

**Statement by
Stacy Dean
Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services
U.S. Department of Agriculture**

**Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Washington, D.C.**

February 16, 2023

Thank you, Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, and Members of the Committee for the invitation to join you today to talk about Nutrition in the Farm Bill. I am Stacy Dean, the Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services at USDA, and I am joined today by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Administrator, Cindy Long.

I have the privilege to talk with families who use our programs as well as those who operate them. I routinely hear how important the federal nutrition programs are to struggling families and communities. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in particular—by helping families put food on the table—supports families’ basic wellbeing and overall health, especially during tough times. Coming out of the pandemic and inspired by the recent historic White House Conference and National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition and Health, USDA is focused on how we can strengthen and leverage our programs to reduce hunger and hardship in America and help people live healthier lives – fulfilling the goal President laid out as part of the National Strategy. We are deeply committed to that work and look forward to engaging with Congress on opportunities to advance these goals through the Farm Bill.

My testimony will touch on where we have been since the last Farm Bill and where we are heading today. I will cover the impact and importance of SNAP and our food distribution programs, the pandemic response, and our work to build even stronger programs, including by ensuring benefit levels better reflect the current cost of eating healthfully on a tight budget, supporting opportunity through SNAP Employment and Training, promoting nutrition security, and combatting benefit theft, among other topics.

I want to start by anchoring ourselves in USDA’s core strategic goal in this space. Building on and complementing our longstanding efforts to address food security, we are working to advance food and nutrition security. Nutrition security means having consistent and equitable access to healthy, safe, affordable food essential to health and well-being. One way to think about the two concepts is that food security focuses on ensuring that everyone has enough to eat, while nutrition security ensures that everyone has nutritious food to eat that contributes to their overall health.

The stakes are high. Poor nutrition is a leading cause of illness in the United States, associated with more than half a million deaths per year. There is a strong association between

food insecurity and poor nutrition, with individuals who report being most food insecure also at a higher risk of developing diet-related diseases like obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. Recognizing that structural inequities make it hard for many people to eat healthy and be physically active, we are emphasizing equity in all our efforts to ensure all Americans have access to the nutrition they need. While FNS programs support individuals and families of all backgrounds and at all life stages, we are especially committed to promoting nutrition security among eligible children and underserved populations.

Our work to advance nutrition security is driven by four pillars:

- (1) Providing meaningful nutrition support from pregnancy to birth and beyond – for example, by delivering SNAP benefits that allow households to afford a healthy diet, by providing high-quality nutrition education to SNAP-eligible populations through SNAP-Ed and by proposing science-driven updates to the foods prescribed to participants in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) to support healthy growth and development.
- (2) Connecting all Americans with healthy, safe, affordable food sources – this includes our work to increase SNAP participants’ access to more foods through farmer’s markets, as well as incentive programs that encourage SNAP participants to purchase nutritious foods, such as the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP), which focuses on increasing fruit and vegetable consumption and the Healthy Fluid Milk Incentive (HFMI), which aims to increase consumption of low-fat milk.
- (3) Developing, translating, and enacting nutrition science through partnerships with health professionals, the food and retailer industry, and other key stakeholders; and
- (4) Prioritizing equity every step of the way.

Through our food and nutrition security efforts, we are also working to support another of Secretary Vilsack’s key goals: supporting more and better markets and improving the resiliency of U.S. agriculture. USDA is on a mission to ensure today’s markets work better for both family farmers and the communities they feed. A great example of how we’re working together on this front with our colleagues across USDA is through our work to strengthen connections between farmers, ranchers, and USDA nutrition programs through investments in local and regional food system infrastructure and markets.

For example, the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is managing a new program called the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) program that provides funds to states, tribes, and territories to purchase food from local and underserved farmers for food banks, pantries, and other nutrition assistance programs. As of the start of the year, AMS has awarded nearly \$375 million to 48 states, 4 territories, and 24 tribes to support these efforts. At the same time, USDA

entered into an additional 33 agreements amounting to over \$151 million to use the same approach to provide local foods to schools. This effort opens up hundreds of new market opportunities for small and mid-sized operations to improve their bottom line. The purchase of products from local farmers and growers not only supports the local economy, but also allows for products like fruits and vegetables that are harvested at their peak, providing consumers the benefit of seasonal varieties and fresh flavors. We work closely with our colleagues at AMS and with FNS program operators in the emergency food and school food systems to maximize these programs for all involved.

These are ambitious goals. But we believe by setting our sights on ensuring our food assistance programs support nutrition security, agricultural producers, and resilient food systems, we will drive towards meaningful change and a healthier population.

Let me now turn to review where we are with respect to the major program areas covered by the nutrition title of the Farm bill: SNAP, the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).

SNAP'S IMPACT AND IMPORTANCE

As our largest federal nutrition program, SNAP is foundational to USDA's efforts to tackle food and nutrition insecurity and to advance equity. As you begin work on the next Farm Bill, it is worth reminding ourselves of SNAP's impact. SNAP is the most far-reaching, powerful tool available to ensure that all Americans can afford healthy food—it's a lifeline for tens of millions of Americans in every part of the country. It reduces poverty and food hardship, and participation by young children has been linked to better long-term health, education, and employment outcomes.

SNAP serves a very diverse range of people. About 70 percent of SNAP participants are children, older adults, or adults with disabilities. The program supports households in major cities and small towns across rural America. While all households must demonstrate that their income is low enough to qualify for a benefit, their circumstances differ. For low-income workers, SNAP helps supplement their food budgets so they can afford to put healthy food on the table on their low wages. For seniors, SNAP supports those who are struggling to make ends meet on a fixed income. And for parents, SNAP helps them afford healthy food for their children, so their children can grow and thrive.

One of SNAP's core strengths is its structure, which enables it to adapt as economic conditions change. By design, SNAP expands to meet increased need and contracts when the need abates, providing food to people and communities where and when it is needed most. SNAP cushions the blow for families when a parent loses a job, sees their hours cut, or is temporarily unable to work due to illness or natural disaster. As our economy continues to

recover from the pandemic, USDA projects that SNAP participation will decline by over 1 million participants between FY 2023 and FY 2024.

SNAP benefits are used at grocery stores, injecting demand into the economy. Not only does SNAP help households put food on the table, but it has a multiplier effect that is powerful and proven. SNAP supports countless retailers across the country where participants buy food, but SNAP also helps the grocery store employees who stock the shelves, run the bakery, and check you out, plus the truck drivers who deliver those products to stores. Let us also not forget that those dollars then in turn support the manufacturing plants, our local food distribution and aggregation centers, and of course the hard-working farmers who produced the food in the first place. A 2019 USDA study found that in an economic downturn, every dollar in additional SNAP benefits leads to an increase of \$1.54 in gross domestic product.¹ That is why so many economists value SNAP as an economic stimulus tool.

The benefits of SNAP also extend to people's health and well-being. Research has shown that participation in SNAP reduces food insecurity and allows families to have healthier diets. There is a strong correlation between food insecurity and chronic health conditions among all age groups, from children to seniors. SNAP helps reverse this trend by enabling families to purchase healthier diets and freeing up financial resources to be used for other necessities such as medical care. A recent study found that—for seniors eligible for both Medicare and Medicaid—participating in SNAP was associated with fewer inpatient hospital admissions and lower health care costs.²

PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Exactly as it's designed to do, SNAP responded to the sudden shift in economic conditions caused by the economic fallout from the pandemic, including rising unemployment and increased need for food. SNAP participation increased from 37 million to 43 million people in just 3 months, underscoring the program's power and resiliency in expanding to meet families' needs during times of great hardship.

Recognizing that the scope of the hardship caused by the pandemic was unprecedented, Congress acted quickly to bolster nutrition assistance in five legislative packages. Key SNAP provisions included increasing SNAP benefits for all households; providing additional benefits to help households weather the pandemic economy; expanding SNAP eligibility for low-income college students; providing additional resources for the emergency feeding network; and providing USDA with authority to protect SNAP access during the period of increased need by

¹ USDA Economic Research Service: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Economy: New Estimates of the SNAP Multiplier; USDA ERS, July 2019: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=93528> (accessed 2/2/23)

² Seth A. Berkowitz, Deepak Palakshappa, Joseph Rigdon, et al. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Health Care Use in Older Adults: A Cohort Study. *Ann Intern Med.*2021;174:1674-1682. [Epub 19 October 2021]. <https://doi.org/10.7326/M21-1588> (accessed 2/9/23)

offering states flexibilities to adapt program administration and operations. With the authorities and resources provided by Congress, and working with our partners in State, Tribal, U.S. Territories, and local government, USDA has leveraged every tool at our disposal to meet the moment.

The official measure of food security, collected through a partnership between the Census Bureau and USDA, showed that the food security rate held steady between 2019 and 2021. We actually saw the prevalence of food insecurity decline among households with children between 2020 and 2021. While it will take some time for researchers to fully assess the impact, many are suggesting that a strong safety net—including nutrition assistance and other pandemic aid such as expanded unemployment insurance and housing supports—was critical to protecting people from increased hunger and hardship during a time in which we would have otherwise expected to see a substantial increase. That stands in contrast to the surge in food insecurity we saw during the Great Recession of 2007-2009.

USDA also acted quickly to expand participant access to more retailers through the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot, which allows SNAP participants to shop and pay for their food online. Today, more than 99 percent of SNAP households have access to online purchasing across 49 states and Washington, D.C. We expect that Alaska will implement online purchasing soon, making online purchasing available in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. In addition to affording those paying with EBT cards the same options as other consumers, many living in food deserts and families working multiple jobs with little time to spare now have access to more retail options through SNAP online shopping, and the positive impacts have been particularly strong in rural areas. In November 2022, nearly 4 million SNAP households shopped online, which is more than a hundred-fold increase from March 2020, when about 35,000 SNAP households shopped online.

Together, we have taken bold action to help Americans get back on their feet—these efforts have made a remarkable difference, which underscores how powerful the federal nutrition programs can be in quickly responding to hunger and hardship. A strong safety net works, and we have many positive lessons to build on from the past few years.

As we look ahead, Emergency Allotments will end in all States, after February benefits are paid, in March, and certain programmatic flexibilities provided will end when the federal Public Health Emergency (PHE) ends in May. We are working closely with states now to assess their readiness and build their capacity to transition to traditional program rules, and we continue to review the full array of existing flexibilities that states may utilize to streamline program operations. Many states are ready for this transition, but for others, the shift will be operationally difficult. We are committed to helping states navigate the end of the PHE and changes to SNAP to ensure their smooth transition to normal program operations with minimal disruptions in benefit access.

While there's no doubt that families will experience challenges when the remaining pandemic benefit supplements end, we are also collaborating with states and external partners to ensure that households that have counted on temporary benefits understand how their benefits are changing, so that they can manage the changes with knowledge and confidence.

In addition to ensuring that SNAP is adapting and responding as needed to the pandemic, USDA has been working on many fronts to strengthen SNAP for the future. I want to share some of the major efforts we have undertaken to strengthen SNAP in the long-term, many of which stem from Congress' direction in the last Farm Bill.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2018 FARM BILL

Thrifty Food Plan Reevaluation

In 2021, in the midst of the pandemic and economic turmoil that closed schools and left millions out of work and struggling to put food on the table, USDA conducted a reevaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), which serves as the basis for determining the value of SNAP benefits. As directed by Congress in the 2018 Farm Bill, USDA used the latest available data and an evidence-based process to update the Plan to reflect the cost of a practical, cost-effective, nutritious diet in today's market.

Based on Congress' directive, USDA reevaluated the TFP to reflect the four elements specified in the statute: the latest dietary guidance, the most recently available data on current food prices, food composition data, and consumption patterns. USDA took a careful and considered approach, with evidence-based documented decisions, using the same mathematical TFP model used in all previous reevaluations, but with updates to the underlying data and an evaluation of the underlying assumptions of the model. We made updates only when the body of scientific evidence was clear and convincing to do so.

The reevaluation was a scientific and data-driven approach that concluded that the cost of a nutritious, practical, budget-conscious diet is 21 percent higher than the previous TFP. That resulted in the first permanent increase to the purchasing power of SNAP benefits since the TFP was first introduced in 1975, reflecting notable shifts in the food marketplace and consumers' circumstances over the past 45 years. The increase translates to a modest increase of \$1.19 per person per day, or 40 cents per person per meal more than what they would otherwise have received—helping to put more American farmer produced healthy foods within reach for millions of Americans. The Urban Institute found that the increase to SNAP benefits resulting from the TFP reevaluation lifted 2.3 million people out of poverty, reducing overall poverty by 4.7 percent and child poverty by 8.6 percent.

A recent General Accounting Office (GAO) report contained eight recommendations for improving the TFP re-evaluation process, focused primarily on project management, peer review

guidelines, documentation, and transparency. We have already begun integrating some suggestions from the report into our ongoing work related to the TFP as part of our commitment to continuous process improvement. However, we have significant concerns about several of GAO's conclusions, which appear to stem from a fundamental difference of perspective regarding what the 2018 Farm Bill directed for the re-evaluation. We stand by our 2021 re-evaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan — the sound process, the scientific findings, and the resulting positive impact on tens of millions of Americans in need.

Another tool the Biden-Harris Administration has employed to ensuring families have the tools and resources they need to put food on the table during the pandemic is Emergency Allotments. This is a temporary increase in benefits that provided all SNAP households an additional benefit of at least \$95 per month. When Emergency Allotments end nationwide in March, participants will see their SNAP benefits decrease—some will see very sizeable reductions. While the change will be disruptive, benefit levels will return to a level that will allow them to afford a healthy diet, due to the TFP reevaluation.

Strengthening SNAP Employment & Training

SNAP is an important work support, and the program is designed to provide incentives for participants to seek employment and increase their earnings: for each additional dollar SNAP participants earn, their benefits decline by only 24 to 36 cents. That ensures that workers see an increase in their total resources (SNAP and earnings) when they bring home additional income. The overwhelming majority of SNAP participants who can work do so, and States may provide training and support services to those who need assistance in entering the workforce through state SNAP Employment & Training—or E&T—programs.

In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress built on efforts in the 2014 bill and took important steps to improve the quality of SNAP E&T programs, emphasizing the use of evidence-based practices like case management and work-based learning. The 2018 Farm Bill also underscored the importance of matching participants with the right services and partnering with state workforce systems to align programs with the needs of participants and employers. Congress gave us clear direction that E&T programs should not just be bigger, but they should be better.

The final rule implementing these bipartisan changes—which became effective in March 2021—strengthened E&T by ensuring that states use evidence-based strategies to help participants obtain the skills employers need, increasing the use of case management services for E&T participants and allowing E&T funds to be used for subsidized employment and apprenticeships. The rule also encourages states to build high quality programs and holds states accountable for participant success in E&T programs.

USDA and States want to build stronger E&T programs that truly help SNAP participants get a job, keep their job, or get a better job, and we are working to provide the support and

resources to help them do that. For example, in December we hosted a SNAP E&T National Forum with 350 attendees from 51 States and territories. The National Forum was designed to bring together E&T stakeholders from across the country to learn from one another and share best practices. That type of peer learning complements the in-depth technical assistance FNS has provided to States through our SNAP to Skills project and our work with 142 E&T providers in 31 States through our SNAP E&T National Partnership grants.

Earlier this year, I had the chance to travel to Minnesota to see the Hennepin County Department of Community Corrections and Rehabilitation's Construction Pathway Program, where participants work and learn on site at the direction of the journeyman union carpenters. They are taught proper tool usage, problem solving, and construction techniques consistent with code, all while being paid a livable stipend. I also had the chance to see a house that the group's Community Productive Day Program, supported with SNAP E&T funds, rehabbed in North Minneapolis. The program focuses solely on formerly incarcerated individuals and provides county-directed work experience. Each Friday of the program is dedicated to addressing barriers participants face to stable and livable employment—they help people obtain drivers' licenses, work through child support issues, and tackle other challenges that could otherwise derail their progress.

It is proof that we have come a long way in SNAP E&T and we are committed to continuing to strengthen the program with our continued work with states and Governors across the country. By learning what works, we are integrating promising and evidence-based practices that will better the program for all participants. We still have a lot of work to do, particularly with respect to bringing promising programs to scale, and we welcome your continued partnership along the way as we seek to strengthen and improve these opportunities.

Protecting Program Integrity

Ensuring strong program integrity is—and will continue to be—an ongoing priority for FNS. We have a critical obligation to pursue program integrity as stewards of taxpayer dollars. Consistent with Congressional direction in the 2018 Farm Bill, USDA is working to strengthen oversight and data collection, minimize improper payments and administrative errors, and enhance fraud detection.

National Accuracy Clearinghouse (NAC)

The 2018 Farm Bill required USDA to establish a National Accuracy Clearinghouse (NAC) to prevent simultaneous benefit issuance to the same individual by more than one State. Duplicate participation occurs most often when people move from one state to another and forget to notify their SNAP state agency, or when the state agency doesn't properly process the notification. The NAC will result in a more seamless experience for participants who move from state to state and need to disenroll in one state to apply in another, while also catching and

preventing the rare but egregious instances of individuals attempting to steal from SNAP by intentionally enrolling in multiple states. We are working closely with external experts on design and deployment of the NAC and will leverage security technology to safeguard SNAP participants' personally identifiable information and to stand up the NAC in a way that improves program integrity and customer service. At this time, we expect that an initial group of States will begin implementing the NAC this summer, with all States fully implementing by 2027.

We are committed to successful nationwide implementation of the NAC and take seriously our responsibility to do so in a way that safeguards SNAP participants' personally identifiable information, minimizes burdens on participants, and avoids delays in benefit determinations.

SNAP Quality Control

SNAP payment accuracy is an ongoing priority for FNS. SNAP payment accuracy measures both under and over payments to eligible households. Accurate payments mean better customer service for SNAP clients, and we are committed to maintaining program integrity as stewards of taxpayer dollars.

Congress provided States with the option to suspend certain Quality Control (QC) requirements during the pandemic through June 2021, allowing states to focus on increased caseloads due to the economic challenges of the pandemic. During this period, FNS encouraged state agencies to continue conducting QC reviews, but because the data for FY 2020 and FY 2021 were incomplete, FNS could not establish national or state-level payment error rates for either year. Data for FY 2022 reflects the first full fiscal year of QC reviews since the pandemic began. FNS will publish the FY 2022 payment error rates by June 30, 2023, as required, and preliminary State-reported QC data indicate that payment errors were elevated during this time, likely reflecting significant operational challenges associated with the pandemic.

Even while QC requirements were suspended, FNS has continued to actively review QC data to analyze trends and provide technical assistance to support their error-reduction efforts. Although it's not surprising to see elevated error rates during such a challenging and complex time, it is incumbent upon us at USDA to address this, and we are working aggressively to support States to do so. We are striving for better real-time information to allow FNS and States to identify issues and analyze the root causes quickly and then act to address them in a timely manner.

LOOKING AHEAD

SNAP is a powerful and effective tool to address hunger and hardship in America, and we are obligated to continue to strengthen the program and ensure that it works for those it is meant to serve. I have already touched on several priority areas and want to mention a few others that we are focused on at USDA.

Combatting SNAP Benefit Theft

USDA is working with our State and Federal partners to protect participants from benefit theft and combat a recent uptick in EBT card “skimming.” Skimming is when thieves place an illegal device on an ATM or a retailer’s card-swiping machine to copy SNAP EBT card information. Criminals then use the information to make fake EBT cards and steal benefits from victims’ accounts. Card skimming can happen to anyone who uses a credit, debit, or an EBT card, but it hits SNAP households particularly hard, as they rely on their benefits to feed their families. Losing SNAP benefits can be devastating for victims and we will not tolerate benefit theft in our programs. Card skimming is different from fraud or payment error, it is a deplorable crime committed by individuals with no connection to SNAP. It is also an evolving crime, which means we must both tackle the current security threat as well as prepare for the future.

Congress recently took a major step forward with the enactment of a provision in the FY2023 Consolidated Appropriations Act to ensure that victims of SNAP card skimming or other similar fraudulent methods can get their SNAP benefits replaced by requiring states to replace these stolen benefits and allowing them to use federal funds to do so through fiscal year 2024. We greatly appreciate the leadership and partnership of this Committee and the bipartisan effort in Congress that led to this new law to help prevent skimming and support SNAP participants who fall victim to these horrible theft schemes by no fault of their own. The law also charges USDA with developing regulations requiring States to take additional card security, fraud prevention, and detection measures that will prevent these fraudulent schemes, including card skimming and cloning. We have already disseminated guidance to states so they can submit their plans for replacing these stolen benefits under the new law and we are working to implement other provisions of the new law quickly. We look forward to continuing to partner with Congress to secure the SNAP program for the families who rely on it and to guard taxpayer dollars.

Expanding SNAP Online Shopping and Improving Customer Experience

As I already mentioned, USDA has worked closely with States and other partners to rapidly expand the availability of SNAP online shopping. More than 175 retailers—representing thousands of actual stores—now offer SNAP online shopping to participants. As we committed to in the National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, we will continue working to modernize SNAP payment and shopping options, building on the successful expansion of SNAP online purchasing with a focus on smaller, independent grocery stores. USDA recently awarded \$5 million to the National Grocers Association Foundation to guide retailers—especially small, independent stores—through the process of standing up SNAP online purchasing.

Not only does SNAP online purchasing increase convenience for participants, it also promotes equity by expanding benefit redemption options for those who live in rural areas,

where brick and mortar SNAP-authorized stores may be limited. Through the grant and our partnership, we aim to give all stores an opportunity to offer SNAP online – and give all SNAP participants the flexibility to buy groceries from home.

In the coming weeks, we intend to announce the selection of five states participating in the SNAP Mobile Payments Pilot. This pilot is an opportunity to provide the same cutting-edge technology and services to SNAP participants that are available to all other customers and the general public. We will test, in five states, the ability for SNAP participants to receive and use their benefits with participating retailers who accept payment via a mobile device, such as a phone, to truly transform the customer experience. This has the potential to improve access, reducing the length of time it takes for participants to access their benefits once approved. It also has the potential to reduce fraud, by using more secure payment methods compared to outdated magnetic stripe technology. We will conduct an evaluation of this pilot to learn about successful rollout strategies and the impact of mobile payment on access, cost, and fraud prevention, ensuring that Congress can use this information to make informed decisions about the future of SNAP.

Promoting Nutrition Security through SNAP

As highlighted above, the TFP reevaluation has strengthened SNAP and its power to promote nutrition security, since families simply cannot achieve a nutritious diet, even a cost-conscious nutritious diet, without sufficient resources. In fact, previous research found that nearly 9 out of 10 SNAP participants struggled to achieve a healthy diet, with the cost of healthy food most commonly cited as a roadblock. Other ways that USDA promotes nutrition security through SNAP include SNAP Nutrition Education (or SNAP-Ed) and SNAP incentive programs.

SNAP Nutrition Education

Last year we celebrated the 30th anniversary of SNAP Nutrition Education — or SNAP-Ed. SNAP-Ed provides evidence-based programming to promote healthy choices, help participants use SNAP dollars to shop for and cook healthy meals, and encourage physical activity.

In response to the Biden Administration’s Executive Orders related to food security and racial equity, as well as the Department’s focus on nutrition security, USDA recently made several significant changes to SNAP-Ed that were designed to strengthen its impacts on public health and health equity. These changes include: establishing a new National Program Evaluation and Reporting System; developing new resources to ensure equity in SNAP-Ed program access, service delivery, and funding distribution; encouraging maximum flexibility in the use of policy, systems, and environmental change approaches within the SNAP-Ed

guidelines; and establishing a new Nutrition Education Branch dedicated to SNAP-Ed for the first time in the history of FNS.

SNAP Incentive Programs

Incentive programs encourage SNAP recipients to purchase healthy foods by providing a coupon, discount, gift card, bonus food items or extra funds when they buy specific foods, such as fruits and vegetables. Research shows that incentive programs are effective in promoting healthy eating by increasing SNAP participants' purchasing power. For example, in one study, SNAP participants who received fruit and vegetable incentives consumed 26 percent more fruits and vegetables per day than nonparticipants.

USDA encourages SNAP retailers to participate in one or more of the SNAP-based incentive initiatives, which include:

- The Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP), focused on increasing fruit and vegetable consumption;
- The Healthy Fluid Milk Incentive (HFMI), which aims to increase consumption of low-fat milk; and
- State, nonprofit and retailer-initiated SNAP incentives that promote foods aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Recognizing the powerful opportunity to leverage incentives to support health, the Biden-Harris Administration—as part of the Food Systems Transformation effort--invested nearly \$85 million in incentives for SNAP participants to purchase healthy fruits and vegetables.

That includes \$25 million for the Electronic Healthy Incentive Projects—or eHIP. Through these projects, states will test SNAP incentive delivery through State electronic benefit transfer (EBT) systems, with the goal of reducing administrative costs and allowing incentive dollars to reach more SNAP participants.

We stand ready to work with you on expanding these effective models to promote healthy eating and bolster SNAP participants' purchasing power.

Building on Progress in SNAP Employment & Training (E&T)

COVID turned the labor market on its head, accelerating deep fundamental changes to how, where and what we do for work. Some entry-level jobs in sectors like retail, hospitality, and food service disappeared while health care, transportation, and infrastructure sector employers still face enormous skilled workforce gaps. SNAP E&T is one part of the workforce development system, and we are working with our SNAP E&T partners to ensure that every worker has the skills they need so they are not left out of the economic recovery.

We need to continue to focus on bridging the gap between the people looking for jobs and the jobs available today, which requires connecting people with the skills they need to successfully secure and maintain those positions and building connections with employers in high-demand industries. We also need to design SNAP E&T to address the specific barriers and challenges faced by our program participants, whether that's transportation, childcare, access to education, or other challenges. I know that strengthening SNAP's role as a work support is a priority we share, and I hope to work with Members of the Committee to build on the progress we've made to date in SNAP Employment & Training.

Supporting the Emergency Feeding Network

The experience of the past few years has shown that there is significant demand for emergency food through the food bank, food pantry and shelter system and that federal resources play a critical role in supporting the thousands of community organizations around the country who help to feed their communities.

One of USDA's critical household emergency food distribution programs is the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). First authorized in 1981, TEFAP is designed to support the emergency feeding network by providing USDA Foods through our state agency partners. We also want to make sure that any individual facing an emergency food need has access to this critical safety net including in remote, rural, tribal, and other underserved communities. That's why FNS is investing \$100 million in TEFAP Reach and Resiliency Grants to expand the reach of the emergency food system in underserved areas including remote, rural, Tribal, and low-income communities—supporting communities that have long faced systematic barriers to opportunity and providing them with reliable, equitable access to food when they most need it. By improving partnerships and the infrastructure that powers emergency food distribution, we are striving to reach more people, ensure they receive high-quality, nutritious food, and support a stronger food system for those who have been historically underserved.

Throughout the pandemic, emergency food providers have been resilient leaders in our collective efforts to combat food and nutrition insecurity. The Administration has responded with historic levels of support to emergency food systems. As described earlier in my testimony, we are also testing innovative new methods to support emergency food providers while also supporting local food procurement. These necessary investments focus on additional food purchases, improving infrastructure, supporting health and nutrition, and lifting local food systems—all while promoting access and equity.

As we move out of the worst of the pandemic, and the administration has recently announced that the COVID-19 national emergency and public health emergency declaration will end this spring, we want to work with Congress to assess the reach of our TEFAP foods into the emergency food system, how we might support local food procurement and local food systems

through purchases for emergency food systems, and how best to calibrate the support that's needed to maintain and strengthen our robust emergency food system.

Working with Tribal Communities and Investing in FDPIR

USDA is committed to furthering Tribal involvement and engagement in all nutrition assistance programs – supporting food sovereignty and ensuring Tribal communities are equitably served in federal programs was another key element in the National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. We recognize the important role of Tribes and Tribal organizations in ensuring American Indian and Alaska Native households have access to nutrition assistance, and we are working with our Tribal partners to explore opportunities to advance Tribal sovereignty with respect to FNS programs. Through the historic FDPIR Self-Determination Demonstration Projects Congress authorized in the 2018 Farm Bill, USDA is able to support Tribal food sovereignty by allowing tribes to enter into contracts with farmers, growers, and producers to procure their own food to feed their people.

The demonstrations provided Tribes with an opportunity to better align the FDPIR food package with their dietary preferences and traditional foods, and to purchase foods from Indigenous producers. Of the \$12 million received by FNS to date, approximately \$6 million has been utilized by eight participating tribes to purchase local, traditional foods, including bison, ground beef, Alaskan Halibut, Alaskan Cod, wild rice, and a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables among other products, from local farms. We are offering all tribes currently participating in the pilot the opportunity to extend their projects as well as offering additional tribes the opportunity to join the pilot. Last October, USDA announced the solicitation for a second round of proposals to join the demonstration project, which remained open through the end of January 2023.

Another way USDA is working to support Tribal food sovereignty is through nutrition education. Tribal leaders have made it clear that nutrition education funds need to flow directly from the Federal government to Tribal nations. And, they need to be more flexible to support Indigenous traditions. USDA requested, and Congress provided, an annual increase of \$4 million to support nutrition education and is accepting proposals from FDPIR Tribes to develop and expand these efforts locally. We are working closely with FDPIR programs and other federal agencies to facilitate partnerships with stakeholders across Indian Country, including in health care and SNAP-Ed, to develop and deliver in a more accessible way culturally appropriate nutrition education at a scale that reaches both FDPIR clients and the broader eligible community.

FNS also regularly engages in consultations with Tribal leaders about nutrition program policies and regulations that may have Tribal implications. Additionally, we have made significant progress in increasing Indigenous and culturally appropriate food offerings in WIC, the Child Nutrition programs, and the Food Distribution Programs. For example, our recently

proposed update to the school meal nutrition standards includes flexibility for schools serving primarily American Indian and Alaska Native students to replace grains with vegetables, and specifically acknowledges traditional foods as allowable components of a reimbursable meal.

We look forward to continuing and strengthening these efforts as well as our broader commitment to be a better partner to tribal governments who are operating federal nutrition programs.

CONCLUSION

Thank you, Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, and every Member of the Committee for your leadership and commitment to helping Americans put food on the table for their families and for your partnership as we continue this critical work. We appreciate our work together and this opportunity to update the Committee. I look forward to working with you to advance our shared goals in the upcoming Farm Bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to join you today.

###