



Policy Recommendations for the Farm Bill: Helping Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Background: Each year, an estimated 4.2 million youth and young adults¹ experience homelessness in the United States, 700,000 of which are unaccompanied minors—meaning they are not part of a family or accompanied by a parent or guardian. These estimates indicate that approximately one in 10 adults ages 18 to 25, and one in 30 youth ages 13 to 17 will experience homelessness each year. In addition, according to U.S. Department of Education data, nearly 1.1 million students experienced homelessness in the 2020-2021 school year, or 2.2 percent of all U.S. students enrolled in public schools.²

Not surprisingly, **research has found that at least one-third of youth experiencing homelessness has experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days.**³ Ensuring access to food and stable housing is critical. It is essential that SNAP benefits and nutrition programs reach children and youth experiencing homelessness, who are highly mobile and face barriers to accessing existing programs. Hidden homelessness also causes many children and young people to go unidentified by social safety nets. Therefore, to reach these populations, it is essential that community-based organizations serving children and youth are supported by reimbursement of meals and streamlining access to key SNAP benefits authorized in the Farm Bill.

Covenant House International, National Network for Youth, and SchoolHouse Connection offer the following policy recommendations to Congress to consider during the reauthorization of the Farm Bill in the 118th Congress:

Policy Recommendations:

- 1. Ensuring success for youth experiencing homelessness in the SNAP Education and Training (E&T) program:** The Agricultural Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-79) authorized \$200 million for the development, implementation, and evaluation of up to 10 pilot projects to test innovative strategies to increase employment and reduce the need for SNAP among program participants. SNAP E&T has supported Covenant House's efforts to help youth train, obtain and retain employment opportunities. Using SNAP E&T funding, Covenant House New Orleans helped secure employment for 109 young people in its first year of funding. Under current law, jobseekers in SNAP E&T or Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act programs who receive SNAP benefits risk losing their nutrition security because of their status earning a wage in temporary job training or work-based learning. We urge Congress to adopt Senator Gillibrand's legislation, the Training and Nutrition

¹ Voice of Youth Count (2023). *Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America*, <https://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/national-estimates-of-youth-homelessness/>

² SchoolHouse Connection (2023). *The Education of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Current Trends, Challenges, and Needs* <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/fy24-ehcy-fact-sheet/>

³ Whitbeck, L. B., Chen, X., & Johnson, K. D. (2006). Food insecurity among homeless and runaway adolescents. *Public health nutrition*, 9(1), 47–52. <https://doi.org/10.1079/phn2005764>

Stability Act in the Farm Bill reauthorization, which would allow youth who experience homelessness and enrolled in the SNAP E&T program to maintain SNAP benefits while receiving additional income through these federal job training programs. At Covenant House California, almost half of the youth enrolled in SNAP E&T lost eligibility once they were employed; unfortunately, none of them were making enough to move out of our housing programs when SNAP eligibility was lost.

2. **Implementing a trauma-informed approach to accessing SNAP benefits:** At Covenant House sites through the United States, many youths experiencing homelessness are still included on their parent's households SNAP benefits, and do not wish to be taken off due to concern that this will cause harm to younger siblings or other household members. National Network for Youth's 300+ organization network often cites youth clients who fear pursuing SNAP benefits when their parent, foster parent, or legal guardian already receive their SNAP benefits. Additionally, youth experiencing homelessness are commonly estranged from the households where they remain on benefits. Therefore, a trauma-informed approach is needed by SNAP agency personnel to address these barriers youth experience who should otherwise be able to access SNAP benefits. In the Violence Against Women Act of 2022, Section 703 amended Section 402(a) of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 602(a)) and adds new certification requirements related to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which requires states to ensure they have established appropriate standards to ensure that potential applicants for assistance who are survivors of domestic violence or sexual assault are aware that TANF assistance may be available to them. This section ensures that caseworkers and other TANF agency personnel are adequately trained on how to best work with survivors. The same provision should be drafted to require states to certify that they are working with community-based organizations (CBOs) who serve youth experiencing homelessness and that SNAP agency personnel are adequately trained in a trauma-informed manner when processing a youth's eligibility. States should be given the flexibility to pilot the training of staff at CBOs to process SNAP eligibility on site. Lastly, Congress must act urgently to dismantle any barriers that persist between youth eligible but not enrolled in SNAP. As an example, Congress could authorize states the ability to implement presumptive eligibility for SNAP (based on the Medicaid model) for youth experiencing homelessness and who have recently aged-out of the foster care system.

3. **Helping youth experiencing homelessness and youth from foster care persist and complete higher education by accessing the SNAP program:** According to a 2020 national survey, 46 percent of college students experienced housing insecurity and 17 percent experienced homelessness in the previous year. That same study found that 38 percent of students in two-year colleges and 29 percent of students at four-year colleges reported experiencing food insecurity in the previous year.⁴ Other research has found that students experiencing homelessness and students from foster care have lower rates of

⁴ The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (2021), The Hope Center Student Basic Needs Survey, <https://hope.temple.edu/research/hope-center-basic-needs-survey>

persistence⁵ and completion than their peers. These students lack family support, and have histories of trauma, abuse, and neglect. While some form of education beyond high school remains their surest path toward a more secure future, homeless and foster youth are forced to choose between food, housing, and college costs. Congress recently acknowledged the unique challenges of youth experiencing homelessness and youth who age out of foster care by exempting them from SNAP work requirements in the Fiscal Responsibility Act. We urge Congress to adopt language in the Farm Bill reauthorization to allow homeless and foster youth, and other eligible at-risk populations, to access SNAP benefits while pursuing higher education, so that they stay enrolled and complete their degrees.

- 4. Ensuring that youth experiencing homelessness have access to nutritious meals while staying in shelter:** The definition of institutional eligibility under the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) program should be expanded to allow emergency shelters to receive reimbursement for meals served to individuals under the age 25 (a change from current law, which is limited to shelters serving children age 18 and under). Changes in statute are needed to reimburse community-based organizations for serving meals to youth and young adults, ages 18-25. These young people are extremely vulnerable, having survived abuse, neglect, abandonment, and often trafficking. The need is great. Last year, Covenant House provided 1.1 million meals across 25 U.S. cities, reaching nearly 12,000 young people getting housing and other supportive services. Shelters who serve these youth are struggling to keep up with increasingly higher food costs due to inflation. According to the USDA, in 2023, all food prices are predicted to increase 6.5 percent, with a prediction interval of 4.9 to 8.2 percent.⁶ This policy change to expand the definition of institutional eligibility should be made permanent to reflect the ongoing crisis of homelessness among youth and young adults. Beginning on May 11, 2023, program operators in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) are no longer able to provide homeless young adults ages 19-24 at emergency shelters (under a provision authorized in the American Rescue Plan Act). We urge Congress to adopt language in the Farm Bill reauthorization of 2024 to codify the CACFP provision which allows community-based organizations who serve individuals up to the age of 25 to receive reimbursement for meals. Additionally, National Network for Youth's 300+ organization network cites regulatory barriers in applying for reimbursement through CACFP and the effects of prohibiting meal recipients from having more than one serving. Congress should consider language to address these barriers experienced by CBOs in accessing CACFP who work with youth experiencing homelessness.

⁵ Government Accountability Office (2016). Higher Education: Actions Needed to Improve Access to Federal Financial Assistance for Homeless and Foster Youth

Accountability Office., <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-16-343>

⁶ USDA Economic Research Service (2023), *Summary Findings*

Food Price Outlook 2023, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings/>