

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 15, 2022

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden,

Thank you for your leadership in convening the first White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health (the Conference) in more than 50 years. We look forward to working to address the hunger crisis in our nation and ensure that every American has access to healthy and affordable food.

In that spirit, we write today to submit a bipartisan proposal to the Conference. Our compromise package consists of three separate pieces of legislation: *H.R. 4077 Closing the Meal Gap Act of 2021*, *H.R. 5220 the Puerto Rico Nutrition Assistance Fairness Act of 2021*, and *H.R. 421 Assuring You Uniform Dietary Assistance (AYUDA) of 2021*. As you begin preparing for the Conference, we urge you elevate the policy considerations found in these bills as we prepare for the 2023 Farm Bill. The federal government should take this specific action as these recommendations address the five pillars that you have already identified as themes of the Conference: improving food access and affordability, integrating nutrition and health, empowering consumers to make and have access to healthy choices, supporting physical activity for all, and enhancing nutrition and food security research.

The last and only White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health was a landmark event. Commissioned by the Nixon Administration in 1969, the occasion convened thousands of organizations, local stakeholders, Tribal governments, activists, and federal lawmakers to create 1,800 policy recommendations. Of those, approximately 1,650 were implemented within two fiscal years.<sup>1</sup> Inspiring inclusivity and bipartisanship, that conference helped our country substantively reduce caloric malnutrition.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the 1969 conference provided a forum for Congress to focus on hunger and nutrition. Fifty years later, we as Members of Congress persist in forging the bipartisan support needed to tackle the current food and nutrition crisis. We welcome this opportunity to submit the following policy recommendations with the objective of seeing its passage into law.

## I. H.R. 4077: Closing the Meal Gap Act of 2021

Closing the Meal Gap Act was originally introduced in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress by Congresswoman Alma S. Adams, Ph.D., and has been reintroduced in each subsequent Congress. The Senate companion to the Closing the Meal Gap Act was first introduced in the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress by then-Senator Kamala Harris. The Closing the Meal Gap Act of 2021 includes Representatives Jahana Hayes, Nydia M. Velázquez, and Barbara Lee as House co-leads and is led in the Senate by Senator Kristen Gillibrand. The legislation expands and strengthens the nation's largest federal food and nutrition program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) by:

- Increasing SNAP benefits – which are only an average of \$5.45 per person per day, without including COVID-19 aid – to ensure that they provide truly adequate support to families in need of food assistance. As economists warn of the possibility of an upcoming recession, SNAP will continue to function as a stimulus package, aiding in stabilizing the economy during any downturn. In fact, each

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<sup>1</sup> 50th Anniversary of the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health – Boston, October 3-4, 2019; Washington DC, October 30, 2019.” Accessed July 12, 2022. <https://sites.tufts.edu/foodnutritionandhealth2019/>

<sup>2</sup> School, Tufts Friedman. *50th Anniversary of the White House Conference on Nutrition*, 2019. <https://vimeo.com/363375966>.  
[https://vimeo.com/363375966?embedded=true&source=video\\_title&owner=18501318](https://vimeo.com/363375966?embedded=true&source=video_title&owner=18501318)

\$1 in SNAP benefits spent during economic downturns generates between \$1.50 and \$1.80 in economic activity, making an increase in benefits particularly effective for both the households it supports and the broader economy.<sup>3</sup>

- Permanently authorizing and expanding SNAP’s standard medical deduction, allowing households with elderly and disabled individuals to deduct a standard amount – up to \$140 in Fiscal Year 2022 – of their medical costs. By helping individuals claim deductions more easily, without unnecessary paperwork, Congress can better address our country’s “hunger cliff.”<sup>4</sup>
- Removing the cap on the excess shelter deduction to allow households to deduct any shelter expenses and utilities that exceed 50 percent of their income after all other deductions have been applied. As many Americans struggle to keep up with rising housing and energy costs, eliminating the shelter deduction cap – currently only \$597 – would make it easier for households, particularly in high cost-of-living areas, to receive the nutrition assistance they need.<sup>5</sup>
- Eliminating the 3-month time limit on benefits for non-elderly adults without children in their homes, or “able-bodied adults without dependents” (ABAWDs). While these households would still be subject to SNAP’s general work requirement, eliminating the punitive 3-month time limit would allow more flexibility for those searching for work, working part time, or struggling with other barriers to work. Studies show that the time limit is ineffective; it substantially reduces SNAP participation among those subjects it and does not increase employment or eared wages.<sup>6</sup>
- Providing and implementing a transition into SNAP for the following U.S. territories: Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands. In lieu of SNAP, these U.S. territories currently receive nutrition assistance through their Nutrition Assistance Programs (NAP), which are funded via block grants. Due to the fixed nature of the funding, unlike SNAP, participation in NAP for all three territories is limited by the amount of funding available, instead of being based on need. As a result, nutrition assistance in these territories is less flexible in times of economic downturn or natural disaster and benefits levels for households are historically below what would be provided by SNAP. Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands also generally have higher food insecurity and poverty rates than the 50 states, as well as substantially higher food costs, making it even more difficult for these territories to utilize their existing block grants to provide benefits equivalent to SNAP.

## II. H.R. 5220: Puerto Rico Nutrition Assistance Fairness Act

In March 2022, Congresswoman Adams extended an invitation to Congresswoman González-Colón (PR-At-large) and Congressman Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan (MP-At-large) to provide their leadership and expertise on an issue both Members have respectively advocated on for their communities and constituents for years. The desire for bipartisan buy-in, along with the opportunity to build consensus has allowed us the chance to collaborate on detailed and tailored legislation that holds integrity in theory and in practice. In September 2021,

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<sup>3</sup> Rosenbaum, Dottie, Stacy Dean, and Zoe Neuberger. “The Case for Boosting SNAP Benefits in Next Major Economic Response Package.” Center for Policy and Budget Priorities. Accessed July 12, 2022. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/the-case-for-boosting-snap-benefits-in-next-major-economic-response>

<sup>4</sup> Sutton, Colleen Barton. “Addressing the Looming Hunger Cliff: Improve SNAP Deductions.” *Food Research & Action Center* (blog). Accessed July 12, 2022. <https://frac.org/blog/addressing-the-looming-hunger-cliff-improve-snap-deductions>.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, Ty. “SNAP’s Homeless Shelter Deduction Can Provide Much-Needed Help for Homeless Individuals and Families.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, December 2, 2011 <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/12-2-11pov.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Urban Institute. “The Impact of SNAP Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) Time Limit Reinstatement in Nine States.” Accessed July 12, 2022. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/impact-snap-able-bodied-adults-without-dependents-abawd-time-limit-reinstatement-nine-states>

Congresswoman González-Colón introduced H.R. 5220, the Puerto Rico Nutrition Assistance Fairness Act of 2021, which provides a comprehensive transition to SNAP for the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico by<sup>7</sup>:

- Appointing an advisory board from the Department of Agriculture (USDA), Puerto Rico’s Department of the Family (ADSEF), and stakeholders to develop a plan and provide technical assistance for a transition to SNAP.
- Mandating submission of a plan of operations that includes a recommended State plan and a plan to transition the Island from the current NAP block grant to SNAP for approval and certification by the Secretary of USDA.
- Allows for the continuation of NAP for up to five years to accommodate the potential overlap between NAP and SNAP operations.

### III. H.R. 421: Assuring You Uniform Dietary Assistance (AYUDA) Act of 2021

In January 2021, Congressman Sablan introduced H.R. 421, the Assuring You Uniform Dietary Assistance (AYUDA) Act of 2021. The bill’s updated language includes the Northern Mariana Islands in the SNAP program by:

- Establishing an advisory board of members appointed by USDA and the Northern Mariana Islands Governor to formulate a recommended State agency plan and transition outline within 60 days of enactment.
- Mandating the advisory board to provide technical assistance, oversee policy changes the Northern Mariana Islands will be required to make to implement SNAP, along with possible changes to current nutrition eligibility requirements.
- Providing a plan of operation for administrative costs and expenses including staffing and technical requirements.
- Certifying and requires the preparation and submission within one year of enactment, the State agency plan to the Northern Mariana Islands Governor. The Governor may then submit the agency plan to the Secretary of USDA as a request to participate in SNAP.
- Contingent on approval of the plan, the Secretary may continue to carry out the Northern Mariana Islands block grant during the transition into SNAP for a period not exceeding three years

As Members of Congress who led the charge for expanded food and nutrition assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic, we recognize the encouraging prospect ahead for our country. Crises are opportunities. This upcoming Conference, along with the 2023 Farm Bill is a chance to provide transformative and resilient legislation to address hunger, nutrition, and health outcomes in the United States and territories. The Conference’s theme speaks to the deep linkage of chronic disease and hunger, and the chains of production that bring food from farmer’s fields to everyone’s plate. Today, the United States is the wealthiest nation in the world. Yet we have one of the highest food insecurity rates, along with one of the highest obesity rates per industrialized nations, with children the most affected group nationally. Indeed, their bodies become broken by childhood poverty. American children may struggle to metabolize and risk storing the poor-quality food that they can access as fat.<sup>8</sup> Current consumption patterns point to a dire trend: children born in America today will live fewer years because of diet-related diseases.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Puerto Rico Report. “Working toward Equality: Nutrition Assistance for Puerto Rico,” September 15, 2021.

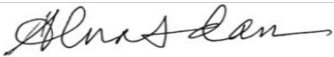
<https://www.puertoricoreport.com/working-toward-equality-nutrition-assistance-for-puerto-rico/#.YszLiHbMLHo>

<sup>8</sup> Patel, Raj. *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System.* New York: Melville House Publishing, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

SNAP has proven itself to support American families in eating healthier and improving their long-term health outcomes.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, we urge the Biden-Harris Administration to endorse and support this legislation for the upcoming White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. We believe it can set a path for its vitality and passage in the upcoming 2023 Farm Bill.

Sincerely,



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Alma S. Adams, Ph.D.  
Member of Congress



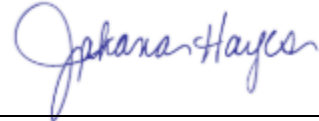
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Barbara Lee  
Member of Congress



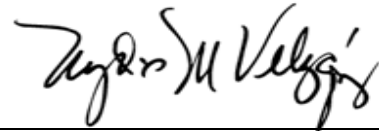
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Jenniffer González-Colón  
Member of Congress



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Jahana Hayes  
Member of Congress



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Nydia M. Velázquez  
Member of Congress



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Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan  
Member of Congress

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<sup>10</sup> Carlson, Steven, and Brynne Keith-Jennings. "SNAP Is Linked with Improved Nutritional Outcomes and Lower Health Care Costs." Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, January 17, 2018. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-is-linked-with-improved-nutritional-outcomes-and-lower-health-care#:~:text=SNAP%20serves%20a%20vital%20role.enough%20food%20on%20the%20table>.