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Congress to Mull Whether Puerto Ricans Are Allowed Same Food Assistance as USVI Residents

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People who live in Puerto Rico could, if the U.S. Congress allows, join their fellow territorial residents in Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands in being able to access benefits under the country's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Following companion legislation introduced by Puerto Rico's Delegate to Congress Jenniffer González-Colón in the House of Representatives earlier this year, last week Senator Kirstin Gillibrand revived the legislation she had brought forward during the last session of Congress, where it never made it out of the committee stage.

Called the Puerto Rican Nutrition Assistance Fairness Act, the measure would reverse the 1982 decision by Congress to replace SNAP in Puerto Rico with a Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP)

specific to the territory. NAP is a federal block grant, meaning that each year, there is a finite pool of money recipients can draw benefits from.

“How unfair it is that Puerto Rico receives a set amount for nutrition assistance. This prevents Puerto Rican families from putting food on the table and feeding their loved ones,” said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, speaking at the [announcement](#) of the draft legislation.

On the other hand, the Food Stamp Program — what SNAP was called at the time — was structured such that everyone who was able to meet the qualification thresholds could receive assistance towards food purchases.

With a population filled with those struggling to cope with the economic impacts of Hurricane Fiona in 2022, 2017’s devastating hurricanes Irma and Maria, and the pandemic in between, access to SNAP would play a key role in accelerating Puerto Rico’s recovery, Mr. Schumer argued.

While this new Fairness Act makes its way through the legislative process, Senator Gillibrand said that potential users may not have to wait that long. “I’ve sent an appropriations letter requesting an additional one billion dollars for the NAP block grant; this will make sure Puerto Ricans have the food assistance they need until we pass our bill,” Ms. Gillibrand informed.

Meanwhile, pandemic-induced emergency allotments of SNAP in the USVI ended on Feb. 28. The V.I. Dept. of Human Services said that due to the 2023 Consolidated Appropriations Act passed by Congress on December 29, 2022, the U.S. Virgin Islands is required to phase out the emergency SNAP benefits households have been receiving since March of 2020 — the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Normal SNAP benefits resumed in March.