ACTION NEEDED:
Urge your members of Congress and the administration to support counties’ role in the federal, state and local partnership in administering and financing the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). While the 2018 Farm Bill reauthorization largely preserved SNAP’s existing entitlement and funding structure, subsequent regulatory actions have either proposed or finalized key changes to SNAP eligibility and participation requirements.

BACKGROUND:
The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, is an entitlement program that offers nutrition assistance to millions of low-income individuals and families. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers the program in partnership with states, 10 of which delegate that responsibility to counties: California, Colorado, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Virginia and Wisconsin. These 10 county-administered states account for 31 percent of all SNAP program participants. Counties operating SNAP often contribute significant levels of local funds to meet the administrative and supplemental costs of running the program.

SNAP is an important program that not only helps struggling families put food on the table but effectively and efficiently stimulates the economy during times of downturn and natural disasters, as families in need can quickly access and spend benefits. In FY 2018, nearly 40 million individuals participated in SNAP; 70 percent of whom lived in families with children and more than one-quarter of whom were in households with seniors or people with disabilities.

In addition to guaranteeing food assistance for millions of low-income families, elderly Americans and individuals with disabilities, SNAP supports self-sufficiency through Employment and Training (E&T) programs that help participants gain skills, training or work experience and equip them for regular, sustained employment. SNAP E&T funds can also support enhanced individualized services for program participants.

SNAP eligibility is tied to the federal poverty level, a measure of...
income issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Applicants must earn a gross monthly income at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (households with an elderly or disabled member are exempt) and a net monthly income at or below the poverty level. Additionally, applicants must not possess assets exceeding $2,250 ($3,500 for households with an elderly or disabled member), with certain exceptions. However, an option called Broad Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE) allows states to forego verification of these asset requirements and/or expand income eligibility up to 200 percent of the federal poverty line if SNAP applicants qualify for non-cash Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or state maintenance of effort-funded benefits. In 2019, FNS proposed eliminating the BBCE option for states, though Congress excluded a similar provision when it reauthorized SNAP in the 2018 farm bill.

In addition to income and asset requirements, SNAP participants must also fulfill work requirements. Work requirements include registering for work, accepting a suitable job if offered one, not voluntarily quitting a job without good cause and not reducing work participation below 30 hours a week, with exemptions for certain groups such as students, those caring for children under age 6, individuals over age 59 and participants in alcohol or drug treatment programs. Able bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs)—individuals aged 18-49 deemed work-eligible and not living with children—are subject to additional requirements. ABAWDs are limited to participating in SNAP for three out of 36 months unless they are working or participating in unpaid work through a state approved program or an E&T program for at least 20 hours per week. Currently, states may apply to waive these requirements for counties or the entire state based on economic hardship. However, FNS has finalized a rule that will take effect in April 2020 to narrow geographic and economic criteria for ABAWD waivers. USDA estimates that under the rule, 76 percent of counties (712 total) currently eligible for waivers will no longer qualify.

While SNAP is an entitlement program, it still receives funding annually through the congressional appropriations process. In the wake of a government shutdown in January 2019 that caused a lapse in SNAP funding, Congress included a provision in its Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 appropriations bill to make SNAP reserve funds available for three years to provide certainty in case of a future shutdown. Over the past several years, some congressional budgets have called for converting SNAP from an entitlement program into a block grant. Currently, the federal government shares the cost of SNAP benefits with states and counties; as demand for these benefits increases, the federal government’s share of these costs increases accordingly. If the program is converted into a block grant, states would receive a capped amount of SNAP funding that may not meet demand for the program. Such a scenario would force states and counties to either increase their own funding for the program or reduce benefit levels for participants. SNAP’s authorization will expire on September 30, 2023.

KEY TALKING POINTS

SNAP helps provide food assistance as well as employment and training programs for low-income individuals and families. Nearly 70 percent of the households participating in SNAP include children.

States and counties should maintain flexibility in designing and implementing the program according to their needs and economic context, including the discretion to streamline administrative and application processes with other social service programs.

Families participating in SNAP often face multiple barriers to self-sufficiency. Due to these challenges, participants can struggle to meet SNAP’s full work and participation requirements. States and counties should continue to receive flexibility in waiving SNAP work requirements to meet the individual needs of their caseloads.

In county-administered states, counties often contribute substantial local funds to administrative and supplemental costs of the SNAP program.

Converting SNAP into a block grant would force states and counties to increase their own funding contributions to the program or reduce benefits for participants.

For further information, contact Rachel Merker at 202.661.8843 or rmerker@naco.org.
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