

United States Senate

April 23, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Leader McConnell and Leader Schumer:

As you consider an additional emergency recovery package in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating impacts, we urge you to address the crucial nutrition needs of college students by qualifying the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP) as an eligible form of Individual Assistance during a pandemic under the Stafford Act.

College students across the nation are facing unprecedented challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. For many, shuttered campuses have exacerbated their food insecurity. In 2019, 39% of America's college students reported being food insecure within the past 30 days.¹ Food insecurity is more common among students attending two-year and community colleges, and disproportionately affects Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, students who are parenting, and students who have been in foster care.² Many college communities have woven a safety net for food-insecure students with food pantries, on-campus meal provision, and similar programs, but many of those services are inaccessible during this pandemic due to social distancing and campus shutdowns.³ Dozens of states have sought waivers of college student eligibility rules under the broad authorities given to USDA in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act.⁴ The USDA, however, has denied these waivers.⁵

Unfortunately, SNAP benefits are often inaccessible to college students. College students are presumed to be ineligible for SNAP unless they meet a set of specific eligibility criteria, such as working at least 20 hours per week, participating in Federal Work Study, or having dependent children under age 12.⁶ These high eligibility criteria leave many food-insecure college students ineligible for SNAP

¹ Christine Baker-Smith et al., “#RealCollege 2020: Five Years of Evidence on Campus Basic Needs Insecurity,” (The Hope Center, February 2020), 2. https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019_RealCollege_Survey_Report.pdf.

² Baker-Smith et al., 21-22.

³ Sara Goldrick-Rab, Clare Cady, and Vanessa Coca, “Campus food pantries: Insights from a national survey. Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice,” (The Hope Center, September 2018), 3. <https://cufba.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2018-CUFBA-Report-web-2.pdf>.

⁴ Alexis Fernandez, “Waiver Request: Process New Applications Timely and Ensure Access to Food Due to Coronavirus Disease 2019,” <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/CA-SNAP-COV-Students-Incoming.pdf>; Madeline St. Amour, “Student SNAP Waivers Denied,” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/21/feds-deny-state-requests-waive-student-requirements-snap>.

⁵ Jessica Shahin, “Letter To State Agencies – Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – Denial of Certain Requests to Adjust SNAP Regulations,” (USDA Food and Nutrition Services, April 2020). <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNAP-COVID19-Multiple-Adjustment-Denials.pdf>.

⁶ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services, “SNAP- Students” (Washington, D.C., 2013). <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/students>.

benefits. Additionally, many eligible college students do not avail themselves of SNAP benefits—a 2018 GAO report found that SNAP failed to serve almost 60% of eligible students.⁷

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, students have lost on- and off-campus campus employment and can no longer fulfill the SNAP 20-hour work requirement.⁸ Thus, even the few students who could access benefits are now ineligible for SNAP benefits. While the Families First Coronavirus Response Act suspended work requirements for adults, it did not change the strict requirements for students.⁹ In addition, as students move back in with family members, those households now have extra mouths to feed and aren't able to access extra funds. We can address the unique needs of these families and food insecure college students by making D-SNAP available for students affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Congress can do this by amending the Stafford Act and qualifying D-SNAP under Individual Assistance during pandemics, similar to the Pandemic Disaster Assistance Act.¹⁰

D-SNAP was created to meet immediate food needs during times of disaster. There is no doubt that the current crisis is causing closures and disruptions similar to those caused by a hurricane or an earthquake, but on a national scale. D-SNAP would apply to college students who are employed or unemployed, and to those who have dropped out due to the challenges of remote learning as long as they meet income requirements.¹¹ For those already enrolled in SNAP, it provides the maximum SNAP benefit.¹² Additionally, D-SNAP provides flexibility for program requirements including waiving in-person interviews and document signing, allowing applicants to follow social distancing guidelines.¹³ Furthermore, states already have an existing infrastructure to implement D-SNAP during natural disasters, which would allow students to access these crucial resources more quickly.

College students were among the first to experience substantial changes as the nation worked to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. As policymakers, we must bolster protections for our most vulnerable college students during this uncertain time. Opening D-SNAP to college students would ensure their immediate needs are met. We thank you for your urgent attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

/s/ Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator

/s/ Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

/s/ Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator

⁷ United States Government Accountability Office, *Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits*, GAO-19-95 (Washington, D.C., 2019), 11. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/696254.pdf>.

⁸ “Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims.” U.S. Department of Labor, April 9, 2020. <https://www.dol.gov/ui/data.pdf>.

⁹ Families First Coronavirus Response Act, Pub. L. No. 116-127, 2020.

¹⁰ Pandemic Disaster Assistance Act, S. 3534, 116th Cong. (2020).

¹¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Disaster Snap Guidance. (Washington, D.C., 2014), 3. https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/D-SNAP_handbook_0.pdf.

¹² U.S. Department of Agriculture, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Disaster Snap Guidance, 3.

¹³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Disaster Snap Guidance, 56.

/s/ Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

/s/ Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/s/ Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

/s/ Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

/s/ Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

/s/ Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

/s/ Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

/s/ Patrick Leahy
United States Senator

/s/ Tim Kaine
United States Senator

/s/ Robert Menendez
United States Senator

/s/ Ron Wyden
United States Senator

/s/ Mark R. Warner
United States Senator

/s/ Mazie Hirono
United States Senator

/s/ Tina Smith
United States Senator

/s/ Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

/s/ Jacky Rosen
United States Senator