



## AUSTIN-TRAVIS COUNTY FOOD POLICY BOARD RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation Number: 20180611-5ii4

Adopt a legislative agenda item to protect and strengthen SNAP in the 86<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislative Session

Whereas, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, is the backbone of our nation's federal nutrition programs, and has successfully elevated millions of Texans out of food insecurity; and

Whereas, SNAP provides critical food assistance for over 100,000 Travis County residents; and

Whereas, two-thirds of SNAP participants are children, seniors, and people with disabilities; and

Whereas, \$148 million in SNAP benefits are spent in local retailers annually, generating \$264 million in economic benefit to the Austin area economy; and

Whereas, SNAP is often targeted during the Texas Legislative Session with harmful legislation that would result in decreased access to the program for those who need it most; and

Whereas, decreasing access to SNAP would increase hunger in our community, and negatively impact our residents' health, academic success, and workforce participation; and

Whereas, approximately 70 percent of eligible SNAP participants in Texas are enrolled in the program as compared to 83 percent nationwide; and

Whereas, significant opportunities exist for the Texas Legislature to improve SNAP, reduce existing barriers to access, and expand efforts to make healthy food more affordable for SNAP recipients.

Now, therefore be it resolved that the Austin Travis County Food Policy Board recommends that Austin City Council and the Travis County Commissioners Court place on their respective legislative agendas for the 86<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislative Session support for protecting and improving SNAP and opposition to any legislation that would decrease access to the program.

Date of Approval: June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Record of the vote: 9 -0

Attest:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Edwin Martinez". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

City of Austin, Office of Sustainability, Food Policy Manager/ ATCFPB Staff Liaison

## **Healthy Food Access Working Group Proposal to the Austin-Travis County Food Policy Board, 6/11/18:**

Advocate the adoption of a City of Austin and Travis County legislative agenda item to protect and strengthen SNAP in the 86<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislative Session.

### **Background**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is responsible for bringing approximately \$148 million in federal funds to Travis County annually.<sup>1</sup> The bulk of these dollars are spent at local food retailers, benefiting the local food and farm economy in addition to alleviating food insecurity and improving dietary health among Travis County's most vulnerable families. These dollars generate an estimated \$264 million in economic benefit to the Austin area economy.<sup>2</sup>

SNAP may be the most unfairly maligned federal program of the last decade. Despite its evident success, SNAP has come under near-constant legislative attack at the state and federal levels. Much of this legislation has sought to reduce the size and cost of the program through various negative policy changes, resulting in reduced federal aid for Travis County and a less effective program overall.

There is also substantial room at the state and federal levels to strengthen SNAP. Currently, only an estimated 70% of income eligible Texas residents receive SNAP, which is lower than the national average of 83%<sup>3</sup>, primarily due to bureaucratic obstacles. The monthly benefit is inadequate for a healthy diet, and many program regulations governing eligibility, access and long-term financial security are punitive and unproductive. Additionally, effective programs exist at the local level, including in Austin, to incentivize the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables in the SNAP program, making healthy foods more affordable and accessible for families receiving SNAP. There is opportunity for Texas to invest in this model at the state level to expand the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables purchased with SNAP dollars.

### **State Legislative Opportunities & Challenges**

SNAP benefits are 100% federally-funded, while administration of the program is paid for 50/50 from state and federal funds. Broad program rules around eligibility and access exist at the federal level, but Texas has significant discretion to tailor these policies in different ways. Recent legislative attacks on the program have taken aim at the following policy areas:

#### **Stigma / Shaming**

SNAP already suffers from a negative public perception that exacerbates under-participation in Travis County and statewide. In recent sessions, Texas lawmakers have sought to increase program stigma by proposing changes such as presenting participants with a mock "bill" for their benefits, placing inflammatory language on the EBT card that carries SNAP benefits, or placing recipient photos on the EBT card, despite SNAP's status as a full-household benefit.

#### **Eligibility / Access**

Texas already employs among the strictest state options governing program eligibility. Attempts to improve program access by updating artificially low income and asset thresholds, particularly relating to vehicle ownership, have failed to pass the legislature across multiple sessions.

Applicant families must also undergo an invasive determination of eligibility involving many unnecessary verifications. This process presents a significant barrier to working households, and

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<sup>1</sup> Texas Health and Human Services Commission, SNAP Statistics, 2017-2018, <https://hhs.texas.gov/about-hhs/records-statistics/data-statistics/supplemental-nutritional-assistance-program-snap-statistics>

<sup>2</sup> USDA Economic Research Service, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/supplemental-nutritional-assistance-program-snap/economic-linkages/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/Reaching2015.pdf>

could be tailored for certain populations based on an analysis of risk, such as a simplified process for seniors.

### **Enrollment/Application**

Documentation requirements are a common challenge for applicants. The application, which is over 18 pages long, is itself a burden, especially when multiple family members are applying or applicants have multiple jobs. Without in-person application assistance many applicants do not complete the process, not knowing how to supply all of the information required, or become fearful because of the overwhelming documentation requirements. The application process is lengthy and sometimes exacerbated when mistakes are made, leaving families without benefits for a long time. Additionally, lack of access to a computer and/or the skills necessary to complete the online application are an additional barrier, especially among the elderly population.

Recent immigration policies at the state and federal level have had a further chilling effect on enrollment in SNAP, as families that could apply for SNAP on behalf of a child may not do so for fear of deportation. Past legislation such as SB 4, or the “Sanctuary Cities” bill from the 85<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislative Session in 2017 is one example.

### **Time Limits / Sanctions**

For recipients who are not otherwise exempted, SNAP includes strict work requirements. Participation requires adherence to many punitive rules that do not recognize the complexity of modern low-wage work, and imposes harsh sanctions to the whole family when one member is out of compliance. For able-bodied SNAP recipients without dependents, SNAP also has an arbitrary three-month time limit for recipients who are unable to find work. Texas has significant authority to make these rules more flexible and responsive to local conditions, as well as recognize the complex barriers to work faced by many recipients.

### **Program Structure**

SNAP is an entitlement program, meaning that program’s size and cost is dictated by the size of the need, not an inflexible budget number. This allows SNAP to respond nimbly to unforeseen economic or natural disasters, such as Hurricane Harvey. Despite this success, some Texas lawmakers seek to petition the federal government to turn SNAP into a fixed state block-grant similar to TANF, which would give much more flexibility to the state while capping the amount of federal aid available.

## **Adoption of an Agenda Item to Protect and Strengthen SNAP**

This working group is aware that attacks on SNAP are likely to continue at the state legislature, particularly following a divisive year in national politics in which the program has undergone high-profile debate through the Farm Bill. Despite these challenges, the working group is also aware that significant opportunities exist to improve SNAP, reduce existing barriers to access, and expand programs to make healthy food more affordable for SNAP recipients.

Therefore, we recommend that the Travis County Food Policy Board advocate for the adoption of an official City of Austin and Travis County position to protect and strengthen SNAP in the 86<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislative Session.