



Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: How Montana Can Help During COVID-19

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As the economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic takes root, the Supplemental Nutrition Access Program (SNAP) is one of the quickest and most effective ways Montana can help individuals and families. Early estimates project that Montana will face a loss of 4.6 percent (approximately 18,230) of total private-sector jobs, as a result of the pandemic.¹ This job loss rate is one of the highest in the country, as Montana's economy relies heavily on tourism and retail industry which are already facing temporary closures. Workers who lose income or employment altogether will turn to SNAP to help meet their basic needs. Additionally, SNAP food assistance provides critical support for families who may be caring for children at home as a result of school and child care closures.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act has given states broad temporary flexibility to adapt their SNAP assistance to address the current crisis.² Montana must act quickly to fully utilize this flexibility in order to protect as many people possible from economic hardship and also promote public health.³ While the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has provided limited guidance at this point, Montana should consider pursuing the following recommendations.

Provide Emergency SNAP Benefits to Maximum Amount Available

The Families First Act allows states to increase benefits to the maximum amount allowed for their household. For example, a household of four would be eligible for \$646.⁴ Montana should provide emergency supplemental SNAP benefits to households by allowing them to receive the maximum available for their household.⁵

Provide SNAP to Children Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price School Meals

Because schools in Montana are currently closed, students receiving free or reduced-price school meals are eligible for SNAP benefits. The vast majority of families who receive free or reduced-price school meals already receive SNAP, but the state may also make "issuances" to households who are not currently enrolled in SNAP. The Department of Public Health and Human Services should work with the Office of Public Instruction to execute communications to families not currently receiving SNAP. The state should utilize school districts to help rapidly provide this information to families.

Protect SNAP Benefits for Current Eligible Households

The state should ensure families do not lose their eligibility for food assistance during the COVID-19 health emergency. With the expected economic downturn, Montana should request approval to extend certification lengths, or the period in which a family is eligible for SNAP benefits, while the state of emergency continues. It is critical to avoid gaps in coverage, especially for seniors and people with disabilities. Measures to keep participating households connected to SNAP will ease the pressure on state staff, allowing them to focus on processing new applications.

Furthermore, the state should find ways to streamline the application process in order to increase capacity to process new application. The state should request approval to waive certification interviews and verification of documents. The state should also request to waive telephonic signature requirements due to limited capacity.

Calculate Benefits Based on Prospective Income

Currently, the state determines SNAP benefits and eligibility based on the applicants' income the month they apply for benefits. Because for many people affected, income changed suddenly, SNAP benefits should be calculated based on anticipated income and should disregard any discontinued income received earlier in the month.

Waive Work-Requirement for College Students

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act suspended the three-month time limit on benefits for adults who are unable to meet the work requirement. College students receiving SNAP, however, are expected to meet a 20 hour a week work requirement. With campuses at a standstill, many students will be unable to meet this requirement. Montana should seek a waiver from the USDA in order to allow eligible college students who had been receiving SNAP benefits to keep receiving them.

Conclusion

SNAP is considered the “first-responder” of government programs as it is able to quickly get people the resources they need. In these difficult times, Montana must ensure that all families affected by this crisis are able to afford the food they need to stay healthy. Acting quickly to simplify the process and extend benefits to those in need will provide stability during this crisis.

¹ Cooper, D., and Wolfe, J., “[Every state will lose jobs as a result of the coronavirus: Policymakers must take action](#),” Economic Policy Institute, March 19, 2020.

² “[Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#),” Pub. L. No. 116-127, March 18, 2020.

³ Rosenbaum, D., et al., “[USDA, States Must Act Swiftly to Deliver Food Assistance Allowed by Families First Act](#),” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 20, 2020.

⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services, “[SNAP Eligibility](#),” retrieved on March 23, 2020.

⁵ It is important to note that those households that are at lower income levels and currently receive the maximum benefit would not see increased benefits, so it is important for USDA to provide further guidance to states on how states can provide additional emergency benefits in certain circumstances. Rosenbaum, D., et al., “[USDA, States Must Act Swiftly to Deliver Food Assistance Allowed by Families First Act](#),” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 20, 2020.