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Encouraging Healthy Food Purchases: Alternatives to Restricting Choices in SNAP

The United States Department of Agriculture describes the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as the nation's first line of defense against hunger. Although the main role of SNAP is to ensure that low-income Americans have the resources that they need to avoid going hungry, it can also be an important contributor to the fight against obesity. There are many ways that participation in SNAP can be leveraged to help families purchase, prepare, and consume a healthier diet. A variety of different strategies have been piloted and evaluated in this area and serve as viable options for improving the diets of the 1.4 million Texas households that currently receive SNAP benefits.

Rates of obesity and overweight have been increasing for Americans of all ages, races, and income levels since the 1980s. The increases have been particularly dramatic among low-income Americans. Because of this pattern and the prevalence of SNAP use among the poor, a connection between the program and obesity has been theorized. Research by leading public health investigators has actually found the opposite. In fact, researchers at USDA found that each additional SNAP dollar received increased a household's dietary quality score on the Healthy Eating Index.¹ In other words, the more SNAP benefits a household received, the more their vegetable, dairy, and meat consumption improved. Specifically the level of vegetable, dairy, and meat consumption improved with increased with the level of SNAP benefits. Low-income Americans who are not participating in the SNAP program or receive relatively low levels of SNAP benefits have been found to be at a significantly higher risk of being overweight or obese and than those on the program.^{2,3}

Due to its positive effects and widespread use, policymakers and public health professionals have become interested in ways that the SNAP program could be altered in order to encourage the consumption of an even more healthy and balanced diet. This report will summarize four ways that the SNAP program could be improved in order to support healthy food choices among its participants. It will also touch on the proposal to restrict the purchases of SNAP recipients and the dangers associated with doing so.

Four Ways to Improve the Nutritional Intake of SNAP Recipients

1. Ensure that households receive an adequate amount of SNAP benefits so that that can afford a balanced diet, including healthy foods

The amount of monthly benefit that SNAP households receive is based on the USDA's Thrifty Food Plan (TFP). The TFP is the national standard for a nutritious diet at minimal cost. The plan was updated in 2006 to account for inflation and changes



to the US Dietary Guidelines. The 2006 update did not account for increases in the real costs of TFP items beyond inflation and research shows that even recipients receiving the maximum amount of SNAP benefits cannot cover the true costs of the TFP.^{4,5} Additionally, studies in Boston and Philadelphia found that the availability of foods included in the Thrifty Food Plan was not consistent across retailers. The most commonly missing foods were fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy products, and lean meats.⁶ Due to this lack of access, SNAP recipients may have to spend more of their financial and time resources traveling to retail locations that offer healthy foods. In retail locations where healthy foods are available, those foods are often much more expensive relative to foods with refined grains, added sugars, and fats. When a family is trying to stretch a limited food budget, they often resort to cheap, calorie-dense foods that are filling.^{7,8} In order to encourage families to eat a healthier diet, we must ensure that their benefits are at a level that allows them to afford healthy foods. The amount of individual SNAP benefits and total SNAP funding is determined by the Farm Bill. This bill, reauthorized every five years, is currently being drafted, marked up, and debated by the US Congress. Severe cuts to the SNAP program have been proposed by both the US House and the Senate Agriculture Committees and it is vital that Texas policymakers and stakeholders advocate for the protection of this vital safety net program.

2. Make the SNAP Benefit Go Further for Healthy Purchases

State and local communities have ways to help SNAP recipients extend the reach of their benefits and improve their diets without increasing the level of federal benefits received. By offering incentives for the purchase of fruits, vegetables, and other healthy items, the barriers that low-income individuals face in purchasing those items can be reduced. Incentives can be provided in the form of coupons or vouchers that are good for the purchase of produce at farmers markets or other retailers. A 2007 study by the Economic Research Service at USDA found that offering these financial incentives to SNAP clients would translate into a significant increase in fruit and vegetable purchases and consumption.⁹

Several communities responded have piloted their own incentive programs. Data from these programs shows that improving the purchasing power of food benefits through “double-value vouchers” and fruit and vegetable coupons can have a positive effect on fruit and vegetable purchase and consumption, even after the incentive programs end.^{10, 11} The Sustainable Foods Center in Austin, TX recognized the public health value of these programs and recently launched an incentive program at their newest farmers’ market location. With funding from the St. David’s Foundation and Wholesome Wave, the market allows SNAP and WIC recipients to double the value of their benefits up to twenty dollars when used to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at the market. This market was strategically placed in a location that has been identified as a “food desert” by the USDA or an area where the majority residents have low access to a major supermarket. Due to the success of the local initiatives, the federal government has launched a federal SNAP incentive pilot. The Healthy Incentives Pilot program will study the impact of financial incentives on purchasing and consumption of healthy foods among SNAP recipients.¹² In early 2013, USDA will complete the evaluation phase of the pilot and continue to track purchasing trends of participants after the conclusion of the study.

If Texas policymakers and public health advocates wish to improve the diets of SNAP recipients, they must encourage consumers to purchase and prepare healthy foods. Promoting healthy food purchases with SNAP benefits through incentives, coupons, and vouchers is an evidence-based option that if implemented at the state level, could have a significant impact on the diets and health outcomes of Texans who receive SNAP.

3. Improve Access to Healthy Foods Through Farmer's Markets and Community Supported Agriculture

There are many areas in the United States where supermarkets are unlikely to locate due to low population density or relatively high cost of business. In these underserved communities, farm-to-consumer models offer promising ways of improving the dietary intake of residents. Unfortunately, the vast majority of farmers' markets and farm stands currently in operation do not accept SNAP benefits. When farmers' markets or produce stands do accept SNAP benefits, there is often a lack of awareness or access among low-income consumers. To enhance the impact that farmer's markets can have on the diets of low-income Americans, communities must encourage new markets to locate in underserved areas. Those markets must also be supported in their efforts to accept SNAP benefit with technological and educational support from state agencies and local stakeholders.

The state of Texas currently has 170 registered farmers' markets and only thirty-one of those markets accept SNAP benefits. The costs of the technology required to accept the EBT benefits are a barrier to participation for many markets. In 2011, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission partnered with eighteen markets to help the farmers acquire, set up, and utilize the terminals that are capable of reading the magnetic strip on the SNAP benefit card. This year, USDA Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan reported that SNAP spending at farmer's markets has increased by 400 percent since 2008. In order to continue this upward trend, Texas must invest more in helping markets to get started in low-income neighborhoods and ensure that those markets have the capacity to accept SNAP EBT cards as payment.

USDA announced in May 2012 that they would spend \$4 million helping another 4000 markets purchase and set up the technology needed to accept SNAP benefits. Texas is set to receive approximately \$800,000 from this initiative. Once the additional markets are brought online, it is crucial that SNAP recipients in Texas are made aware of this option and its benefits so that they can take advantage of it.

4. Enhance SNAP Nutrition Education

The federal government provides Texas with over \$5 million per year to provide SNAP and SNAP-eligible consumers with the skills and knowledge they need to make healthy choices. Using science-based, behaviorally-focused education strategies, the SNAP-Ed program has demonstrated that it can have a significant impact on eating behaviors and food security of those who participate in the program.¹³ USDA recommends that states use the SNAP-Ed funds to engage in a variety of direct and indirect education strategies, ranging from classroom-based lessons to social media campaigns.¹⁴ In Texas, the majority of SNAP-Ed funding goes towards direct education efforts and this limits the number of individuals who can benefit from the multifaceted, multi-channel approach the USDA recommends.

In 2010, the federal grant that the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) received for SNAP nutrition education was divided between twelve sub-grantees. Eleven of those funding recipients were regional food banks and the remaining sub-grantee was the Texas A&M Agrilife Extension. Between the twelve organizations, over 12,000 SNAP-Ed classes were offered at 2365 sites across the state. In total, only 370,000 of the 1.4 million SNAP recipients in Texas participated in a SNAP education class. The before-and-after evaluation of participants in the classes indicates that those who attend do improve knowledge and behavior regarding shopping and eating patterns.¹⁵ Although they do show a positive result, the classes do not have the far-reaching impact that is needed. TDA must expand its use of federal SNAP-Ed funding to include indirect

education practices in the education efforts. Using print and multimedia messaging to educate through advertising and social media would allow a greater number of SNAP recipients to be exposed to state nutrition education efforts.

An Impractical, Ineffective Strategy: Restricting Choice in SNAP

As stated in the opening portion of this report, SNAP does not cause poor diets or an increase in obesity among those who receive benefits. In fact, a multitude of studies have found that receiving food assistance through SNAP actually improves dietary intake.^{16,17} For this reason, public health experts at the Institute of Medicine include increasing SNAP participation in their list of early childhood obesity prevention policies.¹⁸ Since participation in the SNAP program does not contribute to the obesity epidemic, it is not a practical place to look to reverse the problem. There is limited research exploring the impact of food restrictions in SNAP and it is likely that the costs associated with developing and implementing the program would far outweigh any benefits.

Concerns Associated with Developing and Implementing Restrictions on the use of SNAP Benefits

1. There are not agreed upon standards for determining what food items are “healthy” or “unhealthy” and creating them will likely lead to political, rather than scientific, battles over what foods qualify as “good” and “bad”.
2. Increased confusion and stigma for SNAP recipients at the grocery checkout could lead to decreased participation in the program and increased rates of hunger and obesity.
3. Increased complexity and costs for participating retailers could lead to decreased food outlet participation and increased rates of hunger and obesity.
4. Restricting food purchases will be ineffective if SNAP consumers do not have access to eligible foods at affordable prices.
5. There is no empirical evidence that restricting choice in SNAP will improve diets or reduce obesity.

Conclusion

There is no question that the diets of most Texans need to improve. Issues of access, education, and affordability are especially impactful on the eating patterns of the state’s low-income population. Fortunately, the SNAP program assists these vulnerable citizens in affording a consistent and nutritious diet. Targeting the poor assumes that they have a culture that is different or dysfunctional relative to the rest of society. In reality, SNAP participants and non-participants have similar purchasing and consumption patterns regardless of income level.¹⁹ We must strengthen SNAP’s role in improving health outcomes through incentives and education rather than taking an untested and costly tactic that will likely result in a decrease in SNAP participation and an increase in obesity and food insecurity.

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Endnotes

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