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Boosting NJ SNAP: ELIMINATING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION



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Executive Summary

NJ SNAP expands to help feed residents during pandemic; now is the time to build on that success.

The number of people receiving food aid through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) expanded 23 percent during the pandemic, helping fight hunger when so many New Jersey residents were struggling to put food on the table.

Now is the time to build on this pandemic-fueled expansion so SNAP, also known as food stamps, reaches all New Jersey residents who could benefit, says a **new report from Hunger Free New Jersey**.

While the boost in enrollment — and benefit levels — during the pandemic is positive, SNAP could still reach more residents in need, the report

finds. This critical resource supports the food security, health and economic well-being of hundreds of thousands of New Jersey residents, while also pumping roughly one billion dollars into New Jersey's local economies each year.

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 also convened three summits, engaging nearly 90 organizations that work in SNAP-related areas. The goal was to identify challenges and workable solutions, which are detailed in HFNJ's **new report**.

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 service at county Boards of Social Service offices.

During the pandemic, the federal government boosted monthly SNAP benefits and relaxed several rules, making it easier for people to apply and receive this aid. New Jersey participated in all the waivers, including extending certification periods and waiving period reporting between certifications, eliminating interviews before being approved, allowing telephonic signatures on applications and increasing monthly benefit amounts.

Many of these changes should be made permanent at the federal level. In addition, New Jersey should take steps to strengthen SNAP and make it more accessible to all New Jersey residents who can benefit, the report said.

The report makes a series of recommendations in those three areas.

Streamline the application process by:

- Updating the online system to make it user-friendly and employ current technology,
- Editing the application to be clearer and use plain language,
- Simplifying the income verification process,
- Educating 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.

Expand community outreach to educate the public about the program and assist more potentially eligible residents in completing the application process, with a focus on college students, older adults, immigrants and the newly unemployed. This should include expanded state funding of additional and more intensive outreach efforts and engaging new partners, such as the healthcare and school systems, in reaching potentially eligible residents.

Examine the level of customer service provided at county Boards of Social Services to identify challenges and solutions at the county level. This should include administering a customer satisfaction survey to SNAP recipients to identify and address issues in each county and creating a call center where people can access a live person to assist with issues.

Pandemic EBT Improvements

The report also makes recommendations for improving the implementation of Pandemic EBT, a child nutrition program that is separate from SNAP and that provides federal dollars to help families buy groceries during the pandemic.

Stakeholders agreed that there had been widespread confusion about P-EBT in previous rollouts. With a new round expected this spring, the New Jersey Department of Human Services should:

- Engage school officials, advocates, child care providers and community organizations to keep them informed of the program rollout and to assist with communicating information to families.
- Establish and adequately staff a toll-free, statewide hotline where people can reach a live person to investigate their case and resolve issues.
- Work with school districts and the New Jersey Department of Education to correct erroneous information sent during the first round (i.e., wrong addresses, listing only one child and not others) and ensure all school districts collect and provide complete, accurate information about eligible families.

Hunger Free New Jersey, and its many partners, will work with state officials and legislative leaders to advance these changes in the coming months.

Read the full report here.



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