

Millions of people with low incomes in the U.S. are experiencing a hunger cliff since temporary increases in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit allotments during the COVID-19 pandemic ended in early 2023. Most SNAP [participants have lost \\$82 a month in SNAP benefits](#). The Closing the Meal Gap Act of 2023 (H.R. 3037/S. 1336), introduced by Rep. Alma Adams (D-NC) and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), would address this hunger cliff and improve food security and health by improving SNAP benefit adequacy for all participants.

H.R. 3037/S. 1336

The Closing the Meal Gap Act would:

■ Base SNAP Benefits on a More Realistic Food Budget

SNAP benefits average a mere \$6 a person a day. The most commonly noted [barrier to healthy eating while on SNAP](#) is the high cost of healthy foods. The shortfall in SNAP benefit adequacy is due in large part to a flaw in the basis for determining benefit amounts. SNAP benefits are pegged to the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), the most meager of the federal government's food plans. In contrast, the Low Cost Food Plan, which is one level higher than the TFP, is the standard that the MIT Living Wage Calculator uses in [determining the cost of a basic standard of living](#). The legislation would substitute the more appropriate Low Cost Food Plan for the TFP as the barometer for SNAP benefits. This would help SNAP households afford food throughout the month.

■ Raise the Minimum Benefit

Some SNAP households qualify for only a minimum benefit. In fiscal year (FY) 2023, the SNAP minimum



benefit is only \$23 a month. H.R. 3037/S. 1336 would raise the minimum benefit by basing it on the Low Cost Food Plan and adjusting the percentage applied.

■ Ease the Food or Rent Dilemma

Working-age renter households spend a significant amount of their income on rent, utilities, and other basic needs.^{1,2} This is especially the case for rent-burdened households of color.³ While the SNAP shelter deduction allows households to claim their out-of-pocket expenses for housing, most SNAP households are limited in the amounts they can claim. H.R. 3037/S. 1336 would remove the artificial cap on the SNAP shelter deduction and ease the dilemma many SNAP households with children have between paying for food or paying for rent.

¹ See, for example: Whitney Airgood, Alexander Hermann & Sophie Wedeen. (2022). "The Rent Eats First": Rental Housing Unaffordability in the United States, *Housing Policy Debate*. [DOI:10.1080/10511482.2021.2020866](https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2021.2020866).

² Airgood-Obyrcki, W. (2022, March 22). *Millions of Renters Fall Short of a Comfortable Standard of Living*. Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University. <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/blog/millions-renters-fall-short-comfortable-standard-living>.

³ Wedeen, S. (2021, January 11). *Black and Hispanic Renters Face Greatest Threat of Eviction In Pandemic*. Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University. <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/blog/black-and-hispanic-renters-face-greatest-threat-eviction-pandemic>.

■ **Ease the Food or Medicine Dilemma for Older Adults and Persons Who Have a Disability**

Older adults and people with disabilities who experience food insecurity face several challenges that make it difficult to afford food, including high health care expenses.⁴ Persons with disabilities often have expenses for wheelchairs and other adaptive equipment and expenses associated with their disability.⁵ Only 14 percent of SNAP households with elderly members and 8 percent of SNAP households with non-elderly members with disabilities, however, claimed the SNAP excess medical deduction in FY 2020. H.R. 3037/S. 1336 would help improve the SNAP Standard Medical Deduction (SMD) that states can use to streamline the process for claiming excess medical costs.

The legislation would set the federal minimum SMD at \$140 a month. The improved SMD would ease the dilemma older people and those with disabilities face between paying for food or paying for medicine.

■ **Improve Equitable Access**

H.R. 3037/S. 1336 also would provide more equitable SNAP access for people who are unemployed and underemployed struggling in the labor market as well as for residents of Puerto Rico. These provisions are similar to those in other pending bills — H.R. 1510. See [H.R. 1510](#) and [H.R. 253/S. 949](#), respectively.

Members of Congress should protect and strengthen SNAP, including by sponsoring and passing H.R. 3037/S. 1336.

⁴ National Council on Aging. *Get the Facts on Food Insecurity and Older Adults*. Published 2022. Accessed April 24, 2023. <https://ncoa.org/article/what-is-food-insecurity-get-the-facts>.

⁵ Economic Research Service. *Disability Is an Important Risk Factor for Food Insecurity*. United States Department of Agriculture. Published May 6, 2013. Accessed April 24, 2023. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2013/may/disability-is-an-important-risk-factor-for-food-insecurity>.