RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN SNAP AND WIC

Share Our Strength’s No Kid Hungry Campaign
Across America, one in six children lives in a household that struggles with hunger. Programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) are critical to ensuring that children and families have access to the nutritious foods they need. These programs have been demonstrated to decrease hunger and food insecurity, and are the backbone of our country’s fight against hunger. Nevertheless, more can be done to strengthen these programs to create a nation in which no child goes hungry.

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

SNAP is the nation’s largest and most powerful antihunger program. In 2016, the program served about 45 million Americans, including about 20 million children, by providing families with benefits to purchase food at grocery stores, farmer’s markets, and other food retailers. SNAP works in concert with other child nutrition programs, such as school meals and WIC, to ensure that children have access to the healthy meals they need to grow and thrive.

Independent research shows that SNAP reduces food insecurity and poverty among children. Specifically, food insecurity among children falls by one-third after families have been receiving SNAP benefits for about six months. SNAP also reduces poverty for children and their families. In 2012, SNAP kept nearly 5 million children out of poverty and kept an estimated 2.1 million children from experiencing deep poverty, defined as a family income of 50 percent or less of the federal poverty threshold. SNAP participation has a strong connection to a child’s ability to succeed in school. Specifically, early access to SNAP leads to an 18-percentage-point increase in the likelihood of high school graduation.

Action: More can be done to strengthen SNAP for families with children. First, Congress should move the SNAP benefit calculation from the Thrifty Food Plan to the Low-Cost Food Plan to increase benefits for participants. Currently, SNAP benefits often run out before the end of the month because the outdated Thrifty Food Plan sets unrealistic projections for food costs and unrealistic expectations about the time families have available to prepare meals. This disconnect causes households to make difficult trade-offs between food, shelter, and healthcare.

Moving to the Low-Cost Food Plan would account for variations in food prices in
different geographies, ensure benefit levels that are more closely aligned with current food costs, and ensure that families have the resources to purchase meals throughout the month. Evaluations of pilot programs that test increased benefit levels consistently demonstrate a reduction in food insecurity.

Second, Congress should maintain the option for broad-based categorical eligibility (BBCE). This policy allows households to remain eligible for SNAP if their gross income exceeds 130 percent of the poverty line, allowing them to accrue modest savings that help lift them out of poverty. BBCE incentivizes SNAP participants to find and hold jobs without the fear that their benefits will steeply decline as a result, a situation that can leave them worse off than before they were working.

Third, Congress should ensure that no changes are made to the current structure of the program, including making no attempt to convert it to a block grant, give states discretion over benefit levels, or alter eligibility rules. The current program structure allows SNAP to expand and contract in response to varying levels of poverty and unemployment. Block grants or cost sharing with states would set SNAP up to fail, leaving it without enough money in times of greatest need (such as major economic shocks or natural disasters).

**SPECIAL SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION PROGRAM FOR WOMEN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN**

WIC assists low-income pregnant women, new mothers, infants, and young children up to age five with obtaining the healthy food they need. WIC provides critical resources for mothers to purchase healthy, nutrient-rich foods for their children, as well as critical nutrition education programming for families.

For many children, WIC is their first encounter with federal food assistance programs. WIC fights childhood hunger and improves health; children under age three participating in WIC are more likely to be in excellent or good health compared with eligible children who do not participate. WIC also reduces the medical costs associated with poor nutrition. WIC participants have a reduced likelihood of adverse birth outcomes, including very-low-birth-weight babies.

SNAP and WIC are the two largest programs serving low-income pregnant women,
infants, and children younger than five. The benefits of WIC for children, families, and communities are significant; however, many individuals who are eligible for WIC (because they are enrolled in SNAP) are still not enrolled in WIC, often because they do not know they are eligible for WIC.5

**Action:** Because WIC is a discretionary program, maintaining strong support for it is essential to ensure that it meets the needs of low-income pregnant women and their young children. Congress should continue to support this program by providing funding every year to meet caseload and necessary program costs, as well as by identifying opportunities to streamline program eligibility rules and enrollment procedures for greater efficiency. For example, Congress should direct the U.S. Department of Agriculture to work with governors and state agencies to cross-enroll eligible SNAP participants in WIC to ensure that low-income young children have access to the nutrition they need to grow up healthy.

ENDNOTES


3. Ibid., 9.


5. APCO Insight and Share Our Strength, Early Childhood Research Study (Washington, DC: APCO Insight and Share Our Strength, 2017).