



## PROPOSALS WOULD WEAKEN SNAP'S PROVEN ABILITY TO HELP POOR, HUNGRY

The Center for Public Policy Priorities supports efforts to reduce obesity and encourage Texans to pursue a healthy diet. However, we are opposed to proposals currently being debated in the Texas Legislature [House Bill (HB) 1151 and HB 3451] and the United States Congress that would restrict the use of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) benefits. These proposals have the potential to erode the value of SNAP benefits—already too little—and would weaken the programs proven ability to help the poorest and hungriest among us. In this *Policy Point*, we outline our concerns and recommendations for an alternative approach.

### Concerns with Restricting the Use of SNAP Benefits

1. No study has demonstrated a direct association between SNAP participation and obesity. However, children receiving SNAP were more likely to be overweight or obese in cities with high food prices. This finding suggests that SNAP's impact on obesity depends on the purchasing power of the program's benefits, and that people who live in areas with higher food costs—communities with no supermarket—are less able to purchase a good diet. Research done by one food retailer in Texas shows that SNAP customers purchase mostly healthy food (the study looked at the top-25 items purchased). This suggests that SNAP benefits actually help families follow healthy diets and not vice versa. However, as the month progresses and benefits run out, the same customers begin to purchase more “empty calories.”
2. Restricting benefits to healthy foods will result in a de-facto cut in benefits, as healthier foods tend to cost more on a per-calorie basis. The reason for the purchase of unhealthy, nutrient-dense foods may be a survival strategy for families needing to stretch their benefits. The better approach to ensure SNAP recipients use their benefits to purchase a healthy diet would be to increase the adequacy of the benefit. An opportunity to do this exists in the 2012 farm bill.
3. Restricting food stamps benefits by even a small amount opens the door to others who wish to alter or weaken what is widely considered a model public program. This will leave SNAP in a weakened political position in advance of the 2012 farm bill debate.
4. Restricting the foods available to SNAP participants will reintroduce a program stigma that public officials have worked diligently to remove over the last decade.

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5. Any predicted public health benefits from this measure likely would be more than out-weighted by the increased bureaucracy, creation and enforcement of these new rules at the local level. It is likely that most retailers would oppose such restrictions, because it costs them (programming, labor, and training) to implement them.
  6. Restricting consumer choice in SNAP opens the door to a general erosion of the benefit itself. Moreover, defining which foods are healthy and allowable will be difficult, and the restrictions will be costly to administer.
  7. All available research shows that SNAP participants do not eat any differently from non-participants. We all have poor diets, across the board. Singling out poor people is discriminatory.

## Alternative Approach

1. The Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) should evaluate initiatives in other states to create incentives for SNAP participants to use their benefits to purchase more fruits and vegetables and other nutritious foods. For example, the state of California developed a “Healthy Purchase” initiative that aims to make fresh fruits and vegetables available to low-income people by addressing access and affordability of fresh produce in low-income areas. Specifically, the pilot program enables small grocers in low-income areas to sell fresh produce by providing them with the support to add refrigerated display cases for fruits and vegetables and giving them the appropriate produce storage, display, and marketing knowledge. Recipients who use their SNAP benefits to purchase fresh produce in participating stores then receive a rebate that is credited back to their electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card, allowing them to buy other SNAP qualifying foods.
2. Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) should explore possible solutions to increasing access to healthy, affordable food in low-income communities that have a high concentration of SNAP participants and limited access to grocery stores or supermarkets. For example, the Food Trust operates successful food financing initiatives in several states (see <http://www.thefoodtrust.org/php/programs/ffi.php>).
3. Congress should ensure that SNAP benefits are adequate for the purchase of a nutritious diet and protect funding for all of the federal nutrition programs.
4. Congress should support efforts by the Obama Administration to fight obesity, end childhood hunger by 2015, and improve access to healthy and affordable foods in underserved communities.

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The Center for Public Policy Priorities is a nonpartisan, nonprofit policy institute committed to improving public policies to better the economic and social conditions of low- and moderate-income Texans. Learn more at [www.cppp.org](http://www.cppp.org).

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