

Prevention Alliance

TOPIC: SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

GOAL: Encourage healthy eating through SNAP.

PROBLEM STATEMENT:

From 2010 to 2012¹, 14.6% of Washington households experienced food insecurity², which includes low or very low food security³, meaning that not every household member's food needs were met because of insufficient resources. An estimated [400,000 children](#) in Washington live in food insecure households. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service, provides low-income individuals and families with monthly benefits to purchase food. Termed "Basic Food" in Washington State, the amount of benefits is based on monthly income, household size, and monthly expenses, such as rent and child care. Basic Food benefits are used to purchase food items for the household, including breads, dairy products, meat, fruits, and vegetables. Unhealthy food items like soft drinks, candy, and ice cream can be purchased with Basic Food benefits as well. In FY 2012, [over 580,000 Washington households](#) were enrolled each month, receiving an average of \$241.96 to supplement their incomes and purchase food. Even with Basic Food benefits, many families find it difficult to eat a healthy diet that incorporates more fruits and vegetables. The bottom line is that healthy food is often more expensive than unhealthy food, and cost is overwhelmingly cited as a barrier to healthy eating.

VALUES STATEMENT:

Poverty, food insecurity, and poor nutrition all have serious implications on health status and outcomes. Compared to higher income children, low-income children are more likely to face food insecurity, obesity, tobacco exposure, behavioral and emotional problems, poor oral health, and asthma. Furthermore, food insecurity is particularly harmful to children as researchers have found links to birth defects, developmental risk, mental health problems, and poor educational outcomes. Low-income and food insecure families are at a higher risk for poor nutrition, which has been associated with hypertension, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and other chronic conditions. Poor nutrition also contributes to obesity, an epidemic that is both detrimental to individual health and costly to the health care system. SNAP has been shown to alleviate poverty, reduce food insecurity, and improve dietary intake. In several studies, SNAP participation has been protective against obesity, and the [Institute of Medicine supports the participation of federal nutrition programs](#) to prevent childhood obesity. SNAP presents an opportunity to promote and foster lifelong healthy eating habits.

¹ The USDA calculated prevalence of food insecurity by averaging the prevalence rates for 3 years from 2010 through 2012 for higher reliability.

² Coleman-Jensen A, Nord M, Singh A. Household Food Security in the United States in 2012, ERR-155, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, September 2013. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/1183208/err-155.pdf>. Accessed August 29, 2014.

³ The USDA considers a household to have very low food security when some household members change eating patterns or reduce food consumption because of insufficient resources.

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EXISTING EFFORTS: Initiatives are underway to encourage healthy food consumption through SNAP benefits:

- In Washington State and other areas, some SNAP participants receive a rebate for purchasing fruits and vegetables. This strategy encourages the consumption of fruits and vegetables and increases participants' purchasing power to do so.
 - In the USDA's [Healthy Incentives Pilot](#) (HIP) in Massachusetts, SNAP recipients received a \$0.30 rebate for every SNAP dollar they spent on targeted fruits and vegetables. Targeted fruits and vegetables were those without added sugars, fats, oils, or salt. Most fruits and vegetables were included and could be fresh, frozen, canned, or dried. White potatoes and canned mature legumes (e.g., red kidney beans, lentils) were excluded, among other items. The rebate was directly transferred to participants' Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card, which could be used to purchase other SNAP-eligible items. The [interim report](#) revealed that HIP participants consumed 25% more targeted fruits and vegetables than non-HIP participants. Seventy percent of HIP-participating households also reported that fruits and vegetables became more affordable due to HIP. HIP was funded by the Farm Bill and ran from November 2011 through December 2012. The final report is expected to be completed in September 2014.
 - Seattle's [Fresh Bucks](#) program, which remains active, gives shoppers extra purchasing power by matching a dollar for each SNAP dollar spent at farmers' markets, up to \$10 per participant per market per day. The public-private program began in 2012 and is funded by JPMorgan Chase and The Seattle Foundation and carried out by City of Seattle Office of Sustainability and Environment and the Neighborhood Farmers Market Alliance. Fresh Bucks now operates at all 16 Seattle farmers' markets and two farm stands. A University of Washington evaluation of Fresh Bucks found that 90% of survey respondents increased their purchases of fruits and vegetables and 95% reported that the program has affected their family's diet.
 - [Health Bucks](#) is an active New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene program where each paper Health Buck is worth \$2 and can be used at farmers' markets throughout the city. For every \$5 a customer spends using SNAP, he/she receives a Health Buck. Health Bucks can also be distributed by community organizations to incentivize participation in nutrition and health-related activities. This latter distribution method may attract first-timers to farmers' markets. An evaluation of the Health Bucks program found that farmers' markets that offered Health Bucks to SNAP participants had higher daily EBT sales than markets without Health Bucks.⁴ Additionally, Health Bucks had a 93% redemption rate in 2011, meaning that those who received them were actually using them to purchase more fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets.
- SNAP-Ed is a nutrition education program that is equally funded by the USDA and the state. Its goal is to "improve the likelihood that persons eligible for SNAP will make healthy food choices within a limited budget and choose physically active lifestyles." To request funds, states submit a

⁴ Baronberg S, Dunn L, Nonas C, Dannefer R, Sacks R. The Impact of New York City's Health Bucks Program on Electronic Benefit Transfer Spending at Farmers Markets, 2006-2009. *Prev Chronic Dis* 2013;10:130113. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd10.130113>

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State SNAP-Ed Plan, which must include [evidence-based interventions](#). In 2009, using federal SNAP-Ed funding, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the New York State Department of Health created Stellar Farmers' Markets. These farmers' markets offer onsite cooking demonstrations and nutrition education. Participants receive Health Bucks and/or free cooking equipment. In 2011, more than 1,300 nutrition workshops and cooking demonstrations were conducted at 18 markets. Of the Health Bucks distributed to workshop participants, 92% were redeemed.⁵

- The [2014 Farm Bill](#) includes a food insecurity nutrition incentive where \$100 million will be distributed over 5 years as grants to promote fruit and vegetable purchases.
- In June 2014, the [Vegetables Are Really Important Eating Tools for You \(VARIETY\) Act](#) was introduced in Congress. Modeled after the Health Incentives Pilot, the Act would amend the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 and provide all SNAP recipients a financial incentive for purchasing fruits and vegetables.

POTENTIAL PSE STRATEGIES: Opportunities may exist:

- Explore funding streams and create a rebate for each SNAP dollar spent on vegetables and fruit at farmers' markets, grocery stores, corner stores, and other food retailers, i.e., a statewide Fresh Bucks program that works beyond farmers' markets. [Potential funding pathways](#) include: local public and philanthropic funding, state funding, federal funding through the Farm Bill, funding through the health care system, and a hybrid/combination strategy.
- At the federal level:
 - Support the VARIETY Act.
 - Advocate for a prohibition on using SNAP dollars to purchase sugar-sweetened beverages and other unhealthy food items.
- At the state level:
 - Encourage or require that all farmers' market vendors and CSAs accept SNAP benefits.
 - Encourage or require that all farmers' markets include free food demonstrations, taste tests, and recipes.
 - Support and advocate for additional SNAP-Ed funds to conduct nutrition workshops and cooking demonstrations at farmers' markets.

RESOURCES:

[Hunger in Washington State](#) – Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition

[SNAP and Public Health: The Role of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Improving the Health and Well-Being of Americans](#) – Food Research and Action Center (2013)

[Policy Basics: Introduction to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#) – Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2014)

[Charting a Sustainable Course for Seattle's Fresh Bucks Program](#) – Cedar River Group (2014)

⁵ New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. New York City Health Department Farmers' Market Programs. 2012. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/cdp/farmers-market-report-11.pdf>. Accessed August 29, 2014.