

U.S. families struggle following end of pandemic-era food benefits

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U.S. Congress has cut back expanded COVID-era food assistance benefits, creating strain for some low-income families.

A woman browses items at a food pantry in Eagle River, Alaska, in April [File: Mark Thiessen/AP Photo]

Washington, May 19 (RHC)-- About a year ago, a woman named Ana, who asked that her last name be withheld, gave birth to a baby boy named Israel. Ana was, as she put it in a recent phone call with Al

Jazeera, “making it through hard times.” Living in a shelter in Los Angeles for women who had escaped abusive relationships, she struggled to find a job.

“During the pandemic, nobody could work,” she said. “A lot of people are still looking for jobs and adjusting to things.” But with the birth of Israel, Ana received some much-needed good news: She qualified for an expanded food assistance programme implemented by the United States government during the COVID-19 pandemic. “It really was a help,” Ana said. “Truly, it was.”

But in December, Congress passed a spending bill that ended the expanded food benefits, known as emergency allotments (EAs), after February. For households that rely on food assistance, the effect has been considerable — between \$95 and \$250 less in food benefits per month.

With a baby to feed and about \$100 less for groceries than before, Ana said she has had to make difficult choices with her budget, which was already stretched thin. “It’s been a real shock,” she explained. “My son is eating solid food now, but I have to hold back because the benefits don’t last through the month anymore.”

EAs were part of a series of programs the U.S. government implemented in March 2020 to stave off economic insecurity, as families across the country reeled from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the economy slumped amid lockdowns and uncertainty about the virus, many worried that the country was on the edge of a severe increase in poverty.

But instead, the opposite happened. A proliferation of expanded government programmes — bolstering unemployment insurance and other benefits — slashed poverty rates nearly in half from pre-pandemic levels.

Expanded allotments for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which helps low-income individuals buy food, were one such effort. “These temporary increases were hugely successful at pushing back against hunger and hardship,” said Dottie Rosenbaum, who studies food benefit programmes with the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. “It’s striking that, during this period of economic crisis, food insecurity held steady and actually reached 20-year lows for families with children.”

In the last quarter of 2021, one study estimated that the EAs were keeping more than 4 million people in the U.S. out of poverty. They also decreased child poverty by 14 percent in states where they were issued. While all 50 states in the US initially utilised the EAs, by late last year 17 states had ended their pandemic emergency declarations and returned to previous benefit levels.

However, 32 states continued to offer the EAs until they came to an end as a result of the December spending bill. Some factors, such as SNAP’s annual cost-of-living adjustment and an increase in benefit maximums, may ease the hardship for recipients of food assistance. But the reality remains stark: Without the EAs, SNAP beneficiaries will receive an average of about \$6.10 per day in 2023.

Becky Silva, director of government relations at the California Association of Food Banks, said that families also have to account for the strain of inflation on household budgets. “Food prices have already gone through the roof,” Silva told Al Jazeera over a phone call. “And now 5 million people in California are experiencing this drop in their benefits. It’s going to be devastating.”

Workers at food pantries and other community organisations say they are already struggling to meet the high demand from households needing assistance. Many lack the resources to plug the holes left by the end of emergency benefits.

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