Houston Food Bank
Legislative Agenda 2021
87th Session

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Houston Food Bank distributes food to families and individuals, in 18 counties, across our Southeast Texas service area in. Over the course of the pandemic, we have seen a 112% increase in the number of households served on average each week. **Distribution has surged as high as 200% of typical service, with March - October 2020 showing a 49% increase in the average number of households served** compared to the same timeframe in 2019. In Harris County, the third largest county in the country, food insecurity is projected at 25%.

Unfortunately, with a reduction in additional allocations of the USDA’s Food Purchase and Distribution Programs,(Farmers to Families and The Emergency Food Aid Program), **the supply of USDA foods will drop by an estimated 50% in 2021**. In addition, the Texas Department of Agriculture cut the Surplus Agricultural Products Grant by 44% resulting in a **cut of 4 million pounds of produce to our 18-county region alone**. These decreases will leave food banks with a major shortage at a time when food need has increased by about 60% on average.

From March to September of this year, over 3.8 million households received food through our partner network and our Partner Distribution Organizations. Despite these increased efforts, the need for nutritious food still exceeds the capacity of any one food bank across the country to keep children and students fed, especially those missing out on daily meals due to the pandemic.

Putting food on the table is not the only challenges our communities face. A recent study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation indicates that **one-third or more** Houston households report serious problems paying utilities, paying their mortgage or rent, and affording food. Children are especially vulnerable-- in 2018 21% of children living in Harris County were considered food insecure (approximately 260,000 children).

While we need to ensure food banks have the funding necessary to fight hunger, we also need to ensure policy change supports the economic self-sufficiency of our families and promotes the growth of the economy.
POLICY PRIORITIES

Houston Food Bank is currently working in partnership with Feeding Texas and other advocates on the following recommendations:

1. **Budget:**
   - ✓ Return Surplus Agricultural Grant funding cut from the 2020-2021 budget and protect funding for the next biennium
   - ✓ Incentivize Managed Care Organizations to focus on Social Determinants of Health, like food insecurity, by increasing opportunities for reimbursement.

2. **Improve SNAP access for vulnerable populations such as those aged 60 and older** *(HB 701 [Walle] and SB 224 [Perry and West]) as well as college students (to be filed).*

3. **Remove vehicles from the SNAP Asset Test** *(HB 1230 [Ortega]).*

4. **Support policies and budget items that contribute the long-term health and stability of working families such as an increase in the minimum wage and the expansion of Medicaid.*
The Surplus Agricultural Grant

The Houston Food Bank is working on this budget issue with Feeding Texas and their other members.

The Surplus Agricultural Grant, since 2001, has assisted food banks in acquiring fresh produce that is unsellable due to imperfections or market conditions. The funds go directly to farmers, offsetting their costs of harvesting, storage, and packaging.

❖ In the early months of the spread of the coronavirus, Houston Food Bank saw a 112% increase in average households served.¹

❖ Even as the economy struggles back, food insecurity lags as families continue to make tough choice to forgo nutritious food to pay rent, utilities, and medical costs.²

❖ Hungry Texans will not have access to produce.

❖ Texas farmers will incur costs for harvesting and disposing of the produce they can’t sell because it is 2nd grade (nutritious but misshaped so grocery stores won’t buy). The specialty crop sector in Texas — consisting primarily of fruits and vegetables — has already been one of the hardest hit sectors of the economy as well with projected losses in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

❖ Nutritious food will be wasted.

The Texas Surplus Agricultural Products Grant must be included in the Supplemental Appropriations Budget and protected in full in the 2022-2023 state budget.

¹ The increase from March to June 2019 compared to the same period in 2020 was a 112% increase.
Incentivizing Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)
The Houston Food Bank is working in partnership with the Texas Association of Health Plans on this budget rider

Accessibility to nutritious food is one of the social factors that directly impacts health outcomes. As this fact, as well as the impact of other SDOH such as unstable housing, has become widely recognizable, more and more managed care organizations have examined how they can invest in these social supports. While managed care organizations (MCO) have the flexibility to include value added services that enhance the health care of their members, they are not compensated for providing additional services.3 An important step in this direction is for the Texas Legislature to direct the Health and Human Services Commission to use rate setting tools to incentivize providers and MCOs to invest in SDOH.

SNAP - What works and what needs to work better
The Houston Food Bank is working on this budget issue with Feeding Texas and their other members.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides a greater return on investment to families, local businesses, and government than any other hunger fighting initiative.4 In the Houston area, SNAP created access to over 15 million meals and allowed families to reinvest that money into paying for expenses such as rent or medical care. Despite the benefits of SNAP, the program is not reaching all of the vulnerable populations it is intended to help. In particular, those who aren’t able to fully benefit include hard working college students, seniors, and individuals with a disability. College students struggle to make a living wage and complete higher education requirements with SNAP qualifications requiring them to work at least 20 hours a week.5 They also report high levels of food insecurity, but over half who would be eligible for SNAP don’t receive it.6 Among seniors, Texas has the 5th highest rate of food insecurity.7

What the Texas Legislature can do for College Students:

- Those participating in internships or other unpaid out of classroom training and those in vocational programs not requiring a high school diploma should meet the work requirement. Expanded definitions of “Employment and Training programs” that designate

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5 Berry, T., Sloper, M., and Doll, K. Feeding America. 2019. “Addressing Food Insecurity Among College Students.”
6 Association of American Colleges and Universities. June/July 2019. “Majority of College Students Experience Food Insecurity, Housing Insecurity, or Homelessness.”
community college programs as those that increase employability would also help address this.

What the Texas Legislature can do for Seniors and Individuals with a Disability:

*HB 701 (Walle) and SB 224 (Perry and West)*

- Simplifies application (currently 20 pages) and verification process and extends recertification from 12 to 36 months for those seniors/persons with a disability with no earned income.
- Uses data matching to identify seniors who are on Medicaid and eligible but not enrolled for SNAP.

**Remove Vehicles from the SNAP Asset Test**

*Every Texan is the lead on this legislation. The Houston Food Bank will be working with them and Feeding Texas to advance this important policy issue.*

*HB 1230 (Ortega)*

Whether it’s getting a grandchild to a doctor’s appointment, driving through a food distribution line, or getting to work to keep grocery stores open, families in Texas need transportation. Unfortunately, it is a vehicle which most often stands in the way of a family’s ability to eat if they need assistance in doing so through SNAP. A family of five (two parents and three children) in the State of Texas cannot qualify for SNAP if they own a car worth $20,000. They cannot qualify for SNAP if they have two cars with one worth $15,000 and the second worth just $4,650. This is due to the asset test which counts even a car on which a family is still paying against the total amount allowable for SNAP benefits.\(^8\)

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how quickly a hard-working family can face empty pantries and empty plates. SNAP is meant to supplement the food budget of eligible low-income individuals and families. And yet, many families who would otherwise qualify are not eligible because they own a vehicle – necessary to assist them in looking for work, participating in a job or training program or working at least 20 hours a week. **Vehicles need to be completely removed from the SNAP Asset Test.**

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