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Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rate Report

January 2021



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

January 2021

OVERVIEW

Line-item 4400-1001 of Section 2 of Chapter 227 of the Acts of 2020 requires the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to annually report the status of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) client outreach to the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means.

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSITIONAL ASSISTANCE MISSION

DTA's mission is to assist and empower low-income individuals and families to meet their basic needs, improve their quality of life, and achieve long-term economic self-sufficiency. DTA offers a comprehensive system of programs and supports to help individuals and families achieve greater economic self-sufficiency, including food and nutritional assistance, economic assistance, and employment supports.

DTA serves one out of eight people in the Commonwealth including working families, children, elders, and people with disabilities.

BACKGROUND ON SNAP IN MASSACHUSETTS

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

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

AGENCY RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Since March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has touched every corner of the Commonwealth, impacting many families' and individuals' financial stability, and, in many cases, exacerbating existing inequities in economic opportunity and food insecurity. The widespread public health and economic impacts associated with the pandemic led to a significant increase in demand for DTA's supports and services, leading to historic increases to the state's SNAP caseload.

DTA's response to the impacts of the pandemic has focused on ensuring stability in benefits for existing clients and timely application processing for newly eligible families. To reach these goals, the agency initiated significant operational changes, introduced new ways for clients to

do business with the agency, implemented critical supplemental benefit programs, and pursued administrative flexibilities to streamline the agency's ability to process cases.

Massachusetts leveraged all federal flexibilities made available by Congress and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). This included extending the certification periods of households due to recertify their benefits between March and June. This allowed the DTA workforce to prioritize new benefit applications, which at the peak of the crisis saw an increase of 360%. Extending these certification periods ensured existing households retained access to benefits during this critical time.

To further manage the workload associated with the increased applications, DTA adopted federal waivers that allowed the Department to forgo the required application interview. Not requiring an interview, combined with the adoption of a federal waiver allowing for signatures to be taken over the phone, streamlined operations ensuring DTA provided the most responsive customer service possible. Further flexibilities were adopted when recertifications were reintroduced in the fall to streamline the process and assist the Department in processing the backlog of recertifications from the spring.

In mid-March, DTA's 22 local transitional assistance offices closed to in-person services to promote the wellness of the agency's clients and staff. By the end of April, DTA provided its entire caseworker workforce with equipment, training, and technical support to fully transition to teleworking schedules, with more than 1,000 laptops and cell phones deployed to field staff to support remote work.

In addition to its core programming, the Department implemented new, federally approved programs, and invested in existing programs that have provided critical additional benefits to families throughout the pandemic. To support families whose children were unable to receive free or reduced priced school meals as a result of school closures Massachusetts implemented Pandemic EBT, or P-EBT. P-EBT was first launched in the Spring, a second round of benefits were distributed in September, and Massachusetts was the first state in the nation approved to distribute benefits for the duration of the 2020-2021 school year. This program has provided direct financial assistance to the families of about 550,000 students and has injected more than \$250 million into the state's economy.

Since March, DTA has received federal approval to issue additional SNAP benefits to families not already receiving the maximum benefit amount for their household size, bringing another \$290 million in federal funding into the state's economy

In recognition of the important role that local farmers play in the state's food system, the Baker-Polito Administration announced a \$5 million investment in the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), which allowed for the strategic onboarding of 39 new vendors that serve vulnerable populations and previously underserved communities. These vendors joined nearly 200 existing vendors, many of whom developed creative, low-contact methods to connect families in need with fresh, local produce.

DTA continues to operate remotely in response to the public health emergency and support families and individuals across the Commonwealth as they navigate the impacts of the public health crisis. To help address the increased demand for DTA services, the Department promoted 59 existing clerical staff to become SNAP caseworkers. Training for these new workers began in November. Additional administrative flexibilities and program extensions afforded by a recently approved federal Continuing Appropriations Act are under consideration between the Department and USDA.

Moving forward, the Department intends to leverage the innovations and new practices that have been successful in response to the pandemic and have contributed to efficiencies and improved access for clients, including expanding the agency's digital footprint, and integrating opportunities for telework and remote services.

SNAP CASELOAD

In March and April, DTA experienced a significant increase in applications for SNAP as a result of the economic impact of the pandemic. At the peak, weekly SNAP applications increased by 360% over the average weekly SNAP applications prior to COVID-19. SNAP applications increased again in August following the expiration of federal pandemic unemployment compensation at the end of July. Prior to the pandemic, the state's SNAP caseload had been stable at around 450,000 households.

As of November 2020, DTA's SNAP caseload is 526,837 households, consisting of 889,968 total benefit recipients. Of these recipients,

- 187,904 were 60 or over;
- 283,552 were persons with disabilities; and
- 303,141 were age 18 or under.

Of all SNAP households in Massachusetts, 68.6% have gross countable income of less than 100% of the Federal Poverty Level—\$16,910 for a household of two.

SNAP OUTREACH STRATEGIES

DTA strives to ensuring that SNAP benefits and related services are available to all eligible Massachusetts households. Outreach to potential new and existing SNAP clients is done through a multi-pronged, data-informed approach focused on engaging targeted populations with low SNAP participation rates. SNAP outreach works across DTA, sister agencies under the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, other secretariats, community-based organizations, and contracted vendors.

TECHNOLOGICAL ENHANCEMENTS

Online Client Services. The past efforts employed by DTA to expand the DTA Connect platform to include a streamlined eligibility screener, an interactive, user-friendly online SNAP application and a client and provider web portal proved critical in enabling DTA to provide a

rapid and comprehensive response to the COVID-19 public health and economic emergencies. The online tools made it possible for families and individuals to conduct all their business with DTA from the safety of their home. The availability of DTA Connect allowed DTA to streamline the processing of applications and ensured that existing clients retained access to these critical benefits. DTA was able to swiftly modify language and functionality on DTA Connect to accurately communicate changes in policies and procedures to families.

Text Messaging Platform. Leveraging funds awarded in 2019 to support the implementation of a texting platform, DTA was able to launch text message functionality at the start of the COVID-19 public health emergency. At a time when federal waivers and a shift in the Department’s business delivery model changed operations, DTA used text messaging to communicate broadly and directly with families and individuals. The introduction of this alternative, modern method of communication has allowed the Department to proactively communicate case status information to clients, which is critical information for applicants and clients that could previously only be addressed by waiting to speak with a case manager through DTA’s Assistance Line.

Online Purchasing Program. In May 2020, DTA received approval from USDA to join the SNAP Online Purchasing Program. Prior to approval, all SNAP purchases were required to be done in-person. Launching this new program enabled online purchasing for SNAP recipient by way of Amazon and Walmart, creating a safe way for our most vulnerable individuals and families to access food during the COVID-19 pandemic. In December 2020, the USDA approved ALDI Grocery Stores to participate in the state’s program. DTA continues to work with USDA to encourage the inclusion of additional retailers into the program.

INTERAGENCY PARTNERSHIPS

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. In 2020, DTA and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) were provided a unique partnership opportunity to develop Massachusetts’ Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) program, authorized as part of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. P-EBT benefits supplement the loss of access to in-person school meals for children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, including those eligible through participation in SNAP. Administration of P-EBT required close collaboration between the two agencies, and this renewed focus on food insecurity among school-age child has resulted new outreach opportunities. Using information provided through the administration of P-EBT, schools are conducting direct outreach to families likely eligible for SNAP by providing education on the program and application assistance. This approach is designed to leverage the role of school districts as trusted sources and reach families in the community where they reside to bridge the divide between children eligible for free or reduced-priced meals and those who may be SNAP eligible. DTA and DESE intend on expanding this partnership by conducting robust recruitment of school districts as outreach partners to close the “P-EBT Gap.” As of November 2020, five public schools are serving as outreach partners.

MassHealth. DTA and MassHealth continue to prioritize efforts to reduce the number of residents who receive MassHealth benefits but are not currently receiving SNAP benefits

although they are likely eligible for them, commonly called the “SNAP Gap.”. MassHealth and DTA launched a joint application pilot in March 2020 by attaching a short SNAP supplement to the MassHealth senior paper application. Further, in July 2020, MassHealth eligibility staff began a direct outreach project to members who appeared on the SNAP Gap list, with MassHealth staff calling and inquiring if they would like to apply for SNAP and taking applications over the phone. Additionally, DTA and MassHealth are actively working on additional initiatives designed to reduce the SNAP Gap.

Department of Veterans’ Services. Throughout 2020, DTA has continued its focus on expanding SNAP access to veterans by building on the strong partnership with the Department of Veterans’ Services (DVS). Utilizing input from both DVS and DTA staff members who are military veterans, DTA developed resources to assist veterans and organizations including a SNAP Veterans’ Guide for organizations and a [Food Assistance \(SNAP\) for Prior and Active Service Members Brochure](#). To date, two VSOs and two veteran organizations have become outreach partners. DTA continues its outreach to organizations serving veterans to help increase access.

Department of Higher Education. DTA, with assistance from the Department of Higher Education (DHE), is actively working to bring on colleges and universities as outreach partners and SNAP Path to Work providers. In a joint effort to address the issue of food insecurity on college campuses, this approach enables higher education institutions with available federal funds to maximize services and supports to food insecure college students. To date, one Community College, Bunker Hill Community College, has come on as an outreach partner. Additionally, there are currently four Community Colleges participating in the SNAP Path to Work program including Cape Cod Community College, Holyoke Community College, Middlesex Community College, and Quinsigamond Community College.

Departments of Developmental Services and Mental Health. The work between DTA and the Developmental Services (DDS) continued through collaboration and adjustments to address remote operation procedures in response to the pandemic. This includes the development of system enhancements that will allow for DDS to have provider portal access streamlining processes. In October, the Memorandum of Understanding was renewed with DDS. DTA and the Department of Mental Health (DMH) have resumed the data share process of identifying a shared consensus of clients to aid in the analysis of potential program integrity concerns and to increase SNAP participation offsetting their food budgets through utilization of SNAP benefits.

Department of Public Health. In July of 2020 DTA and the Department of Public Health (DPH) completed a data share agreement that allows both agencies to outreach to clients not participating in either the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance for Women Infants and Children (WIC) program or SNAP. On a quarterly basis through the data exchange, DTA will reach out to WIC participants not currently on SNAP via notices to families as well as text messages.

Massachusetts Department of Agriculture Resources. DTA continues to work with the Massachusetts Department of Agriculture Resources (MDAR) to administer the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), which helps SNAP clients access healthy produce from local farms via

a monthly nutrition incentive. In 2020, DTA and MDAR collaborated to select and onboard 39 additional HIP farms as part of the COVID-19 Command Center's Food Security Task Force efforts to address urgent food insecurity needs resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The HIP expansion prioritized areas and communities most heavily impacted by COVID-19 and areas classified as food deserts.

OUTREACH PARTNERS

Enhanced Community Based Outreach Partner System. DTA engaged with the University of Massachusetts Medical School (UMass Medical) to administer a performance-based federal reimbursement project to enhance DTA's provider outreach activities. In federal fiscal year (FFY) 2020, DTA contracted with 94 providers, known as outreach partners. These outreach partners are responsible for client outreach and education, as well as assistance with applications and recertifications. As in previous years, preliminary information shows that most Outreach Partners reached their annual application and approval goals. These providers received \$885,528 in payments for SNAP outreach services. For FFY 2021, USDA approved an expansion of the SNAP Outreach Partner Reimbursement Project and reimbursement of up to \$2.18M.

Project Bread. DTA has a long-standing relationship with Project Bread. Project Bread's Food Source Hotline performs SNAP eligibility screenings and provides application assistance for individuals interested in applying for SNAP benefits. Project Bread also assists families in need with resources to address more immediate food needs. In FY20, Project Bread received additional funds that they used to assist DTA in outreach efforts designed to reduce the SNAP Gap (defined above) and assist in supporting the implementation and administration of Pandemic EBT.

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

SNAP PATH TO WORK PROGRAM

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

Through this partnership, UMass Medical School assists DTA with:

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

In FFY20, 45 SNAP Path to Work providers and the statewide network of MassHire Career Centers provided services to an average of 400 program participants per month. Providers were reimbursed approximately \$3.5M for employment and training services provided to program participants.

As of the start of October 2020, 47 SNAP Path to Work providers from across the state and the statewide MassHire Career Center network will provide services to program participants under the state's approved FY21 SNAP Employment and Training State Plan. USDA has approved provider reimbursements of approximately \$6.7M under this plan.