



June 26, 2023

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
731 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Glenn Thompson
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
555 Dirksen Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable David Scott
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Boozman, and Ranking Member Scott:

AARP, which advocates for the more than 100 million Americans age 50 and older, appreciates the opportunity to offer our comments and priorities regarding the 2023 Farm Bill reauthorization. AARP strongly believes that no one in this country should have to go hungry. Access to an adequate, nutritious diet is foundational to maintaining health, dignity, quality of life, and independence as people age. The Farm Bill is crucial to fighting hunger and poverty, including for older adults living on fixed incomes.

We urge Congress to work together in a bipartisan manner to find ways to strengthen food assistance efforts and eliminate barriers to accessing existing nutritional programs, including through:

- Reducing red tape and administrative barriers that limit SNAP participation
- Enhancing benefits for participants
- Protecting against harmful cuts or changes to eligibility requirements
- Strengthening other major federal nutrition assistance programs

Food assistance programs are vital for older adults

Nearly 9.4 million Americans aged 50 and older—about 1 in 12—were food insecure in 2021, meaning they had limited or uncertain access to adequate, nutritious food. Older adults may face life challenges as they age—such as experiencing a job loss, medical crisis, or the death of a spouse or other loved one—that may result in financial instability and increased difficulty affording food. Food insecurity is most prevalent among adults ages 50–59 and may be long-term or episodic.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the nation's most effective nutrition assistance program, is a lifeline to millions of older adults at risk for food insecurity, providing a very modest benefit to purchase food. Research shows that SNAP participation among older adults is associated with fewer hospital and emergency room visits, as well as lower hospital and long-term care admissions. In short, SNAP is a smart investment that can help lead to reduced overall health care costs. SNAP is especially important for those older Americans who have a harder time gaining and retaining employment.

Despite SNAP's importance, older adults have historically had much lower participation rates in the program than other age groups. A recent AARP/Mathematica [analysis](#) found that under state SNAP rules, more than 60 percent of eligible adults age 50 or older – 16 million Americans – were not enrolled in the program in FY 2018. This is, in part, due to administrative barriers. While many would have been eligible for the minimum benefit, more than 3 million older adults lived in households that could have been eligible for over \$200 a month.

With rising food prices and a growing aging population, it is more important than ever to connect eligible older adults to SNAP and other nutrition assistance. AARP supports the following ways to strengthen, and protect, these programs:

Reducing red tape and administrative barriers that limit eligibility and program participation

As Congress begins the work of the Farm Bill reauthorization, AARP supports policies that will ensure seniors can access and receive the full benefits for which they are eligible. Improved efficiencies could also lead to reduced costs and enhanced program integrity. In addition, we urge Congress to promote Puerto Rico being included in SNAP who currently face significant challenges accessing nutrition assistance.

AARP further urges action on the following policies:

- ***Preserve and expand access to broad-based categorical eligibility (BBCE).*** BBCE can help individuals, families, and older adults on fixed incomes access vital food assistance while allowing them to build or preserve modest savings for emergencies, like unexpected medical bills. Our AARP/Mathematica study found that BBCE is associated with higher participation among adults ages 60 and older, and the policy simplifies SNAP administration. Restricting BBCE could disproportionately harm older adults and increase administrative burden.
- ***Consider CAP as standard policy option.*** In partnership with the Social Security Administration (SSA), the SNAP Combined Application Project (CAP) is a demonstration project that enables individuals applying for or undergoing redetermination for SSI to also apply for SNAP through a combined application. Several states with CAP use an automatic enrollment approach in which individuals ages 60 and older who newly enroll in or have a redetermination for SSI and are not already enrolled in SNAP are automatically enrolled. Streamlining enrollment and minimizing administrative red tape can reduce government waste and better target assistance to those

most in need. Congress should make SSI-CAP a [standard policy option](#) and consider other ways to streamline enrollment and recertification processes across low-income programs, including data sharing when appropriate.

- ***Permit Telephonic Signatures without audio recording.*** AARP supports permanently allowing collection of telephonic signatures without an audio recording, as allowed in temporary rules put in place during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Reducing administrative barriers in the application and recertification processes associated with SNAP is particularly important to reduce red tape and excess bureaucracy.
- ***Extend certification periods.*** The AARP/Mathematica study and other research have found that extended certification periods could help those most in need access benefits to put food on the table. Extended certification periods also reduce churning, or frequent entry and exit from SNAP. States have the option to extend certification periods for households in which all members are 60 years or older or have a disability to 24 months, or up to 48 months under CAP. To enhance efficiencies and support the most vulnerable populations, we urge Congress to permit states to further extending the maximum allowable certification period for households with older adults or people with disabilities without earned income.

Enhancing benefits for SNAP participants

Older SNAP households are more likely than younger SNAP households to receive the minimum benefit. Enhancing benefits in the following ways can help ensure eligible older adults have access to the nutrition they need to live healthy, active lives.

- ***Expand nutrition incentives.*** AARP supports increasing incentives for access and purchase of nutritional foods, including fruits and vegetables for SNAP participants, such as through the Double Up Food Bucks program. This program doubles the value of federal nutrition SNAP benefits spent at participating markets and grocery stores, helping people bring home more healthy fruits and vegetables while supporting local farmers. The wins are three-fold: low-income consumers eat more healthy food, local farmers gain new customers and make more money, and more food dollars stay in the local economy.
- ***Technology Improvements.*** AARP supports USDA's recent announcement to provide \$25 million for SNAP technology improvements to modernize the delivery of nutrition incentive programs and improve access to nutrition incentives. Methods for delivering food benefits should keep up with technological developments in the retail environment, including online SNAP purchases and delivery. New methods for managing benefits must be accessible and have strong consumer protections while protecting program integrity.
- ***Continue to evaluate the Thrifty Food Plan and consider more responsive benefit adjustments.*** AARP supports continuing the 2018 Farm Bill provision requiring re-evaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) every five years. The re-evaluation updates SNAP benefit levels for inflation to ensure benefit adequacy. However, while SNAP benefits are adjusted for inflation annually, the cost of groceries has increased so rapidly

that the annual adjustment does not reflect today's actual food prices. Congress should consider the health and economic costs of hunger, food insecurity, obesity, and other diet-related diseases as it reauthorizes the Farm Bill and determine how to ensure program benefits are responsive in times of economic crises.

- ***Increase minimum monthly benefit.*** Households that qualify for the minimum benefit are very low-income households that meet strict SNAP income requirements. Under federal SNAP rules, gross income must not be higher than 130 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL)—about \$1,473 per month for a single-person household in 2023 according to USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)—while net income must not be higher than 100 percent of the FPL. The minimum benefit is currently set at 8 percent of the maximum allotment for a household of one—which translates to \$23 a month, or about 77¢ a day. The expectation of low benefit levels is a [commonly cited](#) reason for nonparticipation among eligible older adults. Further, the rising cost of food also underscores the need to reevaluate the minimum monthly SNAP benefit amount.

Protecting against harmful cuts or changes to eligibility requirements

AARP opposes [policies that would make it harder for food insecure seniors to access the benefits for which they are eligible](#). It is important to recognize the employment challenges and barriers older Americans face, even in good economic times. While most individuals who receive SNAP benefits are already working, older Americans who fall out of the labor force face significant barriers to gaining employment and take longer to find employment compared to younger age groups. Older workers continue to remain long-term unemployed at a much higher rate than younger workers. Age discrimination is pervasive: two in three workers ages 40-plus (64%) report having seen or experienced age discrimination. This is not a new phenomenon, and widespread age discrimination continues to hold older workers back.

Additionally, many older adults are forced to cut hours or drop out of the workforce to care for their loved ones. Family caregivers are stressed and often overwhelmed balancing the physical, emotional, financial, and time-consuming demands required to care for their loved one. A recent AARP family caregiving poll reveals that 42% – and half of female caregivers – have had to quit a job or reduce their hours at work because of family caregiving responsibilities. Other older adults have unstable or temporary work and may work on and off throughout the year. The bottom line is that making it harder for older adults to get the nutrition they need is only going to add to the challenges we face in ensuring a healthy and productive workforce.

Strengthening other major federal nutrition assistance programs

Congress should also consider ways to improve the other federal nutrition programs authorized through the Farm Bill to help alleviate food insecurity among older adults.

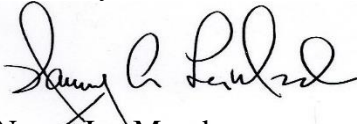
- ***Commodity Supplemental Food Program.*** The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) improves the health of low-income older adults at least 60 years of age by supplementing their diets with nutritious USDA foods. Unlike SNAP, the number of people who can participate in CSFP is limited, and many eligible older adults are not able

to access the program. As food prices increase, additional funding is needed to meet the needs of older adults who are struggling with food insecurity.

- ***Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program.*** The Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) enables older adults with low incomes to purchase fresh produce at farmers' markets or Community Supported Agriculture operations. With some exceptions, the federal SFMNP benefit level must be at least \$20 per year but cannot be more than \$50, whether for a household or individual. Increasing the annual benefit amounts would allow participants to purchase more healthy foods.
- ***Emergency Food Assistance program.*** The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) provides nutritious food to low-income individuals through food banks and other charitable organizations nationwide, while supporting domestically grown commodities. Feeding America food banks have reported substantial increases in demand for food assistance throughout the pandemic, with many people turning to food banks for the first time ever. It is our hope that as the underlying causes of hunger are addressed and other federal programs strengthened, there will be less reliance on emergency programs. Until then, with sustained demand for food assistance, additional investments for TEFAP food will be needed to help stem the tide of hunger.

Thank you for your ongoing work to reauthorize the Farm Bill. AARP appreciates the opportunity to outline our priorities and stands ready to work with you. If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me or contact Rita Landgraf, Director, Family and Caregiving at rlandgraf@aarp.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nancy LeaMond", written over a faint circular stamp.

Nancy LeaMond
Executive Vice President and
Chief Advocacy and Engagement Officer