

Basic Needs

OHIO'S FOOD ASSISTANCE POLICY IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC WILL PETRIK

No matter our differences, we all need to eat. We all want to support our families and live with dignity. Now is the time for our leaders to make policy choices that help all people -- not just the wealthy and powerful few. In this moment of uncertainty, state and federal lawmakers need to do everything they can to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and stabilize families, households, and the economy.

This brief examines elements of the federal stimulus packages and policy changes in Ohio that can help people access food during this difficult time. It also highlights additional recommendations to make sure all Ohioans have enough to eat.

Steps to slow the spread of COVID-19 have caused instability

Governor Mike DeWine has helped slow the spread of COVID-19 with orders that encourage social distancing, and Ohioans have been doing their part to help flatten the curve. He ordered the statewide closure of restaurants, bars, movie theatres, gyms, salons, child care centers, and K-12 schools until May 1.

While these are necessary measures, they have caused insecurity and instability for families and the economy. Employers have laid off thousands of workers. During the week that ended on March 28, 272,117 Ohioans filed unemployment claims compared to 7,046 claims just two weeks before.¹ Food banks across the state are providing emergency food assistance to a record number of people.²

The Federal Reserve estimates that four in 10 Americans don't have enough savings to cover a \$400 emergency.³ As the crisis disrupts Ohioans' daily lives, our leaders need to ensure working people can make ends meet. The choices our government makes now can set a better course for the future of our communities.

A strategy to stabilize families and the economy

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is one of the most effective programs during a recession. First, SNAP meets people's immediate needs and allows people to keep feeding their families. Research shows that children whose families use SNAP are healthier and do better at school.⁴ Second, SNAP can help stabilize the economy during a downturn by quickly supporting people who lose their jobs or income. As unemployment rises, more people get their food through SNAP, and research shows that people who use SNAP spend it quickly in their community.⁵ Four-fifths of SNAP benefits are spent in the local

¹ Shields, Michael, "Ohio jobless claims top last week's record high," Policy Matters Ohio, April 2, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2w7uile>

² VanAllen, Amanda, "Food banks seeing record number of people in need," ABC News 5 Cleveland, April 1, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3bHp2xd>

³ Dealing with Unexpected Expenses, from "Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2018 - May 2019," Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, <https://bit.ly/3bGrUdG>

⁴ Carlson, Steven, Rosenbaum, Dottie, Keith-Jennings, Brynne, and Nchako, Catlin, "SNAP Works for America's Children," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), <https://bit.ly/2UWZCVq>

⁵ Bernstein, Jared and Spielberg, Ben, "Preparing for the Next Recession: Lessons from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act," CBPP, <https://bit.ly/340zPie>

economy within two weeks, and 97% within a month. SNAP also frees up resources for Ohioans to meet other basic needs, like paying for rent, diapers, medication, or toilet paper.

National steps taken to provide food to people who need it

Congress passed three major bills in response to COVID-19. The first provided funds for medical equipment, vaccine development and other research. The second, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, addressed immediate, pressing health and social needs. The third, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, addressed income support, business assistance, and aid to state and local governments, among other things.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act provides important flexibility and relief to meet emerging needs. The bill extends food assistance by:⁶

- Allowing states to provide SNAP benefits to households with children who received free or reduced-price meals, if a school is closed for at least five days due to COVID-19.
- Making it easier for people to access SNAP and freeing up administrative capacity to connect people to SNAP. The bill allows states to offer all recipients the maximum benefit amount, which many do not get. It also allows the interview, screening, and processing of benefits to be more streamlined for the applicant and the caseworker.
- Suspending the three-month time limit. Adults without children were required to report 80 hours of work or training each month to receive SNAP for longer than three months. The act temporarily suspends this requirement.
- Allocating \$500 million in emergency funding for the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, which provides nutrition education, and food for pregnant women, new mothers, infants and children up to 5 years old. The bill gives states flexibility to waive certain administrative requirements to make it easier to serve WIC participants.
- Allocating \$400 million to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to fund food purchases through the Temporary Food Assistance Programs to support emergency aid for food banks.

These changes are all temporary and available only during the public health emergency.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act is the third federal stimulus package. It includes several major elements to buffer Americans from the recession, such as expanded unemployment compensation (UC), payments to individuals and families, and financial assistance to states. By not increasing SNAP benefits, the CARES Act misses an opportunity to both stimulate the economy and help families make ends meet, like policymakers did during the last recession.⁷

Policymakers can temporarily increase the maximum SNAP benefit by 15% in the next stimulus package. This would provide roughly \$25 per person per month, or a little less than \$100 a month to help a family of four afford food and help stabilize consumer spending in local economies.⁸ We urge federal lawmakers to include this in the next relief bill, which is being discussed now.

⁶ Parrott, Sharon, Aron-Dine, Aviva, Rosenbaum, Dottie, et al, "Immediate and Robust Policy Response Needed in Face of Grave Risks to the Economy," CBPP, <https://bit.ly/3bMHFzT>

⁷ Parrott, Sharon, Stone, Chad, Huang, Chye-Ching, et al, "CARES Act Includes Essential Measures to Respond to Public Health, Economic Crisis, But More Will Be Needed," CBPP, <https://bit.ly/2yrdyQ6>

⁸ Parrott, Sharon, Aron-Dine, Aviva, Rosenbaum, Dottie, et al, "Immediate and Robust Policy Response Needed in Face of Grave Risks to the Economy," CBPP, <https://bit.ly/3bMHFzT>

Steps Ohio has taken to support people in need

Food is the most basic human need. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act gives Ohio more flexibility to respond to the needs of the moment. The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) is taking important steps to make sure current SNAP participants don't lose benefits and help newly eligible people apply and access benefits quickly.

The USDA has granted Ohio waivers toward these goals. The first waiver prevents Ohioans who participate in SNAP from losing access to benefits due to expiration or redetermination.⁹ This means that SNAP benefits scheduled to expire in March, April and May 2020 will be extended six months until September, October and November 2020. This will keep Ohioans enrolled in SNAP and free up caseworkers to connect people with critical food assistance.

The USDA also authorized new, flexible guidelines for processing new SNAP applications.¹⁰ Federal rules had required people to complete an interview to receive SNAP benefits. The new, temporary rules will allow ODJFS to waive the interview requirement as long as the applicant's identity has been verified and other mandatory verifications have been completed.

ODJFS should establish procedures to guide county Job and Family Service (JFS) agencies to operationalize these changes. ODJFS has already developed temporary procedures for county JFS agencies to accept verbal signatures over the phone. These measures will make sure more Ohioans who need it get help affording food.

The USDA also approved a waiver to bring all households receiving SNAP "up to the maximum benefit due to pandemic related economic conditions for up to 2 months."¹¹ This would infuse over \$150 million into Ohio's economy over two months and help households pay for food expenses. This will allow households to receive up to the maximum benefit based on their household size. Typically, households with higher monthly income receive less SNAP assistance, and households with the lowest or no income receive the maximum benefit. Federal lawmakers decided that households already receiving the maximum amount will not see a boost.

Policymakers are taking steps to help Ohioans safely use SNAP to buy food. The DeWine Administration issued an order to allow SNAP recipients to pay for curbside grocery pickup with their SNAP Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card.¹² School districts across the state have also taken initiative to get food to students who need it. The USDA granted a waiver to Ohio for schools to package and distribute meals to students.

What else is needed

Metro County JFS agencies are reporting staff shortages all across the state as they transition to at-home or remote work environments. County JFS offices have reported being overwhelmed by calls for UC claims. Food banks across the state are reporting major increases in demand -- 250% in Dayton and 300% in Cincinnati.¹³ While schools are working to

⁹ USDA Approval letter re: SNAP - Ohio Request to Extend Certification Periods and Adjust Reporting Requirements Due to COVID-19. Interim reporting requirements due between March and May this year will have due dates extended to after May 2020, <https://bit.ly/2X2n3j4>

¹⁰ "SNAP - Adjusting Interview Requirements Due to Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) - Blanket Approval," USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, <https://bit.ly/2R30J54>

¹¹ "COVID-19; OH Emergency Allotments Approval," USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, <https://bit.ly/39zGoKP>

Note: While the USDA approved this waiver, a public announcement from ODJFS has not yet been released,

¹² "ODJFS Coronavirus (COVID-19) Response," Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, April 1, <https://bit.ly/3aBacbi>

¹³ "Rising to the Challenge: Preventing Hunger in Ohio Before, During, and After the COVID-19 Pandemic," Ohio Association of Foodbanks, March 2020, <https://bit.ly/2w45QdJ>

get food to students, the Plain Dealer reported that only around 10% of students in Cleveland are picking up free meals.¹⁴

Recommendations

While state and federal lawmakers have moved quickly, Ohioans in crisis need more support.

Federal policy makers can:

- **Increase the maximum SNAP benefit by 15%.** This would provide roughly \$25 per person per month for food and help the nation weather the emerging recession by boosting consumer spending in the economy.

State policymakers can:

- **Support Ohio's emergency food distribution network.** The Ohio Association of Foodbanks has asked for an additional \$25 million to purchase, pack, and distribute over 1 million emergency food boxes that will be needed to feed hungry Ohioans over the next month.
- **Get resources to kids who no longer have access to free school meals.** The Families First Coronavirus Act authorized Pandemic EBT to support children who were receiving free or reduced-price meals at school. ODJFS needs to get benefits to households that have SNAP EBT cards and develop a system to make sure households that don't have EBT cards get them as soon as possible. Pandemic EBT will provide roughly \$114 per child per month on the SNAP EBT card.
- **Make it easier for more households to access SNAP.** Ohio can expand eligibility for SNAP from 130 to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level through broad-based categorical eligibility.¹⁵ The state could also include the SNAP application on the UC website (<https://unemployment.ohio.gov>) and add instructions for how to check for SNAP eligibility in determination letters that ODJFS sends to UC claimants. This would help more Ohioans get support through SNAP and help stimulate the economy.
- **Expand food options for people with SNAP.** Ohio can request a "hot foods" waiver to allow SNAP participants to purchase a wider variety of foods in grocery stores. This will provide more options for populations with less capacity to cook at home.
- **Expand curbside pick-up options at grocery stores.** While Governor DeWine authorized curbside grocery pickup with SNAP EBT cards, most Ohio grocery stores don't offer online ordering and curbside pickup. The state should work with grocers to make this option available for all Ohioans, including SNAP participants.
- **Educate the public about how to access SNAP benefits.** Food banks are being overwhelmed by demand. ODJFS Director Hall can use one of Governor DeWine's daily press briefings to educate Ohioans about how to access food assistance through SNAP.

We are all in this together. While individuals, nonprofits, and businesses all play a part, only government can mobilize our shared resources to ensure all of us can eat. In the midst of the COVID-19 emergency, we need to remember what we learned during the Great Recession. A swift expansion of SNAP (as well as Unemployment Compensation and Medicaid) is one of the best ways to meet the emerging needs of kids and families, and stabilize our economy.

¹⁴ O'Donnell, Patrick, "Free lunches have few takers during coronavirus school closures," The Plain Dealer, March 28, 2020, <https://bit.ly/39DSYsG>

¹⁵ Cahill, Rachel, "Seeking Unemployment Insurance? Remember to apply for SNAP too." Center for Community Solutions, April 1, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Rlahsi>