



In 2020, Hunger Free New Jersey (HFNJ) launched a statewide project to better understand the barriers to SNAP participation and identify strategies to reach more SNAP-eligible people across the state.

HFNJ partnered with the Food Research & Action Center and The Food Trust, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, to survey SNAP participants and those likely eligible for SNAP. HFNJ convened three summits, engaging nearly 90 New Jersey organizations that work in SNAP-related areas. The goal was to identify challenges and workable solutions, which are detailed in HFNJ's May 2021 report, [*Boosting NJ SNAP: Eliminating Barriers to Participation.*](#)

The surveys and stakeholder meetings identified barriers to participation in three key areas:

1. An unwieldy and difficult application system,
2. Inadequate community outreach to potentially eligible residents,
3. Lack of consistent quality service at county Boards of Social Service offices.

Stakeholders and other partners identified dozens of recommendations to improve access to SNAP. Here are the top priorities for 2021-22.

Streamline the Application Process

The NJ Department of Human Services (DHS) should:

- Update the online system to make it user-friendly and employ current technology. This should include making it easier to create and access an account (i.e. use a person's e-

mail and phone number for username and password), allow applicants to stop and start an application and provide more precise information about the status of an application.

- Edit both the paper and online application to be clearer and use plain language.
- Create a SNAP call center where people can receive assistance with a SNAP application, check on the status of an application and troubleshoot issues.

Expand Community Outreach

- Provide state funding to support community-based organizations to expand outreach by employing “navigators” who can help applicants complete the application process, with a focus on underserved counties.
- Educate community-based organizations about assisting clients in completing online applications and submitting them via telephone, while leveraging community partners’ capacity to offer clients computer access.
- NJ Department of Human Services (DHS) and county Boards of Social Services should conduct direct outreach to participants in other public programs, such as Medicaid, subsidized school meals and unemployment insurance, who are likely eligible but not currently receiving SNAP.

Strengthen Services at County Boards of Social Services

Stakeholder and SNAP recipient input, along with county-level data published by Hunger Free New Jersey, indicates deep disparities among county operations. To create uniform, effective customer service in all counties, DHS should:

- Provide ongoing trainings to county Boards of Social Services to keep caseworkers up to date with changes in policy and practice and reinforce adherence to federal regulations, especially with regard to documentation and verification requirements and flexibilities.
- Publish case tracking, county-level data in its monthly Current Program Statistics reports, including application approval rates, reasons for denial, average approval time, etc. These data are collected by DHS from nearly every county and would help to identify and address issues in each county office.

- Conduct a pilot program in three counties – one in the northern, central and southern parts of the state – to expand outreach and application assistance through the county Boards of Social Services. This should include an increase in outreach/navigator staff in the county offices. This staff would conduct more aggressive outreach, especially to underserved populations such as older adults, college students and immigrants, while providing more intensive application assistance. DHS should report on the success of the pilot and the viability of replicating this approach statewide.

In addition to these solutions, HFNJ also recommends that the state advance the following changes:

- Eliminate the requirement that certain SNAP recipients engage in work-related activities to qualify for benefits. There is no evidence that this requirement results in recipients landing good-paying jobs and it penalizes people who cannot find employment.
- Provide a state-funded supplement to SNAP benefits for older adults and people with disabilities. Under current federal benefits, monthly benefits can be as low as \$16 for these vulnerable populations. A supplement will help meet the nutritional needs of seniors and the disabled.
- Mandate that the state apply for federal waivers of work requirements for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs). Federal law requires ABAWDs to meet additional work requirements to receive SNAP benefits for more than three months in a 36-month period. They must participate in qualifying work activities for at least 80 hours a month. These waivers eliminate this requirement for recipients living in areas with high unemployment rates and should be standard practice in New Jersey.

For more information, contact Adele LaTourette, director, Hunger Free New Jersey, alatourette@cfanj.org.