

The Farm Fresh Food for Families Act of 2023: increasing access to healthy foods for low-income families



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Abstract

Low-income families who are reliant on SNAP or WIC may struggle with higher rates of obesity due to scarcity of healthy food options. Improving access to healthy foods for these higher-risk populations is key to reducing the prevalence of obesity and its negative health effects. Forging a partnership between SNAP/WIC programs and local farmers' markets is one way of creating more accessible venues for low-income families to shop for healthy food. A new policy proposal called the Farm Fresh Food for Families Act of 2023 aims to establish a framework in Georgia that can be developed and distributed nationwide.

Introduction

A strong association between unhealthy dietary patterns and adverse health outcomes is gaining prevalence and attention in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, and certain cancers are currently among the leading causes of preventable death in the United States, and diet is a key modifiable risk factor for these health outcomes [1]. Establishing healthy eating patterns in childhood is fundamental to curbing risk of morbidity and mortality from these preventable causes of death later in life. Key examples include reducing consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, limiting intake of red meat, and eliminating ultra-processed foods [2-4]. Preventing adverse health outcomes and promoting balanced nutrition starts with the foods American families purchase and consume. All American families deserve access to healthy foods, and new policies like the Farm Fresh Food for Families Act of 2023 can offer opportunities to improve healthy food access.

Rationale

The United States is experiencing its highest-ever prevalence of obesity [5]. While obesity itself is a complex diagnosis and does not exclusively portend poor health outcomes, dietary habits that manifest excess weight can be strong modifiable risk factors for cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer. Between 2017 and 2020, the prevalence of obesity in children and adolescents in the United States was 19.7%, or approximately 14.7 million individuals [6]. It is of particular concern when obesity is diagnosed in childhood because children who

carry excess weight, especially adolescents, are more likely to develop adverse health conditions in adulthood [7]. For this reason, it is essential to support policies that address nutrition and weight-related concerns for children and families. Improving childhood nutrition is a significant public health issue because it affects the long-term health and wellness of populations [8-9].

The prevalence of obesity in children in the United States is highest amongst Hispanic children (26.2%) and non-Hispanic Black children (24.8%) [6]. Not coincidentally, minority children more commonly come from families struggling with lower incomes compared to their white counterparts [10]. Low-income Americans are more likely to struggle with food insecurity and have limited access to healthy foods [11]. Inaccessibility may be due to cost constraints, poor availability of grocery stores within living communities, and/or lack of transportation. Federal assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) were established to provide low-income families with better food security. Unfortunately, these programs have been historically criticized for their limited access to fruits and vegetables [12]. For many low-income families, SNAP and WIC vouchers dictate where they can shop and what foods they can afford to eat.

SNAP and WIC are cornerstone programs for millions of Americans struggling with food insecurity. Studies show that children receiving SNAP benefits are less likely to be in poor health or underweight, and their families are less likely to make tradeoffs between paying for health care and basic necessities like food [13]. On the other hand, research found that children receiving SNAP benefits

consumed fewer whole fruits and vegetables, more added sugar components, and had higher prevalence of obesity and elevated blood pressure compared to age-matched peers [13-14]. With this in mind, SNAP and WIC have taken steps in recent years to incorporate more nutritionally-balanced foods into their programs. Forging a partnership between SNAP and WIC programs and local farmers' markets is one way of creating more accessible venues for low-income families to shop for whole fruits and vegetables.

Policy Opportunity

In 1992, the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) was founded for the mutual benefits of providing fresh, local produce to SNAP and WIC program participants and increasing business for local farmers [15]. The original program was sponsored by Democratic Senator Dale Kildee of Michigan and permanently established grants for state programs to provide farmers market fruits and vegetables to nutritionally at-risk populations by providing redeemable vouchers [16]. Previously, the idea had been implemented as a three-year pilot program in ten states [16]. This year, Democratic Senator Jon Ossoff of Georgia and Republican Senator Joni Ernst of Iowa have introduced a new bipartisan bill: the Farm Fresh Food for Families Act of 2023. The updated Farm Fresh Food for Families Act of 2023 builds on the original WIC FMNP to reach more families with fresh, local produce in more modern venues [17]. This amended bill improves upon the original 1992 WIC FMNP by updating the language, strengthening the original content, and increasing funding.

The Farm Fresh Food for Families Act of 2023 proposes doubling the minimum assistance families can receive through the FMNP program and would also remove the maximum cap on assistance [18]. In 2021, the national average voucher amount was \$26 and the maximum cap was \$30 [19]. Participants receive this amount as a one-time yearly allocation to last them through the market season. The updated bill would also expand eligibility for farmers to allow more produce vendors to participate [18]. Expanding vendor participation allows greater accessibility of venues near participants. Modern venues include roadside stands, bodegas, or county health offices.

The Farm Fresh Food for Families Act of 2023 is being introduced in the state of Georgia with the intention of nationwide expansion. The state of Georgia currently has fewer farmers markets and stands than other states, and

Senator Ossoff is introducing the amended bill to help markets become more accessible in his state [19]. Compared to the rest of the United States, the geographical South where Georgia is located has the highest prevalence of obesity and the highest mortality rate from heart disease in the country [20-21]. Initiating the Farm Fresh Food for Families Act of 2023 in Georgia will increase access to produce for some American families facing the highest health risks.

So far, several national stakeholder groups have voiced their support for the amended bill, including the National WIC Association, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, and the Farmers Market Coalition [22]. It is also significant that the bill is being introduced with bipartisan support from members of the Senate Agriculture Committee. Other potential stakeholders for this bill include farmers, health departments, pediatricians, dietitians, and parents. Stakeholder engagement should begin by mapping each state and selecting influential partners, such as local chapters of the American Heart Association and Feeding America (both have been significant supporters of SNAP). Local partners can further engage beneficiary parties such as parents, pediatricians, and farmers.

Those in favor of the bill will recognize that it serves mutual benefits to community members. An average of 1.7 million recipients receive benefits from the FMNP each year, and expansion of the program will help more families access fresh produce [15]. The FMNP operates in some of the hardest-to-reach communities, including within Indian tribal territories. Providing healthier food choices to vulnerable communities helps prevent costly adverse health outcomes. Moreover, these programs generate local wealth. SNAP beneficiaries spend more dollars on food in local stores than eligible non-participants [23]. Additionally, each \$1 billion of retail generated by SNAP benefits creates more than 10,000 full-time jobs [23].

Those in opposition of the Farm Fresh Food for Families Act of 2023 include politicians who contest additional funding for the program. Congress appropriates funding to states annually through grants. Federal funds support 100 percent of the food costs but only 70 percent of administrative costs [15]. This means participating state agencies must provide matching funds for the program equal to 30 percent of the administrative cost [15]. Smaller states with less funding have historically struggled to implement programs and may oppose expanding the FMNP due to anticipated low impact. For example, Mississippi has

limited state funding, which only supports recipient voucher usage at five market locations in the state [24].

Strengths and Limitations

Those who oppose the Farm Fresh Food for Families Act of 2023 may point to inconclusive research on the benefits provided by the original WIC FMNP. It is difficult to aggregate research on nutrition-related effects due to methodological limitations: thus, studies to date have not demonstrated tangible health benefits. Opponents could also argue that voucher redemption rates have historically been low—only 59% on average between 1994 and 2006, though participation varies greatly by state [25]. Some barriers to participation include inconvenient market hours, location of markets, lack of transportation, and perceived lack of time.

On the other hand, studies have found that participants in the FMNP report a greater perceived diet quality and have higher produce intake [26-27]. Research indicates that participants display advanced stages of dietary change that are more likely to be sustained over time [27]. Studies have also demonstrated that these programs have greater participation and present fewer barriers when they are implemented along with tailored strategies, such as distributing informational handouts on how to store and prepare produce, providing educational events, and sending text reminders to use vouchers for upcoming events [28-29]. Some communities have elected FMNP directors to identify community-specific barriers and coordinate strategies to overcome them. Increased funding and simple community planning can address barriers that have historically limited program engagement in some areas.

Concluding Statements

The Farm Fresh Foods for Families Act of 2023 should move forward as it builds on an existing program that has demonstrated successful dietary change impacts for SNAP and WIC beneficiaries. This policy is especially important for bridging the widening health disparities gap between poor and wealthy Americans, starting in its homegrown state of Georgia and then expanding nationally. The policy is supported by objective data showing that nutrition is intimately related to health outcomes, and it is also supported by subjective data that SNAP and WIC partici-

pants find these incentive programs acceptable and successful at increasing fruit and vegetable consumption [30].

The Farm Fresh Foods for Families Act of 2023 is not without limitations, including variation by state and historically low voucher redemption in some areas. These limitations may be addressed by using additional funding to hire program directors or coordinators, which has proven successful. All American families deserve access to healthy foods, and the Farm Fresh Food for Families Act of 2023 will help increase that access.

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