On behalf of the 115,700 members and affiliates of the American Psychological Association (APA), I am writing regarding the Agriculture Improvement Act (S. 3042) and the Agriculture and Nutrition Act (H.R. 2) of 2018, henceforth referred to as the Farm Bill, and specifically to comment on the nutrition provisions of the bill, which reauthorize the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). We support the relevant Senate provisions that expand and strengthen SNAP, and we oppose provisions in the House bill that weaken the program.

APA is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States. Our membership includes researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants, and students. APA works to advance the creation, communication, and application of psychological knowledge to benefit society and improve people's lives.

Research shows that poverty is associated with harm to physical and mental health. For example, data from the National Institute of Mental Health indicate that low-income individuals are 2 to 5 times more likely to experience a diagnosable mental disorder than those of the highest SES group, and poverty poses a significant obstacle to accessing treatment for these mental health problems. Accordingly, our APA governing council has adopted a Resolution on Poverty and Socioeconomic Status, which states that APA “will support public policy and programs that ensure...access to sufficient food and nutrition...for poor people and all working families.”

SNAP is the largest program in the domestic hunger safety net, currently helping about 39 million Americans a month. Although the average benefit is just $1.40 per person per meal, the program lifts millions of people out of poverty, with both short-term and long-term health benefits. In this regard, there is compelling research documenting the relationship between access to SNAP and improved health, decreased psychological distress, and reduced health care expenditures. Moreover, early access to SNAP is associated with long-term improvements in health.

The bipartisan Senate Farm Bill – easily passed by a vote of 86-11 - protects and strengthens SNAP. The bill includes initiatives to strengthen the relationship between employers and SNAP
Employment & Training (E&T) programs. Specifically, we support an increase in pilot funding to test promising approaches to connecting SNAP E&T participants to the workforce. This would ensure that the investments are evidence-based before they are implemented on a larger scale. In addition, this portion of the bill encourages communication and partnership between SNAP E&T programs and local employers in order to align services and supports with employers’ current and projected needs. Research has demonstrated that this approach increases employment and earnings.¹ (While the House bill also proposes a dramatic expansion of work training programs, it does not do so with a firm evidence base and does not provide sufficient funding to make this a realistic option.)

In addition, APA supports provisions in the Senate bill that propose targeted improvements for especially vulnerable SNAP recipients. Specifically, we support extending the certification period for elderly and disabled households; increasing federal funding and support for Food Distribution Programs on Indian Reservations; and investing in nutrition initiatives that increase access to emergency food sources and address food insecurity. Given the well-known detrimental effects of food insecurity on child development,¹²,¹³ we believe that supporting these initiatives is imperative.

In contrast to the strong SNAP-related provisions noted above, several provisions in the House bill amount to harmful cuts to the program. They would lead many SNAP recipients to lose their benefits, pushing them further into poverty. For example, the bill would impose new mandatory work requirements, requiring all those between the ages of 18 and 59 who do not have a disability or a child under the age of six to prove that they are working (or participating in a work program) for at least 20 hours a week. The initial penalty for failing to comply would result in a loss of benefits for 12 months; subsequent failures would lead to benefits being lost for 36 months.

APA opposes these cuts to SNAP based on research showing that increasing work requirements and penalties will likely be unsuccessful in leading people out of poverty.¹⁴ Psychological science on the cognitive effects of scarcity is instructive about why harsh requirements do not work. All individuals have limited mental capacity. When one does not have enough money, food, time, or any other important human need, this scarcity limits one’s ability to pay attention to anything but the most pressing tasks.¹⁵ Financial scarcity is especially damaging, so unemployed and low-income people are likely to suffer from these effects, which can limit cognitive functioning and decision-making¹⁶ and impair job-seeking ability. Contrary to assumptions underlying these proposed changes to SNAP, unemployed beneficiaries seeking jobs need support overcoming barriers to employment — for instance, increased assistance with child care, transportation, or job-training — rather than harsh incentives.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of our concerns. If we can provide any further information as you deliberate the Farm bill, please contact Gabriel Twose, PhD, (gtwose@apa.org) in our Public Interest Government Relations Office.
Sincerely,

Arthur C. Evans, Jr., Ph.D.
Chief Executive Officer

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