COVID-19 IS TESTING WHO WE ARE AS A SOCIETY

Official Statement from Washington’s Leading Hunger Relief Agency

(Seattle, WA – March 12, 2020) The COVID-19 virus does not discriminate. It is a human disease and not the fault of any one race. Yet the disease does have disproportionately negative impacts on individuals and communities that struggle with hunger and poverty. These communities face roadblocks to opportunities put in place by an inequitable system that does discriminate. As a result, they lack resources to afford basic needs—a struggle that’s exacerbated further in times of crisis.

The effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 relies heavily on social distancing. It’s a necessity—but it creates unique hardships for struggling families. Each day schools are closed means kids are at risk of missing nutritious meals provided daily at their school. The lack of affordable childcare or reduction of hours worked means missed or reduced paychecks. Stockpiling emergency supplies of food is a daunting expense—especially when you can barely afford to eat on a day-by-day basis.

This is why Northwest Harvest is leading the effort to secure nutritious food in response to increased food insecurity throughout our state during this crisis. Food pantries are struggling to meet increased need for services on dwindling donation streams and are in critical need of healthy volunteers to help put groceries into the hands of our neighbors.

Public funds must also be leveraged in this fight. Last week, Congress passed a bipartisan, emergency spending package to spend $8 billion on efforts to contain COVID-19. But a comprehensive public health response must include efforts to protect, strengthen, and infuse flexibility into the disbursement of federal nutrition assistance programs like SNAP (formerly called food stamps), WIC, and school meals, our first lines of defense against hunger, because charity is not enough on its own. Unfortunately, divisive and partisan politics has created federal policies that limit access to these programs when they are most in need.

Federal rules introduced by the Trump Administration severely undermine our efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 if they are implemented during this health crisis. For instance, the public charge rule, currently in effect since February 24, causes immigrant families to delay or even forgo medical or food assistance out of fear of family separation. We applaud the work of Senator Patty Murray and Attorney General Bob Ferguson for calling on the Trump Administration to immediately suspend this foolhardy rule.

Additionally, there are three rules that threaten to take food off the tables of 3.7 million Americans that could be deployed while we wait for COVID-19 to run its course.1 The first of these SNAP cuts is scheduled to take effect April 1, at a time when we could be witnessing increased work slowdowns. The rule impacts at least 68,000 Washingtonians who are limited to just three months of SNAP if they can’t consistently report 20 hours of work each week. It’s excessively cruel and defies logic to impose this rule at a time when people can’t report to work or job training due to business and school closures. It also undermines our efforts to contain the spread of the virus—taking food from individuals puts them at risk of malnutrition, which can compromise their body’s abilities to fight off the disease and cause life-threatening complications.

The COVID-19 virus is a test of who we are as a society. We must work together to ensure all have access to the essential needs that sustain good health in order to contain the spread of the virus, and that is only made possible by strong public and private partnerships. We must hold our government leaders accountable for the care of all who reside here and demand they delay implementation of harmful cuts to our safety net.

We can also volunteer our time and raise resources within our communities. We must work together to call out discrimination and xenophobic stigma triggered by misinformation and fear. We can come out of this crisis stronger than ever but only if we set aside the partisan beliefs that fuel inequity.

1https://www.urban.org/research/publication/estimated-effect-recent-proposed-changes-snap-regulations

# # #

About Northwest Harvest

Northwest Harvest is Washington’s leading hunger relief agency – supporting a statewide network of 375 food banks, meal programs, and high-need schools. Focused on improving equity in our food system, Northwest Harvest believes everyone in Washington should have consistent access to nutritious food that feeds the body, mind, and spirit. In addition to making sure those who suffer from hunger have increased access to healthy food, Northwest Harvest aims to shift public opinion, as well as impact institutional policies and societal practices that perpetuate hunger, poverty, and disparities in our state.