

CLOSING THE **SNAP** **GAP** **IN DENVER**

RECOMMENDATIONS
TO PREVENT HUNGER
AND STRENGTHEN
COMMUNITIES



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LETTER FROM THE DENVER SNAP TASK FORCE

As co-chairs of the Denver SNAP Task Force, we are pleased to present this report outlining our Task Force's policy recommendations for increasing enrollment in the federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) within the city and county of Denver.

Enrollment in SNAP has been demonstrated to improve food security and multiple health outcomes; decrease health care costs, the incidence of chronic disease and poverty; and positively impact economic development.

The Denver SNAP Task Force convened multiple stakeholders to decrease hunger in the city and county of Denver by maximizing enrollment in SNAP, the nation's first line of defense against poverty and hunger. Enrollment in SNAP has been demonstrated to improve food security and multiple health outcomes; decrease health care costs, the incidence of chronic disease and poverty; and positively impact economic development. **Currently, over a third of eligible people in Denver are not receiving SNAP benefits.**

The Task Force, composed of over 40 individuals from the public, private and nonprofit sectors, including anti-hunger community-based partners, government, health, education, food retailers, agriculture, philanthropy and individuals with experiential knowledge of hunger and SNAP, met to explore the barriers to SNAP enrollment and participation and to identify a series of policies and practices to maximize participation. These recommendations build upon the work completed as a result of the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger (a multi-year plan to end hunger statewide), and recent policy efforts such as Senate Bill 16-190 and the Denver Human Services (DHS) *SNAP into Health* report. It is our hope that this report will be used as a tool for further advocacy and action.

Everyone deserves access to affordable, nutritious food. Maximizing SNAP enrollment and participation is an important strategy to improve access to nutritious food. The implementation of these recommendations will require continued support of multiple sectors and stakeholders working together in partnership and informed by individuals and communities with experiential knowledge of hunger and SNAP. We thank all the Task Force members for their investment of time and their insights, as well as Target for its support of this work.

Sincerely,

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The following individuals who are current or recent SNAP participants in Denver lent their expertise through a series of community-based focus groups. Themes from their feedback are incorporated into these recommendations.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as “food stamps,” is the nation’s first line of defense against poverty and hunger, and has been proven to be an effective, efficient source of temporary assistance for families in need. SNAP enrollment is associated with multiple improved health outcomes, quality of life, economic self-sufficiency and decreased health care costs.¹ In addition to benefitting households, SNAP brings revenue into the local economy. In an average month in 2016, SNAP served 81,000 individuals in Denver, bringing in more than \$10.6 million of federally funded benefits that, in turn, generated approximately \$19 million in economic activity.² Those resources are used to purchase food at SNAP-authorized stores, including grocery stores, convenience stores, farmers markets and farm stands. Not only does the program help lift families out of poverty, but every federally funded SNAP dollar generates \$1.79 in economic activity, supporting grocery stores and other food retail businesses and creating jobs.

SNAP is important to the city and county of Denver, but less than two-thirds of eligible individuals in Denver are enrolled. As of 2016, Colorado ranked 45th in access to SNAP for lower-income people.³

The Denver County Impact Report estimates that in 2016 more than 45,000 residents were likely eligible for the program but not participating, contributing to the 36% of Denver’s lower-income population not enrolled in SNAP.⁴

SNAP is important to the city and county of Denver, but less than two-thirds of eligible individuals in Denver are enrolled.

Fortunately, there is already broad recognition in Denver that 1) SNAP has positive impacts on food security, health and economic development; and 2) SNAP is an important component of the city’s neighborhood stabilization strategy and its ability to build a more inclusive city. The City and County of Denver have set a five-year goal of increasing the portion of eligible Denver residents enrolled in SNAP to 80% by 2023. Furthermore, building capacity for strategies around eliminating barriers to SNAP in Denver will help the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger meet its goal of being a top-ranking state in SNAP enrollment rate among eligible people.

Overview of Recommendations

The following is an overview of the recommendations that the Denver SNAP Task Force offers to the City and County of Denver. These recommendations focus on impacts related to the individual SNAP user, partnerships, and business processes.

Elevate public awareness of the Denver SNAP Task Force goals and prioritize implementing strategies across agencies and sectors.

Implement best practices for Denver Human Services and community-based partners for SNAP application assistance, education, intake and client access.

Address the needs of Denver's diverse populations—for example, by developing materials that are culturally competent and accessible at all literacy levels and in multiple relevant languages.

Improve the methods and clarity of communications with clients, including notices, telephone interviews, text messaging, online access to case and benefits status information, and soliciting and receiving regular feedback from clients about customer service and operations.

Leverage other programs that serve similar populations to simplify SNAP enrollment, such as by utilizing reliable and accurate data matching strategies.

Promote skills development, capacity and retention of Denver Human Services SNAP staff for best customer service and sound administration.

Engage community-based partners, health sector stakeholders, food retailers, the philanthropic sector and others to assist in educating the public, improving the perception of SNAP, connecting SNAP-eligible people with benefits, and improving their access to nutrition education, incentives and other resources that can promote their health status.

THE DENVER SNAP TASK FORCE

Local momentum and leadership led to a special convening of key stakeholders charged with developing recommendations to increase SNAP participation in Denver. The Denver SNAP Task Force was convened by Hunger Free Colorado, Food Research & Action Center and The Food Trust, and co-chaired by Todd Jorgensen, Deputy Executive Director for Assistance at Denver Human Services, and Sandra Stenmark M.D., Clinical Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. The group included leaders from community development, public health, education, civic, food retail, agriculture and anti-hunger sectors, as well as those who have participated in SNAP. Through a series of racially and linguistically diverse focus groups, additional individuals who have participated in SNAP were also directly engaged to help generate and advise on recommendations.

Recognizing the many barriers to participating in SNAP, the Task Force recommends support for a wide range of strategies to improve and modernize SNAP administration, outreach and utilization. The Task Force acknowledges that efforts to increase participation in SNAP should also fit with the county and state's greater agenda to improve the program. The success of those efforts will be enhanced by coordinated action from state and local government agencies, the health sector, education advocates, community development organizations, charitable foundations, food retailers, and those with experiential knowledge of hunger and SNAP.

The recommendations listed in this report primarily focus on changes that can be made by the City and County of Denver to help SNAP reach its full potential. However, the Task Force recognizes the important role federal, state and local governments also play in administering SNAP. Therefore, these recommendations point to areas that we hope will inform discussion and advocacy that can support the current momentum in Denver and elsewhere in Colorado.

Together, these recommendations are a call for Denver's civic leaders to continue to elevate SNAP as a central strategy to eliminate hunger and to invest resources into an achievable, comprehensive plan.



INTRODUCTION

An increasing body of research shows that SNAP improves food security and health as well as positively impacts community economic development. However, less than two-thirds of eligible individuals in Denver are enrolled, and Colorado ranks 45th in getting SNAP to lower-income residents.⁵ The recommendations outlined in this report are designed to reduce the Denver “SNAP Gap.”

In an average month in 2016, SNAP served more than 81,000 individuals in Denver, bringing in more than \$10.6 million of 100% federally funded benefits, generating approximately \$19 million in economic activity.⁶ Hunger Free Colorado estimates that, in 2016, more than 45,000 Denver residents were likely eligible for SNAP but not participating.⁷

Lost Benefits, Lost Dollars ⁸	
2016 BENEFITS AWARDED	\$127,930,000
ECONOMIC IMPACT GENERATED BY SNAP	\$228,995,000
2016 BENEFITS NOT AWARDED	\$35,876,000
LOST ECONOMIC IMPACT	\$64,218,000

This means that each year, Denver leaves nearly \$35.9 million of SNAP benefits on the table.⁹ Since every \$1 of SNAP generates \$1.79 of economic impact through direct investment in grocery stores and other food retail, job creation, and the improved long-term health of families and neighborhoods, this is equivalent to a loss of more than \$64 million in annual economic activity in Denver.¹⁰

HOW SNAP WORKS IN DENVER

SNAP is a shared federal/state partnership. Benefits are funded 100% by the federal government; administrative expenses are shared between United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Colorado. In Colorado, counties also contribute to the state share of administrative expenses (approximately 20% of the federal and state total). Unlike a block-granted program, SNAP's federal structure allows it to respond to changes in need, whether due to economic downturns or natural disasters.

Federal eligibility rules provide income and resource limits on SNAP eligibility but allow states to apply for a variety of options and waivers to vary those rules. For most Colorado households, their gross incomes must fall below 200% of the federal poverty level; this is pursuant to a federal option that the state implemented in June 2018. This more adequate gross income test in Colorado allows more SNAP applicants to have their expenses for other basics like shelter and child

care taken into account in determining whether their net incomes are low enough to qualify them for SNAP benefits.¹¹

Colorado is a county-administered and state-supervised SNAP state. The Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) is the administering agency and Denver Human Services is the operating agency for Denver. The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Mountain Plains Regional Office provides oversight and guidance to Colorado and other states in the region. The USDA also provides funds to states for conducting SNAP outreach and application assistance (on a 50/50 federal/state reimbursement basis); implementing SNAP Education (SNAP-Ed) (based on a federal formula basis); and offering SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) (on a 50/50 federal/state reimbursement basis as well as through a limited 100% federal allocation).

POSITIVE IMPACTS OF CLOSING THE DENVER SNAP GAP

Based on SNAP research across the country, the positive impacts of closing the Denver SNAP gap include:

- Increasing food security for residents
- Improving health and lowering health care costs
- Ensuring lower-income students' access to school meals
- Increasing academic performance and decreasing school absenteeism
- Helping older adults afford food so they are better able to afford medicine
- Spurring demand for food retail stores, especially in underserved neighborhoods
- Increasing sales at retailers who accept SNAP benefits
- Boosting local economic activity

Recognizing the opportunities an effective SNAP program brings, Coloradans have developed a shared responsibility to keep their communities from going hungry. An excellent example of progress toward that goal is the January 2018 release of the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger, a statewide effort convened by The Colorado Health Foundation that identified shared goals, priority areas for funding, innovation and policies needed to address hunger and access to healthy food. One of the five priority goals identified in the Blueprint is to "Maximize SNAP and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) enrollment to propel Colorado to become a leading state for enrollment in these health and nutrition benefits."

This report seeks to build on these and other efforts, with a focus on Denver County, where Denver Human Services has taken a leadership role to identify opportunities and strategies in partnership with clients and diverse stakeholders to maximize SNAP enrollment.

Key Barriers to Higher Participation in SNAP

The Denver SNAP Task Force identified a variety of barriers to higher participation in SNAP that included:

- Lack of information about the benefits and how to apply
- Stigma associated with public assistance
- Difficulty of completing the application process, including submitting documents and having an interview
- Perception that the household is over the income limit
- Difficulty in accessing Denver Human Services offices, especially for those with limited mobility
- Concern that participation might undermine immigration status for someone in the household
- Perception that the benefit levels are too low to warrant applying
- Termination of benefits due to procedural error
- Lack of proper screening for eligibility factors
- Lack of language access with application and promotional program materials
- Lack of cultural competency among Denver Human Services staff throughout the application process
- Misinformation about eligibility
- Technology access barriers
- Restricted hours of service and at times poor customer service
- Lengthy hold times in phone systems
- Lack of community outreach and education
- Confusing agency notices and communication methods
- Concerns about termination or reduction of benefits due to an increase in income from an employment status change (i.e. the cliff effect)

METHODOLOGY

The Denver SNAP Task Force was convened in 2017 to identify barriers to higher participation in SNAP and create a set of policy recommendations for the City and County of Denver. The convening partners, composed of Hunger Free Colorado, Food Research & Action Center and The Food Trust, invited members for the Task Force from the public, private and nonprofit sectors, including community-based partners, health sector stakeholders, food retailers, the philanthropic sector, and individuals with experiential knowledge of hunger and SNAP. The lead partners aimed to convene a diverse group of stakeholders to conduct a comprehensive dialogue around the barriers to participation.

The Task Force met three times during 2017 and 2018 to discuss barriers to SNAP participation in three broad areas: policy, application and business processes, and client access. In addition to meeting as a group, the convening partners hosted one-on-one conversations to ensure that each participating member had an opportunity to share their unique perspective and role regarding SNAP enrollment. Small group discussions were held to ensure the recommendations reflected stakeholders' priorities and consensus.

It was important to the convening partners and Task Force members to understand the perspective of residents experiencing food insecurity as well as those currently enrolled in SNAP, and to develop a process for ongoing engagement and learning from experts with unique lived experience of food insecurity and those most impacted by SNAP.

THE ROLE OF SNAP CONSULTANTS

Several SNAP participants sat on the Task Force and provided clarity and guidance to the process and provided analysis of recommendations. Hunger Free Colorado and community partners also hosted a series of intensive SNAP participant focus groups. Fifty-one experts with lived experience with SNAP provided feedback to the Denver SNAP Task Force through six focus groups. Each focus group was made up of six to nine individuals that currently or within the last 12 months received SNAP benefits through Denver Human Services. Focus groups were held at four community-based locations, including the Marie L. Greenwood Academy, Metro Caring, Colorado Works Employment and Education and Colorado Cross Disability Coalition.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Denver has conducted previous assessments of barriers to SNAP. In 2016, the *SNAP to Health* report commissioned by Denver Human Services conducted a comprehensive assessment of barriers in the various spheres of SNAP administration and use, from individual to organizational and societal. The Task Force seeks to build upon this body of work and identify the most readily achievable gains, high-impact policies and practices, and long-term solutions.

Together, the Task Force recommendations provide a roadmap for Denver's civic leaders to continue to elevate SNAP as a central strategy to eliminate hunger, expand the stakeholders who have been a part of this effort, and invest resources into an achievable, comprehensive plan.

The recommendations in this report are broken into four parts:

- I Denver Government Leadership** outlines opportunities for Denver government and agencies to set public priorities, direct the overall implementation of goals, and foster collaboration among departments and between the public agencies and other sectors to improve SNAP's performance in Denver.
- II Denver Human Services** outlines opportunities for Denver Human Services to improve customer service and access to SNAP benefits for eligible Denver residents.
- III Community-Based, Nonprofit, For-profit and Philanthropic Sectors** outlines strategies for partnerships among these sectors. Each sector brings different skills and points of alignment with SNAP to amplify mutual goals, convene stakeholders, connect potential eligible SNAP users, and provide resources and financial support.
- IV State Policies and Operations** outlines opportunities to improve state policies and procedures to improve access to SNAP and the SNAP user experience.

I Denver Government Leadership

PUBLICLY PRIORITIZE THE GOALS OF THE DENVER SNAP TASK FORCE.

Recommendation 1: The work of the SNAP Task Force fits within the Mayor of Denver's ongoing focus on housing, health and jobs.

Denver's goal is to increase enrollment in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, SNAP, to 80 percent of eligible residents. That equals about 20,000 individuals, many of whom include children, seniors and the working poor.

Denver is working to align individual, community, business and government efforts to improve Denver's food system through the Denver Food Vision. Collaborations to increase SNAP enrollment include the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger and the Denver SNAP Task Force.

Strategies include enabling enabling emergency food assistance providers to assist people in applying for SNAP; implementing policies to reduce the number of people entering, leaving and re-entering the program; and supporting targeted outreach to people enrolled in Medicaid but not participating in SNAP.

PROVIDE ADVOCATES, PARTNERS AND OTHER CITY AGENCIES WITH AN ANNUAL UPDATE.

Recommendation 2: Denver Human Services will provide advocates, partners and other city agencies with an annual update on progress toward reaching these goals along with ideas for how partner agencies and organizations can help make progress.

"SNAP can be a powerful resource for individuals and families battling food insecurity. By providing supplemental means to eligible individuals to purchase groceries, SNAP not only works to improve food security but also overall health. With adequate support behind SNAP, we can ensure the program is more accessible and successful at reaching individuals in need, and through this, we may better demonstrate the tangible impact SNAP can make for individual and community health."

— **Kirsti Klavercamp**,
Assistant
Management
Analyst, Denver
Regional Council of
Governments, Area
Agency on Aging



SPOTLIGHT

II Denver Human Services

Denver Human Services' (DHS) mission is to partner with the community to protect those in harm's way and help all people in need. Denver Human Services provides assistance benefits and protection and prevention services to one in three Denver residents. The assistance programs it provides to eligible Denver residents in financial need include food (SNAP), cash and medical benefits, child care, child support and general assistance. Denver Human Services leads the county's efforts for application assistance, awareness campaigns, and efficiency of its systems and processes, making the agency a fundamental stakeholder in SNAP's improvement and overall success. The recommendations below acknowledge the leadership that Denver Human Services has shown to continually improve SNAP enrollment and recertification processes and also align with the needs of community-based direct service providers and those individuals and families currently participating in SNAP or in process of applying.

Applying for SNAP has a reputation for being invasive and complicated to navigate. This perception explains why eligible persons often cannot complete the process without assistance or simply do not apply at all. Applicants face a multitude of barriers that hinder their ability or desire to apply for SNAP, such as lack of understanding of eligibility criteria, not possessing the proper verification documents, language barriers, technological errors, and even mistrust of caseworkers and enrollment assisters. Furthermore, as clients are experiencing these barriers, the opportunities to communicate their concerns to the appropriate authority are often limited. Alongside application assistance and educating eligible persons about the program, Denver Human Services must also evaluate its own systems and processes. This calls for increased transparency about policies for clients and partners, training for staff, and openness to innovation and change.

A high-performing SNAP program is one that prioritizes the client experience and creates pathways to easy enrollment while supporting department staff and community-based partners. These recommendations call upon Denver Human Services to deepen its investment in the Denver community by continuing to adapt to the ever-changing needs of the populations it serves and to take up opportunities that modernize its systems and processes.

To further strengthen SNAP in Denver, Denver Human Services can:

IMPROVE SNAP APPLICATION ASSISTANCE AND EDUCATION ABOUT THE PROGRAM.

Recommendation 1: Better align SNAP outreach efforts with the demographic diversity of Denver, with a focus on populations with high rates of eligible but not enrolled individuals.

- Conduct additional research on the demographics of the eligible but not enrolled (EBNE) population and incorporate it into development and implementation of the agency's SNAP outreach plan, so these efforts are strategic, targeted and culturally competent. In considering research and outreach strategies, take into account how other factors, such as lack of transportation or homelessness, may affect equitable access to and acceptance of programs such as SNAP.
- Leverage the efforts of other benefits programs (e.g., Medicaid, Social Security Income [SSI]) with higher rates of participation among groups who tend to under participate in SNAP, such as elderly persons, persons with disabilities, working families and immigrants/persons with Limited English Proficiency (LEP).

Recommendation 2: Partner with community-based organizations and local institutions, such as schools and centers for older adults to increase awareness of SNAP benefits and enrollment processes.

- Strengthen partnerships with community-based organizations and schools to plan and implement an awareness campaign that employs trained application assisters, including community experts, to educate immigrant, mixed-status and refugee households, older adults and people with disabilities about facts regarding SNAP benefits, and to dispel misperceptions around eligibility.
- Work with trusted, culturally competent community-based partners and their volunteers, including schools, faith-based organizations, senior service centers and early education providers such as Head Start to conduct outreach to specific populations in communities with high rates of EBNE populations.
- Identify strategic opportunities for Denver Human Services staff to work out of the office and in collaboration with additional community-based partners, especially in locations across the city where need is high. Additional community-based partnerships are an effective way for Denver Human Services staff to integrate into communities, build trust and gain first-hand knowledge about whether current SNAP outreach strategies are effective or should be modified.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Because many older adults use senior centers to receive free or low-cost meals, they can be excellent partners for sharing information about SNAP. For example, **Amherst Center for Senior Services** in New York draws on case managers to help its low-income participants apply for a range of benefits available to them, including SNAP. In 2013, the Center's case managers had the highest level of SNAP enrollment out of all case management teams in Erie County. Senior centers that have limited staffing often partner with local organizations to conduct benefits counseling. Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon has a county SNAP eligibility worker who visits senior centers, building trust and connecting seniors with SNAP benefits. For more information, visit bit.ly/2DuCcQZ.¹²

Recommendation 3: Prioritize cultural competence and multilingual access.

Develop additional strategies to ensure that Denver Human Services can best serve Denver's diverse population including: 1) continuing to recruit multilingual staff who can engage with clients throughout the application process, and 2) ensuring that all components of outreach, application and recertification processes are accessible to all populations by considering needs of people with disabilities, who have reduced literacy and/or who speak and read languages other than English and Spanish. As needed, conduct research, engage community partners and review demographic data to determine language needs that reflect Denver's diversity.

PROMISING PRACTICE

In 2004, the statewide **Illinois Hunger Coalition** and **Illinois Department of Human Services** (IDHS) local offices established Community Quality Councils (CQCs). Since then, regular meetings convene participants such as community groups, direct service providers, food pantries, medical clinics, domestic violence shelters and homeless advocacy organizations. The meetings have improved services at local offices and established collaborative relationships between local office staff, service providers and community groups. For more information, visit ilhunger.org/cqc.¹³

Recommendation 4: Create forums and processes for client and community input to create an ongoing feedback loop.

Denver Human Services should regularly participate in forums that local nonprofit organizations coordinate and host, with Denver residents who have direct experience with SNAP, as a mechanism for sharing information and continually collecting client and other stakeholder recommendations for quality and process improvement.

Recommendation 5: Prioritize, measure and improve the overall client experience.

- Research, develop and implement systems for gathering input and evaluating the overall client experience with metrics that create a feedback loop that enables Denver Human Services to track and measure progress toward goals that are client-centric and focus on enhancing customer service and successful client outcomes. This increase in data and evaluation of the client experience should be accompanied with training for staff to reinforce a customer-centered philosophy and practice.
- Upholding Denver Human Services' commitment to "One Touch and Done," the agency should strive to build a "Culture of Eligibility" with staff oriented toward using all tools available to connect clients with the full array of benefits and services, reflecting a whole-person, whole-family approach.

Recommendation 6: Improve communication with clients, direct service providers and community partners.

- Increase use of text messages and other technology-forward methods as options for effectively communicating with clients. Explore ways to use this technology to keep clients informed about their progress through the process.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Code for America and several partners in San Francisco's Bay Area sought a way to lessen the time it takes to apply for CalFresh. Code for America created the "GetCalFresh" mobile phone app as a way to help eligible residents apply for CalFresh, submit documents, and communicate via SMS with California Department of Human Services staff. With the app, clients can expect to apply for CalFresh within 10 minutes and hear within a week from their county office about an eligibility interview. SMS capability has reportedly helped lead to improved applicant response rates, quicker application completion, decreased workload for agency staff, and increased accessibility to the CalFresh Program for the eligible but not enrolled population. For more information, visit getcalfresh.org.¹⁴

- Create tools, available in print and online, that clearly illustrate the SNAP enrollment process in the City and County of Denver for customers, partners and staff, with a focus on workflow, policies and procedures that Denver Human Services currently employs. Language should be simple, clear and in line with marketing best practices and behavioral insights techniques.
- Develop a method of regularly communicating about SNAP policies, procedures and progress with partners via new or existing communication channels. Create and make available accessible information for clients and community-based partners regarding SNAP-specific topics such as eligibility rules, foods eligible for SNAP purchase, Double Up Food Bucks sites and SNAP education opportunities.

Recommendation 7: Invest in Denver Human Services staff training as well as retention and development.

- Strengthen training for technicians to ensure it is a priority to thoroughly screen applicants for applicable childcare expenses, and medical expenses for households that include older adults or people with a disability. The screening should routinely ask applicants about the cost of their transportation for childcare and medical purposes.
- Prioritize Denver Human Services staff retention, skills development and advancement with continued emphasis on work-life balance, professional development and well-being of staff. Task force recommendations included a holistic training focused on leadership, customer service, cultural competency, trauma-informed care, equity, empathy and fairness.

Recommendation 8: Make it easier for clients and partners to navigate Denver Human Services systems and processes.

- Improve navigation options for individuals visiting Denver Human Services offices or contacting the agency via phone. Opportunities could include enhanced signage at county offices, designation of a multilingual on-site advocate to assist clients in the waiting room or making it easier to reschedule an interview. Concurrently, for clients who place a call to the call center, increase the number of issues that are resolved in real time, via a single phone call, rather than referred up the agency staff chain.
- Explore policy changes and partnerships that reduce transportation barriers to accessing service. For example, consider approval of exceptions for older adults with functional limitations or collaborations with Regional Transportation District (RTD) and ride-share companies.
- Review business hours and days to determine if they are convenient and accessible for clients and supportive of optimal Denver Human Services operations. If not, consider modifications, such as revisiting which services are available on Wednesdays, considering opening one weekday evening a week, or other schedule changes.

PROMISING PRACTICE

The **Colorado Double Up Food Bucks** Program (Double Up) allows participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to receive up to an additional \$20 in Colorado-grown fruits and vegetables. When customers use the benefits on their Quest card at participating farmers markets or select retailers, those food benefits will be matched dollar for dollar to be put toward Colorado-grown, fresh fruits and vegetables, up to \$20 per visit. Double Up helps families access and afford more fresh, healthy foods while also supporting Colorado's farm community.

Over 5,000 individuals and families utilize the Double Up incentive. 85% of customers reported purchasing more fruits and vegetables and 84% reported eating more fruits and vegetables. The cooperation and innovation of multiple community partners and agencies are key to Double Up Food Bucks' success.

In order to inform eligible individuals and families, Double Up is supported by over 200 outreach partners statewide, many of which integrate Double Up information into SNAP outreach and enrollment information. LiveWell Colorado supports efforts by providing free printed promotional materials, how-to videos, and training support to integrate the program into SNAP outreach and referrals. This increases knowledge about the program, legitimizes the Double Up's connection to SNAP, and reduces stigma.

Double Up also engages stakeholders such as SNAP shoppers, outreach partners, farmers market managers, local store owners, and farmers through regular gatherings, a Community Food Advocate program, and a statewide advisory committee to share feedback and strategize how this program can become another long-term piece of Colorado's food environment. This allows participants to guide program growth and how service providers can best outreach to the community.

For more information about how Double Up Food Bucks works, where markets and retailers are located, and how to get involved visit doubleupcolorado.org.¹⁵

PROMISING PRACTICE

Benefits Data Trust's (BDT) BenePhilly initiative combats poverty and increases economic security by ensuring Philadelphians receive the benefits and services they need to make ends meet. In operation since 2008, BDT and a network of BenePhilly Centers have helped more than 110,000 lower-income Philadelphians enroll in benefits.¹⁶ BDT's strong partnerships with the Mayor's Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity, the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, the Pennsylvania Department of Aging, and a variety of community organizations allow for cross-agency data sharing to facilitate identification of individuals likely eligible for benefits, targeted outreach, and simplified enrollment. Trained counselors at each BenePhilly Center, as well as in BDT's contact center, screen people for eligibility and complete applications using BDT's Community PRISM software. For more information on the BenePhilly initiative, visit bit.ly/2CS79y7.¹⁷

Recommendation 10: Convene a separate working group focused on Employment & Training.

Make Denver's SNAP Employment & Training (E&T) a model program that works with Denver and the state to tackle tough issues and brings new perspectives via an externally convened, short-term, multi-sectoral task force. This group would conduct a comprehensive review of current practices and consider how to incorporate best practices from across the country. Within this process should be an internal audit regarding current processes, including referrals and exemptions, consistent implementation of waivers, current programming, and potential partners.

Recommendation 9: Find new ways to strategically use data and technology.

- Continue to explore ways to share data that empower clients, simplify verification, and improve SNAP outreach and the client experience. Action steps include continued work on data-sharing agreements, as well as learning from and adopting best practices from other Colorado counties and other states.
- Explore ways to ensure that everyone who provides requested documentation in person or electronically receives a receipt to note that the documentation was provided.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Recognizing that skills training and education can help individuals on a path to self-sufficiency, the **Foundation for California Community Colleges**, created Fresh Success. The program helps community colleges and community-based organizations (CBOs) partner with counties to start SNAP E&T programs. For the Fresh Success collaborations, local colleges and CBOs provide funds that can leverage federal reimbursement matches. The Foundation provides tools, templates, trainings, and technical assistance to ease the start-up process and help manage the federal funds. Participants in Fresh Success have access to educational programs to improve both basic and vocational skills. Under Fresh Success's comprehensive approach, participants also receive support services such as career counseling, job search and placement, educational tutoring, and reimbursement for transportation or educational supplies. For more information about Fresh Success, visit bit.ly/2ynlzCy.¹⁸



III Community-Based, Nonprofit, For-Profit and Philanthropic Sectors

Improvement of SNAP is not an exclusive role of Denver Human Services. On the contrary, there are opportunities for community-based, nonprofit, for-profit partners and the philanthropic sector to inform improvement strategies, support existing and future initiatives, and help shape perceptions about SNAP. These entities, which are bountiful in Denver, share a desire to see every Coloradan have increased access to food. Community-based nonprofits are central to successful SNAP outreach. These groups are well positioned to connect with new, eligible clients due to their ability to relay information clearly and in culturally appropriate ways. Community-based groups' local knowledge and trust among community members help them to conduct effective outreach to the EBNE population and connect them to a multitude of services available.

The private sector plays an important role in serving Denver SNAP participants because SNAP is rooted in partnership between the public sector (e.g. Denver Human Services) and the private sector (e.g. grocers, corporations, and healthcare providers). The private sector is well positioned to increase the number of outlets that accept SNAP benefits; to standardize the healthcare sector's attention to hunger and SNAP; and to educate the public and opinion leaders about the currently problematic narrative around the usage of SNAP.

Finally, foundations have convening powers and flexible resources that can be powerful catalysts for local action and cross-sector collaboration. Additionally, expanded support from foundations offers community-based partners the opportunity to diversify funding streams and stretch state resources. To implement the recommendations and execute the activities described in this paper, additional resources, support and evaluation that foundations play an important role.

COMMUNITY-BASED AND NONPROFIT PARTNERS CAN:

Recommendation 1: Share information about SNAP and the benefits of SNAP enrollment.

Share updated information about SNAP and its potential benefits, such as, the ability to reallocate income to cover other basic needs such as utilities, medication, or transportation expenses with their service populations, who may include EBNE residents. Additionally, community-based and nonprofit partners can consistently refer potentially eligible SNAP residents to both Denver Human Services and community-based application assistance providers, such as the Hunger Free Colorado Food Resource Hotline.

"SNAP ensures that my family and I will be able to purchase food. Food is not just a physical item. It's something that we need to function, to be healthy; it's also something to help us heal. Having SNAP means that other necessities, such as rent, heat and transportation are not sacrificed as much."

— **Andrea Fuller**,
Entrepreneur and
Advocate, Consultant



SPOTLIGHT

Did you know?

Families, older adults and individuals seeking food assistance in Denver can utilize the Hunger Free Colorado Food Resource Hotline. By calling the state-wide toll-free number (855) 855-4626, Coloradans can be connected to a bilingual food assistance navigator that will assist them with food and nutrition resources based on their geographic area.

Recommendation 2: Host regular community meetings and invite Denver Human Services.

Host a biannual meeting for community partners and individuals who have experienced hunger that serves as a forum for Denver Human Services to provide an update on current progress and gather input for additional improvements to SNAP outreach, processes, and the overall application and recertification experience. Meetings should be hosted at locations convenient for SNAP participants to reduce travel time, and accommodations for compensation, interpretation and child care should be arranged. Recommendations that spur progress should be regularly reported back to attendees of these meetings.

Recommendation 3: Expand incentive programs.

Expand and support incentive programs that make it more affordable to purchase healthy foods, including the Colorado Double Up Food Bucks SNAP incentive program.

Recommendation 4: Increase the number of food retailers, especially in North and West Denver, that accept SNAP and WIC benefits.

Authorized SNAP retailers range from big-box superstores and well-known, national chain grocery stores, to independently, family-owned corner stores, farmers markets and military commissaries. Having a wide variety of these types of retailers ensures that SNAP participating families are able to regularly access and redeem their SNAP dollars on food. SNAP also boosts local economies due to how quickly benefits are redeemed.¹⁹

Recommendation 5: Collaborate with Denver SNAP authorities to stay informed of best practices and innovations regarding SNAP policy and processes.

Collaborate with the City and County of Denver and the state to make full use of flexibilities and local discretionary authorities to design best-in-class, people-friendly, and evidence-based policies and programs.

“We cannot expect to address the entire continuum of economic inequity by providing SNAP benefits; however, it is our social and political responsibility to help people during difficult times by providing bridges to resources to help feed families. No one should have to decide between paying rent, purchasing food or paying for vital medication to sustain life. Let us think of SNAP benefits as a small component within a complex problem for those trapped in the pitfalls of poverty. It is not an option to provide “nothing” because any amount can help when you are starting from zero.”

— **Kim Desmond**,
Director, Denver
Office on Women
& Families



SPOTLIGHT

THE PRIVATE SECTOR CAN:

Recommendation 6: Identify best practices for grocers to serve SNAP participants and educate the public and opinion leaders about SNAP.

SNAP-authorized grocery stores should experiment in using on-site spaces such as community rooms to make SNAP application assistance or education regarding the use of the program available on-site. Grocery stores are encouraged to work with the state to utilize the MyCOBenefits mobile phone app to ensure clients know their account balances when shopping, and to disseminate educational information about SNAP and healthy, affordable shopping.

Recommendation 7: Build robust partnerships with the health care sector.

The health care sector is positioned to increase awareness of how food insecurity leads to poorer health, an increased prevalence and poorer management of chronic illnesses, impaired child development, higher healthcare costs and how enrollment in SNAP and WIC has been demonstrated to improve health and decrease healthcare costs. Stakeholders working in the health sector should promote the health benefits of SNAP enrollment and partner with patients, human services and anti-hunger agencies to develop efficient strategies to enroll Medicaid beneficiaries and others in SNAP. Quality and process improvements need to be informed by metrics such as number of applications completed, current SNAP enrollment data as well as patient experience and accessing benefits.

Recommendation 8: Engage the private sector in creative ways to expand upon current outreach efforts, SNAP incentive programs, and overcome stigma and amplify the benefits of enrolling in SNAP.

Local and national corporate partners that want to bolster their commitment to their communities' health and economic stability can take a variety of steps to help Denver achieve its SNAP-related goals. Examples include providing financial support to leverage federal matching funds for SNAP outreach and education and for the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) program. Another role institutions and corporate partners can play is helping to reinforce the benefits of SNAP as a tool for improving health, education and economic opportunity while realizing health care savings in our city. Finally, corporate partners and institutions are encouraged to consider offering discounts to Colorado QUEST Card holders, as is current practice at the Denver Zoo and several other Denver cultural institutions where discounted admission is \$1.



The Colorado QUEST Card holds benefits from SNAP and looks like a credit or bank card that may be used at any SNAP authorized retailer in the country. Balance, transaction history, and other information can be accessed at ebtEDGE.com.

THE PHILANTHROPIC SECTOR CAN:

Recommendation 1: Convene and engage unlikely partners.

Convene and secure commitments from the private sector for SNAP-related outreach, engagement and marketing; and support the evaluation of these efforts.

Recommendation 2: Provide financial support to community-based partners.

Ensure Denver-based organizations engaged in SNAP outreach have optimal capacity to devote to the work, can obtain or create necessary materials, and are incentivized to collaborate, rather than compete.

Recommendation 3: Enable compensation of consultants with direct experience of hunger and SNAP for their time and expertise.

Provide means for compensating consultants with direct experience of hunger and with Denver's SNAP program for their time. In addition, assist addressing needs for transportation, interpretation, child care or food that affect the ability of people with lived experience to participate in meetings or otherwise provide input and feedback.

IV State Policies and Operations

State and federal policies have a tremendous impact on how SNAP is administered locally, in both the city and county of Denver, and throughout the state of Colorado. The Denver SNAP Task Force strongly supports the changes Colorado has made within the last couple of years to increase the standard medical deduction and implement a homelessness waiver. We also strongly support the state's recent increase in Colorado's SNAP gross income test to 200% of the federal poverty level, thereby fully implementing broad-based categorical eligibility in the state.

The Denver SNAP Task Force recommends that Colorado make the following changes to help increase the number of eligible Coloradans who participate in SNAP:

Did you know?

State and federal policies have a tremendous impact on how SNAP is administered locally, both in the City and County of Denver and throughout the state and nation.

SIMPLIFY SNAP-RELATED PROCESSES FOR OLDER ADULTS.

Recommendation 1: Adopt a simplified application and lengthened recertification process for older adults applying to and enrolled in SNAP, with special attention to older adults with disabilities or whose income is minimal or fixed.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Beginning October 1, 2017, the state of California implemented the **Elderly Simplified Application Project** (ESAP) to increase the number of older adults participating in CalFresh. ESAP streamlines the application and certification process through use of data matching. As a result older adults need only verify identity, residency, income and household size. With ESAP, the annual recertification period is lengthened to a 36-month period and households fill out interim reports at 12 and 24 months. Counties waive the recertification interview for those households. For more information on ESAP guidance visit fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/ESAP_Guidance.pdf.²⁰



Recommendation 2: Make improvements to PEAK, Colorado's online application system for SNAP, WIC, Medicaid and several other programs, to make the system more intuitive, user-friendly and, in time, integrated with the Colorado Benefits Management System (CBMS).

- Develop a clear and concise statement that explains to the applicant the next steps once their PEAK application is complete (e.g., explain that applicants will need to complete an interview with their county office and submit any requested verifications to receive an eligibility determination).
- Allow for clients to create accounts without an email address (e.g., by verifying their account via a text).
- Create a pathway to enroll in SNAP via an "Add New Benefits" button for those who already receive some form of benefits and have a case number or provide these persons with a guide to file a "Change Report", thereby enrolling in SNAP.
- Ensure that the PEAK website is optimized for smartphone/mobile phone use.

IMPROVE CLIENT CORRESPONDENCE AND NOTICES.

Recommendation 3: Improve client correspondence and Notices of Action (NOA) so they are clear, concise, fewer in number and easy for clients to understand.

Client correspondence and notices should present information in multiple languages on how clients can access support regarding a submitted application, an active case, or Notice of Action. Correspondence and notices should provide support information for applicants and clients who may require additional language assistance. The process for updating client correspondence and Notices of Action should involve working with counties, clients, and nonprofit and community-based organizations.

"Students who live in households that receive SNAP benefits are eligible to receive free school meals under the National School Lunch Program. Denver Public Schools feeds over 25,000 students that have been Directly Certified with SNAP benefits. Students who are Directly Certified do not need to complete a meal application, which means they are in a meal benefit status much quicker; this helps to ensure that students are able to eat during the school day. A well-balanced nutritional meal plays an important role in academic achievement."

— **Rosemarie Campbell**,
Meal Applications
Supervisor, Denver
Public Schools



SPOTLIGHT

Recommendation 4: Continue to pursue federal waivers and state options that improve the client experience, including the pre-enrollment waiver for incarcerated individuals, and regularly share information about state options and waivers with implementing agencies and partners.

Did you know?

Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) has applied for and received a federal waiver to provide SNAP application information to prisoners preparing to reenter society. This will help smooth the transition of formerly incarcerated persons back into their communities, allowing them to more seamlessly connect with basic services that can contribute to greater well-being and lower recidivism rates.

IMPROVE FAIR HEARING PROCESS.

Recommendation 5: Explore ways to publish fair hearing appeal decisions in a manner that would allow for convenient public access. Borrow the Medicaid appeal model practice whereby an Administrative Law Judge reviews the legal sufficiency of a notice at the outset of the appeal hearing.

Recommendation 6: Review and adopt promising practices for:

- **Benefit issuance:** Review and adjust Colorado policy to align with promising practices for benefit issuance by optimizing the staggering of benefit distribution throughout the month to meet the needs of clients, retailers and SNAP administrators. For more information about state distribution schedules visit bit.ly/2PHC1Ek.²¹
- **Dismissal and prevention of overpayments and outstanding claims:** In addressing overpayments and outstanding claims, maintain priority on encouraging counties to use all tools available to dismiss claims that are outdated, burdensome to the client, or administratively expensive to recoup. Additionally, review and adopt promising practices regarding overpayments, including a statute of limitations and additional tools for dismissing claims that are outdated, burdensome, or administratively expensive to recoup.
- **Mailing EBT card:** Explore with USDA's Food and Nutrition Service and Colorado's SNAP processor promising practices for mailing EBT cards.

“Healthy food should be within reach of every child, yet one in seven Colorado kids don’t always know where their next meal will come from. We know that when kids are hungry, they are likely to be sick more often and hospitalized more frequently. This makes SNAP a critical part of our work to ensure all children in Denver and in communities across our state can enjoy optimal health.”

— **Aditi Ramaswami,**
Senior Policy
Coordinator,
Children’s Hospital
Colorado



SPOTLIGHT



MOVING FORWARD

Denver is well positioned to support the initiatives and policies identified in this report to lower barriers to accessing SNAP. There is already momentum surrounding this issue in Denver and Colorado, and leaders in the civic, public, private, business and grocery sectors have expressed the need for a multi-sector effort.

SNAP is an effective way to help people purchase groceries for their families in times of need in Denver County and across the country. Despite considerable progress, the current participation rate in SNAP demonstrates that there is still more opportunity to close the Denver SNAP gap. This report identifies many of the barriers to enrollment, and sets specific, concrete goals toward eliminating those barriers.

As Denver continues to experience rapid population growth, SNAP is an important component of the city's neighborhood stabilization strategy and its ability to build a more inclusive city. If the goal of 80% participation of eligible persons is reached, Denver could receive an estimated \$15.9 million in additional federal nutrition benefits each year, generating nearly \$28.5 million in economic activity per year.²² An increased participation rate would lead to proven, positive impacts on food security, health and education.

The Denver SNAP Task Force recommendations will benefit those households struggling to afford food, including: lower-income children trying to learn in school; college students juggling expenses for tuition, textbooks and food; older adults on fixed incomes too often choosing between food and medication; immigrant parents looking to ensure their children have a nutritious meal; military veterans transitioning back to civilian employment; and working families with children who need help supplementing low-wage jobs. We encourage all who are interested to join us in moving the Task Force recommendations forward to increase access to SNAP and improve the health, education and well-being of the residents of Denver.

Endnotes

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FRAC

Food Research
& Action Center

Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) is the leading national nonprofit organization working to eradicate poverty-related hunger and undernutrition in the United States. Founded in 1970, FRAC provides coordination, training, technical assistance and support on nutrition and anti-poverty issues to a nationwide network of advocates, service providers, food banks, program administrators and participants and policymakers. To learn more about FRAC, visit www.frac.org.



The Food Trust
THEFOODTRUST.ORG

The Food Trust, founded in 1992, strives to make healthy food available to all. Working with neighborhoods, schools, grocers, farmers and policymakers, The Food Trust has developed a comprehensive approach that combines nutrition education and greater availability of affordable, healthy food. To learn more about The Food Trust, visit www.thefoodtrust.org.



Hunger Free Colorado, a statewide nonprofit organization founded in 2009, leads efforts to connect families and individuals to food resources and fuels change in systems, policies and social views, so no Coloradan goes hungry. By leveraging the power of collaboration, innovation and partnership, Hunger Free Colorado eliminates barriers to the access of affordable, nutritious food and brings a unified, statewide voice to the issue and solutions surrounding hunger. To learn more about Hunger Free Colorado, visit www.hungerfreecolorado.org.

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