



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Five-Minute Floor Statement as Prepared for Delivery
Introduction of the *Puerto Rico Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Restoration Act*
March 28, 2012

Mr./Madame Speaker:

Today, I introduced the *Puerto Rico Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Restoration Act*.

In 1971, Congress enacted legislation to partially include Puerto Rico in what is today called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—or SNAP—and what was then called the Food Stamp Program. Implementation of the Food Stamp Program in Puerto Rico began in 1974. In 1977, Congress amended federal law to fully include Puerto Rico in the Food Stamp Program, so that the rules governing eligibility and benefits applied no differently on the Island than they did in the 50 states. Four years later, however, Congress reversed course. In the *Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981*, Congress exercised its broad authority under the Territory Clause of the U.S. Constitution and removed Puerto Rico from the Food Stamp Program, electing instead to provide the Island government with an annual block grant. Since 1982, Puerto Rico has used this block grant, which is now adjusted each year for inflation, to administer the Nutrition Assistance Program, called PAN, which differs from SNAP in a number of material respects.

The bill I have introduced today, which I will seek to include in the 2012 Farm Bill, would reinstate the SNAP program in Puerto Rico in place of the block grant.

If this bill is enacted into law, Puerto Rico would join the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and two U.S. territories—Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands—as jurisdictions fully participating in SNAP.

My decision to file legislation converting Puerto Rico back to SNAP was made only after a careful weighing of the benefits and costs associated with conversion. Specifically, I relied primarily upon an in-depth study prepared by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which evaluated the feasibility and impact of reinstating SNAP in Puerto Rico. This study was required by a provision in the 2008 Farm Bill, which was included due to the efforts of then-Resident Commissioner, and now-Governor, Luis Fortuño. On this subject, as with other important issues that I am tackling, I have adhered to the principle that it is essential to build a thorough evidentiary record prior to taking significant legislative action in order to maximize the chance of success. To act with haste, without adequate empirical data to support one's cause, is ultimately self-defeating.

The USDA report is comprehensive and raises a number of important policy questions, but its bottom-line message for Puerto Rico is crystal clear: namely, while there are some trade-offs associated with conversion from PAN to SNAP, the benefits of conversion far outweigh the costs.

Let me be more specific. Applying certain assumptions, the USDA study found that conversion would increase the number of households that receive nutrition assistance in Puerto Rico by over 15 percent. An additional 85,000 households—consisting of 220,000 individuals—would participate in SNAP. Moreover, restoring SNAP would raise the average monthly benefit for participating households by nearly 10 percent, or \$23 dollars. Not every household would see an increase in benefits under SNAP, but most would. And finally, instituting equal treatment for Puerto Rico under SNAP would mean an additional \$457 million dollars in federal funding for the Island each year, over 90 percent of which would take the form of additional benefits for households.

These numbers reveal a fundamental truth: because Congress removed Puerto Rico from SNAP 20 years ago, hundreds of thousands of needy children, families and seniors on the Island have received no nutrition assistance at all or have received far fewer benefits than they would have received if living in the 50 states or even the neighboring USVI. Accordingly, Puerto Rico's exclusion from this program serves as yet another example of how the American citizens I represent—especially my most vulnerable constituents—are treated unequally because of the Island's territory status.

Whether I am fighting to convert Puerto Rico to SNAP or to increase its annual PAN block grant so that more families can receive assistance, I strongly believe this is a fight worth making. By ensuring that the neediest of my constituents can afford a healthy diet, we enable them to live dignified and independent lives, which in the long run helps reduce health care costs and take the pressure off other government-funded social safety-net programs.

Thank you, Mr./Madame Speaker.