

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a profoundly important program that reaches tens of millions of vulnerable Americans. The program's fundamental strengths include: its anti-poverty as well as anti-hunger effects; its reach to a wide variety of types of people in need; its use of normal, established commercial means of distribution to get food to people in need; and its ability to respond to surges of need among families and communities, as demonstrated in natural disasters and during the Great Recession.

The program's most important weakness is that benefits are not adequate to get most families through the whole month, let alone to allow them to buy the foods needed for a quality diet. Benefits are inadequate, in part, because they are based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) impractical Thrifty Food Plan, the lowest cost of USDA's four food cost plans.

USDA has commissioned studies of the TFP over the years, but each time has imposed the constraint that a theoretical market basket of food had to fit within the existing dollar amount of the TFP. Thus, the inadequate purchasing power of the TFP has not been addressed. Research continues to show that the TFP amount and the theoretical market basket are impractical and inadequate. The TFP:

- Includes impractical lists of foods,
- Lacks the variety called for in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans,
- Unrealistically assumes adequate facilities and time for food preparation,
- Unrealistically assumes food availability,
- Unrealistically assumes food affordability,
- Unrealistically assumes adequate, affordable transportation,
- Underestimates food waste,
- Is exacerbated in its inadequacy by SNAP benefit calculations,
- Particularly costs more than the SNAP allotment in many parts of the country, and
- Ignores special dietary needs.

The full analysis is available at: <http://bit.ly/10cvhlh>

One solution, a legislative one, to make SNAP adequate for the families the program serves is for Congress to replace the TFP as the basis for SNAP with a more adequate food plan. An alternate solution is for the Secretary of USDA to use his authority to allow TFP to be studied, redefined, and rebudgeted as an adequate plan with a higher SNAP allotment amount to purchase it.

Even though it does not solve all of the weaknesses and challenges of the Thrifty Food Plan, USDA's Low-Cost Food Plan – the second lowest cost of USDA's four plans – is a much more appropriate basis for SNAP allotments. Such a change would make benefits more adequate, and improve the health and well-being of millions of low-income Americans. The nation in fact has just de facto run a large experiment involving more adequate SNAP benefits, and it worked. Benefits beginning in April 2009 reflected a temporary boost in allotments pursuant to the American Recovery Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 – initially by 13.6 percent for those receiving the maximum allotment. The boost initially covered roughly half of the gap between the TFP and Low-Cost Food Plan. Research on the ARRA boost and benefit adequacy suggest that more adequate benefit levels have favorably impacted food spending and health.

For many reasons, half of all American children will receive SNAP at some point during childhood, and half of all adults will do so at some point between the ages of 20 and 65 years. This underscores how important SNAP benefit adequacy is to the health and well-being of the nation. It is time for USDA, Congress – and the nation – to start addressing inadequate benefit levels.