

Hunger in a Pandemic

More than 112,000 people in Arizona have confirmed cases of COVID-19,¹ and many more are struggling with hunger as a result of the pandemic. Nearly **1.3 million Arizonans** could face food insecurity this year, many for the first time.²

How Has the Arizona Food Bank Network Responded?

Since mid-March, when schools and businesses began to close, AzFBN and its members³ have worked tirelessly to meet the demand for emergency food assistance, which, at times, spiked to three times the daily average. Collectively, AzFBN's member food banks and statewide network of partner agencies:



Distributed 52.5 million pounds of food, or roughly 40 million meals, to Arizonans in need in March, April, and May. That's **16 percent more** than this time last year.

Led frequent ongoing mobile distributions in tribal communities and other hard-hit areas.



Provided more than 144,000 emergency food boxes of USDA commodities in April alone, a 25 percent increase since February.

Delivered food boxes and prepared meals to seniors, families, and homeless individuals, in partnership with organizations that serve these groups.



Modified distributions to drive-through, low-touch service and collaborated with the National Guard to replace volunteers and relieve overworked staff.

SNAP Provides Critical Support

From mid-March through April, layoffs and employment restrictions put in place to reduce the spread of COVID-19 led **more than 450,000 people to file for unemployment** in Arizona. That number continues to grow, alongside participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).



Roughly **916,000 Arizonans participated in SNAP in May**, and half of them were children. That's a 12 percent jump since the start of the pandemic.⁴

The average amount of SNAP each person received rose **from \$118 to \$165 per month**, due to the sharp drop in participants' household income along with the emergency allotments authorized by the USDA through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act.



Beginning in May, Arizonans could **use SNAP to purchase groceries online** at participating retailers, minimizing COVID-19 exposure risk for people struggling with hunger.

Schools Provide Emergency Meals

Nearly **600,000 children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals in school**, and, in a typical month, schools provide about 14 million meals to students. Even with flexibilities provided by the USDA that allowed for "grab-and-go" meal service of multiple meals at one time, nearly 4 million fewer meals were served in April, according to data requested from the Arizona Department of Education.



What Can Congress Do?

There are several actions that Congress can take to improve food security for Arizonans. AzFBN urges you to:

1. Boost SNAP

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the nation's most effective nutrition program, especially for children. It can provide up to nine meals for every one meal provided by a food bank. SNAP isn't just a help to families though; it also stimulates the economy. Every \$1 of SNAP generates between \$1.50–\$1.80 in economic activity, resulting in an average of \$157 million a month infused into Arizona's economy in 2019.⁵

To limit the depth and duration of the COVID-19 health and economic crisis, AzFBN supports:



A **15 percent boost in the maximum SNAP monthly benefit**, to increase Arizona's average benefit per person from \$118 to \$138 per month.

An increase in the minimum SNAP monthly benefit from **\$16 to \$30**, to help our most vulnerable community members—namely seniors—at a time when their health is at risk.

The **suspension of time limits** on SNAP benefits for adults aged 18–49 who are not employed or raising minor children until the economy has recovered.

2. Extend Pandemic EBT

The Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) program, which provides Arizona children who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch access to \$315 in nutrition benefits during the COVID-19 school closures, has been highly successful. In May, **P-EBT reached 571,409 Arizona schoolchildren**, with more to follow in June and July. Newly eligible families can apply for the retroactive benefit until August 1.



Congress must extend P-EBT through the remainder of the summer and into the next school year, when online and hybrid learning models could reduce meal access. In summer in Arizona, only 17 percent of kids who are eligible for free or reduced price meals get the nutrition they need from schools. Extending the P-EBT program in partnership with school meal flexibilities is especially critical for children in rural, remote, and tribal areas, where access to grab-and-go meal distributions is limited.

3. Increase TEFAP Funding for Food Bank Infrastructure

As food banks in Arizona distribute more and more food to families in need that are impacted by COVID-19, the capacity of the emergency food network is stressed. Additional resources are needed for coolers, freezers, trucks, and trailers to store and distribute food across the state. This investment is critical to meet the current need and prepare for future crises.



For more information, please contact AzFBN Public Policy Manager Ashley St. Thomas at ashley@azfoodbanks.org or 602-775-5035.

SOURCES

1. AZDHS (AZ Department of Health Services), *COVID-19 Data Dashboard*. www.azdhs.gov. Total cases listed as of July 9, 2020.
2. Feeding America. *SNAP & COVID-19 in Arizona*. April 2020. www.feedingamericaaction.org/data-visualization-snap-and-covid-19/.
3. AzFBN member food banks are Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, HonorHealth Desert Mission Food Bank, St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance, United Food Bank, and Yuma Community Food Bank.
4. DES (Department of Economic Security), Family Assistance Administration. *Statistical Bulletin: May 2020*. Accessed June 30, 2020. <https://des.az.gov/documents-center>.
5. Moody's Analytics and the USDA estimate that every \$1 in SNAP generates between \$1.50–\$1.80 in economic activity. The figure cited is an average of the "total monthly issuance" of SNAP statewide in 2019 (\$95,122,426) multiplied by 1.65 (\$156,952,003), using 2019 DES Monthly Statistical Bulletins.