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# IF CONGRESS CAN ALLOW ROTISSERIE CHICKEN, WHY STOP THERE?

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The **Farm Bill** is one of the nation's most important pieces of legislation shaping food access, agriculture, and economic security. Reauthorized approximately every five years, the legislation governs programs that millions of people rely on every day, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the nation's largest anti-hunger program.

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For decades, SNAP has helped families afford groceries during periods of economic hardship. Yet the program continues to reflect deeply rooted tensions in how policymakers view poverty, public assistance, and who deserves dignified and autonomous access to food. While lawmakers often acknowledge the importance of addressing hunger, SNAP policies frequently impose restrictions and administrative barriers that fail to reflect the realities families face.

One example is the longstanding ban on using SNAP benefits to purchase hot or prepared foods, a **decision** made during the 1964 Farm Bill that has **remained** in place since the 1970s.<sup>2,3</sup> More than 50 years later, this policy no longer reflects the realities participants face today, including rising costs of living, changing workforce demands, and the everyday challenges many families experience when trying to access or prepare affordable meals. With limited exceptions, SNAP participants cannot use their benefits to buy ready-to-eat meals, even when prepared foods may be more affordable, accessible, or practical for people navigating disabilities, older adults, working parents, individuals experiencing homelessness, or households without reliable kitchen access.

**Recent proposals** to allow SNAP recipients to purchase only one kind of prepared hot food, rotisserie chicken, signal a growing recognition that the hot foods ban creates unnecessary barriers for families.<sup>4</sup> Expanding access to prepared foods is a meaningful step toward improving access and reducing burdens for many households. But if Congress is willing to acknowledge that families need access to prepared meals, policymakers must also confront a larger question: why stop there?

Limiting access to hot foods is not simply an outdated law; it reflects a racialized narrative about who is considered deserving of dignity, flexibility, and choice. Disallowing SNAP recipients from purchasing hot foods assumes everyone has access to refrigeration, a functioning stove, stable housing, time to cook, and the physical ability to prepare meals. For many families, that is simply not the reality.

## THE UNDERLYING NARRATIVE: POLICING POVERTY AND DESERVINGNESS

When evaluating public policy, it is important to understand the historical context, assumptions, and **mental models** driving those decisions.<sup>5</sup> Restrictions on SNAP purchases are rooted in a long history of policing people experiencing poverty, particularly Black families and other communities of color.

Policies that restrict what people can purchase do nothing to address the structural barriers that limit access to affordable and nutritious food. Instead, they place responsibility on individuals while ignoring systemic inequities such as low wages, **food apartheid**, housing instability, disinvestment, and **lack of access** to grocery stores and culturally relevant foods.<sup>6,7</sup>

Policies that dictate what people can and cannot purchase with food assistance rely on the assumption that people experiencing poverty cannot be trusted to make decisions for themselves and their families. Historically, these narratives have disproportionately targeted communities of color by framing poverty as an individual moral failing rather than the result of systemic inequities and policy choices. This assumption is both harmful and inaccurate.

Solutions must move beyond policing individual choices and instead focus on structural changes that address the root causes of hunger and poverty.

## EXPANDING ACCESS MUST GO BEYOND ROTISSERIE CHICKEN

Allowing SNAP participants to purchase rotisserie chicken recognizes a reality advocates have long raised: families need access to affordable, prepared, and ready-to-eat food options. For many households, prepared foods can provide flexibility, accessibility, and relief from burdens that make meal preparation difficult.

But Congress cannot treat rotisserie chicken access as the final step toward SNAP modernization. Limiting reform to just one specific food risks creating a narrow and symbolic solution while leaving intact the underlying narratives and belief systems that continue to police the food choices of people experiencing poverty.

The assumptions driving policies that restrict food purchases are rooted in racism, classism, and other forms of oppression. People experiencing poverty do not need to be controlled or educated about what foods are “acceptable” to purchase. They need a food assistance system that ensures access to affordable, nutritious, culturally relevant, and easily accessible meals.

If lawmakers are willing to acknowledge that families need prepared hot foods, they must also recognize that limiting access to one confined category of hot food is an incomplete and inequitable solution.

## WHAT THIS PROVISION GETS RIGHT

The SNAP hot foods ban is deeply disconnected from how many families actually live. Preparing meals requires time, energy, kitchen access, physical ability, and stable housing conditions. For many families, that is simply not the reality. People **navigating disabilities** often face additional barriers to meal preparation.<sup>8</sup> Cooking can require significant physical and mental energy for individuals managing pain, fatigue, chronic illness, or mobility limitations.

Removing barriers to prepared foods can help reduce those burdens and expand access to nourishment for millions of households.

A prepared rotisserie chicken may help someone navigating a disability avoid prolonged standing, lifting heavy cookware, or other physically demanding kitchen tasks. For a working parent, it may mean being able to feed children quickly after a long shift while also providing leftovers for the next day. For someone without reliable kitchen access, it may mean having a hot meal at all.

Expanding SNAP purchasing options to include rotisserie chicken is just one step in a positive direction. Now that lawmakers have demonstrated that expanding access is both possible and necessary, why stop there?

## WHY ROTISSERIE CHICKEN ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

Families have diverse dietary, cultural, religious, and health needs. Restricting expanded access to

one specific food ignores vegetarians, people with dietary restrictions, individuals with health concerns like **hypertension**, and households that rely on other affordable prepared meals.<sup>9</sup>

Recognizing that one kind of prepared food is sometimes necessary risks creating a symbolic solution rather than a meaningful one. Expanding access to rotisserie chicken may be politically convenient and cost efficient, but it does not fully address the realities families face when trying to access affordable and nutritious meals. Policymakers should not confuse an “easy” reform with a sufficient reform.

## THE BIGGER CRISIS: SNAP CUTS UNDERMINE FOOD ACCESS

Expanding access to prepared foods cannot meaningfully improve food security if people are simultaneously losing eligibility for the program itself.

Since H.R. 1 was implemented last year, SNAP participation has already fallen by **three million people**, an eight percent decline and the largest drop in participation seen since Congress enacted deep cuts to SNAP in **1996**.<sup>10,11</sup> This decline is not because people are less hungry or have moved out of poverty. Rather, it is the result of expanded punitive and ineffective work requirements, increased eligibility restrictions, and other policy barriers that make it harder for people to access benefits. As SNAP participation declines, families face even greater barriers to accessing the food they need.

At the same time, the current Farm Bill proposal largely misses the mark because it does little to **stop or reverse** the harm already caused by H.R. 1.<sup>12</sup> Instead of restoring access to food assistance, the proposal would further entrench harmful SNAP cuts, expanded work requirements, and administrative burdens that continue pushing families deeper into economic instability.

SNAP is already under strain as lawmakers advance policies that increase barriers to participation and place households at greater risk of hunger. At a minimum, Congress should use the Farm Bill as an opportunity to halt or reverse harmful policy changes that destabilize access to food assistance, rather than codify them further. This moment calls for long-term solutions that strengthen food access and address the root causes of food insecurity, not symbolic reforms that leave broader structural harms untouched.

## A BETTER VISION FOR SNAP

“When you know better, you do better.” — Maya Angelou

Expanding access to hot foods should be part of a broader effort to modernize, strengthen, and protect SNAP so the program reflects the realities families face and advances dignity, accessibility, and equity.

A **truly equitable** SNAP program would:<sup>13</sup>

- Remove the hot foods ban broadly rather than creating narrow exceptions.
- Eliminate unnecessary SNAP food purchase **restrictions**.<sup>14</sup>
- Protect and expand SNAP eligibility.
- Reduce punitive administrative barriers and **harmful** work requirements.<sup>15</sup>
- Ensure benefits are **sufficient** and **accessible** to all who need them.<sup>16,17</sup>
- Center trust, respect, and **trauma-informed** care in program administration.<sup>18</sup>
- **Promote** long-term economic opportunity and stability.<sup>19</sup>

Allowing SNAP participants to purchase rotisserie chicken is an important acknowledgment that families need greater flexibility and access to prepared foods. But Congress should not stop there. At a time when millions of people are at risk of losing SNAP benefits, lawmakers must pursue reforms that meaningfully expand access to all hot foods rather than rely on narrow exceptions.

Legislation like the **Hot Foods Act**, championed by Representative Grace Meng (D-NY), is one example of the type of reform lawmakers should pursue.<sup>20</sup> The bill would take a more comprehensive approach by allowing SNAP recipients to purchase all hot prepared foods, ending the decades-long ban and better meeting the realities of everyday life for many families.

Families deserve SNAP policies rooted in trust, dignity, and equity — and a Farm Bill that meaningfully addresses hunger, racial inequity, and economic hardship.

For additional recommendations on building a more equitable and anti-racist food assistance system, visit **CLASP’s Farm Bill Landing Page** and read CLASP’s **“A Community-Driven Anti-Racist Vision for SNAP”**.<sup>21,22</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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