

PUBLIC COMMENTS

HB 1019

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

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Hearing Date: March 16, 2021 8:00 AM

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Valerie Hawthorne, Director Government Relations

North Texas Food Bank

Dallas, TX

My name is Dr. Valerie Hawthorne and I'm the Government Relations Director at the North Texas Food Bank. I want to thank the Chairpersons and the members of the committee for allowing me the opportunity to comment on an issue close to my heart.

I'm writing to support House Bill 1019, which would simplify the application and renewal process for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for our senior citizens.

At the North Texas Food Bank, we serve our 13 counties through a variety of nutrition programs that address child hunger, adult hunger, and senior hunger. I know many here are no strangers to fighting hunger and would agree with me when I say, there is no one face of hunger, that no zip code that is free from hunger, and that each group of people we serve have their own unique challenges.

Unlike children, seniors typically have less support and less help to assist them in getting adequate nutrition. Seniors aren't meeting with school counselors or often do not live in households with other members that can offer that helping hand.

Our senior hunger team at the food bank sees common ways that our older clients navigate their challenges. Some seniors self-alter their medications to make them last by halving or skipping doses. Some skip meals or eat minute portions so that they can make every single dollar of their fixed incomes stretch. All these of acts result in decreased health for our seniors.

One of the most humbling stories we have at North Texas Food Bank comes from a team member who met a woman named Ms. Wilson\*. She was living alone, and her cat was her only source of companionship. She, like many others who live in the shadows, didn't know she had options to help her with her nutritional needs. It wasn't until a cashier at her local grocery store suggested she apply for SNAP after realizing that the cat food Ms. Wilson was purchasing was not just for her beloved cat, but for herself as well. Ms. Wilson\* explained that the only way for both of them to eat, was for her and her cat to share the cheaper cat food.

How fortunate am I that, if I needed to, filling out an 18-page application for SNAP with fonts as small as 10 point isn't a big issue for my eyes. That going on-line to create a username and password, establishing security questions and answers, and typing out the responses to pages and pages of questions is not a big deal. Renewing this process every six-months is not a big deal. I can do this! But for many seniors, these seemingly easy tasks for me, are the barrier between accessing programs that can help get them the meals they need.

I thank you for your time and your consideration of this bill that provides a simple solution to address a complex problem and will help make life a little easier for our seniors in need.

Andrea Hill

Self

Dallas, TX

I support this bill and think it is a necessary step for seniors!

Alison Chapman

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self, Business Manager

Grand Prairie, TX

I support simplification of the certification and recertification process in support of the seniors in our communities and state. Barriers that prevent eligible seniors from receiving SNAP benefits should be minimized if not eliminated, ensuring that all eligible seniors receive access to this essential supplemental nutrition benefit. A challenging application process, as well as limited knowledge or access to technology are contributing factors to a low SNAP participation among seniors. In addition, many seniors do not have a personal or community network to help them stay informed of benefits available to them. I support data matching to identify and ultimately assist seniors with applying for SNAP, and a simplified certification and recertification process.

Eric Lewis

Self

Plano, TX

I just want to let you know my family and I like this bill. Please pass it - thank you!

Katherine Chandler

Self

Dallas, TX

Support Senior SNAP Simplification Bill - Support

- Several factors contribute to Texas' low SNAP participation rate among seniors, including difficulties navigating the application process, limited mobility and access to technology, and lack of awareness or knowledge of the program.
- While most Texans apply for SNAP benefits via an online portal, the process can be daunting for seniors.
- Implementing a simplified application process a household composed solely of seniors and/or persons with a disability with no earned income can be certified for 36 months using a shortened application form with limited documentation requirements.
- Using data matching with Medicaid will identify seniors that are eligible but not enrolled in SNAP. Data matching conducted by the state would enable community partners to better identify and assist seniors on Medicaid in applying for SNAP.

Elizabeth Vela

NTFB

Mesquite, TX

Support

Katherine Kitchens

self (graduate student, UTA School of Social Work)

Irving, TX

I ask you to vote in favor of HB 1019 (Support Senior SNAP Simplification Bill). Implementing a simplified application process for seniors and persons with a disability will increase SNAP accessibility for populations in need. Data matching with Medicaid to identify seniors who are eligible but not enrolled with SNAP will help community partners identify and assist this population.

Janet Dudding

Self

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Bryan, TX

SUPPORT

Tammy Leonard

self, economics professor

Wylie, TX

Dear Representatives,

Only 50% of potentially-eligible Texas Seniors are enrolled in SNAP, and this is unacceptable. The SNAP enrollment process is very complicated, and this complication is made worse by the fact that the world has moved “online” during the COVID pandemic. This process itself is ill-suited for seniors who have difficulty accessing online resources and hearing conversations (such as required for the SNAP interview) over the phone.

The proposed legislation will simplify the SNAP enrollment process for seniors and improve the ability of community service providers to assist with this enrollment. Not only will this improve access for seniors, but it will reduce the costs of enrollment that are bore by family members and service providers who work assist seniors. Additionally, SNAP benefits help seniors maintain health and independence, which saves additional public expenditures on medical and long-term care.

Sincerely,  
Tammy Leonard, PhD

Lauren Trlica

self

Dallas, TX

Support!

Meredith Wilsey

CitySquare Food Pantry

Dallas, TX

The current complexity of the SNAP application process leaves too many seniors citizens in Texas without food. Factors limiting Texas' low SNAP participation rates among seniors include difficulties navigating the application process, limited mobility and access to technology, and lack of awareness of the program. Implementing a simplified application process for households composed solely of seniors and/or persons with a disability would reduce hunger and diet related illness (cardiovascular disease, diabetes) in a very vulnerable population. Hunger relief organizations such as CitySquare's Food Pantry would see less strain on our system as individuals are able to access SNAP benefits to purchase food for themselves, while also spending money in our local economy.

Renae Perry, Chief Operating Officer

The Senior Source

Dallas, TX

More than ever, older adults rely on SNAP benefits for adequate nutrition and food security. It's imperative that the certification and recertification process be simplified as noted in this bill. It supports our older adults well and allows staff to better distribute their time to other needed activities. This bill would truly be a win-win for our state and the older adults in need who live here.

Cynthia Walker

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Hope's Door New Beginning Center

Garland, TX

I support.

Shawn Martin

Self

Dallas, TX

SUPPORT

Karen Turner

North Texas Food Bank

Rowlett, TX

Support

Emily Grooms

Memory Care Consulting

Dallas, TX

Food security should be a right for all elder Texans. But this was not the case before COVID-19 and certainly is not now. Food insecurity has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Many seniors were able to get hydration and nutritional centers serving congregate meals. These facilities have been closed as a result of COVID-19. Many volunteers who delivered Meals on Wheels were and are older themselves and fear of contracting the virus has dwindled their numbers during the crisis. It's my hope you will expand the SNAP Program and simplify the SNAP application and the recertification process.

Joi Anne Garrett, General Partner

Memory Care Consulting

Dallas, TX

The roots of the Texas Constitution go to protecting families, women and children in a frontier setting. The needs for family protection have not change. If anything, with COVID-19 those needs have expanded. Food security should be a fundamental right for all elder Texans. Food insecurity has been worsened by the pandemic and our 'COLDVID' three weeks ago. The Older American Act and parallel legislation extended hydration and nutritional programs to numerous community centers, serving congregate meals. Those services faltered and regrouped with pandemic conditions. Meals on Wheels volunteers were and are often older themselves -- fear of viral exposure certainly dwindled their numbers during the crisis. Let me urge you to expand the SNAP Program and simplify the SNAP application and the recertification process.

Susan Goodell, CEO

El Pasoans Fighting Hunger Food Bank

El Paso, TX

It has long been a challenge to find effective and meaningful solutions to the issues surrounding poverty and hunger. The pandemic's year-long stranglehold on the world has shown the prevalence of food insecurity and its negative impacts on overall health and well-being. As you, the policy-makers of the 87th State Legislature roll up your sleeves to confront the arduous task of passing a biennial budget in one of the most difficult economic climates in our history, we ask that you also commit to enacting laws that truly improve the lives of your most vulnerable and underserved constituencies.

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Many of our beloved seniors struggled with health and economic challenges long before the pandemic's onset and the last 12 months have undoubtedly exacerbated the difficult situations in which they find themselves. Seniors struggling to meet basic needs are making difficult decisions with alarming frequency. In some instances, seniors are weighing whether to buy food or medicine, buy medicine or pay utility bills—all impossible choices with potentially harmful consequences. In fact, Texas is ranked #5 in the nation for the highest rate of food insecurity among seniors, this is estimated to have doubled due to the health and economic fallout of the pandemic. Only half of all eligible Texas seniors are enrolled in SNAP, which serves as a critical safety net for food-insecure seniors and people with disabilities. Research shows that people with disabilities are at increased risk of being food-insecure and experience higher rates of poverty.

For many seniors, these hardships are compounded by SNAP application and recertification processes that are daunting, and often times, frustrating. The application process is lengthy, and for seniors with limited mobility and/or access to technology, successful completion of these requirements is unfeasible. Many of the seniors our food bank assists in applying for SNAP benefits have shared with us that they have little to no means of transportation, computer or internet access, and without help at home the process can feel insurmountable. These barriers to acquiring essential economic relief are unnecessary and can easily be remedied. More often than not, determining eligibility is easier as our seniors and disabled neighbor's financial situations are less likely to fluctuate.

HB1019, filed by Rep. Meza will effectively simplify the initial application, waive the in-person recertification interviews, and extend the certification period from 12 to 36 months. In addition to these much-needed improvements, those enrolled in Medicaid can be connected via data matching tools to resources for enrolling in SNAP. The reality on the ground demands that SNAP and programs like it be at the forefront of our relief efforts today and moving forward. Further, efforts to simplify the SNAP enrollment and recertification processes would alleviate burdens felt by our community's vulnerable populations during this difficult and unprecedented time

Heather Mustain, Reverend

Wilshire Baptist Church

Dallas, TX

We have a moral obligation to care for those most vulnerable in our society. This bill will create a much easier and simplified process for seniors to apply for SNAP benefits. Please consider supporting this bill as it will help drive down senior hunger in our community.

John Vasquez

AARP - Texas

San Antonio, TX

My name is John Vasquez, I am the volunteer AARP Texas State President. I am a part of the 2.3 million AARP members in Texas and I am submitting this statement in support of HB 1019. Everyday seniors must deal with hunger, food insecurity and inadequate access to nutritious food. Approximately 3.7 million Texans are age 65 plus. This means an estimated 400,000 seniors are not sure where their next meal is coming from.

SNAP is a critical part of the nutrition safety net available to low-income seniors and those with disabilities. Compared to food-secure seniors, those facing food insecurity are over twice as likely to be in poor health.

SNAP is an especially important program for older adults because many live on fixed incomes and have limited financial resources. SNAP benefits help recipients afford other necessities, such as housing and utility expenses, by freeing up household resources otherwise needed for food costs. There may also be a positive effect by preventing health related problems associated with food insecurity, such as postponing needed medical care, delaying or not taking prescribed medications, increased emergency room use, and more frequent hospitalizations.

Food security can mean better management of chronic diseases, and it can make the difference in being able to age-in-place in their home or entering institutional care.

Many seniors who are eligible for SNAP do not participate or do so at a lower rates than other age groups, some are embarrassed to accept public assistance, others might not know they are eligible. Many are not enrolled due to barriers inherent to the application process, including difficult and confusing documentation requirements, application length, and recertification processes.

My support for HB 1019 is grounded on my own personal observations. During my career as a judge, I conducted indigency hearings to determine the financial resources of individuals appearing before the court. I regularly heard testimony from persons

Printed on: April 20, 2021 6:53 AM

who were apparently indigent, but not receiving SNAP benefits. Their explanation was that the application process was too difficult for them to complete.

AARP supports HB 1019 because it will simplify the SNAP application and enrollment process for low-income seniors (60+) and those with disabilities who are eligible for SNAP. It will certify senior households for 36 months using a shortened application form, and it will require no reporting between certification periods unless significant changes in income or assets occur. Finally, it will implement data matching with Medicaid to help food banks identify and assist seniors in applying for SNAP.

I urge this committee and the Texas Legislature to address senior hunger by improving SNAP access for seniors and people with a disability by passing HB 1019. Thank you.

Rachel Cooper

Every Texan

Austin, TX

Every Texan supports HB 1019 by Meza as it removes barriers to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for vulnerable senior citizens and the disabled which will reduce Texas' high rate of hunger by providing stable access to healthy food.

For many seniors, Texas is a hard place to grow old. Long before the pandemic, Texas had the fifth highest rate of senior hunger in America and the hardships have only increased. SNAP acts as a buffer against hunger for low-income seniors and people with disabilities by supplementing food budgets and making it possible to buy the food they need. SNAP benefits can be used only on food items like fruits and vegetables, flour, meat, fish and dairy products at supermarkets, grocery stores, convenience stores and farmers' markets. By improving food security, SNAP leads to better nutrition, improved health and fewer hospitalizations. Enrolling in SNAP also financially benefits low-income seniors and the disabled by freeing up scarce cash resources for other basic needs, such as housing and medications.

Yet despite the need, many eligible Texans find it difficult to enroll in SNAP especially those with limited technology access or proficiency. Completing the SNAP application and recertification process can be overwhelming and without assistance many eligible seniors fail to make it through. Only 36 percent of eligible seniors in Texas participate in SNAP.

HB 1019 will improve food security for seniors and the disabled by implementing a simplified SNAP application process for households with no earned income and will extend coverage for 36 months. It will also require the state to identify seniors and the disabled who are enrolled in Medicaid to allow community partners to assist them in applying for SNAP. By making it easier for eligible seniors and the disabled to get SNAP and to stay on for 36 months, Texas will improve the health and well-being of some of its most vulnerable citizens.

Marlene Cohen

Self, community volunteer

Dallas, TX

My name is Marlene Cohen. I am a Texas Silver-Haired Legislator representing Dallas County.

As a Texas Silver-Haired Legislator, I advocate for improving the lives of older adults living in Texas. The Texas Silver-Haired Legislature (TSHL) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization whose members are volunteers age 60 and over and have been elected by their peers from 28 regions across Texas.

I urge you to support HB 1019.

As a volunteer with the Dallas Coalition for Hunger Solutions' Senior Hunger Action Team, I have seen first-hand how many older adults are food insecure but are hesitant to apply for SNAP. In conjunction with a sub-committee focusing on SNAP outreach, I helped develop a program to provide nutrition and SNAP information to older adults in Dallas County.

Older adults who are food insecure are more likely to suffer from chronic health conditions such as diabetes, depression, high blood pressure, and congestive heart failure. Also, Texas has low enrollment rates in SNAP among older adults due to difficulties

Printed on: April 20, 2021 6:53 AM

navigating the lengthy, online application process.

Several factors contribute to the low SNAP participation rate among older adults in Texas, including difficulties navigating the application process, limited mobility, access to technology, and lack of awareness or knowledge of the program. Once qualified, the income of older adults and people with disabilities is relatively stable from year to year. Lengthening the recertification period will help prevent people from losing SNAP benefits due to failure to reapply because the process is too complicated.

Increased SNAP access can decrease food insecurity's adverse effects, allowing older adults to age in place with dignity and good health. Increased food security among older adults will also lower State healthcare costs.

HB 1019 is critical to addressing hunger. No older adult or person with disabilities should go hungry. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Katherine Byers, Dr.

Houston Food Bank

Houston, TX

Houston Food Bank has been distributing approximately 800,000 pounds of food per day over the 18 counties we serve. From March to September of this year alone, over 3.8 million households received food through our partner network and our Partner Distribution Organizations. Despite these increased efforts, food insecurity persists.

Seniors are one population we serve that is particularly vulnerable. In 2018, Texas was one of ten states with the highest food insecurity among seniors. And that was in a relatively good economy, while food insecurity in Texas has doubled over the course of the pandemic.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) could help ensure consistent nutrition for low-income seniors as it provides a greater return on investment than any other hunger fighting initiative. For every one meal a food bank can provide, SNAP can provide nine and for every \$1.00 spent on SNAP, there is a \$1.70 generated in economic activity. However, due to an arduous application process and lack of knowledge about the program only half of eligible seniors are enrolled.

The Texas Legislature Can Address this by:

- Implementing a simplified application for seniors and persons with a disability
- Extending the eligibility period from 12 to 36 months for seniors and/or persons with a disability who have no earned income (meaning their income eligibility doesn't change).
- Utilizing data matching with Medicaid to identify seniors that are eligible but not enrolled so community partners can better identify and assist them in applying for SNAP.

Please vote in favor of HB 1019 by Representative Meza and take a critical step towards reducing food insecurity and hunger among Texas seniors.

Krystal DeVore

Safe-T

Pittsburg, TX

support