

Farm Bill Conference Sign-On Letter

Dear Representative/Senator:

We—the undersigned faith-based organizations representing various religious organizations, denominations, and faith traditions—urge you to pass a Farm Bill that reduces hunger and improves nutrition in the U.S. Our values and holy scriptures instruct us to ensure that everyone may live with dignity and the opportunity to recognize their full potential. We join together to care for those who are poor and vulnerable, including over 40 million Americans who struggle to feed themselves and their families.

We have serious concerns about the harsh and punitive provisions related to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the version of the Farm Bill that narrowly passed the U.S. House of Representatives in June. Alternatively, the Senate Farm Bill passed its chamber with broad bipartisan support and more accurately reflects our values—it helps curb hunger and malnutrition, supports rural communities and agricultural economies, and promotes sustainable use of natural resources. We urge Congress to pass a conferenced Farm Bill modeled after the bipartisan Senate bill that will protect and strengthen SNAP.

As the Farm Bill moves into conference, we have three main priorities for the final bill.

1. Reject Harmful, Expanded Work Requirements

It is important to acknowledge that work requirements are already integral to the structure of SNAP—most participants who can work are already working, and benefits are cut off for people who do not comply. Expanding work requirements would have many negative, unintended consequences. The House-passed Farm Bill would expand harsh work requirements while failing to address serious barriers to employment, increase an already large bureaucracy, and force individuals into short-term, temporary jobs that don't pay as well. These proposals would not help anyone find meaningful work; in fact, they would likely hinder future opportunities for long-term employment.

SNAP is an anti-hunger program, not a jobs program. Despite this, the House Farm Bill would implement even harsher work requirements than what is currently in place. These draconian requirements would hurt people who need these benefits the most including people with disabilities, low-income working parents, seniors, those with serious barriers to employment, and more.

Work is important, and there is enormous dignity in work. A good job with a living wage is the best path out of poverty. Therefore, we support efforts to connect SNAP recipients to work through effective employment and training programs. The 2014 Farm Bill established and funded ten pilot programs to examine best practices for SNAP employment and training. The 2018 Senate Farm Bill proposal continues to invest in these pilots and encourages targeting them at reducing barriers to work faced by specific vulnerable populations. We urge Congress to wait until the results of these pilot programs are released and make appropriate modifications to SNAP's Employment & Training programs based on the lessons learned.

2. Oppose Barriers to Accessing SNAP

The Farm Bill must make it easier—not harder—for people to access SNAP. However, in addition to increasing the number of people held to the expanded SNAP work requirements, the House Farm Bill proposes harsh penalties for those who fail to meet the requirement—unemployed SNAP applicants would have 30 days to find a job or enter a work training program until being dropped for the program for one year. With a second infraction, this individual would be banned from receiving SNAP benefits for 3 years. Furthermore, it would require the creation of a massive new bureaucracy with insufficient funding in every state.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that beginning in 2021, over 7 million people would have to prove every month that they met the requirement or qualified for an exemption. This barrier to access would be particularly detrimental for vulnerable populations like seniors and caretakers, those living in rural communities, single-parent households, and people who work in jobs with fluctuating schedules.

We urge Congress to reject the creation of any barriers to accessing SNAP as well as efforts to make the program less accessible to those who are struggling.

3. Maintain State Flexibility for “Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility”

The House Farm Bill seeks to eliminate “broad-based categorical eligibility” which for years has improved SNAP access and simplified states’ administration of the program, allowing each state to respond to economic fluctuations. Categorical eligibility allows for a helpful flexibility to adjust the upper income limits for eligibility of SNAP benefits—it is particularly helpful for low-income working households when their monthly income approaches SNAP’s cutoff of 130% of the federal poverty line.

Over 40 states currently utilize this categorical eligibility, and there is bipartisan support for maintaining this important state flexibility. We urge Congress to preserve this crucial provision in the final Farm Bill, ensuring that working families don’t face a “benefit cliff” of losing SNAP eligibility when their wages increase slightly.

Our faiths call on us to help those who are in need, but religious congregations and charity organizations cannot match the role of SNAP in assisting and supporting the millions of Americans who live at risk of hunger. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the 2018 House Farm Bill proposal would reduce or eliminate SNAP benefits for more than 1 million households with more than 2 million people. We therefore implore you to prioritize our country’s most vulnerable people and support a final Farm Bill that is modeled after the Senate version, protecting and strengthening SNAP.