

Testimony to Senate Finance Committee 3.30.21
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 SNAP Emergency Allotments. Failure to extend a disaster 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.

During the pandemic, hunger 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 and Sitka, for example, have seen an estimated 72% and 55% increase respectively in child food insecurity during the pandemic.

To meet these needs, Food Bank of Alaska and our over 150 agency 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, as we've had record numbers within multiple programs just in the last few 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, and for the additional burden their loss would place on the already stretched thin charitable food network.

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 and disabled individuals receive just the minimum benefit, and know that this vulnerable group has greatly benefited from these boosts. We hear daily from recipients how important these benefit boosts have been.

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.

These emergency allotments are 100% federal benefit boosts worth about \$8 million each month to the State of Alaska, which is the equivalent of over 2.2 million meals. 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 while the need is still so high, we can't even start to fill this gap.

These benefits are an essential tool in our state's hunger response toolkit, and the nonprofit anti-hunger network is depending on the legislature to allow these benefits continue as long as the option is available to us. It's important to note while an alternative option does exist to preserve the Emergency Allotments, it would also require legislation to give the specific authority to the state using language approved by USDA Food and Nutrition Services. Given that we are rapidly approaching the April 1st extension deadline that USDA has granted, my concern around delaying this process further is the impact on families who are depending on and expecting these benefits. Not only is there a clear financial impact that struggling families will experience if they don't receive these benefits as expected, but we also need to consider the stress and confusion that comes with a sharp decrease in benefits without notice or time to plan. I would strongly encourage the committee to move forward with this bill, which provides the clearest path to continuing these critical benefits without interruption or delays for families who are depending on them. Thank you.