



Our Public Policy Priority:

Maintain Federal Funding for Food Assistance Programs included in the Farm Bill

A strong Farm Bill is vital to farmers and rural communities, and critical to people in need and the food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters that serve them.

Here's why:

The problem of hunger is real.

Nationally, 42 million people have trouble getting enough food to eat. In the communities served by the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank, the total is about 164,000. Those are big numbers, and they have come down only slightly since the peak of the recession several years ago.

Why are so many people struggling with hunger when unemployment is low and the economy is steadily improving? The primary reason is that more people than ever are working part-time rather than full time or are otherwise earning less money than they were before the financial crisis... while their spending for housing, health care and other basic needs has increased. And, the number of seniors who are living on meager fixed incomes and don't have enough food to eat is growing rapidly. In fact, hunger among seniors is expected to grow by 50% over the next nine years.

The solution is for government and charities to continue to work together.

Fortunately, our nation has a food assistance system – a public-private partnership – that works really well, and it's funded mostly through the Farm Bill, the major agriculture and food legislation that is reviewed and funded every five years in Congress.

Food banks across the country do a lot for people who don't have enough to eat. Locally, the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank distributes enough food for about 21 million meals each year. Nearly 20% of that food comes from the federal government, and it's among the healthiest food we get. This food, and some money to offset some of the costs associated with distributing it, comes to us from the United States Department of Agriculture through a program called The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). It's funded through the Farm Bill, and it's a great example of government and charities working together to solve a problem.

But as much food as we're distributing from all our sources, it's a fraction of the total food assistance provided to people living in poverty. SNAP – the Supplemental Food Assistance Program, or what we used to call food stamps – provides **10 times** as much food than food banks.

We need to keep food banks and SNAP working together for people who don't have enough to eat.

The Farm Bill helps support the country's agriculture economy and rural communities while also assuring that millions of our neighbors don't go hungry. It is due to be re-introduced in 2018, but already some in Washington are talking about reducing the amount of support to food banks and slashing funding for SNAP by as much as 25%.

For the most part, those advocating for deep cuts think that there is a lot of waste in the program and that people who truly need help would still get help.

That simply isn't true. SNAP is incredibly efficient, with more than 93% of SNAP spending on the purchase of food. And the error rate is under 3%, which is very low – the lowest in decades. (*Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*).

Two-thirds of people who receive SNAP benefits are children, seniors and people with disabilities who cannot work (*source: USDA*). Virtually all the SNAP benefit dollars go to people living in absolute poverty, so our most vulnerable neighbors would suffer if SNAP is cut.

If SNAP is cut, food banks, including the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank, would not be able to make up the difference. Even a 10% cut could mean that twice as many people would turn to us and our network of food pantries for help. On a monthly basis, we're serving about 105,000 people through our partner agencies, and if you put that many people shoulder to shoulder, the line would stretch 41 miles. We can't handle twice as many people, let alone three times as many, nor could we ever afford enough food to feed them. And neither could all the church pantries and community organizations we supply.

There's a misconception that spending on SNAP has grown out-of-control in recent years. That's not true, either. SNAP utilization has grown because the number of people living in poverty has risen. And in the last two years, when poverty rates inched downward, spending on SNAP also declined, saving taxpayers about \$30 billion in the last year alone (*source: Congressional Budget Office*). Spending on SNAP goes up when poverty goes up, and comes down when poverty comes down.

And here's one more fact: For most, SNAP is temporary. The average new household stays on SNAP for less than a year and most leave the program within two years.

We need your help.

Ask Congress and the President to maintain current levels of funding for nutrition programs in the Farm Bill, specifically The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) which supports food banks, and SNAP, which provides a lifeline to children, seniors, people with disabilities and other neighbors who desperately need help.