

US Coronavirus Relief Package: Update on Food and Nutrition Provisions

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At last, the world is responding to the pandemic of respiratory disease spreading from person-to-person caused coronavirus (COVID-19).¹ which is expanding² and has already hit all 50 states.³

Food and nutrition professionals are on the front-lines of COVID-19's various impacts and are vital for ensuring the implementation of these important initial provisions at the federal, tribal, state, and local levels. Without question, this is unprecedented territory so if you are such a professional, please engage through professional or personal channels to put best food and nutrition practices in place. Reach out to appropriate advocacy groups, professional societies, and local health authorities to help shine light on what these best practices are and how to apply them, and seek expert guidance on areas of uncertainty. It will take a village – or village-like approaches across the globe – to end this pandemic. Do what you can to ensure your neighbor does not go hungry and to leverage the support - where possible within our field - to spread best practices on ensuring access to safe, nutritious foods and beverages across the globe

This update reviews some of the recent measures Congress has taken to ensure that the food and nutrition needs of our citizens are met in these difficult times. Congress has acted quickly to help citizens. On March 18, 2020, the President signed the Coronavirus Relief Package (P.L. 116-127) also known as the Families First Coronavirus Response Act into law. It is one of three public laws so far that have responded to the coronavirus outbreak in the US. Specific nutrition provisions include:

- **The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC):** \$500 million to provide access to nutritious foods to income-eligible pregnant women or mothers with young children who lose their jobs or are laid off due to the COVID-19 emergency.
- **The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP):** \$400 million to assist local food banks to meet increased demand for low-income Americans during the emergency. Of the total, \$300 million is for the purchase of nutritious foods and \$100 million is to support the storage and distribution of the foods.
- **Emergency SNAP Assistance to Households with Children:** Allows the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to approve state plans to provide emergency SNAP assistance to households with children who would otherwise receive free or reduced-price meals if not for their schools being closed due to the COVID-19 emergency through Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT). In order to be eligible, the child's school must be closed for no less than 5 consecutive days.
- **Nutrition Assistance for US Territories:** \$100 million for the USDA to provide nutrition assistance grants to Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the

Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

- **Senior Nutrition Program;** Includes \$250 million for the Senior Nutrition program in the Administration for Community Living (ACL) to provide approximately 25 million additional home-delivered and pre-packaged meals to low-income seniors who depend on the Senior Nutrition programs in their communities. This funding will provide meals to low-income seniors: who are home-bound; who have disabilities; who have multiple chronic illnesses; as well as caregivers for seniors who are home-bound. ACL's Senior Nutrition grants are provided to States, territories, and eligible tribal organizations and serve more than 2.4 million individuals annually. Nearly two-thirds of recipients of home-delivered meals report these meals as more than half of their food intake for the day.
- **National School Lunch Program Requirement Waivers Addressing COVID-19:** Allows all child and adult care centers to operate as non-congregate (i.e., they can serve outside the school or in individual settings) and waive all meal pattern requirements if there is a disruption to the food supply as a result of the COVID-19 emergency.
- **SNAP Flexibility for Low-Income Jobless Workers:** Suspends the work and work training requirements for SNAP during the crisis.
- **Additional SNAP Flexibilities in a Public Health Emergency:** Allows states to request special waivers from the Secretary of Agriculture to provide temporary, emergency CR-SNAP benefits to existing SNAP households up to the maximum monthly allotment, as well as give the Secretary of Agriculture broad discretion to provide much more flexibility for states in managing SNAP caseloads.

Among the other food related considerations uppermost in peoples' minds are whether there is a role of food in the transmission of this virus, whether the increased food supply demand can be met, especially as shoppers stock up to comply with social distancing, and what nutrition related issues a pandemic of this intensity and duration might affect particularly vulnerable populations, such as the very poor, the very sick and others.⁴⁻⁶ It may even have implications for obesity, as people are trapped in their homes, engage in more sedentary behaviors and overindulge with comfort foods. We will try to shed light on these issues in the weeks and months to come.

Here is one example of an effective action taken by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention supported Nutrition and Obesity Policy and Research Evaluation Network (NOPREN) which recently formed an Ad hoc Working Group on the COVID-19 Response.⁷ This group has only met twice thus far and is made up of about 20 researchers and practitioners at this stage that are exploring ways to inform policy and practice in real-time, as well as examine the impacts of federal, tribal, state, and local COVID-19 relevant decisions on food security in the short and long term. Perhaps you belong to a group that could join in these or other efforts.

Stay safe, maintain good hygiene with hand washing, and practice social distancing while staying in touch with others by phone, mail and video.

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