



## **COVID-19: FRAC Responds Quickly to Ensure the Nutritional Needs of Millions in the U.S. Are Met**

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a twin threat to public health and the American economy. This is creating significant challenges for 37 million people across the country who are living in food-insecure households and for untold others who are on the brink of poverty, which is the root cause of hunger. Social distancing, decreased work opportunities, and school and child care closures are exacerbating the struggles of families that were already wondering how they will put their next meal on the table, and do not have the resources to stockpile food during this crisis.

Despite the rapidly evolving context, FRAC has quickly mobilized to help mitigate hunger during the pandemic. FRAC has provided early and ongoing leadership for policymakers, anti-hunger advocates, and other stakeholders on leveraging federal nutrition program resources to assist low-income households during the COVID-19 virus outbreak.

### **Work With Congress**

At the earliest indications of the breadth and enormity of the COVID-19 pandemic, FRAC staff immediately engaged with House and Senate leadership and key offices to provide technical assistance and policy recommendations for a swift and comprehensive response. Specifically, FRAC has urged policymakers to 1) provide nutrition resources to help households stockpile food for social distancing and to make up for disrupted school meal service; 2) suspend implementation of [rules changes](#) that weaken the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); 3) increase SNAP benefits to bolster the program's economic impact; 4) create a Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program to provide resources to purchase food for families with children who have lost access to free or reduced-price school meals due to school closures; and 5) give USDA greater authority to issue child nutrition waivers to ensure access to school meals.

Many of the priorities FRAC recommended were included in the Families First Coronavirus Act, H.R. 6201, including the creation of a P-EBT program; the expansion of USDA's child nutrition waiver authority; measures to ensure that programs, like SNAP, school meals, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), are able to respond as needed and to reach households during this crisis.

FRAC tapped into its network of anti-hunger advocates from across the country to help inform advocacy asks that are based on what is happening on the ground. Constant

communications continue through webinars, conference calls, e-mail updates, and one-on-one communication.

FRAC staff continue to engage with congressional leaders and national and network partners on a more sustained and comprehensive response that addresses the health and nutritional needs of low-income individuals and families and the devastating long-term economic impact that this pandemic will have on the nation.

### **SNAP: Ensuring Struggling Households Can Put Food on the Table**

During the earliest stages of COVID-19, FRAC began disseminating information about pandemic planning contained in its [Advocate's Guide to Disaster SNAP](#).

The passage of H.R. 6201 gives the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) authority to allow states to provide supplemental benefits to SNAP households and suspends time limits on SNAP eligibility for unemployed and underemployed people. FRAC has helped educate reporters about how the time limit suspension in the legislation dovetails with action to temporarily prevent USDA from implementing a rule change that would have cut nearly 700,000 individuals off of SNAP.

As an entitlement program, SNAP is structured to respond to increases in need and to get benefits out over regular rails of commerce — food retailers and electronic benefit transfer systems. FRAC has [lifted up](#) the research documenting that in recessionary times, each \$1 of SNAP benefits generates \$1.50 to \$1.80 [in economic activity](#). FRAC also has lifted up [the research](#) documenting SNAP benefits' impact on nutrition and health.

Given the current emergency, some policy and operational adjustments are important for SNAP to respond most effectively in the COVID-19 emergency. FRAC has disseminated [information](#) about and advocated for administrative flexibilities that can keep SNAP households connected to the program longer and ease workload burdens on SNAP agencies.

FRAC also has advocated for administrative flexibilities to accommodate changes in the food retail sector so that authorized stores can continue to serve SNAP and WIC customers without disruption. FRAC is exploring options to augment food access for SNAP customers, such as authorizing the purchase of hot prepared foods from grocery retailers and restaurants, broader use of online SNAP purchases, and delivery options that promote social distancing and overcome transportation barriers.

### **Ensuring Low-Income Children Get the Nutrition They Need**

FRAC is providing intensive technical assistance to national partners, state anti-hunger advocates, and other stakeholders on ways to implement child nutrition feeding programs when schools close and strategies to overcome barriers. FRAC also has developed several resources to assist state agencies and schools during these uncertain times.

FRAC's legislative work to give USDA broad waiver authority to allow more communities to provide meals through the child nutrition programs, and to create a P-EBT program that will provide an EBT card to families with children to purchase food after having lost access to free and reduced-price school meals because of school closures has turned into work to implement the new provisions. The P-EBT benefits will provide millions of families approximately \$125 per child per month to purchase food.

### **WIC and CACFP**

During the pandemic, it is crucial to preserve access to the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and WIC.

At the recent National Anti-Hunger Policy Conference, which FRAC co-hosted with Feeding America in cooperation with the National CACFP Forum, FRAC led discussions with USDA around the need for the agency to allow waivers and special program options to help respond to child care and school closures during the public health crisis, including moving the location of the meal service and allowing menu substitutions if certain foods are unavailable. USDA staff at the conference welcomed the information from FRAC's network of advocates and asked FRAC to continue to provide feedback from the field. FRAC also had productive CACFP visits with the committee staff regarding the pandemic. FRAC followed up with recommendations and feedback from the advocates and network of CACFP program operators.

FRAC is advocating with USDA to allow the full range of disaster options recommended in the WIC in Disasters chapter of FRAC's [\*Making WIC Work Better: Strategies to Reach More Women and Children and Strengthen Benefits Use\*](#) and more specifically related to COVID-19. Based on feedback from the network and previous WIC lessons learned from disasters, FRAC sent a memo to USDA with recommendations for maximizing the role of WIC during the pandemic. In addition, FRAC's [\*Maximizing WIC's Role in Supporting Health, Food Security, and Safety During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Opportunities for Action\*](#) guide is designed to offer WIC advocates, partner organizations, and state and local governments the information needed to take action quickly to preserve access to WIC during this time.

USDA has issued the first set of CACFP and WIC program waivers based on the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. The nationwide waivers will support CACFP providers and programs in maintaining access to nutritious meals for children in the current COVID-19 public health crisis. A key new CACFP option is for CACFP providers and programs to offer meals off-site, via "grab and go," and through delivery to accommodate closures and operate consistently with public health requirements. The WIC waiver options will facilitate services during the COVID-19 pandemic by allowing WIC to certify participants without being physically present at the WIC clinic, including deferring the measuring of height and weight and conducting lab work, and offering flexibility in WIC food package choices and vendor requirements. FRAC and its partners are engaged in ongoing efforts to communicate the needs from the field to USDA and policymakers. FRAC anticipates additional helpful waivers will be forthcoming.

In addition, FRAC has been talking to USDA, CDC, and the Hill about sharing messaging and resources about the important public health role of WIC and CACFP to families.

### **Older Adult Food Insecurity**

With older adults facing unique risks and challenges in the face of the COVID-19 public health emergency, FRAC has been engaging with Meals on Wheels America, the National Association of Nutrition and Aging Service Providers, and others to support legislation that would expand funding for senior nutrition programs (i.e., home-delivered meals) and allowing flexibility in meal service models. Additionally, FRAC has facilitated calls among older adult groups and Hill staff that have been aimed at strengthening SNAP's ability to respond during the pandemic and how to best address the needs of more than 5.5 million participating older adults.

### **FRAC's Initiatives in Maryland and D.C. Mobilize Responses**

In Maryland, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in tens of thousands of layoffs, which will likely overburden the state's social safety net programs. Fortunately, **Maryland Hunger Solutions**, the state's premier anti-hunger organization, has an infrastructure to help address the challenge.

The organization's toll-free number — 1-866-821-5552 — can be accessed anywhere in the state. The number is being promoted by the state SNAP agency, the Maryland Department of Human Services. Residents across the state wishing to apply for SNAP (known as the Food Supplemental Program in Maryland) can call the toll-free number; Maryland Hunger Solutions staff determine eligibility, and then walk them through the application process. Staff also are connecting callers with other much-needed resources, such as pantries and food banks in their local community.

Maryland Hunger Solutions has also created a list of every school meal feeding site in the state which is located on [its website](#) and has been shared with local media and partner organizations.

Maryland Hunger Solutions' only challenge is capacity because it expects to go from dozens of calls per day to hundreds. Hiring additional outreach workers **now** will allow the organization to help Marylanders who have been recently affected by the pandemic by putting federal financial resources in their pockets so that they can purchase food at grocery stores, farmers' markets, and corner stores in every community in the state. Financial support is needed so that Maryland Hunger Solutions can hire additional staff to mitigate the hunger gap caused by the public health emergency.

**D.C. Hunger Solutions** is in frequent contact with the Executive Office of the Mayor, the D.C. Food Policy Council, the Department of Human Services, the Office of the State Superintendent for Education, D.C. Health, the Department on Aging and Community Living, and regional partners to ensure that the most vulnerable residents have access to healthy food during the pandemic. This includes making sure SNAP applications are processed in a timely manner, providing guidance on waivers for child nutrition programs for public and charter schools, and providing advice on WIC operations.

D.C. Hunger Solutions is working with the Department of Aging and Community Living because the organization realized that seniors are not being served appropriately. To that end, D.C. Hunger Solutions is reviewing the latest legislation from the D.C. Council to ensure that it addresses food insecurity for all residents.

D.C. Hunger Solutions is also reaching out to its regular collaboration partners to identify gaps in service and possible solutions to filling those gaps, including providing a regular listserv that identifies support services.

While D.C. Hunger Solutions primarily serves District of Columbia residents, the organization is branching out to look at regional opportunities because it understands that the borders in the D.C., Maryland, and Virginia region are porous. Among other activities, D.C. Hunger Solutions is working to ensure that all eligible organizations are fully using the federal nutrition programs and other available resources to assist vulnerable populations.

### **Keeping Advocates and the Public Informed**

FRAC has shined a national spotlight on the important role of nutrition programs in mitigating hunger during the pandemic with coverage in leading media outlets, including the Associated Press, The New York Times, NBC News, Politico, and Bloomberg, among many others. This and other COVID-19 stories are shared in FRAC's *Weekly News Digest*, which is sent to nearly 40,000 subscribers. In addition, FRAC's weekly *Federal Nutrition Programs Update* also provides information on the latest pandemic developments.

In early March, FRAC quickly launched a webpage, <https://frac.org/covid-19-updates>, dedicated to the response that features FRAC's legislative asks and resources. In its first week, the page received nearly 19,000 views. The page, along with FRAC's graphics and resources, have been widely shared by advocates and national partners on social media. FRAC is also engaging its stakeholders and expanding its sphere of influence through participating in Tweet storms as well as co-hosting at least one Twitter chat with MomsRising on food security. FRAC has also created a series of graphics to share across its social channels.