

## FAQs on SNAP Emergency Allotments and Flexibilities

This FAQ provides information about the SNAP flexibilities authorized during COVID, with a particular focus on the Emergency Allotments (EA). This resource has been updated to reflect USDA's latest [guidance](#) on EA that was issued on April 1, 2021, superseding previous EA guidance and extending the benefit to the lowest-income SNAP households. Congress first authorized EA under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act in March 2020.

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Please refer to the US Department of Agriculture's guidance on [Emergency Allotments](#) and your state agency website for additional information.

*To quickly find what you need, please click on a question to be directed to its answer.*

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## 1. What is the Families First Coronavirus Response Act ([H.R 6201](#))?

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) provides temporary new authority and broad flexibility for the USDA and states to adapt SNAP to address many people's food needs during the current public health and economic emergency triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

FFCRA was signed on March 18, 2020. It:

- Allowed states to temporarily raise SNAP benefits to all households to the maximum level allowed for household size.
- Temporarily suspends the work requirement for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs), which normally limits SNAP benefit access for people ages 18-49 to 3-months in a 3-year period unless they work at least 20 hours/week, participate in qualified workfare programs, or are exempted.

Other subsequent federal relief laws added more program flexibilities and funding to SNAP. Notably:

- [The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act \(CARES Act\)](#) was signed on March 27, 2020. This Act:
  - Provided \$15.5 billion for the SNAP program to cover costs associated with the administration and implementation of the SNAP flexibilities granted under FFCRA, as well as the increased expenditures resulting from growth in SNAP participation due to the pandemic.
- [The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021](#) was signed into law on December 27, 2021. This Act:
  - For the first time since the beginning of the pandemic increased SNAP benefits by 15% for all participants for about 6 months, January-June 2021.
  - Excluded Pandemic Unemployment Insurance from income for SNAP eligibility and benefit determinations.
  - Eased SNAP eligibility rules for college students.
- [The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021](#) was signed into law on March 11, 2021. This Act:
  - Extended the 15% SNAP benefit enhancement through Sept. 30, 2021. Previously it was authorized through June 30, 2021.
  - Provided \$1.15 billion, available until Sept. 30, 2023, for SNAP administrative expenses. Of this funding, \$15 million is dedicated to program management and oversight.
  - Provided \$25 million, available until Sept. 30, 2026, for online SNAP purchasing pilot modernization efforts.

## 2. Where can I find a summary of the FFCRA?

- The House Appropriations Committee has posted [a summary](#) of the FFCRA.

- The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has posted a detailed [resource](#) on EA, and other SNAP flexibilities and waivers authorized under FFCRA and subsequent laws.
- The Kaiser Family Foundation developed [a summary](#) of the key provisions of the FFCRA.

### 3. What are the Emergency Allotment (EA) benefit increases authorized by FFCRA?

SNAP households are eligible for an additional emergency food supplement when the Secretary of Health and Human Services has declared a public health emergency under section 319 of the Public Health Service Act related to an outbreak of COVID-19 or when a State has also issued an emergency or disaster declaration.

It is state option to issue emergency allotments (increased benefits) to households receiving SNAP to meet temporary increased food needs due to the pandemic-triggered job losses and spike in food prices.

The law provides for an additional allotment for SNAP households up to the amount of the maximum benefit for their household size. In the latest USDA interpretation of the FFCRA and corresponding policy change, those with incomes low enough to qualify for or near the maximum benefit would also be able to receive these additional benefits.

USDA's [State Guidance Determination](#) provides information explaining the change in interpretation of who is eligible for benefits and the [State Guidance Memo](#) provides additional EA guidance. State specific information is available [here](#).

### 4. Who is eligible for EA?

All SNAP participating households are eligible.

**Update:** On April 1, 2021, USDA issued policy [guidance](#) allowing the lowest-income SNAP households to receive the EAs, benefitting an [estimated 25 million](#) people, according to USDA. These are people who were near or at the maximum benefit level before the pandemic and were excluded from receiving EAs by the prior USDA rulings.

### 5. Are families receiving P-EBT for their children also eligible to receive EA?

Yes, families can receive benefits from both P-EBT and EA.

### 6. How much is the EA benefit?

Households will receive EA benefits reflecting the household size. Under the [latest USDA guidance](#), it is determined that households who had not been receiving EA payments and those whose EA payments were less than \$95 per month will get increased benefits. Payments will not change for households who had been receiving EA benefits of \$95 or more per month.

Emergency Allotments are calculated as follows:

1. Determine the household's base SNAP benefit level using the current temporary level of 115 percent of Thrift Food Plan [TFP].
2. The EA is the difference between the SNAP household's base benefit calculation and the maximum benefit for the household size; except that,
3. All households receive EA of at least \$95
  - a) Those households currently receiving \$95 or more will continue to receive that same amount—no change in EA for these households.
  - b) Those households receiving the maximum SNAP benefit for their household size at the current temporary level of 115 percent of TFP will receive EA of \$95 per month.
  - c) Those households with a calculated EA amount less than \$95 will receive EA totaling \$95 per month.

The following table shows the current maximum monthly SNAP allotment based on household size for the period between Jan. 1, 2021, through Sept. 30, 2021. (See USDA SNAP Eligibility Guidance [here](#))

People in Household	Maximum Monthly Allotment*
1	\$234
2	\$430
3	\$616
4	\$782
5	\$929
6	\$1,114
7	\$1,232
8	\$1,408
Each additional person	+ \$176

\*These allotments are for households in the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia.

USDA requires all states to continue to submit a separate EA report from the regular or base SNAP benefit amount.

## 7. When will the EA benefits expire?

USDA will approve state requests to continue to issue the EAs to eligible SNAP households *each month* as long as the current [national public health emergency declaration](#) remains in place and one or more of the following conditions are met:

- The State's emergency or disaster declaration or the Federal Public Health Emergency Declaration remains active, and
- Residents of the State are confirmed to have contracted Covid-19
- Some or all areas of the State are containment or quarantine zones
- Businesses have closed or significantly reduced their hours
- The State's residents have experienced economic impacts due to job suspensions or losses
- The State's residents have been directed to practice social distancing

USDA guidance on the month-to-month extension of the SNAP emergency allotment is [here](#).

#### **8. Which states have been approved for EA?**

All states and US territories (except Puerto Rico) are approved to issue the emergency maximum SNAP benefit level to participating SNAP households, but must submit a request to USDA in order to provide the benefit.

We encourage states to proactively maximize the latest federal policy flexibilities that also extend the EA to the very lowest-income households.

States are required to submit a preliminary report to USDA on the total value of the emergency allotments issued and the number of households for whom the emergency allotment is issued. The full list of approved states is available at the [USDA website](#) and approvals are updated monthly.

#### **9. Are states required to submit waiver requests on work requirements for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDS) in SNAP?**

No. The FFCRA includes a nationwide waiver, automatically and temporarily suspending the 3-month time limit on SNAP benefits for adults without children under age 50, also called Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs). This is effective from April 1, 2020, and will remain in effect until the pandemic designation is lifted. USDA is not required to issue additional waivers or guidance. States are not expected to submit a plan to exercise this flexibility during the pandemic designation.

USDA guidance on the ABAWDs waiver is [here](#).

**Update:** On March 24, 2021, A federal court [voided](#) the final ABAWDs rule that was enacted by the prior administration to restrict states' options to waive SNAP time limits. This means once the pandemic is over and the temporary suspension of the 3-month time limit is lifted, the old ABAWDs waiver rules will be in effect.

#### **10. What additional SNAP operational and administrative flexibilities are available to states under FFCRA?**

The FFCRA gives USDA authority to allow states to make changes to their normal SNAP operations such as those related to SNAP benefit issuance, application processes, and reporting or quality control requirements to address operational challenges caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. This also allows states and state agencies to implement social distancing guidelines to minimize caseworkers and SNAP recipients' risk of exposure to the virus.

We encourage states to utilize the following flexibilities: (For more information on these options and recommendations see the CBPP resource [here](#))

#### For current SNAP households:

- *Extend certification periods by at least 6 months.* Every month states must recertify SNAP households whose benefits are expiring. This requires households to complete an application, an in-person or telephone interview, and provide several documents to verify their eligibility so there is no disruption in the issuance of their SNAP benefits. If a household fails to complete this process, they must reapply and wait up to 30 days for their benefits to be issued.
- *Suspend recalculation of SNAP benefits when a household has a change in income.* When someone in a SNAP household loses their job, the state recalculates their SNAP benefit based on the new lower income. This allows the household to receive a higher SNAP allotment. If states were permitted to increase SNAP benefits for all households for several months, states could focus their efforts on processing new applications.

#### For new applications:

- *Waive the requirement that applicants be interviewed by a state eligibility worker.* Federal law requires states to interview households via telephone or in-person at the initial application and at least once a year thereafter. For cases that can proceed without a full interview, a state should be permitted to waive this requirement.
- *Relax telephonic signatures.* Most states have the capability to accept telephonic signatures for applications processed over the telephone. For states who do not have this technology and for applicants without access to a telephone and the internet, states should be permitted to sign on the applicants' behalf without having to record their telephone conversation.
- *Ease paper verification requirements.* Federal law requires applicants to submit several verification documents such as pay stubs and utility bills. States should be permitted to temporarily waive these documentation requirements.
- *Expand the expedited benefits criteria.* Federal law requires states to process an application and issue benefits within 7 days for a household with extremely low income and resources, a process called expedited benefit. States should be permitted to expedite benefits to all types of household applications.
- *Expand the use of trusted application assisters.* Some community-based organizations assist the household with filing an applicant online. States should be permitted to allow applications that are not complicated coming from a trusted community-based organization to be approved.
- *Determine income based on current circumstances.* Eligibility is determined by the month of the application. For households that have experienced a change in income due to job losses and submitted an application in March, USDA could allow states to look at the applicants' anticipated income.

#### For both new and re-enrollment applications

- *Flexibility with the timing of issuing benefits.* For states that are considering more extreme measures of social distancing such as enforceable “stay at home” orders, the state could issue benefits earlier than the next scheduled date to allow households to stock up on food, facilitating compliance with social distancing measures and mitigating shortages when there are disruptions in the food supply chain.
- *Flexibility with the timing of issuing EBT cards.* States may need to change how they administer new EBT cards to households so that a household can receive their EBT card within 7 business days or less than the standard 30 days wait time from the date of certification to receive the benefit.
- *Allow purchases of hot foods and other non-eligible foods.* Federal law prohibits SNAP benefits to be used to purchase hot foods such as prepared foods in a grocery store or restaurant meals. States should be permitted to temporarily waive this requirement due to disruptions in the food supply chain transporting food to retail settings.
  - [Arizona](#), Louisiana, [North Carolina](#), and Texas have requested USDA to approve their plans to allow SNAP beneficiaries to utilize their SNAP benefits to purchase hot and ready-to-eat foods from groceries and retailers. [Texas](#)’s and [Louisiana](#)’s request is approved.

#### 11. Is the use of SNAP EBT cards to purchase food online allowed?

Yes, but **only** if your state is participating in the USDA SNAP Online Purchasing pilot. USDA started the [Online Purchasing pilot](#) program in April 2019 and it has been operational in 6 states: Alabama, Nebraska, New York, Iowa, Oregon, and Washington State.

Forty-two new states (including DC) were added in the pilot over the course of the pandemic: **Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Kansas, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming, Vermont, and Virginia.** Only state-approved retailers are eligible to participate in the pilot, which includes Walmart and Amazon in the majority of states.

USDA is seeking to expand the pilot during the pandemic due to social distancing requirements. The remaining few states should proactively submit a request to USDA for approval so that SNAP recipients in their states can purchase eligible foods online using their EBT cards from approved retailers. This would help reduce the virus exposure risk for SNAP recipients and grocery staff while facilitating the implementation of social distancing guidelines.

Please see [USDA’s website](#) on the list of states that are currently participating in the pilot including approved retailers by states.

Please see USDA's [FAQ](#) on SNAP waivers and flexibilities.

**12. Where can I find a full list of nationwide waivers issued by USDA on SNAP?**

- The USDA has started issuing nationwide waivers to provide flexibility across all federal and child nutrition programs. You can find a full list of these waivers [here](#). Please note that the USDA website is continually updated, so check back frequently. This FAQ will be updated accordingly.