

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 1, 2021

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We write today to request documents and information about the dramatic and indefinite expansion of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Taxpayer-funded SNAP assists low-income Americans in meeting their nutrition needs. But based on recent actions, the Biden Administration is abusing its authority and expanding SNAP—without congressional authorization.

On August 16, 2021, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released a re-evaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan (the Plan). Using this analysis, the USDA is increasing monthly SNAP benefits an average of 27 percent over pre-pandemic levels starting October 1, 2021.¹ The average monthly benefit will go up from about \$121 per person (pre-pandemic) to about \$157 per person.² The new maximum SNAP benefit for a family of four will be \$835 per month, or \$10,020 per year, for a nonworking household.³ In 2019 the average four-person household in the U.S. spent only \$537 per month on food at home—less than the benefits will now cover.⁴ It is estimated that this increase will cost the American taxpayers an additional \$20 billion per year.⁵

The law requires the Thrifty Food Plan to be updated every five years. The Biden Administration, however, broke with longstanding precedent that the USDA only increase the cost of the plan in accordance with inflation.⁶ Even last month, the Congressional Budget Office acknowledged this precedent when it estimated only inflationary adjustments to the Plan through 2031.⁷ The Biden Administration's move reflects its continued willingness to ignore precedent and unilaterally expand government programs.

¹ The Editorial Board, *The Democratic Food-Stamp Boom*, THE WALL ST. J. (Aug. 17, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-democratic-food-stamp-boom-joe-biden-usda-welfare-state-11629225286>.

² *Id.*

³ Angela Rachidi, *Biden ignores Congress to increase SNAP*, THE HILL (Aug. 19, 2021), <https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/568386-biden-ignores-congress-to-increase-snap>.

⁴ The Editorial Board, *The Democratic Food-Stamp Boom*, THE WALL ST. J. (Aug. 17, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-democratic-food-stamp-boom-joe-biden-usda-welfare-state-11629225286>.

⁵ Ashraf Khalil & Josh Boak, *Food stamp benefits to increase by more than 25% in October*, ASSOC. PRESS (Aug. 16, 2021), <https://apnews.com/article/health-coronavirus-pandemic-f51d32a6830fe74b8bc06fcf99c57f71>

⁶ Angela Rachidi, *Biden ignores Congress to increase SNAP*, THE HILL (Aug. 19, 2021), <https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/568386-biden-ignores-congress-to-increase-snap>.

⁷ *Id.*

Further, under the CARES Act, work requirements for food-stamp benefits are waived until the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) declares the public health emergency over. HHS, however, appears unwilling to relinquish its emergency authorities. Therefore, these increased benefits continue to have no work, training, or education requirement. This could incentivize a pattern we are observing with enhanced unemployment benefits, and in fact research shows that since the 1970s, when SNAP was instituted, those eligible for benefits have worked less.⁸

The USDA claims that increasing these benefits enables beneficiaries to buy healthier foods which are more in line with the nation's nutritional guidelines, however very little recent, comprehensive data exists that shows this to be true.⁹ The updated Thrifty Food Plan emphasized the need for nutrient dense diets to improve the overall health of the American people.¹⁰ The government, however, does not restrict what kinds of food can be bought with SNAP benefits.¹¹ According to government data, food-stamp recipients spend about 26 percent of their funds on sweetened beverages, prepared foods, and candy.¹² The report also allowed recipients 7 percent more calories based off the fact that Americans are more obese now than before.¹³ This increase will not contribute to the healthier lifestyle the Thrifty Food Plan purports to promote.

Further, a 2018 study in the Journal of the American Medical Association examined the diet quality of food-stamp beneficiaries and similar SNAP eligible low-income individuals who didn't receive the benefits from 2003 to 2014—a period in which average benefits increased more than 50%.¹⁴ The study found low-income individuals not receiving SNAP ate healthier diets than SNAP beneficiaries, and their diets also improved more over time.¹⁵

The Biden Administration's actions to dramatically expand SNAP—without guardrails and without congressional input—appears to be another example of its efforts to keep Americans dependent on government handouts. To better understand the increases in SNAP benefits, please provide the following documents and information no later than September 15, 2021. In addition, please provide a staff level briefing no later than September 8, 2021.

⁸ Angela Rachidi, *Biden ignores Congress to increase SNAP*, THE HILL (Aug. 19, 2021), <https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/568386-biden-ignores-congress-to-increase-snap>.

⁹ Press Release, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, USDA Modernizes the Thrifty Food Plan, Updates SNAP Benefits (Aug. 16, 2021), <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2021/08/16/usda-modernizes-thrifty-food-plan-updates-snap-benefits>.

¹⁰ THRIFTY FOOD PLAN, 2021, U.S. DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE (Aug. 2021) <https://www.fns.usda.gov/resource/thrifty-food-plan-2021>.

¹¹ The Editorial Board, *The Democratic Food-Stamp Boom*, THE WALL ST. J. (Aug. 17, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-democratic-food-stamp-boom-joe-biden-usda-welfare-state-11629225286>.

¹² Angela Rachidi, *Biden ignores Congress to increase SNAP*, THE HILL (Aug. 19, 2021), <https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/568386-biden-ignores-congress-to-increase-snap>.

¹³ Mike Doring, *Biden to provide more than 25% boost to food stamp benefits*, FORTUNE (Aug. 16, 2021), <https://fortune.com/2021/08/16/biden-food-stamps-program-25-percent-boost-usda-snap/>.

¹⁴ Fang Fang Zhang, et. al, *Trends and Disparities in Diet Quality Among US Adults by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Status*, J. OF AM. MEDICAL ASSOC. (Jun. 15, 2028), <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2684625>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

1. A detailed accounting of the calculations used to determine the current food prices and consumption rates.
2. The rationale and authority under which the USDA moved away from the cost-neutral evaluation.
3. A copy of all relevant contracts with 3rd parties that conducted research as a part the re-evaluation of the Plan.
4. A detailed list of all factors considered in analyzing food insecurity.
5. Documents, data, research contracts, and other relevant information that sufficiently shows 1) that when provided additional benefits, recipient households have increased their purchase of healthy foods and, 2) how the USDA will ensure the increase in SNAP benefits correlates with better food choices by SNAP beneficiaries.
6. Whether the increase in benefits will be accompanied by an expectation of productivity, both through general work requirements and able-bodied adult without dependent (ABAWD) work requirements.
7. All documents, guidance, and information being provided to States in preparation for the cessation of the public health emergency and reinstatement of the work requirement for SNAP benefits.
8. Whether this increase in benefits will be accompanied by a work requirement post-public health emergency.
9. An accounting of how each State has used their FY 2021 Employment and Training funds.

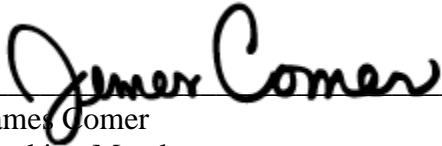
The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. The House Committee on Agriculture has jurisdiction over “human nutrition” under House Rule X. Thank you in advance for your cooperation with this inquiry.

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack

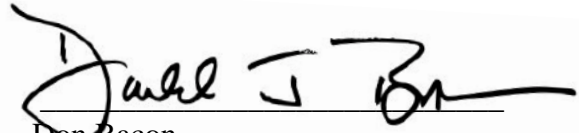
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Sincerely,



James Comer
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Reform



Don Bacon
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Nutrition,
Oversight, and Department Operations

cc: The Honorable Carolyn Maloney, Chairwoman
Committee on Oversight and Reform

Rep. Jahana Hayes, Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations