

The SNAP Participants Collaborative: **IMPROVE SNAP BENEFITS TO PROMOTE HEALTH AND REDUCE HUNGER**

INTRODUCTION

Many people say that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or food stamps, helps treat hunger in America. As participants in this program, we agree. SNAP helps us buy much needed groceries. But it cannot end hunger in America because the benefit amount is not enough to cover the cost of a healthy diet, nor does it reach all families equally. We know firsthand how to cut coupons, shop at multiple stores to get the best deals, stretch our dollars, and stretch our food. Yet we still run out of money for food by the third week of each month.

We, the SNAP Participants Collaborative, are experts on SNAP benefits. We have been using SNAP to help feed our families for decades. We have seen a variety of problems in the way SNAP is calculated and administered. We encourage the administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) to vastly improve the Thrifty Food Plan Calculation and make other improvements to SNAP.

In the following brief, we identify major challenges with the current SNAP benefits and offer recommendations to make SNAP work for families like ours.

BACKGROUND

The Thrifty Food Plan has not changed since 2006, and increases in job loss and uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that the time for change is long overdue.

Here is the good news: On January 22, President Joe Biden issued an executive order to reevaluate the Thrifty Food Plan, on which SNAP benefits are based, as part of the COVID-19 economic relief plan.

The executive order notes that the current SNAP benefits are out of date and do not meet the needs of struggling households today.

After decades of our advocacy and that of research scientists, the administration is finally looking to update SNAP to better support a healthy, adequate diet for families like ours across the country.

WHAT IS THE THRIFTY FOOD PLAN?

The Thrifty Food Plan is a food cost calculation used to determine the amount of money people receive



in SNAP. Developed in 1968 by the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the current TFP is based on the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the 2005 MyPyramid Food Guidance System.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

1 Choosing healthy foods is difficult with current SNAP benefits

Having the choice to buy quality foods is important for our health. We have the right to have healthy foods such as fresh produce, whole grains, and lean, unprocessed meats.

Because the current SNAP benefits are not enough for a healthy diet, many families cannot afford or readily access fresh produce.

Some people think we ought to buy food in bulk that has a longer shelf life. However, many of us prefer fresh produce over canned foods. Canned food is usually less healthy. It has higher sodium levels and may have the chemical BPA in the can lining, which can cause cancer. Frankly, canned vegetables, fruit, and meat do not taste as good as their fresh counterparts.

Shopping weekly for fresh fruits and vegetables allows us to cook and feed our families healthier meals.

The problem is even deeper for families with children and adults with special needs. This includes special considerations necessary for breastfeeding and having family members with disabilities, dietary sensitivities, or food allergies. Additionally, it is important for participation in our precious cultural traditions.

We are no different than the general American public—we struggle with trying to prevent and treat heart disease and diabetes. Like all people, we need to be able to access healthy foods to manage these conditions.

2 SNAP calculation discriminates against people trying to escape poverty

The SNAP benefit calculation does not take into account all related costs that go into buying and cooking food. This includes costs of housing, utilities, childcare, and transportation.

As a result, when most families run out of SNAP benefits long before the month is over, we must then make unbearable trade-offs. We have to consider skipping meals, eating less healthy foods, or choosing between paying bills or buying food. This not only adds more stress for families on SNAP, but it can also have financial consequences. For example, families that fall behind on bills may be penalized with late fees, have utilities shut off, or face eviction from falling behind on rent.

Additionally, many families exceed the income limit by just a few dollars. Those families are excluded from participating in SNAP, even though they also struggle to afford food.

For those of us participating in SNAP who are trying to get better jobs with better pay, there are even more challenges. The moment we get a bigger paycheck, our benefits are immediately reduced or even cut off.

The research reflects this reality: when families make a bit more money and lose benefits, they are more likely to report their kids as hungry, be in poor health, or make healthcare tradeoffs.¹

The SNAP calculation is also unfair in how it accounts for other benefits families may receive. SNAP benefits are reduced when families receive benefits like Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and child support payments. All these programs—just like SNAP—do not account for the total cost of purchasing food, including transportation, preparation, and storage. As a result, the reduction in SNAP benefits keeps families in a constant state of poverty.

The SNAP calculation undervalues participants by undercounting the true cost of a healthy diet and cost of living. We are intentionally penalized for getting a raise or a better job, which discourages us from advancing our careers. We want to eventually get off SNAP, but the way it works now makes it seem like the goal is to keep us poor and sick.

1. Ettinger de Cuba, S., Chilton, M., Bovell-Ammon, A., Knowles, M., Coleman, S. M., Black, M. M., Cook, J. T., Cutts, D. B., Casey, P. H., Heeren, T. C., & Frank, D. A. (2019). Loss Of SNAP Is Associated With Food Insecurity And Poor Health In Working Families With Young Children. *Health Affairs*, 38(5), 765–773. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2018.05265>

3 SNAP application and recertification processes are discriminatory

Applying for SNAP benefits and proving eligibility is stressful and time-consuming. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, county assistance offices have been unpleasant and unsafe. Caseworkers are known to lose paperwork, forget to file, or delay filing the necessary paperwork. Many of them are rude or disrespectful to families on SNAP.

It becomes even more stressful when benefits arrive late, or pandemic-specific benefits never arrive.

During COVID-19, the process for receiving SNAP has improved. The updated, computerized systems are much more efficient (with a timestamp to keep everyone honest). We are not putting ourselves at health risks by going to the county assistance offices in person.

We encourage the USDA/FNS to continue to improve these processes.

4 Grocery store and farmers market locations and prices make it hard to access healthy food

Families want affordable options to access healthy foods. That is not possible when there are no good grocery stores in our neighborhoods. We recognize that this is due to effects of redlining and housing discrimination.

To access healthy foods, many of us need to travel to other neighborhoods via car, rideshare, or public transportation. This is costly, time-consuming, and unsafe, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many of the grocery stores and corner stores in our neighborhoods have higher prices and lower quality foods, with many grocery shelves devoted to unhealthy foods.

Farmers markets offer affordable options to get fresh produce. However, many of our neighborhoods don't have farmers markets, and most markets are not set up to accept SNAP benefits.

Finally, many of us have observed that the grocery stores in our neighborhoods will raise prices at the beginning of the month to make food even less accessible for SNAP recipients who receive their benefits at the beginning of the month.

NEXT STEPS

- We have already met with representatives at the USDA Food and Nutrition Services to express these concerns and recommendations.
- Now, we share these recommendations with you, the public and policymakers, so that you too, can understand the challenges of SNAP. We hope you use the opportunities you can to encourage the USDA to update and improve SNAP and help promote health and wellbeing of all people in the United States.

Policy Recommendations

Given the challenges we experience with the current SNAP calculation, recertification processes, and neighborhood factors, we offer the following solutions for improving SNAP.



Reevaluate the SNAP calculation

- The SNAP benefit calculation should be based on the cost of a healthy diet—consisting of fresh produce, whole grains, and lean meat—for the general public, not just for “the poor.” This demands that the USDA make a strong commitment to equity and non-discrimination in their calculations.
- The SNAP benefit calculation should consider the true cost of living—this includes accounting for the true cost of housing in various communities, and the true cost of utilities, childcare, and transportation.
- The SNAP benefit calculation should account for the time costs of cooking and travel.
- SNAP benefits should accommodate families with unique needs—i.e. older children with diets similar to adults, special dietary requirements, and medical issues—and offer a greater allotment of benefits to accommodate those needs.



Increase family eligibility to support career opportunities

- The income limit for families to be eligible for SNAP should be increased from 130% to 200% of the federal poverty line.
- The re-certification period should be 24 months to allow families to accept raises and promotions on the job or make it past new job probation periods to stabilize their incomes and homes.



Update store eligibility

- Grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods that accept SNAP should be required to have more shelf space devoted to healthier options and should only advertise healthy food options.
- Guidelines should be implemented to prevent grocery stores from price gouging in low-income neighborhoods, as well as shifting prices throughout the month to try to capture more of our SNAP funds.
- Efforts should be made to ensure farmers markets are accessible to underserved neighborhoods and all accept SNAP as payment to increase healthy food options.

ABOUT THE SNAP PARTICIPANTS COLLABORATIVE

We are a group of current and past SNAP participants sharing our expertise based on the lived experience of participating in SNAP to educate policymakers and the public on how to make the program work for all people.

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