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Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rate Report

May 2023



**DEPARTMENT OF TRANSITIONAL ASSISTANCE
SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
PARTICIPATION RATE REPORT**

May 2023

OVERVIEW

Line-item 4400-1001 of Section 2 of Chapter 24 of the Acts of 2022 requires the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to report annually to the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means on the status of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) client outreach.

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSITIONAL ASSISTANCE MISSION

DTA's mission is to assist and empower low-income individuals and families to meet their basic needs, improve their quality of life, and achieve long-term economic self-sufficiency. DTA offers a comprehensive system of programs and supports to help individuals and families achieve greater economic mobility, including food and nutritional assistance, economic assistance, and employment supports. DTA serves one out of seven people in the Commonwealth including working families, children, older adults, and people with disabilities.

BACKGROUND ON SNAP IN MASSACHUSETTS

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federally funded program that provides critical nutritional support to low-income families by helping supplement household food budgets and access nutritious food. DTA administers SNAP on behalf of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Beyond the core responsibilities of administering SNAP benefits, DTA works alongside a variety of partners contributing to the larger mission of food security in the Commonwealth.

SNAP CASELOAD

As of March 2023, DTA's SNAP caseload was 655,968 households, consisting of 1,083,392 total benefit recipients. Of these recipients:

- 239,157 were 60 or over;
- 309,875 were persons with disabilities; and
- 346,254 were age 18 or under.

Of all SNAP households in Massachusetts, 70% had gross income below 100% of the federal poverty level, which is \$19,720 for a family of two in 2023.

SNAP OUTREACH STRATEGIES

DTA strives to ensure that SNAP benefits and related services are available to all eligible Massachusetts households. Outreach to potential new and existing SNAP clients is done through a multi-pronged, data-informed approach focused on engaging targeted populations with low SNAP participation rates. SNAP outreach is a collaborative effort across sister agencies

under the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, other secretariats, community-based organizations, and contracted vendors.

INTERAGENCY PARTNERSHIPS

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. In 2022, DTA and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) launched the third iteration of the Massachusetts' Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) program, authorized as part of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFRCA). P-EBT benefits supplement the loss of access to in-person school meals for children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, including those eligible through participation in SNAP, when a child is absent from school due to COVID-19. In school year 2021-2022, P-EBT supported over 676,800 infants and children, providing over \$670 million in financial food assistance. Summer P-EBT in 2022 also provided \$263 million in funds to buy food for nearly 668,740 infants, children and their families. Administration of P-EBT required close collaboration between the two agencies, and the renewed focus on food insecurity among school-age children has resulted in new outreach opportunities. DTA and DESE partnered directly with schools, providing them with email, text and robocall templates informing them about SNAP. Short videos were developed and included in the outreach. A "P-EBT to SNAP" webinar was also hosted with school nutrition staff. This approach was designed to leverage the role of school districts as trusted sources and reach families in the community where they reside, to bridge the divide between children eligible for free or reduced-priced meals and those who may not be receiving SNAP. Lastly, DTA and DESE continue their partnership around ensuring all DTA households are aware and utilizing all available nutrition resources, implementing a text message campaign to inform them of the availability of summer meals ("Summer EATs") in their community. Last summer, DTA sent a text message to over 504,460 families receiving SNAP benefits directing them to DESE and Project Bread's Summer EATs meal finder. The text message led to huge increases in website traffic to the finder pages compared to the previous week, including a 4526% increase in English, a 16382% increase in Spanish, a 5807% increase in Portuguese and a 5633% increase in Chinese simplified.

MassHealth. DTA and MassHealth continue to prioritize efforts to integrate their enrollment systems and reduce the number of residents who receive MassHealth benefits and are not currently receiving SNAP benefits. This population is commonly called the "SNAP Gap." In July 2022, a system enhancement went live enabling applicants and members to apply both online and on paper for SNAP at the point of application or renewal for MassHealth. This has resulted in 37,583 applications for SNAP via MassHealth members. In 2022, DTA conducted a full data analysis of the various SNAP Gap interventions that have occurred over the past 5 years identifying best practices and barriers. Using this data analysis, and in recognition that many of the barriers originate at the federal level, DTA put forth a federal waiver request that would enable some newly approved MassHealth recipients to be directly certified for SNAP, streamlining the entire SNAP application process. This waiver is currently still under review with the federal government.

Department of Higher Education. As a result of the COVID-19 public health emergency, the federal government expanded SNAP eligibility for college students. In 2022, DTA and the Department of Higher Education (DHE) continued to leverage this opportunity, conducting a direct outreach campaign by emailing almost 30,000 qualifying college students to notify them of their potential eligibility for SNAP. DTA and DHE continue this work to actively recruit colleges and universities as outreach partners and SNAP Path to Work providers. In a joint effort to address the issue of food insecurity on college campuses, this approach enables higher education institutions with available federal funds to maximize services and supports to food insecure college students. To date, three higher education institutions, Bunker Hill Community College, Holyoke Community College and UMass Boston, have become Outreach Partners. Additionally, there are currently six community colleges participating in the SNAP Path to Work program including Springfield Technical Community College, Holyoke Community College, Middlesex Community College, Northern Essex Community College, Cape Cod Community College, and Quinsigamond Community College.

Department of Public Health/WIC. Utilizing a data match established during the pandemic, DTA and the Department of Public Health (DPH) continue their outreach by sending notices and text messages on a quarterly basis to clients not participating in either the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance for Women Infants and Children (WIC) program or SNAP. Further, information on WIC was included in all P-EBT correspondence for children ages 0-5.

Massachusetts Department of Agriculture Resources. DTA continues to work with the Massachusetts Department of Agriculture Resources (MDAR) to administer the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), which helps SNAP clients access healthy produce from local farms via a monthly nutrition incentive. In 2022, DTA and MDAR opened a second Notice of Opportunity (NOO) for farmers to participate which facilitated program expansion in a strategic and equitable way utilizing a data-informed approach. In developing the NOO, DTA used internal and external qualitative data sources from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and DPH to identify priority communities¹ and priority populations to target for the expansion of HIP. Priority communities were defined by relation to or prevalence of Food Deserts, classification as an Environmental Justice community, and/or are a city or town with less HIP access relative to their SNAP population. Priority populations were defined as historically experiencing lower access to HIP locations and/or higher rates of diet-related chronic disease. Priority populations specifically identified as part of the NOO were Black SNAP recipients² and SNAP recipients with disabilities³.

¹ Identified for the purposes of the 2022 NOO as: Brockton, Springfield, Fall River, New Bedford, Worcester, Chelsea, Randolph, Lawrence, Everett, Taunton, Lynn, Boston, Malden, Lowell, Southbridge, Revere, Holyoke, Fitchburg, West Springfield, Milford, Palmer, Chicopee, Webster, Pittsfield, and Marlborough.

² Underrepresented among HIP users by 10%

³ “Obesity rates for adults with disabilities are approximately 57% higher than for adults without disabilities “
[obesityfactsheet2010.pdf \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov/obesityfactsheet2010.pdf)

OUTREACH PARTNERS

Enhanced Community Based Outreach Partner System. DTA continues to partner with the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School (UMass Chan Medical) to administer a performance-based federal reimbursement project designed to improve access to SNAP through partnerships with qualifying organizations. In federal fiscal year (FFY) 2022, DTA contracted with 106 providers, known as Outreach Partners. These Outreach Partners are responsible for client outreach and education, as well as assistance with applications, recertifications, and for the first-time, activities designed to support households during their certification period. In April 2022, DTA requested and received permission from the USDA to allow contracted Outreach Partners to receive reimbursement for time spent assisting families maximizing their benefits in anticipation of the ending of the SNAP Emergency Allotment payments as a result of the sunset of the Public Health Emergency (PHE). Similar to previous years, preliminary information shows that most Outreach Partners reached their annual application and approval goals. In FFY 2022, 94 of the 106 active Outreach Partners who submitted SNAP applications met or surpassed the 50% Application Approval Rating Standard. These providers received \$1,084,441 in payments for SNAP outreach services. For FFY 2023, USDA approved an expansion of the SNAP Outreach Partner Reimbursement Project and reimbursement of up to \$2.92 million.

The pandemic created many challenges for older adults, especially for those who have difficulty accessing online tools and resources. DTA's past and continued recruitment of Councils on Aging (COAs)/Senior Centers proved beneficial in positioning DTA to serve older adults during this difficult time. COAs are trusted community resources that offer important support and services. DTA continued to work closely with the Massachusetts Council on Aging (MCOA) to add local COAs to the program during the last fiscal year. Older adults especially appreciate working with a trusted local community partner to help them navigate the SNAP process. To date of the 106 SNAP outreach partners, 33 are COAs. For FFY 2023, COAs anticipate assisting 1,727 older adults to complete new SNAP applications and are seeking a total of \$249,100 in federal reimbursement.

Project Bread. DTA has a long-standing relationship with Project Bread. Project Bread's Food Source Hotline performs SNAP eligibility screenings and provides application assistance for individuals interested in applying for SNAP benefits. Project Bread also assists families in need with resources to address more immediate food needs. In FY22, Project Bread received additional funds through the state budget that they used to assist DTA in outreach efforts designed to reduce the SNAP Gap (defined above) and assist in supporting the implementation and administration of P-EBT.

Community-based Trainings. DTA provides SNAP 101 trainings for community-based organizations to educate them on the SNAP program and application process. In addition, DTA provides specialized trainings to best suit the needs of organizations that work with specific populations, such as veterans, immigrant families, college students, older adults, and persons with disabilities.

SNAP PATH TO WORK PROGRAM

Since 2006, DTA has partnered with UMass Chan Medical School to offer training and employment supports to SNAP clients who are not receiving economic assistance through the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. The goals of the SNAP Path to Work program are to assist under- and unemployed SNAP participants in gaining valuable skills and experience needed to increase employability, secure employment, and establish a path towards economic mobility, as well as to meet state or local workforce needs. Through a network of contracted community partners, participants receive job search assistance, job readiness training, job retention services, employment focused education opportunities, vocational skills training, work experience and supports.

Through this partnership, UMass Chan Medical School assists DTA with:

- Recruiting, subcontracting, and monitoring SNAP Path to Work providers;
- Assisting providers with federal reimbursement claims;
- Designing and producing promotional material; and
- Maintaining the program's website - snappathtowork.org

In FFY22, 35 SNAP Path to Work providers and the statewide network of MassHire Career Centers provided services to an average of 575 program participants per month. Providers were reimbursed approximately \$3.8 million for employment and training services provided to program participants.

As of March 2023, 40 SNAP Path to Work providers from across the state and the statewide MassHire Career Center network provide services to program participants under the state's approved FY23 SNAP Employment and Training State Plan. USDA has approved provider reimbursements of approximately \$8.4 million under this plan.

ONGOING CROSS-SECRETARIAT FOOD SECURITY PLANNING

Building on the work of the Food Security Task Force, the Administration has transitioned from a pandemic-related emergency response to a longer-term approach to ongoing food security planning. This includes:

- Maintaining ongoing cross-Secretariat/Agency coordination of food security efforts through the Food Security Work Group;
- Continuing to track, monitor and report on implementation of Task Force recommendations including lessons learned to address ongoing food security needs;
- Continuing work with public and private partners to produce data on food security needs; and
- Engaging with community-based Food Security Task Force stakeholders to continue to partner and advise on food security efforts.

TECHNOLOGICAL ENHANCEMENTS

Online Client Services. DTA's existing DTA Connect mobile application and web platform, available to customers since 2016, served as a critical foundation from which the agency was able to respond rapidly to the COVID-19 public health and economic emergencies. The tools available on DTA Connect made it possible for families and individuals to conduct all their business with DTA from the safety of their home. The availability of DTA Connect enabled DTA to streamline the processing of applications and ensured that existing clients retained access to these critical benefits. DTA was able to swiftly modify language and functionality on DTA Connect to accurately communicate changes in policies and procedures to families. DTA Connect is now available in Haitian Creole, in addition to English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Portuguese and Chinese Simplified, and clients can now reschedule their appointments with DTA via DTA Connect. As of February 2023, the DTA Connect mobile app was updated to increase functionality, offering users the ability to complete all the same tasks as DTACConnect.com from the mobile app. The expanded options on the mobile app included checking their SNAP eligibility, applying for SNAP and cash benefits, and completing SNAP recertifications and interim report forms.

Text Messaging Platform/Launching Emails. Leveraging funds awarded in 2019 to support the implementation of a texting platform, DTA was able to launch text message functionality at the start of the COVID-19 public health emergency. At a time when federal waivers and a shift in the Department's business delivery model changed operations, DTA used text messaging to communicate broadly and directly with families and individuals. The introduction of this alternative, modern method of communication has allowed the Department to proactively communicate case status information to clients, which is critical information for applicants and clients that could previously only be addressed by waiting to speak with a case manager through DTA's Assistance Line. The functionality has also proven to be a critical tool in connecting DTA clients with additional resources and supports available from sister state agencies and the federal government. DTA previously also sent out case related email messages to clients. In 2022, the agency shifted platforms to send additionally email campaign messages in alignment with texting campaigns to expand accessibility and inclusivity of messaging.

In calendar year 2022, the agency sent more than 15 million text messages and 243,000 emails to clients. In addition to case related information, these messages shared information on the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit, COVID-19 vaccination locations in partnership with DPH's Vaccine Equity Initiative, the Affordable Connectivity Program, LIHEAP Fuel Assistance, and Summer Eats meal locations. Texting and email capabilities were also critical to getting information out to clients on how to protect their benefits from scams.

Online Purchasing Program. In 2020, Massachusetts launched its SNAP Online Purchasing Program, which enables residents to buy groceries online using SNAP benefits from federally-approved retailers. Today, residents can buy groceries online and receive them by delivery or pickup from nineteen retailers. Across retailers, residents have spent over \$329 million in SNAP benefits to-date buying groceries online.

Increasing Language Access. Throughout 2022, the agency continued efforts to expand languages available through a variety of access points, including via flyers, videos, text and email messages and over the phone. The agency has shifted many resources to be available in at least the top six languages of clients: simplified Chinese, English, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Where possible, documents and resources have been translated into upwards of 16 languages, including videos in American Sign Language (ASL).

Importantly, DTA leveraged funds provided by the American Rescue Plan Act to translate forms, most commonly sent notices, and automated text and email messages from two languages to the six most common languages that DTA clients read and write. Further, the agency added Haitian Creole to the DTA Assistance Line, connecting clients directly with information and caseworkers in six languages, with interpreters available for additional language support.

For clients who wish to visit a DTA office, the agency launched several new and expanded efforts in 2022 to improve accessibility and an equitable and inclusive experience. The agency has rolled out a client-facing Pictorial Communication Board in all local offices to support clients who are Deaf, hard of hearing, nonverbal or have limited verbal or English proficiency. These boards include images and descriptive words in eight languages to help determine the primary reason for a client's visit. Further, DTA recently procured a new interpreter services vendor through which the agency has expanded Video Remote Interpreter (VRI) auxiliary aid access to all local DTA offices.