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Contact:

alex.haurek@mail.house.gov (Velázquez)

Keane_Bhatt@sanders.senate.gov (Sanders)

Velázquez, Sanders Introduce Nutrition Equity Bill for Puerto Rico, Samoa and Northern Mariana Islands

WASHINGTON, May 13 –Rep. Nydia M. Velázquez (D-N.Y.) and Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) introduced the Equitable Nutrition Assistance for the Territories Act of 2020 today to ensure that in the face of the economic, public-health, and food-security crises posed by the coronavirus pandemic, the people of Puerto Rico, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa receive equal access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The federal SNAP program is designed to respond to meet the needs of food-insecure Americans during times of high poverty, unemployment, and economic downturns, automatically expanding coverage. Under SNAP, everyone who is eligible receives benefits. The block grant that exists for these three territories' nutrition assistance means that no matter how many people face food insecurity, the amount of funding remains flat.

Puerto Rico is in especially dire need of increased food assistance funding due to a decades-long economic crisis, [hundreds](#) of recent earthquakes, and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, which has devastated certain parts of the island. Prior to the outbreak, [one-third](#) of adults experienced food insecurity. Since then, the island has seen an increase of over [10,000 new families](#) applying for nutrition support.

In the early 1980s, Congress removed Puerto Rico from what was then the Food Stamp Program and replaced it with a block grant. A family of four in Puerto Rico receives a maximum basic benefit of \$410 per month compared to \$649 for a family of four living

in the continental United States. The Equitable Nutrition Assistance for the Territories Act of 2020 transitions Puerto Rico, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa to SNAP benefits.

“Puerto Ricans are American citizens who fight and die in our wars,” **said Rep. Velázquez**. “It is shameful and unconscionable that, when it comes to food security, they receive disparate treatment through a program that fails to help them when they need it most. No child in our nation should ever go hungry, but especially not after natural disasters or during a historic pandemic. Unfortunately, the current nutrition assistance program fails Puerto Rico when food demand is highest. This legislation would fix this longstanding injustice and I’m proud to join Bernie Sanders in introducing it,” Velázquez added.

“Millions of families are struggling to put food on the table during this devastating pandemic. The people of Puerto Rico, the Northern Mariana Islands and American Samoa deserve the same help from the federal government as any state—period,” **Sanders said**. “This bill would end unequal treatment of the territories, help Puerto Rico recover from the earthquakes, and aid some of the most vulnerable in our society during this time of global crisis. Right now, we are all in this together and we cannot tolerate American citizens going hungry, living on U.S. soil, being denied the support they are entitled to.”

The bill is cosponsored by Senators Booker (D-N.J.), Markey (D-Mass.), Harris (D-Calif.), Blumenthal (D-Conn.), Gillibrand (D-N.Y.), Menendez (D-N.J.), Warren (D-Mass.) and Klobuchar (D-Minn.). Representatives Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.), Moore (D-Wis.), Grijalva (D-Ariz.), Gonzalez-Colón (D-P.R.), Espaillat (D-N.Y.), Holmes Norton (D-D.C.), Serrano (D-N.Y.), Meng (D-N.Y.), and Lee (D-Calif.) are House cosponsors.

“We are in the midst of a historic public health and economic crisis and the people of Puerto Rico, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa are, like other Americans, struggling to put food on the table,” **said Harris**. “It is time for Congress to take immediate action to end the discriminatory treatment of Americans living in U.S. territories and help give people the resources they need to afford food during tough times.”

Menendez: “The COVID-19 pandemic doesn’t discriminate based on the geographical location. All American citizens, no matter where they live, need and deserve support from the federal government,” **said Sen. Menendez**. “Providing equal access to the supplemental nutrition assistance program across states and territories is critical in helping families who are struggling during this crisis to put food on the table. I urge my colleagues from both sides of the aisle to join us and pass this bill. These American families have no time to wait.”

“The COVID-19 pandemic has made even more apparent the unacceptable disparity in federal nutrition assistance provided to Americans in Puerto Rico and other territories,” **Blumenthal said**. “As families across the United States struggle to make ends meet and put food on the table, our fellow citizens living in territories deserve the same help the federal government provides residents of any state. I am proud to support this legislation to ensure that federal funds are distributed justly and to help all Americans tackle food insecurity during these unprecedented times.”

“Long before this pandemic, families in Puerto Rico have suffered from natural disasters, economic crises, and unacceptable responses from the Trump administration. But enough is enough,” **said Senator Warren**. “I’m glad to support this bill to ensure communities in Puerto Rico, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa have equal access to food assistance programs, like SNAP, that they need and deserve.”

“This bill should not be controversial or partisan. The richest country in the world should feed its people. These are Americans – and we must stop treating them as second-class citizens,” **said Ocasio-Cortez**.

“Puerto Ricans need and deserve reliable access to nutrition assistance,” **said Rep. González-Colón**. “The natural disasters that have recently taken place, including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrate how the block grant formula established for Puerto Rico is inadequate and incommensurate with need. Participation in SNAP will provide truly lasting relief to residents who currently do not have access to nutrition benefits due to limited funding, and will allow equitable distribution of benefits, similar our counterparts in the 50 states, USVI and Guam.”

“Millions of American citizens in Puerto Rico and the territories depend on nutritional assistance,” **said Congressman José E. Serrano**. “Puerto Rico, in particular, has suffered due to the coronavirus pandemic, the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria and numerous earthquakes in 2020 in addition to the ongoing economic crisis. Every American citizen residing in any of the territories deserves equal treatment and this bill does just that. The Equitable Nutrition Assistance for the Territories Act of 2020 grants equal treatment under SNAP to Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands. As a longtime champion in Congress of equal treatment for Puerto Rico and the territories, I am proud to support this bill.”

“The people of Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories are American citizens and nationals with urgent needs and a legitimate claim to government aid,” **said Grijalva**. “Congress needs to fix this inequity as quickly and comprehensively as possible, and I’m proud to join my colleagues in offering badly needed food assistance before more children go hungry.”

“As communities around the globe face ongoing challenges due to the coronavirus, our

efforts to provide relief and recovery must first address the needs of the most vulnerable among us,” **said Rep. Adriano Espaillat.** “It is long past time that Puerto Rico receives equal federal treatment to support individuals and families in need, and the global COVID-19 pandemic only further exacerbates the many hardships families face. We must extend SNAP benefits to ensure these families do not face further barriers when providing food for their families during these challenging times.”

“COVID-19 has forced families across the nation to endure financial hardships including our brothers and sisters in Puerto Rico, the Northern Mariana Islands and American Samoa,” **said U.S. Rep. Grace Meng.** “We must make sure they have the help they need so that families can purchase food during this crisis and in future disasters. Nobody deserves to go hungry. I’m proud to join Senator Sanders and Congresswoman Velázquez in calling for equal access to SNAP, and I commend them for leading this critical effort.”

“For decades, Puerto Rico has been excluded from SNAP which has resulted in increasing levels of food insecurity and poverty levels for families and individuals. As Americans, it is unacceptable to continue to fund nutrition aid in Puerto Rico in such an inequitable and unfair manner,” **said Lillian Rodriguez Lopez,** representing the Coalition for Food Security Puerto Rico.

To read a summary of the bill, [click here.](#)

To read the text of the bill, [click here.](#)

To see a video on the legislation, [click here.](#)

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