

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SNAP is a critical lifeline for 2 million Pennsylvanians. However, we know that many eligible families forego participation. As food insecurity rises locally and nationally in the post-pandemic world, it is imperative to assess how accessible the SNAP program is in Pennsylvania. Through surveys, interviews and focus groups, quantitative and qualitative data was gathered to investigate the current state of the PA Department of Human Services' administration of SNAP. These results show multiple damaging barriers to accessing SNAP benefits that are currently affecting Pennsylvanians, including:

Challenges with communicating with County Assistance Offices (CAO)

- 46.3% of SNAP participants do not receive paperwork with enough time to complete it before deadlines, leading to benefit interruptions.
- 28% reported difficulty reaching a worker by phone.
- 30% experienced wait times of an hour or more at CAOs.
- 18.6% feel they are not treated with dignity or respect by workers.

“They [local CAO caseworkers] always are so ignorant, expect [you] to know everything, and just very rude. It makes me feel so embarrassed and put down to be there!”

Complex reporting processes

- 45% are unaware of when to expect renewal paperwork.
- 14.4% find SNAP rules and procedures confusing.
- 16.5% struggle with understanding the questions on recertification forms.
- 29% cite income verification as a major challenge.
- 17% do not know how to report changes.
- 22% are unaware of their right to appeal a decision they disagree with.

Stigma and misinformation

Fear of judgment or mistreatment from loved ones, fellow shoppers, and DHS employees often lead to hesitation to apply.

The perception of a lengthy application process also deters applicants.

Furthermore, confusion and misinformation about eligibility and rules discourage eligible immigrants and students from applying.

The SNAP application and recertification processes are “long, difficult for clients to understand, and not structured with SNAP participants in mind.”

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Lack of digital access or literacy

SNAP recipients who were familiar with COMPASS or the MyCOMPASS PA mobile app were more likely to know about their renewal, how to report changes, and experience less churn. But nearly a third of SNAP users were unaware of or have a reluctance to using those services.

While most respondents use mobile devices, one-third lack consistent access to a desktop or laptop at home.

“We like human beings, not artificial intelligence.”

Barriers identified by senior adults include:

- Only 39.5% of seniors surveyed considered themselves to be capable of finding and accessing resources online.
- Long wait times and poor service at CAOs
- Impacts of stigma and ageism.

Barriers to SNAP for post-secondary students include:

- Poor communication about eligibility rules,
- The perception of a complicated application process,
- and the complicated work rules

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Track and improve CAO customer service

Improve accountability for CAO employees' conduct toward clients; Collect and publish customer service related data such as office wait times, call wait times, and disconnects; Re-evaluate staffing and training needs

2

Improve systems for handling and sending documents

Pilot a mail tracking system and/or considering utilizing a local mail service to streamline delivery; Ensure that mail dates are at least 3 weeks prior to due dates; Send document related alerts via text and/or email.

3

Increase accessibility of SNAP resources and paperwork

Increase access to large-print notices; Expand language accessibility of COMPASS, notices, and forms; Increase in-office access to shorter SNAP-only applications; Create a usability testing group for forms and notices.

4

Improve Marketing of SNAP-related Information

Clarify and publicize vital information for benefit recipients; Improve marketing of services and resources to SNAP users; co-create SNAP marketing materials for specific populations such as students and immigrants.