

# Introduction

## The Benefits of Participation in SNAP

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formally known as the Food Stamp Program, is an investment in our future. It offers nutrition benefits to participating clients, supports work, and provides economic benefits to communities. However, too many low-income people who are eligible for the program do not participate and thus forgo nutrition assistance that could stretch their food dollars at the grocery store. Their communities lose out on the benefits provided by new SNAP dollars flowing into local economies.

In fiscal year 2008, only 66 percent of those eligible for SNAP benefits participated.<sup>1</sup> The most common reason eligible people do not participate is because they do not realize they may be eligible. Others choose not to apply because of myths or misunderstandings about SNAP benefits or because of stigma that continues to persist. Others make a cost-benefit decision that the time involved in applying for benefits is not worth the expected return. Some do not want to accept government assistance. For specific populations, there may be additional compounding factors, such as language barriers for legal immigrants, or time and transportation barriers for the working poor. Seniors may not understand the nature of the program and choose not to apply for benefits, thinking children or families need the help more.

Outreach and education are powerful tools in overcoming barriers to SNAP participation. Even a small increase in SNAP participation can have a substantial impact. If the national participation rate rose 5 percentage points, 1.9 million more low-income people would have an additional \$1.3 billion in benefits per year to use to purchase healthy food and \$2.5 billion total in new economic activity would be generated nationwide.

*“SNAP is the first line of defense against hunger in our community. Making sure low-income people receive SNAP benefits accomplishes many things. First and most importantly, people get fed. Second, community and faith-based organizations such as ours are relieved of having to provide a higher level of food assistance. Third, the local grocers do business with customers that they may not have otherwise. And fourth, we are all healthier and happier.”*

Bill Bolling, Executive Director,  
Atlanta Community Food Bank Atlanta, Georgia

## **Why does increasing participation in SNAP make sense for your community?**

### SNAP Generates Economic Activity

SNAP brings Federal dollars into communities in the form of benefits which are redeemed by SNAP participants at local stores. These benefits ripple throughout the economies of the community, State, and Nation. For example:

- Every \$5 in new SNAP benefits generates a total of \$9.20 in community spending.<sup>2</sup>
- Every additional dollar's worth of SNAP benefits generates 17 to 47 cents of new spending on food.<sup>3</sup>
- On average, \$1 billion of retail food demand by SNAP recipients generates 3,300 farm jobs.<sup>4</sup>

1. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis (ORA). Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates, 2001-2008, by Joshua Leftin. Washington, DC, June 2010. Available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/Published/snap/SNAPPartNational.htm>.
2. Hanson, Kenneth, and Elise Golan (2002). Effects of Changes in Food Stamp Expenditures Across the U.S. Economy. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. Available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr26/fanrr26-6/fanrr26-6.pdf>. Note: The economic effect of increasing food stamp benefits was measured for the whole U.S. economy and may vary by location.
3. Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs and the General Economy: Links to the General Economy and Agriculture (2002). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. Note: Even though recipients spend all food stamps on food, the food stamps allow them to shift some of their previous cash expenditures on food to alternative uses.

In fiscal year 2009, the average monthly SNAP benefit per household was approximately \$272. These benefits, funded by Federal dollars, create business when they are redeemed at your local food retailers. Eighty-six percent of benefits, totaling \$25 billion, were redeemed at the nation's 35,000 supermarkets. The remaining benefits, totaling \$3.6 billion, contribute to the viability of 121,000 other firms which include grocery stores, convenience stores, combination stores, farmer's markets, and other retail food stores; plus wholesalers and meal services.<sup>6</sup>

SNAP benefits are positively and significantly related to household food expenditures.<sup>7</sup> Although estimates of the impact vary, studies have shown that a \$1 increase in the value of SNAP benefits of a typical recipient household leads to additional food expenditures of between 17 and 47 cents.<sup>8</sup> SNAP recipients spend more dollars on food at local retailers in communities than eligible nonparticipants.

SNAP benefits can be used at authorized farmers markets that sell local produce. This provides additional customers for local farmers and provides SNAP recipients access to healthy, locally grown fruits and vegetables that might otherwise be unavailable to them.

## SNAP Supports Work And Helps Low-Income People Make The Transition To Self-Sufficiency

More than 29 percent of SNAP households had earnings in 2008 and 40 percent of all SNAP participants lived in a household with earnings.<sup>9</sup> Employees whose nutrition needs are met at home may be healthier and thus may take fewer sick days for themselves or their children. Employees may stay longer with companies that care about them by sharing information about SNAP benefits and its importance as a work support.

SNAP helps families become financially stable and make the transition to self-sufficiency, getting them through the tough times. Half of all new participants will leave the program within nine months.<sup>10</sup>

SNAP benefits are a work support. SNAP benefits help those leaving the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program and transitioning to work by supplementing their food budgets so that they can stay independent and work toward self-sufficiency.<sup>11</sup> Since SNAP benefits decrease only by 24 to 36 cents for every additional dollar of earnings, SNAP recipients have incentives to work since they will be better off working rather than receiving SNAP benefits alone.<sup>12</sup>

*“To reach common ground, we need to go to higher ground. Together with our business and government leaders, we can build community and economic prosperity for all.”*

Daniella Levine, Executive Director  
Human Service Coalition Miami, Florida

4. Ibid.
5. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis, *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2009*, by Joshua Leftin, Andrew Gothro, and Esa Eslami. Project Officer, Jenny Genser. Alexandria, VA: 2010. Available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/Published/SNAP/SNAPPartHH.htm>
6. STARS Quarterly Management Activity Report, 10/23/04.
7. Fraker, Thomas M., Sharon K. Long, and Charles E. Post (1990). *Analyses of the 1985 Continuing Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals--Volume I, Estimating Usual Dietary Intake, Assessing Dietary Adequacy, and Estimating Program Effects: Applications of Three Advanced Methodologies Using FNS's Four-Day Analysis File*. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.  
  
Also: Levedahl, JW. *The Effect of Food Stamps on Household Food Expenditures*. Technical Bulletin No. 1794. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture: Economic Research Service.
8. Fox, Mary Kay, William Hamilton, (editors) and Biing-Hwan Lin (2004). *Effects of Food Assistance and Nutrition Programs on Nutrition and Health, Volume 3, Literature Review*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture: Economic Research Service, USDA, 2004. [www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr19-3](http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr19-3)
9. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis (ORA). *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2008, Summary*. October 2009. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/SNAP/FILES/Participation/2008CharacteristicsSummary.pdf>
10. Gleason, Phillip, Peter Schochet, and Robert Moffit (1998). *The Dynamics of Food Stamp Program Participation in the Early 1990s*. Alexandria, VA: U. S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan03012/efan03012ref.pdf>
11. Rosenbaum, Dorothy and David Super (2005). *The Food Stamp Program: Working Smarter for Working Families*. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Available at <http://www.cbpp.org/3-15-05fa.htm>
12. Ibid.

## SNAP Helps Low-Income Families Make Healthy Food Choices And Puts More Nutritious Food On The Table

Dietary patterns among low-income people, as well as those of the general public, indicate an excessive consumption of calories, unhealthy fats and sugars, while fruit, vegetable and whole grain intakes are modest.<sup>13</sup> These poor eating habits contribute to making overweight and obesity a national health problem. In addition to the toll on personal health, this “epidemic” of obesity has economic implications as well. Obesity-attributable medical expenditures in the United States reached \$75 billion in 2003. Taxpayers financed about half of these costs through Medicare and Medicaid.<sup>14</sup>

However, research shows that low-income households participating in SNAP have access to more food energy, protein, and a broad array of essential vitamins and minerals in their home food supply compared to eligible nonparticipants.<sup>15</sup> Nationwide, if there were a 5 percentage point increase in the SNAP participation rate, an additional 1.9 million low-income people would reap the nutrition benefits of SNAP. SNAP also helps participants manage their food resources more wisely through SNAP nutrition education. States may exercise the option to provide targeted nutrition education activities or social marketing campaigns designed to help persons eligible for SNAP make healthier food choices and pursue active lifestyles.

Because SNAP benefits are available to most low-income households with few resources, regardless of age, disability status, or family structure, SNAP households are a diverse group. Nine percent of SNAP recipients are aged 60 or older.<sup>16</sup> For the elderly, a particularly vulnerable and underserved population, participation in SNAP and other food assistance programs can help improve their nutrition status and well-being and increase independence. Nearly half of SNAP participants are children.<sup>17</sup> Children who are well-nourished may have better attendance at school and, once there, may be more focused on learning.

*“The additional support which [SNAP benefits] provide to needy individuals is readily seen in our stores that serve customers in low-income areas. This benefit not only helps those who require some additional assistance in making ends meet, but is also an aid to the supermarkets making a commitment to serving economically challenged communities. Our partnership with nonprofit organizations in outreaching to potential participants speaks to Pathmark’s commitment to this important program.”*

RICH SAVNER, Director of Public Affairs and Government Relations  
Pathmark Stores, Inc. Carteret, New Jersey

## Combined Efforts Are Needed

SNAP is the cornerstone of the Nation’s nutrition safety net, providing assistance to those who qualify. It helps relieve pressure on emergency food providers, enabling them to provide more assistance to those who do not qualify for SNAP benefits. Because of the nutrition benefits to participants and the economic benefits to the Nation and to States and communities, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has made increasing participation in SNAP a priority. Increasing participation in SNAP requires the combined efforts of National, State, and local public leaders as well as nonprofit community agencies, employers, and anyone else who touches the lives of potentially eligible people.

13. Gleason P, Rangarajan A, Olson C. Dietary Intake and Dietary Attitudes Among Food Stamp Participants and Other Low-Income Individuals. Report prepared for the Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, September 2000. Available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/NutritionEducation/Files/FSPDiet.pdf>.
14. Obesity Costs States Billions in Medical Expenses. Press Release. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, January 21, 2004. <http://www.cdc.gov/media>
15. Devaney, Barbara, Pamela Haines, and Robert Moffitt (1989). Assessing the Dietary Effects of the Food Stamp Program -Volumes I and II. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

Also: Allen, Joyce E., and Kenneth E. Gadson (1983). Nutrient Consumption Patterns of Low-Income Households. Technical Bulletin No. 1685. Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Also: Fox, Mary Kay, William Hamilton, (editors) and Biing-Hwan Lin (2004). Effects of Food Assistance and Nutrition Programs on Nutrition and Health, Volume 3, Literature Review. Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

16. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Analysis, Nutrition and Evaluation. Characteristics of Food Stamp Households: Fiscal Year 2003, FSP-04-CHAR, by Karen Cunnyingham and Beth Brown. Project Officer, Kate Fink. Alexandria, VA: 2004. Available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/MENU/Published/SNAP/FILES/Participation/2003Characteristics.pdf>.
17. Ibid.

*The rest of this “Introduction” section provides an explanation of the Toolkit, an overview of SNAP, SNAP question-and-answer sheets (Q&As), talking points, information about nutrition education providers, and other background materials.*

## ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

### ***Why was this toolkit developed?***

We all have a common goal: to improve the ability of low-income people to access nutritious food by participating in SNAP. The information and materials in this toolkit will help you share information about SNAP benefits with those who are eligible but not participating. They will also help you let potential partners, government officials, and the public know how SNAP participation helps the local economy and addresses the national health problem of obesity.

### ***What is SNAP outreach?***

SNAP outreach is providing information or assistance to someone who might be eligible for SNAP. The goals of SNAP outreach are to help someone make an informed decision about whether to apply for the program, and ultimately to increase participation by eligible individuals and families.

### ***What is in the toolkit?***

This toolkit includes information on:

- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Maximizing your outreach efforts through developing partnerships
- Tailoring outreach to unique audiences
- Resources

### ***How do I use the toolkit?***

The materials in this toolkit show a number of outreach possibilities, and offer your State the flexibility to pick and choose pieces that work for your specific needs. Throughout the toolkit there are tip sheets and templates that you can duplicate. You do not have to conduct every one of these activities or invest a lot of time in each one. Do what works best for your State. Since SNAP State agencies have policy options and State-specific information, it is suggested that State-specific references and information be inserted as appropriate into this kit. For example, if your State has its own toll-free number, it may be inserted into this kit to make it more relevant to your State.



### Tips & Tools

Each section features easy-to-follow instructions, helpful hints, and useful materials (such as PSA scripts and recipe cards). We also have included templates (for letters, calendar listings, etc.) that you can customize with local and State specifics and enhance with information about your organization.

## Target Populations

Findings show that, in addition to the general low-income audience, there are distinct groups that are significantly underrepresented in accessing SNAP benefits. The national outreach campaign is focused on reaching:

- **GENERAL LOW-INCOME** Eligible, nonparticipating individuals and families;
- **WORKING POOR** Employed individuals and families who may not understand that even though they work, they still might qualify;
- **ELDERLY** People 60 years-old or older who may have misunderstandings about the process and potential benefits; and
- **LEGAL IMMIGRANTS\*** Immigrants may misunderstand eligibility requirements related to citizenship.

*\*There are other immigrant groups that could benefit from this educational effort. You may want to connect with local SNAP eligibility workers in your community to identify other distinct groups to target. Some FNS outreach materials are available in 36 languages and can be downloaded from the FNS Web site. Refer to the [Resources](#) section of this toolkit.*

### ***How do I get started with outreach?***

You can ask organizations in the community you wish to target about their current efforts to conduct SNAP outreach project, and whether they have a resource guide, task force, or advisory group. Other State SNAP offices and community-based groups would be a good starting point for such a discussion. They may be able to share State and local information and may also have informational materials to add to your effort. By working together, you will be able to further your goals and avoid duplication.

As you start your project, be sure to keep SNAP workers informed of your activities. Explore ways of working together to reduce application barriers—the best outreach efforts will not work if people run into barriers at the SNAP office. Extended office hours, child care areas in waiting rooms, and shorter applications are some examples of how SNAP offices can increase accessibility. Potential roadblocks such as crowded offices, long waiting lines, or repeated visits to the SNAP office may counter your efforts to educate potential applicants about SNAP and prepare them for certification interviews.

### ***Are funds available to help pay for a State outreach project?***

One way to pay for part of your outreach project is through a State outreach plan. Outreach is an allowable administrative cost for SNAP. States can receive 50 percent reimbursement from the Federal Government for necessary, reasonable, and allowable SNAP outreach expenditures. States have the option of developing an outreach plan and submitting it for approval to their FNS regional office. FNS encourages States to develop and submit an outreach plan since it provides structure for the activity and enables FNS regional offices to provide technical assistance. The outreach plan also formalizes the State's plans and may be used as a powerful tool to garner community support and resources. Instructions for developing and submitting a plan, as well as examples of allowable and unallowable outreach activities and applicable fiscal policies for State plans, can be found at: [www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/stateplan.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/stateplan.htm).

For more information about State outreach plans, contact your FNS regional office. Contact persons and email addresses are included at the end of this toolkit.

### ***Can States provide nutrition education too?***

Yes, SNAP funding is available for nutrition education. States can develop a nutrition education plan and submit it to their FNS regional office. Almost all States have optional nutrition education plans in place. For a list of organizations participating in State nutrition education plans, go to the Food Stamp Nutrition Connection Web site at [www.nal.usda.gov/foodstamp/Stategates/index.html](http://www.nal.usda.gov/foodstamp/Stategates/index.html).

### ***What outreach is happening on a national level and how does our State fit in?***

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has a nationwide effort to educate and inform eligible nonparticipants — with special emphasis on working poor, elderly, and immigrants — about SNAP.

The campaign's primary goal is to increase enrollment in SNAP and to reinforce its role as a nutrition assistance program. The objectives of the education effort were developed with advice and input from many local SNAP offices and partners, as well as those in target audiences. These objectives are to:

- Expand awareness of SNAP as a nutrition assistance and work support program;
- Inform eligible, unenrolled people about where and how they can apply; and
- Ensure that people who are eligible to enroll have reasonable access and can participate with dignity and respect.

This effort, designed to raise awareness of and change beliefs about SNAP, includes promotion of a national toll-free information line through a variety of English and Spanish paid radio advertisements and public service announcements. These advertisements run on stations in major population centers, and in areas with particularly large numbers of eligible but unenrolled

populations. Over a seven year period, 2003-2010, markets carrying ads with the SNAP National Hotline number averaged a 272 percent increase in information packets. (Calls could not be tracked in areas where the ads offer a local toll-free number rather than the national one.)

States are an important part of this national effort to inform low-income people across the country about how they and their families can eat right, even when money's tight. The outreach you conduct Statewide and on a local level is a vital part of the national campaign.

### ***What if I have more questions?***

If you have any questions about this toolkit, or about how to conduct outreach to increase local enrollment in SNAP, please email us at [fspoutreach@fns.usda.gov](mailto:fspoutreach@fns.usda.gov) or refer to the FNS Web site, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/default.htm>. Your FNS regional office is also a good source of information about outreach.

You may also wish to tap the Food Stamp Outreach Coalition, a Web-based network of national advocacy groups and partner organizations, for helpful insights about ways to reach SNAP target audiences. Details about this group can be found in the "Resources" section under "General Food Stamp Outreach Resources," or by visiting [www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/about.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/about.htm).

# Common SNAP Myths

## Four Common SNAP Myths Heard From Potential Applicants

**MYTH: “SNAP is a welfare program.”**

**TRUTH:** SNAP is a nutrition assistance program designed to help individuals and families buy nutritious food when money’s tight.

**MYTH: “Some people receive only \$10 a month in SNAP benefits.”**

**TRUTH:** While some receive \$10, the average SNAP benefit per person is about \$101 per month (fiscal year 2008 data).

**MYTH: “You cannot get SNAP benefits if you have a job.”**

**TRUTH:** Individuals may work and still have income low enough to receive SNAP benefits. In fact, nearly 40 percent of SNAP households had earnings in 2008.

**MYTH: “Other people need SNAP benefits more than I do.”**

**TRUTH:** By receiving SNAP benefits, you are not taking benefits away from another person. Everyone who applies and is determined to be eligible by the State/local eligibility worker will get SNAP benefits.

## Four Common SNAP Myths Heard From Eligibility Workers

**MYTH: “Outreach could mean more quality control errors.”**

**TRUTH:** The number of low-income people participating in SNAP is growing; however, the error rate is at an all-time low.

**MYTH: “Community workers cannot prescreen for eligibility or help gather verification documents.”**

**TRUTH:** Community groups can prescreen clients using the FNS prescreening tool known as “Step 1” (or the State prescreening tool, if one exists). Additionally, they can help fill out application forms, gather verification information, etc. However, the responsibility for the actual certification of households for program benefits remains with SNAP staff.

**MYTH: “Certification interviews must be held at local SNAP offices.”**

**TRUTH:** Local SNAP offices can take applications or certify households for benefits at remote locations such as food bank and grocery stores. Local offices may offer telephone interviews, when appropriate.

**MYTH: “Outreach will increase my workload.”**

**TRUTH:** Community workers help potential applicants gather appropriate verification documents so that clients are better prepared for the interview and bring the proper paperwork.



## Overview of SNAP Program

### Nutrition Assistance

SNAP is the cornerstone of the Federal nutrition assistance safety net, serving as the first line of defense against hunger. SNAP provides much-needed nutrition support to millions of low-income people. Nearly half of them are children.

### Economic Benefits

Not only does SNAP help individuals and families when money’s tight, but your State and local community also benefit. The average SNAP benefit per person is about \$101 per month (fiscal year 2008 data), which is spent in local grocery stores. In fact, every \$5 in new Federal SNAP benefits generates almost double the amount in local economic activity. Also, every additional dollar in SNAP benefits generates 17 to 47 cents of new spending on food.

### Electronic Issuance

In June 2004, SNAP completed a transformation from paper coupons to an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card. Participants receive a plastic EBT card (similar to a bank debit card) with the dollar amount for which they are eligible each month. There is evidence that EBT also decreases fraudulent use of SNAP benefits.

### Underserved Population

Millions of low-income people are not accessing the nutrition benefits for which they qualify. To be effective, it is important that our national and local outreach efforts counter myths about SNAP among those who think they are not eligible or have beliefs that discourage them from enrolling.

# SNAP Fact Sheet

SNAP is the first line of defense against hunger. On average, it helps more than 28 million (fiscal year 2008 data) low-income people buy nutritious food each month and make healthy food choices within a limited budget. Eating healthier foods helps low-income people and their families stay well and have the energy they need for today's active lifestyles.

To apply for SNAP benefits, a person must go through the local SNAP office. If it is not possible to get to the office, a person may apply by telephone or make an appointment for another time or place. Any knowledgeable adult in the family can initiate an application, or the household may designate an "authorized representative" to apply for them.

## Eligibility Requirements

**Applicants must have INCOMES under certain levels, based on household size. A household is defined as people who live together and eat meals together.**

**Applicants may have RESOURCES, but they must be less than a certain level:**

- \$2,000 for most households
- \$3,000 for a household with an elderly person (age 60 or older) or disabled person
- Most States exempt one or more vehicles from household resources
- A household's home does not count as a resource

**An immigrant is eligible to apply for SNAP benefits if he/she:**

- Has been in the United States as a legal resident for five years
- Is a legal immigrant child (not born in the United States)
- Has earned, or can be credited with, 40 quarters of work
- Is a refugee or asylee
- Has a military connection
- Is a member of certain Indian tribes

*NOTE: A child born in the United States or a legal immigrant child is eligible for SNAP benefits, even if other household members are not eligible because of their immigration status.*

**Please check with your local SNAP office for more information about these eligibility requirements.**

The amount of the SNAP benefit for each household takes into account the household's income, current living expenses, and resources.



## Outreach Tools

SNAP outreach is critical to reaching those low-income people who are not aware that they may be eligible for, or do not know how to apply for, program benefits. The Food and Nutrition Service has several efforts under way to help with local outreach:

### Tools Available

- A prescreening eligibility tool, written at the 6th grade level in both English and Spanish, is available for anyone with Internet access. The tool helps people learn if they are eligible and how much they **might** receive in monthly benefits. It can be found at [www.snap-step1.usda.gov/fns/](http://www.snap-step1.usda.gov/fns/)
- A toll-free information line (1-800-221-5689) is available in Spanish and English.
- Free educational posters and fliers in Spanish and English can be ordered at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/default.htm>.
- Five basics documents in 36 languages can be found online at [www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/translations.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/translations.htm).
- A national SNAP Outreach Coalition brings together national and local organizations interested in SNAP outreach and helps to empower these groups to do more and better outreach.
- The FSOC listserv was developed to be a communication mechanism for those interested in outreach at the local, State, and national levels, and to share ideas among groups. To join, send an email to [fsoc@fns.usda.gov](mailto:fsoc@fns.usda.gov).

# SNAP Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

## ***What is SNAP?***

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is a nutrition assistance program that helps low-income families and individuals purchase nutritious, healthy food. It is the cornerstone of the Nation's nutrition assistance safety net. The U.S. Department of Agriculture oversees SNAP at the Federal level through its Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). State agencies administer the program at State and local levels. Their responsibilities include determining eligibility and distributing benefits.

## ***Who is eligible to receive SNAP benefits?***

Anyone who meets the eligibility requirements can get SNAP benefits. Household income and other resources have to be under certain limits and are reviewed. The program allows for certain deductions like housing costs, child support, medical expenses, or child-care costs. A household may also have up to \$2000 in assets. Households with a member age 60 or older—or a disabled member—may have up to \$3000 in assets. Assets that do not count toward eligibility requirements include: a home, a vehicle to carry a physically disabled member of a household, the fair market value of one vehicle (up to \$4,650; higher limits in most States), and the resources of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients. Specific details are outlined in the FNS-313 brochure at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/translations.htm>.

## ***Where can people find out if they are eligible to receive SNAP benefits?***

People with access to a computer can quickly find out if he/she might qualify for SNAP benefits through the prescreening tool available on the USDA Web site, [www.snap-step1.usda.gov/fns](http://www.snap-step1.usda.gov/fns). Local SNAP offices can provide information about eligibility, and USDA operates a toll-free number (1-800-221-5689) for people to call if they want to receive information about SNAP by mail. Most States also have a toll-free information/hotline number that can be found at [www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/contact\\_info/hotlines.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/contact_info/hotlines.htm). Some community organizations work closely with SNAP offices and can provide information on the application process.

## ***What is the EBT card?***

All 50 States have made the transition from paper coupons to the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card. The EBT card is like a debit card and can be used at USDA-authorized grocery stores across the country. At the cash register, the customer or cashier swipes the EBT card through the card reader at the point of sale and the customer enters a personal identification number to secure the transaction. The system deducts the exact dollar amount of the purchase from the customer's EBT account and deposits it into the retailer's bank account. Once the SNAP EBT transaction is complete, a receipt shows the amount of the SNAP purchase and the amount of SNAP benefits remaining in the EBT account.

# SNAP Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

## ***What are some of SNAP's benefits?***

SNAP provides much-needed help so that low-income people can put good, healthy food on the table. SNAP helps with the grocery bill. Households can use SNAP to purchase breads, cereals, fruits and vegetables, meats, fish and poultry, and dairy products. Many States offer free nutrition education materials and programs for SNAP benefit recipients. SNAP benefits also help the local community. Each \$5 in new SNAP benefits generates almost twice that amount in economic activity for the community. Plus, SNAP benefits are funded with Federal dollars — so when everyone who is eligible for the program receives benefits, State and local economies also benefit.

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## ***Why is there a national SNAP outreach effort?***

Currently, only about 65 percent of those eligible for SNAP benefits are enrolled. The goal of this national SNAP outreach effort is to raise awareness of SNAP eligibility and benefits. The campaign includes promoting a national toll-free information line (1-800-221-5689) (or State toll-free lines where available) through a variety of English and Spanish radio advertisements in major population centers and in areas with large numbers of eligible but unenrolled people.

## ***Who is involved in SNAP outreach?***

SNAP outreach is a community-wide effort enlisting the help of State and local SNAP offices, faith-based groups, food banks, and others. Together, these groups play an important role in helping low-income families learn about and access SNAP. Community groups can help in many ways. For example, they can distribute informational materials, conduct prescreening for program eligibility, provide application assistance and forms, and help gather verification documents.

A core group of national anti hunger advocacy groups and other organizations are part of a group called the SNAP Outreach Coalition. The Coalition members also collaborate to promote the nutrition benefits of SNAP through outreach to local anti hunger projects.

# SNAP Talking Points And Messages

Following are suggested talking points regarding SNAP. You are encouraged to localize this information with State or local SNAP data, or promote State-specific resources such as a toll-free SNAP information line or prescreening tool.

## **SNAP is the first line of defense against hunger.**

- SNAP benefits provide much-needed temporary help with the grocery bill so that low-income people can put nutritious, healthy food on the table.
- Nearly half of those who receive SNAP benefits are children.

## **SNAP is a nutrition program that helps low-income families and individuals purchase nutritious, healthy food. It is the cornerstone of the Nation's nutrition assistance safety net.**

- Low-income people get financial support to help with their grocery bills so they can buy fruits and vegetables, whole-grain foods, dairy products, and other healthy foods. In addition, many SNAP participants are offered free nutrition education materials and classes to help them make good purchasing choices and stretch their food dollars.

## **SNAP has made some fundamental changes in recent years that make it easier to:**

- Find out about the program
  - Individuals can call [1-800-221-5689](tel:1-800-221-5689) for a free information packet to learn more about SNAP and how to apply. Information is available in English and Spanish.
  - Individuals can go to a Web site featuring a prescreening tool and, by answering a few simple questions, determine if they might be eligible for SNAP benefits and how much they could receive. The Web site address is [www.snap-step1.usda.gov/fns/snap](http://www.snap-step1.usda.gov/fns/snap).
- Apply for benefits
  - FNS and States are working to simplify the application process.
- Shop for healthy food
  - There are no more paper coupons. Now, benefits are delivered with an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card that works like a debit card at the grocery store.

## **SNAP is a win-win for low-income people, local retailers, and local communities.**

- Each \$5 in new SNAP benefits generates almost twice that amount in economic activity for the community.
- The average benefit per person is about \$101 a month (fiscal year 2008 data). That translates into money spent at local grocery stores.
- SNAP benefits are funded with Federal dollars. When everyone who is eligible for the program receives benefits, State and local economies also benefit.
- Research shows that low-income households participating in SNAP have access to more food energy, protein, and an array of essential vitamins and minerals in their home food supply compared to eligible nonparticipants.
- Since SNAP benefits help defray the costs of buying healthy foods, low-income people are less likely to have to make hard choices between eating right and paying for other essentials.

## **USDA and the anti hunger community are working as partners to ensure that everyone who is eligible for SNAP knows about it and is able to access benefits.**

- Many low-income people are not aware of their eligibility and how to apply, particularly those who are working, seniors, or legal immigrants.
- To ensure that everyone who is eligible knows about the benefits of the program, USDA is conducting a national media campaign.

# SNAP Questions & Suggested Answers

Why are Questions and Answers (Q&As) important? Q&As are anticipated questions and suggested answers that program administrators and outreach spokespeople can study to help get ready for media interviews or other public speaking. You might receive these questions from the media, the public, or others.

Here are some examples of Q&As about SNAP outreach:

## Why are you encouraging people to enroll in SNAP?

### RESPONSE

*SNAP is a nutrition assistance program that helps low-income people put healthy food on the table. SNAP supplements the food budgets of low-income people who are having a tough time paying for food for themselves or their families. Children have important nutritional needs and they make up about half of those currently receiving SNAP benefits. We want everyone who is eligible to have the opportunity to apply for benefits so that they can have access to healthier foods. Our outreach efforts are specially targeted to people who are least likely to understand that they may be eligible: elderly persons, immigrants, and working poor.*

## Why are you encouraging the use of SNAP benefits when application numbers are increasing already?

### RESPONSE

*Yes, enrollment numbers are increasing. However, there are still many people who need help. Currently, in an average month, more than 13 million eligible households are NOT receiving SNAP benefits. This is usually because they do not think they qualify, or think there are people in greater need of the benefits. We want to reach out to those people, encourage them to get prescreened, and, if appropriate, apply for SNAP benefits so they can get help with their grocery bills. SNAP benefits are not only good for low-income people; they also help the local economy.*

## Are the financial benefits worth the effort to enroll?

### RESPONSE

*SNAP benefits are not intended to be the only means of paying the grocery bill, but they do help low-income people purchase healthier food items, such as fruits and vegetables. Monthly benefits vary based on income and household size. On average, an eligible person receives around \$101 per month (fiscal year 2008 data). This additional support will help low-income households purchase nutritious foods for a healthy diet.*

# SNAP Questions & Suggested Answers

## Can people purchase whatever they want with SNAP benefits?

### RESPONSE

*SNAP benefits are intended to supplement a household's grocery budget and help them purchase healthier foods. Households can use SNAP benefits to purchase a wide range of food items. Participants are encouraged to use their SNAP benefits wisely to maximize their nutrition impact and economic value. To that end, they are encouraged to buy nutrient-dense foods such as whole-grain bread and cereals; fruits and vegetables; low-fat meats, fish, and poultry and milk products. Other items that can be purchased with SNAP benefits are seeds and plants that produce food. Nonfood items cannot be bought with SNAP benefits.*

## I have heard that enrolling in SNAP is difficult. What does it involve?

### RESPONSE

*USDA and State and local agencies that administer SNAP are working to improve the application process by simplifying forms, offering extended office hours, and, in some instances, allowing online applications. Anyone can check to see if they might qualify for benefits through an online prescreening process at [www.snap-step1.usda.gov/fns/](http://www.snap-step1.usda.gov/fns/).*

*Anyone interested in finding out more about how to apply should call 1-800-221-5689 for information. [Localize this information if your State or community has a toll-free number.]*

## How long does it take to start receiving benefits?

### RESPONSE

*If you are in special need because of very low income, you may receive benefits within 7 days, if eligible. However, for others, it may take up to 30 days to receive benefits. At the time of application, an eligibility worker will give applicants this type of information.*

# SNAP Questions & Suggested Answers

## What measures are taken to prevent SNAP fraud?

### RESPONSE

*USDA is committed to integrity in all of its nutrition assistance programs. USDA has taken several steps to make it easier to identify and punish those who misuse SNAP benefits. Retailers who violate program rules, recipients who try to obtain their benefits based on false information, or recipients who sell their benefits can be removed from the program, fined, and even jailed. Also, with the introduction of the electronic benefit card (EBT), which works much like a debit card at a grocery store, the USDA is better able to track and deter fraud.*

## Doesn't the EBT card make it easier for people to abuse the system?

### RESPONSE

*No. The EBT card makes it more difficult for people to commit SNAP fraud. EBT eliminates paper food stamps and creates an electronic record for each transaction, making fraud easier to detect. Not only does the EBT card cut down on SNAP abuse, but it also reduces the stigma some people associate with receiving SNAP benefits.*

## Why are you advertising a free benefit for poor people?

### RESPONSE

*SNAP is a nutrition program that helps low-income people have better diets, and better eating can mean better health. There are many people who are eligible for SNAP benefits but are not participating in the program. SNAP is a win-win for local retailers and local communities. Each \$5 in new SNAP benefits generates almost twice that amount in economic activity for the community. Average SNAP benefits are about \$101 a month per person (fiscal year 2008 data), translating to money spent in local grocery stores. Everyone wins when eligible people take advantage of benefits to which they are entitled.*

# Nutrition Education Providers In Your Community

Many communities have a wealth of information available to promote the nutrition benefits of SNAP. Focusing on nutrition can help get the attention of individuals who might not be inclined to pick up SNAP informational materials. This provides an opportunity to explain SNAP as a nutrition assistance program to potential applicants — as well as employers, community leaders, and others — who might still associate SNAP with welfare programs. Learn more about SNAP nutrition education providers in your community and what role each organization can play to increase SNAP participation.

## **What is the goal of SNAP Nutrition Education?**

The goal of SNAP Nutrition Education is to improve the likelihood that persons eligible for SNAP will make healthy food choices within their limited budget and choose active lifestyles, as the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommends.

## **How can outreach and nutrition education efforts work together?**

Outreach and SNAP Nutrition Education can work together to communicate messages about how SNAP can help needy families obtain healthy foods. The possibility of better nutrition can help generate interest in SNAP among potentially eligible persons as well as community workers serving that population. SNAP Nutrition Education providers have conducted needs assessments to identify which nutrition messages to promote and strategies for communicating these messages to SNAP-eligible populations. They also have access to nutrition education materials that are consistent with national nutrition initiatives. By working together, outreach and nutrition education can communicate accurate, unified, and reinforcing messages that have a more powerful reach.

FNS has developed a series of nutrition education and promotion materials targeting mothers entitled, "Loving Your Family, Feeding their Future: Nutrition Education Through the Food Stamp Program." These nutrition education messages address the needs of English and Spanish speaking mothers with limited literacy skills. This series of education materials includes an educator's handbook, four discussion sessions with accompanying participant handouts, participant guidebook, and an online educator's learning module with a flash video component. These materials were developed primarily for SNAP nutrition education participants, however, they can be used in other nutrition education settings with similar target audiences such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. Educators can access "Loving Your Family" materials at <http://foodstamp.nal.usda.gov>.



## **Learn More About SNAP Nutrition Education**

States often provide nutrition education to SNAP participants through contracts with the Cooperative Extension System, State Nutrition Networks, public health departments, and other organizations.

The Food Stamp Nutrition Connection, a project of the USDA Food and Nutrition Service and the National Agricultural Library, maintains a list of State SNAP Nutrition Education providers. You can access it online at [http://snap.nal.usda.gov/nal\\_display/index.php?info\\_center=15&tax\\_level=1](http://snap.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=15&tax_level=1), request a print copy by phone at [301-504-5719](tel:301-504-5719), or email [FSNC@nal.usda.gov](mailto:FSNC@nal.usda.gov).

You can also contact your State or local SNAP offices for information on SNAP Nutrition Education activities in your area.