Gillibrand

1. The 2018 Farm Bill strengthened SNAP Employment & Training, or “E&T” programs by allowing participation of paid job training programs, like for apprenticeships, that can best reach individuals with little prior work experience and high barriers to securing a job.

- a. Will you discuss USDA’s implementation of SNAP E&T program improvements?
- b. What have you done to ensure states and E&T providers understand these important new tools to help people find paid training and careers that lead to self-sufficiency?
- c. How can USDA make it easier for more states and E&T providers to take part in this new expanded authority?

USDA Response

SNAP is an important work support, and the program is designed to provide incentives for participants to seek employment. Through SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) programs, States can provide training and support services to those who need assistance in entering the workforce. In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress took important steps to improve the quality of SNAP E&T programs, emphasizing the use of evidence-based practices like case management and work-based learning. The 2018 Farm Bill also underscored the importance of matching participants with the right services and partnering with State workforce systems to align programs with the needs of participants and employers.

In March 2021, USDA published a final rule implementing these changes. The rule expands upon the themes in the 2018 Farm Bill. FNS hosted a webinar for States in April 2021, released two sets of Q&A’s, published additional guidance on the implementation of subsidized work-based learning (a new SNAP E&T component added by the 2018 Farm Bill), and released guidance on screening and referral to E&T to ensure participants receive appropriate services.

States want to build stronger E&T programs that truly help SNAP participants get a job, keep their job, or get a better job, and USDA is working to provide the support and resources to help them do that. For example, in December 2022 we hosted a SNAP E&T National Forum with 350 attendees from 51 States and territories. The National Forum brought together E&T stakeholders from across the country to learn from one another and share best practices. This type of peer learning complements the in-depth technical assistance USDA provides to States through our

SNAP to Skills project and our work with 142 E&T providers in 31 States through our SNAP E&T National Partnership grants.

We have come a long way in SNAP E&T, and we are committed to continuing to strengthen the program with our continued work across the country. By learning what works, we are integrating promising and evidence-based practices that will better the program for all participants. We welcome Congress' continued partnership along the way as we seek to strengthen and improve these opportunities.

2. A major issue I have heard from E&T providers – including from my state of New York – is that participants are getting kicked off SNAP because the wages they get from the expanded E&T training programs count towards their income. Since you must be on SNAP to participate in E&T, they're also getting kicked off SNAP E&T because of the very wages they earn from E&T. I am working on legislation to disregard wages received in a SNAP E&T job training program so participants can continue to both receive SNAP support and take part in these high-quality training programs without interruption.

a. Will you commit to working with me and the committee to make sure SNAP E&T participants can finish their transitional jobs and paid training before they are deemed ineligible through no fault of their own?

USDA Response

The Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, requires that States consider income from most job training programs, including SNAP Employment and Training (E&T), as they do income earned from other sources. This means that income earned from most job training activities may change household benefit levels, and potentially make a household ineligible for SNAP, and consequently SNAP E&T. USDA does not have the authority to waive this requirement for States. USDA has provided guidance encouraging States to work with SNAP E&T participants to determine how many hours they can participate in a paid job training activity before their household income exceeds their household eligibility, and to ensure that they understand how their SNAP eligibility and/or benefit levels may be impacted by the activities.

While USDA cannot waive the requirement to consider income earned through most job training programs, including SNAP E&T, it is worth noting that earnings of individuals participating in most programs under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) are excluded from income. USDA welcomes the opportunity to work with you as you consider ways to strengthen and improve these programs.

3. As you know, the Healthy Food Financing Initiative is a model solution for access to fresh and healthy food outlets. HFFI was authorized as part of the farm bill to build on existing efforts and allow for communities across the country to improve healthy food access, foster local economies, and enhance public health- in urban, rural and small towns. While the Rural Business-Cooperative Service has a number of financing programs, HFFI in particular has been proven to create jobs, revitalize communities, generate tax revenue, improve access to healthy food, and establish new opportunities to support the growth and expansion of rural food

economies in the region. HFFI has had three rounds of small grants and each time it is extremely overprescribe.

- a. How are you coordinating with other programs to leverage this great program model? How is USDA communicating out to the field that this new program exists?

USDA Response

The Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) has a strong track record of success in both rural and urban communities nationwide. The Rural Business Cooperative Service at USDA Rural Development (RD) is thrilled that, in 2022, the HFFI program received \$155 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to greatly expand HFFI, as a part of the Food Systems Transformation (FST) effort at USDA. \$20 million of this funding has already been awarded and announced in 2022. The HFFI works together with other FST programs, and existing USDA programs, to create a more resilient, fair, and just food supply chain that provides more market opportunities for farm producers and more healthy, affordable food options for consumers. For instance, HFFI can work alongside the Food Supply Chain Guaranteed Loans to finance enterprises along the supply chain bringing America's farm foods to healthy retailers, for the benefit of consumers nationwide. Or, just as HFFI provides financing to retailers of healthy foods, RD's Meat and Poultry Intermediary Lending Program provides capital to processors who support independent producers to bring products to consumers through retail establishments. And, legacy programs such as the Business & Industry Guaranteed Loan program and REAP (Rural Energy for America Program), while not food- or food retail specific, can and have provided both grant and loan capital to retailers looking to grow or adopt sustainable and energy efficient technologies, and expand fresh food offerings.

Please see the FST website for more information: <https://www.usda.gov/build-back-better>.

HFFI is administered by Reinvestment Fund (RF), a Community Development Financial Institution, on behalf of USDA RD. As the National Fund Manager, they are responsible for developing and implementing the expanded HFFI program in FY 2023 and USDA expects launch of the expanded HFFI in the first half of calendar year 2023. USDA RD will continue coordinating with RF to communicate new availability of funds, award announcements, and more.

4. We have seen a small increase in kosher commodity availability since 2020, but this increase is inadequate for emergency food providers to meet USDA's "MyPlate" standards. During this period, only one halal product was added to The Emergency Food Assistance Program commodities list.

- a. What is the Food and Nutrition Service doing to expand the availability of kosher, halal, and other culturally sensitive food products in The Emergency Food Assistance Program and other emergency food programs? How can Congress support those efforts in the 2023 Farm Bill?

USDA Response

USDA is committed to offering a variety of nutritious, domestically-produced food options—

including kosher and halal foods—through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) to meet the needs of diverse communities in the United States. We continue to explore strategies for increasing the availability of foods that will meet the needs of communities seeking kosher and halal products in TEFAP.

Currently, several USDA Foods require commercial kosher or halal certification, and many more are acceptable to some kosher or halal observant communities without certification. FNS is currently working with Jewish and Muslim advocacy organizations to identify and promote these items that do not require a commercial certification. To expand awareness of existing offerings, USDA published new online resources for State agencies, food banks, and advocacy organizations late last year. The TEFAP Fresh Produce Box, introduced in FY 2021, provides additional fresh produce options to meet the needs of diverse communities, including those observing kosher and halal practices.

Over the past year, USDA has met with a range of stakeholders and released a survey to collect feedback from TEFAP State agencies and eligible recipient agencies such as food banks to understand the needs of kosher and halal observant communities, identify opportunities to incorporate kosher and halal food items in TEFAP, inform adjustments to priority foods and desired certifications as needed, and provide technical assistance to State agencies and food banks. USDA will use the information collected to inform decisions on how best to support the diverse communities served through TEFAP.

Each year FNS and AMS work collaboratively to develop a list of priority items for the agencies to jointly commit to addressing within the coming year. For calendar year 2023, several of these priorities directly relate to the procurement of kosher and halal foods for TEFAP and other emergency food programs, including assessing appropriate kosher and halal certifications, conducting market research to determine the feasibility of procuring additional kosher or halal certified items, and assessing whether kosher certification can be added as a requirement for frozen fruits and vegetables.

Taken together, these actions will support the Department's goal of ensuring State agencies and food banks have a variety of offerings available to observant communities to help meet the increasing demand for kosher and halal certified foods. USDA also appreciates Congressional interest in this topic and is available to work with Congress on any other advancements they wish to see.

5. In New York, the GusNIP program, otherwise known locally as Double Up Bucks NY Program, matches SNAP dollars \$1 for \$1 on purchases of local fresh fruits and vegetables helping families get access to healthy food. More than 100,000 New York SNAP participants are able to access the Double Up Bucks Program in over 220 locations. This program is having a significant impact on the local food economy contributing to \$8.3 million in local produce sales from over 400 local farmers. As GusNIP continues to grow, how can the Farm Bill and USDA ensure local farmers continue to benefit from the program?

USDA Response

USDA supports incentive programs as an effective way to promote healthy eating and improve nutrition security for more Americans. We are working to expand these incentives, including

GusNIP, and learn from current incentive programs to inform future expansions. Our continued investment in incentives delivers on the White House commitment to improving access to healthy and affordable food.

USDA encourages SNAP retailers to participate in one or more of the SNAP-based incentive initiatives, which include:

- The Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP), focused on increasing fruit and vegetable consumption;
- The Healthy Fluid Milk Incentive (HFMI), which aims to increase consumption of low-fat milk; and
- State, nonprofit, and retailer-initiated SNAP incentives that promote foods aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Recognizing the powerful opportunity to leverage incentives to support health, the Biden-Harris Administration—as part of the Food Systems Transformation effort—invested nearly \$85 million in incentives for SNAP participants to purchase healthy fruits and vegetables.

That includes \$25 million for the Electronic Healthy Incentive Projects—or eHIP. Through these projects, States will test SNAP incentive delivery through State electronic benefit transfer (EBT) systems, with the goal of reducing administrative costs and allowing incentive dollars to reach more SNAP participants.

Additionally, USDA provides targeted support to farmers interested in redeeming SNAP benefits. USDA provides access to a mobile payment application and card reader that farmers can use to accept SNAP benefits at all direct marketing outlets and is developing an online SNAP payments platform specifically for farmers.

We stand ready to work with Congress on expanding these effective models to promote healthy eating, support local farmers, and bolster SNAP participants' purchasing power.

6. According to the Emergency Food Assistance Act of 1983, as amended by the Agricultural Act of 2014, 7 U.S.C. § 7502(h), Kosher and Halal food,

“As soon as practicable after February 7, 2014, the Secretary shall finalize and implement a plan—

- (a) to increase the purchase of Kosher and Halal food from food manufacturers with a Kosher or Halal certification to carry out the program established under this chapter if the Kosher and Halal food purchased is cost neutral as compared to food that is not from food manufacturers with a Kosher or Halal certification; and

(2) to modify the labeling of the commodities list used to carry out the program in a manner that enables Kosher and Halal distribution entities to identify which commodities to obtain from local food banks.”

This amendment was first introduced by my office and former Representative Crowley during the 2013 Farm Bill negotiations and was signed into law by President Obama on February 7, 2014. It is now February 16th of 2023, over nine years since this bill became law, and we are unaware of any such plan. Can you explain the delay in creating or implementing this plan and how the 2023 Farm Bill can help to address these issues?

USDA Response

Since the enactment of the Agricultural Act of 2014, USDA has made significant strides to increase the purchase of kosher and halal certified USDA Foods and modify the labeling requirements to ensure food banks and distributing agencies can identify the foods needed to serve their communities. Since 2014, USDA has added kosher certified canned salmon, canned tuna, peanut butter, canned tomato sauce, canned applesauce, canned pears, canned green beans, canned corn, and canned garbanzo beans to the TEFAP Foods Available List. The canned tomato sauce is also halal certified. All kosher and halal-certified foods are indicated on the Foods Available Lists (FAL). This change was first implemented on the FY 2015 FAL and continues to be the practice. USDA FNS worked collaboratively with AMS to identify a list of acceptable kosher and halal certifications for USDA Foods, and these are publicly available for vendors to review in the specifications housed on AMS’ website. There are products on the FAL that are likely already kosher certified, such as canned fruits and vegetables, that are not currently required to have kosher certification in USDA’s procurement specifications. Requiring these items to have a certification offers a cost-neutral opportunity to expand the kosher foods available through TEFAP.

In FY 2022, USDA provided a report to Congress on the agency’s activities to support kosher and halal observant communities through procurement and resource development. USDA will provide an updated report to Congress in FY 2023 and welcomes the opportunity to provide technical assistance to Congress as it considers the 2023 Farm Bill.

Senator Cory Booker

1. SNAP-Ed is currently the largest program we have to improve SNAP diet quality, and is one of the primary tools that we have to improve the nutrition security of low-income Americans. However, the program does not reach nearly enough people.

a. How might SNAP-Ed be redesigned so that it can start to reach a lot more of the 90 million low-income Americans who we need to reach?

USDA Response

In FY 2022, States reported reaching an estimated 77 million individuals through SNAP-Ed projects across 313,617 sites with 27,496 partners. The estimated number of individuals reached reflect SNAP-Ed projects that include interventions, such as direct education, as well as organizational and community-level interventions and social marketing campaigns.

Every State currently has SNAP-Ed interventions underway that focus on making the healthy choice the easy choice through policy, system, and environmental (PSE) change. PSE

interventions support healthy diet and physical activity and have the potential to reach significantly more SNAP eligible people than traditional direct education. Fifty-one percent of all SNAP-Ed interventions included PSE activities; however, estimating an unduplicated number of individuals reached through these interventions is challenging.

Efforts to modernize and improve data collection and reporting are underway. The new electronic National Program Evaluation and Administration Reporting System, or N-PEARS, will replace the existing system this year. The new electronic system will increase the feasibility of measuring SNAP-Ed's reach and public health impact and will facilitate planning and reporting of State SNAP-Ed efforts to better share outcomes and metrics with program stakeholders.

Additionally, in FY 2022, USDA FNS added a new Nutrition Education Branch dedicated to the SNAP-Ed program, strengthening FNS's capacity to provide specialized training and technical support to States and SNAP-Ed implementing agencies. In the near term, the new Branch is prioritizing implementation of N-PEARS and increased use of PSE interventions across the country, including improved reporting of program reach. USDA anticipates these efforts will improve SNAP-Ed's ability to better reflect broad impact on food and nutrition security and move the program in a direction that expands reach and inspires innovation through public health approaches.

Senator Ben Ray Lujan

1. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is one of the most effective tools the federal government has at its disposal to combat widespread hunger and food insecurity. In the state of New Mexico, 40 percent of all SNAP recipients are children. Kids have no control over how much money their parents make, nor can they contribute economically to their household. But I think we can all agree that in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, no child should go to bed hungry because of political decisions made in Washington, DC.

- a. Will the recent updates to the Thrifty Food Plan help combat child poverty?
- b. Can an association be made between SNAP enrollment and improved health outcomes?

USDA Response

As directed by Congress in the 2018 Farm Bill, USDA re-evaluated the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP)—which is used to set SNAP benefit amounts—to reflect the true price of a cost-conscious, healthy diet today based on current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance. The Urban Institute found that the increase to SNAP benefits resulting from the TFP re-evaluation lifted 2.3 million people out of poverty and reduced child poverty by 8.6 percent.

A modernized TFP is more than a commitment to good nutrition—it is an investment in our nation's health, economy, and security. Putting healthy food in reach for low-income families helps prevent disease, supports children in the classroom, reduces health care costs, and more. Research has shown that participation in SNAP reduces food insecurity and may lead to healthier diets. There is a strong correlation between food insecurity and chronic health conditions among all age groups, from children to seniors. SNAP helps reverse this trend by enabling families to

purchase healthier diets and freeing up financial resources to be used for other necessities such as medical care. A recent study found that—for seniors eligible for both Medicare and Medicaid—participating in SNAP was associated with fewer inpatient hospital admissions and lower health care costs.

2. In addition to the important role that SNAP plays in addressing food insecurity, it has also proven to be a highly effective tool for promoting economic growth. According to the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, every dollar spent on SNAP has the potential to increase GDP by \$1.50.

- a. Is it correct to say that in the event of future economic downturns, SNAP is well-positioned to contribute to rural economies?

USDA Response

SNAP is designed to adapt to changes in economic conditions and provide food to families and communities when it is needed most. This design is one of the program's core strengths. By expanding to meet increased need and contracting when that need abates, SNAP cushions the blow for families across America when a parent loses a job or sees their hours cut.

Not only does SNAP help families put food on the table, it also acts as an economic stabilizer by injecting demand into the economy. SNAP benefits are used at grocery stores, benefiting those stores' employees as well as the truck drivers and distribution centers who deliver the food, the manufacturing plants who process it, and the hard-working farmers who produce it. A 2019 USDA study found that in an economic downturn, every dollar in additional SNAP benefits leads to an increase of \$1.54 in gross domestic product.

SNAP's economic benefits are particularly impactful in rural communities. A study from the USDA Economic Research Service found that, as the country dealt with high unemployment during the Great Recession from 2009 to 2014, household spending of SNAP benefits contributed more to economic recovery in rural areas than urban areas and supported the employment of 279,000 rural workers.

SNAP serves a very diverse range of people in both rural and urban communities. About 70 percent of SNAP participants are children, older adults, or adults with disabilities. The program supports households in major cities and small towns across rural America. For low-income workers, SNAP helps supplement their food budgets so they can afford to put healthy food on the table. For seniors, SNAP supports those who are struggling to make ends meet on a fixed income. And for parents, SNAP helps them afford healthy food for their children so their children can grow and thrive.

3. The SNAP-Ed program plays an important role in disseminating information about improving health through diet and exercise to hard-to-reach populations.

As you know, Tribal Nations are not currently eligible to directly administer SNAP-Ed funds, leaving Tribal citizens out of valuable nutrition education programming.

- a. How can Congress and USDA work together to ensure that culturally appropriate nutrition education is available to Tribal citizens?

- b. More broadly, how can we ensure that SNAP-Ed is tailoring outreach to meet the cultural and language needs of the populations it serves?

USDA Response

In September 2022, USDA released the Memorandum on Tribal Consultation Requirements and the Memorandum on State Tribal Consultation Best Practices, and accompanying trainings for State SNAP agencies to clarify requirements and support efforts to improve tribal consultations. For SNAP-Ed, USDA is taking additional actions to clarify State agencies' responsibilities for consulting with Tribal Nations when conducting required needs assessments for SNAP-Ed. In December 2022, the SNAP-Ed Needs Assessment Toolkit was released to support State agencies' efforts to identify program gaps and assets, and to ensure equity considerations are woven into the program planning process. In addition, this spring, USDA is hosting a training for SNAP-Ed providers to ensure cultural appropriateness and equity considerations are part of the SNAP-Ed planning and implementation process.

More broadly, in September 2022, USDA began a project to evaluate equity in SNAP-Ed service delivery. The purpose of this evaluation is to identify challenges and best practices in the equitable allocation of State funding and service delivery among diverse racial and ethnic groups, individuals with disabilities, urban and rural geographic locations, and indigenous communities. USDA expects to use the project's findings to inform SNAP-Ed program improvements, as well as the development of resources, trainings, and technical assistance, to support culturally appropriate and equitable service delivery.

Apart from SNAP, Tribes that participate in the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) have access to culturally appropriate nutrition education opportunities through an annual appropriation of \$4 million in administrative funds which was made available in FY 2022. This fiscal year, USDA has allocated over \$2.5 million in FDPIR administrative funds for nutrition education to over 80 Tribes. Nutrition education projects range from conducting cooking demonstrations using traditional foods, offering nutrition classes, and developing nutrition education resources on various topics relevant to tribal communities. Nutrition education is delivered using traditional methods and language, and activities may focus on MyPlate nutrition, food sourcing and preservation, health and wellness, and preventing disease. In addition to FDPIR administrative funds for nutrition education, USDA has a cooperative agreement with a SNAP-Ed implementing agency in Oklahoma, the Oklahoma Tribal Engagement Partners (OKTEP), to develop a culturally relevant nutrition paraprofessional training program that educates FDPIR staff on basic nutrition topics to enhance their nutrition education programming. Five in-person trainings will be held in FY 2023, and additional trainings will be held in FY 2024 and 2025. Ensuring administrative funds for nutrition education are appropriated annually supports FDPIR participants' access to culturally appropriate and relevant materials.

4. Deputy Under Secretary Dean and Administrator Long, as we look towards the next Farm Bill, what strategies can both Congress and USDA employ to expand access to locally grown and culturally appropriate foods across the nutrition programs administered by FNS?

USDA Response

USDA has leveraged several opportunities provided by Congress to expand access to locally grown and culturally appropriate foods across nutrition assistance programs. We continue to work with our colleagues across USDA to strengthen connections between farmers, ranchers, and USDA nutrition programs through investments in local and regional food system infrastructure and markets.

USDA receives dedicated funding to purchase traditional foods for the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) food package. Congress provides \$5 million specifically for the traditional food purchases, and USDA's total spending on traditional foods for FDPIR typically exceeds this amount, averaging between \$8-\$14 million in recent years. USDA regularly consults with Tribal partners to identify opportunities to enhance the FDPIR food package, including with respect to traditional foods. Importantly, in the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress authorized up to \$5 million per year for the FDPIR Self-Determination Demonstration Project that empowers Tribal Organizations to procure and distribute local, regional, and/or Tribal foods. Eight Tribal Organizations currently participate in the program, and the application period for Round 2 of the project closed on January 31, 2023. USDA is considering all applications for funding and plans to award the contracts as early as summer 2023.

In The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), Farm to Food Bank grants aim to reduce waste while building relationships between agricultural producers and the local emergency food system. In FY 2023, USDA provided \$3.7 million to 28 States for projects that harvest, process, package, or transport commodities donated by the agricultural industry to be used by emergency feeding organizations. In addition, USDA recently collected feedback from TEFAP State agencies and food banks about culturally responsive foods to inform decision making and procurement strategies.

USDA also supports farmers who sell their products locally through direct marketing outlets, such as farmers' markets and roadside stands by providing a SNAP mobile payment application and card readers to enable them to redeem SNAP benefits.

The Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP), authorized under the Farm Bill, supports access to local foods, and is designed to provide low-income seniors with access to locally grown fruits, vegetables, honey, and herbs; increase the domestic consumption of agricultural commodities through farmers' markets, roadside stands, and community supported agricultural programs; and aid in the development of new and additional farmers' markets, roadside stands, and community support agricultural programs. In February 2023, USDA awarded \$50 million in funds provided by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to implement SFMNP initiatives to maintain and improve supply chain resiliency.

While ARPA provided a significant, one-time infusion of funding to support the program's modernization and success, the annual funding level for SFMNP has remained unchanged since 2008. SFMNP funding is authorized and provided under the Farm Bill, at \$20.6 million annually via the Commodity Credit Corporation. Funding all new requesting State agencies, allowing existing State agencies to expand their program without cutting benefits to other participants, and supporting program improvements to ensure the program's long-term sustainability would require additional funding.

Also, USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) has established the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) and the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program (LFS), both of which establish cooperative agreements to

strengthen our food systems through purchases of local foods for emergency food or school food providers. Leveraging the purchasing power of the Federal government through local procurement creates a win for local economies and for people's health. It puts rural prosperity front and center by adding value to food where it is produced so that capital stays within a community, leading to longer term economic growth and vibrant rural communities. For LFPA, AMS has awarded nearly \$375 million in agreements with 48 states, four territories, and 24 tribes. For LFS, AMS has awarded more than \$151 million in agreements with 33 states.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) nutrition standards provide flexibility for local menu planners to adapt menus and offer foods that appeal to their unique student populations' dietary preferences. In addition, schools also receive specific funds to purchase food for their school meal programs via USDA Foods. USDA Foods provides high-quality, 100 percent American grown food to schools, child-care facilities, and institutions that participate in Child Nutrition Programs including the NSLP, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). The variety and versatility of USDA Foods products allow schools to develop their menus based on their regional and cultural preferences while still meeting the required nutrition standards. FNS also helps schools by making culturally appropriate foods available via the USDA Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (USDA DoD Fresh).

Senator Reverend Raphael Warnock

1. According to a 2021 USDA study conducted by Urban Institute examining states that reinstated time limits following the Great Recession,⁷ work requirements take food assistance away from people struggling to find work. Under current law,⁸ able-bodied adults without dependents are only eligible to receive food assistance for three months in a three-year period. The recent public health emergency suspended these time limits, but they are set to come back.

- a. What will be the effect of the return of this 3-month time limit?
- b. Has USDA produced or reviewed any research regarding the return of this 3-month time limit? If so, what conclusions can be learned from this research?

USDA Response

In response to the pandemic, Congress temporarily and partially suspended the time limit for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs), protecting program access for many jobless adults during an unprecedented crisis. This partial suspension will continue for one month beyond the end of the federal public health emergency. Starting in July 2023, ABAWDs will generally only be allowed to participate in SNAP for three months, unless they are exempt or meet the work requirement. Therefore, USDA expects a significant number of ABAWDs to be disqualified beginning three months after the end of the time limit suspension, in October 2023. Since administering the time limit for ABAWDs is complex and can be burdensome for State

⁷ "The Impact of Snap Able Bodied Adults without Dependents (ABAWD) Time Limit Reinstatement in Nine States." *Food and Nutrition Service U.S. Department of Agriculture*, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/impact-snap-able-bodied-adults-without-dependents-abawd-time-limit-reinstatement-nine>.

⁸ 7 U.S.C. § 2014

agencies, USDA has issued guidance and provided training and technical assistance in various media to help States prepare for the reimplementation of the time limit.

USDA wants to ensure that SNAP supports work. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the ABAWD time limit helps move people to employment. While a 2021 USDA study found that the reinstatement of the ABAWD time limit substantially reduced SNAP participation among those subject to the time limit, there was no evidence to suggest that imposing the time limit improved employment or earnings for those participants. These participants typically left SNAP three to four months after the time limit was reinstated (the point at which ABAWDs could first lose eligibility due to the time limit), which could suggest they lost eligibility due to the time limit, not due to new employment. Another paper published by external researchers in 2020 found similar results for ABAWDs in Virginia. Furthermore, a journal article published in March 2023 found that when the time limit for ABAWDs was reintroduced in 2016, the number of households served by food pantries increased in urban areas. On average, an urban food pantry in an area where the time limit was reintroduced served 34 percent more households in the 8 months after reintroduction than a pantry in an area with no change.

We welcome the opportunity to work with Congress to ensure that SNAP incentivizes work through targeted benefit design and State flexibility.

2. In the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, Congress provided an emergency boost to food assistance programs, called Emergency SNAP Allotments. But this boost is set to end next month. In fact, many states, including Georgia, have already ended them.

- a. After the emergency assistance was cut off in Georgia, the Atlanta Community Food Bank saw visits increase by about 34% when compared to the same period the previous year.
- b. What can Congress do to ease the burden on our food banks?
- c. Would the Thrifty Food Plan update, that provided a modest increase in food benefits, benefit food banks? If so, how?

USDA Response

Food banks are an essential safety net for American families who cannot access a sufficient diet through other private or public means. USDA continues to support the incredible work of food banks and the broader emergency food system with investments to support the purchase of additional food, improve infrastructure, and strengthen local food systems. In FY 2023, the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) received \$445.5 million for entitlement food funds and \$92 million for administrative funds. By law, the June Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) is the basis for TEFAP entitlement food funding formula for the upcoming fiscal year. Accordingly, TEFAP food funding for FY 2023 increased by \$46 million over FY 2022.

In addition to these changes, in September 2022, USDA announced a \$1.5 billion investment in the emergency feeding programs using USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation funds. Later this year USDA will award up to \$60 million in TEFAP Reach and Resiliency Grants to support access in areas currently underserved by the program. This builds on the \$40 million in TEFAP Reach and Resiliency grants awarded last year, with funds supporting a variety of initiatives such

as refrigerated “food lockers” or new food distribution centers.

The 2021 re-evaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) and annual inflationary adjustment help ensure that SNAP benefit amounts reflect the price of a cost-conscious, healthy diet today, resulting in a modest but meaningful increase in SNAP benefit amounts. It is reasonable to expect that increasing SNAP benefit amounts would alleviate food bank demand to some extent.

USDA stands ready to work with Congress and explore additional support for emergency feeding partners based on current needs. It is also important to keep in mind that, while food banks do incredible work to support their communities, they are just one critical part of a broader safety net that supports struggling Americans.

Senator Peter Welch

1. It is critical our nutrition programs not only feed struggling families but also support local, sustainable agriculture practices. Throughout the pandemic, there were efforts at all levels of government to increase access to healthy, nutritious locally-sourced produce. This includes the establishment of the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program, TEFAP Reach and Resiliency Grants, and the rest of the Build Back Better Food System Transformation initiative.

- a. What key lessons can we take away from the height of the pandemic when it comes to increasing access to locally-sourced, sustainable agriculture?
- b. As we look to the Farm Bill, what programs should we consider to increase access to locally-sourced foods for Americans who utilized these important nutrition programs?

USDA Response

One of Secretary Vilsack’s key goals, informed by lessons learned from the pandemic, is to improve the resiliency of U.S. agriculture by ensuring that today’s markets work better for both family farmers and the communities they feed. FNS works with our colleagues across USDA to strengthen connections between farmers, ranchers, and USDA nutrition programs through investments in local and regional food system infrastructure and markets.

For example, in The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), Farm to Food Bank grants reduce food waste while building relationships between agricultural producers and the local emergency food system. States use these funds for projects that harvest, process, package, or transport commodities donated by the agricultural industry to be used by emergency organizations. USDA allocated \$3.7 million to 28 TEFAP State agencies in FY 2023. Furthermore, programs like the WIC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program and the Seniors Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) by design connect participants to locally grown fruits and vegetables.

For the SFMNP, while USDA invested \$50 million in funds from the ARPA to support the program’s modernization and resiliency, the annual funding level for SFMNP has remained unchanged since 2008. SFMNP funding is authorized and provided under the Farm Bill, at \$20.6 million annually via the Commodity Credit Corporation. Funding all new requesting State agencies, allowing existing State agencies to expand their program without reducing benefits to

other program participants, and supporting program improvements to ensure the long-term sustainability of the program would require additional funding.

The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service has also established the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program and the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program, both of which establish cooperative agreements to strengthen our food systems through purchases of local foods for emergency food or school food providers. These novel procurement options are able to support local and historically underserved farmers and ranchers while delivering food to our communities. We are hearing that these programs are helping small farmers scale up and access better, consistent markets, create job opportunities in rural communities, and bring more revenue into local economies.

USDA looks forward to working with Congress to explore how to further leverage our food assistance programs to support nutrition security, agricultural producers, and resilient food systems.

2. In Vermont, more than 8% of senior households are food insecure; over 17,000 seniors are threatened by hunger; and nearly 40,000 are isolated and live alone. The demand for senior meals continues to grow. We must continue to do what we can to ensure that our nation's seniors are not going hungry.

- a. How can the USDA increase seniors' access to locally-sourced foods?
- b. How can Congress utilize the farm bill to increase seniors' access to critical food programs?

USDA Response

USDA works continually to make it easier for all people—but especially for vulnerable populations, like older adults—to access the nutrition assistance they need and deserve. Older adults face unique challenges. For example, some have limited mobility, making it harder to shop for groceries or prepare meals. Older Americans participate in SNAP at much lower rates as well; before the pandemic, only 47 percent of eligible older Americans participated in SNAP, compared to 78 percent of all eligible people.

Recent updates to SNAP benefit levels and renewed collaboration with other Federal agencies will improve SNAP access and nutrition security for low-income adults.

For example, USDA has been working to strengthen our partnership with the Social Security Administration (SSA) to help connect people to Supplemental Security Income and SNAP benefits.

We would welcome the opportunity to work with Congress to explore changes that help us serve older adults better. For example, households with an elderly or disabled member may claim a deduction for out of pocket medical expenses they incur over \$35, increasing their SNAP benefits. However, due to the paperwork involved, claiming the deduction can be burdensome for households. Nearly half of States, including Vermont, operate a demonstration project to allow households to claim a standard medical deduction (SMD), which does not require extensive paperwork.

USDA is committed to supporting the Senior Farmer's Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP)

which provides participants with access to fresh fruits, vegetables, herbs, and honey while supporting local farmers. Using ARPA funds, USDA was able to award SFMNP Food System Transformation Grants to SFMNP State agencies to support initiatives to sustain, improve, and expand program operations and services. Such changes include supporting State agencies in their transition from paper-based coupons to an e-solutions.

While ARPA provided a significant, one-time infusion of funding to support the program's modernization and success, the annual funding level for SFMNP has remained unchanged since 2008. SFMNP funding is authorized and provided under the Farm Bill at \$20.6 million annually via the Commodity Credit Corporation. Funding all new requesting State agencies, allowing existing State agencies to expand their program without reducing benefits for other participants, and supporting the implementation of program improvements to ensure the long-term sustainability of the program would require additional funding.

USDA also operates the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), a food package program which works to improve the health of low-income persons at least 60 years of age by supplementing their diets with nutritious USDA Foods. USDA distributes both food and administrative funds to all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and eight Indian Tribal Organizations to operate CSFP. In 2022, CSFP served an average of over 658,000 participants per month and is authorized to serve 760,547 participants in 2023.

USDA welcomes the opportunity to work with Congress to explore how to improve seniors' access to nutrition assistance programs and local food.

3. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – known as 3SquaresVT in Vermont—supports the grocery budgets of an average of 70,000 people in Vermont, more than 10% of the state. For many Vermonters, SNAP is the only way to afford groceries from the store. As the wealthiest nation in the world, we must do all that we can to ensure that Americans have access to healthy, nutritious and affordable locally-sourced foods. I believe that imposing stricter work requirements for SNAP and other federal nutrition programs is denigrating and hurtful toward struggling Americans who are simply trying to feed their families. SNAP benefits are an important lifeline for Vermont families. It is critical that we expand support for families struggling to put food on their tables so they can make ends meet and raise healthy and happy kids. In every farm bill, there are efforts to impose stricter work requirements on federal nutrition programs, especially SNAP. These requirements are demeaning and create more red tape for struggling families trying to put food on the table.

- a. Is there evidence to support claims that work requirements in SNAP lead to higher employment rates or annual earnings?
- b. Currently, job search does not count towards the time limit for SNAP work requirements, yet we all know that looking for a job can be just as, if not more, time-consuming than an actual job. How would changing the parameters of eligible activities for SNAP work requirement time-limits to include job search expand access to the critical nutrition program for struggling families in need?

USDA Response

The general [work requirements](#), which apply to many SNAP participants aged 16-59, mean they must register for work, participate in SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) if assigned by the state SNAP agency, take a suitable job if offered, and not voluntarily quit a job or reduce work hours below 30 hours per week without a good reason. Individuals aged 18-49 who are able to work and do not have dependents are held to an even stricter standard. In addition to the overall work requirements, they generally must work—or participate in a jobs program—at least 20 hours per week or lose SNAP benefits completely after three months in any three-year period (this policy is known as the time limit).

SNAP is an important work support, and the program is designed to provide incentives for participants to work and increase their earnings. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the time limit placed on able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs)—under which these individuals lose SNAP benefits after 3 months in any 3-year period — helps people move into employment or increase earnings. A 2021 USDA study found that the ABAWD time limit substantially reduced SNAP participation among those subject to the time limit. These participants typically left SNAP after three to four months which could suggest they lost benefits due to the time limit, not because they gained employment. Another paper published by external researchers in 2020 found similar results for ABAWDs in Virginia. Furthermore, a journal article published in March 2023 found that when the time limit for ABAWDs was reintroduced in 2016, the number of households served by food pantries increased in urban areas. On average, an urban food pantry in an area where the time limit was reintroduced served 34 percent more households in the 8 months after reintroduction than a pantry in an area with no change.

The time limit cuts off people—including people experiencing homelessness, veterans, youth aging out of foster care, and people with health conditions—from assistance they need to buy food. Proposals to expand SNAP’s [time limit](#) to more participants, including parents, are not based in evidence.

USDA examined the effectiveness of requiring SNAP recipients to participate in SNAP E&T (“mandatory E&T”) as part of the SNAP E&T pilots authorized under the 2014 Farm Bill. The rigorous, randomized-control trial evaluation found that participants who were sanctioned in mandatory E&T programs had lower earnings by as much as \$2,000, had lower employment rates by as much as 6 percentage points, and lower SNAP participation rates by as much as 17 percent when compared to individuals in the same programs who were not sanctioned.

This evaluation also found that individuals who were sanctioned for failure to comply with requirements and, as a result, lost food assistance had different characteristics than those who were not sanctioned. Individuals who were sanctioned were more likely to be male, Black, and to not have a high school diploma or equivalent. Sanctioned individuals were also less likely to be employed at the time of pilot enrollment. When taken together, these findings present major red flags about the effectiveness of mandatory E&T requirements at increasing earnings and employment.

One way that ABAWDs can meet the ABAWD work requirement is through participation in an employment and training program (E&T), including the SNAP E&T program, for at least 20 hours per week. The Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 provides that supervised job search and job search training programs are not qualifying activities to fulfill the ABAWD work requirement.

However, job search or job search training programs/activities, when offered as part of qualifying SNAP E&T program component, are acceptable as long as those activities comprise less than half the requirement (less than half the total required time spent in the component). Additionally, job search and job search training are qualifying ABAWD activities when offered through a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I program. Allowing job search programs to count as qualifying activities to fulfill the ABAWD work requirement would provide an additional option for ABAWDs who are actively looking for work to meet the work requirement and likely extend the period some ABAWDs could continue participating in SNAP. It is important to note, however, that unsupervised job search is not an allowable SNAP E&T component; rather State agencies are only permitted by statute to offer supervised job search.

USDA is committed to connecting SNAP participants, especially ABAWDs, to E&T opportunities. We welcome the opportunity to work with Congress to ensure that SNAP incentivizes work through targeted benefit design and State flexibility.

Senator John Fetterman

1. The Department of Agriculture administers Farm to Food Bank grants, as part of The Emergency Food Assistance Program. This Program was modeled after a program in my home state—Pennsylvania. How is the Farm to Food Bank Program doing, and how can it be improved in this year’s Farm Bill?

USDA Response

The Farm to Food Bank Project—which supports State projects to harvest, process, package, or transport commodities donated by the agricultural industry before use by emergency feeding organizations—is now in its fourth year. For FY 2023, USDA provided \$3.7 million to 28 State agencies operating The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), including two newly participating states.

USDA has partnered with stakeholders in Pennsylvania through Farm to Food Bank funding in all four years. Most recently, Pennsylvania received Farm to Food Bank Project funds to continue to support the Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System, which provides an efficient mechanism for Pennsylvania’s agricultural industry to donate safe, wholesome food products while being reimbursed for costs involved in harvesting, processing, and transporting these foods. This system partners with 2,700 local charitable partners – including food pantries, soup kitchens, feeding programs, and shelters to help Pennsylvania-grown products go to those in need. Without this system, food products would likely be left in the field or otherwise wasted. USDA is ready to work with Congress as you consider how to build on the Farm to Food Bank Program.

2. Over 1.7 million Pennsylvanians rely on SNAP benefits to put food on the table for their families. I’ve heard from families across the commonwealth that poor technology security on their EBT cards allows their benefits to be stolen. I was glad to hear that states are now required to reimburse those stolen funds to families. How can SNAP technology be modernized for the

21st century? How is the USDA comprehensively responding to beneficiaries having their funds stolen (skimmed) from EBT cards?

USDA Response

USDA is fully committed to combating card skimming, card cloning, and other fraudulent methods, which can be devastating for victims who rely on their benefits to feed their families. The 2023 Omnibus appropriations bill signed into law in December allows States to replace stolen SNAP benefits using federal funds through September 2024. USDA is working to implement this new law quickly and is committed to supporting States throughout this process.

USDA is working with our State and Federal partners, as well as retailers, EBT processors, law enforcement, and other industry experts to protect SNAP benefits. This includes exploring more secure payment technologies to protect SNAP recipients from becoming victims of theft. USDA has already issued guidance to States on how to reimburse victims, verify theft claims, and collect data to better understand this emerging issue. USDA has started approving State plans, so that States can begin reimbursing families whose much-needed benefits have been stolen.

USDA is also working on new regulations to prevent SNAP benefit theft from occurring in the first place, by making EBT cards more secure. USDA is exploring long-term technological solutions, such as chip card technology and mobile payment pilot projects, that will provide enhanced benefit security. Additionally, the Administration's FY 2024 budget request includes funding to hire five additional SNAP staff with specialized knowledge of payment system industry standards to support these efforts.

USDA appreciates Congressional interest in this important issue, and we look forward to our continued partnership to modernize SNAP and prevent benefit theft.

3. Ms. Dean referenced “modernizing [SNAP] with respect to delivery.” Can you please elaborate on what that could look like from a regulatory *and* legislative perspective?

USDA Response

USDA is working to bring modern payment options to SNAP participants, enhance program integrity, and support American farmers and businesses that expand food access for SNAP participants. We are prioritizing smaller retailers and farmers' markets with the resources Congress provided to support online shopping. For example, we:

- Awarded funds to create a SNAP Modernization Technical Assistance Center to support retailers of all sizes and types in adopting SNAP online payments.
- Selected five States to operate Mobile Payment Pilots. The pilots will test allowing SNAP participants to receive and redeem benefits using a mobile device. This has the potential to improve access by reducing the length of time it takes for participants to access their benefits once approved and the potential to reduce fraud. We will evaluate the pilot to examine rollout strategies and the impact of mobile payment on access, cost, and fraud prevention, which will provide useful information for Congress to consider.
- Held EBT modernization roundtable discussions with advocates, State, retailer and industry stakeholders.

- Funded development of an eCommerce site specifically designed to assist farmers in the move to online SNAP.
- Supported development of a mobile app farmers can use to accept SNAP payments at direct marketing venues such as farmers' markets, roadside stands, and pick-your-own operations. Close to 2,000 farmers have been given access to the app since 2019.
- As we work to modernize, we must also consider how to serve participants or retailers who are not yet well situated to take advantage of new technology. Expanding tools that States and EBT processors can use to allow clients to manage and view their EBT card balances while shopping.

Senator John Hoeven

1. As a follow up to my questions on the Department's implementation of the National Accuracy Clearinghouse:
 - a. Can the Department provide an explanation as to why the implementation of the National Accuracy Clearinghouse was delayed?
 - b. As the Department has worked to implement the National Accuracy Clearinghouse, have there been particular challenges that the Department has identified, addressed, or is actively working to resolve?
 - c. Does the Department anticipate that the National Accuracy Clearinghouse will meet the Congressional Budget Office's cost savings estimate? If not, what steps if any, is the Department taking to maximize savings through the use of the National Accuracy Clearinghouse?

USDA Response

USDA is fully committed to implementing the National Accuracy Clearinghouse (NAC) nationwide with maximum effectiveness for the long term. We have worked closely with external experts on the NAC's design and deployment and are leveraging optimal security arrangements using the best technology to protect the personally identifiable information (PII) of SNAP participants. We are taking care with the NAC implementation because we know that it will be a powerful tool not only to prevent the very rare instance of duplicate participation, but also to improve customer service for clients who move across State borders.

Although USDA began efforts to design the NAC after the 2018 Farm Bill, when the pandemic hit, the prior administration appropriately reprioritized FNS's efforts to respond to increased need and to adapt our programs to operate within the COVID environment. In addition, the initial design of the NAC relied on USDA collecting and storing PII protected by stringent security protocols and encryption. Under the Biden administration, USDA decided to provide security enhancements to the system design by taking advantage of a newer approach to data matching. This approach does not require the NAC to collect or store names, Social Security

numbers, or dates of birth—thereby providing a greater degree of data protection for the confidential information of millions of Americans. USDA revised the NAC Interim Final rule to incorporate new protocols to support this approach, and the agency published the rule in October 2022.

This is the first national system of records that will contain all SNAP applicant and participant data, and this is a complex endeavor that will be completely new for States. Successful implementation of the NAC will require all 53 SNAP State agencies to work together in a coordinated fashion to avoid delaying benefits. That said, USDA has made great strides toward developing a strong NAC system for improving program integrity and customer service.

The Department anticipates that the NAC will increase savings by preventing individuals from receiving SNAP benefits in more than one State at the same time. Based on the results seen in the original NAC pilot, USDA estimates a net reduction in SNAP spending of approximately \$463 million over the first 5 years, which is greater than CBO's original 2018 estimate of \$138 million over the first 5 years. Actual savings will be realized as State agencies begin to use the system as part of the eligibility determination process to discover and prevent duplicate participation before it occurs. All State agencies are required to implement the NAC by October 2027, and USDA has encouraged and will continue to encourage States to implement the NAC as soon as is feasible, to maximize the NAC's impacts on program integrity and program savings.

USDA will continue to be in close touch with Congress, as we have been, to provide updates as we continue to move forward on NAC implementation.

Senator Joni Ernst

1. Our social service agencies are impacted by ongoing labor shortages. An understaffed workforce can cause errors that harm those in need, or allow others to defraud the system. We've heard USDA say that states have some flexibility in processing SNAP applications, but USDA has consistently prohibited states from choosing to use a private contractor to augment, not replace, overburdened state and local staff.

- a. If a state believes a public-private blended workforce will benefit their SNAP recipients and increase accountability and transparency for the taxpayer, are you open to allowing states to opt in?

USDA Response

USDA is committed to promoting accountability and access in SNAP and supports innovations in program delivery to enhance efficiency and customer service. These innovations include new technologies, process design enhancements, and public-private partnerships. The Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, requires that only merit system personnel employed by a state agency perform SNAP certification functions.

USDA has worked to ensure that SNAP State agencies are aware of existing flexibilities related to contractors that can help streamline program administration and reduce customer wait times, and we will continue to work with them to clarify. We will continue to offer technical assistance to States who are interested in exploring these options. Many States already rely on private contractors to facilitate vital program operations, like mail processors, document scanning

operators, and EBT vendors. As State operations evolve and technology shifts what is possible, new questions arise about where the right line is with respect to private contractors. As we confront these questions, our guiding principle from statute and regulation is that States and their employees must be responsible for the most critical functions of SNAP operations, particularly with respect to client privacy and determining eligibility for benefits.

2. How are FNS and NIFA currently working together to support the streamlining of Statewide nutrition incentives, and what can be done in the 2023 Farm Bill to improve GusNIP and make the program more efficient?

USDA Response

FNS and NIFA collaborate on GusNIP throughout the grant solicitation and administration process. While NIFA provides administrative guidance to grantees, FNS provides policy guidance and meets with NIFA regularly to review common challenges and improve processes. Our Agencies partner to encourage innovation and initiatives that provide incentives to the broadest population of SNAP participants efficiently. USDA welcomes the opportunity to provide technical assistance to Congress in connection with the 2023 Farm Bill and this program.

Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith

1. The Food and Nutrition Service agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued a proposed rule to revise regulations governing the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infant, and Children's (WIC) food packages "to align them with the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans and reflect recommendations made by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) in its 2017 report, 'Review of WIC Food Packages: Improving Balance and Choice.'" The proposed changes are, according to the USDA, "intended to provide WIC participants with a wider variety of foods that align with the latest nutritional science; provide WIC State agencies with greater flexibility to prescribe and tailor food packages that accommodate participants' special dietary needs and personal and cultural food preferences; provide more equitable access to supplemental foods; and better promote and support individual breastfeeding goals of participants to help establish successful long-term breastfeeding." One aspect of this proposed rule includes the specification that "all cereals on the State agency authorized food list must contain whole grain as the first ingredient."

a. Current USDA WIC dietary guidelines state that at least one-half of the total number of breakfast cereals on the State agency's authorized food list must have whole grain as the primary ingredient and meet labeling requirements for making a health claim as a "whole grain food with moderate fat content" as defined in Table 4 of 7 CFR 246.10. This is a minimum federal standard, meaning states can go above and beyond this standard based on the unique dietary needs of their WIC recipients. For example, for more than 10 years, the State of Oklahoma implemented a stricter requirement for whole grain cereals in WIC.

b. Furthermore, in 2017, NASEM estimated a whole grain only-cereal policy would result in a 10% rate of decline in the redemption of cereal benefits from 60% to 54%.

These calculations were based on Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) data from 2013 across five states. Yet NASEM did not consider any data from Oklahoma, the only state that was implementing a whole grain only-cereal policy at the time. Oklahoma's whole grain-only cereal policy resulted in a far more significant drop in cereal redemption, down to 36%. The omission of this data from the NASEM study calls into question its estimate that such a policy would not significantly impact the redemption rate of cereal among program participants.

USDA Response

USDA recently proposed changes to the WIC Food Packages to align with the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans and recommendations in the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's (NASEM) 2017 report, "Review of WIC Food Packages: Improving Balance and Choice."

USDA is proposing to require all breakfast cereals meet the criteria for whole grain cereal, to address inadequate consumption of whole grains and excess consumption of refined grains among WIC participants, and as recommended by NASEM.

In its 2017 report, NASEM recommended all cereals provided through WIC meet the whole grain criteria to better support the nutritional needs of WIC participants. The latest dietary guidelines noted that nearly all Americans – 98 percent – do not meet recommendations for whole grain intake and 74 percent exceed limits for refined grains. The 2017 report also cited significant expansion in the availability of whole grain products in the marketplace in recent years, including corn and rice-based options. Sufficient marketplace availability is an important consideration before implementing this change, and USDA specifically requested comment on the provision. USDA is currently reviewing all public comments received during the comment period and will use this feedback to inform development of a final rule implementing changes.

When considering NASEM's recommendations, USDA replicated NASEM's analysis using more recent and more comprehensive redemption data that USDA collected from 48 State agencies – including Oklahoma and covering about 56 percent of all WIC participants. According to this data, the breakfast cereal redemption rate in Oklahoma was similar to the National breakfast cereal redemption rate in 2020. Specifically, the breakfast cereal redemption rate in Oklahoma was about 44 percent from January to December 2020, which was only about 4 percentage points lower than the National breakfast cereal redemption rate of 48 percent during that time. Many factors might have contributed to this modest difference in redemption rates.

2. Given there is no current barrier to any state wanting to implement a whole grain-only cereal policy, why is USDA mandating a new federal, whole grain-only cereal policy across all states when states already have that flexibility?

USDA Response

The amounts and categories of foods provided by the WIC food packages are intended to supplement an individual's diet and provide specific nutrients determined by nutritional research to be lacking in the diets of WIC's target population. According to the *Dietary Guidelines for*

Americans, 2020-2025, 98 percent of Americans fall below recommendations for whole grain intake and 74 percent exceed limits for refined grains. Specific to the population served by WIC, 100 percent of pregnant, postpartum or breastfeeding women, and about 93 percent of children do not meet recommended whole grain intakes. The Dietary Guidelines also notes that 80 percent of refined grains are generally eaten as separate food items, such as cereals, breads, tortillas, pasta, rice, or pancakes, and that fiber is a nutrient of public health concern since low intakes are associated with health concerns.

For breakfast cereal, as recommended by NASEM, USDA proposes to require that WIC-eligible whole grain breakfast cereals contain a whole grain as the first ingredient, and that all WIC-eligible breakfast cereals meet this criteria. Breakfast cereals must also contain 28 mg of iron per 100 grams. These proposed changes are expected to improve dietary quality by increasing foods under consumed, including whole grains, and increase intakes of key nutrients such as dietary fiber and folate.

3. Given the USDA's proposed rule was largely based on NASEM's whole grain-only cereal recommendation, why didn't USDA question the omission of Oklahoma's EBT data or consider more recent data to better understand its impact before proposing a new federal standard for cereal purchases among WIC recipients?

USDA Response

USDA considered a number of factors in developing the proposed revisions and to ensure the WIC Food Packages align with the latest science and advance nutrition security, including recommendations from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in its independent report of the WIC food packages completed in 2017; the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025 which include new recommendations specifically for pregnant and postpartum women and children under age 2; and feedback from participants, state and tribal partners, and other government agencies.

FNS actively encouraged public comment on the proposed rule "Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC): Revisions in the WIC Food Packages." When considering NASEM's recommendations, USDA replicated NASEM's analysis using more recent and more comprehensive redemption data that USDA collected from 48 State agencies -- including Oklahoma and covering about 56 percent of all WIC participants. According to this data, the breakfast cereal redemption rate in Oklahoma was similar to the National breakfast cereal redemption rate in 2020. Specifically, the breakfast cereal redemption rate in Oklahoma was about 44 percent from January to December 2020, which was only about 4 percentage points lower than the National breakfast cereal redemption rate of 48 percent during that time. Many factors might have contributed to this modest difference in redemption rates.

4. 100 percent juice is a nutrient-dense beverage, a major source of vitamin C in the diet, and one of the primary beverages recommended for consumption in the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The current WIC proposal offers 0 fl oz of juice for the non-breastfeeding mother.

- a. Given that 100 percent juice provides essential vitamins and minerals, and hydration, as well as an easy way to increase fruit consumption, why has 100 percent juice been removed/decreased in WIC packages?
- b. Would the agency be willing to increase the juice allocation for the WIC Postpartum (non-breastfeeding) Food Package VI?

USDA Response

As recommended by NASEM and to align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, USDA proposed a reduction to juice in the child, pregnant, and breastfeeding food packages and to eliminate juice for postpartum participants. The proposed rule notes that the DGA emphasizes the consumption of whole forms of fruits and vegetables over juice and recommends limits on the amount of juice consumed as part of a healthy dietary pattern. Juice is lower in dietary fiber when compared to whole fruits or vegetables, a dietary component of public health concern for underconsumption.

Senator Tommy Tuberville

1. Ms. Dean, your testimony states that SNAP has a multiplier effect and that government spending on SNAP automatically increases economic growth. However, there is also the multiplier effect for the cost of fraud in SNAP. One study indicates that we spend \$3.72 for each \$1 of benefits lost, to investigate, detect, and report the fraud. We're spending three times the amount of money that was wrongfully spent in the first place.

- a. How can we make the investigation process more efficient? How can we decrease fraud, and decrease the waste charged to taxpayers?

USDA Response

USDA is committed to working with our State and Federal partners on strategies to strengthen SNAP integrity and payment accuracy while ensuring access, customer service, and equity. A strong SNAP recipient fraud program is one that combines advanced analytics with people, processes, and technologies that can improve fraud prevention, detection, and investigation.

USDA has developed a SNAP Fraud Framework based on innovative State work to combat fraud. This framework combines data analytics with best practices from industry to offer flexible models for States to detect and prevent fraud. For example, Texas has used its SNAP Fraud Framework Implementation (SFFI) grant to develop an automated fraud data analytics model that allows investigative staff to identify households that may be engaging in SNAP fraud.

In August 2022, USDA launched a study to assess novel ways States are detecting and responding to emerging SNAP recipient fraud schemes, while protecting due process. USDA expects to complete this study by the end of 2023 and will use the findings to inform future updates of the Fraud Framework. USDA, in collaboration with the Census Bureau, is also currently conducting a study assessing the effectiveness of State client integrity education communications. USDA expects to complete this study by September of this year and will also use the findings to inform future updates of the SNAP Fraud Framework.

2. In your testimony, you mentioned SNAP's structure enables it to adapt to changing economic conditions. For two years, participants have received emergency allotments of at least \$95 per month.

- a. Why do you believe the program has an adaptable, robust structure if emergency allotments have been utilized over the past two years?
- b. What suggestions would you provide to ensure SNAP can flow independently when there is a financial downturn?
- c. In what financially feasible way do you believe we should promote temporary assistance on SNAP instead of permanency?

USDA Response

SNAP is designed to adapt to changes in economic conditions and provide food to families and communities when it is needed most. This design is one of the program's core strengths. By expanding to meet increased need and contracting when that need abates, SNAP cushions the blow for families across America when a parent loses a job or sees their hours cut. Responding to the sudden shift in economic conditions from the economic fallout of the pandemic, SNAP participation increased from 37 million to 43 million people in just three months.

Not only does SNAP help families put food on the table, it also acts as an economic stabilizer by injecting demand into the economy. SNAP benefits are used at grocery stores, benefiting those stores' employees, as well as the truck drivers and distribution centers who deliver the food, the manufacturing plants who process it, and the hard-working farmers who produce it. A 2019 USDA study found that in an economic downturn, every dollar in additional SNAP benefits leads to an increase of \$1.54 in gross domestic product.

Recognizing that the scope of the hardship caused by the pandemic was unprecedented, Congress acted quickly to bolster nutrition assistance. This included increasing SNAP benefits, known as Emergency Allotments, for all households to help them weather the pandemic economy. Emergency Allotments will end in all States in March, once February benefits are paid.

3. Ms. Dean, the purpose of SNAP is to provide low-income individuals and families with assistance in purchasing healthy options to ensure food and nutrient security. However, we see time and time again these benefits are used for unhealthy foods.

- a. How do you propose we crack down on these spending habits in order to avoid abuse and inaccurate utilization of SNAP benefits?

USDA Response

USDA is committed to improving nutrition security and diet quality for all Americans. It is important to note that most Americans—SNAP participants included—have room for improvement when it comes to diet. USDA is focused on putting fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and other healthy options within reach of SNAP participants.

That is why our agency ensured that SNAP benefit amounts reflect the cost of a healthy diet on a budget, and why we are focused on providing nutrition education and exploring incentives for the purchase of healthy foods.

In recognition of the need to expand support and cultivate leadership at the national, tribal, State, and local levels to scale up evidence-based approaches that advance food and nutrition security, reduce diet-related chronic disease, and promote equity, FNS established, in 2022, a devoted Nutrition Education Branch. SNAP-Ed is also working to fulfill the Administration's priority on equitable access and service delivery to marginalized or underserved people and communities. Last December, FNS released the SNAP-Ed Needs Assessment Toolkit, intended to help SNAP State agencies gain a thorough understanding of their nutrition and physical activity landscapes and to increase the diversity of voices involved in the needs assessment process.

4. Ms. Dean, SNAP is the target of both domestic and international fraud rings. Lack of enforcement to prevent fraudulent activity and misuse of funds continues to burden the American taxpayer and harm the SNAP participants who actually depend on the benefits.

Program flaws allow the use of refillable EBT cards that lack modern security features and are vulnerable to skimming technologies by fraudsters. Additionally, lack of identification verification requirements allows fraudulent users to make large purchases by presenting multiple cards from multiple beneficiaries.

I'm told USDA is aware of the potential for fraud, yet to date has not acted to address these vulnerabilities – besides partially reimbursing users who are victims of fraud.

What measures is USDA taking to prevent fraudulent activity and enhance security for both beneficiaries and the agency?

USDA Response

USDA is fully committed to combating card skimming, card cloning, and other fraudulent methods, which can be devastating for victims who rely on their benefits to feed their families. The 2023 Omnibus spending bill signed into law in December allows States to replace stolen SNAP benefits using federal funds through September 2024. USDA is working to implement this new law quickly and is committed to supporting States throughout this process.

USDA is working with our State and Federal partners, as well as retailers, EBT processors, law enforcement, and other industry experts to protect SNAP benefits. This includes exploring more secure payment technologies to protect SNAP recipients from becoming victims of theft. USDA has already issued guidance to States on how to reimburse victims, verify theft claims, and collect data to better understand this emerging issue. USDA has started approving State plans, so that States can begin reimbursing families whose much-needed benefits have been stolen.

Over the next year, USDA will also work on new regulations to prevent SNAP benefit theft from occurring in the first place, by making EBT cards more secure. USDA is exploring long-term technological solutions, such as chip card technology and mobile payment pilot projects, that will provide enhanced benefit security.

USDA does not currently require that States implement extra EBT card security like EMV (Europay, Mastercard, and Visa) chip cards, but any State agency may choose to pursue chip cards at any time. A State agency does not need a waiver or approval from USDA to make this change. However, moving to chip cards represents a significant cost and administrative undertaking for State agencies and as a result, must be carefully considered and planned. It requires technology changes by the EBT processors, outreach and equipment upgrades in the

retailer community, education with SNAP recipients, and a myriad of logistical changes, such as replacing all EBT cards. FNS supports any State agency that wishes to initiate this change and is able to provide technical assistance to help them with this endeavor. USDA appreciates that the 2023 Omnibus bill directs FNS to promulgate regulations through notice-and-comment rulemaking to require States to implement card security updates, fraud prevention, and detection measures.

The Department stands ready to work with Congress to consider legislation to provide permanent authority to replace stolen SNAP benefits using federal funds, after current authority expires in September 2024.

5. Ms. Dean, Auburn University's Hunger Solutions Institute is known across the country for its renowned efforts in domestic and global food security.

Auburn administers the Double Up Food Bucks Program, also called GusNIP, and the SNAP Healthy Fluid Milk Incentive (HFMI) Project for the State of Alabama.

The HFMI grant program is intended to incentivize SNAP participants to increase their purchase and consumption of qualifying fluid milk, in the same way GusNIP incentivizes fruit and vegetable purchases.

However, when Auburn applied for HFMI, USDA required them to alter the program to allow recipients to redeem their coupons for any SNAP product, instead of specifically fluid milk or dairy products.

Considering the growing rates of child obesity in our nation and the Biden administration's continued efforts to tighten school nutrition requirements, why is USDA promoting unhealthy food consumption over dairy consumption?

- a. Additionally, I have heard that the HFMI cooperative agreements have been somewhat limiting in providing funds to the grantees for not only technical assistance, but also for some of the point-of-sale system upgrades that are costly but necessary to start-up projects. What can USDA do within these cooperative agreements to allow those grantees to be reimbursed while still maximizing the amount of funds going to the dairy incentives themselves?
- b. Can retailers access grant funds from the Electronic Healthy Incentives Pilot or other grant or technical assistance programs to help cover the upfront costs for installing a point-of-sale system for dairy incentives?

USDA Response

USDA is focused on putting fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and other healthy options within reach of SNAP participants. One key way to do so, as you raise, is through our incentive programs like Healthy Fluid Milk Incentive (HFMI) Project and through the Electronic Healthy Incentives (eHIP) pilot.

The primary purpose of the HFMI project is to develop and test multiple approaches to increase the purchase and consumption of qualifying fluid milk by SNAP households by providing them an incentive at the point of purchase at authorized retailer locations. Auburn's project expands upon our previous work and takes a deeper dive into new approaches for maximizing use of the qualifying fluid milk incentive by SNAP recipients. "Qualifying fluid milk" includes all varieties

of pasteurized cow's milk that (1) is without flavoring or sweeteners, (2) is consistent with the most recent dietary recommendations, (3) is packaged in liquid form, and (4) contains vitamins A and D at levels consistent with the Food and Drug Administration, State, and local standards for fluid milk.

Auburn University received the third HFMI grant award. Based on USDA's experience with the first two grant awards, requiring that SNAP participants purchase dairy items as the incentive for the purchase of low-fat cow's milk met with limited success. As noted in the recent USDA report to Congress, in the first HFMI grant only \$89 in dairy incentives were redeemed by SNAP participants. To improve results, USDA expanded the incentive options to include allowing the purchase of SNAP eligible items as an incentive for purchase of qualifying dairy items. Grant applicants had the option to use one of five incentive models (e.g., incentivizing low-fat milk for other dairy items or low-fat milk for SNAP eligible foods). Applicants, such as Auburn, proposed the incentive model they would implement upon award based on their own assessment of the best option or options.

Further, and for the first time, the HFMI grant solicitation offered an option to allow grant funds to be used to cover the cost of point-of-sale upgrades in participating stores in target zones which included:

- Tribal Lands and/or surrounding tribal communities;
- Rural communities as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau;
- Opportunity Zones, as defined by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS); and,
- Neighborhoods with contaminated water to mitigate lead absorption among SNAP households.

eHIP will enable grantees to provide incentives and to test the delivery of incentives through States' electronic benefit transfer (EBT) systems, which is also known as EBT integration, to incentivize and reward SNAP households for purchasing healthy foods. eHIP is focused on leveraging the State SNAP EBT infrastructure for the delivery of the incentives to SNAP participants. As outlined in the solicitation, applicants may propose to use grant funds for independent retailers that sell sufficient quantities of qualifying fruits and vegetables and are located in priority target areas for POS system costs to provide incentives through a process that can be certified by the retailer's third-party processor (TPP) and electronically tracked through the POS system at the point of the qualifying purchase. Priority target areas include marginalized and/or high food insecurity communities such as:

- Tribal Nations and/or surrounding tribal communities;
- Rural communities as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau;
- Persistent poverty counties, as defined by USDA ERA Poverty Area Measures; and,
- Low-income and low access census tracts, as defined by the USDA ERS Food Access Research Atlas.

Senator John Thune

1. Deputy Under Secretary Dean, I am following up on my question to you during the hearing on USDA's process of seeking approval from the Office of Management and Budget for the Thrifty Food Plan update, which is expected to cost approximately \$250 billion over 10 years.

- a. Can you explain USDA's collaboration with OMB on the TFP update? Please provide a copy of OMB's approval of the update, including emails, letters, or any other form of documentation outlining the process and OMB's approval of the update.

USDA Response

USDA consulted with OMB during the re-evaluation process, and we presented our model and methodology to them. The model was largely similar to the model used previously, and any changes were detailed in the methods section of the TFP 2021 report. Consistent with past practice, OMB did not formally approve USDA's re-evaluation.

Enclosures



U.S. Department of Agriculture



USDA Food Plans

Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion
U.S. Department of Agriculture
February 23, 2021



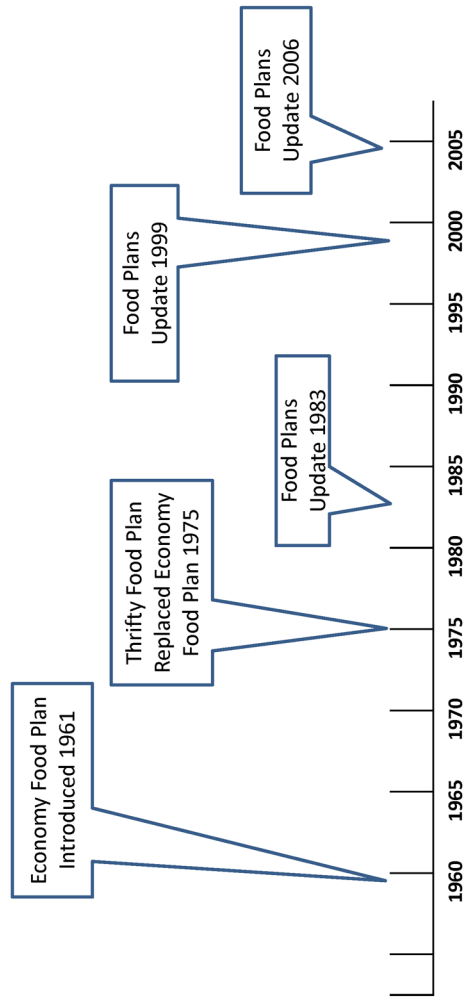
USDA Food Plans

- Four USDA Food Plans at different cost-levels
 - Thrifty Food Plan
 - Basis for maximum SNAP allotments¹
 - Low-Cost Food Plan (+30%)
 - Used by bankruptcy courts
 - Moderate-Cost Food Plan (+65%)
 - Liberal Food Plan (+100%)
 - Moderate-Cost and Liberal Food Plans used by Dept. of Defense for Basic Allowance for Subsistence and Basic Daily Food Allowance.
 - Both also used by some courts in calculation of child support and alimony payments.
- **Current plans meet nutritional needs for 15 age-sex groups**
- **Plans are updated each month to reflect current food prices using the Consumer Price Index**

¹ https://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/PL_106-580.pdf



History of the TFP



Updated periodically to reflect updates to nutritional standards and data on food prices and consumption.

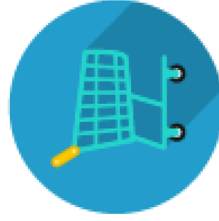


Thrifty Food Plan

A minimal cost, nutritious market basket that meets the nutrient needs of Americans and, as a Federal nutrition analysis, it aligns with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

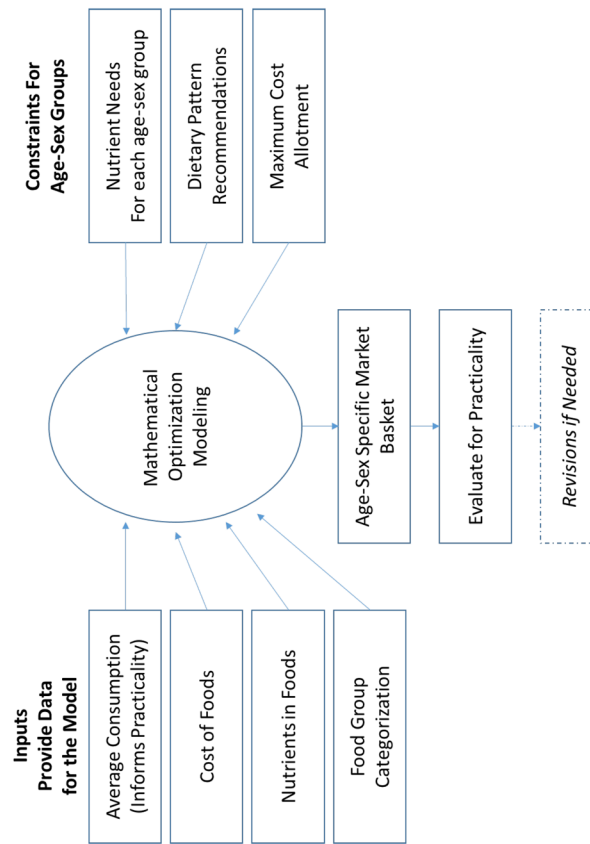
“Market Baskets”

Amount of food in purchasable food categories that together can be used in meals to meet nutritional standards.





Current Food Plan Optimization Model





Goal for TFP Re-evaluation

Scientifically sound process that will produce market baskets that:

- Reflect evidence-based nutrition guidance as published in the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the HMD Dietary Reference Intakes.
- Are practical, including commonly consumed foods in their nutrient-dense forms at average prices, and that are not unnecessarily cumbersome to prepare.

The market baskets should be evaluated for translation into meals that could be prepared by the diverse American families for which the plans are devised.



Integration of Currently Available Data

Goal: to ensure a scientifically sound, practical, minimal cost nutritious diet.

Update Guidance:

- 2020-2025 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*
- Updated Dietary Reference Intakes

Update Data:

- 2018 IRI food price data*
 - Price data are linked to national food composition databases
- 2017-18 National average consumption data
- 2017-18 FNDDS and FPED data

Integrate NESR reviews:

- Formal evidence review of the literature

*2015-16 price data will be available in June 2021. 2018 price data available in December 2021. 2015-16 price data will be linked to food composition data from 2015-2016.



Addressing Common Concerns



The TFP considers food preparation

The TFP considers ease of food preparation and convenience.

- Frozen vegetables
- Ready to serve breads and cereals
- Canned soups and beans
- Boxed mashed potatoes and macaroni and cheese
- Chicken parts (e.g., breasts, thighs)
- Recipes are limited in ingredients
 - Ex) presume jarred sauces in recipes, not home made sauces



Common choices reflected in nutrient dense forms

The TFP represents a minimal cost, nutritious diet.

- Meets nutrient needs
- Aligns with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans

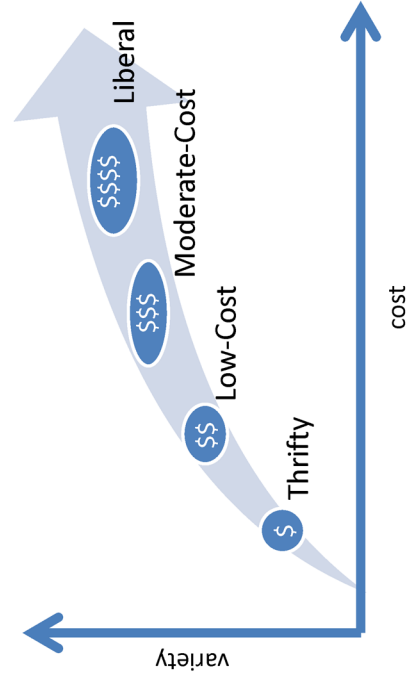
Diet quality of Americans is poor and does not align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

- Diet quality of low-income Americans is slightly lower than the national average.
- Food purchase choices of low-income Americans is similar to that of higher income Americans.



Healthy Eating Illustrated at Four Cost Levels

- USDA prepares nutritious market baskets at four cost levels.
- Same optimization model across all plans
 - Same nutritional standards across all plans
 - Higher cost levels allow for greater variety





Resources for Healthy Eating on a Budget

Healthy Eating on a Budget



Healthy eating on a budget can be a challenge. It requires a range of skills, planning and creativity to efficiently use benefit dollars.

- CNPP hosts resources that can help Americans
 - Menus
 - Recipes
 - Grocery lists

www.choosemyplate.gov/budget



Additional Concerns Open for Discussion

- Definition of higher and lower cost foods
- Pantry staples
- Updating prices to reflect current conditions
- Number of constraints
- Consideration of monetary and non-monetary constraints
- Inclusion of diversity in the model



Roundtable Open Discussion Objectives

To receive input on the process to develop the TFP

- *Describe the existing TFP model*
- Discuss options for altering the existing TFP model or for establishing a new approach for re-evaluating the TFP



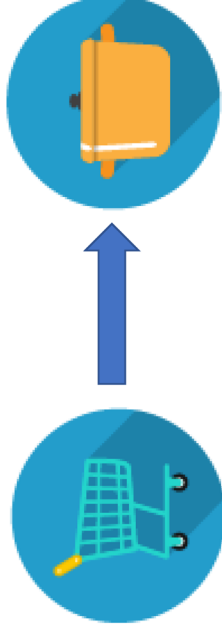
Thrifty Food Plan Re-Evaluation Committee Briefing

The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP)

The TFP is the lowest cost of four USDA market baskets that meet the nutrient needs of Americans and align with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

Market Basket

Amount of food in purchasable food categories that together can be used in meals to meet nutritional standards.



USDA Food Plans

Four USDA Food Plans at different cost levels:

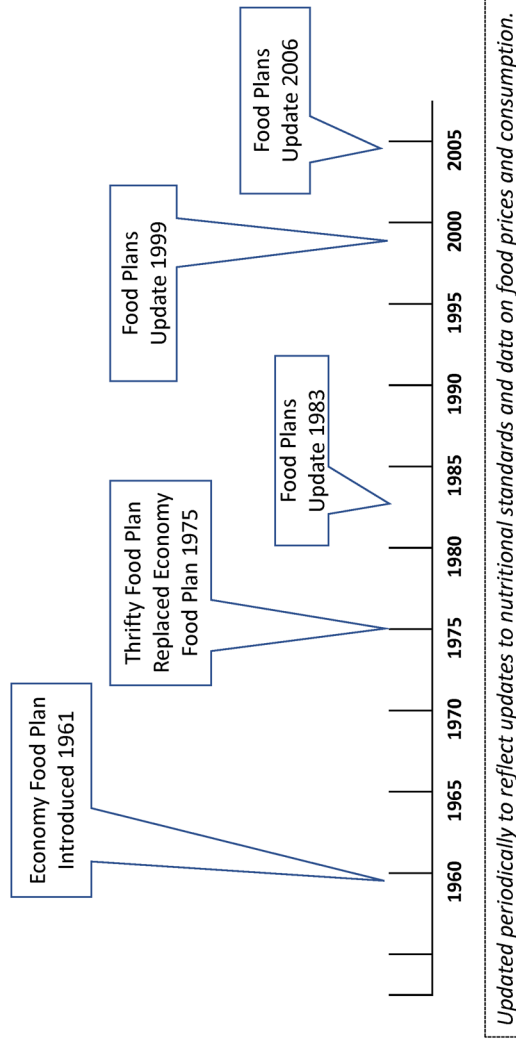
- Thrifty Food Plan (lowest cost)
 - Basis for maximum & minimum SNAP allotments
- Low-Cost Food Plan
 - Used by bankruptcy courts
- Moderate-Cost Food Plan
- Liberal Food Plan
 - Moderate-Cost and Liberal Food Plans used by DOD for Basic Allowance for Subsistence and Basic Daily Food Allowance.
 - Both used by some courts to calculate child support and alimony payments.

- All plans meet nutritional needs for 15 age-sex groups
- Cost of each plan is updated monthly to reflect current food prices using the CPI

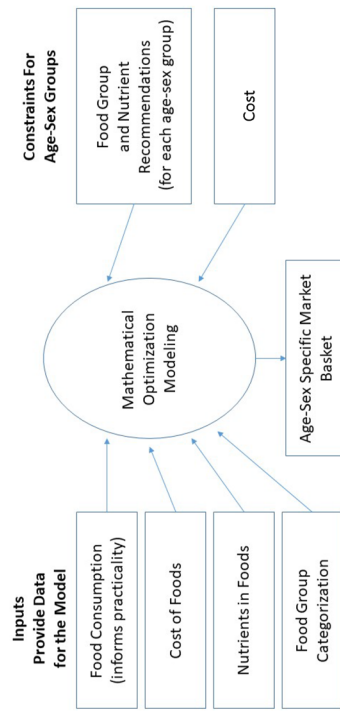
Food and Nutrition Act of 2008

SEC. 3(u) “Thrifty food plan” means the diet required to feed a family of four persons consisting of a man and a woman twenty through fifty, a child six through eight, and a child nine through eleven years of age, determined in accordance with the Secretary’s calculations... The cost of such diet shall be the basis for uniform allotments for all households...”

History of USDA Food Plans



Food Plan Optimization Model



TFP Re-evaluation – Congressional Mandate

Agriculture Act of 2018 requires:

“By 2022 and at 5-year intervals thereafter, the Secretary shall re-evaluate and publish the market baskets of the thrifty food plan based on current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance.”

Integration of Currently Available Data

Updated Guidance	Updated Data	Integration of Nutrition Evidence Systematic Review (NESR)
• <i>Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025</i> • Updated Dietary Reference Intakes (set by NASEM)	• 2015 IRI food price data • Price data are linked to national food composition databases • 2015-16 National food composition and food consumption data	• Formal evidence review of the literature

Timing

- Farm Bill requires USDA to update TFP by 2022
- Changes in maximum SNAP allotments are based on the June TFP and are implemented annually on October 1

Alaska and Hawaii

- Alaska, Hawaii have separately calculated TFPs under law, as do Guam and USVI
- Last re-evaluation of Alaska and Hawaii TFPs completed in 1978

Other Impacts

- SNAP Minimum Benefit
- NAP amounts
- TEFAP indexed to TFP

THRIFTY FOOD PLAN RE-EVALUATION

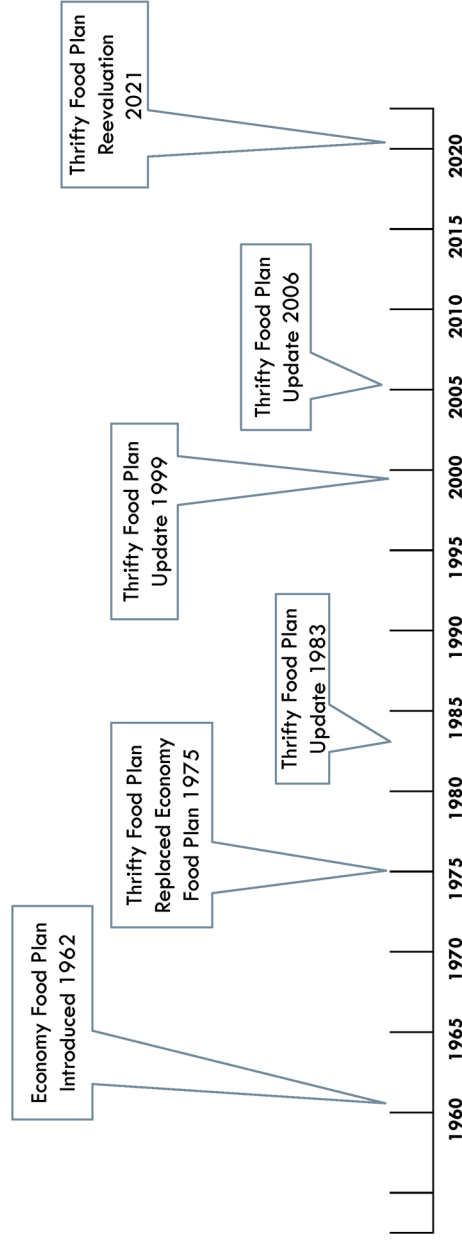
The TFP represents the cost of a nutritious, practical, cost-effective diet.



FOOD AND NUTRITION ACT OF 2008

SEC. 3(u) “Thrifty food plan” means the diet required to feed a family of four persons consisting of a man and a woman twenty through fifty, a child six through eight, and a child nine through eleven years of age, determined in accordance with the Secretary’s calculations...The cost of such diet shall be the basis for uniform allotments for all households...”

HISTORY OF THRIFTY FOOD PLAN

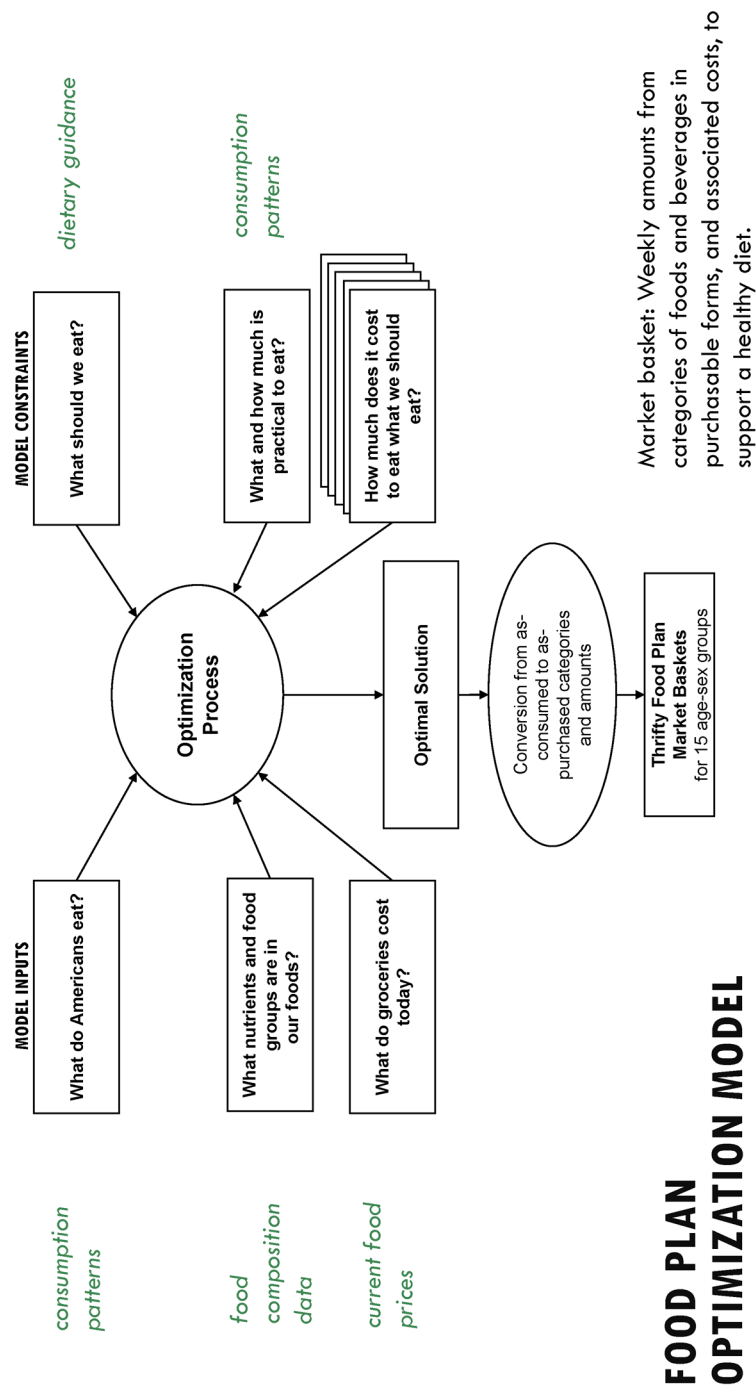


2018 FARM BILL

Prior updates were completed periodically at the Secretary's discretion to reflect updates to nutritional standards and data on food prices and consumption.

The Agriculture Act of 2018 requires USDA to re-evaluate the TFP by 2022 and regularly going forward:

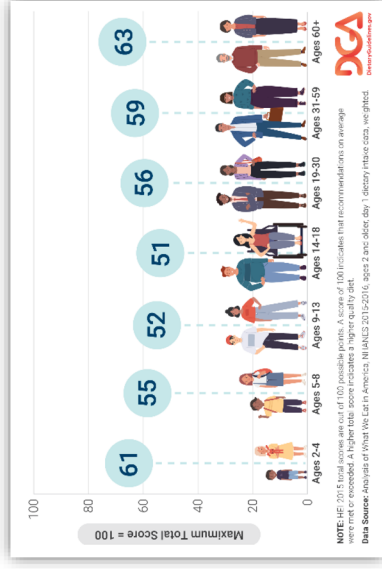
“By 2022 and at 5-year intervals thereafter, the Secretary shall re-evaluate and publish the market baskets of the thrifty food plan based on current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance.”



WHAT DO WE EAT?

What We Eat in America, NHANES uses a 24 hour dietary recall in a nationally representative group to collect consumption data.

- Establishes the foods in categories that the model can choose from



WHAT NUTRIENTS AND FOOD GROUPS ARE IN OUR FOOD?

INPUTS

USDA Food and Nutrient Database for Dietary Studies
<https://www.ars.usda.gov/northeast-area/beltsville-md-bhnrc/beltsville-human-nutrition-research-center/food-surveys-research-group/docs/fndds/>

- Nutrient values for ~9000 foods and beverages
- Energy and 64 nutrients
 - Examples: Protein, calcium, potassium, iron

USDA Food Patterns Equivalents Database

<https://www.ars.usda.gov/northeast-area/beltsville-md-bhnrc/beltsville-human-nutrition-research-center/food-surveys-research-group/docs/fped-overview/>

- Converts foods and beverages in FND DS into food group components
- 37 USDA Food Patterns components
 - Examples: Fruits, Red and Orange Vegetables, Seafood, Whole Grains

WHAT DO GROCERIES COST TODAY?

Two data sources considered to calculate nationally representative average prices of foods and beverages: IRI Retail Scanner Data (collected from scanners at stores) and IRI Consumer Network Panel (collected from households)

Which data will allow us to best reflect *current food prices*?

- Store data includes a large number of stores, including grocery stores and super centers, where most SNAP benefits are redeemed; includes over 5 billion transaction records
- Household data underrepresents families with children, non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic households, and households under age 35; certain items underreported due to respondent burden

FNS and ERS considered the IRI store data the best source of price data for the Thrifty Food Plan, 2021

INPUTS

WHAT MAKES IT “THRIFTY?”

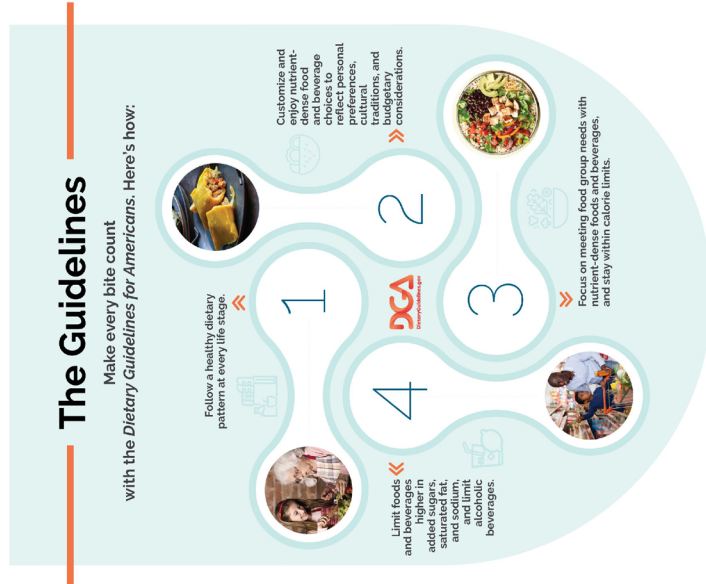
- Price outliers excluded from analysis
- About half of the categories divided into higher and lower cost categories (above/below 35th percentile)
- Food choices of highest income group excluded (>350% poverty)



WHAT SHOULD WE EAT?

- The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025 describe a healthy diet
- Dietary Reference Intakes provide nutrient recommendations
- Estimated Energy Requirements used to determine calorie levels

CONSTRAINTS



WHAT AND HOW MUCH IS PRACTICAL TO EAT?

National average consumption data was used to inform the maximum amounts of foods in Market Baskets to prevent Market Baskets with amounts that are far in excess of current consumption.

Ensured that food groups and subgroups are in the range consumed by most (75 or 95%) of the population.

The maximum amount for categories of food with no recommended amount was limited at 2 standard deviations above average consumption.

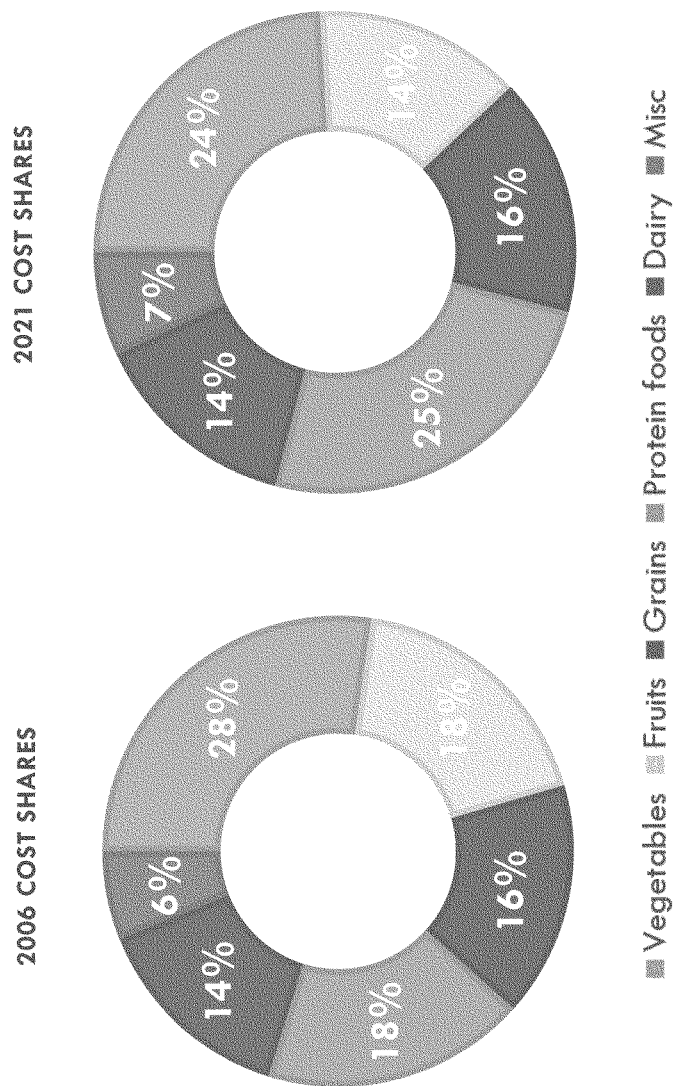
CONSTRAINTS

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO EAT WHAT WE SHOULD EAT?

The optimization model requires that a cost constraint be set in order to solve for the cost of a diet that meets all of the dietary and practicality constraints while considering current consumption patterns.

The cost constraint was set at **cost neutral** (i.e., the June 2021 cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, 2006) and then **increased in \$0.01 increments** (or decreased in the case of the child age 1) to identify the lowest cost at which the model solved for the 15 age-sex groups based on all the inputs and after meeting the dietary and practicality constraints.

CONSTRAINTS



THE TFP CONSIDERS PRACTICALITY

The TFP considers ease of food preparation and convenience.

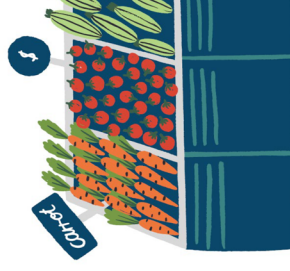
- Frozen vegetables
- Ready to serve breads and cereals
- Canned soups and beans
- Boxed mashed potatoes and macaroni and cheese
- Chicken parts (e.g., breasts, thighs)
- Recipes are limited in ingredients
 - Example: Assume jarred sauces in recipes, not home made sauces

ALASKA & HAWAII

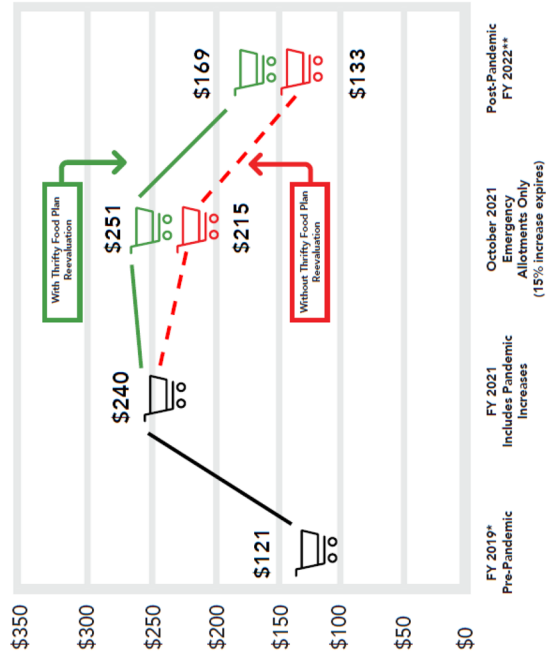
- Alaska, Hawaii have separately calculated TFPs under law, as do Guam and USVI
- Last re-evaluation of Alaska and Hawaii TFPs completed in 1978
- USDA will re-evaluate TFPs for Alaska and Hawaii by 2022; in meantime, TFPs will be adjusted proportionally

HOW DOES THE THRIFTY TRANSLATE TO SNAP?

- Maximum allotments will increase by 21%
 - \$43 increase per month for 1 person HH
 - \$80 increase per month for 2 person HH
- } 70+% of SNAP HHs
- The SNAP **minimum benefit** will increase \$3 per month
 - On average, most SNAP participants will receive **40 cents more per meal**.



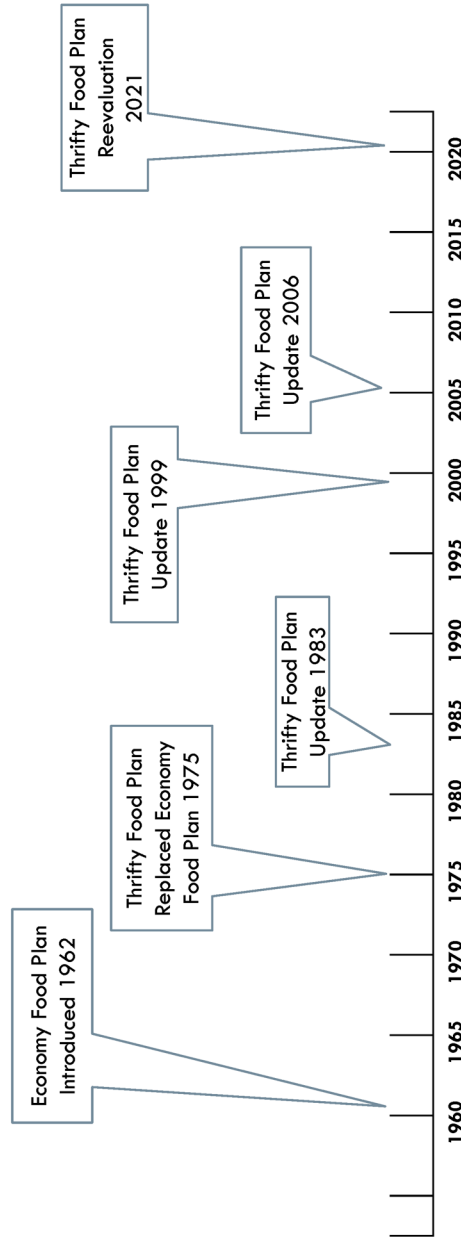
SNAP Average Monthly Per Person Benefits FY 2019 - FY 2022 (Projected)



THRIFTY FOOD PLAN RE-EVALUATION

BRIEFING FOR KEY STAKEHOLDERS

HISTORY OF THRIFTY FOOD PLAN



2018 FARM BILL

Prior updates were completed periodically at the Secretary's discretion to reflect updates to nutritional standards and data on food prices and consumption.

Agriculture Act of 2018 requires regular re-evaluations:

"By 2022 and at 5-year intervals thereafter, the Secretary shall re-evaluate and publish the market baskets of the thrifty food plan based on current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance."

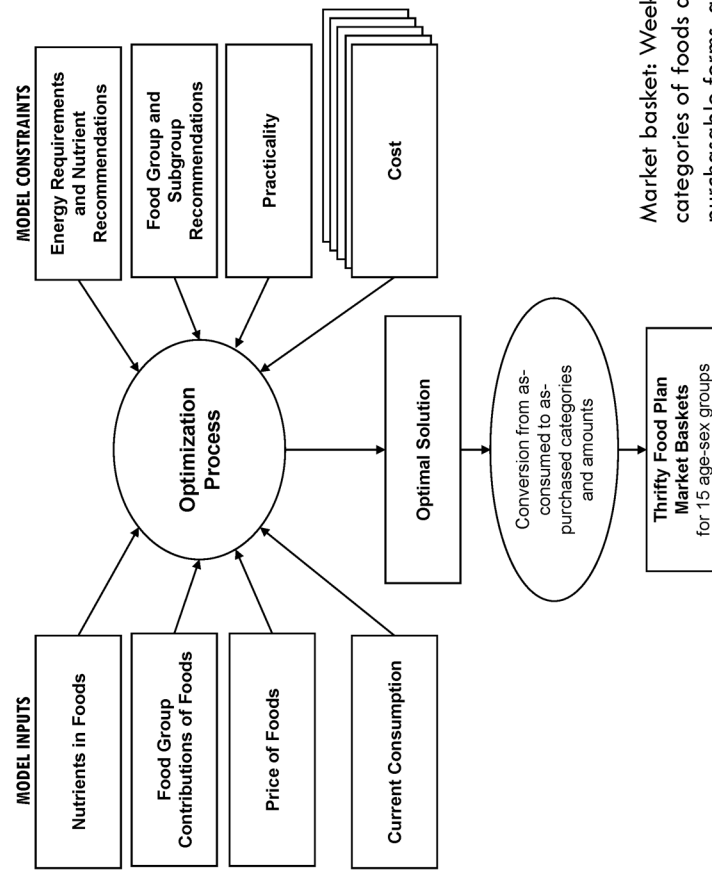
FOOD AND NUTRITION ACT OF 2008

SEC. 3(u) “Thrifty food plan” means the diet required to feed a family of four persons consisting of a man and a woman twenty through fifty, a child six through eight, and a child nine through eleven years of age, determined in accordance with the Secretary’s calculations...The cost of such diet shall be the basis for uniform allotments for all households...”

The TFP represents the cost of a nutritious, practical, cost-effective diet.

Review completed by a team of civil servants from the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, including nutrition scientists, analysts, and economists – collaborating with colleagues in USDA and other Federal agencies.

Used to create
all of the
previous
Thrifty Food
Plans



Market basket: Weekly amounts from categories of foods and beverages in purchasable forms, and associated costs, to support a healthy diet.

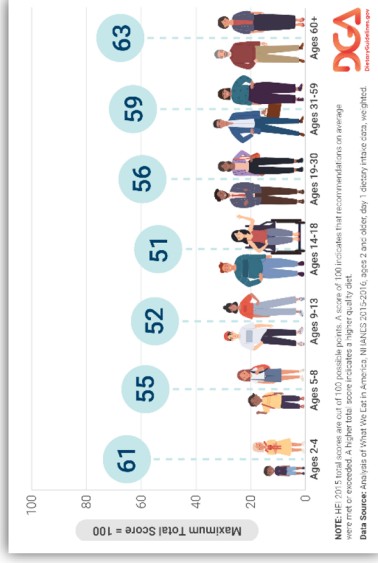
FOOD PLAN OPTIMIZATION MODEL

WHAT DO AMERICANS EAT?

What We Eat in America, NHANES uses a 24-hour dietary recall in a nationally representative group to collect consumption data.

- Establishes the foods in categories that the model can choose from
- Establishes average consumption of each category

INPUTS



<https://www.ars.usda.gov/northeast-area/beltsville-md-bhnrc/beltsville-human-nutrition-research-center/food-surveys-research-group/docs/weianhanes-overview/>

WHAT NUTRIENTS AND FOOD GROUPS ARE IN OUR FOOD?

INPUTS

USDA Food and Nutrient Database for Dietary Studies
<https://www.ars.usda.gov/northeast-area/beltsville-md-bhnrc/beltsville-human-nutrition-research-center/food-surveys-research-group/docs/fndds/>

- Nutrient values for ~9000 foods and beverages
- Energy and 64 nutrients
 - Examples: Protein, calcium, potassium, iron

USDA Food Patterns Equivalents Database

<https://www.ars.usda.gov/northeast-area/beltsville-md-bhnrc/beltsville-human-nutrition-research-center/food-surveys-research-group/docs/fped-overview/>

- Converts foods and beverages in FND DS into food group components
- 37 USDA Food Patterns components
 - Examples: Fruits, Red and Orange Vegetables, Seafood, Whole Grains

WHAT DO GROCERIES COST TODAY?

Retail Scanner Data (IRI InfoScan) is used to calculate nationally representative average price of foods and beverages

- Data from stores that reflects purchased made by all income groups and include stores where SNAP benefits are redeemed
 - Examples: Grocery stores, supercenters, convenience stores, military exchanges
- Over 5 billion transaction records
- Price outliers excluded from analysis (e.g., lobster)
- About half of the categories divided into higher and lower cost categories
- Food choices of highest income group excluded (>350% poverty)

INPUTS

WHAT SHOULD WE EAT?

The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025* and corresponding USDA Dietary Patterns describe a healthy diet

Dietary Reference Intakes provide nutrient recommendations

Estimated Energy Requirements used to determine calorie levels

CONSTRAINTS



[DietaryGuidelines.gov](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov)

WHAT AND HOW MUCH IS PRACTICAL TO EAT?

National average consumption data used to inform upper limits that prevents Market Basket amounts that are far in excess of current consumption.

Recommendations for food groups were limited to

- No more than 10% above recommended amounts (e.g., whole grains)

OR

- Most limits capped at the 95th percentile (e.g., beans)
- Some limits capped at the 75th percentile (e.g., eggs)

OR

- Categories with no recommended amount capped at 2 standard deviations above average consumption (e.g., soups)

CONSTRAINTS

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO EAT WHAT WE SHOULD EAT?

The optimization model requires that a cost constraint be set in order to solve for the cost of a diet that meets all of the dietary and practicality constraints while considering current consumption patterns.

The cost constraint was set at **cost neutral** (i.e., the June 2021 cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, 2006) and then **increased in \$0.01 increments** (or decreased in the case of the child age 1) to identify the lowest cost at which the model solved for the 15 age-sex groups based on all the inputs and after meeting the dietary and practicality constraints.

CONSTRAINTS

WHAT MAKES IT “THRIFTY?”

- Price outliers excluded from analysis
- About half of the categories divided into higher and lower cost categories (above/below 35th percentile)
- Food choices of highest income group excluded (>350% poverty)



RESULTS

The cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, 2021 Market Baskets for the reference family of four—at June 2021 prices—is \$835.57 per month.

Compared to the June 2021 cost of the previous Thrifty Food Plan:

- 21.03% increase for the reference family of four.
- \$145.19 increase per month for the reference family of four.
- \$1.20 increase per person per day.



COST SHARES

The Market Baskets illustrate how a household could use their resources to purchase foods and beverages that align with dietary guidance and consumer choice.

Choose items within each category that are lower in price and higher in nutritional quality.

Households can choose how to spend their SNAP allotments.



COST DRIVERS

Shift to store scanner data

- Best reflects current prices
- Broad scope of retailers (grocery stores, super stores, convenience stores)

Calories

- The reference family includes 600 more calories now than in the 2006 update
 - 200 calories more for adult male to reflect current median weight, 200 calories each to reflect children's physical activity levels

Other factors, most notably shifts in Dietary Guidelines



Aligns with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans

Meets nutrient recommendations

Stays within assigned calorie limits

NUTRITIOUS

THE TFP REFLECTS A HEALTHIER DIET THAN CURRENTLY CONSUMED.

Current HEI-2015 scores for the
reference family members

52-59

HEI-2015 scores of the TFP, 2021
for the reference family members

93-98

Healthy Eating Index, 2015 is a tool that measures how well diets align with the *Dietary Guidelines* for Americans on a scale of 0-100 with a higher score indicating a higher quality diet.

Reflects the way people eat

Integrates forms of foods that are commonly consumed

Includes time-saving foods and ingredients

PRACTICAL

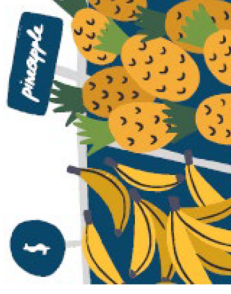
Includes, with few exceptions, lower cost foods and beverages within food categories

182

COST-EFFECTIVE

DIFFERENCES IN PROCESS BETWEEN TFP, 2006 AND TFP, 2021

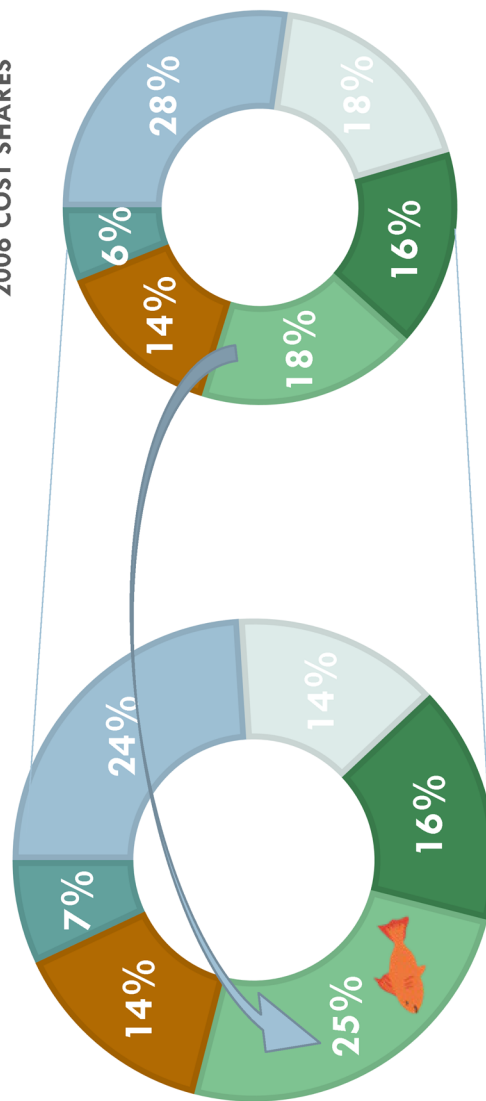
- More similar than different in the model itself—updated modeling categories and nutrition and practicality constraints
- Shifting the source of data on food prices
- Adjusting calorie levels
- Not requiring cost neutrality



*In 2021, more calories...
Shifts in market baskets; most notably,
more fish*

2021 COST SHARES

2006 COST SHARES



■ Vegetables ■ Fruits ■ Grains ■ Protein foods ■ Dairy ■ Misc

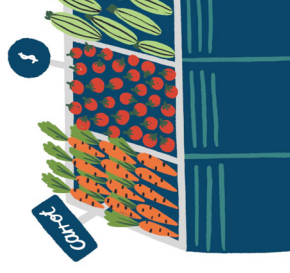
ALASKA & HAWAII

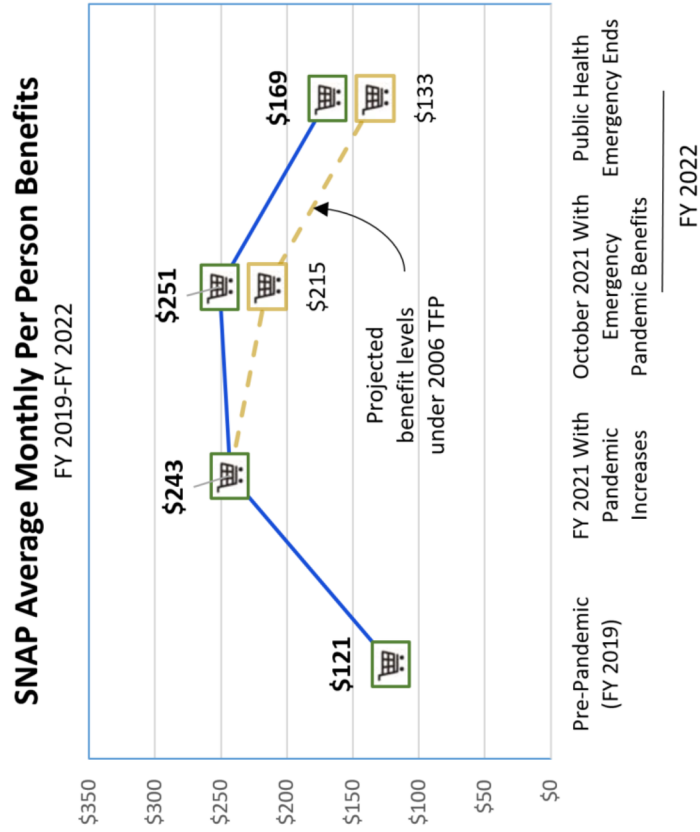
- Alaska, Hawaii have separately calculated TFPs under law, as do Guam and USVI
- Last re-evaluation of Alaska and Hawaii TFPs completed in 1978
- USDA will re-evaluate TFPs for Alaska and Hawaii by 2022; in meantime, TFPs will be adjusted proportionally

HOW DOES THE THRIFTY TRANSLATE TO SNAP?

- Maximum allotments will increase by 21%
- \$43 increase per month for 1 person HH
- \$80 increase per month for 2 person HH
- The SNAP **minimum benefit** will increase \$3 per month
- On average, most SNAP participants will receive **40 cents more per meal**.

186







fns.usda.gov/tfp
FNS.FoodPlans@usda.gov



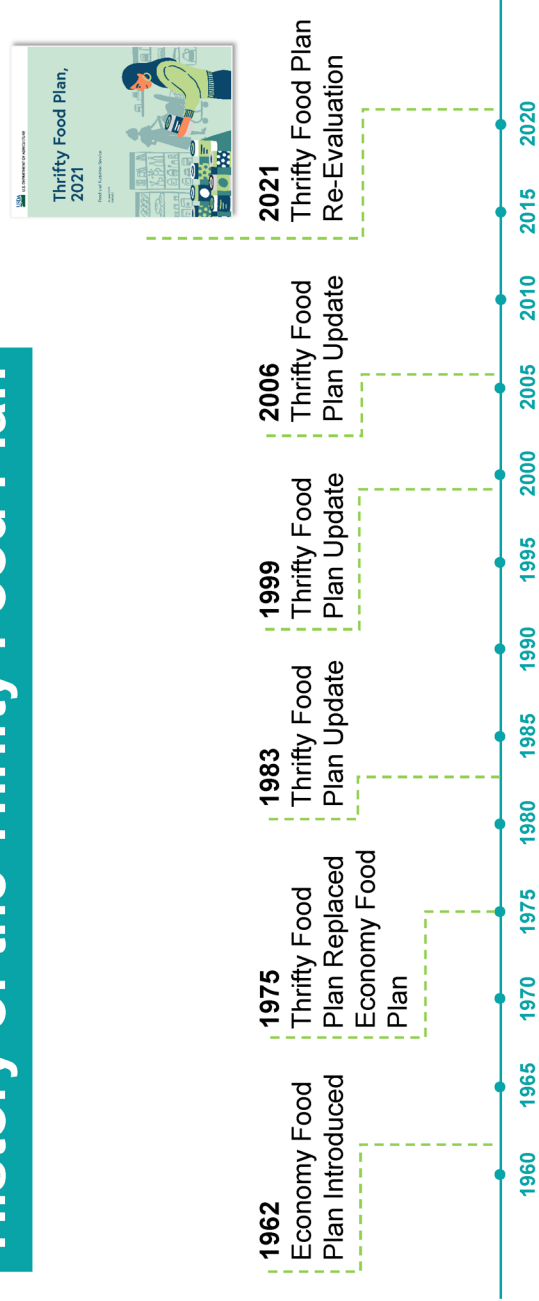
Thrifty Food Plan Re-Evaluation



Food and Nutrition Act of 2008

SEC. 3(u) “Thrifty food plan” means the diet required to feed a family of four persons consisting of a man and a woman twenty through fifty, a child six through eight, and a child nine through eleven years of age, determined in accordance with the Secretary’s calculations... The cost of such diet shall be the basis for uniform allotments for all households...”

History of the Thrifty Food Plan



2018 Farm Bill

Prior updates were completed periodically at the Secretary's discretion to reflect updates to nutritional standards and data on food prices and consumption.

The Agriculture Act of 2018 requires USDA to re-evaluate the TFP by 2022 and regularly going forward:

*“By 2022 and at 5-year intervals thereafter, the Secretary shall re-evaluate and publish the market baskets of the thrifty food plan based on **current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance.**”*

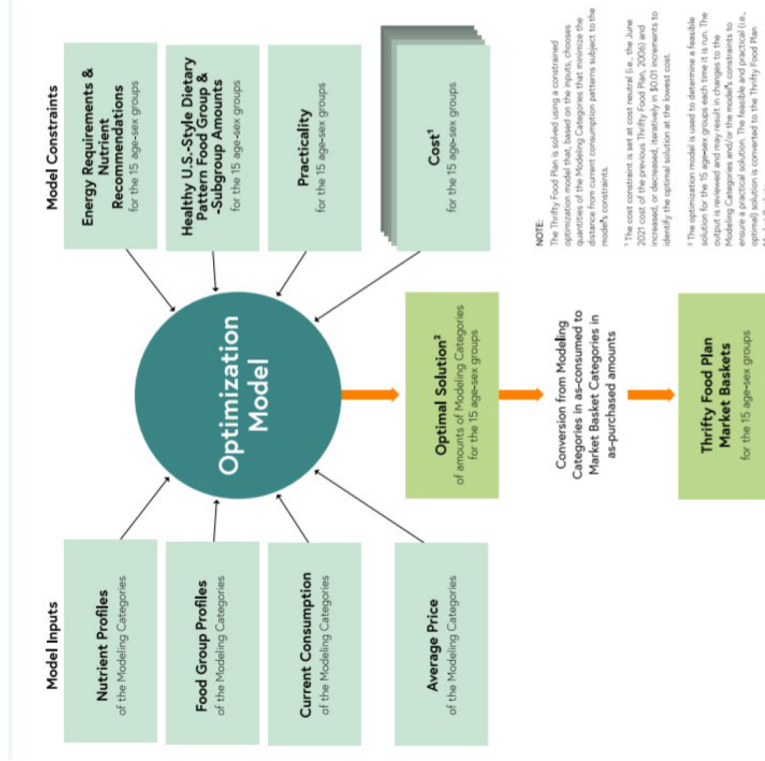
Methods: Optimization Model

- Uses nationally representative data on consumption patterns, food composition, and current food prices
- Applies constraints to ensure market baskets are practical and cost effective and meet dietary guidance
- Produces a market basket of foods at the lowest cost that meets dietary guidance and is practical



Food Plan Optimization Model

Market basket: Weekly amounts from categories of foods and beverages in purchasable forms, and associated costs, to support a healthy diet.



Alaska & Hawaii

- Alaska, Hawaii have separately calculated TFPs under law, as do Guam and USVI
- Alaska and Hawaii TFPs created in 1978 and have been updated semi-annually with the Consumer Price Index (CPI)
- USDA will re-evaluate TFPs for Alaska and Hawaii by 2022; in meantime, TFPs will be adjusted proportionally





[FNS.USDA.gov/tfp](https://fns.usda.gov/tfp)

- Thrifty Food Plan, 2021 Report
- Monthly Cost of Food Reports
- Online supplement that provides the input data, including food categories and food price data

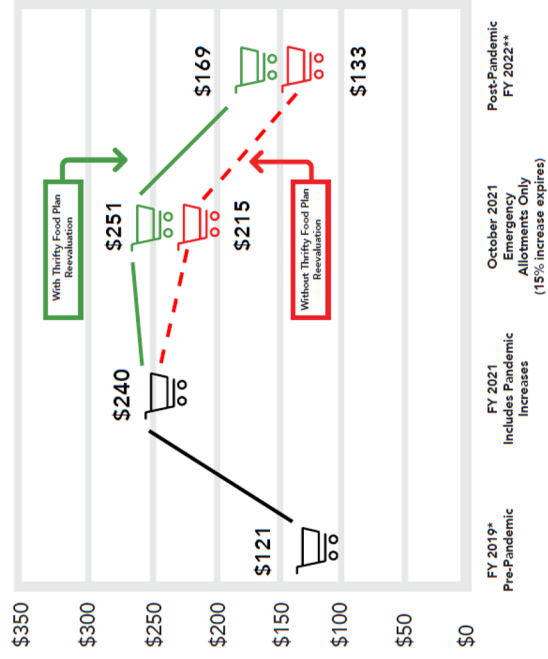
How does the Thrifty Translate to SNAP?

- Maximum allotments increased by 21%, **relative to what they otherwise would have been**
- \$43 increase per month for 1 person HH } **70+% of**
- \$80 increase per month for 2 person HH } **SNAP HHs**
- The SNAP **minimum benefit** increased \$3 per month—to \$20/month
- On average, most SNAP participants will receive **40 cents more per meal**



SNAP Average Monthly Per Person Benefits

FY2019 - FY2022
(Projected)



Data Required to Inform Nutrition Security Policy: The Thrifty Food Plan, 2021

Kevin Meyers Mathieu, MPH
Economist
United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service
Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion



Nutrition Security

- Goal: ensure all Americans have consistent access to the safe, healthy, affordable food essential to optimal health and well-being
- Builds on existing efforts:
 - Recognizing that structural inequities make it hard for many people to eat healthy and be physically active
 - Applying an equity lens
- Achieved through:
 - Meaningful support
 - Healthy food
 - Collaborative action
 - Equitable systems
- Visit <https://www.usda.gov/nutrition-security> for more information

Examples of Nutrition Security Policy

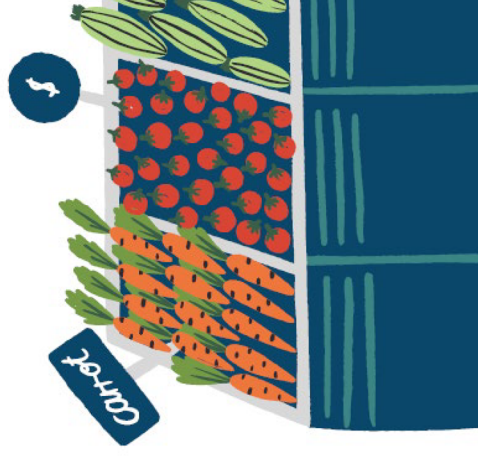
<u>Meaningful support</u> • Ensure adequate benefits • Update programs to reflect nutrition science • Promote and support breastfeeding	<u>Collaborative action</u> • Develop, translate dietary guidance • Equip child nutrition program operators • Tailor products to programs
<u>Healthy food</u> • Promote fruits and vegetables • Healthy eating incentives • USDA foods	<u>Equitable systems</u> • Native American/Tribal school food systems • SNAP & WIC online shopping • Bridging language barriers

Ensuring Adequate Benefits: The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP)

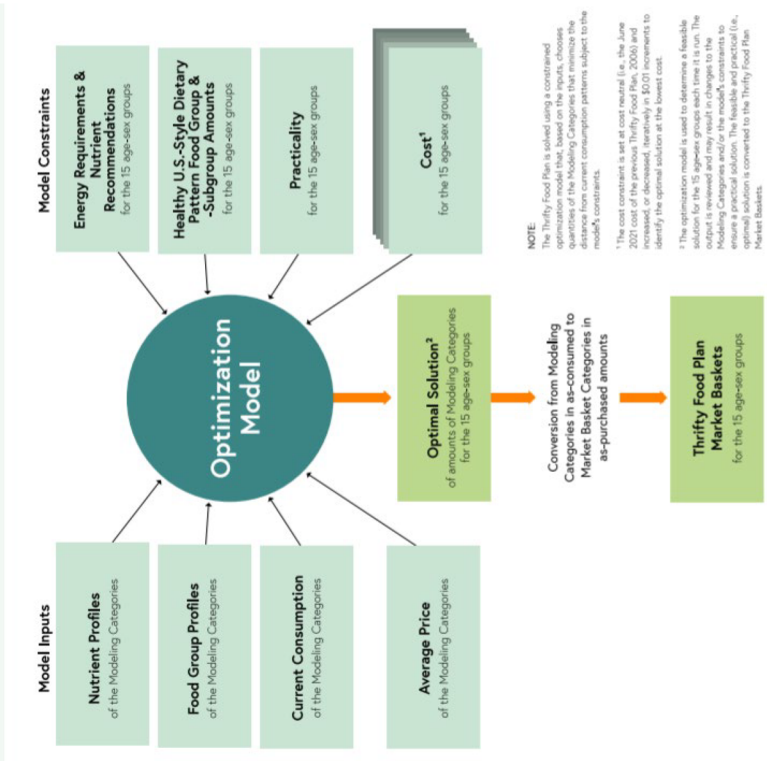
- Represents a nutritious, practical, and cost-effective diet
- Basis for maximum allotments for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- 2021 reevaluation ensured adequate benefits — increased purchasing power of SNAP benefits by 21%
- 2018 Farm Bill required reevaluations every 5 years moving forward — opportunities for evolution

Data Underlying the TFP, 2021

- Ideal characteristics:
 - Nationally-representative
 - Common, linkable unit of analysis
- Domains:
 - Dietary intake
 - Food composition
 - Food prices
- Opportunities:
 - Continuous quality advancement
 - Adapt to evolving food supply and market conditions
 - Expanding capabilities for practicality testing

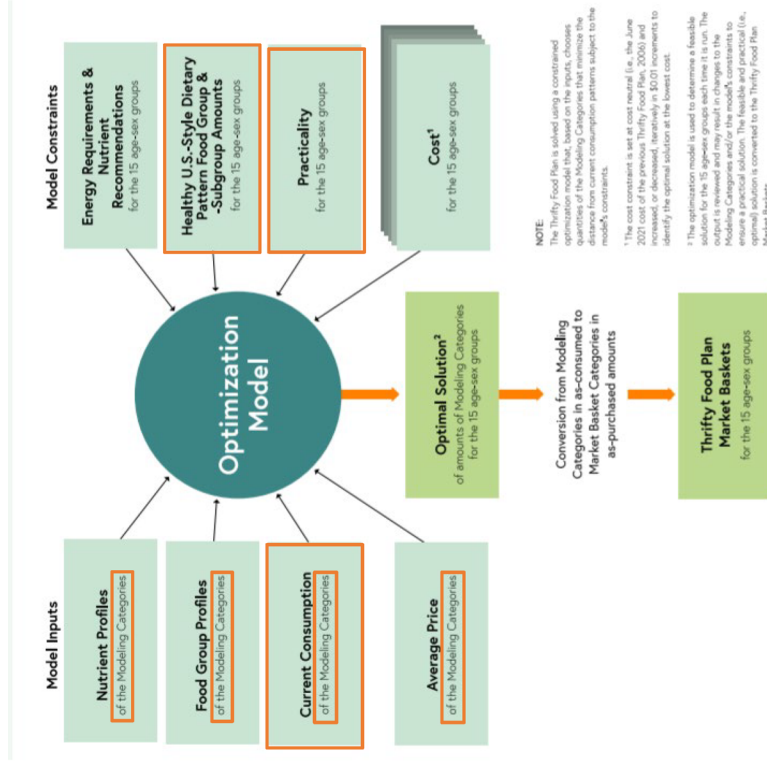


TFP, 2021 Optimization Model



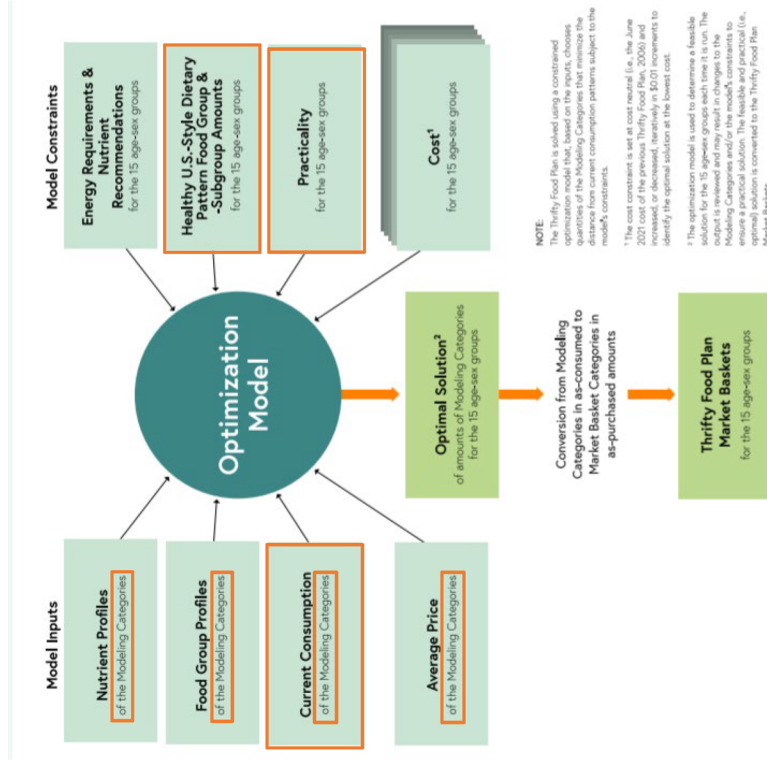
Dietary Intake Data

- What We Eat in America (WWEIA) – dietary component of the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES)
- In-person 24-hour dietary recalls
- Weights account for non-response and day of the week



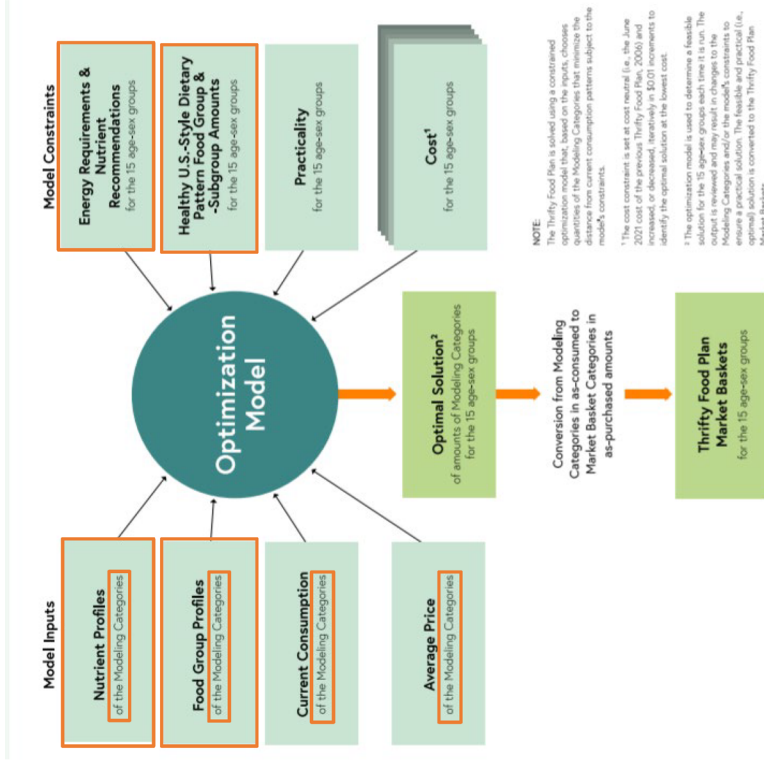
Dietary Intake Data Opportunities

- Additional data-driven measures of diet practicality
- State- and territory-representative intakes outside Mainland United States



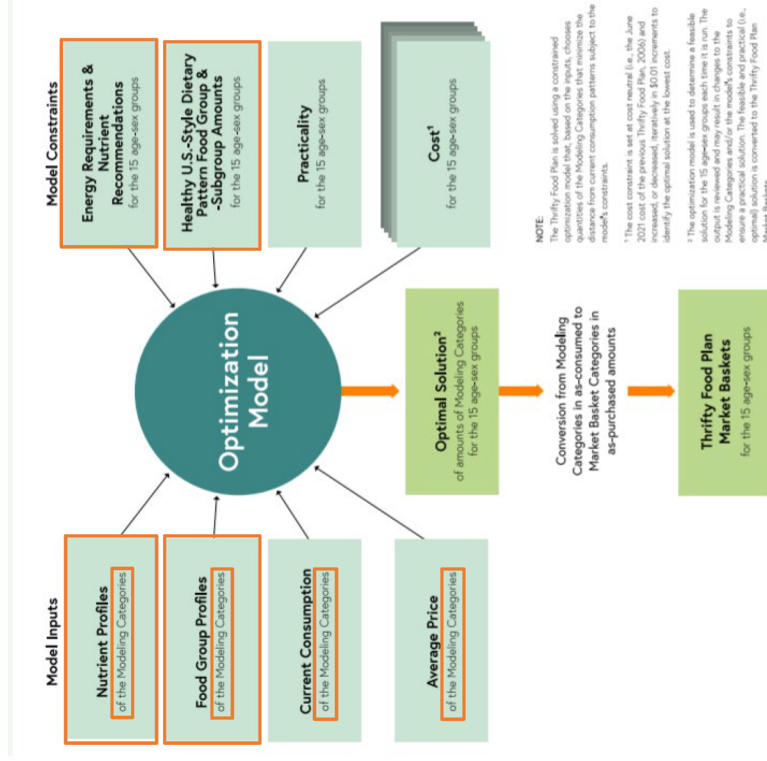
Food Composition Data

- Food and Nutrient Database for Dietary Studies (FNDDS) and Food Pattern Equivalents Database (FPED)
- Reflects nutrient composition and food group contribution of foods and beverages reported in WWEIA, NHANES per 100 edible grams



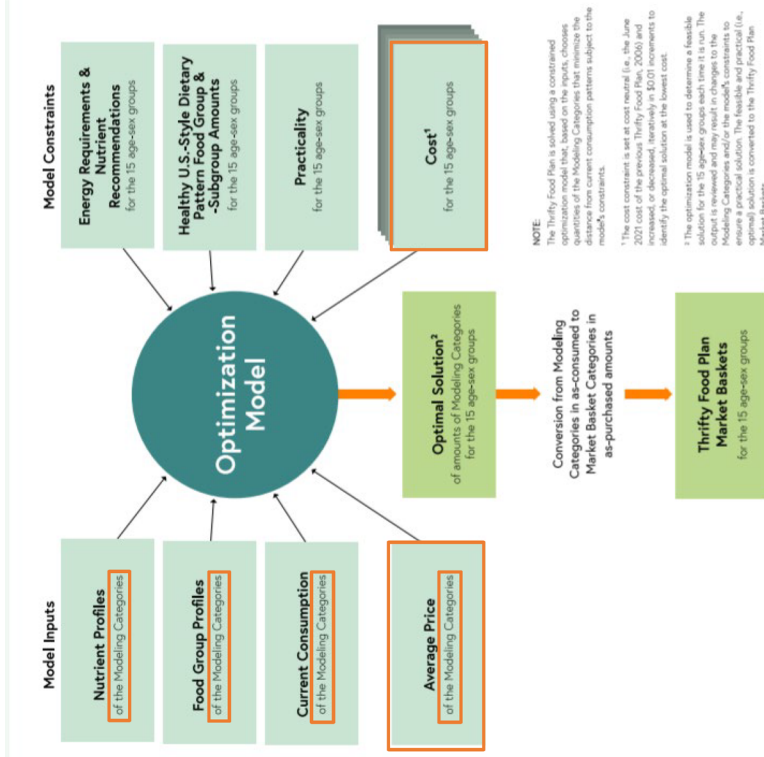
Food Composition Data Opportunities

- Composition of culturally relevant foods
- Continue to develop and integrate modernized databases (i.e., Foundation Foods)
- Accounting for added table salt assumptions



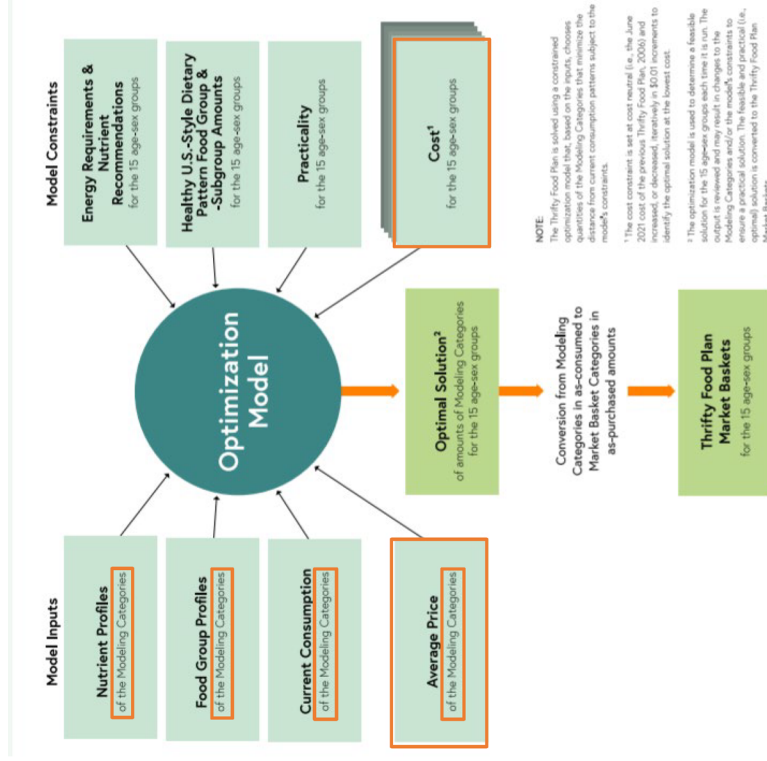
Food Price Data

- IRI InfoScan store-based scanner data and Purchase to Plate Suite
- National average retail unit prices of foods and beverages reported in WWWEIA, NHANES



Food Price Data Opportunities

- Integrate IRI store weights
- Real-time, current prices
- State- and territory-representative prices outside Mainland United States
- Food away from home
- Proprietary data & transparency



Thank you!

- Additional information available on:
 - [USDA's actions on nutrition security](#)
 - [The TFP, 2021 report and online supplement](#)
 - [WWEIA NHANES](#)
 - USDA food composition databases, [FNDDS](#) and [FPED](#)
 - [IRI InfoScan store-based scanner data](#)
- Questions? Email kevin.meyersmathieu@usda.gov

GAO-23-105450
*“Thrifty Food Plan: Better Planning and
Accountability Could Help Ensure Quality of
Future Reevaluations”*

**USDA FNS Briefing for Congressional Requestors
December 2022**



United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

TFP 2021 – Background

- Congress's 2018 Farm Bill directed USDA to reevaluate the TFP no later than 2022
- The provision specified four components for FNS to consider in the reevaluation:
 1. Current food prices;
 2. Food composition data;
 3. Consumption patterns; and
 4. Dietary guidance
- Reevaluation for contiguous States completed in August 2021
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/resource/thrifty-food-plan-2021>

213



United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

TFP 2021 – USDA Approach

**FNS drew upon
extensive technical
expertise and experience**

- ✓ Nutritionist and economists from the FNS Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP)
- ✓ Economists from the Economic Research Service (ERS)
- ✓ Nutrition scientists from the Agricultural Research Service (ARS)

214



United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

3

TFP 2021 – USDA Approach

**FNS utilized the model
used in all previous
updates**

- ✓ Updates were only made to the model's data sources and constraints consistent with the four specified components from the 2018 Farm Bill.
- ✓ FNS only made updates which were supported by clear and convincing existing evidence, which resulted in very few significant changes.

215

TFP 2021 – USDA Approach

The 2021 reevaluation is well documented and transparent

- ✓ The TFP 2021 report provides more information regarding the analyses and considerations than any prior TFP update.
- ✓ FNS consulted with experts and incorporated feedback at multiple stages, including listening sessions with external stakeholders and review of the methodology by subject matter experts.
- ✓ The agency made data publicly available via an online supplement to the report available on its website.

216



United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

GAO Review

- GAO review focused on FNS management processes and methodology
- FNS and GAO differ in our understandings of the reevaluation mandate:

FNS	GAO
• Utilized same optimization model as all previous updates • Updates only made to model's data sources and constraints consistent with four Farm Bill components • Changes only made when clear and convincing evidence exists	• Opportunity to comprehensively reassess • Possible redesign of TFP methodology and inputs • Comprehensive economic analyses



Evidence-Based Decisions

- Technical experts examined the evidence and decisions were made based on the weight of the scientific evidence.

Updated Food Price Data	Food Loss/Plate Waste Assumptions
• Evidence clearly supports change to using store-based data • Data better represents diverse American population	• Evidence suggests a possible change, but further research is needed • Prudent approach was to maintain 5 percent factor in accordance with past practice



Data Analyses

- GAO’s report provides a number of critiques based on internal analyses. For example, based on their analyses, GAO suggests the TFP contains relatively few convenience foods. However, FNS disagrees with the limited definition and approach used by GAO in making this assessment.
- FNS analyses are technically sound and we strive to make complex analyses accessible to readers and researchers. We will work with GAO and any others to utilize the model code and underlying datasets.



USDA Project Management

GAO utilized a particular organization's approach to project management
(*Project Management Book of Knowledge – PMBOK*)

- FNS utilized project management principles fully consistent with Project Management Institute (PMI) guidance.
- The agency designated a Project Liaison/Project Manager.
- This individual was on special assignment to ensure project objectives were met.
- They provided additional support to the CNPP project lead to ensure they could focus on the technical aspects of the reevaluation.

USDA Future Plans

GAO Feedback on Key Issues will strengthen future TFP reevaluations

FNS Will:

- Expand use of Peer Review
- Publish a formal study plan in advance
- Conduct ongoing TFP research:
 - Systematic reviews and analyses of key topics such as food loss/waste, food prep time, online purchases and others.
 - Examine alternatives to the current optimization model for USDA to consider.
 - Case studies of how SNAP participants utilize their funds to purchase healthy diets.

Questions?



GAO-23-105450
*“Thrifty Food Plan: Better Planning and
Accountability Could Help Ensure Quality of
Future Reevaluations”*

**USDA FNS Briefing for Congressional Requestors
December 2022**



United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

TFP 2021 – Background

- Congress's 2018 Farm Bill directed USDA to reevaluate the TFP no later than 2022
- The provision specified four components for FNS to consider in the reevaluation:
 1. Current food prices;
 2. Food composition data;
 3. Consumption patterns; and
 4. Dietary guidance
- Reevaluation for contiguous States completed in August 2021
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/resource/thrifty-food-plan-2021>

TFP 2021 – USDA Approach

**FNS drew upon
extensive technical
expertise and experience**

- ✓ Nutritionist and economists from the FNS Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP)
- ✓ Economists from the Economic Research Service (ERS)
- ✓ Nutrition scientists from the Agricultural Research Service (ARS)

225



United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

3

TFP 2021 – USDA Approach

**FNS utilized the model
used in all previous
updates**

- ✓ Updates were only made to the model's data sources and constraints consistent with the four specified components from the 2018 Farm Bill.
- ✓ FNS only made updates which were supported by clear and convincing existing evidence, which resulted in very few significant changes.

TFP 2021 – USDA Approach

The 2021 reevaluation is well documented and transparent

- ✓ The TFP 2021 report provides more information regarding the analyses and considerations than any prior TFP update.
- ✓ FNS consulted with experts and incorporated feedback at multiple stages, including listening sessions with external stakeholders and review of the methodology by subject matter experts.
- ✓ The agency made data publicly available via an online supplement to the report available on its website.

227



United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

GAO Review

- GAO review focused on FNS management processes and methodology
- FNS and GAO differ in our understandings of the reevaluation mandate:

FNS	GAO
• Utilized same optimization model as all previous updates • Updates only made to model's data sources and constraints consistent with four Farm Bill components • Changes only made when clear and convincing evidence exists	• Opportunity to comprehensively reassess • Possible redesign of TFP methodology and inputs • Comprehensive economic analyses



Evidence-Based Decisions

- Technical experts examined the evidence and decisions were made based on the weight of the scientific evidence.

Updated Food Price Data	Food Loss/Plate Waste Assumptions
• Evidence clearly supports change to using store-based data • Data better represents diverse American population	• Evidence suggests a possible change, but further research is needed • Prudent approach was to maintain 5 percent factor in accordance with past practice



USDA Project Management

GAO utilized a particular organization's approach to project management
(*Project Management Book of Knowledge – PMBOK*)

- FNS utilized project management principles fully consistent with Project Management Institute (PMI) guidance.
- The agency designated a Project Liaison/Project Manager.
- This individual was on special assignment to ensure project objectives were met.
- They provided additional support to the CNPP project lead to ensure they could focus on the technical aspects of the reevaluation.

USDA Future Plans

GAO Feedback on Key Issues will strengthen future TFP reevaluations

FNS Will:

- Expand use of Peer Review
- Publish a formal study plan in advance
- Conduct ongoing TFP research:
 - Systematic reviews and analyses of key topics such as food loss/waste, food prep time, online purchases and others.
 - Examine alternatives to the current optimization model for USDA to consider.
 - Case studies of how SNAP participants utilize their funds to purchase healthy diets.

Questions?



GAO-23-105450
*“Thrifty Food Plan: Better Planning and
Accountability Could Help Ensure Quality of
Future Reevaluations”*

USDA FNS Briefing for Congressional Requestors
January 2023



United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

TFP 2021 – Background

- Congress's 2018 Farm Bill directed USDA to reevaluate the TFP no later than 2022
- The provision specified four components for FNS to consider in the reevaluation:
 1. Current food prices;
 2. Food composition data;
 3. Consumption patterns; and
 4. Dietary guidance
- Reevaluation for contiguous States completed in August 2021
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/resource/thrifty-food-plan-2021>



United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

TFP 2021 – USDA Approach

**FNS drew upon
extensive technical
expertise and experience**

- ✓ Nutritionist and economists from the FNS Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP)
- ✓ Economists from the Economic Research Service (ERS)
- ✓ Nutrition scientists from the Agricultural Research Service (ARS)

235



United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

3

TFP 2021 – USDA Approach

**FNS utilized the model
used in all previous
updates**

- ✓ Updates were only made to the model's data sources and constraints consistent with the four specified components from the 2018 Farm Bill.
- ✓ FNS only made updates which were supported by clear and convincing existing evidence, which resulted in very few significant changes.

TFP 2021 – USDA Approach

The 2021 reevaluation is well documented and transparent

- ✓ The TFP 2021 report provides more information regarding the analyses and considerations than any prior TFP update.
- ✓ FNS consulted with experts and incorporated feedback at multiple stages, including listening sessions with external stakeholders and review of the methodology by subject matter experts.
- ✓ The agency made data publicly available via an online supplement to the report available on its website.

237



United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

5

GAO Review

- GAO review focused on FNS management processes and methodology
- FNS and GAO differ in our understandings of the reevaluation mandate:

FNS	GAO
• Utilized same optimization model as all previous updates • Updates only made to model's data sources and constraints consistent with four Farm Bill components • Changes only made when clear and convincing evidence exists	• Opportunity to comprehensively reassess • Possible redesign of TFP methodology and inputs • Comprehensive economic analyses



Evidence-Based Decisions

- Technical experts examined the evidence and decisions were made based on the weight of the scientific evidence.

Updated Food Price Data	Food Loss/Plate Waste Assumptions
• Evidence clearly supports change to using store-based data • Data better represents diverse American population	• Evidence suggests a possible change, but further research is needed • Prudent approach was to maintain 5 percent factor in accordance with past practice



USDA Project Management

GAO utilized a particular organization's approach to project management
(*Project Management Book of Knowledge – PMBOK*)

- FNS utilized project management principles fully consistent with Project Management Institute (PMI) guidance.
- The agency designated a Project Liaison/Project Manager.
- This individual was on special assignment to ensure project objectives were met.
- They provided additional support to the CNPP project lead to ensure they could focus on the technical aspects of the reevaluation.

USDA Future Plans

GAO Feedback on Key Issues will strengthen future TFP reevaluations

FNS Will:

- Expand use of Peer Review
- Publish a formal study plan in advance
- Conduct ongoing TFP research:
 - Systematic reviews and analyses of key topics such as food loss/waste, food prep time, online purchases and others.
 - Examine alternatives to the current optimization model for USDA to consider.
 - Case studies of how SNAP participants utilize their funds to purchase healthy diets.

Questions?





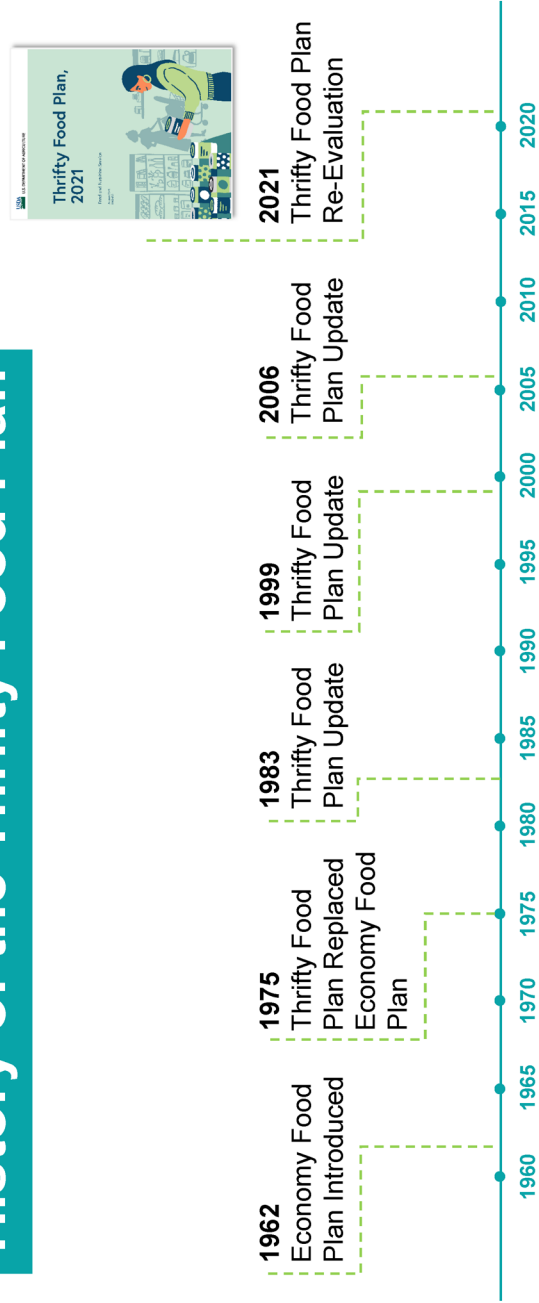
Thrifty Food Plan Re-Evaluation



Food and Nutrition Act of 2008

SEC. 3(u) “Thrifty food plan” means the diet required to feed a family of four persons consisting of a man and a woman twenty through fifty, a child six through eight, and a child nine through eleven years of age, determined in accordance with the Secretary’s calculations... The cost of such diet shall be the basis for uniform allotments for all households...”

History of the Thrifty Food Plan



2018 Farm Bill

Prior updates were completed periodically at the Secretary's discretion to reflect updates to nutritional standards and data on food prices and consumption.

The Agriculture Act of 2018 requires USDA to re-evaluate the TFP by 2022 and regularly going forward:

*“By 2022 and at 5-year intervals thereafter, the Secretary shall re-evaluate and publish the market baskets of the thrifty food plan based on **current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance.**”*

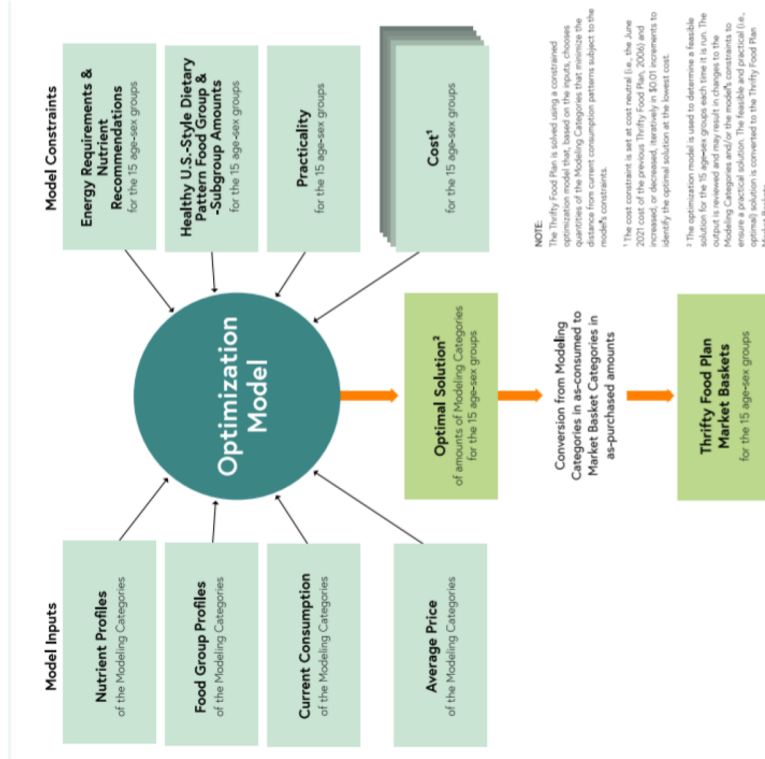
Methods: Optimization Model

- Uses nationally representative data on consumption patterns, food composition, and current food prices
- Applies constraints to ensure market baskets are practical and cost effective and meet dietary guidance
- Produces a market basket of foods at the lowest cost that meets dietary guidance and is practical



Food Plan Optimization Model

Market basket: Weekly amounts from categories of foods and beverages in purchasable forms, and associated costs, to support a healthy diet.



Alaska & Hawaii

- Alaska, Hawaii have separately calculated TFPs under law, as do Guam and USVI
- Alaska and Hawaii TFPs created in 1978 and have been updated semi-annually with the Consumer Price Index (CPI)
- USDA will re-evaluate cost estimates for TFPs for Alaska and Hawaii by 2023; in meantime, TFPs will be adjusted proportionally



How does the Thrifty Translate to SNAP?

- Maximum allotments increased by 21%, **relative to what they otherwise would have been**
- \$43 increase per month for 1 person HH } **70+% of**
- \$80 increase per month for 2 person HH } **SNAP HHs**
- The SNAP **minimum benefit** increased \$3 per month—to \$20/month
- On average, most SNAP participants will receive **40 cents more per meal**





[FNS.USDA.gov/tfp](https://fns.usda.gov/tfp)

- Thrifty Food Plan, 2021 Report
- Monthly Cost of Food Reports
- Online supplement that provides the input data, including food categories and food price data as well as code needed to replicate the results.

Nutrition and Economic Analysis Branch

TusaRebecca Pannucci, PhD, MPH, RD
Branch Chief, Nutrition and Economic Analysis

tusarebecca.pannucci@usda.gov

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

Farm Bill 2023: Nutrition Programs

February 16, 2023

Questions for the Record

Mrs. Cindy Long

Senator Michael F. Bennet

1. According to the Colorado School Nutrition Association, an organization that connects farmers and ranchers with communities in need of healthy food, the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program is one of the nation's most effective programs at exposing kids to fruits and vegetables. This program has reduced childhood obesity rates in elementary schools by 3% at a cost of only \$50 to \$75 per student. Unsurprisingly, demand for the program outpaces the resources available.

- a. What results have you seen in schools that participate in Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program?
- b. What outcomes could we see if we expanded the program in elementary schools so that all students, especially those from low-income families, have access to this more?

USDA Response

The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) was last evaluated in School Year 2010-2011. The evaluation found that, on days they received an FFVP snack, students in FFVP-participating elementary schools consumed more fruits and vegetables than non-participating students. FFVP-participating students consumed about one-third of a cup *more* of fruits and vegetables than students in comparable non-participating schools. Consistent with this, students in FFVP-participating schools consumed more carbohydrates, beta carotene, vitamins A and C, and fiber than their counterparts in non-participating schools.

The majority of participating schools offered FFVP snacks three or more days each week. FFVP-participating schools were more likely to offer nutrition education and promotion activities than non-participating schools, and on average students in FFVP-participating schools reported more positive attitudes towards fruits and vegetables.

Program policy has not changed significantly since this original evaluation, and the \$50 to \$75 per student per year allocation specified in the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 is unchanged. Given these factors and other changes in the school meal environment, USDA plans to re-visit the evaluation of FFVP in the near future to determine the extent to which these impacts continue to hold.

Senator Ben Ray Lujan

1. Deputy Under Secretary Dean and Administrator Long, as we look towards the next Farm Bill, what strategies can both Congress and USDA employ to expand access to locally grown and culturally appropriate foods across the nutrition programs administered by FNS?

USDA Response

USDA has leveraged several opportunities provided by Congress to expand access to locally grown and culturally appropriate foods across nutrition assistance programs. We continue to work with our colleagues across USDA to strengthen connections between farmers, ranchers, and USDA nutrition programs through investments in local and regional food system infrastructure and markets.

USDA receives dedicated funding to purchase traditional foods for the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) food package. Congress provides \$5 million specifically for the traditional food purchases, and USDA's total spending on traditional foods for FDPIR typically exceeds this amount, averaging between \$8-\$14 million in recent years. USDA regularly consults with Tribal partners to identify opportunities to enhance the FDPIR food package, including with respect to traditional foods. Importantly, in the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress authorized up to \$5 million per year for the FDPIR Self-Determination Demonstration Project that empowers Tribal Organizations to procure and distribute local, regional, and/or Tribal foods. Eight Tribal Organizations currently participate in the program, and the application period for Round 2 of the project closed on January 31, 2023. USDA is considering all applications for funding and plans to award the contracts as early as summer 2023.

In The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), Farm to Food Bank grants aim to reduce waste while building relationships between agricultural producers and the local emergency food system. In FY 2023, USDA provided \$3.7 million to 28 States for projects that harvest, process, package, or transport commodities donated by the agricultural industry to be used by emergency feeding organizations. In addition, USDA recently collected feedback from TEFAP State agencies and food banks about culturally responsive foods to inform decision making and procurement strategies.

USDA also supports farmers who sell their products locally through direct marketing outlets, such as farmers' markets and roadside stands by providing a SNAP mobile payment application and card readers to enable them to redeem SNAP benefits.

The Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP), authorized under the Farm Bill, supports access to local foods, and is designed to provide low-income seniors with access to locally grown fruits, vegetables, honey, and herbs; increase the domestic consumption of agricultural commodities through farmers' markets, roadside stands, and community supported agricultural programs; and aid in the development of new and additional farmers' markets, roadside stands, and community support agricultural programs. In February 2023, USDA awarded \$50 million in funds provided by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to implement SFMNP initiatives to maintain and improve supply chain resiliency.

While ARPA provided a significant, one-time infusion of funding to support the program's modernization and success, the annual funding level for SFMNP has remained unchanged since 2008. SFMNP funding is authorized and provided under the Farm Bill, at \$20.6 million annually via the Commodity Credit Corporation. Funding all new requesting State agencies, allowing existing State agencies to expand their program without cutting benefits to other participants, and supporting program improvements to ensure the long-term sustainability of the program would require additional funding.

Also, USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) has established the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) and the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program (LFS), both of which establish cooperative agreements to strengthen our food systems through purchases of local foods for emergency food or school food providers. Leveraging the purchasing power of the Federal government through local procurement creates a win for local economies and for people's health. It puts rural prosperity front and center by adding value to food where it is produced so that capital stays within a community, leading to longer term economic growth and vibrant rural communities. For LFPA, AMS has awarded nearly \$375 million in agreements with 48 states, four territories, and 24 tribes. For LFS, AMS has awarded more than \$151 million in agreements with 33 states.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) nutrition standards provide flexibility for local menu planners to adapt menus and offer foods that appeal to their unique student populations' dietary preferences. In addition, schools also receive entitlement dollars to purchase food for their school meal programs via USDA Foods. USDA Foods provides high-quality, 100 percent American grown food to schools, child-care facilities, and institutions that participate in Child Nutrition Programs including the NSLP, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). The variety and versatility of USDA Foods products allow schools to develop their menus based on their regional and cultural preferences while still meeting the required nutrition standards. FNS also helps schools by making culturally appropriate foods available via the USDA Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (USDA DoD Fresh).

Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith

1. The Food and Nutrition Service agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued a proposed rule to revise regulations governing the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infant, and Children's (WIC) food packages "to align them with the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans and reflect recommendations made by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) in its 2017 report, 'Review of WIC Food Packages: Improving Balance and Choice.'" The proposed changes are, according to the USDA, "intended to provide WIC participants with a wider variety of foods that align with the latest nutritional science; provide WIC State agencies with greater flexibility to prescribe and tailor food packages that accommodate participants' special dietary needs and personal and cultural food preferences; provide more equitable access to supplemental foods; and better promote and support individual breastfeeding goals of participants to help establish successful long-term breastfeeding." One aspect of this proposed rule includes the specification that "all cereals on the State agency authorized food list must contain whole grain as the first ingredient."
 - a. Current USDA WIC dietary guidelines state that at least one-half of the total number of breakfast cereals on the State agency's authorized food list must have whole grain as the primary ingredient and meet labeling requirements for making a health claim as a "whole grain food with moderate fat content" as defined in Table 4 of [paragraph](#)

(e)(12) of 7 CFR 246.10. This is a minimum federal standard, meaning states can go above and beyond this standard based on the unique dietary needs of their WIC recipients. For example, for more than 10 years, the State of Oklahoma implemented a stricter requirement for whole grain cereals in WIC.

- b. Furthermore, in 2017, NASEM estimated a whole grain only-cereal policy would result in a 10% rate of decline in the redemption of cereal benefits from 60% to 54%. These calculations were based on Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) data from 2013 across five states. Yet NASEM did not consider any data from Oklahoma, the only state that was implementing a whole grain only-cereal policy at the time. Oklahoma's whole grain-only cereal policy resulted in a far more significant drop in cereal redemption, down to 36%. The omission of this data from the NASEM study calls into question its estimate that such a policy would not significantly impact the redemption rate of cereal among program participants.

USDA Response

USDA recently proposed changes to the WIC Food Packages to align with the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans and recommendations in the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's (NASEM) 2017 report, "Review of WIC Food Packages: Improving Balance and Choice."

USDA is proposing to require all breakfast cereals meet the criteria for whole grain cereal, to address inadequate consumption of whole grains and excess consumption of refined grains among WIC participants, and as recommended by NASEM.

In its 2017 report, NASEM recommended all cereals provided through WIC meet the whole grain criteria to better support the nutritional needs of WIC participants. The latest dietary guidelines noted that nearly all Americans – 98 percent – do not meet recommendations for whole grain intake and 74 percent exceed limits for refined grains. The 2017 report also cited significant expansion in the availability of whole grain products in the marketplace in recent years, including corn and rice-based options. Sufficient marketplace availability is an important consideration before implementing this change, and USDA specifically requested comment on the provision. USDA is currently reviewing all public comments received during the comment period and will use this feedback to inform development of a final rule implementing changes.

When considering NASEM's recommendations, USDA replicated NASEM's analysis using more recent and more comprehensive redemption data that USDA collected from 48 State agencies – including Oklahoma and covering about 56 percent of all WIC participants. According to this data, the breakfast cereal redemption rate in Oklahoma was similar to the National breakfast cereal redemption rate in 2020. Specifically, the breakfast cereal redemption rate in Oklahoma was about 44 percent from January to December 2020, which was only about 4 percentage points lower than the National breakfast cereal redemption rate of 48 percent during that time. Many factors might have contributed to this modest difference in redemption rates.

2. Given there is no current barrier to any state wanting to implement a whole grain-only cereal policy, why is USDA mandating a new federal, whole grain-only cereal policy across all states when states already have that flexibility?

USDA Response

The amounts and categories of foods provided by the WIC food packages are intended to supplement an individual's diet and provide specific nutrients determined by nutritional research to be lacking in the diets of WIC's target population. According to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025*, 98 percent of Americans fall below recommendations for whole grain intake and 74 percent exceed limits for refined grains. Specific to the population served by WIC, 100 percent of pregnant, postpartum or breastfeeding women, and about 93 percent of children do not meet recommended whole grain intakes. For breakfast cereal, as recommended by NASEM, USDA proposes to require that WIC-eligible whole grain breakfast cereals contain a whole grain as the first ingredient, and that all WIC-eligible breakfast cereals meet this criteria. Breakfast cereals must also contain 28 mg of iron per 100 grams. These proposed changes are expected to improve dietary quality by increasing foods under consumed, including whole grains, and increase intakes of key nutrients such as dietary fiber and folate.

3. Given the USDA's proposed rule was largely based on NASEM's whole grain-only cereal recommendation, why didn't USDA question the omission of Oklahoma's EBT data or consider more recent data to better understand its impact before proposing a new federal standard for cereal purchases among WIC recipients

USDA Response

USDA considered a number of factors in developing the proposed revisions and to ensure the WIC Food Packages align with the latest science and advance nutrition security, including recommendations from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in its independent report of the WIC food packages completed in 2017; the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025 which include new recommendations specifically for pregnant and postpartum women and children under age 2; and feedback from participants, state and tribal partners, and other government agencies.

FNS actively encouraged public comment on the proposed rule "Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC): Revisions in the WIC Food Packages." When considering NASEM's recommendations, USDA replicated NASEM's analysis using more recent and more comprehensive redemption data that USDA collected from 48 State agencies – including Oklahoma--and covering about 56 percent of all WIC participants. According to this data, the breakfast cereal redemption rate in Oklahoma was similar to the National breakfast cereal redemption rate in 2020. Specifically, the breakfast cereal redemption rate in Oklahoma was about 44 percent from January to December 2020, which was only about 4 percentage points lower than the National breakfast cereal redemption rate of 48 percent during that time. Many factors might have contributed to this modest difference in redemption rates.

4. 100 percent juice is a nutrient-dense beverage, a major source of vitamin C in the diet, and one of the primary beverages recommended for consumption in the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The current WIC proposal offers 0 fl oz of juice for the non-breastfeeding mother.
 - a. Given that 100 percent juice provides essential vitamins and minerals, and hydration, as well as an easy way to increase fruit consumption, why has 100 percent juice been removed/decreased in WIC packages?
 - b. Would the agency be willing to increase the juice allocation for the WIC Postpartum (non-breastfeeding) Food Package VI?

USDA Response

As recommended by NASEM and to align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, USDA proposed a reduction to juice in the child, pregnant, and breastfeeding food packages and to eliminate juice for postpartum participants. The proposed rule notes that the DGA emphasizes the consumption of whole forms of fruits and vegetables over juice and recommends limits on the amount of juice consumed as part of a healthy dietary pattern. Juice is lower in dietary fiber when compared to whole fruits or vegetables, a dietary component of public health concern for underconsumption.