

STRATEGY 4

Increase Uptake of Food and Nutrition Services

- a. North Carolina philanthropies should provide additional financial support for outreach contractors to increase awareness of the eligibility and enrollment process for Food and Nutrition Services (also known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - SNAP), particularly in historically underserved communities. Financial support should also include sensitivity and cultural awareness training for outreach contractors on methods to reduce stigma for consumers accessing Food and Nutrition Services.
- b. Outreach contractors should consult with the North Carolina Division of Social Services, Division of Aging and Adult Services, County Departments of Social Services, and Area Agencies on Aging on effective outreach methods in North Carolina's diverse communities to ensure all eligible individuals have the opportunity to enroll in the program.
- c. The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services should ensure that the Division of Child and Family Well-Being, Food and Nutrition Services Section is able to complete transition from the 1-year client recertification period to a 3-year client recertification period for USDA's Food and Nutrition Service/SNAP as soon as possible.
- d. The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services should provide guidance on establishing partnerships between the health and medical community and health care payers to promote food prescription programs, the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, Commodity Supplements (senior boxes), and food programs for veterans and military families.

Desired Result - Increase knowledge of, access to, and participation in nutrition support services for older adults most in need.

Why does the task force recommend this strategy?

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federal program administered by state agencies that provides benefits to increase the food budget of households in need so they can afford healthier food options. In North Carolina, this program is referred to as Food and Nutrition Services (FNS). While this program is currently available in all 100 counties, only around 26% of older adults who are eligible for this means-tested program participate in it.⁵⁹ Among the reasons given for low participation include a confusing application process and the daunting requirement of reapplying every year.⁶⁰ Other available resources, such as food prescription programs, rely on state and federal funding that often require providers of the programs to contribute matching funds.

Context - Malnutrition in older adults leads to worse health outcomes and higher costs for medical care. Those who are malnourished have three times as many hospital admissions, have longer hospital stays, and see their primary care physician twice as often as those who are well-nourished.⁶¹ Increased enrollment in programs such as SNAP/FNS is associated with fewer hospital and emergency room visits as well as higher rates of medication adherence.⁶²

SNAP/FNS Outreach

Outreach contractors are responsible for connecting organizations with local communities through education, information, and assistance. The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services identifies the role of outreach contractors as "rais[ing] awareness of the nutrition benefits of SNAP/FNS, eligibility rules, and how to apply. SNAP Outreach corrects myths and misperceptions about SNAP/FNS and enables potentially eligible people to make an informed decision to participate."⁶³ Contractors must share in 50% of the costs of their work, with the other 50% reimbursed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).⁶³

Targeted outreach to older adults may motivate those currently unsure of their eligibility in the program to enroll. By helping connect older adults with information about how and where to apply for benefit programs, barriers such as transportation, mobility, and stigma can be breached. One such program, More in My Basket (MIMB) based at North Carolina State University, connects

North Carolina residents to education about SNAP/FNS through community presentations and resource fairs. MIMB staff and agents also provide assistance with completing and submitting the SNAP/FNS application.⁶⁴

The National Council on Aging (NCOA) Benefits CheckUp is a national resource website that "connects millions of older adults and people with disabilities with benefits programs that can help pay for health care, medicine, food, utilities, and more."⁶⁵ The site helps people understand what benefits they may be eligible for and how to apply.

Disparities in Food Security

Black and Hispanic older adults are twice as likely as White older adults to suffer from food insecurity and are also more likely to experience negative health outcomes associated with malnutrition, such as high blood pressure and diabetes.^{66,67} Among Black populations, the most prevalent nutritional risks reported include low levels of fruit and vegetable intake, as well as eating fewer than two meals a day.⁶⁸ Other determinants include limited access to grocery stores and fresh produce, which disproportionately affects Black and Hispanic communities.⁶⁷ In Hispanic populations, food insecurity aligns closely with unemployment rates, which lead to lower incomes.⁶⁹ For households with undocumented residents, programs designed to improve nutrition may be inaccessible.⁷⁰

In May 2023, the USDA issued a memorandum to remind state agencies that they are obligated to provide appropriate communication for those with limited English proficiency and those with disabilities.⁷¹ The memo also referenced an executive order that called for government agencies to address barriers that prohibit access to federal benefits, services, and programs.⁷¹ For fiscal year 2024, priority outreach groups include students, veterans, immigrant households, and older adults.⁷² SNAP/FNS participation rates – the share of people per state who are eligible and receive benefits – vary widely state by state, in part due to the varying state policies of eligibility.⁷³ North Carolina ranked below the national average participation rate by six percentage points.⁷⁴ A 2022 AARP study found that many older adults did not enroll due to a perception that they would not receive a large enough benefit.⁷⁴ Cultural barriers can also be a factor in participation in programs like SNAP/FNS. For example, a USDA study found that in some Hispanic and Asian cultures, there is a belief that family members should take care of their elders rather than allowing these family members to enroll in government assistance.⁷⁵



SNAP/FNS Recertification

Traditionally, people enrolled in the FNS program must prove their eligibility through an annual recertification process that verifies continued eligibility and typically mirrors the initial certification process. While the initial application for the program can be done online, recertification must be completed via a paper application that can be filled out in person or by mail. To reduce the number of people who lose enrollment through this process – not because of a change in eligibility, but because of challenges completing paperwork – other modes of recertification (e.g., phone and internet) or longer recertification periods can be implemented. State FNS programs have identified a longer recertification period as a useful strategy to reduce financial burdens on households and administrative burdens on agencies. This could alleviate a condition known as “churn” caused by households exiting and re-entering services within the span of several months. Extended recertification periods could raise participation among older adults who may view the reapplication process as difficult to complete.

The North Carolina Division of Child and Family Well-Being, Food and Nutrition Services Section has received approval for a waiver to implement the Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP) for households with older adults. Implementation of a simplified recertification process that would take place every three years instead of annually has been delayed due to staffing limitations in making changes to the application technology.^H

Other Sources of Food Assistance

The National Produce Prescription Collaborative recommends providing a produce prescription benefit within Medicaid as well as funding federal research examining the impact of these prescriptions. Currently, North Carolina is one of four states that uses a Medicaid Demonstration Waiver to cover services like produce prescriptions that are not typically covered under federal regulation. Designating older adults as targeted beneficiaries of these services may increase awareness of the programs and improve utilization.

As part of its 2023-2024 initiative, NCDHHS aims to expand the Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program.

Other Sources of Food Assistance

Meal services for older adults include:

Congregate nutrition program - meals provided at no cost in group settings (requires eligibility)

Meals on Wheels - delivers fully cooked meals to homes (requires eligibility)

Faith-based programs such as the Inter-Faith Food Shuttle Seniors Eating Well which serves almost 2,000 North Carolina older adults annually

Assistance with purchasing more nutritional foods includes:

Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program - provides a coupon to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables at local farmers’ markets

How would this impact the health of older adults?



Adequate nutrition is an important factor in maintaining health and reducing the risk of falls.



Adequate nutrition can help maintain health and mobility for older adults for longer.



Food and nutrition assistance programs are vital to helping older adults most in need to maintain adequate nutrition.



Adequate nutrition can help maintain the health of older adults, thus supporting their ability to maintain connections in the community.



Rose is a proud grandmother of three. She helps care for some of her grandchildren every day when her daughter and son-in-law go to work. Her income is mostly from Social Security and she didn’t think she would meet the criteria for Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) benefits. She received help applying for benefits a long time ago and she wasn’t eligible for FNS at that time. Her daughter recently helped her use the online BenefitsCheckup tool to check her eligibility and found out she is qualified to receive benefits. Now she receives \$112 per month to help buy groceries, which allows her to purchase the nutritious foods she likes to eat and enjoys cooking.

**Note – This is a composite story based on the experiences highlighted in the article by the National Council on Aging, ‘Lifting Barriers to SNAP: Real Stories from Older Adults.’ <https://www.ncoa.org/article/lifting-barriers-to-snap-real-stories-from-older-adults>*

^H Information based on discussion with staff members from the North Carolina Division of Child and Family Well-Being, Food and Nutrition Services Section.