



# SUSTAINABLE FOOD POLICY BOARD

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April 16, 2012

Honorable Lee Leffingwell, Mayor  
Austin City Council  
301 West Second Street  
Austin, Texas 78701

Dear Mayor and Council Members:

The Sustainable Food Policy Board (SFPB) has been studying the issue of enrollment in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or "food stamps") in the Austin/Travis County area. It is estimated that only 53% of the SNAP-eligible population in Travis County receives SNAP benefits.

SNAP provides critical food assistance to our most vulnerable citizens. In fact, the majority of SNAP recipients are children and the elderly. SNAP has also been credited with being the most responsive federal program providing additional assistance during economic downturns. As you are aware, many of our citizens are still suffering the effects of the recent recession and are struggling to put food on the table.

SNAP benefits are spent in local communities at retailers and grocers. It is estimated that every \$1 in SNAP benefits generates \$1.79 in economic activity. With only 53% of the SNAP-eligible population receiving benefits, Travis County businesses are losing \$349,052,961 in economic return.

Therefore, the SFPB recommends that the Austin City Council create a citywide outreach campaign to increase SNAP enrollment, including providing a variety of technical assistance options for the SNAP-eligible population. It is also recommended that this campaign be led by a trusted bilingual public official and that it be disseminated using media and social services outreach methods.

The SFPB also recommends that the City of Austin research possible grants or other sources of funding to increase the value of SNAP dollars spent locally at farmers markets and other retailers for fresh produce. Currently, the Sustainable Food Center is doubling the value of SNAP dollars with a match of up to \$10 weekly at one of its farmers market locations in East Austin. The city can measure the economic and access benefits of this effort as well as resources allocated to similar incentive programs in such cities as Chicago, Boston and New York with proven results. Such benchmarks can help justify resource allocation and support for additional incentive opportunities throughout the city. Increased enrollment in SNAP can also help offset the cost investment made by smaller retailers to participate in the program—such as equipment and paperwork.

The SFPB recommends that the city council take action by asking city staff to implement an effective outreach and assistance effort to increase participation in the SNAP program as well as expand SNAP benefits at local farmers markets, thereby greatly benefitting our local economy. The SFPB will support city staff and its partners in these efforts.

Attached is a report from the SNAP working group as well as a list of cities with best practices on SNAP outreach, enrollment, and incentive programs.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can answer questions or be of further assistance.

Sincerely,



Paula J. McDermott

Chairperson

Austin/Travis County Sustainable Food Policy Board

Enclosures:

SNAP Working Group Report

List of Cities with Best-Practices for SNAP Outreach and Enrollment

cc: Marc A. Ott, City Manager  
H. G. (Bert) Lumbreras, Assistant City Manager  
Carlos Rivera, Director, HHSD, Public Health  
Philip Huang, Executive Liaison  
Lucia Athens, Chief Sustainability Officer  
Sherri Fleming, Executive Manager, Travis County HHS & Veteran Services  
Travis County Commissioners

## List of Resources and Best Practices for SNAP Outreach and Farmers Markets/EBT Initiatives

- Eat Fresh Maryland Network: <http://eatfreshmd.wordpress.com/>  
A public/private partnership to increase access to farmers markets in Maryland for SNAP and WIC recipients. This is funded through a USDA Farmers Market Outreach Grant and a Maryland Department of Agriculture Specialty Block Grant.
- Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon: <http://oregonhunger.org/snap-outreach>  
Developed a comprehensive SNAP outreach program, guided by a SNAP Outreach Steering Committee.
- Community Food Security Coalition and Farmers Market Coalition report, *Real Food, Real Choices: Connecting SNAP Recipients with Farmers Markets*:  
[http://foodsecurity.org/pub/RealFoodRealChoice\\_SNAP\\_FarmersMarkets.pdf](http://foodsecurity.org/pub/RealFoodRealChoice_SNAP_FarmersMarkets.pdf) Review of 15 states and access to farmers markets by the SNAP-eligible population, including recommendations.
- City Seed and buy CT grown, *SNAP at Farmers Markets: Four Case Studies from Connecticut*:  
[http://snakeroot.net/mffm/SnapAtFarmersMarkets\\_CitySeed\\_CT.pdf](http://snakeroot.net/mffm/SnapAtFarmersMarkets_CitySeed_CT.pdf)  
Highlights best practices on SNAP redemption at farmers markets in Connecticut.
- USDA SNAP Outreach Toolkit:  
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/pdfs/toolkit/2011/Community/Communications/partnerships.pdf>  
Details how to establish community partnerships to increase SNAP enrollment.
- Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) SNAP Outreach and Access Toolkit: <http://frac.org/snapfood-stamps-outreach-and-access-toolkit/>  
Provides resources and information on SNAP outreach and enrollment.

## **Sustainable Food Policy Board SNAP Working Group Discussion and List of Recommendations**

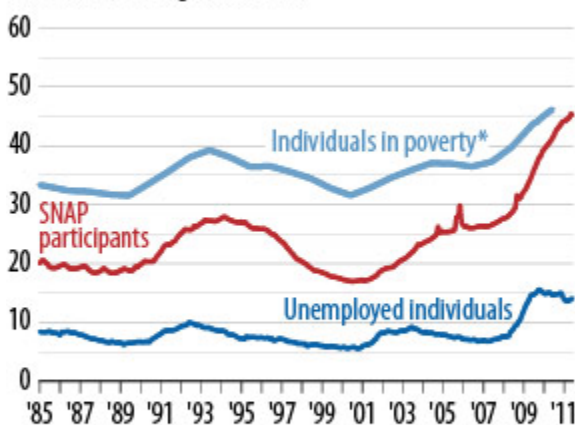
The SNAP Working Group met, consisting of the following members: Kathy Green, Capital Area Food Bank and Member of the Sustainable Food Policy Board; Celia Cole, Policy Analyst with the Center for Public Policy Priorities; Claudia Herrington, Community Relations Coordinator with El Buen Samaritano; and Suzanne Santos, Farmers Market Director with Sustainable Food Center. Also attending the meeting were Whitney Devin, Social Services Coordinator with the Capital Area Food Bank.

### **Background:**

The Special Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), previously known as “food stamps,” is a \$56 billion federal nutrition assistance program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture at the federal level. SNAP is reauthorized in Congress every five years as a part of the Farm Bill. The federal government pays the full cost of SNAP benefits, but splits the cost of administering the program with the states. In Texas, the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) administers the program. Behind unemployment insurance, SNAP is credited with being the most responsive federal program providing additional assistance during economic downturns. Since the beginning of the recession, SNAP participation has increased by 15.6 million people, or 57 percent (43.2 million in October 2010). (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities)

### **SNAP Caseloads Closely Track Changes In Poverty and Unemployment**

In millions, through June 2011



\*Poverty numbers are annual estimates and not yet available after 2009. Spikes in SNAP participants are from disaster food stamps after hurricanes.

Sources: Food and Nutrition Service (SNAP participants); Census Bureau (individuals in poverty); Bureau of Labor Statistics (unemployed individuals)

A recent survey by the U.S. Council of Mayors reported that 86 percent of the survey cities had seen requests for emergency food assistance increase over the past year. Among the recommended list of actions to reduce hunger, city officials cited increasing food stamp benefits.

<http://www.usmayors.org/pressreleases/uploads/2011-hhreport.pdf>

In Travis County, approximately 113,965 citizens participate in SNAP. However, it is estimated that 129,269 residents are eligible, but do not participate. Recent U.S. Census data show that 189,811 Travis County residents live at or below the poverty level and that 244,025 live between 100% and 200% of the poverty level.

The average SNAP benefit is \$133 per person per month. To receive SNAP, a citizen must apply with HHSC and provide documentation of income, residence, household composition, and other information. SNAP beneficiaries must reapply every six months. The amount of benefits a household receives is based on their income and expenses. All able-bodied adults, with some exceptions, are required to work at least 30 hours per week to qualify for benefits. Childless adults who are not working can only receive SNAP benefits for three months out of every three years. They may reapply when employed if they meet income requirements. Legal immigrants qualify after having lived in the United States for five years, with the exception of children who qualify immediately. Undocumented immigrants are not eligible.

Since SNAP benefits are spent in local communities at retailers and grocers, it is estimated that for every \$1 in SNAP benefits, \$1.79 is created in local economic activity.

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR103/ERR103.pdf>

Almost 90 percent of the food consumed by food SNAP households goes to fruits and vegetables, grain products, meats, or dairy products. (CBPP) The Sustainable Food Center recently received a grant from the St. David's Foundation to locate a Farmers' Market in an underserved area of Austin. SFC is currently doing a feasibility study to determine location. Once the market opens, SNAP clients will be able to receive double the value of their SNAP benefits for fresh fruits and vegetables (up to \$10 match weekly for \$10 spent). SFC is also piloting a WIC (Women, Infants, and Children Nutrition Program) with DSHS for their farmers markets.

Following are the issues identified as barriers to SNAP participation in Austin/Travis County, and some possible solutions.

## **Issues Identified:**

1. There is a general distrust of government programs among the immigrant population. You must be a citizen or a legal immigrant under certain conditions to receive SNAP. However, those who do not meet those requirements can still sign up their children for benefits. Many among this population are not aware of this provision or they do not want to take advantage of it because of fear of the government.
2. In Texas, persons with a felony drug conviction are not eligible for SNAP. This is a provision enacted during the federal 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. States have the ability to opt out of the ban. However, to date Texas has not chosen to do so. (This is the only felony conviction that has this prohibition—any other—robbery, rape, murder, etc.—can receive SNAP.) There are a considerable number of citizens in this situation, and many of them have difficulty finding work because of their criminal record. Providing them access to food assistance while looking for employment could assist in preventing recidivism.
3. There is a misperception about working and ability to get benefits. Therefore, many working poor are not aware that they could receive SNAP.
4. Although the SNAP application is now electronic, the application process is time-consuming and difficult for some populations unless they are assisted. Many clients don't have e-mail or a computer, so filling out an on-line application is not feasible for them. Applying via the paper application is time-consuming, and many do not want to bother with it.
5. Many clients are transient. HHSC sends a lot of mail (notices, paperwork, etc.) to SNAP clients, and if a client has moved, there is a delay in getting the notices. Clients are supposed to report changes in addresses to HHSC when they move. However, there is also a delay with HHSC making the change.
6. Many seniors are eligible for SNAP. However, it is difficult to get the senior population to sign up because with their Social Security benefits, they only get \$16 a month on average. Additionally, the senior population is resistant to ask for help.

**Possible Solutions/Recommendations:**

1. Create a citywide outreach effort to the Hispanic population using a trusted bilingual public official. This effort should be disseminated using Latino media and the promotora (public health worker) population. Both the Latino media and promotoras are respected and trusted by the Hispanic population.
2. Recruit local government and other HHS/social service agencies to serve as community partners with HHSC to provide application assistance via the enhanced self-service portal that HHSC is rolling out in 2012.
3. Create a city network/coalition of promotoras. Work with the Department of State Health Services, which does promotora certification and training, and ensure that there are adequate programs within Austin/Travis County, and that they include information and education on SNAP.
4. Provide a comprehensive training for non-profit organization staff on SNAP—including requirements, enrollment procedures, etc.
5. City of Austin and Travis County officials should work with legislators at the state level and Congressional members at the federal level to address barriers in SNAP enrollment. Further, local officials should encourage protection of SNAP in the upcoming 2012 Farm Bill to prevent funding cuts or damaging structural changes.