

HOW THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S COVID-19 RESPONSE IMPACTS NEW MEXICO



FOOD ASSISTANCE



BY THE NUMBERS:

Everyone – particularly children – should have enough to eat. But New Mexico had high rates of food insecurity long before the coronavirus pandemic. Rapid increases in unemployment, coupled with food supply interruptions, will only make this worse:

- **25%** of New Mexico children lack regular access to healthy food, must skip meals, or experience hunger¹ – the highest rate of child food insecurity in the nation.
- **33%** of children living in McKinley County suffer from food insecurity – almost twice the national average.²
- **685,385** New Mexicans live in a food desert, which contributes to higher rates of food insecurity within rural, tribal, and frontier communities.³

WHAT'S INCLUDED:

The CARES Act increases funding for SNAP (food stamps)

- Congress appropriated \$15.8 billion in additional funding for SNAP to cover new enrollment, which is expected to surge, and to ensure existing recipients can keep their benefits.⁴

Families First expands SNAP flexibility for states

- States can request waivers from the federal government to make it easier for families to apply for and keep SNAP benefits by extending recertification periods by up to 6 months, reducing reporting requirements, and simplifying other administrative processes.⁵
- Among the other waivers states can request is one that allows the provision of SNAP benefits to families with school-age children as a replacement for free and reduced-price school meals – which New Mexico has done. The benefits are available to households with eligible children whether or not they were already receiving SNAP – amounting to approximately \$114 per child per month.⁶
- States may increase benefits for those already receiving SNAP up to the maximum amount based on household size rather than income. This amounts to as much as \$509 per month for a family of three.⁷
- Families First also temporarily suspends SNAP's 3-month time limit on benefits for able-bodied working adults younger than 50 without dependents.⁸



WHO'S LEFT OUT:



College students

- While some college students rely on their institutions for help with food and other basic needs, many are ineligible for SNAP due to restrictions at the federal level.

Many New Mexico immigrants

- Although they work and pay taxes, most New Mexico immigrants without a Social Security number are ineligible for SNAP benefits.

Families earning the lowest incomes

- Although states can increase SNAP benefits up to the maximum based on household size, this provision doesn't give any extra assistance to families who already receive the maximum benefit based on their income.



WHAT'S NEXT:

Expanding SNAP benefits is an evidence-based approach for promoting food and financial security for families while stimulating the local economy. Lawmakers should include the following provisions in future relief packages, as well as increase SNAP benefit amounts both federally and through the state SNAP supplement to maximize the positive impact of nutrition assistance.

- SNAP is currently limited to households with income less than 130% of the federal poverty level (FPL). Temporarily increasing eligibility to include families with incomes above this cutoff (e.g., to more than 150% of FPL) would provide SNAP benefits to more families.
- SNAP was not designed to replace a family's total food budget, so benefits don't last through the end of the month.⁹ It's critical to increase the maximum benefit amount by at least 15 percent to best support families through this crisis.
- SNAP benefits cannot be used on prepared foods (i.e., hot foods at grocery stores and meals from restaurants), limiting options for people who are less able to prepare their own food because of a disability or housing situation. Expanding options for SNAP benefits to include prepared foods would help close this gap while supporting local restaurants.

1 "Profile of Infants and Toddlers in New Mexico," Food Research Action Center, 2019

2 "Health Indicator Report of Food Insecurity," NM Dept. of Health, 2019

3 "Food Access Research Atlas," US Dept. of Agriculture, 2019, food deserts are areas with limited access to grocery stores – in this case, people who must travel more than 1 mile in urban areas or more than 10 miles in rural areas are considered living in food deserts.

4 "Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act," U.S. Congress, 2020.

5 "USDA, States Must Act Swiftly to Deliver Food Assistance Allowed by Families First Act," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), 2020

6 ibid

7 ibid

8 "Unemployed Workers Can Get SNAP During Health Emergency," CBPP, 2020

9 "More Adequate SNAP Benefits Would Help Millions of Participants Better Afford Food," CBPP, 2019