



Policy Agenda 2021

Hunger Free New Jersey will continue to work to advance broad solutions to hunger, primarily focused on making it easier for struggling residents to receive federal food assistance and improving access to healthy food. In 2021, these overarching goals will be pursued through a variety of measures.

Legislative Solutions to Expanding Access to SNAP

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, also known as food stamps) is the nation's first line of defense against hunger. In New Jersey, an estimated 300,000 New Jersey residents, subsisting on poverty-level income, were not being reached with federal food assistance that could help reduce hunger, lift these residents out of poverty and improve their overall health and well-being, according to a Hunger Free New Jersey 2020 report.ⁱ

To improve SNAP enrollment, the New Jersey Legislature should:

Expand SNAP outreach.

SNAP reaches only about 70 percent of eligible individuals, leaving many who could benefit unserved. The state must expand SNAP outreach efforts. Currently, a combination of state and federal funds pay for outreach in only 13 of New Jersey's 21 counties. Even in counties where contracted agencies conduct outreach, the staff and resources are severely limited. The state Legislature should allocate state funds to pay for adequate outreach. This outreach should focus specifically on underserved communities, including older adults, college students, immigrants and the newly unemployed.

Bolster outreach to college students.

The Legislature should require the Secretary of Higher Education to create and implement a statewide outreach campaign aimed at educating college students about their SNAP eligibility and the application process. This should be done in partnership with the New Jersey Department of Human Services, the New Jersey Council of County Colleges and institutions of higher education.

Leverage schools in SNAP outreach.

Only about one-third of roughly 400,000 New Jersey students approved to receive free school meals were also receiving SNAP in 2019. Many of these 272,000 school-age children are living in families that would most likely qualify for this critical nutrition aid.

Currently, there is no mechanism in place to identify and enroll these families in SNAP. Doing so would greatly reduce hunger in New Jersey, while bringing millions more dollars in federal aid back into the state to fight hunger.

To address this issue, the Legislature should:

- Mandate a pilot program in at least five school districts to develop an effective process to identify and enroll these families. This would require a cooperative effort, including data sharing, among the New Jersey Departments of Education, Human Services and Agriculture and New Jersey school districts. This would also require an increase in funding for state-supported SNAP outreach to reach these low-income families.
- Require school districts to provide information about SNAP, along with school meal applications. The legislation should also require school districts to disseminate this information in a variety of ways, including letters, e-mail, social media, texts and robocalls.

Boost funding for healthy food.

In 2019, New Jersey initiated a small pilot program to double the value of SNAP dollars for fresh fruits and vegetables purchased at certain retailers. This small program enabled some SNAP recipients to afford healthier food. New Jersey should expand this effort by allocating \$50,000 to provide this benefit to more New Jersey residents.

Create a customer service call center.

The COVID pandemic has exposed the lack of responsiveness to clients' issues and concerns that often prevent them from getting the food assistance they need. A central call center that can assist people who are having difficulty applying for SNAP or experiencing other issues would improve the state's ability to reach all those in need with this critical assistance.

Administrative Solutions to Expanding Access to SNAP

Simplify and improve SNAP application process.

The current online SNAP application is outdated, difficult to use and a barrier to enrollment. The New Jersey Department of Human Services (DHS) must overhaul the online system to make it user-friendly and employ current technology, including:

- Make the application compatible with today's browsers rather than relying on the obsolete Internet Explorer.
- Reword the application to be clear and use simple language.

- Make the online application available in more languages.
- Make the application mobile-friendly so people can easily complete the application using their phones.
- Educate community partners about how to complete the online application so they can assist their clients.
- Provide clear instructions linked to the application about how to complete the application, including documents needed, how to create a free e-mail account and how to scan and upload documents. This should be done through a video and should be available in various languages.

Help older adults access SNAP.

NJDHS should allow state-contracted outreach workers to provide telephonic application assistance and submit applications and verification documents on behalf of older adults and people with disabilities.

**For more information, contact Adele LaTourette, alatourette@cfanj.org
or visit hungerfreenj.org.**

ⁱ *Missed Dollars, Bare Cupboards: Improving SNAP Participation in New Jersey*, Hunger Free New Jersey, January 2020, <https://hungerfreenj.org/nj-snap-report2020/>