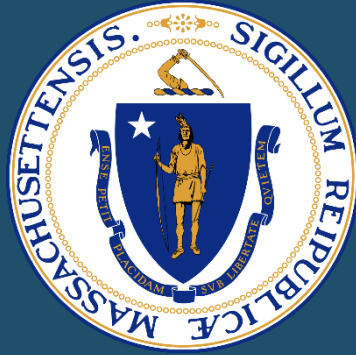


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Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rate Report

April 2022



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

April 2022

OVERVIEW

Line-item 4400-1001 of Section 2 of Chapter 24 of the Acts of 2021 requires the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to report annually on 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 mobility, including food and nutritional assistance, economic assistance, and employment supports. DTA serves one out of seven people in the Commonwealth including working families, children, 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

In response to the public health emergency, DTA closed in-person services in March of 2020. As a result, the Department quickly expanded its online and telephonic access points to enable families to conduct virtually all of their business with the agency without having to visit an office using DTACONNECT.com, the DTA Connect mobile app, and the DTA Assistance Line. In June 2021, DTA reopened its 20 local offices to in-person services. In each office, visitors can use self-service tools, including DTA Connect-enabled kiosks, to apply for benefits, update case information, and access or submit documents and verifications. DTA staff and interpreters are available at each office to provide clients with a high-level of customer service during their visit, guide them through available self-service options and the DTA Connect platform to do business with the agency 24/7 from their home, or connect them with caseworkers on DTA's Assistance Line for more in-depth support.

The Department rolled out key technology upgrades to streamline client experience and benefit processing, including:

- Telephonic signature to decrease processing times of applications and recertifications;
- Proactive text messaging and emailing to provide up-to-date case information for applicants and clients;
- Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology to accelerate document processing; and
- New self-service features on the DTA Assistance Line in 6 languages.

DTA continues to leverage these technological enhancements in conjunction with continued federal flexibilities and increased federal pandemic-related supports to maintain a high level of customer service for families and promote economic stability as families look to recover from the economic impacts of the pandemic.

These tools have enabled the Department to respond to fluctuating caseloads as families navigate shifting pandemic-related federal supports. As the programs and policies changed over time, DTA experienced temporary surges in applications for all of its programming, most recently in September 2021 when federal pandemic unemployment payments expired. As a result, today's SNAP caseload is currently above 590,000 households, representing a nearly 30% increase above the pre-pandemic average of 450,000 households. The Department's Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) and Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled, and Children (EAEDC) caseloads have also seen recent increases, and currently stand at approximately 32,000 and 24,000 respectively.

While DTA offices are open across the state for in-person services, the vast majority of DTA clients continue to choose to do business with the Department through its enhanced online and telephonic platforms. In the first four months of DTA's office reopening, in-person visits were down approximately 85% from the same time period pre-COVID.

Families receiving SNAP benefits continue to receive additional federal SNAP supplemental payments, initially authorized by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, each month to bring families' benefits up to the maximum monthly amount for their household size. On average, this brings an additional \$85 million in federal SNAP benefits into the state each month. Throughout the 2020-2021 school year, the Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) program continued to provide direct food assistance to the families of more than 600,000 children. Since the program began, more than \$1 billion in P-EBT benefits have been issued to Massachusetts families. Together, these monthly SNAP supplemental payments and P-EBT have been an important tool in supporting families, as well as our state and local economies, throughout the public health crisis.

DTA also played a key role in the Administration's Food Security Task Force, which was convened in April 2020 by the COVID-19 Command Center. The Task Force was comprised of a broad group of public and private members charged with ensuring food insecurity and food supply needs were addressed during the COVID-19 public health emergency. In response to the recommendations of the Task Force, the Administration invested nearly \$100 million in efforts

to promote food security and strengthen the state's food system, including more than \$50 million for the newly created Food Security Infrastructure Grant program, a \$5 million investment in the Healthy Incentives Program to strategically partner with 39 farms and farm vendors to increase accessibility, and \$9 million to support the state's food banks.

SNAP CASELOAD

As of December 2021, DTA's SNAP caseload is 590,486 households, consisting of 990,548 total benefit recipients. Of these recipients:

- 205,774 were 60 or over;
- 290,063 were persons with disabilities; and
- 328,558 were age 18 or under.

Of all SNAP households in Massachusetts, 73% of households have gross income below 100% of the federal poverty level, which is \$18,310 for a family of two in 2022.

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.

INTERAGENCY PARTNERSHIPS

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. In 2021, DTA and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) launched the second iteration of the 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 in new outreach opportunities. DTA and DESE partnered directly with schools, providing them with email, text and robocall templates informing them about SNAP. Short videos were developed and included in the outreach. A "P-EBT to SNAP" webinar was also hosted with school nutrition staff. This approach was designed to leverage the role of school districts as trusted sources and reach families in the community where they reside, to bridge the divide between children eligible for free or reduced-priced meals and those who may 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 March 2022, 6 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 and are not currently receiving SNAP benefits. This population is commonly called the “SNAP Gap”. MassHealth and DTA continued outreach efforts that began in 2020 where MassHealth eligibility staff conducted direct outreach to members who appeared on the “SNAP Gap” list. Replicating outreach previously conducted by DTA’s SNAP Outreach partners, MassHealth staff called members to assess interest in applying for SNAP and applying over the phone. In April 2021 DTA and MassHealth also partnered with Boston Medical Center to launch a pilot designed to produce a “common application experience”, allowing MassHealth and DTA to assess the uptake of these efforts to inform future strategies to address the “SNAP Gap”. In July 2021, MassHealth modified paper applications by adding the ability for applicants to check off if they would like the MassHealth application to also serve as their SNAP application. Building on this work, MassHealth will be releasing updates to its online eligibility system in July 2022 that will enable applicants and members to apply for SNAP at the point of application or renewal for MassHealth. This expedited data exchange between the agencies will provide a more streamlined experience for Massachusetts households in need of food assistance.

Department of Higher Education. In December 2020, the federal government expanded SNAP eligibility for college students. Leveraging this opportunity DTA and the Department of Higher Education (DHE) conducted a direct outreach campaign emailing over 90,000 college students notifying them of their potential eligibility for SNAP. DTA and DHE continue this work to actively recruit colleges and universities as outreach partners and SNAP Path to Work providers. In a joint effort to address the issue of food insecurity on college campuses, this approach enables higher education institutions with available federal funds to maximize services and supports to food insecure college students. To date, two higher education institutions, Bunker Hill Community College and UMass Boston, have come on as outreach partners. Additionally, there are currently four community colleges participating in the SNAP Path to Work program including Springfield Technical Community College, Holyoke Community College, Middlesex Community College, and Quinsigamond Community College.

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

Massachusetts Department of Agriculture Resources. DTA continues to work with the Massachusetts Department of Agriculture Resources (MDAR) to administer the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), which helps SNAP clients access healthy produce from local farms via a monthly nutrition incentive. In 2021, DTA and MDAR provided technical onboarding assistance to the 39 additional HIP farms who were selected 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. DTA and MDAR also launched a SNAP Equipment Grant funded through USDA.

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) 2021, DTA contracted with 110 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 \$917,464 in payments for SNAP outreach services. For FFY 2022, USDA approved an expansion of the SNAP Outreach Partner Reimbursement Project and reimbursement of up to \$2.69 million.

A focus area for enrolling new SNAP outreach partners since October 2017 has been Councils on Aging/Senior Centers (COAs). The COVID-19 pandemic created many challenges for older adults, especially for those who have difficulty accessing online tools and resources. COAs are trusted community resources that offer important supports and services. DTA worked closely with the Massachusetts Council on Aging (MCOA) to add 17 local COAs to the program during 2021, so they could help the older adults they work with apply for SNAP over the phone or answer questions about their case with DTA. Older adults especially appreciate working with a trusted local community partner to help them navigate the SNAP process. To date of the 110 SNAP outreach partners, 33 are COAs. For FFY 2022, COAs anticipate assisting 1,400 older adults complete new SNAP applications and seeking a total of \$238,390 in federal reimbursement.

Project Bread. DTA has a long-standing relationship with Project Bread. Project Bread's Food Source Hotline performs SNAP eligibility screenings and provides application assistance for individuals interested in applying for SNAP benefits. Project Bread also assists families in need with resources to address more immediate food needs. In FY21, 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 March 2022, 41 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 FY21 SNAP Employment and Training State Plan. USDA has approved provider reimbursements of approximately \$6.7 million under this plan.

ONGOING CROSS-SECRETARIAT FOOD SECURITY PLANNING

Building on the work of the Food Security Task Force, the Baker-Polito Administration is transitioning 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;
- 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 platform 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.

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. 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.

Online Purchasing Program. In 2020, Massachusetts launched its SNAP Online Purchasing Program, which enables residents to buy groceries online using SNAP benefits from federally-approved retailers. Today, residents can buy groceries online and receive them by delivery or pickup from eight retailers. Participating retailers in the Commonwealth include BJ's, Stop & Shop, Daily Table, Walmart, and Amazon, as well as ALDI, Hannaford, Price Chopper and Price Rite via Instacart. Across retailers, residents have spent over \$143 million in SNAP benefits to-date buying groceries online.

Increasing Language Access. Throughout 2021, the agency expanded languages available through a variety of access points, including via flyers, videos, notices, text messages and over the phone. The agency has started to shift many resources to be available in at least the top six languages of clients, including simplified Chinese, English, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Where possible, documents and resources have been translated into upwards of 14 languages. New and updated documents include SNAP outreach flyers, DTA Connect and Assistance Line flyers, P-EBT flyers, and EBT brochures. The Department also produced a variety of SNAP-related videos in multiple languages.

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