



March 15, 2021

Alaska House Finance Committee
Co-Chairs Representative Neal Foster and Representative Jennifer Johnston
120 4th Street
Juneau, Alaska 99801

To Whom it may Concern,

I am writing on behalf of Catholic Social Services Alaska and all the families and neighbors we serve. Catholic Social Services compassionately serves those in need, strengthens individuals and families, and advocates for social justice from our main office in Anchorage.

One way we carry out our mission is through St. Francis House Food Pantry. Our pantry is the largest food pantry in the state, distributing 55,000 lbs. of food during the month of January. We are continuously seeing the ongoing economic effects of Covid firsthand through the pantry operations. Prior to the pandemic, each day the food pantry served an average of 70 households. Now, the food pantry regularly serves over 100 households every day.

When this increase in need first begun, The Public Health Emergency declaration helped alleviate the strain on the entire food support network. Now that the Public Health Emergency (PHE) declaration has not been extended, it may result in the loss of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) emergency allotments (EAs), which are 100% federally funded benefit boosts for individuals in need.

Without this PHE, it is unclear if there is an alternate path forward to continue issuing the EAs. If we cannot find a workaround to this problem, we concerned that the need will simply be too great for our pantries to meet. This means our neighbors could go without the most basic of needs, food.

As you consider the path forward for our state during this critical moment, I ask that you remember the 3,000 people who receive food from our pantry each month. These families, children, and seniors need nourishment at a time where it's critical we take care of our health. Without good nutrition, how does one find housing, search for a job, or care for their family? Food is a basic need that must be met before all else, and we are seeing firsthand just how much it is needed right now. I hope that this group of dedicated and driven legislators can find a solution for the EAs, making sure no Alaskan goes hungry.

Thank you for your time and service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lisa DH Aquino".

Lisa DH Aquino
CEO, Catholic Social Services

Testimony to House HSS Committee 3.4.21
Cara Durr – Food Bank of Alaska

For the record, my name is Cara Durr, and I am the Director of Public Engagement for Food Bank of Alaska. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB76. For my part, I'm going to focus on a big area of concern for the food bank and our partners related to the public health emergency declaration, which is the potential loss of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, Emergency Allotments. Failure to extend a Public Health Emergency declaration or something comparable will result in the loss of these Emergency Allotments, which provide critical, 100% federally funded benefit boosts to individuals in need.

Hunger, during the pandemic has increased dramatically. Map the Meal Gap, which is a research project of Feeding America, estimates that food insecurity in Alaska has increased 32% in 2020. Looking at children specifically, hunger has increased 44%. Areas of the state that had high rates of food insecurity previously, such as rural areas like Bethel and the Northwest Arctic, continue to see increased need. The Kulsilvak Census Area has emerged as the most food insecure region of the country for kids during the pandemic. And on the other side of the coin, we have seen areas that tend to have lower rates of food insecurity, including much of Southeast Alaska, experience huge increases. Skagway, for example, has seen an estimated 72% increase in child food insecurity during the pandemic.

To meet these needs, Food Bank of Alaska and our many partners statewide have worked incredibly hard to source and distribute more food than ever before. Food Bank distributed 43% more pounds of food in the last six months of 2020, compared with the same time frame in 2019. And things don't seem to be slowing down. Just last month we saw our biggest weekly distribution ever at our Anchorage Tikahtnu drive through site. Our SNAP Outreach Team, which provides application assistance and case status checks, saw our second, third, and fourth busiest months ever in December, January, and February. We've also had reports from partners like Catholic Social Services and the Southeast Alaska Food Bank, that they too have seen some of their highest numbers in the recent months. With the current high level of need that we are seeing, we are deeply concerned about what the loss of the SNAP Emergency Allotments could mean for food insecurity in Alaska.

SNAP benefit levels in Alaska are calculated based on household size, income, expenses/ deductions, and geographic region. SNAP emergency allotments supplement existing SNAP benefits by providing all individuals and families with the maximum benefit level for their household size. For example, a single person in Anchorage could have their benefits bumped up from \$20/month to \$251/month through emergency allotments. We see a lot of seniors in this category, and know that this vulnerable group has greatly benefited from these boosts. We hear daily from recipients how important these benefit boosts have been.

These emergency allotments are 100% federal benefit boosts worth about \$8 million each month to the State of Alaska. This is the equivalent of over 2.2 million meals each month. To

put this into perspective, Food Bank of Alaska, with our very heightened current numbers, distributes about 750,000 meals a month. Clearly, if we lose these emergency allotments, we can't even start to fill this gap.

And while I can't overemphasize the importance of these benefits to individuals receiving them, they also have broader positive economic impact. Moody's analytics estimates that in a weak economy, every \$1 in SNAP benefits yields \$1.70 in local economic activity. So, \$8 million a month translates to \$13.6 million in economic activity. That's money that is spent at local grocery stores and money that flows back into struggling communities, as well as helping families meet their nutrition needs.

As you are likely aware, USDA Food and Nutrition Services, or FNS, granted Alaska a small extension until April 1st to continue issuing emergency allotments after the disaster declaration expired. But in order to continue issuing these benefit boosts, we need to have a disaster declaration of some kind this month. These benefits are essential to our state's hunger response, and HB76 provides a clear path forward to continuing them.

From: Cara Durr <cdurr@foodbankofalaska.org>
Sent: Monday, March 15, 2021 5:16 PM
To: House Finance
Subject: Follow up - SNAP Emergency Allotments
Attachments: Testimony on HB76 Public Health Emergency Declaration 3.4.21.docx

Dear Members of the House Finance Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB76 today. I wanted to share some expanded testimony that I presented to the House HSS Committee as follow up (attached) and include some additional information on the SNAP Emergency Allotments. As I mentioned, a big area of concern for the food bank and our partners related to the public health emergency declaration is the potential loss of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Emergency Allotments. Emergency Allotments (EAs) are authorized under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020, and [per USDA guidance](#) are available to states "based on a public health emergency declaration by the Secretary of Health and Human Services under section 319 of the Public Health Service Act related to an outbreak of COVID-19 when a State has also issued an emergency or disaster declaration." If states meet these requirements, they still need to request these EAs on a monthly basis. Failure to extend a state Public Health Emergency declaration or something comparable will result in the loss of these Emergency Allotments, which provide critical, 100% federally funded benefit boosts to individuals in need.

These emergency allotments are worth about \$8 million each month to the State of Alaska. This is the equivalent of over 2.2 million meals each month. To put this into perspective, Food Bank of Alaska, with our very heightened current numbers, distributes about 750,000 meals a month. Clearly, if we lose these emergency allotments, we can't even start to fill this gap, and that is a concern for our network as we struggle to keep up with need. Food assistance is often the first place people turn when they need a little help, and it will likely be the last resource they give up as they get back on their feet. We expect to see elevated levels of need far into the future as we work towards economic recovery, and we will need to tap into all available food resources to meet that need.

And while I can't overemphasize the importance of these benefits to individuals receiving them, they also have broader positive economic impact. Moody's analytics estimates that in a weak economy, every \$1 in SNAP benefits yields \$1.70 in local economic activity. So, \$8 million a month translates to \$13.6 million in economic activity. That's money that is spent at local grocery stores and money that flows back into struggling communities, as well as helping families meet their nutrition needs.

USDA Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) granted Alaska a small extension until April 1st to continue issuing emergency allotments after our disaster declaration expired. But in order to continue issuing these benefit boosts, we need to have a disaster declaration of some kind this month. We know DHSS Commissioner Crum and his team have been working diligently to see what further flexibilities FNS might grant on this issue, and it appears that FNS has identified an alternative way forward to continue with the emergency allotments. As I understand, USDA has approved language for Alaska that could be inserted into the intent language of a bill that will satisfy their requirements for future approvals of the EA SNAP benefits. The approved language:

“These authorities are in response to the ongoing pandemic and statewide public health emergency posed by COVID-19, and tied to the Federal Public Health Emergency and Major Disaster Declarations.”

While this appears to be a viable alternative, the path forward is not entirely clear, and the concern is now that we are so close to the April 1st deadline it seems unlikely that the legislature would have sufficient time to introduce and pass new legislation. If we don't pass something ahead of that deadline, families lose out on those benefits, and the state does as well. These benefits are essential to our state's hunger response, and HB76 provides a clear path forward to continuing them.

Please feel free to reach out with any questions. Thank you so much for your time and consideration!

Cara Durr

Director of Public Engagement

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