Improving the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

BY ANN MORSE AND RACHEL MORGAN

The federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, provides nutrition assistance to low-income people. SNAP is the primary food assistance program in the farm bill, which funds dozens of farm, food and nutrition programs, most recently authorized through fiscal year 2018. SNAP is the largest federal food program serving low-income families in the United States.

SNAP has had long-term, bipartisan support for its capacity to help reduce hunger for children, older Americans, people with disabilities and households during economic decline. Participation in SNAP reduces hunger; benefits children’s learning abilities, improves health, lifts families out of poverty and strengthens economic self-sufficiency in women. Research from the United States Department of Agriculture indicates that every $5 in food stamp benefits generates $9 of economic activity in local communities.

The U.S. House of Representatives’ Agriculture committee engaged in a top-to-bottom review of SNAP and released a report of its findings—Past, Present and Future of SNAP—in December 2016. The report documents the findings of a series of hearings held in 2016 that reviewed characteristics of SNAP recipients, the functioning of the program, and innovations in serving those in need of nutrition assistance. Key findings from the 16 hearings will result in further efforts to use innovation and flexibility to serve SNAP recipients, help them climb the economic ladder through work, maintain program integrity, and promote and improve access to healthy food.

In addition, the committee’s oversight plan, filed in January 2017, reveals the focus of the agriculture department’s Food and Nutrition programs moving forward. Scrutiny will be given this year to the SNAP program’s fruit and vegetable initiatives,
“We can all agree that no one ought to go hungry in America, and SNAP is essential in protecting the most vulnerable citizens during tough times. For many it is a vital lifeline to keeping food on the table.”
—U.S. Representative K. Michael Conaway (R-TX), chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture, on bipartisan efforts to improve SNAP and make sure the program reaches those it is intended to serve.

which are designed to increase beneficiaries’ consumption of healthier foods, and the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). The committee also plans to review the eligibility criteria for SNAP participants, the SNAP Employment and Training programs, and the interaction between SNAP and other low-income assistance programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Federal Action
Since the 1930s, Congress has allocated federal resources to alleviate food insecurity and prevent low birth weights and chronic illnesses associated with being undernourished. The food stamp program grew from a pilot program that served just 500,000 people in 1964 to a program that served more than 47 million Americans at the height of the Great Recession. As of November 2016, SNAP provided benefits to about 43 million people, down 2 million from the previous year. Eighty-two percent of households receiving SNAP benefits include a child, senior or person with disabilities.

SNAP benefits can only be used for food. They cannot be used to buy nonfood items, such as alcoholic beverages, tobacco, vitamins or medicines, nor can they be used to purchase hot food or any food that will be eaten in the store. The minimum monthly benefit is $10. In fiscal year 2016, the average monthly benefit was $125.51 per person, or $1.39 per meal. Eligibility for SNAP is based on household income and assets.

The federal cost of the program in fiscal year 2016 was $70.8 billion, $66.6 billion of which went to SNAP benefits and the balance to program administration, employment and training services, and nutrition education services.

SNAP can also help non-beneficiaries during disasters such as hurricanes, forest fires or severe droughts. Citizens can register for disaster SNAP—or D-SNAP—using a simplified application system that provides benefits within 72 hours of applying. Sixteen states and territories have recently declared emergencies that qualified for emergency food distribution under D-SNAP.

State Action
The federal government pays the full cost of SNAP benefits but shares the costs of administering the program with the states. To that end, states have flexibility to streamline program administration and remove barriers to enrollment. They can adopt policies that will reduce paperwork for staff and beneficiaries, minimize the burden on families, and ensure that benefits are reaching people in need. For example, states can simplify reporting, use electronic documents, and expand categorical eligibility for the program. See the USDA’s State Options Report for a summary of state policy and administrative options.

Applicants may have a difficult time visiting SNAP offices due to transportation barriers, lack of child care or inability to take off work. To address these concerns, many states have created SNAP enrollment stations at convenient locations, made applications available online, waived in-person interviews, and extended office hours to include some evenings or weekend days.

States that want to increase access to SNAP can use the option to raise the income standard. Illinois, for example, increased the income eligibility for SNAP from 130 percent to 165 percent of the federal poverty level in 2015. More than 3,200 farmers’ markets accept SNAP dollars, generating $19.4 million in sales. California established the Nutrition Incentive Matching Grant Program in the Office of Farm to Fork in 2015. It collects matching funds from the federal program and other public and private sources to encourage both healthier eating by SNAP clients and purchases of California fresh fruits, nuts and vegetables.

Similarly, South Carolina included a provision in its budget bill to require the Department of Social Services to provide coupons allowing SNAP recipients to purchase additional fresh fruits and vegetables at grocery stores or farmers markets. The Healthy Bucks program allows beneficiaries to double the amount they spend on produce, up to $10.

Additional Resources
NCSL Hunger Partnership webpage
NCSL U.S. Domestic Food Assistance Programs webpage
U.S. House Committee on Agriculture report, Past, Present and Future of SNAP
USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program homepage
Congressional Budget Office, The Effects of Potential Cuts in SNAP Spending on Households with Different Amounts of Income

NCSL Contacts
Rachel Morgan
(202) 624-3569
Ann Morse
(202) 624-8697