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Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rate Report

May 2024



**FY 2024 DEPARTMENT OF TRANSITIONAL ASSISTANCE
SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
PARTICIPATION RATE REPORT**

May 2024

OVERVIEW

Line-item 4400-1001 of Section 2 of Chapter 24 of the Acts of 2023 requires the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to report annually to the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means on the status of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) client outreach.

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSITIONAL ASSISTANCE MISSION

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

SNAP IN MASSACHUSETTS

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

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

SNAP CASELOAD

As of February 2024, DTA's SNAP caseload was 655,968 households, consisting of 1,083,392 total benefit recipients. Of these recipients:

- 250,229 were 60 or over;
- 312,602 were persons with disabilities; and
- 349,798 were age 18 or under.

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

SNAP OUTREACH STRATEGIES

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

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

INTERAGENCY PARTNERSHIPS

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

In 2023, DTA and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) launched the fourth iteration of the Massachusetts' Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) program, authorized as part of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFRCA). P-EBT benefits supplement the loss of access to in-person school meals for children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, including those eligible through participation in SNAP, when a child is absent from school due to COVID-19. In school year 2022- 2023, P-EBT supported over 676,800 infants and children, providing over \$670 million in financial food assistance. Summer P-EBT in 2023 also provided \$59 million in funds to buy food for nearly 499,755 school -aged children and their families. Administration of P-EBT required close collaboration between the two agencies, and the renewed focus on food insecurity among school-age children has resulted in new outreach opportunities. DTA and DESE partnered directly with schools, providing them with email, text and robocall templates informing them about SNAP. Short videos were developed and included in the outreach. Lastly, DTA and DESE continue their partnership around ensuring all DTA households are aware and utilizing all available nutrition resources, implementing a text message campaign to inform them of the availability of summer meals ("Summer EATs") in their community.

MassHealth

DTA and MassHealth continue to prioritize efforts to integrate their enrollment systems and reduce the number of residents who receive MassHealth benefits and are not currently receiving SNAP benefits. This population is commonly called the "SNAP Gap." The "SNAP Check Box," introduced in July 2022, continues to allow MassHealth applicants and members to apply both online and on paper for SNAP at the point of application or renewal for MassHealth. In 2023 this has resulted in over 80,000 applications for SNAP via MassHealth members. DTA put forth a federal waiver request that would enable some newly approved MassHealth recipients to be directly certified for SNAP, streamlining the entire SNAP application process. This waiver is currently still under review with the federal government.

Department of Higher Education

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

Department of Public Health/WIC

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

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 monthly nutrition incentive. During the 2023 calendar year, DTA and MDAR continued the process of onboarding the cohort of vendors selected in Fall 2022. The new vendors onboarded in 2022-2023 represent an expansion of HIP access to 41 towns that previously had no HIP access and to 67 towns that had very low HIP access relative to their SNAP client population. Selected vendors collectively offer HIP access in 25 languages and serve 25 Gateway Cities. Vendors applied through an open and competitive Notice of Opportunity (NOO) for farmers to participate which facilitated program expansion in a strategic and equitable way utilizing a data-informed approach that identified priority communities that had limited access to food as well as priority populations including Black SNAP recipients¹ and SNAP recipients with disabilities².

OUTREACH PARTNERS

Enhanced Community Based Outreach Partner System

DTA continues to partner with the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School (UMass Chan Medical) to administer a performance-based federal reimbursement project designed to improve access to SNAP through partnerships with qualifying organizations. In federal fiscal year (FFY) 2023, DTA contracted with 124 providers, known as Outreach Partners. These Outreach Partners are responsible for client outreach and education, as well as assistance with applications, recertifications, and for the first-time, activities designed to support households during their certification period. Similar to previous years, preliminary information shows that most Outreach Partners reached their annual application and approval goals. In FFY 2023, 101 Outreach Partners filed claims for reimbursement, and 86 of the Outreach Partners who submitted SNAP applications met or surpassed the 50% Application Approval Rating Standard. These providers received \$1,403,039.94 in payments for SNAP outreach services. For FFY 2024, USDA approved an expansion of the SNAP Outreach Partner Reimbursement Project and reimbursement of up to \$3.41 million.

The pandemic created many challenges for older adults, especially for those who have difficulty accessing online tools and resources. DTA's past and continued recruitment of Councils on Aging (COAs)/Senior Centers proved beneficial in positioning DTA to serve older adults during this difficult time. COAs are trusted community resources that offer important support and services. DTA continued to work closely with the Massachusetts Council on Aging (MCOA) to add local COAs to the program during the last fiscal year. Older adults especially appreciate working with a trusted local community partner to help them navigate the SNAP process. In FFY23, of the 124 SNAP outreach partners, 28 are COAs. For FY 2024, COAs anticipate assisting 1,792 older adults to complete new SNAP applications and are seeking a total of \$228,398.16 in federal reimbursement.

Project Bread

DTA has a long-standing relationship with Project Bread. Project Bread's Food Source Hotline performs SNAP eligibility screenings and provides application assistance for individuals interested in applying for SNAP benefits. Project Bread also assists families in need with resources to address more immediate

¹ Underrepresented among HIP users by 10%

² Obesity rates for adults with disabilities are approximately 57% higher than for adults without disabilities " obesityfactsheet2010.pdf (cdc.gov)

food needs. In FY23, Project Bread received additional funds through the state budget that they used to assist DTA in outreach efforts designed to reduce the SNAP Gap (defined above) and assist in supporting the implementation and administration of P-EBT.

Community-based Trainings

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

SNAP PATH TO WORK PROGRAM

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

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

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

In FY23, 40 SNAP Path to Work providers and the statewide network of MassHire Career Centers provided services to an average of 568 program participants per month (1,746 unique participants). Providers were reimbursed over \$3.9 million for employment and training services provided to program participants.

As of January 2024, 40 SNAP Path to Work providers from across the state and the statewide MassHire Career Center network provide services to program participants under the state's approved FY24 SNAP Employment and Training State Plan. USDA has approved provider 50% reimbursements of approximately \$55.5 million under this plan (with an additional \$3.1 million pending) in addition to \$2.6 million in Employment and Training 100% grant fund spending.

In the summer of 2024, DTA expects results from a study the SNAP Employment and Training program has been participating in since spring of 2021. DTA was selected as one of seven sites to participate in the FNS commissioned Rapid Cycle Evaluation (RCE) of Operational Improvements in SNAP Employment and Training Programs study. DTA staff have worked with Mathematica to design, implement, and test small scale interventions aimed at improving the direct referral process and increasing SNAP client participation in the Work Participant Program (WPP), a DTA and Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOL) workforce training collaboration. The intervention involves proactive outreach using technology to improve participant communication while reducing the burden on DTA

and MassHire staff (use of the SignalVine text platform), interventions proactively assessing clients for interest and motivation (online self-screener and assessment with a DTA Full Engagement Workers) before referral (warm hand-off) of “work ready” clients for WPP services. Study participants are randomly selected from six DTA catchment areas: Brockton, Fall River, Framingham, Lawrence, North Shore, and Springfield. Study findings are expected in the summer of 2024.

ONGOING CROSS-SECRETARIAT FOOD SECURITY PLANNING

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

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

TECHNOLOGICAL ENHANCEMENTS

Online Client Services

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

Text Messaging Platform/Launching Emails

Leveraging funds awarded in 2019 to support the implementation of a texting platform, DTA developed text message functionality to better reach and engage clients. First launched in 2020 at the start of the 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. Texting allows the Department to proactively communicate case status information to clients, which is critical information for applicants and clients that could previously only be addressed by waiting to speak with a case manager through DTA’s Assistance Line. The functionality has also proven to be a critical tool in connecting DTA clients with additional resources and supports available from sister state agencies and the federal government. DTA previously also sent out case related email messages to clients.

In 2022, the agency shifted platforms to send additional email campaign messages in alignment with texting campaigns to expand accessibility and inclusivity of messaging. In calendar year 2022, the agency sent more than 16 million text messages and 4 million emails to clients. In addition to case-related information, these messages shared information on programs that would positively impact clients, including the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit, COVID-19 vaccination locations in partnership with DPH's Vaccine Equity Initiative, the Affordable Connectivity Program, LIHEAP Fuel Assistance, and Summer Eats meal locations. Texting and email capabilities were also critical to getting information out to clients on how to protect their benefits from scams.

Online Purchasing Program

Since 2020, Massachusetts has enabled residents to buy groceries online using SNAP benefits from federally- approved retailers. Today, residents can buy groceries online and receive them by delivery or pickup from nineteen retailers. Across retailers, residents have spent over \$329 million in SNAP benefits to-date buying groceries online.

Increasing Language Access

Throughout 2023, the agency continued efforts to expand languages available through a variety of access points, including via flyers, videos, text and email messages and over the phone. The agency has shifted many resources to be available in at least the top six languages of clients: simplified Chinese, English, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Where possible, documents and resources have been translated into upwards of 16 languages, including videos in American Sign Language (ASL).

Importantly, DTA leveraged funds provided by the American Rescue Plan Act to translate forms, most commonly sent notices, and automated text and email messages from two languages to the six most common languages that DTA clients read and write. Further, the agency added Haitian Creole to the DTA Assistance Line, connecting clients directly with information and caseworkers in six languages, with interpreters available for additional language support³.

³ For more information on language access, see the departments plan: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/language-access-at-the-department-of-transitional-assistance>