

May X, 2018

Dear Representative,

As child advocates in the areas of hunger and nutrition, poverty, health, welfare, housing, and education, we are writing to express our opposition to the Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018 (H.R. 2), which will harm the millions of children who rely on federal nutrition programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for access to consistent, healthy food. **In the interests of our nation's babies, children and youth we strongly urge you to vote NO on H.R. 2.**

SNAP is a proven anti-hunger and anti-poverty program for children, which also lowers the odds of household and child food insecurity, and of children's anemia, poor health, hospitalization for failure to thrive, and developmental delays. Research has also found that receiving SNAP in early childhood improved high school graduation rates, adult earnings, and adult health. Today, nearly 20 million children participate in SNAP, representing almost half of the program's recipients and receiving nearly half of every SNAP dollar.<sup>1</sup> In addition, school breakfast and lunch programs provide many of these same children a nutritious morning and lunchtime meal each day. Because children experience both poverty and food insecurity than the general population, federal nutrition program such as SNAP and school meal programs are critical supports that help them develop, learn, and succeed. To that end, we are very concerned about the impact H.R. 2 would have on our nation's children. **In fact, several provisions in the Nutrition Title of H.R. 2 directly threaten access to vital nutrition programs countless children and youth that we represent:**

**Drastic Program Eligibility Changes:** H.R. 2 Makes several harmful changes to state options that simplify SNAP eligibility requirements to improve access to SNAP for poor and low-income families with children. These changes would:

- **Expose Low-Income Children to a SNAP “Benefit Cliff”:** H.R. 2 eliminates Broad Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE), which gives states additional flexibility and efficiency in granting SNAP eligibility. This change will reinstate a benefit cliff in a majority of states, jeopardizing food assistance for families who are scraping by on earnings just above 130 percent of the Federal poverty line.
- **Undermine the Ability of Poor and Low-Income Families with Children to Build Savings:** Similarly, the virtual elimination by H.R. 2 of Categorical Eligibility will mean many states will have to introduce a counterproductive and costly process of asset testing for SNAP eligibility. As a result, H.R. 2 would cause many families to lose eligibility solely because of red tape, and force other families choose between meeting their basic need for food and building up the savings and resources that would help them achieve economic mobility.<sup>2</sup>
- **Deny Poor and Low-Income Children Access to School Meals:** Under current law, children who receive SNAP are directly certified for free school meal programs. These meals help combat childhood hunger, while playing an important role in improving academic achievement and test scores and reducing absenteeism, tardiness, and discipline referrals. By forcing families off of SNAP due to changes in categorical eligibility, H.R. 2 would break this vital link between SNAP receipt and school meals for low-income and poor children. As a result, some 265,000 children stand to lose access to free school meals.<sup>3</sup>
- **Undermine SNAP benefits for Poor and Low-Income Children Whose Families Rely on the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP):** LIHEAP is a program that helps low-income

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2016, by Sarah Lauffer. Project Officer, Jenny Genser. Alexandria, VA, 2017. Table 3.5

<sup>2</sup> The Urban Institute. The Unintended Consequences of SNAP Asset Limits, by Caroline Ratcliffe Signe-Mary McKernan, Laura Wheaton, and Emma Cancian Kalish. Washington, D.C., 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. House Agriculture Committee's Farm Bill Would Increase Food Insecurity and Hardship, by Ed Bolen, Lexin Cai, Brynne Keith Jennings, Dottie Rosenbaum, Elizabeth Wolkimer, and Caitlin Nchako. Washington, D.C. 2018.

households afford their monthly utility bills. Under current law, some states allow households to use LIHEAP benefits greater than \$20/month as proof of significant energy expenses, creating a streamlined method for families to access a modest increase in their SNAP benefit. However, H.R. 2 removes this option for households that do not have an elderly member, effectively requiring poor and low-income families with children to provide substantial documentation of energy bills on a frequent basis for caseworkers to determine their utility allowance, which could discourage them from seeking the larger benefit or decrease its size.

**Harsh Work Requirements:** Under current law, existing SNAP work requirements aimed at childless adults already have unintended and harmful consequences for children (for instance, those who rely on pooled resources from extended family and Non-Custodial Parents) and youth (such as those aging out of foster care.) Yet in spite of limited supporting evidence, H.R. 2 intensifies and expands work requirements, reduces state flexibilities for exemptions, and requires states to implement costly training and employment programs that will take funds from food benefits to support a bureaucracy that will not provide quality services to people. The consequences of these changes could be devastating for countless children and youth, including:

- **The 13.4 million<sup>4</sup> school-aged children on SNAP:** H.R. 2 takes the unprecedented step of expanding work requirements to adults with school-aged children. This provision risks the wellbeing of children whose parents or guardians are: 1) acting as a caretaker for a loved one such as a child with a disability; 2) have physical or mental health disabilities that don't qualify as a disability under the legal definition; 3) face substantial barriers to work, including substance abuse issues or domestic violence; 4) working but struggling to meet the 20 hour per week threshold or the burdensome documentation requirements; and 5) have difficulty obtaining childcare or transportation. For these parents or guardians, losing SNAP translates to a benefit cut for their whole household, meaning there will be less food on the table for their children. Some parents and guardians may also erroneously believe that their inability to meet these new work requirements makes their children ineligible for SNAP as well, and as a result opt out of applying for or renewing benefits for the entire family.

**In addition, children in *very vulnerable families* may be impacted by the new requirements, such as:**

- **Children in the Care of Grandparents:** Today, more than 2.5 million children are being raised by their grandparents or other relatives, in part because families are dealing with parental alcohol and substance abuse issues, which are growing rapidly due to the opioid epidemic. And already, these families face barriers to accessing the full array of benefits and services they need.<sup>5</sup> H.R. 2 would further threaten the ability of grandparents and other older relatives to care for children because it expands work requirements for adults up to age 60 who are caring for children over six years of age.
- **Children in Families with a History of Family Violence:** H.R. 2 requires parents fleeing family violence with their children to meet the new work requirements unless they receive a state exemption. In addition, H.R. 2 requires parents to cooperate with state Child Support Enforcement (CSE) efforts in order receive SNAP benefits- a drastic change from current law, under which 42 states have declined to link the two. Yet H.R. 2 effectively eliminates existing state flexibility around CSE cooperation, meaning parents who would like to apply for SNAP but are afraid of CSE requirements which would link them to their abusers are forced to choose between safety and feeding their children.
- **Children in Military and Veteran Families:** Many veteran and military families need help feeding themselves and their children. Today, households that include a veteran with a disability are nearly twice as likely to lack access to adequate food as households that do not include someone with a disability, and sadly, food insecurity rates are nearly double among post-9/11 veterans. Furthermore, currently-serving

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2016, by Sarah Lauffer. Project Officer, Jenny Genser. Alexandria, VA, 2017. Table 3.5

<sup>5</sup> Generations United. In Loving Arms: The Protective Role of Grandparents and Other Relatives in Raising Children Exposed to Trauma. 2017.

military families often experience food insecurity because of financial emergencies, low pay, and crisis levels of chronic unemployment or underemployment of military spouses in a society where most families need dual incomes to live. By subjecting these parents, including those suffering from PTSD, to the new work requirements, H.R. 2 penalizes families in need who have already sacrificed so much for our nation.

- **Youth aging out of foster care and unaccompanied, homeless youth:** Youth aging out of foster care often face various challenges, including homelessness, difficulty affording education, and finding employment. Unaccompanied homeless youth and young adults (who lack safe stable housing and who are not in the care of a parent or guardian) experience similar difficulties, especially when they reach age 18. Existing SNAP work requirements already create a substantial barrier for these young people from accessing food assistance, because they technically meet the definition of a childless adult. Under the harsh requirements in H.R. 2, these vulnerable young adults will face even larger obstacles to food assistance.

The Farm Bill represents an important opportunity for policy solutions that will strengthen and improve nutrition programs for our nation's children. Instead, H.R. 2 is slated to reduce spending on SNAP benefits by more than \$20 billion over 10 years and will disproportionately hurt children through its harmful provisions. We urge you to protect our nation's children and vote NO on H.R. 2.

Thank you for your time and attention. If you have any questions, please contact Rachel Merker with First Focus at [RachelM@firstfocus.org](mailto:RachelM@firstfocus.org) or Randi Schmidt with the Children's Leadership Council at [RSchmidt@childrenleadershipcouncil.org](mailto:RSchmidt@childrenleadershipcouncil.org).

Signed,

(Alphabetical List of Organizations)