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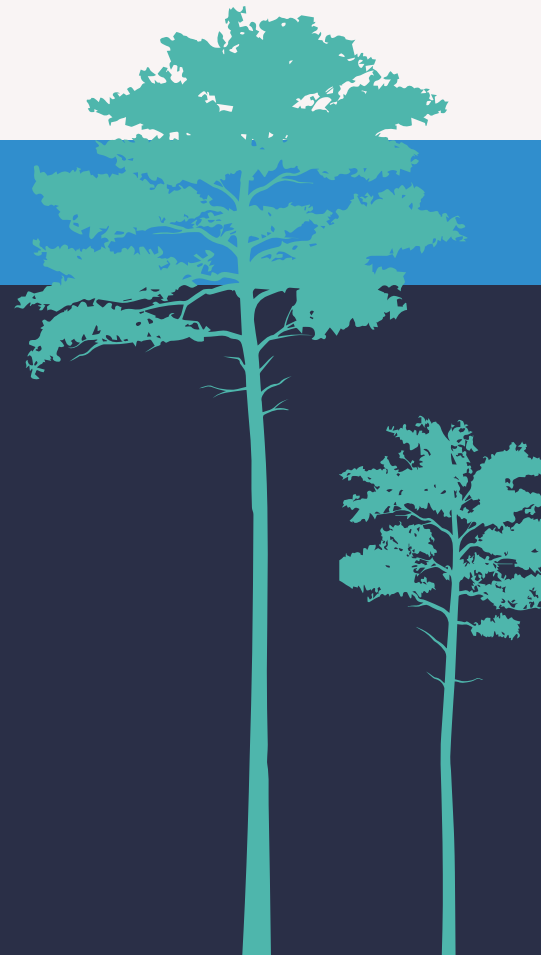
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Nourishing Communities: How SNAP Became Florida's Most Effective Anti-Hunger Program

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Executive Summary

While the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has grown to be one of the most powerful poverty reduction tools in the nation, SNAP's effectiveness is the culmination of roughly 100 years of bipartisan support and growing pains, as various roadblocks impeded earlier food assistance programs from reaching their full potential in fighting food insecurity.

However, there is still work to be done around SNAP on the state level to reverse course on policies that have led to inequitable access to the program. Such policies include time limits and the exclusion of various groups facing food insecurity, like some college students, immigrants, and people with past drug trafficking convictions.

Introduction to SNAP

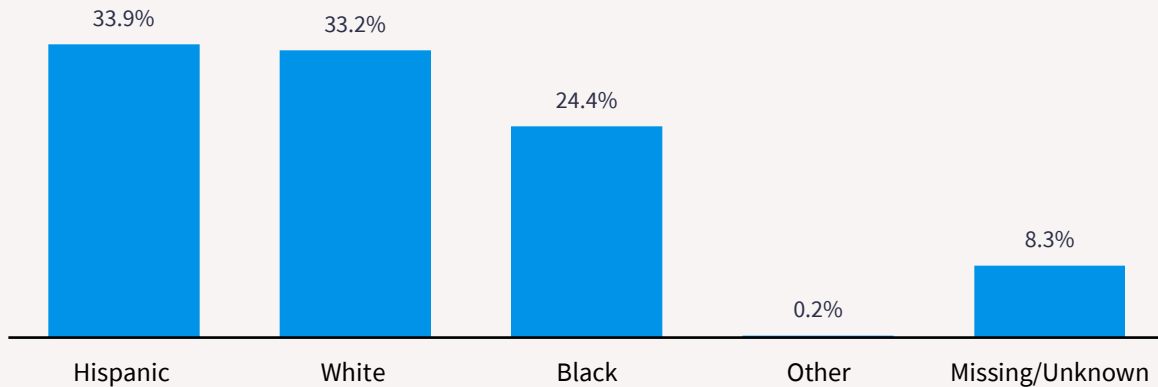
The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the most effective and efficient anti-hunger program in the country. SNAP, which was called the Food Stamp Program until 2008,¹ provides monthly grocery assistance to households with low income who cannot afford necessities because they live on fixed incomes or low wages, have lost jobs, or are unable to work due to a health crisis. Not only does the program protect people from hunger — SNAP also keeps many families out of poverty, helps households afford a more nutritious diet, promotes both short- and long-term health, reduces health care costs, supports workers in low-paid jobs, and is a powerful stimulus during economic downturns.²

In Florida, roughly 3 million people³ of all ages, ethnicities, and races rely on SNAP to put food on the table. (See *Figure 1*.) While everyone who participates in SNAP is better off because of the program,⁴ families with children and people of color — who experience higher rates of poverty⁵ and food insecurity⁶ in the Sunshine State — particularly benefit from the boost in nutritional support that this important program provides.

SNAP did not become a success overnight. The program has its origins in nutrition assistance programs that were first created during the Great Depression to assist families who would have otherwise gone hungry. Although some of the laws and policies governing SNAP in Florida reflect stereotypes and racial bias, such as work requirements, time limits, and bans on the eligibility of many college students, people convicted of drug trafficking, and some qualified immigrants,⁷ the program that exists today is the result of nearly a century of bipartisan teamwork that recognizes the shared value in ensuring that people avoid malnutrition and hunger regardless of their income, race, or ethnicity.

Figure 1. SNAP Helps Families of All Races and Ethnicities Put Food on the Table

Distribution of SNAP households by race and Hispanic status of household head (October 2019 - February 2020)



Source: Pre-pandemic data from FNS, Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households, Fiscal Year 2020.

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Roosevelt’s Surplus Commodity Program Meets a Critical Need of Florida Farmers and Families During the Early Years of the Great Depression

President Franklin D. Roosevelt laid the foundation for the current SNAP Program in the 1930s.⁸

Roosevelt, who was elected president during the Great Depression, faced the immediate task of tackling not only staggering unemployment in the United States but also the near collapse of the country’s farming industry.⁹ In response, Roosevelt established a food assistance program that used surplus commodities to both help farmers recover and provide food to people who had lost jobs.¹⁰ The goal of Roosevelt’s program was two-fold: 1) get groceries onto the tables of food-insecure households who were unemployed during the country’s unprecedented economic decline and 2) provide relief to farmers who were producing more crops and livestock than consumers were able to afford. To achieve this goal, the government bought excess crops and distributed those crops to people who were struggling to put food on the table.¹¹

Although the retail sector complained that Roosevelt’s surplus commodities program left grocers out of the loop, the program was lauded by both farmers and food-insecure households alike.¹² In Florida, farmers were especially supportive of the program. During the first six months of 1938, the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation (FSCC) had already spent almost \$700,000 (nearly \$15 million in

current dollars) buying oranges and celery from Florida growers to distribute nationwide.¹³ The program was also popular with Floridians themselves who could not afford to feed their families during one of the worst economic downturns in history. By June 1938, the State Welfare Board (the Board), which oversaw the surplus commodity program in the state, estimated that roughly 7 percent of Floridians (122,000 people) were receiving food from the program.¹⁴

Even so, the Roosevelt administration was determined to improve upon its method of promoting economic growth and providing nutrition assistance during the crippling Great Depression.

While a New Federal Food Stamp Plan is Embraced by Florida Farmers, Families, Grocers, and Participating Counties, State Experiences Delay in Approval of Local Plans

In 1939, Roosevelt's Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace, devised the first official Food Stamp Program to formalize the concept of using food stamps to feed out-of-work households in a way that more directly included grocery stores.¹⁵ Wallace's experimental pilot program, called the Food Stamp Plan, which was purely discretionary for participating cities and counties, allowed eligible people to buy orange coupons for \$1 to purchase food of their choice¹⁶ and get — free of charge — 50 cents worth of blue coupons that could be exchanged for specified surplus commodities.¹⁷

In 1939, Roosevelt's Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace, devised the first official Food Stamp Program to formalize the concept of using food stamps to feed out-of-work households in a way that more directly included grocery stores.

The First Official Food Stamp Plan is Piloted in New York in 1939

The first location in the country approved by the federal government to test the Food Stamp Plan was Rochester, New York. Early reports from participating families in New York showed enthusiasm for their newfound ability to put healthier food on the table through the program. As one participant said:

Fried potatoes, onions and coffee made up our best supper for two years. Now we have eggs, butter, fresh tomatoes, peaches and pears on the table almost every night...Our 8-year-old daughter has been anemic in the years my husband has been sick and out of work...Since [food stamps] her cheeks have been rosier and she feels a lot better.¹⁸

In addition to the program's tangible impact on the health of families, Wallace's Food Stamp Plan was also hailed by food companies and retail stores, who enjoyed the marked improvement of sales in areas

where food stamps were in use.¹⁹ Grocery stores in areas of the country that had the Food Stamp Plan showed an average increase in sales of 15 percent.²⁰

Although the Food Stamp Plan initially rolled out in Rochester — and later in Dayton, Ohio, and Seattle, Washington — it was so popular that the federal government almost immediately planned an expansion to another 100 cities.²¹ In addition, while the initial program only provided assistance to people in safety net programs, eligibility for food stamps was quickly expanded to low-wage employees.²²

Cities and Counties in Florida Express Interest in Implementing Food Stamp Plan

Buoyed by reports of the immense success of the Food Stamp Plan in other states in the country, many struggling families, farmers, and grocers in Florida hoped that their city or county would participate in the program. The citrus industry eyed the program with optimism, especially since citrus fruits were included in the program’s distribution of surplus commodities.²³ Similarly, vegetable growers in Florida’s East Coast and Lake Okeechobee were encouraged by early reports that 31 percent of benefits from the Food Stamp Plan were being spent on fresh fruits and vegetables.²⁴ Likewise, grocers in Florida welcomed the increase in sales that the program had brought to stores in other states.²⁵

Yet, despite the undeniable impact of the program on grocers and farmers, the primary purpose of the Food Stamp Plan was to ensure that people had enough to eat. The Miami Daily News called the program proof that the country was not willing to let people starve, and described the Food Stamp Program as having, at its core, no other purpose than “seeing that people of low income have enough to eat.”²⁶

Red Tape Delays Roll out of Food Stamp Plan in Florida

Notwithstanding enthusiasm for the program, roll out of the Food Stamp Plan was initially delayed in Florida and other Southeastern states due to red tape. This is because, although the federal government required a field study of interested counties to determine if there was a need for the program, no study could be conducted in the South. The federal government had not yet created a regional office to oversee studies of Southern states during the infancy of the new program.²⁷

This delay was mercifully short-lived. By the end of 1939, the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation, which oversaw food stamps at the federal level, was considering expanding the Food Stamp Plan to cities and counties in Florida.

Notwithstanding enthusiasm for the program, roll out of the Food Stamp Plan was initially delayed in Florida and other Southeastern states due to red tape.

Duval, Hillsborough, and Dade Counties Among First to Roll out Food Stamp Plan

Although several cities and counties in Florida expressed interest in the Food Stamp Plan, Jacksonville, Tampa, and Miami were among the first to formally submit questionnaires that would allow the federal government to approve the program for their residents.²⁸

- **Duval County:** In May 1940, Duval County became the first county in Florida to be approved to administer the Food Stamp Plan, with roughly 14,600 families initially estimated as potentially eligible.²⁹ In the first month, the plan proved its worth: sales of food stamps topped \$50,000 in Duval, the equivalent to over \$1 million today.³⁰ In September 1940, participation in the program was on the uptick and Duval officials estimated that distribution would approach \$1 million in the county for the year. Adjusted for inflation, that \$1 million would be \$22 million in 2023.³¹
- **Hillsborough County:** Soon after the program started in Duval, the Food Stamp Plan was implemented in Hillsborough County.³² At its inception, Hillsborough officials estimated that the program would benefit about 40,000 people and increase business for grocers by more than \$1 million a year. During the first few days of the program more than \$3,200 in stamps were distributed to Tampa residents — \$67,000 in current dollars.³³ After just two months in operation in Hillsborough, the program proved to be a boon for grocers and struggling families, whose buying capacity was increased by 50 percent due to food stamps. In an editorial, the Tampa Tribune said that the program was “doing wonders” in helping households “grow stronger, both mentally and physically.”³⁴ At the time, the average allotment amount for households in Hillsborough County was about \$2.07 per participant, ³⁵ the equivalent of \$44 in today’s economy.³⁶
- **Dade County:** Dade County implemented its Food Stamp Plan in March 1941, providing benefits to eligible residents through government and post office sites, mobile units, and a brick-and-mortar office in what is now Little Havana.³⁷ The impact of the program was immediately evident. Within one month, grocers in Dade — including retailers who did not expect to benefit from the program — reported that they were doing a greater volume of business. At the same time, participants praised the ability to purchase higher quality food.³⁸ In addition, households also celebrated their newfound ability to choose the food they wished to purchase, instead of being forced to “take just what was given them” under the surplus commodity program.³⁹ One industry leader in Miami described the program as giving:

...families additional spending power, and they are spending it on things they should buy. It is the sensible way to move surpluses and provide people with the food they need...[it] benefits the farmer, the consumer, and the merchant. In fact, it’s sensible all around. ⁴⁰

Not all cities and counties in Florida participated in the early Food Stamp Plan. For those that did, the program proved to benefit local economies and food-insecure households alike. At the time, officials estimated that people who participated in the program were able to get 50 percent more food at no extra cost.⁴¹ In December 1940 alone, food stamps were credited with boosting food expenditures in Duval and Hillsborough counties by almost \$100,000 — the equivalent of over \$2 million today.⁴²

Nationwide End of the Food Stamp Plan in 1943 Impacts Florida Seniors, People with Disabilities, and Counties' Ability to Meet the Needs of Families

The Food Stamp Plan, the country's first incarnation of the Food Stamp Program (now called SNAP), was administered in selected cities and counties nationwide until 1943, when employment stabilized, and food surpluses dwindled. By the time that the federal government called an end to the Food Stamp Plan, the popular program⁴³ had been active in roughly half of all counties in the United States and is credited with feeding 20 million people during one of the bleakest economic times in the country.⁴⁴

However, not everyone celebrated the end of the program. In many places, the demise of the Food Stamp Plan created hardship that left people without any way to put food on the table. Florida was particularly hard hit by the discontinuation of the Food Stamp Plan.

The Food Stamp Plan was so vital in participating locations in Florida that, after Tampa temporarily suspended the program pending the county's approval of additional money needed to run the program, angry women took the streets in protest. Among the picket signs that they carried were ones that read: "*Please place upon my grave— 'Starved in a world of plenty.'*" and "*We are human, we must have bread.*"

Source: "Women Picket Commissioners for Food Fund," *The Tampa Tribune*, September 14, 1940; "Women Again Picket Board, Ask for Food," *The Tampa Times*, September 13, 1940. Sources accessed via newspapers.com.

In Dade County, the Food Stamp Plan had distributed about \$1.8 million in stamps — nearly \$31 million in current dollars — during its two-year operation. With the close of the program looming, experts in Dade predicted that seniors living on fixed incomes would bear the brunt of losing food stamps because of the dearth in employment opportunities for people of their age.⁴⁵

In Pinellas County, the local county welfare department reported an increase in requests for help after discontinuation of the program because existing relief allowances were insufficient to meet food needs, particularly given increased living costs.⁴⁶

The Mayor of Tampa bemoaned the end of the Food Stamp Plan, stating that many participants in the program were not able-bodied, could not work, and would experience hardship from closing the program. He also noted that ending the Food Stamp Plan would stretch the resources of local county and city services.⁴⁷

Although the Food Stamp Plan proved to be vital in meeting the nutritional needs of households both nationwide and in Florida, the program languished for almost two decades before the federal government would take steps to revive it.

Kennedy Resurrects Food Stamps Mid-Century as a Pilot Program, But Florida Not Among Test Areas

Despite occasional attempts to resurrect the program, food stamps lay dormant until John F. Kennedy took office in 1961.

In his first executive order, President Kennedy, who had witnessed first-hand the plight of families living in poverty during his campaign, established food stamp pilot programs.⁴⁸ Although households were still required to buy food stamps, Kennedy's pilot programs eliminated blue coupons for surplus food.⁴⁹ Kennedy was critical of surplus food commodity packages because those packages did not allow households to make their own decisions about what food they bought⁵⁰ and, at times, forced them to live on "surplus lard and corn meal."⁵¹

Indeed, food stamp pilot programs were so effective that the federal government began to consider ways to make food stamps a permanent program with a broader reach.

Florida was not one of the 21 states selected to participate in Kennedy's food stamp pilot program.⁵² Instead, test areas included locations in Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia.⁵³ By all accounts, the pilot programs were enormously effective, not only because the programs provided much-needed help to families struggling to make ends meet, but also because they had a significant impact on local economies by increasing the sale of food at retail stores by 8 percent.⁵⁴

Indeed, food stamp pilot programs were so effective that the federal government began to consider ways to make food stamps a permanent program with a broader reach.

Food Stamps Become Permanent Federal Program in 1964, But Participants Still Required to Purchase Stamps

Three years after Kennedy authorized food stamps on a pilot basis, the Food Stamp Program became permanent in the United States under President Lyndon Johnson. As part of his War on Poverty, Johnson successfully pushed for enactment of a permanent Food Stamp Program in the 1964 Food Stamp Act.

To participate in the permanent program, interested localities were required to work through their state welfare or public assistance agency.⁵⁵ While a state's participation in the new Food Stamp Program was entirely voluntary,⁵⁶ states that chose to participate were required to pay administrative costs for the program.⁵⁷

Although the 1964 act continued to require participants to buy food stamps, it also gave households extra stamps to help purchase a more nutritionally sound diet. In addition, the 1964 act better defined the responsibilities of both the state and the federal government and put in place a prohibition on discrimination in the program.⁵⁸

The fact that many households with the lowest income could not afford to participate in the Food Stamp Program [of the 1960s] contributed to hunger and malnutrition.

Despite continuing to force households to purchase stamps, the program was touted as “one of our most valuable weapons for the war on poverty”⁵⁹ for participating families. Yet, despite its popularity, Johnson's Food Stamp Program only reached about 17 percent of eligible people in the United States.⁶⁰ This was due, in part, to the fact that people with the lowest income were unable to participate in the program because they could not afford to purchase food stamp coupons.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle criticized the mandate that continued to force people to buy stamps, noting that some families lack the money to make even a token payment for food stamp coupons.⁶¹ The fact that many households with the lowest income could not afford to participate in the Food Stamp Program contributed to hunger and malnutrition. Researchers from the Field Foundation, who were commissioned in 1967 to do a multi-year study of the impact of hunger on the rural poor in the United States, reported that conditions in the South were akin to “third world” malnutrition.⁶² In a follow-up study conducted in 1968, doctors from the Citizens' Board of Inquiry on Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States (the Board), reported harrowing hunger and malnutrition throughout the entire country resulting in substantial numbers of newborn babies dying from malnutrition.⁶³ According to the Board, 5 million eligible people in the United States were not participating in any food assistance program, causing food insecurity and malnutrition to exist nation-wide despite the existence of food stamps.⁶⁴

At the time, Florida was among the states without any county participating in food stamps. Even so, Florida was not in a hurry to get a Food Stamp Program off the ground.

Florida's State Welfare Board Allows Counties the Option to Implement Food Stamps in 1967, But Has No Takers

Although the Food Stamp Program was made permanent on the federal level under Johnson in 1964, the State Welfare Board in Florida did not give counties in the state permission to participate in the program until July 1967. Although counties would have been forced to foot the bill to help run the program, one Florida official touted the board's decision as a way to get families healthier food⁶⁵ and funnel money into local economies.⁶⁶

However, any hope that Florida counties would take advantage of the opportunity to administer food stamps in 1967 was a pipe dream.

Due, in part, to racism and red tape, it was two more years before any county in Florida initiated a Food Stamp Program.

Strides at the Federal Level Continue to Strengthen the Food Stamp Program in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s

The Food Stamp Program experienced unprecedented growth and transformation that revolutionized the program on the federal level after Richard Nixon took office in 1969.⁶⁷ During President Nixon's tenure, Congress worked on a bipartisan basis to enact uniform benefits and eligibility criteria, relax eligibility criteria, and partially eliminate the purchasing requirement for households with very low income.⁶⁸

The evolution of the Food Stamp Program under Nixon was driven, in part, by research conducted by the Field Foundation and the Citizens' Board, as well as by widespread outrage among lawmakers and the public after CBS aired a special news report called "Hunger in America" in 1968.⁶⁹ The CBS report horrified viewers with a clip of an infant in the United States dying from starvation. Galvanized by the CBS report,⁷⁰ Nixon not only recommended expanding the Food Stamp program but also convened the first White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health with what he said was his goal to eliminate hunger.⁷¹ As Nixon explained:

[W]e have awakened to the distressing fact that despite our material abundance and agricultural wealth, many Americans suffer from malnutrition. Precise factual descriptions of its extent are not presently available, but there can be no doubt that hunger and malnutrition exist in America, and that some millions may be affected. That hunger and malnutrition should persist in a land such as ours is embarrassing and intolerable.⁷²

Florida, One of the Last States to Implement Food Stamps, Authorizes the Program in 1969 for Select Counties, But Not Statewide

By 1969, Florida was one of only four states in the country that were not participating in food stamps.⁷³ However, the 1969 Florida Legislature enacted law allowing the state to authorize interested counties to participate in the program.⁷⁴ At the time, James Bax, who was Secretary of the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) (later renamed the Department and Children and Families or DCF) said that food stamps would save the state money by preventing malnutrition — and urged Florida to join the federal Food Stamp Program as a way to “get the food closer to the bellies of kids that need it.”⁷⁵

The Florida Legislature’s renewed interest in food stamps in 1969 was likely due, in part, to a damning investigation of hunger in Florida by Congress’s Select Senate Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs.

Florida Lawmakers’ Decision to Allow Food Stamps Was Likely Influenced by a Congressional Investigation of Hunger Revealing That Revealed Shocking Malnutrition in Immokalee and Fort Myers

The Florida Legislature’s renewed interest in food stamps in 1969 was likely due, in part, to a damning investigation of hunger in Florida by Congress’s Select Senate Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs (the Select Committee).⁷⁶

During on-site visits to the Sunshine State, the Select Committee found a “pattern of misery and malnutrition” in Immokalee and Fort Myers in Collier and Lee counties, respectively.⁷⁷ One Senator reported that cattle and hogs were better fed than migrants in south Florida.⁷⁸ Another found the conditions in Collier County, which had, so far, rejected food assistance for struggling families, both shocking and distressing.⁷⁹

Inadequate Outreach and Inadequacies in Surplus Commodities Programs Also Play a Part in Florida Lawmakers’ Decision to Authorize Food Stamps

The Select Committee’s investigation also revealed that, even though a surplus commodities program was running in Fort Myers, many residents were either unaware of its existence or afraid to apply. One

mother, who did not know about surplus commodities, reported to investigators that her family's situation was so dire that she could not afford to feed her children breakfast, except for baby food for the youngest, and that other meals consisted of peas and beans.⁸⁰

Although three-quarters of counties in Florida participated in federal commodity distribution,⁸¹ counties were prohibited from participating in both programs at once.⁸² While food commodity distributions may have helped stave off hunger, food that families received in commodity distribution was often inadequate to provide an adequate diet. Unlike food stamps, food from the commodity program did not always offer nutritionally sound basics, like fresh produce, meat, or milk.⁸³ Nor did it allow people to shop locally or buy food that was culturally appropriate or that their families liked and would eat.

Racism, Red Tape, and Finger Pointing Delay Roll Out of Food Stamp Program in Florida Despite Law Allowing Counties to Participate

Although the 1969 Florida Legislature authorized a Food Stamp Program for interested counties, few counties initially expressed any desire to run the program. In addition to the fact that counties had to help pay for administration of a program in their area if they choose to participate, other reasons explain why counties in Florida were slow to roll out a Food Stamp Program for their residents, such as racism, red tape, and finger-pointing.

Red Tape and Finger Pointing Delay Food Stamp Programs in Florida Counties

To participate in the Food Stamp Program in 1969, counties were required to submit an application to Florida's State Welfare Department. In turn, the welfare department was tasked with processing the application and forwarding it to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for approval.

Although both Dade and Orange counties quickly applied to run a Food Stamp Program, Florida's Welfare Department held on to those applications for a year and a half instead of sending them on to the federal government.⁸⁴ The state claimed that it was holding the applications pending confirmation that Congress would appropriate funds for these two programs.⁸⁵ USDA insisted that there was no reason for Florida to keep the applications — and that all applications should be forwarded and would be funded as money was available.⁸⁶ After media reports revealed that the food stamp applications of Orange and Dade counties were languishing indefinitely in the state's Welfare Department, Florida finally forwarded those applications on to USDA.

Within 15 days, USDA approved Orange County's applications. Orange County became the first county in Florida to have a Food Stamp Program.⁸⁷

Racism Feeds Opposition to Food Stamps in Some Counties

Racism also played a part in the reluctance of some Florida counties to administer a Food Stamp Program in the late 1960s. Although Dade and Orange counties were eager to provide food stamps to their food-insecure residents early on, many other counties in the South, including Collier County in Florida, were reluctant to roll out the program.⁸⁸ At the time, some speculated that white government officials were disinclined to offer any kind of food assistance because they wanted to discourage immigrant and Black families from staying in their counties.⁸⁹ As one Florida state senator observed about Immokalee’s reluctance to back a Food Stamp Program in Collier County, “county officials ‘don’t want [migrants] to come in there until there is work for them and a need for them’ [because] they fear free food programs would encourage...[migrants] to come early and stay late.”⁹⁰ Collier County commissioners defended their indifference to the plight of migrant workers by calling them “federal people” who were not theirs to feed,⁹¹ even though the Collier’s agriculture industry would have crumbled without migrant labor.⁹²

By 1966, Florida is the Most Populous of the Six Remaining States Not Providing Food Stamps

State	Population
Florida	5,796,000
Oklahoma	2,448,000
Arizona	1,941,000
South Dakota	686,000
New Hampshire	673,000
North Dakota	652,000

Sources: Rose Allegato, "More States Turn to Program: Food Stamps Pay off for Breadline of the 1960's," *Tallahassee Democrat*, March 21, 1966, accessed via www.newspapers.com; Population Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau, www2.census.gov/library/publications/1966/demographics/P25-354.pdf.

When asked specifically about the refusal of Southern counties — including 16 counties in Florida — to participate in either food stamps or the commodity distribution program, one federal official tried to downplay the impact of racism. That official reasoned that bias against spending money on indigenous people, migrants, and “just plain poor people” was as pronounced as racism in explaining why more counties were unwilling to administer food stamps.⁹³

Counties also balked at the use of uniform criteria to determine eligibility for federal food assistance programs. Local officials in Florida defended their reluctance to participate in those programs by saying that they already assisted people that they feel are “entitled to special help,”⁹⁴ which allowed counties to divvy out help based on racism and moral judgments as to whether the family deserved assistance.

Despite its initial reluctance, Collier County became the second county in Florida to initiate food stamps,⁹⁵ likely because of the scathing investigation of hunger and malnutrition in Immokalee uncovered by the Select Committee. After rolling out the program, Collier County experienced what it called an “unprecedented rush” of people wanting food stamps, selling more than \$26,000 (over \$200,000 in current dollars) in just the first two weeks.⁹⁶

Still, it took further legislative action at both the state and federal levels for a Food Stamp Program to be launched state-wide in Florida.

Florida Legislature Finally Mandates Food Stamps in All Counties in 1970s in Lieu of Relying on Surplus Agriculture Commodities

The Florida Legislature, under Governor Claude Kirk, passed a law in 1970 requiring that the Food Stamp Program be initiated in every county in the state. Under the legislation, which appropriated \$1.5 million for implementation of the program, the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, or HRS (later renamed DCF) oversaw the program at the state level.⁹⁷ Today, DCF continues to oversee the Food Stamp Program (now called SNAP) in Florida.⁹⁸

This new law signaled Florida’s intent to move away from relying on surplus agriculture commodities to assist food-insecure households. Until then, the commodity program had been Florida’s primary form of food assistance for people with low income. At the time the law was passed, only two counties in Florida (Orange and Collier) participated in food stamps while 53 counties relied on surplus commodity distribution.⁹⁹ Critics of surplus commodity distribution welcomed the Legislature’s move to mandate food stamps, lauding the Food Stamp Program as vastly superior for providing families with a balanced diet compared to the limited food choices offered by agriculture commodities.

Congress Expands Food Stamp Program Nationwide in 1973

Nixon’s final act to bolster food stamps came in 1973 when he signed the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act of 1973 into law.¹⁰⁰ This act expanded food stamps nationwide, which allowed all counties in the country to begin to participate in the program instead of relying on commodity distribution programs.¹⁰¹ Nixon’s expansion of the Food Stamp Program was an enormous success, with an unprecedented five-fold growth in participation to 15 million by the time of his resignation.¹⁰²

Within a year, every county in the country — including every county in Florida — was participating in food stamps.¹⁰³ However, Congress was not finished with tweaking the Food Stamp Program to make it accessible to people most in need.

The Requirement That Households Purchase Food Stamp Coupons Caused Hardship on Participants and Disproportionately Impacted Black Households

As early as July 1940, food stamp participants reported that the requirement that they purchase food stamps was an enormous burden, forcing many to choose between participating in the program to eat -- or paying rent. Years later, doctors who participated in the 1967 Southern Regional Council investigation of hunger in the rural South agreed, saying that parents “with literally nothing” are ineligible for food stamps and are forced to feed their children starches and flavored water. At the time, it was common for households who could not afford to buy food stamps to survive on biscuits for breakfast, beans for lunch, and bread and molasses for dinner. As a result, doctors who were part of the investigation formally called for a repeal of the purchasing requirements, although their demands were ignored.

By 1973, one Immokalee man, who worked picking vegetables at a gladiola farm despite having two club feet, reported that his family could not always afford food stamps on his earnings of about \$40 a week. Although he and his wife watched every penny that they spent, they were forced to go without food stamps for months at a time trying to juggle rent payments.

The food stamp purchasing requirement disproportionately impacted Black families, who were more likely to live in poverty and be unable to afford stamps. This disparity was no more obvious than in Mississippi, where the mechanization of the farm industry left many Black workers without jobs and unable to afford stamps. One doctor who took part in a Southern Regional Council investigation of the program noted that, time and again, investigators in Mississippi were told that racist policies, including the purchasing requirement, were designed to exclude Black women. Even though Mississippi was the only state in the country without a Food Stamp Program at that time, Mississippi lawmakers fought against implementation of food stamps in that state. Although some Mississippi lawmakers argued that hunger in Mississippi was exaggerated, one senator called Mississippi’s efforts to ignore hunger among Black children as bordering on genocide.

Sources: “The Daily Washington Merry Go Round, WPA Food Cards,” *Pensacola News Journal*, July 13, 1940; “Mississippi Children Found Starving,” *The Miami Herald*, June 25, 1967; “Children’s Condition Alarming,” *Orlando Evening Star*, June 17, 1967; Randy White, “Stamps Mean Difference,” *News-Press*, March 8, 1973; “Thousands of Poor Negroes Hungry Under Food Stamp System,” *Fort Myers News Press*, February 20, 1957; “Freeman Lauds Food Stamps,” *Pensacola News Journal*, April 26, 1967; “The Nation’s Forgotten,” *Tampa Bay Times*, July 6, 1967; Drew Pearson, “No Food Stamps for Mississippi,” *The Bradenton Herald*, May 9, 1967. All sources accessed via newspapers.com.

Bipartisan Federal Effort in Late 1970s Repeals the Purchasing Requirement in SNAP and Transforms Program to Assist Families With the Lowest Incomes

In 1977, a bipartisan congressional effort under President Jimmy Carter completely repealed the food stamp purchasing requirement, transforming the program into more of what it looks like today.¹⁰⁴ Getting rid of the requirement that households purchase food stamps had been gaining popularity among the public since at least 1969. In a national Gallup Poll conducted in March 1969, the majority of people in the United States — regardless of where they live, their political party, or their income — favored free food stamps.¹⁰⁵

Repeal of the purchasing requirement is largely due to Republican Senator Bob Dole and Democratic Senator George McGovern, who spearheaded an effort to eliminate key barriers to access to food stamps in the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977.¹⁰⁶ (At the time, some members in Congress also called for limiting food choice in the program in order to force families to use their coupons on food with the greatest nutritional value. The restriction was not included in the final changes to the law.)¹⁰⁷

Elimination of the requirement that households buy coupons made an almost immediate impact on the ability of people with low income to access the Food Stamp Program.

Elimination of the requirement that households buy coupons made an almost immediate impact on the ability of people with low income to access the Food Stamp Program.¹⁰⁸ Nationwide, participation increased by 1.5 million people in the first month after Congress finally did away with the mandate.¹⁰⁹ In Florida, in the year before Congress eliminated the purchasing requirement, as many as 720,000 Floridians (or 48 percent) who were eligible for food stamps were not participating in the program.¹¹⁰ However, in the four years following repeal of the mandate, the number of Floridians participating in the program jumped by roughly 31 percent, from 728,000 people in 1977 to 957,000 in 1981.¹¹¹

Florida Administratively Expands SNAP Through Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility in 2010

In 2010, DCF implemented statewide SNAP broad based categorical eligibility (BBCE) under Governor Charlie Crist.¹¹² BBCE, which is still in effect in Florida, is a federal option that gives states the flexibility to expand access to SNAP by increasing income limits to as high as 200 percent of the federal poverty level and abolishing the asset test for many participating households.¹¹³ Without BBCE, a SNAP applicant's gross income must be at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level and assets must not exceed

either \$2,750 (for households without a member who either has a disability or is at least 60 years of age) or \$4,250 (for households with a member who either has a disability or is at least 60 years of age). Assets are things like cash or money that someone in the household has on hand or in the bank.¹¹⁴

People who benefit the most from Florida’s adoption of BBCE are low-income workers, children, and seniors:

- BBCE enables workers who are paid low wages to continue participating in SNAP even after they get a modest increase in pay. Otherwise, many families in which a member gets a raise would lose SNAP benefits altogether, even though a small bump in income does not make up the difference for lost benefits. Roughly 39 percent of households participating in SNAP in Florida have at least one member who is working¹¹⁵ and would be at risk of losing food assistance without BBCE.
- BBCE also contributes to children’s ability to perform better in school. Among other reasons, this is because children whose families participate in SNAP are automatically eligible for free school lunch under the National School Lunch Program. Without BBCE, more than 157,000 children would lose their SNAP in Florida — the largest group of participants in the state who would become ineligible if Florida had not adopted BBCE.¹¹⁶ As a result, these children would also lose their eligibility for free meals at school, increasing their risk of hunger.
- BBCE allows seniors on fixed incomes to accumulate modest savings to weather everyday crises without losing benefits. This is particularly important to Florida’s program, where nearly four in 10 households (37 percent) contain a SNAP participant who is over the age of 60.¹¹⁷

The Food Stamp Program has weathered legislative and policy changes over the years to emerge as a valuable safety net for food-insecure people — and the economy — during tough times.

Despite Setbacks in Assuring Equitable Access to Benefits, SNAP Has Proven to Be a Critical Safety Net in Florida During Recessions, Hurricanes, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Food Stamp Program has weathered legislative and policy changes over the years to emerge as a valuable safety net for food-insecure people — and the economy — during tough times. However, the trajectory of the Food Stamp Program has not always been one of expansion at the federal or state level:

- In 1976, President Ronald Reagan used the trope of “welfare queen” to justify dramatic funding cuts to food stamps during his time in office.¹¹⁸
- The Food and Agriculture Act of 1977, although pivotal in increasing access to food stamps by repealing the purchasing requirement,¹¹⁹ also restricted program access for college students by

limiting the eligibility of students in institutions of higher learning unless those students are in school less than halftime.¹²⁰ At the time, lawmakers were concerned that, absent the restriction, college students whose families earn enough to support them would take advantage of the program regardless of need.¹²¹ This rationale no longer makes sense and is contributing to widespread food insecurity among college students.¹²²

- In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) into law.¹²³ Among other cuts, PRWORA made many immigrants and people with drug felony convictions ineligible for food stamps, reduced maximum Food Stamp benefits levels, and imposed a three-month time limit for certain participants depending on their employment status (*i.e.*, people of working age who do not have children or a disability). In Florida alone, participation in food stamps declined from 1.4 million people in January 1996 to just over 1 million in January 1998 after Clinton’s cuts took effect.¹²⁴ Although a robust economy is partially responsible, some of the changes dictated by PRWORA contributed to an unprecedented 40 percent decline in participation in the program nationwide in the 1990’s, most of which occurred in the years immediately following passage of PRWORA.¹²⁵

Notably, six years after Clinton signed PRWORA, President George W. Bush reversed some of Clinton’s cuts to the program. In the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, Bush, who was concerned about ensuring adequate nutrition for immigrant children,¹²⁶ led efforts to restore eligibility for many of the immigrants who lost eligibility under PRWORA.¹²⁷ In addition, under Bush, the 2002 act also made other expansive changes to the program, such as providing a shelter deduction for people experiencing homelessness.¹²⁸ In all, the number of people participating in food stamps during Bush’s tenure increased by about 14.7 million, or 85 percent.¹²⁹

Despite occasional disagreements over measures that restrict eligibility, the SNAP program continues to thrive with broad support.¹³⁰ One of the reasons for the program’s continued success is that SNAP is an essential safety net during periods of economic downturn to both feed hungry families and stabilize the economy:

Notably, six years after Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, President George W. Bush reversed some of Clinton’s cuts to the program.

- In the Great Recession, the use of SNAP benefits contributed to the state and federal level recovery by stimulating the economy and creating jobs.¹³¹ The need for food assistance was so great during the recession that SNAP participation of food-insecure households almost doubled before falling after the labor market began to recover.¹³² In Florida, the number of SNAP participants increased from 1.4 million to 2.1 million from December 2007 to June 2009 as unemployment rose.¹³³

- SNAP also proved its mettle during the COVID-19 public health emergency. When Floridians lost jobs after employers closed or scaled back hours of operation at the height of the pandemic, participation in SNAP reached a high of 3,941,368 people in September 2020 with almost \$700 million in benefits issued during that month alone. Since every \$1 that a SNAP participant spent during the pandemic is estimated to have generated a minimum of \$1.50 in spending, the economic impact of SNAP in Florida in September 2020 alone is estimated to have been at least \$1 billion.¹³⁴ After beginning to decline as businesses reopened later in the Fall of 2020, participation in SNAP in Florida today has decreased to near-pre-pandemic levels.
- SNAP is key in helping Florida’s families and local economies recover from natural disasters.¹³⁵ After Hurricane Irma, which affected almost every county in Florida in 2017, Disaster-SNAP (D-SNAP) was activated to provide temporary food assistance to people who lost jobs in communities where businesses were destroyed or damaged by the storm. In total, D-SNAP provided over \$1.2 billion in food assistance to Floridians after Irma, which was a lifesaver to local economies, whose recovery was hastened by the influx of dollars spent on groceries in local stores,¹³⁶ as well as to impacted families, who scrambled to afford food after their workplaces closed due to Irma.

Conclusion

SNAP has weathered nearly a century of fine-tuning by policymakers on the federal and state level since Roosevelt first launched a surplus commodity program in 1933. One hundred years later, the program has demonstrated its ability not only to combat food insecurity and promote health for Floridians at times when they are most in need, but also to provide a significant economic stimulus for local businesses and communities in recessions and disasters. Even so, the growth of the program has not been without missteps, particularly for families with very low income, immigrants, and people of color.

Although much has been done at the state and federal levels to make the program accessible to those most in need, there is still work to be done to ensure equitable access. For example, time limits, work requirements, and restrictions on the eligibility of college students, immigrants, and people with past felony convictions continue to block access of food-insecure people to SNAP.

However, despite occasional setbacks and remaining challenges, SNAP has emerged as the country’s — and Florida’s — most effective and efficient tool against hunger. One Florida newspaper, which speculated almost a hundred years ago that food stamps might easily evolve into a much more significant program than anyone imagined at the time, proved to be prescient.¹³⁷ Today, SNAP is the embodiment of what can be achieved when everyone works together toward the common goal of fighting hunger.

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