

2015 SNAP Participant Survey Results

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SEPTEMBER 2015

Overview

With the help of volunteers, D.C. Hunger Solutions staff administered a participant survey to 68 current SNAP recipients at four Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) sites between February and April 2015. The participant survey sought feedback from current SNAP recipients to help inform our SNAP outreach and policy work (see Appendix A for the survey and results).

Methodology

At EITC sites, D.C. Hunger Solutions volunteers and staff shared information on SNAP to D.C. residents who were waiting to meet with volunteer tax preparers. Current SNAP participants were asked to complete a short voluntary survey either on their own or with the help of a volunteer. D.C. Hunger Solutions later collected the surveys, and the data was coded and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Open-ended answers were also transcribed (see Appendix B).

Findings

Household Characteristics

While there was a wide range in the ages of participants, 28% of those surveyed were age 60 and over. The average SNAP benefit for was \$173.31 per household, and the average household size was 2.0 people. Additionally, 60% of participants identified as female, while 40% identified as male.

The Importance of SNAP

Survey results showed that 100% of participants would recommend SNAP to a friend. Survey participants were also asked to tell why the program is important to them. Here is a sampling of their answers (more responses can be found in Appendix B on pages 8-9):

- “SNAP is all I have. I don't have money, a job, no kind of check and [am] unemployed. So I would die without SNAP”
- “One reason why SNAP is important: I can budget money for food.”
- “It's very helpful for people who are unemployed and have a hard time finding work”
- “With my income, the food stamps help me. I get under \$500 per month so the food stamps enable me to eat each and every day”
- “It is important to me because it helps out a lot so I can save some money”
- “Every little bit helps. This program helps to supplement my income and allows me to be able to enjoy good home cooked meals and fresh produce and bread.”
- “Love this program. Very grateful. I buy affordable food now at the new Trader Joe's and use the FreshFarm Program at the farmers' markets, which is great.”

SNAP Champions

Thirty-nine participants provided their contact information with D.C. Hunger Solutions indicating a willingness to share more of their personal story and experience with the SNAP program.

Customer Service

In the 2015 survey, 63% (41 participants) marked that they were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the customer service. That is an increase from the results in the 2014 survey, where out of the 77 people surveyed, 46% said that they thought the service was “good” or “very good.” While the percentage of people who were satisfied with customer service increased in 2015, there were still multiple people surveyed who commented on possible improvements in customer service (see Appendix B for all participant responses, page 10). Additionally, 37% -24 participants- indicated they were “somewhat satisfied” or “not at all satisfied” or with the service received. Lastly, the call center can be improved – 37% of clients were not able to reach someone when they called the SNAP office.

Here are some recommendations and comments from participants regarding customer service:

- “Faster service. When you go to the office it’s very crowded and a long time to wait. And they need to clean more.”
- “[Hire] courteous employees.”
- “[ESA] didn't deliver notices to [my] new address despite filling out change of address.”
- “Drop box [at ESA office] does not give receipts.”
- “Not enough workers, long wait times, lots of people at offices. Sometimes info gets lost in the drop box.”
- “The process about waiting to recertify- I would make the process organized and shorter so the process wouldn’t be so long.”

EBT Card Policy

In the District, residents using the SNAP program have to initially pick up their EBT card from an Economic Security Administration (ESA) office. This is different from many other states, which mail the participant his/her card. While there are five offices around the city where residents can apply to the program, there are only two offices (645 H Street NE, and 2100 Martin Luther King Ave, SE) where they can pick up an EBT card. The survey revealed that 56% of those surveyed said they would not want the card mailed to them, while, 40% of respondents said they would prefer the card mailed to them.

Food Security and Adequacy of Benefits

Two questions in the survey were used to determine the level of food security in the household. The two questions used were derived from a study by Children’s Health Watch, which found that these two questions (originally taken from the USDA food security questionnaire) accurately determined the food security of a household.¹ The survey results demonstrate that 70% of people answered “often true” or “sometimes true” to the statement, “We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.” When given the statement, “The food we

¹ Children’s Health Watch. Hager ER, et al. Development and Validity of a 2-Item Screen to Identify Families at Risk for Food Insecurity. April 2010. Available at: <http://www.childrehealthwatch.org/publication/development-and-validity-of-a-2-item-screen-to-identify-families-at-risk-for-food-insecurity-2/>.

bought didn't last and we didn't have money to get more," 66% of those surveyed answered "often true" or "sometimes true" as well.

Participants were also asked a question to see if their benefit allowed them to buy food for the entire month. Results showed that only 28% of those surveyed said that their benefits were enough to buy food for the entire month. Alternatively, 72% said their benefits did not provide them enough to last the entire month; 11% said their benefits only covered food expenses for one week, 16% said it covered the cost for two weeks, and the other 45% indicated they were able to purchase food for three weeks.

Recommendations

Based on the survey results, D.C. Hunger Solutions recommends the following steps be taken to build on the success of the SNAP program in Washington, D.C.

Improve Customer Service:

While the level of participants' satisfaction with customer service improved from 2014 to 2015, improvements are needed to make trips to ESA Service Centers more productive and less time consuming (see Appendix B, page 10 for responses about customer service). Some possible improvements include:

- Ensure that all clients receive stamped receipts during a visit so they can show proof of the nature of a visit to a Service Center if needed for future reference –even those dropping off information in drop boxes.
Example: A client who called D.C. Hunger Solutions said he left his application in the drop box for review. By the time he called D.C. Hunger Solutions, more than three weeks had passed since he had visited a service center. Because he did not get a stamped receipt of this action, he had to reapply for benefits since ESA had no record of his visit.
- Allow phone interviews for all seniors, people with disabilities, and people who experience hardship (e.g. work schedule doesn't permit office visit, caring for a sick family member or child). With the new system and online application, allow clients (who can access and want to use the online system) to make updates online such as change in address, and do the recertification.
- Shorten the amount of time at the service center it takes to complete a new application and a re-certification because currently there are people waiting in long lines just to drop off documents. This would be beneficial to clients who face time constraints and cannot wait for long periods of time in an ESA service center to complete the process. ESA could create an express line where applicants can easily drop off their documents that need to be received by ESA so they do not have to wait in the long lines.
- Continue to work to increase call center capacity. This can be done having a call back option for clients who do not want to be placed on hold (ensuring clients do not have to leave a message) and while on hold, have a recording with answers to frequently asked questions and answers, for example where to report a change or have instructions/ reminders for case management like completing a mid-certification.
- Make certain that clients receive accurate, up-to-date, and consistent information at all service centers and call centers in the city so they are better informed on the program.

Mail EBT Card to SNAP Participants:

Many respondents said they did not want the EBT card mailed to them because they were worried the card would get lost or stolen in the mail. However, it is possible that if the participants had been informed that the card cannot be used without a valid pin number unique to each household, the results might have been different. D.C. Hunger Solutions suggests creating a pilot program where clients can have the option of having an EBT card mailed to them if they would prefer the option. The survey showed that 40% of respondents would prefer this option. By mailing the EBT card, this may help participants who have disabilities, work conflicts, or who lack transportation participate in the program.

Improve Adequacy of Benefits:

(1) Local Supplement:

The survey found that the SNAP benefit most clients receive is not adequate to purchase food for a household for the entire month, which is a finding that is reported nationally. Increasing the benefit amount so that clients can purchase enough food to last a whole month would increase the food security of SNAP households. While effecting change nationally would be ideal, increasing the benefit could also be done independently of federal action with the use of a local supplement.

In 2014, the DC Council was successful in the passing and funding of The SNAP Expansion Act. This supplement will increase the minimum SNAP benefit level from \$16 to \$30 per month meaning that no household in D.C. will get less than \$30 a month in benefits. This would not cover the cost of food for the whole month, but is an important step forward to decrease food insecurity for D.C. households. In addition, this supplement will be very beneficial for the local economy. The USDA reports that every five dollars in SNAP generates about nine dollars in economic activity.² D.C. Hunger Solutions would like to encourage and support ESA in evaluating the effect of the SNAP Expansion Act of 2014. If the local supplement is successful, then other local supplements can be considered. Implementing local supplements is a great first step and will help many DC residents, especially seniors and household who now only qualify for the minimum SNAP benefit put more food on the table.

(2) Deductions

Accurate use of deductions is another way to help clients get the full benefit for which they qualify. Currently, clients may be missing out on opportunities to maximize their benefit amount by not submitting all documentation. For example, if a client does not submit information to capture dependent care or medical expenses, the client may not receive the maximum benefit for which they are eligible. Data released by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities shows that Washington D.C. is ranked last in percentage of eligible clients receiving medical expense deductions.³ The same report from the Center on Budget Policy Priorities showed that only 2% of SNAP households with seniors or disabled members are claiming medical deductions. ⁴ Similarly, D.C. is ranked 50th in percent of eligible clients receiving dependent care deductions; only 10% of

² United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. Hanson, K. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Linkages with the General Economy. April 2015. Available at:

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-%28snap%29/economic-linkages.aspx>

³ Center for Budget Policy and Priorities. Jones, T. CBPP Tabulations of the Fiscal Year 2013 Quality Control SNAP Household Characteristics Data. Received at CBPP SNAP Conference 2015.

eligible households with young children are claiming this deduction.⁴ This could partly be due to the fact that the city has expansive programs that help cover these expenses, such as Medicaid, and the availability of low-cost childcare. These programs ease the burden for people who otherwise would have to choose between food and other necessities but it is still crucial that we help clients have the appropriate support they need in submitting proof of all expenses so allowable deductions are calculated correctly and that the caseworkers have support systems in place they need to assist clients. D.C. Hunger Solutions believes that an in-depth evaluation would help so the needs of clients and caseworkers are met.

Appendices

Appendix A: 2015 Participant Survey and Results

Please Note: Answers that received the highest rate of response are highlighted in yellow. Other percentages of answers are marked in red color.

1. Which tax site are you at? (n=67)
 - MLK **78%** (32)
 - Jubilee Jobs **19%** (13)
 - CentroNia **3%** (2)
 - UPO **0%** (0)
2. Which SNAP office do you use? (n=67)
 - Taylor Street **16%** (11)
 - H Street **48%** (32)
 - Anacostia **15%** (10)
 - Congress Heights **10%** (7)
 - Fort Davis **9%** (6)
 - MD/VA **1%** (1)
3. Once your SNAP application was submitted, how long did it take to start receiving benefits? (n=67)
 - Less than 1 week **46%** (31)
 - 1-2 weeks **30%** (20)
 - 3-4 weeks **16%** (11)
 - 5+ weeks **7%** (5)
4. Were any parts of the SNAP applications difficult to understand? Which part? (*Answers found in Appendix B, page 10*) (n=64)
 - Yes **11%** (7)
 - No **89%** (57)
5. Were any parts of the SNAP notices you received by mail difficult to understand? Which part? (*Answers found in Appendix B, page 11*) (n=66)
 - Yes **8%** (5)
 - No **92%** (61)
6. Have you experienced problems receiving notices by mail from the SNAP office? (n=66)
 - Yes **20%** (13)
 - No **80%** (53)
7. Have you experienced problems sending documents by mail to the SNAP office? (n=65)
 - Yes **23%** (15)
 - No **63%** (41)
 - Not Applicable **14%** (9)
8. Have you been able to reach someone when you call the SNAP office? (n=65)
 - Yes **52%** (34)
 - No **37%** (24)
 - Not Applicable **11%** (7)
9. How satisfied are you with the customer service you received at the SNAP office? (n=65)

Very Satisfied 18% (12)
Satisfied 45% (29)
Somewhat Satisfied 25% (16)
Not at all Satisfied 12% (8)

10. Have you sent in a Mid-Certification form to continue receiving SNAP? (n=65)

Yes 60% (39)
No/ Not Yet 34% (22)
Do not know 6% (4)

11. If yes, how satisfied are you with the current Mid-Certification process? (n=46)

Very Satisfied 22% (10)
Satisfied 41% (19)
Somewhat Satisfied 22% (10)
Not at all Satisfied 15% (7)

12. Once you were approved for SNAP, you had to pick up an EBT card at the SNAP office. How was that process? Why? (Answers found in Appendix B, page 11). (n=61)

Easy 74% (45)
Somewhat easy 23% (14)
Somewhat Difficult 3% (2)
Very Difficult 0% (0)

13. In the future, would you prefer the EBT card be mailed to you? Why? (Answers found in Appendix B, page 11-12) (n=63)

Yes 40% (25)
No 56% (35)
Do not know 5% (3)

14. The monthly SNAP benefits you receive for your household are enough to cover food expenses for... (n=64)

1 week 11% (7)
2 weeks 16% (10)
3 weeks 45% (29)
the whole month 28% (18)

For the following two statements, please mark whether it was “Often True”, “Sometimes True”, or “Never True” for you or your household in the last 12 months.

15. We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more. (n=64)

Often True 31% (20)
Sometimes True 39% (25)
Never True 30% (19)

16. The food we bought didn't last and we didn't have money to get more. (n=64)

Often True 19% (12)
Sometimes True 47% (30)
Never True 34% (22)

17. Some people want to cut SNAP benefits. Tell us why SNAP is important to you. (Answers found in Appendix B, page 8)

18. What would you tell others thinking of applying to the SNAP Program? (Answers found in Appendix B, page 9)

19. If you could make any changes to the SNAP program, what would they be? (Answers found in Appendix B, page 10)

20. Would you recommend the SNAP program to a friend? (n=62)

Yes 100% (62)
No 0% (0)

21. What is your monthly SNAP benefit? \$173.31 (average)

22. Including you, how many people live in your household? 2.0 people (average)

23. What gender do you identify with? (n=63)

Female 60% (38)

Male 40% (25)

Other 0% (0)

24. What is your age? (n=64)

18-21 2% (1)

22-31 9% (6)

32-41 19% (12)

42-51 20%

52-59 20% (13)

60+ 28% (18)

Appendix B: Open Ended Answers

“Tell us why SNAP is important to you.”

- It helps feed my family when times are hard.
- I'm not making enough hourly for me not to be receiving SNAP. I really do need SNAP at this time.
- “SNAP is all I have. I don't have money, a job, no kind of check and [am] unemployed. So I would die without SNAP”
- My stamps help me because paying my bills does not leave [me] with anything.
- SNAP is all I have. I don't have money, a job, no kind of check and [am] unemployed. So I would die without SNAP.
- With my income, the food stamps help me. I get under \$500/ month so the food stamps enable me to eat each and every day.
- In these hard economic times, and my unemployment, I couldn't quite make it without SNAP
- It's very helpful for people who are unemployed and have a hard time finding work.
- Because people have kids and it's not enough after you pay your bills.
- I know people that depend on it- some people would not manage with children- they really wouldn't.
- I'm under paid and cannot meet household expenses.
- Love this program. Very grateful. I buy affordable food now at the new Trader Joe's and use the Fresh Farm Program at the farmers' markets, which is great. Love the benefits but the process to get them is really flawed, ineffective, needs revamp.
- One reason why snap is important: I can budget money for food.
- It helps people that are unemployed.
- Seniors and people with disability need it to get by.
- Because I'm unemployed.
- It is important to me because it helps out a lot so I can save some money
- Because I live below the poverty line
- It feeds me on a routine basis.
- It helps me buy my food. Once I pay rent, there's no money for food.
- Because it helps you feed people.
- It's important because some people have no jobs and are not employed and it helps in more than one way.
- Because sometimes you don't have enough money to provide food for your family and when you don't have the money to buy food, and then SNAP always comes in handy. After paying bills especially.
- Helps me to be able to pay utilities and rent/ property.
- Es muy importantne para nosotros los [?] le programa porque no gannar lo suficiente para comprar comida y necesita ayuda parpa nuestro (Translation: SNAP is important for us and the program is good because I don't earn enough to buy food and need the help).
- SNAP is important to me because I have no income. Unemployment benefits do not last forever.

- For people I know, I used to live in the shelter and people who had kids and people were talking about you shouldn't use SNAP to buy snacks but it was the only thing I could bring into the shelter. Not everyone has an apt with a kitchen. You should be able to use SNAP to buy whatever covers your need.
- Being unemployed, this program has made a huge difference in my financial situation
- It helps to make ends meet. I am able to eat when I don't have money.
- It would save your money in your pocket.
- Because it helps with the increase and health of the people.
- It always helps.
- Obviously people have to eat. And when you don't have income, SNAP is the only option.
- It helps me because I'm a single mom and I have 4 kids.
- It helps me to provide well-balanced meals to my family.
- Because we don't get a money to last month and next month.

“What would you tell others thinking of applying to the SNAP program?”

- Every little bit helps. This program helps to supplement my income and allows me to be able to enjoy good home cooked meals and fresh produce and bread.
- Please have all your proper documents they ask you for, so that you can receive services quickly.
- It is a beneficial program to anyone finding themselves in a financial hardship.
- Be sure to bring all information needed for applying to speed up your process. Have a lot of patience.
- That it helps in many ways and you should try it.
- I would tell them it's very easy and make sure you go to the correct location.
- Get it. It helps.
- If you are eligible, you should apply, and be persistent to make sure you get what you're entitled to. Don't be discouraged.
- Vale mucho la pena porque nos ayuda, a familis de bajos ingresos (Translation: The program is worth it because it helps low income families).
- It's a good program.
- Make sure you have an overall understanding about SNAP.
- Go ahead and apply- benefits are for those who need it.
- Make sure you have the proper information and be honest about everything you put on the application.
- It's beneficial, very helpful; just watch how you use it.
- That's yours, if that what you want to do.
- I would tell them to sign up ASAP.
- They really help you out with your kids and food.
- Be patient and compromise.
- If you are not making enough money I would consider someone to apply for the benefit if they qualify.
- Go for it! If your income is low, getting food stamps can be very helpful.
- Worth it to try. Wasn't planning on getting it but according to my income I was eligible.
- To do so, its' a big help.
- Don't give up.
- Apply.
- Go for it.
- Please apply if you need SNAP. It helps a lot.
- Do it. Don't think your situation - how should I put it? Some people think "they're going to tell me no" You don't know until you try.
- It's a great benefit that helps.
- Try it.
- Go where people can help you apply.

- Get it.
- I would so do so.
- It's a good program. They should join.

“If you could make any changes to the SNAP program, what would they be?”

- Increase the food stamps so people can buy better food.
- More Food Stamps! A larger amount. Things are very expensive. A gallon of milk is \$5, a dozen of eggs as much as \$3.
- Mejorar el [?] del personal en las oficinas (Translation: The customer service needs to be better at the service centers).
- Faster service. When you go to the office it's very crowded and a long time to wait. And they need to clean more.
- Hopefully not to cut the funding for this program.
- Look more directly at utility bills, especially during winter months when electricity or gas might be double or triple. Simplify so that people who can't get into office can still get benefits (example certify for a longer period).
- Courteous employees.
- The process about waiting to recertify- I would make the process organized and shorter so the process wouldn't be so long.
- Increase it for seniors and handicapped people because they get less than the people with kids. I know seniors who just get \$16 and they only get 1 check a month.
- Not at all.
- Add more food stamps on the card because everything is going up.
- Increase allocation amount.
- The recertification process is tedious. The wait is far too long. The mailings still have the old address and a phone number no answer and voicemail--no one returns calls. It is bad. Long way across town from where I live. Should have more convenient locations. I live in NW & go to NE. I should be able to go to Taylor St NW not 645 H St NE. Last time I got a letter saying I didn't recert & benefits [?]. When I went to person on the exact assigned date and was approved on-site.
- When doing mid-certifications and certification, allow it to be done on the internet. Avoids long lines at the office and speed info. Avoids loss of benefits.
- Little bit more.
- More workers.
- More money.
- Put me back at the H St. Office- Currently have to travel all the way to SE- Get the feeling they want to see how bad you want the stamps- It's like a test.
- They should let you get hot food.
- It's working for me fine right now.
- To have more money on the card.
- Coupons and discounts.
- Customer Service can be improved.
- More Stamps!

“Were any parts of the SNAP applications difficult to understand? Which part?”

- Income-totaling.
- Income.
- Part of address.

- Proof of income.
- Income-doesn't take into account health status.
- Been awhile since applied; system is really ineffective.

“Were any of the SNAP notices you received by mail difficult to understand? Which part?”

- Why do they send me to Anacostia when Taylor or H Street is close to my home?
- Notices of when benefits would begin were difficult to understand.
- Mail return for the address for recertification.
- The address is wrong on envelope- office has moved. What you need to bring is not clear. The phone number is one that no one ever answers/voicemail; people do not return [calls within] 24 hours and no appointment time slots [are] noted or hours, just a date.

“Once you were approved for SNAP, you had to pick up an EBT card at the SNAP office. How was the process?”

- Fast and simple; they only sent me to [a] different office which wasn't necessary.
- Too long to wait.
- Close proximity.
- Close location.
- No problems.
- Very efficient.
- Everything was good.
- It was in and out.
- All you have to do is use common sense.
- Close location.
- Not too crowded.
- Adequately located.
- In and out.
- I currently had a EBT card.
- Fast, doesn't take a lot of time.
- Was easy process.
- It was a very quick in and out process.
- They take their time.
- Very simple.
- I think I got it the same day. It was a while ago.

“In the future, would you prefer the EBT card be mailed to you? Yes or no because...”

- Faster process.
- I am disabled and it is difficult for me to use public transportation.
- Likes to pick up card- doesn't have to worry about getting lost in the mail.
- Easier/ more convenient.
- Takes about two hours to get to the office and back home.
- Would take too long. It would/might be put in the wrong mail box.
- Not sure.
- Because they might send it but it would never come.
- Because if lost or stolen you would have to wait for them to send you another one.
- [It would be] easier to receive it at home.
- I don't trust the mail man or postal.
- Because it may get lost in the mail.
- Easier to receive.

- Time it takes to go to the office.
- Security reasons.
- Better to go in person.
- Convenience.
- People can mess with your mail.
- Safety of not receiving my card.
- Convenient.
- Enjoy going to the office-accessible.
- Don't trust the mail with something important.
- I would rather pick it up.
- Save me a trip.
- Because it would take longer to receive card in the mail, rather than pick it up in 15 minutes or less.
- Parking in an issue.
- The line.
- I don't have transportation.
- I'd rather get it into my hand. I like in person better.
- You only need to pick it up the first time. I believe I got mine on site. No problem. Short.
- Can get lost or stolen. Prefer to pick it up.