

## Expanding SNAP access during COVID-19 outbreak

*State can make sure families receive nutrition benefits, streamline process*

By Natalie Veldhouse

Iowans thrive when they are able to put food on the table and make ends meet. Times of crisis — like the current Coronavirus outbreak and impending economic downturn — make it even more challenging for Iowans to meet their basic needs. That is where the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), one of the nation's most effective anti-poverty initiatives, plays a critical role. Iowa should continue to leverage SNAP in its response to the COVID-19 crisis, using the many supports now available to the state, thanks to key changes at the federal level.

**See more about Iowa's COVID-19 response at [www.iowafiscal.org](http://www.iowafiscal.org)**

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act gives the U.S. Department of Agriculture new flexibility and authority to temporarily change the SNAP program to best respond to this crisis. Boosting SNAP benefits is a proven and effective way to both bolster family security and jumpstart local economies.<sup>1</sup> Through SNAP, Iowa has many tools at its disposal, some of which the state has already utilized, while others it has yet to — but should — implement.

To simplify the process and ensure Iowans have access to food, the state should focus on two priorities: 1) **make sure Iowans already on SNAP maintain their benefits**, and 2) **streamline new SNAP applications**. These changes would reduce complexity for all, and help Department of Human Services workers manage growing caseloads, freeing up capacity to attend to Iowans' most pressing needs.

### ***Opportunities taken by Iowa in the federal CARES legislation***

- Iowa has already taken advantage of a waiver that **enables households to receive the maximum SNAP allotment for their household size**. During April and May, additional benefits will be given to households not already receiving the maximum allotment.<sup>2</sup>
- Adults **without dependents who can work are now allowed to access SNAP without time limits**. Previously, they were eligible SNAP only three months in a three-year period, if not enrolled in 20 hours of work or volunteering.
- In Iowa, **households receiving SNAP that were up for recertification in March, April or May now have their cases recertified for the next six months**.<sup>3</sup>
- SNAP participants will not lose benefits for failure to meet work requirements.

### ***Waivers left on the table, for now***

- The federal act **allows an increase in SNAP benefits to households with children who would normally receive free school lunches**.<sup>4</sup> The Iowa Department of Human Services

and Department of Education are currently working toward this and should implement it as soon as possible.<sup>5</sup>

- **States can streamline the SNAP application process** by not requiring an interview prior to approval.<sup>6</sup>

Many other states have not yet taken up these waivers, likely due to administrative hurdles.

The COVID-19 crisis illustrates the importance of robust safety net initiatives like SNAP. Iowans face uncertain times in the weeks and months ahead, but the state can take smart, concrete steps right now to ensure families can put food on the table while supporting our local economies. COVID-19 presents a massive challenge requiring an all-hands-on-deck approach; Iowa would be wise to use all the tools at its disposal, including a strong, flexible and effective SNAP program.

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*The Iowa Fiscal Partnership is a joint public policy analysis initiative of two nonpartisan, nonprofit, Iowa-based organizations — the Iowa Policy Project in Iowa City, and the Child and Family Policy Center in Des Moines. Find reports at [www.iowafiscal.org](http://www.iowafiscal.org), and the IPP and CFPC websites, [www.iowapolicyproject.org](http://www.iowapolicyproject.org) and [www.cfpciowa.org](http://www.cfpciowa.org).*

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Rosenbaum et al., “USDA, States Must Act Swiftly to Deliver Food Assistance Allowed by Families First Act.” March 2020. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/3-20-20fa.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Iowa Department of Human Service, “COVID-19: Food Security.” March 2020. <https://dhs.iowa.gov/COVID19/FoodSecurity>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, “State Guidance on Coronavirus Pandemic EBT (P-EBT).” March 2020. Food and Nutrition Service. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-guidance-coronavirus-pandemic-ebt-p-ebt>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, “SNAP – Adjusting Interview Requirements Due to Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) – Blanket Approval.” March 2020. Food and Nutrition Service. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/adjusting-interview-requirements-covid-19-blanket-waiver>