

SNAP *in the* SOUTHEAST

Putting Food on
the Table During
the Pandemic
and Beyond



Participating Organizations

Alabama Arise
Alabama Department of Human Resources
Alabama Food Bank Association
American Heart Association, Mississippi Chapter
Atlanta Legal Aid
Delgado Community College
Feeding Kentucky
Feeding the Carolinas
Feeding the Gulf Coast
Florida Impact to End Hunger
Food Bank of the Albemarle
Georgia Budget & Policy Institute
Georgia Department of Human Services
Georgia Division of Family and Children Services
Georgia Food Bank Association
Georgia State University
HealthMPowers
Jackson Medical Mall
Kentucky Center for Economic Policy
Kentucky Equal Justice Center
Louisiana Budget Project
Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services
Mississippi Center for Justice
North Carolina Justice Center
Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Tennessee
South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center
South Carolina Department of Social Services
Step Up Savannah
Student Basic Needs Coalition, University of Tennessee at Knoxville
Tennessee Justice Center
United Way of North Mississippi
Wright's Markets

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the nation's strongest line of defense against poverty and hunger. Enrollment in SNAP has been demonstrated to improve food security and health outcomes; decrease health care costs, the incidence of chronic diseases and poverty; and positively impact economic development and overall quality of life.¹

However, across the Southeast Region, there are serious gaps in SNAP participation. To address that issue, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Atlanta Community Food Bank fielded surveys to elicit input from SNAP participants and conducted a series of online conversations with SNAP stakeholders from a number of Southeast states including Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee. Over 50 participants from food banks, advocacy groups, government agencies and philanthropic organizations reviewed topline results of surveys of SNAP participants in Southeast states, other research findings and policy assessments, as well as listened to national, state and local experts describe important methods for facilitating access

to SNAP for eligible people in need and promoting health equity. After robust discussions, our final recommendations include support for more generous SNAP benefits that acknowledge the rising cost of food; increased investments in modern technology and customer services; and extending education and promotion of SNAP to increasingly diverse populations in the Southeast Region.

¹ https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/FRAC-Facts-SNAP-Strengths_FNL.pdf





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

INTRODUCTION

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the nation's strongest line of defense against poverty and hunger. However, across the Southeast Region, there are serious gaps in program participation.² Concurrently, hunger and poverty are prevalent in the region. Prior to the pandemic, participation rates for SNAP-eligible people overall and for those eligible with earned income in the Southeast Region lagged behind the national average.³ The Southeast Region missed getting benefits to one in five eligible people and left federal benefit dollars on the table in Washington, D.C. Each federally funded SNAP benefit dollar during a downturn generates between \$1.50 and \$1.80 in economic activity and positively impacts all parts of the food chain—from farmers, ranchers and manufacturers, to truckers, retailers and grocery clerks.⁴ Those dollars also add to state and local revenues, as the SNAP benefits free up SNAP shoppers' other resources to purchase basics that are subject to sales tax.

Moreover, the Southeast Region has a mixed record in serving low-income households working their way up the economic ladder. In a majority of the Southeast states, modest increases in wages result in low-income working families losing SNAP eligibility entirely, while in only three of the eight states in the USDA's Southeast Region, benefit amounts decrease as earnings increase and terminate entirely only when a somewhat higher gross income level is reached.⁵ Getting Southeast states to pursue the latter SNAP gross income policy could promote financial success for many more working families.

Nonetheless, SNAP has been a crucial support in the Southeast Region, especially during COVID-19. During this time of great food hardship, Southeast states adjusted policies and operations to meet increased need. Many state human services directors in the Southeast and other regions have pointed out some of the features of the pandemic response that can inform SNAP policy and investment decisions in post-COVID-19 times.⁶

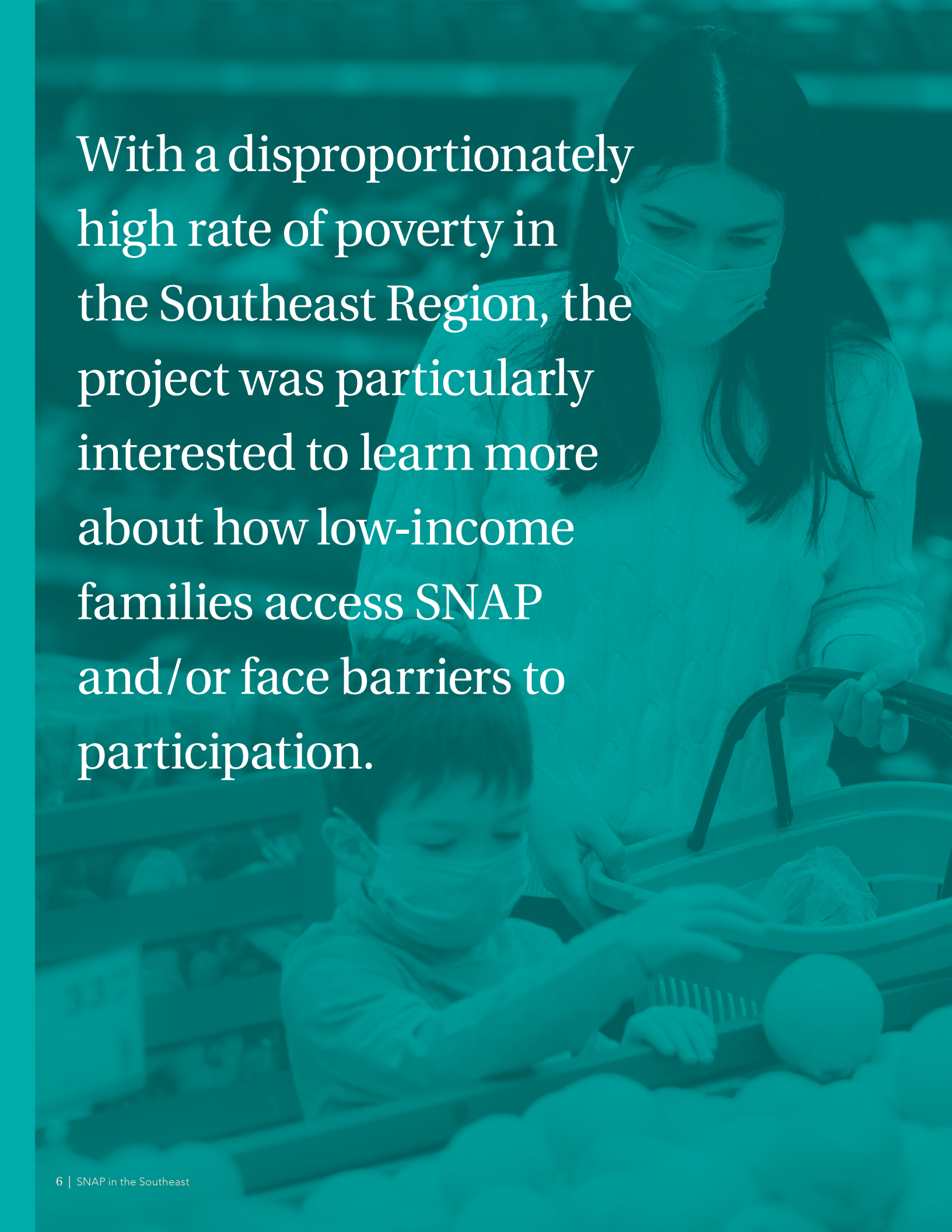
To develop consensus recommendations for reducing food insecurity and closing the Southeast Region SNAP gap, the Atlanta Community Food Bank conducted a series of SNAP participant surveys and online conversations with SNAP stakeholders from the Southeast Region: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Over 50 participants from food banks, advocacy groups, government agencies and philanthropic organizations reviewed topline results of surveys of SNAP participants in Southeast states, other research findings, and policy assessments, as well as listened to state and local experts describe important methods for facilitating access to SNAP for eligible people in need.

WHAT IS SNAP?

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides monthly benefits to eligible low-income people to purchase food, and is a shared federal/state partnership. Benefits are funded 100% by the federal government; administrative expenses are shared between USDA and states. 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. With regard to income limits, applicants' net incomes must be no higher than 100% of the federal poverty line. Most households also face asset limits and a gross income test (130% of the poverty line unless the state opts for a higher limit).

The Southeast Region SNAP initiative was originally planned around in-person focus groups with SNAP clients, and a gathering of Southeast Region SNAP stakeholders in the fall of 2020. However, as a result of COVID and social distancing protocols, work relied on survey research and webinar based-convenings. Thanks to Propel and the Fresh EBT app's survey capabilities, the preferences and opinions of more than 2,000 SNAP clients in Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee informed our discussion series and allowed us to focus attention on client priorities. Virtual gatherings included state and local speakers who might not have been able to travel to an Atlanta conference, and operating under pandemic conditions exposed both strengths and weaknesses of SNAP that might not have been apparent otherwise.

This report compiles key findings from client surveys and summarizes a series of topical presentations and discussions that were hosted via webinars from October 2020 through April 2021. It also describes recommendations for SNAP policy and advocacy that emerged as strong areas of consensus among key stakeholders and participants from nine Southeast states. The groups hope these perspectives will contribute to effective and innovative strategies for strengthening SNAP in the Southeast Region.

A photograph of a woman and a young child in a grocery store, both wearing face masks. The woman is pushing a shopping cart and looking down at it. The child is standing next to her, also looking down. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal color. The text is written in a white, serif font on the left side of the image.

With a disproportionately high rate of poverty in the Southeast Region, the project was particularly interested to learn more about how low-income families access SNAP and/or face barriers to participation.

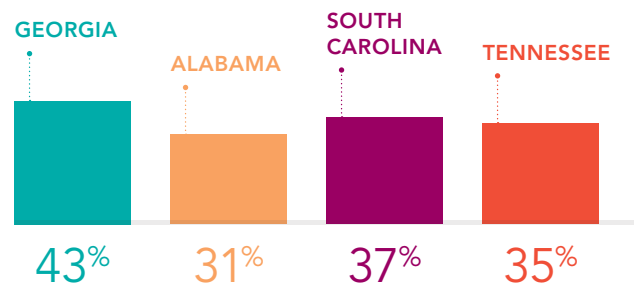
SNAP CLIENT SURVEY

The Fresh EBT app, supported by Propel, offered a unique opportunity to hear from SNAP clients in real time during the pandemic. FRAC's July 2020 report, "Poverty, Hunger, Health and the Federal Nutrition Programs: A Profile of the Southern Region," framed our understanding of regional issues, including federal nutrition program participation gaps by racial and ethnic minority groups. With a disproportionately high rate of poverty in the Southeast Region, the project was particularly interested to learn more about how low-income families access SNAP and/or face barriers to participation.

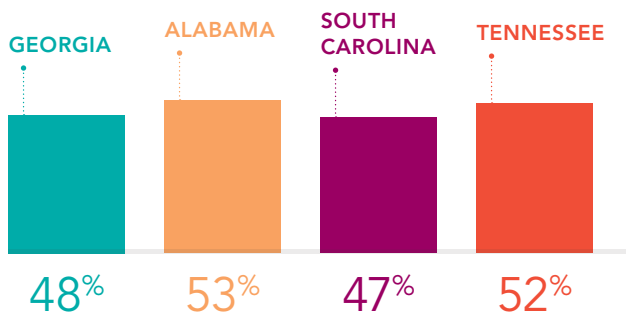
An app-based digital survey in English was fielded over a one-week period from July 28–August 4, 2020. A random sample of 2,093 SNAP participants from Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee who use Fresh EBT to manage their benefits responded to key questions focused on how their households were faring during the pandemic. All households were surveyed anonymously. Those who completed the survey did so voluntarily, and many gave permission to share their comments with the public.

The difficulties SNAP clients reported were profound, and people acknowledged tapping many different resources to get by during COVID-19.

Wages Reduced

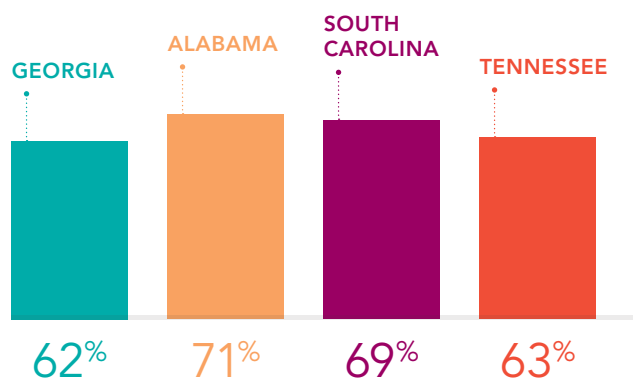


Visited Food Pantry

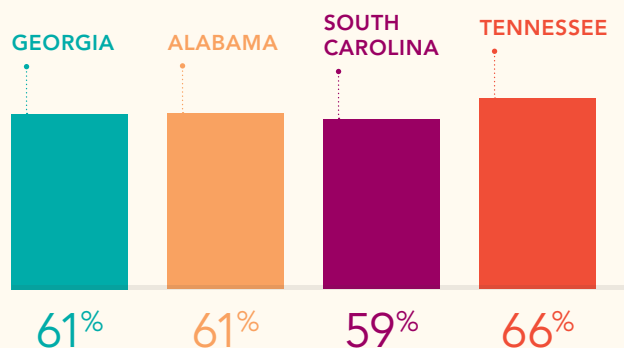


"I am grateful for all I have received. I have four growing boys and the food they get is important."

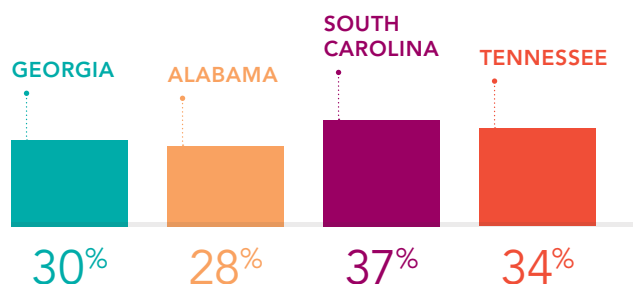
Delayed Paying Bills



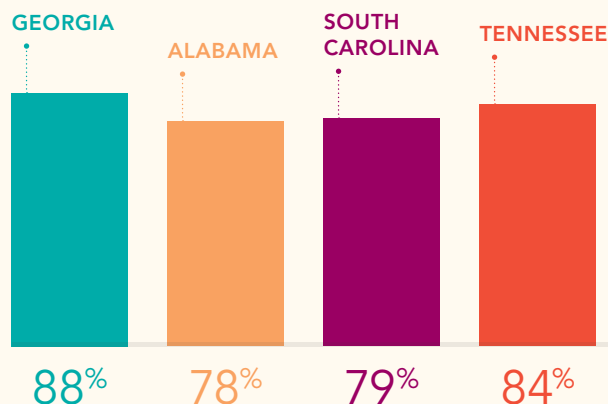
Received Extra SNAP Benefits During June 2020



Lost Job

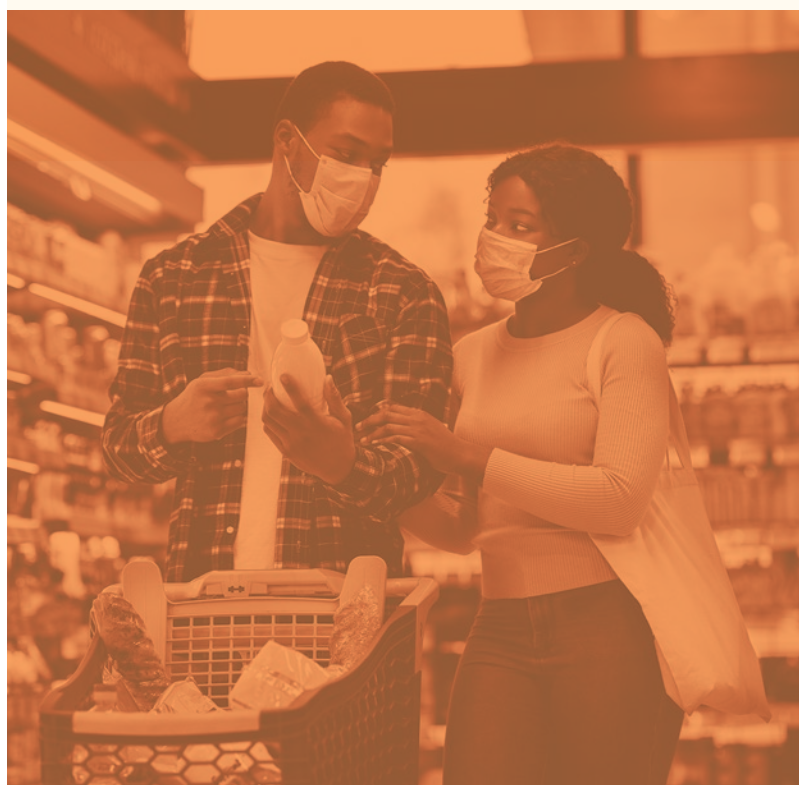
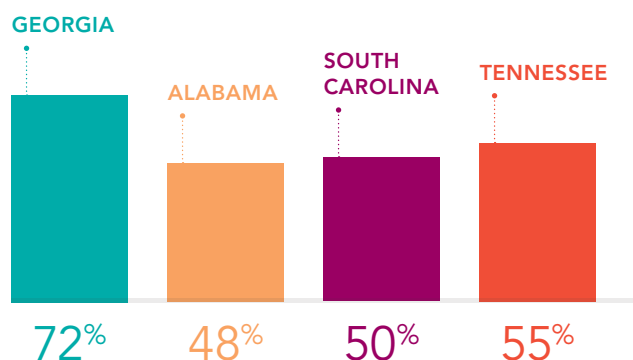


Extra Benefits Helped SNAP Participants Make It Through the Month



Georgia, with its Gateway enrollment system that allows applicants to apply for multiple benefits via a single platform, emerged as an online leader with 70% of respondents who had been able to apply for SNAP online, compared to 48%–55% in the other states. This significant difference prompted the project to learn more about Georgia's system in greater detail in a subsequent webinar. Respondents agreed strongly that increased benefit payments had made a difference.

Able to Apply Online



The survey concluded with an open-ended question:
*Has SNAP helped you and your family during COVID-19?
Do you have suggestions for how to improve the program?
(Telling your story can help people understand the need for
SNAP, and make it better.)*

1,890 survey respondents answered this question. Therefore, the project devoted categorized responses to analyze feedback.

"Has SNAP helped you and your family during COVID-19?"

- 68.7% said yes, indicating a strong majority of positive responses.
- Less than a quarter of respondents said no.

In response to an invitation for suggestions, more than half of respondents answered, though these more often shared some aspect of their individual situation than listing suggested changes. The most common responses described the cost of feeding children who were suddenly at home full time, who would ordinarily have been eating school meals. Nearly as prevalent were descriptions of the rising price of groceries amid the pandemic. Categories below are listed in order of frequency of responses.

1. Costs Associated with Children at Home Full-time

"My son is home from school and eats all day."

"I am grateful for all I have received. I have four growing boys and the food they get is important."

2. Rising Grocery Prices

"[SNAP] helped somewhat but around the third week I was out of resources only because the price of food was [too] expensive even though I tried to stretch the resources it just didn't work out."

"Yes it has helped, but with the prices skyrocketing in the stores it has been very hard."

3. Comments or Complaints about SNAP Services and/or its Representatives

"It has been extremely easy to apply for the benefits online and dropping whatever information they need in the drop box. I wish the wait time for interviews were quicker."

"When it is time to recertify they drag their feet. I haven't receive nothing for month of July."

**68.7% of survey respondents said
SNAP helped them and their family
during COVID-19.**

4. Income Fluctuation and Unemployment Benefits

"Yes, this is a great blessing as I lost my job that I had for almost 8 years without notice due to my company using COVID-19 as the reason to eliminate my position. A week and a half later my husband's job also eliminated his position, and we went from a household earning of over \$90,000 to \$0."

"I was cut off due to me getting the unemployment. They have drop it and I'm having trouble with food because I have to pay my bills with the money I do get."

5. Medical or Disability Costs

"Yes I am disabled and have cancer and it's very hard to pay bills and eat i have no family and go thru this alone with absolutely NO help from anyone"

"I am disabled and in bed 90 percent of the time. It has helped so much to be able to order my groceries online..."

6. Anxiety Surrounding the Pandemic

"Yes, it would really help if they continued the P-EBT while the virus is still on the rise due to many being affected at home and with jobs."

"SNAP came in handy during this pandemic, it keeps food on my table and I don't have to worry where our next meal coming from and now I can just focus on paying the bills."

"We barely made it."



SNAP Client Follow Up Surveys

A small number of SNAP clients surveyed in 2020 had provided email addresses where they could be reached for additional feedback. In February and March 2021, 108 respondents completed an email survey to update project staff on how they were faring. Participants revisited the same list of conditions that appeared in the original survey, and again indicated that a majority of households were forced to skip or delay bills, rent, or mortgage, with continued high numbers experiencing job loss, reduced wages, and nearly half having still having to turn a food pantry or free food site.

Project staff asked new questions in an effort to shed light on how families with a member with a disability and families with children were utilizing SNAP. Over one-third of respondents had a family member with a disability living in their household, and over 80% of those respondents responded yes when asked, "Has SNAP helped you to afford foods needed to keep the person with the disability healthy?"

The majority of survey participants had children in grades K-12 living in the household, and they indicated broad use of diverse methods to put food on the table during the pandemic. The survey asked about household income, receiving food or money from a friend or relative, free and reduced price school meals, Pandemic EBT payments, and groceries or meals from a food pantry or other free food site, in addition to SNAP use.

The survey asked a follow-up question to find out how SNAP ranked compared to these other important resources. When asked to choose a "most important" source, SNAP was the overwhelming selection.

In addition to confirming SNAP's vital role for families, the project hopes this formulation can inform further research, to better understand SNAP's significance for seniors, people with disabilities and other eligible groups.

In the past month have you...?

Visited a food pantry or free food site	48%
Lost your job	34%
Had your hours/wages reduced	23%
Skipped or delayed bills, rent or mortgage	65%

If yes, has SNAP helped you to afford specific foods needed to keep the person with the disability healthy?

Yes	87%
No	13%

What resources have you used to feed your children during the pandemic?

Household income	41%
Food or money from a friend or family member	37%
Free or reduced-price meals provided by the child's school, on-site or to-go	42%
"P-EBT," the Pandemic EBT payment for school meals missed due to the virus	38%
SNAP	62%
Groceries or meals from a food pantry or other free food site	32%

What has been the most important resource for feeding your child(ren) during the pandemic?

Household income	7%
Food or money from a friend or family member	3%
Free or reduced-price meals provided by the child's school, on-site or to-go	2%
"P-EBT," the Pandemic EBT payment for school meals missed due to the virus	9%
SNAP	47%
Groceries or meals from a food pantry or other free food site	2%



Webinar 1: Convening SNAP Stakeholders to Explore Barriers and Promising Practices

As discussed previously, project staff converted meetings to a virtual format and took extra steps to create a sense of community and shared purpose under new circumstances. The series of virtual convenings and webinars allowed participants to explore a range of issues pertinent to SNAP, including Disaster SNAP (D-SNAP), college student hunger, and technology, and to hear about innovative approaches states in the Southeast Region are using to respond to increased need during the pandemic. Lifting up promising practices in the region offered meeting participants concrete ways they could address specific food insecurity issues in their states.

The first stakeholder meeting took place in October 2020. Invitations were extended to 60 stakeholders from more than 40 organizations representing anti-hunger, health, anti-poverty and grocery sectors from Southeast states. The series started and finished with 90-minute sessions hosted by Kyle Waide, President and CEO of the Atlanta Community Food Bank. In January, February and March 2021, focused 30-minute presentations updated stakeholders on shifts in the federal and state policy environment.

Evidence of the profound impact of the pandemic on SNAP recipients' ability to feed their families served as a key point of discussion during the first meeting. Participants had an opportunity to hear a range of perspectives from public and private sector leaders. Georgia SNAP director Kimberlin Donald offered an update on the massive shift required to provide SNAP services remotely, and Jimmy Wright of Wright's Markets, based in Opelika, Alabama, described the experience of grocers and the newly evident need for online access to groceries in rural communities. Discussion groups allowed stakeholders to delve more deeply into the following questions:

- State SNAP programs have had to pivot dramatically during the pandemic. What are some of the major changes you witnessed in your own state, and how did these changes impact clients' access to SNAP?
- The extension of Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), which provides the value of missed free school meals, through the coming year offers important opportunities to solidify the new program and assure nutritional benefits for vulnerable children. What are the key opportunities and challenges you anticipate for P-EBT in your state through 2021?
- SNAP users' needs and preferences are diverse and often directly affected by the pandemic. How does your organization get feedback from SNAP clients about their food needs and access to the program? What are some of the most important messages you are hearing from SNAP users? How could states expand their ability to serve diverse households?

Participants were strongly supportive of the ways states made use of federal waivers, and several common themes emerged across groups, including:

SNAP was very important to many households:

"The pandemic SNAP payments were so important for the families that got them. Their SNAP dollars finally seemed to stretch (enough)."

"The pandemic has forced us to look at how things were working before, to reimagine and make the program work better."

"With more families participating, there is less stigma."

"We think it's a positive thing to build on moving forward."

Strong interest in continued Pandemic EBT, and suggestions for streamlining it:

"It would be nice to see the Department of Education doing more outreach to get students signed up for free/reduced lunch before the next round."

"P-EBT—we're eager to continue that work. There were a lot of issues between taking applications and direct issuance with P-EBT. Not knowing who to call for problems, those kinds of things."



Recognizing the variety of experiences and backgrounds of SNAP clients:

“This is a good opportunity to get better info about the people who we are serving, but is difficult to do during a pandemic.”

“Developing a way to tell the stories about the things people are experiencing right now...there are a lot of stereotypes, but [the pandemic] is an opportunity to dig in and share the stories and how SNAP benefits the individual, the community and beyond.”

“[The pandemic] is an opportunity to dig in and share the stories and how SNAP benefits the individual, the community and beyond.”

High praise for the state and local workers who continued to deliver SNAP under great stress: Most challenges were administrative, with a desire for clearer communication from and between government agencies:

“States have done a lot of great work with SNAP programs, most of the challenges come from getting approvals from FNS.”

“It was confusing working with different offices and not seeing much communication across those offices.”

Explore new avenues for outreach:

“Undocumented communities are less likely to use programs—fear of public charge and there are language barriers. Wouldn't it be great if there were a SNAP person to do more relationship building in communities, who could address myths directly?”

Senior citizens:

“We see seniors who can't use the internet or have trouble with their phones, there should be direct ways to communicate with them.”

Webinar 2: Leveraging Disaster SNAP

Two state SNAP agency leaders addressed a webinar in January 2021 to discuss the implementation of Disaster SNAP (D-SNAP) during COVID-19. Brandon Hardin, Director of the Food Assistance Division of the Alabama Department of Human Resources, presented on his state's experience with leveraging SNAP as a response to need related to two 2020 hurricanes. In traditional D-SNAP programs, FNS requires that applications be made in person. Because physical enrollment assistance sites had to be limited during COVID-19, Alabama sought and received D-SNAP waivers from FNS that allowed online pre-screening,

with applicants uploading documents ahead of client interviews, and outreach workers submitting D-SNAP applications on behalf of those they assisted. At the same time, some county SNAP offices remained open primarily to serve people who were elderly or had disabilities. In order to limit person-to-person contact as much as possible, the SNAP agency offered a drive-through alternative for interviews and intake (including capturing signatures) and distributed D-SNAP EBT cards through overnight mail.

Jean Guinta, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic Stability at the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services, discussed her state's efforts to provide D-SNAP for people affected by 2020 hurricanes Laura, Delta and Zeta. Getting federal approval to enroll D-SNAP applicants remotely rather than interviewing them in person reportedly worked well. Cost and efficiency in getting EBT cards to eligible households, however, proved a big challenge. After an early effort to distribute D-SNAP EBT cards via FedEx, the state switched to regular United States Postal Service, which had effectively delivered notices of eligibility. Looking to the future, the state is interested in tapping technology similar to a “LA Wallet” smartphone app recently introduced by the Department of Motor Vehicles to allow real-time identity verification. Guinta said that the remote interviews for D-SNAP that were permitted due to the COVID-19 pandemic saved administrative funds for the agency compared to regular in-person enrollment, and she hopes they may continue this practice for future D-SNAP interviews, when needed.

“Wouldn't it be great if there were a SNAP person to do more relationship building in communities, who could address myths directly?”

Webinar 3: College Student Hunger and SNAP Access

When USDA announced new waivers in February 2020 that would allow more college students to utilize SNAP during the pandemic, we invited college and university leaders to describe how this would affect their student populations. FRAC's Ellen Vollinger explained the temporary new rules that remove a general barrier to SNAP participation for many college students without outside jobs. Under the expanded rules, eligibility attaches if the student either is found eligible for work-study, whether or not they perform it; or a student's Expected Family Contribution is zero.⁷ Gilda Ebanks, Director of the Single Stop Office of Delgado Community College in New Orleans, LA, confirmed that the traditional 20-hour work requirement imposed a barrier to SNAP that was difficult for many students to meet. Delgado notified students directly about their potential eligibility under the temporary broader criteria. Fallon Proctor,

Change this sentence to: Coordinator of Student Assistance at Georgia State University, with 54,000 students, explained a new special hotline for emergency assistance, established and supported by pandemic-related donations, which received over 10,000 requests for aid. She noted that the school developed a General Resource Letter to notify students of resources available to them. Ashlyn Anderson, a junior at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, described her school's Student Basic Needs Coalition efforts, its advocacy with university administrators, and its campus wide engagement activities to overcome stigma. She also pointed to the direct experience of University of Tennessee students as important to inform policies and strategies to address college student food insecurity.

Food Insecurity and SNAP Access at the University of Tennessee

In 2017, the University of Tennessee Department of Nutrition conducted a study across the entire university system, finding that **one in three students were food insecure**. That dramatic finding laid the groundwork for a new relationship between the administration and student organizations that focuses upon addressing student needs.

With food insecurity increasing exponentially during COVID-19, student advocates hosted the first-ever SNAP information session specifically for students. The Student Basic Needs Coalition is working to assure that student voices are extended and amplified in discussions about food security policies, and they are leading efforts to reduce stigma about SNAP use, since they have identified that as a primary barrier.

Webinar 4: "Georgia Gateway": Technology Platforms & Cross-Program Enrollment

Jon Anderson, Chief Deputy Division Director at the Division for Family and Child Services, Georgia Department of Human Services, spoke directly to the strengths of an enrollment system that allows clients to identify eligibility for multiple public benefits at once, and track their applications from a central location. Anderson explained that GA Gateway had been made possible by prior temporary enhanced federal administrative funding. GA Gateway provides an online interface for workers, customers and providers to access information and services related to public benefits in Georgia. This includes SNAP, Medical Assistance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS). During the pandemic, GA Gateway provided vital access to expanded benefits for families struggling with food insecurity and made analytics an integrated part of the process, giving workers immediate access to valuable information. Agency leaders reportedly planned to allow a majority of SNAP employees to continue to work remotely even after the pandemic ends, while targeting the remaining physical office capacity to serve specific populations that need such access.

Webinar 5: SNAP in the Southeast

In April 2021, the final session in the webinar series reviewed learnings from previous discussions and provided results of follow up email surveys of SNAP clients that the Atlanta Community Food Bank conducted in February and March 2021. Taifa Smith Butler, CEO of the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute and incoming Demos President, thanked stakeholders for taking time to engage in the project and offer their ideas. She discussed the role of SNAP within an overarching strategy for increasing economic prosperity across the Southeast Region and the nation.

- 2 The SNAP Gap: A State-by-State Glance
<https://frac.org/blog/the-snap-gap-a-state-by-state-glance>
- 3 Reaching Those in Need: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates in 2018
<https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/Reaching2018.pdf>
- 4 Remember this December: Hunger is Solvable with SNAP
<https://frac.org/blog/remember-this-december-hunger-is-solvable-with-snap-3>
- 5 Broad-based Categorical Eligibility
<https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/BBCESatesChart%28May2020%29.pdf>
- 6 SNAP Waivers and Adaptations During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Survey of State Agency Perspectives in 2020
<https://files.constantcontact.com/391325ca001/43b432bd-bdde-4525-8e63-a1b0293de236.pdf>
COVID Reponse Project: Lessons Learned from State Adaptations and Federal Flexibilities
<https://files.constantcontact.com/391325ca001/325c402d-8dac-4910-a5d9-07b8b9039a90.pdf>
- 7 Reducing Food Insecurity Among College Students
<https://frac.org/blog/reducing-food-insecurity-among-college-students>





Themes emerged
as leading areas for
continued collaboration
and advocacy across
Southeast Region
SNAP programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND KEY THEMES

Stakeholders participated in robust discussion about the client survey responses and topical webinar presentations. Among an array of diverse topics, the following themes emerged as leading areas for continued collaboration and advocacy across southeastern state SNAP programs:

1. Make certain COVID-related SNAP programs adaptations permanent.

Throughout the project's convenings, state agency SNAP staff were warmly commended for the ways that they adapted so rapidly from office-based to remote operations, and for their willingness to seek extensive waivers in order to continue serving people in need. In particular, stakeholders hope to see several new practices continue over the long term:

- Accept client signatures by phone ("telephonic signature").
- Streamline the process for household recertification.
- Extend services and program promotion to under-enrolled communities, especially immigrants, and college students. Consider collaboration in that effort with trusted nonprofit organizations and community-based groups.

2. Temporary SNAP benefit increases significantly helped families put food on the table.

Every increase in SNAP benefits made a difference to families, from the maximum monthly payments of SNAP "Emergency Allotments" (EAs) begun in March 2020 to the 15% increase provided in 2021. (After the project survey, USDA extended EAs to go to all SNAP households, including those already at the maximum benefit level.) The sheer cost of food, and price increases specifically due to the pandemic, were both cited as challenges by stakeholders and survey participants.

3. Investments in technology matter.

Underlying technology infrastructure in many cases determined the ways that clients were able to access SNAP during the pandemic and natural disasters. Advocates noted the increasing numbers of clients who access the internet through smart phones, and the importance of phone access generally, in addition to online interfaces. Additionally, the GA Gateway system offers a helpful regional model for how states can utilize technology to facilitate greater access to SNAP in combination with other important public benefits.

4. Broader awareness of food insecurity is vital to support for SNAP.

Conveying accurate information about SNAP and the real-life experiences of people who participate in it can improve public understanding of and support for SNAP as part of a strategy to promote health equity in the Southeast Region. Media coverage of long lines for food distribution, as well as personal stories of people struggling to put food on the table during the pandemic, led to increased acceptance of the need for antihunger solutions, including SNAP and the vital role it plays reducing poverty and malnutrition and promoting child and adult health. Stakeholders hope that public awareness of this issue can be sustained as the pandemic eases, and the voices of SNAP participants can continue to inform public policy.

STATE AGENCY PERSPECTIVES ON SNAP DURING COVID-19

A 2021 report by the American Public Human Services Association and the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Health titled *SNAP Waivers and Adaptations During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Survey of State Agency Perspectives in 2020*, examined the multiple ways that human services agencies changed their policies and procedures to better serve people on SNAP during COVID-19, and analyzed how those changes impacted program performance and management. Some of the key findings include the following:*

- **90%** of state respondents agreed the waiver of interviews and extension of certification periods were important for maintaining SNAP benefit access in the early months of the pandemic
- **61%** of state agencies made staffing adaptations to support application processing during the pandemic
- **63%** of states would have preferred to provide supplemental SNAP benefits to all households, including those already receiving the maximum benefit
- **90+%** of state respondents would like the extension of certifications and waiver of interviews to be available as automatic options in future emergencies

The report concludes with a series of recommendations on how states should manage SNAP as the country emerges from the pandemic, and are aligned with much of what was discussed throughout the Southeast Regional SNAP project. The recommendations are as follows:

Codify authority for waiver flexibilities that are triggered for future state or national emergencies: Federal SNAP policy should establish automatic mechanisms for states to access program flexibilities in times of future state or national emergencies, and automatic waiver flexibilities should be expanded to include hot and prepared foods, college students, and telephonic signatures.

Test program changes that increase efficiency or improve delivery of SNAP benefits to households: State survey responses indicate there may be particularly strong interest in alternative approaches to conducting certification and recertification interviews, capturing telephonic signatures, and performing face-to-face quality control interviews.

Help states modernize their staffing and technology infrastructure: Federal policymakers should help states build modern platforms that are resilient in times of crisis and reflect the evolving ways in which people engage with services. While states were largely able to support virtual services for customers and remote case processing for workers, the infrastructure to support these functions lags behind current available technology. Needed investments span a range of areas, such as building mobile-friendly applications, developing electronic modes of client communication, deploying intelligence tools to streamline case review functions, increasing availability of online purchasing, and expanding mobile and virtual EBT benefit access and management.


Provide technical assistance and build the evidence base on virtual services: With strong interest from states to continue to provide virtual and remote services for SNAP customers across a range of areas after the pandemic, FNS should support states through technical assistance and research that strengthens and improves understanding of best practices in service delivery. Future research should incorporate client perspectives to better understand how these services are used, their benefits, and their limitations.

* Recommendations edited lightly for brevity. Full report available at https://aphsa.org/APHSA/COVID_19.aspx

*“Asking our opinion does help.
We are the ones that need help,
receive help, and some of us
appreciate and cannot live
without the help!”*

— Tina S., South Carolina



A photograph of a woman with dark, curly hair, smiling and resting her chin on her hand. She is wearing a watch on her left wrist. The image is overlaid with a teal color filter. The text is white and positioned on the left side of the image.

Making key
improvements to
SNAP will not only
help those struggling
to put food on their
tables, but will help
the Southeast become
a healthier and
stronger region for
all who live here.

MOVING FORWARD

The challenges that emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic will have a lasting effect on communities in the Southeast Region of the United States, and therefore, there has never been a more critical time to invest in, expand and improve access to SNAP. SNAP is an effective way to help people purchase food for their families in times of need, but despite considerable progress, the current SNAP participation rate across states in the Southeast demonstrates that there is more work to be done to close the SNAP gap.

This report identifies many of the barriers to enrollment, and strategies to eliminate those barriers. The recommendations outlined in this report will not only help close the SNAP gap but will also reduce the number of individuals in the Southeast region who are experiencing food insecurity and hunger. SNAP has been demonstrated to improve food security and health outcomes; decrease health care costs, the incidence of chronic diseases and poverty; and positively impact economic development and overall quality of life. Making key improvements to SNAP will not only help those struggling to put food on their tables, but will help the Southeast become a healthier and stronger region for all who live here.

For more information about this project, please contact Megan Middleton, Director of Government Affairs, Atlanta Community Food Bank at megan.middleton@acfb.org.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We sincerely appreciate the support of the Food Research & Action Center and The Food Trust, Propel, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Signe Anderson of the Tennessee Justice Center, Laura Lester of the Alabama Food Bank Association, and Bridget Owens from South Carolina Appleseed served as advisors for both the survey and webinar series, and with them, Tyler Offerman of the Kentucky Equal Justice Center helped to facilitate discussions among stakeholders. Josephine Chivore of the Gwinnett School of Mathematics, Science and Technology analyzed quantitative survey data, and Harrison Gray of Georgia State University performed extensive analysis of qualitative feedback and consumer comments. In addition, staff from the Southeast Regional Office of USDA's Food and Nutrition Service made themselves available for technical assistance and ongoing collaboration. Thank you.



The Atlanta Community Food Bank works to end hunger with the food, people and big ideas needed to ensure the community has the nourishment to lead healthy and productive lives. Through more than 700 nonprofit partners, the Atlanta Community Food Banks helps hungry people across metro Atlanta and north Georgia get access to the nutritious meals they need when they need them. To learn more, visit www.acfb.org.

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, 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.

Propel

Propel is a mission-driven technology company that builds modern, respectful, effective technology that helps Americans with limited income improve their financial health. Propel builds Fresh EBT, an app that helps over 5 million SNAP households check and manage their EBT and cash balances, save money, and access timely information about resources and benefits updates. To learn more, visit www.joinpropel.com.