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## Carly Finkle: Proposed budget cuts threaten nutrition assistance

*By Carly Finkle*

Federal nutrition assistance programs are under attack, once more.

This month the House Budget Committee passed a FY2017 Budget Resolution that would cut \$3.5 trillion from programs for low-income households over the next ten years, including \$150 billion in cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). If enacted, these changes would exacerbate hunger and deepen poverty for millions of Americans.

SNAP, known as CalFresh in California, is a federally-funded nutrition assistance program that provides grocery credits to low-income households. In 2014 the SNAP program raised 4.7 million Americans out of poverty, including 2.1 million children. The proposed 29 percent cuts would force SNAP administrators to choose to reduce benefits or kick currently-eligible households off the program.

Even at present nearly 80 percent of SNAP grocery credits are redeemed within the first two weeks, indicating that benefit amounts are not enough to last recipients the entire month. April, a SNAP recipient from Vallejo, said that with four teenage children, her grocery credits only last a week and a half. She uses SNAP “to buy them meat and milk and all the expensive things ... then we come [a Food Bank distribution] for whatever else we need.” Any further cuts to the program would place an enormous burden on both SNAP recipients and the emergency food networks that would have to fill that gap.

The resolution bundles deep cuts with a mandate to convert SNAP to a block grant, which is an annual lump sum given to states to administer a program. Federal SNAP funding is currently an uncapped stream that fluctuates based on enrollment. A block grant would significantly reduce the program’s ability to respond immediately to unforeseen changes in need.

For example, between 2007 and 2013 when nearly 20 million additional people became eligible for nutrition assistance during the recession, SNAP caseloads increased by close to 40 percent to meet demand. During this same period, the block granted program Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) barely budgeted despite a similar increase in need and eligibility. TANF caseloads peaked in 2010 with a 16 percent increase and had already fallen below pre-recession levels by 2013. SNAP’s ability to

immediately respond to increased need during economic downturns is one of its strongest features.

This flexibility should be strengthened and protected, not eroded by a block grant. Although supporters of block grants argue that it gives more control to states, SNAP is county administered in California and there is already substantial local control over eligibility, implementation, and oversight. During times of recession, block grants would force states to choose between cutting benefits to households, creating waiting lists for families in need, or even shifting funds away from food assistance to fill other budget shortfalls.

Without a block grant, states have a significant incentive to increase enrollment among eligible individuals in times of economic downturn. More qualified participants mean more federal dollars streaming into local economies. According to a 2015 report by California Food Policy Advocates, if every qualified household in Contra Costa and Solano enrolled in SNAP it would annually generate more than \$147 million and \$43 million in economic activity for each county, respectively. Under a block grant, however, this incentive rapidly disappears. Dollars that aren't spent on SNAP benefits can be redirected to other areas in the budget.

The calls in this report to defund and restructure SNAP hinge on concerns of “relentless and unsustainable growth.” Although caseloads have yet to come down to pre-2007 levels, they have been steadily declining since 2013. When the recession hit, the program responded exactly as it was intended to: its caseload ballooned to meet increased need. The fact that millions of people continue to qualify for nutrition assistance is reflective of a slow and deeply uneven recovery, not a fatal flaw in the program.

As a nation, we should focus on job creation and job training, not kicking the ladder out from under those that remain unemployed or underemployed. The Food Bank is strongly opposed to the House Budget Committee's resolution to cut and block grant SNAP, and we encourage you to reach out to your Representatives in the House to ask them to oppose these disastrous changes.

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