



To: Joint Committee on Coronavirus Response
From: Matt Newell-Ching, Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon
RE: Ensuring access to food during the COVID-19 pandemic
Date: March 18, 2020

Now more than ever, it is clear that we're all in this together. As we take unprecedented measures to protect our communities, our elders, and our neighbors, next week's special session should ensure all Oregonians have access to nutritious food during this crisis.

Strengthen and Increase Access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

SNAP is the nation's most effective anti-hunger program. It is also a crucial income support for Oregonians facing unexpected job losses or reduced hours. Because funding is guaranteed federally, SNAP is built for moments like these. SNAP has the added benefit of supporting jobs at grocery stores and through the food supply chain. Oregon should ensure food assistance through SNAP continues and people newly-eligible due to income and job losses can access benefits quickly and easily.

- **Simplify, simplify, simplify.** DHS should exercise every option at its disposal, including exercising new options and federal waivers to ensure more Oregonians have simple and timely access to food assistance through SNAP. This includes:
 - Requesting every state option Oregon has under the federal "SNAP Pandemic Planning Guidelines."
 - Requesting every state option to increase access to SNAP that will become available based on forthcoming federal declarations and stimulus legislation.
 - Eliminating time limits (ABAWDs) across Oregon and recertifications.
 - Put a moratorium on terminations.
 - Ensuring timely issuance of benefits by lowering verification requirements, eliminating interviews where possible, and committing to no pending cases.
 - Fast tracking reports of income changes so that benefit amounts can increase quickly as income goes down.
 - Suspending or continuing all SNAP related hearings, granting continuing benefits to all, whether or not they requested them in the correct time period.
 - Consider delaying the implementation of the new Integrated Eligibility system. While we believe there could be positive long-term benefits to the new IE system, we believe a crisis of this scale is not a time to risk having to work out bugs in a

new system. Since the first select counties were scheduled to begin implementation in May, we believe it's imperative the implementation schedule be revisited through the lens of how it will stand up to a crisis such as this.

- **Outreach:** Many Oregonians facing income of job loss will become newly-eligible for SNAP, or be eligible for an increase in benefits. Oregon needs robust outreach efforts immediately to ensure awareness and to de-stigmatize applying for SNAP. DHS should be resourced to coordinate these efforts and ensure outreach happens in all languages and all communities in Oregon.
 - Reach out to all persons previously terminated from SNAP due to (newly) outdated time limits.
 - Provide special support (additional linguistically and culturally specific staff or additional document translations) for non-English speaking SNAP recipients.
 - Prepare for hundreds of thousands of Oregonians newly needing SNAP in the coming weeks and months due to income disruption.
- **Implement “Pandemic EBT” to support students who lose school meals:** A new option will likely be available to states shortly (“Family First Coronavirus Act” - final passage pending in Congress as of this writing) to increase or newly provide EBT food benefits to families of students who can't access school meals because of closures. For students eligible for free school meals, this would provide an effective and efficient benefit increase for families currently enrolled in SNAP, or issuance of a new benefit if the family doesn't currently participate in SNAP. This would operate in a similar way to “Summer EBT,” which Oregon has implemented in the past, and has reduced child hunger in the summer months by one-third among participants. This will require coordination between DHS, ODE, and all school districts. Now is the time to build a team focused on designing and implementing this program. This will ensure Oregon can submit a plan to utilize Federal funding when available. Oregon should set a goal of issuing this new benefit no later than March 29, and we should ensure that state agencies and school districts have the necessary resources required for startup and administration.
- **Expand SNAP Grocery Delivery Statewide** - Limited online delivery through SNAP in Oregon has begun at several grocery stores. Oregon should encourage grocers to the degree possible to participate in SNAP online delivery. Oregon should provide funding to waive delivery fees. This will be important for all Oregonians, but particularly important for seniors and people with health risks for whom going to grocery stores poses heightened risks. If necessary, Oregon can request USDA to expedite online SNAP grocery purchasing statewide.

Ensure replacements for school meals are accessible for students during closures

Yesterday's announcement that schools will be closed through April 28 was particularly hard for families with students who are eligible for breakfast and lunch at no charge. The state now has new options to ensure students have access to nutritious food.

- **School Meal Replacements:** Ensure all districts exercise the option to distribute “grab and go” meals in lieu of school meals during the entire length of the closures. Require the Department of Education to make meal locations available publicly and School

Districts to notify all students where and when “grab and go” meals are available, in all needed languages.

- ODE should regularly compile and communicate best practices, such as serving grab and go meals, and establishing dropoff sites using buses. It may not be sufficient in many areas to simply use school locations for meal distribution, as transportation to sites is a barrier for many students.
- **Implement Pandemic EBT:** Since even with a grab and go meal option available, many students won't be able to access meals every day during the closure, the federal Family First Coronavirus Act provides access to Pandemic EBT. As of this writing, we believe this option will likely be available *in addition to* “grab and go” meals. Adding money to EBT cards is often an even better solution than providing meals, because it gives families the flexibility to purchase food at the grocery store and eat safely at home. It's also more equitable for kids who are immunocompromised and for kids who lack transportation to meal pickup sites.

Additional Considerations

- **Housing, child care, and work supports:** Emergency rental assistance, a state moratorium of evictions, expansion of TANF grant, additional support for safe child care options, and funding to address Oregon's homelessness crisis should be considered.
- **Federal Stimulus:** Our nation needs a bold response at the federal level to meet this unprecedented challenge. Oregon should urge our federal delegation to promote solutions that make everyone better off, including:
 - Basic income through this crisis and beyond.
 - Extended unemployment insurance eligibility and eliminate the “waiting week.”
 - Paid sick leave.
 - Rental assistance that's sufficiently funded and without wait lists.
- **Reject attempts to gut revenue for education and human services.** With revenue forecasts looking far less optimistic than even a few weeks ago, now is not the time to delay funding streams for Oregon's schools and basic services. Workers and businesses need and deserve robust support - this should primarily be tackled in federal stimulus efforts. Ideas being floated such as delaying the funding mechanism for the Student Success Act alone would cause a Sophie's choice of denying funding schools were promised, or looking to make cuts in other areas, such as human services.

Note: Hunger-Free Oregon has produced a webpage entitled “Accessing food during the Coronavirus outbreak,” which we encourage sharing widely.

[\(https://oregonhunger.org/covid-19/\)](https://oregonhunger.org/covid-19/)