

A trio of bills before the Health and Human Services Committee Wednesday would improve access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which would have a number of positive impacts for Nebraskans and our state as a whole. Likely benefits from the measures include critical infrastructure workers being able to advance in their careers while still being able to feed their families, long-term reduced reliance on public assistance for many Nebraskans and a possible reduction in health care costs.

Offsetting the SNAP “cliff effect”

[LB 108](#) would expand access to SNAP benefits to those with incomes of 185% of the federal poverty level, which is just slightly below the living wage for the average Nebraska family.¹ This benefit expansion would help alleviate the cliff effect that occurs when Nebraskans receive raises and promotions that move them above the current state SNAP threshold of 130% of the FPL but that are still below the living wage. The loss of SNAP benefits can wipe out the increase in income from promotions and this can serve as a disincentive for Nebraskans to seek or accept raises and advancement opportunities. LB 108 would help ensure Nebraskans can continue to put food on the table as they advance in the workplace, thus incentivizing Nebraska workers to continue to strive for self-sufficiency.

Helping critical infrastructure workers

LB 108 would be particularly helpful for thousands of Nebraska’s critical infrastructure workers who are threatened by the SNAP cliff effect. Nebraska’s critical infrastructure workers, as federally defined, are considered vital not only to the state Nebraska, but the nation’s public health and economic security.² These workers have helped keep us healthy during the pandemic, and 360,000³ of them are Nebraskans working in industries where the average wage would put their family between 130 and 185% of the poverty line.⁴ Among these workers are many who work in health care and social assistance, which is the fastest growing industry in the state. Although some careers in this industry are well-paying, doctors and registered nurses only make up 20% of essential health care workers nationally.⁵ The remaining workers serve a number of roles, including as pharmacy technicians, EMTs and paramedics or Licensed Practical and Vocational Nurses, all of which have much lower average incomes that often leave

¹ Massachusetts Institute of Technology, “Living Wage Calculation for Nebraska,” accessed at <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/31> on Jan. 18, 2021.

² Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency, “Infrastructure Security,” accessed at <https://www.cisa.gov/critical-infrastructure-sectors> on Jan. 18, 2021.

³ 2018 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, accessed at <https://data.census.gov/mdat/#/search?ds=ACSPUMS5Y2018> on Feb. 1, 2021.

⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Occupational Employment Statistics,” accessed at https://www.bls.gov/oes/2019/may/oes_ne.htm on Jan. 18, 2021.

⁵ Molly Kinder, “Essential but undervalued: Millions of health care workers aren’t getting the pay or respect they deserve in the COVID-19 pandemic,” Brookings Institute, May 28, 2020, accessed at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/essential-but-undervalued-millions-of-health-care-workers-arent-getting-the-pay-or-respect-they-deserve-in-the-covid-19-pandemic/> on Jan. 18, 2021.

them vulnerable to the SNAP cliff effect.⁶ LB 108 would help ensure critical workers can advance in their careers and continue to provide essential services without worrying about losing the ability to feed their families.

LB 121 would help create a bridge to self-sufficiency, assist vulnerable families

[LB 121](#) would remove the lifetime ban on SNAP benefits for Nebraskans who served time for felony drug convictions. Economic instability often defines the lives of the previously incarcerated. Not only do 91% percent of returning citizens report being food insecure after they're released,⁷ but they also face unemployment at a rate five times higher than the general U.S. population.⁸ SNAP, however, can help lower both statistics. SNAP has a work requirement that requires unemployed participants to participate in an Employment and Training program for at least 80 hours a month, and failure to comply results in a loss of benefits⁹. The SNAP Employment and Training program strategies include building the skills of less job-ready work registrants, with the goal of promoting long-term self-sufficiency of SNAP participants.¹⁰ Allowing full access to SNAP will help newly released individuals get the tools they need to become gainfully employed.

Helping children in deep poverty

LB 121 and [LB 356](#), another bill that will be heard on Wednesday, would help ensure children who live in deep poverty¹¹ -- those who live in households with incomes below 50 percent of the FPL -- have their nutritional needs met. Living in deep poverty results in hunger, food insecurity, and nutritional deficiency,¹² which contributes to poor mental health and educational performance.¹³ By providing benefits to the previously incarcerated, LB 121 helps their children, who are statistically more likely to live in deep poverty.¹⁴ LB 356 would have Nebraska join 39 other states in not disqualifying parents from SNAP benefits if they do something that makes them ineligible for another means-

⁶ Nebraska Department of Labor, "Employment and Wage Data," accessed via <https://neworks.nebraska.gov/vosnet/Default.aspx> on Feb. 1, 2021.

⁷ The Sentencing Project, "Criminal justice includes food security -- we can't ban the social safety net," accessed at <https://www.sentencingproject.org/news/criminal-justice-includes-food-security-cant-ban-social-safety-net/> on Feb. 16, 2021.

⁸ Prison Policy Initiative, "Out of Prison and Out of Work," accessed at <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html> on Feb. 16, 2021.

⁹ USDA, "SNAP Work Requirements," accessed at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/work-requirements> on Feb. 16, 2021.

¹⁰ USDA, "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training (E&T) Best Practices Study," accessed at <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/SNAPEandTBestPractices.pdf> on Feb. 16, 2021.

¹¹ Urban Institute, "The Unwaged War on Deep Poverty," accessed at <https://www.urban.org/features/unwaged-war-deep-poverty> on Feb. 16, 2021.

¹² Economic Policy Institute, "Mass incarceration and children's outcomes," accessed at <https://www.epi.org/publication/mass-incarceration-and-childrens-outcomes/> on Feb. 16, 2021.

¹³ National Education Association, "Children of Incarcerated Parents More Likely to Struggle at School, Study Finds," accessed at <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/children-incarcerated-parents-more-likely-struggle-school-study> on Feb. 16, 2021.

¹⁴ Bread for the World, "Mass Incarceration: A Major Cause of Hunger," accessed at <https://www.bread.org/sites/default/files/downloads/briefing-paper-mass-incarceration-february-2018.pdf> on Feb. 16, 2021.

tested public assistance program. This would prevent many children who live in deep poverty from losing access to SNAP benefits. Studies have shown that children receiving SNAP or prior iterations of the program are more likely to be economically self-sufficient as adults¹⁵, meaning they were less likely to be incarcerated, more likely to own their own homes and much less likely to be accessing government support.¹⁶ But when faced with a reduction in SNAP benefits, the risk of food insecurity and poor health increased for children¹⁷, further perpetuating rather than combating obstacles to economic self-sufficiency in adulthood. Receiving the full benefit of SNAP is especially important for those children in deep poverty, as they are already substantially more likely to experience poverty as an adult¹⁸ and more likely to experience food insecurity and health issues that follow them into adulthood.¹⁹

SNAP can help reduce state health care costs

Deep poverty and food insecurity come at a considerable cost to the state, as well. Poverty and food insecurity are associated with some of the most costly health problems in the U.S.²⁰ In fact, in 2016 the total health care cost associated with food insecurity exceeded \$250 million in Nebraska.²¹ Given that many SNAP beneficiaries receive Medicaid,²² blocking or reducing SNAP benefits would likely increase the cost of Medicaid in Nebraska in the short term and increase reliance on government programs over the long term.

Conclusion

The benefits of SNAP for low-income families as well as for the communities in which they live are extensive and well documented. The bills discussed above will help more Nebraskans make use of this powerful program and this will have positive impacts for our state now and into the future.

¹⁵ Coalition for Human Needs, "OUTCOMES: SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM," accessed at <https://www.chn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/SNAP-Outcomes-2016-Update.pdf> on Feb. 16, 2021.

¹⁶ Martha J. Bailey, Hilary Hoynes, Maya Rossin-Slater and Reed Walker, "Is the Social Safety Net a Long-Term Investment? Large-Scale Evidence from the Food Stamps Program," April 29, 2019, accessed at https://gspp.berkeley.edu/assets/uploads/research/pdf/LR_SNAP_BHRWSW_042919.pdf on Feb. 12, 2021.

¹⁷ Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba and Kate Scully, "Punishing Hard Work: The Unintended Consequences of Cutting SNAP," Children's HealthWatch, Dec. 9, 2013, accessed at <https://childrenshealthwatch.org/punishing-hard-work-the-unintended-consequences-of-cutting-snap/> on Feb. 15, 2021.

¹⁸ National Center for Children in Poverty, "Child Poverty and Intergenerational Mobility," accessed at <https://www.nccp.org/publication/child-poverty-and-intergenerational-mobility/> on Feb. 16, 2021.

¹⁹ Beth Nolan, "What Is Deep Poverty, Anyway?" Voices for Virginia's Children, Jan. 28, 2019, accessed at <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-health-impact-poverty-food-insecurity-health-well-being.pdf> on Feb. 15, 2021.

²⁰ Food Research & Action Center, "The Impact of Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Poor Nutrition on Health and Well-Being," accessed at <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-health-impact-poverty-food-insecurity-health-well-being.pdf> on Feb. 15, 2021.

²¹ Feeding America, "The Healthcare Costs of Food Insecurity," accessed at <https://public.tableau.com/profile/feeding.america.research#!/vizhome/TheHealthcareCostsofFoodInsecurity/HealthcareCosts> on Feb. 15, 2021.

²² Sara Edelstein, Michael R. Pergamit and Caroline Ratcliffe, "Characteristics of Families Receiving Multiple Public Benefits," Urban Institute, February 2014, accessed at <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/22366/413044-Characteristics-of-Families-Receiving-Multiple-Public-Benefits.PDF> on Feb. 15, 2021.