

# Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Inquiry **Report on Findings & Recommendations**

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Development

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# Introduction

## Goals of the Inquiry

In early 2018, the State of Hawai'i, Department of Human Services (DHS), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Program Office asked Social Ventures, LLC and the Hawai'i Alliance for Community-Based Economic Development to conduct an inquiry into the SNAP program. The goals of the inquiry were to:

1. Help DHS staff and administrators develop a deeper understanding of the SNAP target population in Hawai'i.
2. Identify unmet needs of the SNAP target population that might inform changes to SNAP policy or practice.
3. Identify best practices ("bright spots") or areas for improvement where focused attention might yield positive results.

The Program Office expressed a special interest in developing a deeper understanding of the needs among people experiencing homelessness or housing instability, since this is a growing and hard-to-serve segment of the SNAP target population. The Program Office asked that we share findings back with SNAP staff and administrators to build knowledge and capacity.

## Our Methods

Given these objectives, we used *Appreciative Inquiry* interviews with individuals who are within SNAP's target population as our primary research method. We defined individuals as within the SNAP "target population" if they were current or recent (past 24 months) recipients of SNAP, or if they had difficulty affording food and shelter during this time.

*Appreciative Inquiry* uses anonymized, small-group or 1-on-1 interviews with open-ended questions to gather in-depth stories in a safe setting. It is particularly well-suited to developing a deep understanding of complex problems, and identifying new needs, opportunities, or best practices that may be obscured in aggregate, quantitative data. A primer on our Appreciative Inquiry approach is provided as Appendix A.

We conducted Appreciative Inquiry interviews with 240 individuals between March and December of 2018. We worked to ensure that interviews included individuals from all four Counties of the State, residents of urban and rural areas of O'ahu, and from the east and west regions of Hawai'i Island, including both housed and unhoused people. While our focus was on

the SNAP target population, we also conducted inquiry sessions with DHS staff and staff from community partner agencies, i.e., nonprofit organizations, churches, and other community groups that provide SNAP-related benefits or services.

In addition to interviews, we reviewed the research literature on SNAP policy and best practices locally and nationally and scanned secondary data sources on SNAP use, abuse, and outcomes. We also examined the available social and economic data related to conditions that directly impact the SNAP program.

Table 1: SNAP Population Appreciative Inquiry Sessions

	Honolulu County	Hawai'i County	Maui County	Kaua'i County	<b>Total</b>
Housed SNAP Pop	48	18	12	14	<b>92</b>
Unhoused SNAP Pop	54	11	7	10	<b>82</b>
<b>Total Target Pop</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>174</b>
<b>DHS and Partners</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>107</b>

*\* Numbers do not add to 240 because some individuals fit multiple categories.*

We then analyzed stories from the Inquiry sessions to identify themes and patterns, and checked these patterns against the literature and other data to generate our findings and recommendations.

## Some Caveats

The stories we gathered from the SNAP target population, DHS staff, and community partners serve to deepen understanding and identify new opportunities for action. However, they are not designed to provide a comprehensive review or evaluation of current SNAP policy, practice, or performance in Hawai'i. Additionally, readers should bear in mind that this report reflects conditions and perceptions as they existed between March and December of 2018, and that interviewees sometimes referenced experiences from before this period.

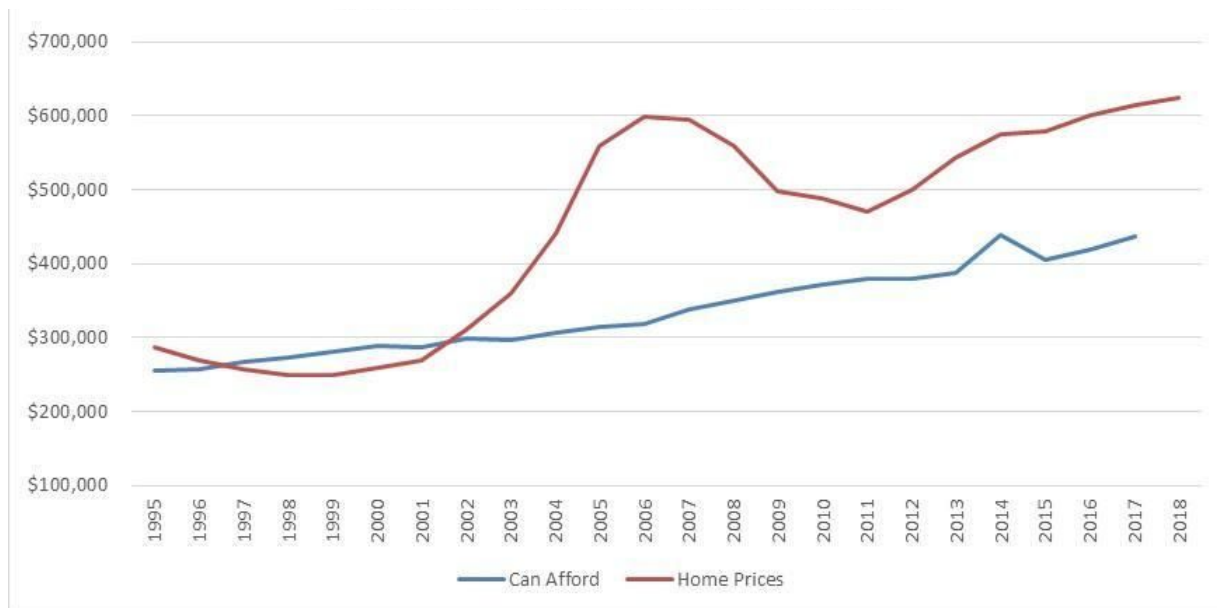
While this inquiry and its findings are not definitive, we hope they offer new insight and reveal new opportunities for action among those with a stake in SNAP – administrators, staff, partners, and clients alike. We also hope that the voices and stories of SNAP-eligible people captured here help inspire fresh compassion, commitment, and creativity among the dedicated administrators and staff of the Department of Human Services in Hawai'i.

# The Big Picture

Within the past 15 years, economic conditions in Hawai'i have changed dramatically. Many of these changes directly impact the SNAP target population and how people interact with the SNAP program.

## Since 2003, Hawai'i housing costs have moved out of reach for working families

Housing affordability and a high cost of living have been challenges in Hawai'i for decades, but historically, the State has also had relatively high incomes to match. From the 1970s to the early 2000s, working people in Hawai'i could generally afford to rent a home. This changed starting in 2004 when home prices and rents began to increase sharply, while wages grew at only a modest rate. As the chart below illustrates, the gap between home prices and what a family with two working adults could afford grew during these years, and it has persisted to the present day.<sup>1</sup> Hawai'i now has the largest gap between average pay and housing costs of any state in the nation.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> What 2 working adults can afford = 2 x Median Annual Wage in Hawai'i x 30% for housing costs / 12 months = monthly mortgage payment. Home price calculated assuming 20% down, 4.0% APR, 30 year term. Median Wages and Median Home Prices from State of Hawai'i, Dept of Business Economic Development & Tourism, Hawai'i State Data Book (Honolulu, annual).

<sup>2</sup> National Low Income Housing Coalition, Out of Reach 2018, (Washington DC, 2018).

Since, 2003-2004, households in Hawai'i have faced a different economic reality than in the past – spending more to keep a roof over their head, and having less for other living expenses, including food. And, for the past 15 years, the people of Hawai'i have been under a new level of strain, facing a real threat of homelessness that had historically been a rarity.

## **Work no longer provides self-sufficiency for half of Hawai'i's working households**

In 2017, Aloha United Way conducted a study of Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) families in Hawai'i – households that work, but do not earn enough to afford a basic "Survival Budget" including housing, child care, food, transportation, and health care. By the thriftiest official standards, including those used by federal agencies to determine eligibility, the study found that the average annual household "Survival Budget" for a Hawai'i family of four (two adults with two young children) was \$72,336, and \$28,128 for a single adult. Based on these figures, the study found that nearly half (48%) of Hawai'i households did not earn enough to cover a Survival Budget.<sup>3</sup>

## **The gap between pay and living costs may be discouraging workers**

There is some data to suggest that workers have become discouraged by the wide gap between wages and living costs. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Hawai'i consistently ranked in the top 5 states with most people working more than one job; and among the top 5 states for part-time workers actively seeking full-time employment. Our ranking in both categories fell sharply beginning in 2004. Further, the number of "Discouraged Workers" (able-bodied adults who stopped looking for work in the past year) increased by 81% between 2004 and 2017 in Hawai'i. Only two states, Georgia and South Dakota, saw larger increases during this period.<sup>4</sup>

## **Income-based eligibility for federal assistance doesn't reflect need in Hawai'i**

Eligibility for federally-funded public assistance programs, including SNAP, is typically tied to the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). While adjustments are made to reflect differences in the cost of living between states, even the adjusted FPL has historically failed to capture Hawai'i's exceptionally high cost of living. With the sharp increase in living costs since 2004, income-based eligibility standards for SNAP and other federal assistance programs are further out of step with the true level of "need" that people in Hawai'i are experiencing. The stories and testimonials of SNAP-eligible people (recounted in more detail below) highlight mounting frustration over the difference between SNAP income-eligibility standards, benefit levels, and the financial hardship experienced by low-income people across the islands. In addition to client stories, data from food pantries also suggests that people are running out of benefits

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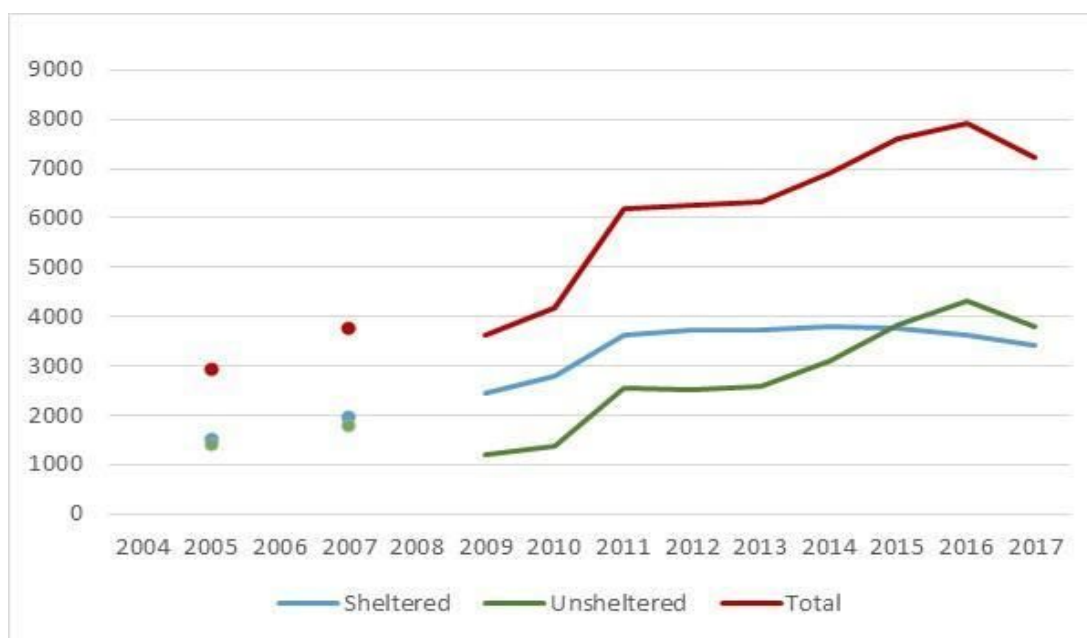
<sup>3</sup> Aloha United Way, ALICE: A Study of Financial Hardship in Hawai'i, (Honoulu, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, data on Discouraged Workers from 2004 and 2017, retrieved from [www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov), December 1, 2018.

before month's end. It is not unusual for food pantries to see a two- to three-fold increase in utilization toward the end of each month.<sup>5</sup>

## Rising homelessness and housing-instability make it harder to deliver assistance

One natural consequence of housing costs exceeding pay since 2004 is that a growing number of people are experiencing homelessness or housing instability in Hawai'i. Given limitations of the Homeless Point-In-Time Count data (PIT Count), the chart below probably does not capture the true scale of homelessness in Hawai'i, but it is somewhat useful for assessing trends. PIT Count data shows that homelessness has risen sharply within the past 15 years, nearly doubling since 2007. PIT Count data also provides some basis for inter-state comparisons and Hawai'i has had the highest rate of homelessness of any state in the nation for several years running.<sup>6</sup>



The rise in homelessness and housing instability makes it hard to deliver social services and public assistance, including SNAP. The lack of a consistent mailing address, phone number, and secure place to store vital records needed to establish and maintain eligibility are among the challenges affecting SNAP clients today. These factors contribute to high rates of “churn” in public assistance – people losing, and having to repeatedly re-establish, their eligibility. More SNAP-specific challenges created by housing instability surfaced in client stories, and are described more fully in other sections of this report.

In summary, changes in Hawai'i's economy and housing market within the past 15 years have had meaningful impacts on the SNAP target population and how they interact with the SNAP

<sup>5</sup> Multiple interviews with food pantry operators on Kaua'i, Maui, Hawai'i Island, and O'ahu.

<sup>6</sup> Bridging the Gap and Partners in Care, State of Hawai'i Homeless Point in Time Count, (Honolulu, multiple years).



program. An emerging gap between pay and housing costs; the failure of work to provide self-sufficiency for many; and the rising number of people experiencing homelessness or housing-instability – all mean that the needs of the SNAP target group are different today than they were in the early 2000s. Like most social assistance programs, SNAP is designed to be a safety net for those unable to work, and as temporary assistance for able-bodied people to “get back on their feet.” But the new economic reality in Hawai‘i means that, even for working people, financial distress is an enduring fact of life, and getting “back on one’s feet” can be a lengthy journey without a fixed destination. That new reality is the backdrop for the gratitude and frustration, the struggles and determination we found in the stories of those served by SNAP in Hawai‘i.

# SNAP Target Population Profile

This section presents broad, descriptive themes about the SNAP target population, derived from Appreciative Inquiry sessions. The themes presented here do not lend themselves to specific action steps in the SNAP program, but do help paint a useful portrait of the SNAP target population in Hawai'i today. Themes that relate to specific action steps are covered in subsequent sections of this report.

## **People in the SNAP target population are determined, but struggling**

The people we interviewed had full lives. They were often juggling jobs; crowded homes with families doubled-up to afford rent; and the responsibility of caring for children, or disabled relatives. Among those we spoke to who were not currently working, many volunteered if they were able – for churches and schools, nonprofit and community organizations. Most were barely making ends meet each month, even with public assistance. As one person observed, “people in Hawai'i are operating on razor thin margins.”

Most had first applied for SNAP due to an illness or injury that left them unable to work, the death of their parent or partner, or the birth of children that required their care. In some cases, SNAP was only needed as a temporary support, but often, longer-term needs emerged, such as when a back injury had lasting effects, when a divorce led to depression, when an illness turned out to be something chronic or terminal, when a single job was simply not enough to pay the bills, or when pain medication led to addiction. Many interviewees were also caring for an ailing parent or partner, or for a child with special needs.

## **People on SNAP are working or have worked most of their lives**

National data shows that a majority of SNAP households in Hawai'i work, and at a higher rate than in other states.<sup>7</sup> Nearly everyone we spoke to talked about work and jobs, past and present. Many shared how they had worked 2 or 3 jobs at a time their whole lives, starting in their teenage years. Some dropped out of school to support their family, a fact that limited job their options and earning power later on. They'd worked in retail stores and on ranches, held jobs in construction and sales, served as environmental scientists and medical technicians. Many were currently or formerly employed in social services. Indeed one-third of the nonprofit Community Partner staff we interviewed were good candidates for SNAP assistance, as were several SNAP staff.

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<sup>7</sup> Center for Budget & Policy Priorities, Hawai'i SNAP Fact Sheet, (Washington DC, March, 2018).

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*Community Voice: “I’m a hard worker. I’ve worked since I was 14.”*

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*Mina has received SNAP or other financial assistance off-and-on for about 20 years—beginning when her husband died of cancer, and she became a single parent of two young children. When her kids were old enough, she went back to work, and was surprised to find that she was disqualified from SNAP because her earned income was just a few pennies over the eligibility limit. “It was discouraging” she reflected.*

*“I’m a hard worker. I’ve worked since I was 14.” At one point, Mina was working simultaneously for a social service agency, driving for Uber, and running newspaper delivery routes. She currently works at a kupuna project, sells Melaleuca products, and substitute teaches at the local elementary school. “I usually work three jobs at a time,” she says, “and it’s still hard to pay the bills.” She recently went back to school to get an Associate’s degree through the HINET program. She’s hoping education will help turn things around for her. She also began training to work for Primerica.*

*Mina tells her kids she doesn’t want to take public assistance. Her goal, she says, is to one day be in a position where she can help others. She likes helping others, which is why she volunteers at Family Promise on top of the multiple jobs she works. Her dream is to one day educate people about managing their finances—particularly youth. She has talked with After School All Stars about starting a financial education class, and she is working with a friend to put together a basic money management curriculum.<sup>8</sup>*

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## **Feelings of guilt, shame, and fear of stigma are common among SNAP recipients**

SNAP eligible people, SNAP staff, and staff at partner agencies all commented that shame remains a significant barrier to SNAP utilization. Sentiments expressed by clients included: “other people need it more than me,” “I resisted for a long time,” “I eventually took it to help the family,” and, “It took awhile for me to accept I needed help.” Other comments were: “I don’t want to be a face of hunger.” “I don’t want to be labeled.” Or “I feel looked down on” for taking SNAP. These kinds of comments came from people of all ages, ethnicities, and regions of Hawai‘i.<sup>9</sup> Several people we spoke to were experiencing food insecurity (e.g., depending on food pantries to eat), but still did not feel they should apply for SNAP. One factor that sometimes mitigated shame was if a person’s family had received SNAP when they were children.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview 119-06-13-2018-OR-HE.

<sup>9</sup> Interviews 107-10-19-2018-MA-UE; 083-12-12-2018-KA-UE; 090-10-26-2018-MA-HE; 166-10-08-2018-OR-HE; 167-10-08-2018-OR-UE.

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*Street Perspective: “I’m choosing it...it’s no one’s fault but my own.”*

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*Many people feel undeserving of SNAP because they are “choosing” homelessness. But, digging deeper into their stories often reveals how economic and systemic factors play a role in “choice.”*

*Jay is 32 years old, born and raised in Liliha, and has been on the street for a little more than a year. We met him in Old Stadium Park in Honolulu. When asked how he became homeless, he said, “I’m choosing it.” Addiction ran in his family. “I grew up around drugs and alcohol” but he’s quick to add: “I had a good childhood, and a good family. I’m out here because of me – it’s no one’s fault but my own.”*

*By the time he was 14, Jay was using drugs. In his 20s, he spent years in prison for possession. When he got out, he decided to get clean. A court-ordered treatment program helped him get there, but staying clean was a challenge. The hardest part, Jay says, was “I had to cut off all my old friends, and my family” because many of them were still using. “It was the loneliest time of my life.”*

*Still, he pushed through. He rented his own place – a studio for \$1,000 a month, and felt “lucky to even get that” given a poor credit history and criminal record. He worked two jobs, one in a restaurant, and another in a repair shop. “I was clean and sober for 5 years. I was working round the clock, 7 days a week. Come home, eat, sleep, repeat the next day. I had no life. Just one friend who was helping me stay clean.” When that friend died suddenly of a heart attack, “I asked myself: Why am I doing this? I got no joy, nothing to look forward to. What kind of life is this?” He reconnected with his old friends and relapsed shortly after. “That’s how I ended up out here,” he said.*

*He has never applied for SNAP because he feels he is choosing to be homeless and therefore should not be taking government assistance.*

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*Community Voice: To struggle is a blessing*

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*When **Bea** married, she and her husband struggled for a while, but did not apply for food stamps even if they knew they were eligible. They always felt they should do whatever they could to be self-sufficient. Even today, she thinks they would qualify because they’re both senior citizens, and her husband is increasingly debilitated by Alzheimer’s. She is able to manage, however, by attending the Food Bank days in Kalihi. She has been coming to the food bank for about 3 years.*

*The Food Bank is also important to Bea because she has found community there. A group of Chinese immigrant women have welcomed her into their circle despite*

*language barriers. They bring her extra food, and worry about her if she doesn't show up on a regular distribution day. Bea feels blessed for the struggles she has had to face in life because these struggles are what has made her able to communicate and empathize with others who struggle. She understands their needs and tries to be helpful as she can.*<sup>10</sup>

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## **Affordable housing makes a world of difference for the SNAP population**

“Thin margins” mean that an accident or illness, a divorce or family dispute, an addiction or run-in with the law – any interruption in income or spike in expenses can lead to financial crisis and eviction. Today’s highly competitive housing market requires renters to have first and last month’s rent, additional security deposits, rental application fees, a strong credit history, and references from past landlords. Once evicted or displaced, these requirements can make it very difficult to secure housing again. Those in the SNAP target population with secure housing – through public housing, a voucher, or a family member with a home large enough to accommodate them – still struggle, but have an important safety net, and a wider margin for error.<sup>11</sup>

## **Houseless<sup>12</sup> people are falling through the bottom of the safety net**

Houseless individuals often face multiple challenges stemming from family instability, physical or emotional trauma, mental illness, substance abuse, and job instability. Any one of these conditions might come first and lead to the others. Most were working odd jobs, and a few were able to sustain steady employment even while living out of a tent, car, or shelter. Most are likely eligible for SNAP, but many don’t have it because they cannot maintain eligibility due to lack of a consistent mailing address and phone number (more on this below). Time limits in shelters and transitional housing, rules that lead to eviction from emergency or temporary housing, and sweeps on the streets create constant instability in their lives. The lack of a refrigerator, pantry, or stove means that they cannot buy fresh produce and cannot buy in bulk, yet rules also prevent them from buying hot, prepared foods. “I wish we could buy hot food” was typically on the SNAP wish-list for those experiencing homelessness. One interviewee noted: “We could save money, make the money last longer if we can buy more things in bulk. Wouldn’t that be good for the EBT program too?”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Interview 210-07-12-2018-OU-HE.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews 230-08-09-2018-OU-NA; 055-05-11-2018-KA-HE.

<sup>12</sup> We use the term “houseless” to describe people experiencing homelessness throughout this report because it was the preferred term of many unhoused people we spoke to. Many felt that Hawai’i was their home, but that they could not afford a house, making them houseless, not homeless.

<sup>13</sup> Interviews 221-05-16-2018-OU-UE; 136-05-18-2018-OR-UE.

## Gratitude, dignity, and a desire to help others

Nearly every person we spoke to expressed deep gratitude for SNAP. Even those who had complaints about the program said things like, “I am so grateful for SNAP,” “Thank God it [SNAP] exists,” and, “I couldn’t survive without it.”<sup>14</sup> Along with expressions of gratitude, there were two other common sentiments from interviewees: One was a desire for dignity, to be “treated like a human being,” and to “not be looked down on.” The other was a widespread desire “to help others.”

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*Community Voice: “It’s the only way...giving each other a hand up.”*

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*Shane grew up with SNAP benefits. When he was young, it was a reward to get to use his mother’s card. She would tell him her pin number, and also tell him how much he could spend, then he would go on his own to the store. Shane recently applied for his own SNAP benefits through his caseworker at a community nonprofit agency. The caseworker said his application had been submitted and approved, but the Processing Center said his application had never been received. He plans to reapply.*

*Shane has been houseless since the 11th grade. He stopped going to school when his mother hurt her back and couldn’t work. He got a job at Little Caesar’s to help pay the rent. He eventually moved up to a manager position. When his mom got better, she moved in with a friend. Shane decided to live on his own because of tensions at home, but couldn’t keep up with rent, and eventually ended up houseless for a year. He continued to work at a nearby restaurant while he was houseless. He appreciated working there because he could eat, but the pay wasn’t enough to get him housed.*

*He moved into a shelter recently and has been going to the Youth Build program where he makes \$100/week. He spends much of it on food, but still tries to save a little. He’s hoping SNAP benefits will help him with being able to save some more. He is also going to work on getting his GED. Shane has always wanted to work towards being self-sufficient. He likes working. He wants to make enough money to lift himself out of poverty so he can give a hand up to other people like him. “It’s the only way – the only way people’s lives will get better – people giving each other a hand up.”<sup>15</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> Interviews 020-08-15-2018-HE-UE; 222-05-15-2018-OU-UE.

<sup>15</sup> Interview 152-07-11-2018-OR-UE.

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*Community Voice: “Why share? Because everybody gotta eat.”*

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*Prior to moving into the youth shelter a month ago, **Kanno** was houseless for 2 years – from when he was 16 years old. He left home because of “family conflicts” and had lived in various places in Windward O’ahu.*

*He applied for SNAP benefits for the first time about 5 months ago. He didn’t know much about the program until a houseless friend took him to the office to apply. When Kanno got his EBT card, he was surprised that he qualified for \$350/month. He mainly purchased his food from 7-Elevens because they were nearby, open 24 hours, and had a microwave he could use to heat up food.*

*The monthly amount was enough to support Kama, and he used the rest to buy food to share with others because, “everybody gotta eat.” In particular, Kanno supported “two old guys” who were having a hard time. He’s been watching over them off and on from when he was 16 years old. One of them stayed in a meadow, “He just slept outside because he didn’t have a tent or anything.” The other was a Vietnam vet who had “seen some crazy sh\*t”. When Kanno first met him, the vet had lost his job as nighttime security because he’d gotten a leg infection that was “oozing stuff” and could barely walk. He was “an insomniac who never knew what time it was, where he was, what he was doing/was supposed to be doing.” Kanno felt badly for him because “there are all kinds of help vets can get,” but he wasn’t in shape to seek any of it. When Kanno got his SNAP benefits, he made sure his “old guy” friends were fed every day, and he often just bought a bunch of food and passed it out to people who were houseless too.*

*Kanno had his EBT card for 3 months before it was stolen. One night when he returned to his tent, his wallet was missing. A few days later, the wallet was returned with everything in it except his EBT card. Now that he has his ID back, Kanno plans to reapply. When he gets SNAP benefits again, he plans to buy a bunch of food, mark what he wants for himself, and share the rest with others at the shelter.<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>16</sup> Interview 156-07-11-2018-OR-UE.

# SNAP Needs & Opportunities

The stories of SNAP clients and SNAP eligible people identified several needs and opportunities for improvement related to the program, as well as best-practices and “bright spots” to build upon.

## High levels of frustration over income eligibility and “cliff” effects

Hawai‘i’s “thin margin” economy makes benefit reductions more painful, and benefits elimination more costly for local families than in other states. The top frustration expressed among members of the SNAP target population was that eligibility standards did not seem appropriate given Hawai‘i’s cost of living. Representative comments included, “Where do they get these income numbers from?” “Doesn’t seem fair” “The people who need it can’t get it.”

A lack of clarity about the process and rules used to determine eligibility compounded frustrations. Many wanted to understand the formulas used and which rules were set by staff, the State, or the federal government. Comments included: “How do they calculate your expenses?” “That’s some weird math.” and “I wish they would make it black and white.”<sup>17</sup>

Interviewees were especially frustrated by cases where an increase in income (from a new job, a pay raise, or new kind of assistance) triggered a sudden loss of benefits, resulting in a net loss for the family – known as the “cliff effect” common to means-tested assistance programs. For clients, experiencing a net loss due to income gains was, “penalizing you for making progress,” as one interviewee put it.

Many shared stories of how added income triggered the loss of multiple benefits at once, and how the loss came with no warning (see the client story below for an illustrative example). “How are you supposed to get ahead?” was a widely held question, as were calls for greater clarity and transparency. Interviewees wanted information on how different benefits programs interact, and how each might be affected by a changes in income or expenses.

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*Community Voice: “I thought about quitting my job, but I don’t want my kids to think that’s what they should do with their future.”*

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*Cassie works 40 hours per week at a local clinic, managing a team of seven people. She first applied for SNAP in 2002 as a single mother of 4 kids. She got married in the summer of 2018. “Getting married changed my household income and cut me off of*

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<sup>17</sup> Quotes in this and the prior paragraph from Interviews 026-08-15-2018-HE-NA; 020-08-15-2018-HE-UE; 107-10-19-2018-MA-UE; 250-03-19-19-HW-HE.



*SNAP. We have a combined income of \$60,000 between my husband and I. The system says we're now making enough to survive, but it sure doesn't feel like it. Being cut off SNAP really took a toll on us. When it was just me and the kids we were getting \$800 per month, now it's zero. My housing assistance got cut at the same time, so my rent went from \$400 to \$1280."*

*"The massive drop-off doesn't make sense to me. The only way to succeed seems to either be very low income and qualify for help, or hold 4 jobs just to barely stay afloat. Having everything cut off or reduced at the same time because we got married has been really hard. Housing was the big one, but also kids can no longer get free lunch. We are told "if you receive Food Stamps your children automatically qualify," so now that they don't we may not. Also, you don't get a free bus pass if you are not on SNAP. And on the A Plus (after school care) application it asks, "Do you receive SNAP?" and if so, you are automatically enrolled. That's \$150 times two kids. Not sure if we still qualify. If we do, maybe change the application to be clearer that you may still qualify."*

*"I always told myself, I want to keep moving forward, I don't want to rely on any kind of government assistance. I hate when my kids see us struggling; when they ask, "Why we gotta eat saimin again?" I thought about quitting my job to keep the [SNAP] benefits, but I don't want my kids to think that's what they should do with their future. I want to be a good example for them. And I want to move forward; I don't want to go backward. My husband and I actually talked that maybe we shouldn't get married because financially we would be worse off, but we prayed on it and we decided we would be stronger together. I'm applying for a second job on Friday. We're just trying to keep moving forward."<sup>18</sup>*

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## **High rates of “churn” among houseless people eligible for SNAP**

SNAP is a critical support for people experiencing homelessness, and vital to any attempt at forward progress in their lives. Yet, as noted above, the lack of a consistent mailing address causes houseless individuals to frequently lose their benefits. The problem has been especially acute among unsheltered people in urban Honolulu since 2017, when the contract for Care-A-Van shifted from Waikiki Health Center to the Institute for Human Services (IHS) and mobile mail service was discontinued. Neighbor island service providers receive mail for clients, but transportation tends to be a limiting factor. The high rate of churn burdens SNAP staff with continual re-certification of houseless clients. “Isn’t there a way to provide them with a mailing address?” was frequently asked by Processing Center staff.

Houseless members of the SNAP population also lack a place to secure vital records (paystubs, ID, social security cards, benefit documents) needed for SNAP certification. Records are often

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<sup>18</sup> Interview 022-09-19-2018-HE-HE.

misplaced, stolen, or lost in “sweeps” (on O’ahu), compounding the frustration of both clients and DHS staff.

The ability to conduct eligibility interviews by phone was praised widely by SNAP interviewees, but this option is generally unavailable to houseless people. The federal Lifeline Program offers free phones to very low-income individuals, but the Program recently changed its rules to require a verified address, disqualifying those without stable housing. Even with a phone, houseless people can only afford to pay for minutes periodically and their phone numbers change repeatedly making scheduling a phone interview difficult.<sup>19</sup>

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*Street Perspective: “You’re in a situation where you lose your personal items all the time...Case workers aren’t biased, but they don’t understand.”*

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*Steve: “I was on SNAP for just a couple of months and then lost my card. When I tried to reapply, something wasn’t right. I was 86’d by the social worker. I tried several times to reapply after so many months went by, but it’s hard if you lose your ID or your phone. [C]ase workers aren’t biased but they don’t understand. The rules is rules – I get that. You need that kind of discipline--make it not personal, keep it consistent, clear and fair. But that’s hard if you’re in a situation where you lose your personal items all the time. That’s why most people on the street don’t have SNAP.”<sup>20</sup>*

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## **Further simplifying the application and re-certification process**

Business Process Reengineering within the SNAP program has reduced processing times for applications, a change that received high praise from SNAP recipients. SNAP clients particularly appreciated same-day issuance of EBT cards, reduced wait times at Processing Centers, and the ability to conduct eligibility and re-certification interviews by phone.

At the same time, interviewees pointed to areas where application and re-certification could still be improved. Several noted that the application still seemed lengthy and confusing in places, in part because the application form contains questions for multiple programs, only some of which apply to SNAP. For example, questions about assets are part of the application although SNAP no longer uses asset limits in determining eligibility.

Clients, community partners, and SNAP staff said that an online application that automatically tailored questions just for the program(s) a person was applying for would be a big help. They also felt the system should allow clients to submit forms and documentation online, and that if vital records like ID were already on file with one program, any program should be able to access them, without applicants having to resubmit for each program. Finally, SNAP staff

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<sup>19</sup> Comments about homeless/houseless “churn” from interviews 221-05-16-2018-OU-UE; 011-06-20-2018-HE-NA; 020-08-15-2018-HE-UE; 107-10-19-2018-MA-UE; 214-05-16-2018-OU-HE and others.

<sup>20</sup> Interview 221-05-16-2018-OU-UE.

suggested that SNAP operate “more like Med-Quest” where, if a client’s circumstances haven’t changed, old materials do not need to be resubmitted for recertification.

## **New processing efficiency is appreciated, but new concerns over accountability**

While interviewees appreciated the ease and efficiency resulting from Business Process Reengineering (BPR), they noted that one trade-off was less accountability for particular cases. Under the old case-manager system it was clear who was responsible for an application at each stage, and who to call if questions arose. But under the new team system, it was sometimes impossible to know where or with whom an application had stalled.

Several clients spoke of applications or supporting documents mailed well ahead of deadlines, but later reported by a Processing Center as not received. Given past experiences, some clients refused to conduct business with SNAP by phone or mail, preferring to visit Processing Centers in-person to ensure documents are properly filed, even if it meant they had to take-off from work. A few clients claimed they submitted forms in-person, but were later told they were missing. One client recalled: “I got a letter that said I had 10 days to turn in my social security card. I came in in-person the next day and turned it in, but the next month, I didn’t get my benefits. Somehow my social security card wasn’t on. Other states I’ve lived have date/time stamp your document so you have proof. But when I dropped off my social security card, I didn’t get one.”<sup>21</sup>

Community Partner agencies noted that sometimes an application can fall through the cracks. In the words of one Partner Agency staff: “BPR has had positive impact on timeliness, but...it’s harder to track cases that are lost. If someone submits an application, it goes to an intake team, then can go to pending or processing, like an assembly line. There’s some times when an app falls into black holes between parts of assembly line, like the intake team has passed it on, but the processing person may disagree that it should move forward. A client can’t pin down where it is in the process. We hear from clients, “I don’t know what’s happening with my case.” It’s gotten better, but still happens sometimes.”<sup>22</sup>

SNAP staff also echoed calls for greater individual accountability: “To me it’s about work ethic. You used to be held accountable. But now no one knows. You no come, that’s okay because the next person will do it. In our office it’s not a problem, but if another office is having problems, we have to support them...They’re all in our section, so we have to help keep all our numbers up.”<sup>23</sup> Another SNAP staff shared, “You have to literally be date stamped and get a copy because things get lost...there’s no accountability.”<sup>24</sup> And finally, “Efficiency—for us timeliness is up (improved), but back-end follow up is missing.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Interview 252-08-21-2018-OU-HE.

<sup>22</sup> Interview 205-06-21-2018-OU-NA.

<sup>23</sup> Interview 202-10-09-2018-OU-NA.

<sup>24</sup> Interview 247-08-21-2018-OU-HE.

<sup>25</sup> Interview 185-08-29-2018-OR-NA.

## **Rules are applied differently between different staff and offices**

Interviewees observed that different staff sometimes had different interpretations and different applications of the same rule. For example, some houseless applicants were told that if a shelter where they were staying provided any regular meals, they could not qualify. Another was told that if the shelter served only one meal a day, they could qualify while staying there.<sup>26</sup>

An outreach worker offered another example: “Each unit is supposed to accept all applications as submitted, then they’re supposed to be routed via DHS courier to the appropriate PC based on census tract. Some units take it upon themselves to tell people to go to another PC to submit, and that is not correct.”<sup>27</sup> Staff at a different community agency had similar experiences: “What happens often depends on the office and even the caseworker you talk to. Some will require that you return to your original office, and others will figure out how to get the individual a new EBT card without returning to the original office.”<sup>28</sup>

A staff at a community agency summarized the need this way: “Consistency of info would be a big improvement. Maybe take a deep dive and look at how info is relayed to units and distributed to the front line. If you’re confused internally, you will really confuse clients on the outside. It makes the end user experience impossible. You at least have to get all your workers singing to the same tune on rules and how they treat clients.”<sup>29</sup> SNAP staff shared similar desire for communication and uniformity: “There needs to be better communication between program and branch” and, “It’s hard on staff to see conflict between administrators.”<sup>30</sup>

## **Overall positive, but wide variation in customer service experiences**

Most current or former SNAP applicants described SNAP staff as efficient, professional, “doing their job,” and “business-like, but not unfriendly.” Among those who described experiences in greater detail, positive descriptions of their encounters outnumbered negative ones by a wide margin. Accounts of interactions with staff included phrases such as: “nice and helpful,” “formal, but good,” and, “showed they were concerned and they cared.” One client, who became a single father of 3 children when his wife left him recounted: “The folks at the A`ala office really helped me to get my benefits started and gave me resources. They bent over backwards to help me.” Positive views of customer service were held by a majority of the SNAP population interviewed overall. However, houseless members of the SNAP population had more negative experiences than positive ones.

SNAP clients expressed two primary service-related concerns. One was that responsiveness varied widely from center to center. Some centers were known for responding to inquiries in a

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<sup>26</sup> Interviews 153-07-11-2018-OR-UE and 147-06-28-2018-OR-NA.

<sup>27</sup> Interview 205-06-21-2018-OU-NA.

<sup>28</sup> Interview 040-08-13-2018-HW-HE.

<sup>29</sup> Interview 205-06-21-2018-OU-NA.

<sup>30</sup> Interview 253-07-09-2018-OU-NA.

timely and helpful manner, while others were known to give people “the runaround.” Some centers were known for answering their phones and returning messages, while others were described as “completely unresponsive” to phone calls and messages. This characterization of different centers was also affirmed by interviews with SNAP staff.

A second major concern was about being treated with suspicion by staff. Many clients already feel ashamed and self-conscious applying for SNAP, and are sensitive to questioning that seems to go beyond what is required. One client was questioned over whether the shelter where he stayed actually existed. It was a relatively new shelter that the staff was unfamiliar with, and the staff’s questioning about it flustered the applicant, who was already nervous. The questioning made the client feel “presumed guilty” of trying to cheat the system.<sup>31</sup> Some eligibility questions are personal, and the way they are asked can communicate either suspicion or professional necessity. “They ask for personal information, like what’s the value of my family house that I own a part of? Do I have a mental illness? The way they asked made me feel like...none of their business. I told them they can keep their benefits.”<sup>32</sup>

Client stories and staff interviews revealed there were also different approaches to verifying information for eligibility among staff. During the application interview process, some staff clearly communicated that lying on an application was a crime that would be investigated, and then took statements at face value, looking only for inconsistencies in answers and supporting documents. Others tried to verify answers on their own, questioning people about applications answers that “don’t seem right,” and going so far as reviewing the social media pages of applicants to see if they were truly “single” parents.<sup>33</sup>

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### *Community Voices: glimpses into the customer perspective*

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**Trina:** “You learn to take off your jewelry before going to the office to apply. Even if the jewelry may be something that was a family heirloom passed down to you--not bought, you might still feel like you should take it off because you know what they will assume.”<sup>34</sup>

**Desiree** had recently left her abusive boyfriend when we interviewed her. She had visited the area Processing Center and asked to have her benefits recalculated based on her separation and sent to her at a different address. Staff told her that the benefits would continue to be sent to her old (boyfriend’s) address until the separation could be verified.<sup>35</sup>

**Tiana:** “Some workers are more helpful than others. Clients also know who is more likely to share good information on resources and will help you get the benefits. If I

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<sup>31</sup> Interview 153-07-11-2018-OU-UE.

<sup>32</sup> Interview 146-05-18-2018-OR-UE.

<sup>33</sup> Interview 173-09-17-2018-OR-NA.

<sup>34</sup> Interview 136-05-18-2018-MA-UE.

<sup>35</sup> Interview 137-05-13-2018-OR-UE.

*show up and I get assigned to a worker who from experience isn't respectful, I just leave, come back another day until I get someone I know is good.*"<sup>36</sup>

**Outreach Worker:** *"If only they could all be how they were when they started the job. Because I think that really plays into whether people apply or not. It gets out quickly that "This worker was bad, don't apply." And then they won't. Interaction with a person is a small snapshot of time that could affect a whole generation of people. In that moment of time, they need the help.*"<sup>37</sup>

**Aurora:** *"You know, it must be hard for them too because they must hear the same problems and stories over and over again. I used to work as a CNA and also for TSA, and after a while, you start profiling people, and you judge them by this impression. That's natural and understandable.*"<sup>38</sup>

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## **Lack of mobility is a major barrier for kupuna, disabled, and houseless**

Transportation and mobility are barriers to several SNAP sub-populations including kupuna, the disabled, and unhoused or unstably-housed. Transportation issues are especially acute on neighbor islands. Visiting a Processing Center may require a commute of 90 minutes or more. Lack of transportation options and the distance to SNAP offices were cited repeatedly by interviewees on neighbor islands, especially by clients or applicants who were employed and had to get to the office before or after work but before the SNAP office closed. In West Hawai'i, the problem has been particularly severe since the closure of the Kona Processing Center office.

Improvements to technology will help address some with mobility issues, but not all. One Community Partner note: "We provide a lot of help to immobile or mobility-limited elderly and disabled. They do not have a lot of access to info, and are not very good with using computers or even phone. And they can't get to the Processing Center." Similarly, houseless people lacking regular access to computers or smartphones, may not benefit from technological solutions.

Even in urban O'ahu, where Processing Centers are relatively nearby (compared to neighbor islands) mobility can be an issue for different reasons. Homeless "sweeps" break up camps and disperse people, separating friends, and pushing them to more remote areas or into a new mix of people. Without trusted friends next door, people are reluctant to leave their tent for visits to Processing Centers. As one interviewee put it: "If you don't trust the people around you, you can't leave tent for half the day. That's why most people on the street don't have SNAP."

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<sup>36</sup> Interview 159-07-11-2018-OR-UE.

<sup>37</sup> Interview 205-06-21-2018-OU-NA.

<sup>38</sup> Interview 214-05-16-2018-OU-HE.

One outreach worker suggested: “What would make most sense is to have a caseworker designated to do onsite outreach once in a while--go to where houseless people live and provide them with direct service there. Or even have a caseworker who can provide SNAP EBT benefit services at service fairs. Something like this would go a long way in getting SNAP benefits to houseless people who need this support.”

## **Concerns over fraud and abuse among SNAP clients**

Data on SNAP fraud has serious limitations because different states approach investigation differently, making it hard to compare numbers. In general though, the number of proven fraud claims represents a very small percentage of SNAP cases – less than 1% of program participants across the country. This is true in Hawai‘i as well, and the rate of fraud cases in Hawai‘i has also declined since 2004.<sup>39</sup>

But numbers aside, fraud and abuse were frequently mentioned as a concern by members of the SNAP population, and many referenced examples of people they felt were abusing the program, taking resources from those who truly needed it. One client’s “one suggestion” for the SNAP program was representative of several we heard: “Find a way to verify the identity of the person who is using an EBT card. Can they, for example, have the photo of the person on the card?” She thought a large number of people in Wahiawa were selling their cards to support a drug habit, and felt “sick about how the government is unknowingly supporting addiction in the community, when there are so many people who could genuinely use funds to feed themselves and their children.”<sup>40</sup>

Clients also pointed out how abuse by some was discouraging for the many who were “truly in need” and “really trying.” A neighbor island client described her feelings: “They are not very good at researching who is lying to them.” she said. “So many people hiding. I know a lady here getting \$1,000 a month in SNAP. She has 2 brand new cars, new TVs. It would be nice to not have people cheating, when you are trying. It does make you feel bad.”<sup>41</sup> Several clients were in favor of drug testing as part of SNAP eligibility determination.<sup>42</sup>

Interviews with staff of SNAP and community Partner Agencies surfaced similar concerns, but with less frequency. SNAP staff on Kaua‘i and Maui worried about people coming from the mainland and immediately applying for assistance. “We enable by letting them fill out an application straight off the plane. They are struggling to be here, but they still want to stay. Maybe we need a 6 month minimum or something...I wish there was the residency requirement.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> USDA Food & Nutrition Service, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, State Activity Report (Washington DC, annual).

<sup>40</sup> Interview 168-10-08-2018-OR-UE.

<sup>41</sup> Interview 025-09-13-2018-HE-HE.

<sup>42</sup> Interviews 146-05-18-2018-OR-UE; 168-10-08-2018-OR-UE; 025-09-13-2018-HE-HE.

<sup>43</sup> Interviews 056-05-11-2018-KA-NA; 057-05-11-2018-KA-NA; 102-05-10-2018-MA-NA.

Staff at a food pantry reported, “I’ve seen women pull up in their Toyota Tundra, nails done, etc., and say they need food for their babies. And then there are those who are in tears, working up the courage to come through the door; families with full time jobs and they cannot make it.” A youth outreach worker shared that she “knows of grandparents who will take a McDonald’s meal once a week to their grandchildren who are living in the park and feel as if that counts for feeding them and justifies their use of the SNAP benefits for their own needs.” Some partner agency staff wrestled with the question of how to help without “enabling.”<sup>44</sup>

## **A desire for flexibility in work requirements under certain circumstances**

While SNAP clients were in favor of being tough on fraud, they pointed to the need for greater flexibility in work requirements under certain circumstances. “There should be some exceptions for people who are taking care of family or others instead of working. If people can't do that, then often it means other family members can't work, or the government ends up paying for taking care.”<sup>45</sup> Broader exceptions for family leave were also of interest. One interviewee had requested time off from her job because her hanai mother needed her support after a death in the family. Her employer had refused and she was forced to quit, and was sanctioned by SNAP as a result.<sup>46</sup>

Students experiencing food insecurity were another proposed exception. “It’s not possible for me to find a job that offers 20 hours a week. Even if I could, working 80 hours a month would make it hard to keep up with school” said one college student who had recently “dumpster dove” for food.<sup>47</sup> One SNAP staff affirmed this view: “Students can’t get food stamps because they’re working just 19 hours a week, and it’s not their fault. Employers purposely limit hours to exactly 19 hours because at 20 hours they need to provide medical. BYUH and WCC only give student employees 19 hours. Scholarship kids need to keep their grades up and yet they have to work 2 jobs to get foodstamp assistance. Not fair. Not giving people who are trying to raise themselves that needed support.”<sup>48</sup>

Finally, clients had questions about what counted as work and how employers or organizations were certified by SNAP. A leader of the houseless village at the Waianae Boat Harbor noted: “We require hours of community service every month for our residents. That can be cutting grass in the park, cleaning the public bathrooms, or going out and feeding other houseless camps. We also have an employment program where people from our village do yard work for people. Can those hours count for SNAP?”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Interview 147-06-28-2018-OR-NA.

<sup>45</sup> Interview 241-06-29-2018-OU-HE.

<sup>46</sup> Interview 145-05-18-2018-OR-UE.

<sup>47</sup> Interview 254-10-01-2018-OU-UE.

<sup>48</sup> Interview 178-08-29-2018-OR-NA.

<sup>49</sup> Interview 146-05-18-2018-OR-UE.



# Momentum & Bright Spots

Opportunities for action are best identified and prioritized with both needs and assets in mind. In this section, we highlight some of the “bright spot” best practices and areas of energy revealed by Appreciative Inquiry sessions, that might be used to address the needs and opportunities described in the previous section.

## **Trust and good will toward SNAP are on the rise among clients.**

As noted above, improvements in processing time and efficiency were widely praised by SNAP participants. Indeed, we did not hear a single complaint related to the length of time required to process applications. While frustrations with the program naturally occur, and opportunities for improvement still exist, trust in the program is growing following recent changes. For example, while a few skeptics remain, most SNAP clients we spoke to had embraced phone interviews and recognized the benefits of this option. Growing confidence in the SNAP program presents a window of opportunity to engage the SNAP target population in efforts to improve and expand program effectiveness. Some specific suggestions are outlined in our recommendations, below.<sup>50</sup>

## **There is staff interest and capacity for meaningful connection with clients.**

BPR has produced many efficiency-related benefits and has lessened some of the burden on staff. Prior to BPR several staff said they felt as though they “couldn’t take vacation” because, “if we were out, and one of our cases was in crisis, there was no one else who to serve them.”<sup>51</sup> Moving away from case management has relieved staff from what were often overwhelming caseloads and the emotional pressure of being the sole contact for so many people in need.

However, moving to a team-based, “assembly line” approach has also depersonalized service, and left many staff longing for a deeper connection with clients. Several SNAP staff expressed a sense of loss and a desire to put the “human” back into human services: “Between a client and staff member, there used to be a rapport,” said one staff. “Now because we’re considered line workers, the human effect is taken away...No human characteristic, no personal relationship.” Another lamented, “They only care about numbers, not the human services. It’s all about stats.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Multiple interviews. See notes from previous section.

<sup>51</sup> Interview 022-09-13-2018-HW-NA.

<sup>52</sup> Interview 174-08-29-2018-OR-NA.

## **Models to simplify eligibility and processing exist or are in development.**

As many interviewees (both clients and staff) noted, Med-Quest online application and processing system offers one example of a simplified system which may offer lessons in how to simplify SNAP. A proposed pilot project on Hawai'i Island to test a shorter and simpler application form for SNAP is another example of a promising discussion to build upon. And finally, an upcoming system redesign and integration may offer opportunities to not only simplify application and processing (through, for example, the creation of an online application form and digital documentation that can be shared across programs), but also opportunities for education and coordination across programs (such as the creation of tools to estimate changes to benefits across multiple programs resulting from an increase in income or decrease in expenses).

## **Models to take processing services out into the community.**

One key bright spot in the DHS realm is the pilot effort to embed benefits processing in the Family Assessment Center (FAC) – a transitional shelter for houseless families in Kakaako. An Eligibility Worker is deployed to the FAC once a month, equipped with secure internet and other tools needed for benefits processing and recertification. She can complete processing at the FAC for both FAC residents and others in the area, including from nearby houseless encampments. The only thing she cannot do is issue EBT cards on-site, but once processed, clients visit the nearest Processing Center and go to a special “fast track” line to receive their card. The staff person deployed to the FAC enjoys the work, and wants to expand the pilot to nearby homeless shelters.<sup>53</sup>

Even outside of the FAC pilot, there is interest and experience among staff in reaching out to, and doing processing work in the community. Staff on Kaua'i, for instance, expressed a desire to do more community outreach, and the geographic expansive of Hawai'i Island has required staff to deploy to different parts of the island. Their lessons learned on Hawai'i Island – such as the critical role of equipment like scanners and tablets, reliable mobile internet, and web-based forms that allow offline data entry – may help future efforts to surmount client mobility barriers.

## **Models and momentum to stretch SNAP dollars toward healthy eating**

A significant number of SNAP clients we interviewed said they wanted to be able to buy more fresh food with SNAP. Some had or were recovering from illnesses which required them to eat more fresh produce. Others were simply interested in eating healthier. All noted that fresh, healthy food was more expensive. Given that clients were already stretching to make SNAP last

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<sup>53</sup> Interview 202-10-09-2018-OU-NA.

through the month, eating healthy was just not something they could always afford. “Poor people have diseases because we are not getting enough produce,” observed one client.<sup>54</sup>

Programs to incentivize the purchase of fresh produce with SNAP got rave reviews, especially on Hawai‘i Island. One client, JW has lived in Hawai‘i for many years and is a Special Forces veteran. He is also battling cancer. Last year, he signed up to receive Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) boxes of locally grown produce, paid for by SNAP. He paid \$18 a week for the CSA with the 2nd week of every month free. “I loved it...it was like Christmas!” he said. But this year, prices went up, and he had to stop his subscription. He would have loved to keep it, especially since it’s hard to get foods he can actually stomach while in cancer treatment. But, he can’t right now, “The money just isn’t there.” Another client said, “I really enjoy Same Canoe,” a program which offers food coupons to reward SNAP clients for buying fresh produce, signing up for a veggie prescription with participating healthcare providers, or who taking classes on food and nutrition. It was “challenging to get produce” with SNAP before the program due to high food costs, and she appreciated the food “Hopefully it will buy me some time to get other finances under control.” On O‘ahu there was interest in using SNAP at more Farmers Markets: ““I wish all farmers’ markets would take SNAP,” said one client at a temporary shelter.”<sup>55</sup>

Efforts by Community Partner Agencies have paved a path and generated interest among SNAP clients. And, the Hunger Action Network – a coalition of public, private, and nonprofit agencies with a shared interest in ending hunger in Hawai‘i – has recently come together to advocate for legislation that would provide State funding to match federal SNAP dollars for purchases of fresh produce.

## **SNAP Nutrition Educators are a valuable asset with untapped potential**

Nutrition Educators who work under the SNAP-Ed program have the knowledge and capacity to teach money management skills and healthy food preparation which can help SNAP clients, especially the most needy, stretch their dollars and eat healthier. Interviews with students in the program indicated that nutrition education can have a big impact, with some clients reporting that the course “changed their lives” – a particularly impressive outcome given that instruction happens during six 90-120 minute sessions over 6 weeks. Nutrition Educators felt that the power of the program was “partly the content,” partly the ability of educators to “customize and make it personal,” and partly that many participants “have never had a positive educational or classroom experience in their lives.”<sup>56</sup>

Interviews also point to several ways that the impact of the program can be amplified. For example, Nutrition Educators are currently responsible for recruiting their own students through community partner agencies. Some centralized support to help Educators identify potential new partner agencies and cross-promotion of the program by SNAP staff or contractors could expand Educators’ reach and impact (see Appendix B for potential new

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<sup>54</sup> Interview 024-09-19-2018-HE-HE.

<sup>55</sup> Interviews 025-09-13-2018-HE-HE; 123-06-13-2018-OR-HE.

<sup>56</sup> Interviews 067-06-25-2018-KA-NA; 081-12-12-2018-KA-UE; 133-06-25-2018-OR-NA.

partner agencies). More flexibility in curriculum delivery, greater involvement of students and Educators in curriculum changes, and dedicated time for Educators to share best practices with each other as a professional learning community – all while maintaining the program’s current focus on student outcomes – could propel the program to new heights.<sup>57</sup>

### **Community Partner Agencies model best practices for outreach and eligibility**

Community partner agencies have staff who are trusted by clients, and provide an important bridge to the SNAP program. The more efficient but less personal service created by BPR has made the role of partner agencies more critical. Outreach agencies contracted by SNAP are key to spreading awareness of SNAP, and getting people “in the door” with application assistance and follow-up. Interviews with staff at partner agencies suggests that broadening outcome measures beyond target quotas to include client satisfaction, program retention and other measures would make their work more impactful.

Some of the most highly trusted and effective partner agencies are not under contract by SNAP to provide outreach or education. Waimanalo Health Center for example, walks people through the processing of competing applications, submit them for clients, and staff sign-up as “authorized representatives” so they can support clients during eligibility interviews and submit follow-up documentation. Partner agency staff are also developers of best practices that may be valuable to the SNAP Program. For example, one homeless outreach worker at ALEA Bridge in Wahiawa, has developed a conversational, informal pre-interview process that allows him to gather key pieces of information and streamline the actual filling-out of applications with clients. “I’ve been there [homeless myself], so I know how applications can put people off.” A list of community organization that were mentioned positively in interviews repeatedly by clients is provided as Appendix B. Giving these agencies an opportunity to connect directly with SNAP staff (as contractors do) and with each other, in the spirit of a professional learning community, could encourage the replication of best practices across the SNAP ecosystem.

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<sup>57</sup> Interviews 067-06-25-2018-KA-NA; 081-12-12-2018-KA-UE; 133-06-25-2018-OR-NA.

# Opportunities for Action

As we noted in the introduction, this inquiry was not designed to provide a comprehensive evaluation of SNAP policies and practices. Instead, Appreciative Inquiry helps identify areas for potential impact which can be missed by aggregate data. The dozen action steps identified below are ones where interviews revealed both unmet needs *and* suggested ways these needs might be addressed. They do not represent a cohesive “plan” for how to improve the SNAP program, nor a set of ranked priorities. Rather, they are offered here as a collection of opportunities to address the needs described above and which, in many cases, offer a chance to build upon bright spots and best practices that already exist in the SNAP system.

## **1. Support efforts to further simplify application and processing.**

The upcoming system re-design and system integration across DHS programs may offer opportunities to explore the type of online applications, electronic documentation submission, and cross-program access suggested by interviews. DHS SNAP and Partner Agencies noted that Med-Quest systems offered a good starting point.

## **2. Tools, materials, or training to increase transparency in eligibility.**

Even a brief overview of how eligibility works, the standards applied, the rationale for application questions, and where the rules come from would help ease client frustrations over eligibility. This may require broadening performance measures of SNAP staff beyond the current focus on numbers of clients processed and processing time.

## **3. Tools, materials, or training to help clients navigate benefit “cliffs”**

Ideally, tools or education for clients would help them to understand how different benefit programs (not only SNAP) will be affected by various changes to income or expenses. Ideally, clients would have access to a multi-program benefits calculator or similar resource to help them anticipate financial impacts on their households. The upcoming system design and integration may offer opportunities for creating such tools for clients. Some in DHS have discussed creating “Navigators” to help people find appropriate programs within the department. If implemented, Navigators might also help clients understand how changes to income effect benefit levels across multiple programs.

#### **4. Explore changes to policy or practice that replace “cliffs” with slopes**

Since the biggest cliffs clients experience are when multiple benefits are lost at once, this effort would need to explore gradual reductions in benefits within programs, and coordination across benefits programs regarding the scale and timing of reductions. Staggered elimination of benefits would help avoid compounding effects that can leave a household worse off due to a new job or pay raise. States including Colorado, Maryland, and Florida are exploring solutions in this area.

#### **5. Expand experiments in mobile or embedded benefits processing**

Take benefits processing out into the field and closer to where immobile clients are – near homeless shelters and camps, at kupuna housing or food distribution centers. The Family Assessment Center is a model to build upon, and there is staff interest in expanding it. The interest of staff to reach out to community (e.g., on Kaua’i), and the experience of staff on Hawai’i Island can also be used to fuel such efforts.

#### **6. Establish mobile mail and free phone services to reduce houseless churn**

Mobile mail service once existed for unsheltered houseless people in urban Honolulu and was viewed as an important lifeline. Establishing this service on all islands (perhaps through some of the SNAP program’s existing contracts or through DHS homeless services contracts) would help connect houseless people with employment opportunities, programs, and services. DHS and/or SNAP could also pilot free or affordable cell phone plans for houseless, or at least offer free voicemail where they clients can receive and leave messages as many other states have done through Community Voice Mail, a national nonprofit organization.

#### **7. Clarify where role of Eligibility stops and Investigations begins**

As noted, a feeling of being ‘presumed guilty’ during SNAP interviews can discourage people from applying. One way to prevent this is to clarify whether eligibility workers are expected to investigate applicants’ answers or accept them at face value after emphasizing the legal consequences of lying.

#### **8. Support efforts that reward SNAP clients for eating healthy**

Build upon the significant interest and lessons of pilot programs like Da Bux (similar to Double Bucks in other jurisdictions) and One Canoe on Hawai’i Island, and support community-based efforts to advocate for public and private resources which can expand these initiatives.

## **9. Unleash the potential of Nutrition Educators with new flexibility and supports**

As noted above, the dedication and effectiveness of Nutrition Educators is a bright spot in the SNAP ecosystem. Interviews with clients and educators identified some specific ways that their effectiveness might be enhanced even further. Three potential areas of focus include: (1) providing greater flexibility to educators to adapt curriculum and delivery, within the bounds of federal rules and requirements; (2) involving educators in decisions about curriculum modification; and, (3) creating opportunities for educators to share best practices and challenges with each other in a non-evaluative, “community of practice” setting.

In addition, some educators would benefit from assistance in identifying potential partner agencies through which students might be reached (see Appendix B). Finally, the program might explore possibilities with DHS Branch Administration (to reach more SNAP clients) and the Judiciary (for connections to court-ordered programs).

## **10. Create opportunities for staff to connect with and learn from clients**

Fostering connection and learning between clients and staff outside of benefits processing and eligibility review may help to address feelings of distrust which sometimes discourage applicants, and might also introduce the “human touch” which many SNAP staff say is missing in the post-BPR processing system. This could be pursued through facilitated talk story sessions with representative leaders from among SNAP clients; focus group discussions between clients and staff; or professional development that brings clients and staff together to learn about and from each other. A customer service feedback survey is a less personal, but also less resource-intensive way to learn from clients. One client suggested Yelp! Reviews for processing centers.

## **11. Create opportunities for staff and partner agencies to learn from each other**

Community partner agencies -- both those contracted by SNAP and those which are simply trusted and relied upon by SNAP clients -- are a wealth of knowledge and best practices that can support improvements in the SNAP program. For greatest impact, learning sessions with partner agencies could include staff from the Program Office, Branch Administration, and Processing Center staff.

## **12. Strengthen communication between program, branch, and line staff**

As the stories of clients and community partners illustrates, somewhere along the chain of communication, guidance about rules and procedures is being miscommunicated or misunderstood. A more uniform understanding and application of rules would benefit everyone across the SNAP system, clients and staff alike. Strengthening communication within and between the Program Office, Branch Administration, and PC Line Staff can take a variety of forms, but in any case should be rooted in the shared commitment to serve client needs.

# Appendix A: Modified Appreciative Inquiry Methodology

We used a modified Appreciative Inquiry approach to gather information for this project. Appreciative Inquiry uses open-ended questions in a safe setting (in this case, third-party interviews who promised anonymity) to delve into the experiences of people, with an emphasis on strengths or positive experiences first. In general, AI begins with a question about people's best or positive experiences, then moves to questions about how to create an improved or ideal experience in the future.

For our purposes, we used a modified AI approach hoping, at a minimum, to get feedback about the SNAP Program. Ultimately, though, we hoped conversations would be deep and rich enough to learn about the conditions and experiences that were behind initial feedback -- the root causes behind the reactions to the SNAP Program.

## Going in empty to build trust and rapport

SNAP-eligible people may be feeling ashamed, vulnerable or powerless, especially in their relationship with DHS, which has the power to help or hurt them. Therefore, the first and most important step in any inquiry was to build trust and rapport.

It was essential to "go in empty" into each interview, with our own research goals as a second priority, and our first priority to build trust. After all, each of us can sense when someone is genuinely interested in us and our ideas, versus just collecting something from us for their own purposes.

Practically speaking, we started each interview with a brief description of the project, while projecting a "vibe" that "**you** are more important than the questions/goals I have." "Empty" meant leading with genuine curiosity about a person and their answers; engaging a person with maximum empathy and minimal judgment or defensiveness; and asking lots of follow-up questions, such as "Can you say more about that?"

## Prompts not scripts, and the importance of "bird walks"

We entered each interview with the following questions to start conversation and build rapport:

- What have been your most positive experiences with the SNAP Program?
- If you could wave a magic wand and change the Program what things would you change?
- What questions do you have for SNAP Program staff or others who work with the Program?



Again, the questions are intended as conversation-starters and rapport-builders, so in practice, we followed interviewees to whatever topics they wished to speak about first. People often wished to start with their ideas for improvement, their gripes, or had a recent experience (good or bad) that they focused on. Wherever the interviewee's energy was, that was where the interview went. Once the conversation is open and there was rapport between the interviewer and interviewee, we could then come back to our core guiding questions. Often, the guiding questions were answered in the process of letting people talk about what they wanted to talk about.

With trust and rapport established, it's then possible to go deeper into the details of a person's experience with the SNAP Program, and the conditions in their lives, in DHS, or in their community that may shape their experiences with SNAP.

- What was your first/earliest experience with the SNAP Program?
- Who or what has been most helpful to you in the process of trying to use SNAP?
- What's been most challenging for you?
- Where do you hope to go or what do you hope to do in the future?
- What do you want DHS staff to know about you that they may not know?
- What questions do you have about DHS and its staff or its partner agencies in the community?

Like the conversation-starters, this second "tier" of questions were not intended as a checklist to be followed. Rather, they are "prompts" to take the conversation deeper, and open the door to sharing of more personal stories, more guarded opinions, and the details of life that influence how a person interacts with the SNAP Program. Again, the guiding principle is to follow the interviewee where they want to go. A good metaphor is "conversational bird-walks" -- and we followed people along the topical bird-walks without trying to force them back to our questions. We would come back to our guiding questions if one was relevant to what the interviewee was saying or if the conversation stalled.

### **Some practical tips for structuring conversations**

Venue. Venues should allow for privacy and comfort. Interview rooms at DHS Processing Centers worked well for this purpose, because we could invite people from waiting rooms to come have coffee and provide feedback on SNAP. We also conducted interviews in the corner of a park, and in meeting rooms in community centers or partner agencies.

Food. Food always helps open the door to trust- and rapport-building. If we were conducting interviews in the morning, we brought coffee and pastries. If in the afternoons, we brought cold drinks and a snack with protein (to keep energy up).

Group size. Interviews are best conducted one-on-one or in small groups of 5 or less. If a group already knows each other well enough to be transparent in their comments, then groups of up to 7 or 8 are possible.

Duration. Allow an hour for each interview and if a conversation is rich and flowing, allow them to go long. In practice this means if you will often need at least half-a-day to get a handful of interviews completed.

Selecting interviewers. Not everyone will be good at this type of interview. Select people who are predisposed to it: who enjoy hearing people's stories and getting to know them; people who are good empathetic listeners and careful observers.

Interviewer Roles. At least 2 people conduct each interview: 1 focused on asking questions and listening, the other taking notes and observing non-verbal cues and surroundings.

Note Taking. Notes should be verbatim as much as possible because the specific words and phrases a person uses often captures their essence and the essence of the experience they're trying to share.

# Appendix B: Community Partner Agencies

The following list of community partners was generated based on the following criteria:

1. Serves customers or clients including SNAP-eligible individuals
2. Customers/clients are present at the agency repeatedly, making it possible to engage them in multiple educational sessions
3. Partner agencies were mentioned positively more than once in interviews with SNAP-eligible individuals

This is not intended to be a comprehensive list of effective or trusted agencies, and just because an agency is not listed does not mean they are ineffective or untrusted. Agencies with an asterisk (\*) next to them may also meet criteria for working with SNAP-Ed and similar nutrition education programs, which require repeated contact with clients over a 6 week period. A separate list is also provided of networks of organizations that hold regular meetings where DHS or SNAP-Ed might connect with multiple agencies.

Waimanalo Youthbuild, Waimanalo, O'ahu\*  
Family Assessment Center, Kakaako, O'ahu\*  
Waimanalo Community Health Center,  
Waimanalo, O'ahu  
Waikiki Community Health Center, Waikiki,  
O'ahu  
Kalihi Palama Health Center, Kalihi, O'ahu  
Waianae Coast Comprehensive Health  
Center, Waianae, O'ahu  
Kokua Kalihi Valley, Kalihi, O'ahu\*  
Tutu Bert's Medican Respite Home, Kailua &  
Honolulu, O'ahu\*  
Hawai'i Food Basket, Hawai'i Island  
Maui Food Bank and its partner  
churches/agencies\*  
Salvation Army Hilo, Hilo, Hawai'i  
Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Center,  
Honolulu, O'ahu\*  
Helping Hands Hawai'i, Statewide\*  
Residential Youth Services & Empowerment,  
Kailua, O'ahu\*  
Surfing the Nations, Kalihi and Wahiawa,  
O'ahu\*  
One Love Ministries, Kakaako, O'ahu\*

Palolo Homes (Mutual Housing), Honolulu,  
O'ahu\*  
Lihue Garden Court (Mutual Housing), Lihue,  
Kaua'i\*  
Alea Bridge, Waipahu, O'ahu\*  
Wai'anae Neighborhood Place, Waianae,  
O'ahu\*  
HOPE Services Hawai'i, Hawai'i Island  
Women In Need (WIN), Lihue, Kaua'i\*  
Malama Kaua'i, Kaua'i

## **Network Gatherings:**

Ho'owaiwai Network -- 3rd Wednesday,  
10:30am-12:30pm, 101 Aupuni Street, Hilo  
Sharon Hirota, County of Hawai'i  
(sharon.hirota@Hawai'icounty.gov)  
Hui Lailima -- 1st Friday, 10:30am-12pm,  
The Salvation Army, 75-223 Kalani,  
Kailua-Kona  
Linda Jeffrey (khparentcenter@yahoo.com)  
Kohala Community Partners -- Quarterly, 2nd  
Tuesday, 12-1:30pm, rotating location in  
Kohala

Lani Bowman, Partners in Development  
([lbowman@pidfoundation.org](mailto:lbowman@pidfoundation.org))  
Community Resources Meeting -- Quarterly,  
12-1:30pm, Lanakila Multi-Purpose Senior  
Center

Suzanne Chun Oakland, Catholic Charities  
([suzanne.oakland@catholiccharitiesHawaii.org](mailto:suzanne.oakland@catholiccharitiesHawaii.org))

# Appendix C: Nutrition Education Opportunities

## Nutrition Education Bright Spots

### Models and momentum to push SNAP use toward healthy eating

Many SNAP clients we interviewed said they wanted to be able to buy more fresh food with SNAP. Some had or were recovering from illnesses which required them to eat more fresh produce. Others were simply interested in eating healthier. All noted that fresh, healthy food was more expensive. Given that clients were already stretching to make SNAP last through the month, eating healthy was just not something they could always afford. “Poor people have diseases because we are not getting enough produce,” observed one client.

Programs to incentivize the purchase of fresh produce with SNAP got rave reviews, especially on Hawai‘i Island and Kaua‘i. One client, JW has lived in Hawai‘i for many years and is a Special Forces veteran. He is also battling cancer. Last year, he signed up to receive Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) boxes of local produce, paid in-part by SNAP. He paid \$18 a week for the CSA with the 2nd week of every month free. “I loved it...it was like Christmas!” especially since fresh food was easier to stomach while in cancer treatment. This year, prices went up, and the program subsidy went down, so had to stop his subscription. Now, “The money just isn’t there.” Another client said, “I really enjoy Same Canoe,” a program which offers food coupons to reward SNAP clients for buying fresh produce, signing up for a veggie prescription with participating healthcare providers, or taking classes on food and nutrition. It was “challenging to get produce” with SNAP before the program due to high food costs.

Efforts by Community Partner Agencies have paved a path and generated interest among SNAP clients. And, the Hunger Action Network – a coalition of public, private, and nonprofit agencies with a shared interest in ending hunger in Hawai‘i – has recently come together to advocate for legislation that would provide State funding to match federal SNAP dollars for purchases of fresh produce.

### Nutrition educators develop client relationships that enable powerful learning.

Universally, educators reported that the most rewarding aspect of their job was seeing clients make positive changes in their lives as a result of nutrition education. “Our educators are awesome. Sometimes frustrated with rules and reporting, but still out there changing people’s lives!” said one educator. And, from current and former clients: “You can tell [the instructor] really cares.” “She’s the best!” and “Loved her class!”

Clients had glowing reviews of their educators, an impressive result, given the limited duration of the program (once-a-week for six weeks) and the fact that attendance is often required as part of other programs (e.g., court-ordered treatment). Several commented on the relationship they'd developed with their teachers "This is my first positive 'school' experience" said one participant; "I learned a lot from this class" said another. One former client explained the impact of the course: "The class was a really important part of being able to get my kids back. The skills helped me be independent [and] the certificate showed my commitment to improving. [That] helped get me into drug court...focus on recovery and get into housing."

Certain curricular components are especially valuable, according to clients.

Safe food handling; budgeting and resource management; and nutrition labels were noted by multiple clients as the most useful elements of the course. Comments included: "I use the food safety at home all the time." "The budget worksheet was good...the pocket folio was super useful." "I read the labels on things now...it's changed how I shop." Another reported that the food safety skills helped him get a job in food service.

## **Nutrition Education Opportunities**

### **1. Communication about curriculum changes and rules.**

Educators expressed confusion and frustration about curriculum changes. They acknowledged that continuous improvement was an important goal, but were concerned about the negative effects of frequent changes to their ability to deliver quality instruction. They were also unclear about the rationale for certain mandated changes, which increased their frustration. Clearer communication about what prompts changes, the rationale and evidence-base behind proposed changes, and distinguishing what is mandated federally versus what is at the State's discretion would foster greater understanding.

### **2. Involving educators in curriculum decisions.**

In addition to clearer communication about curriculum changes, involving educators in curricular decisions could enhance program effectiveness. Educators expressed a desire to be a part of shaping the curriculum and making curricular decisions – beyond providing periodic input or feedback after decisions had been made. Educators hoped for a seat "at the table" as curriculum changes were being discussed and decided upon and felt they could offer valuable perspective about content, delivery, and client needs informed by experience and practice.

### **3. More flexibility in program delivery**

Program impact on clients could be enhanced by offering educators greater flexibility, within the bounds of federal requirements. In particular, providing flexibility in the 6 week, 2-hour session format would enable educators to reach more clients, and assure thorough coverage of

content. For example: allowing for combined units and fewer sessions, or for students to start, stop, and continue beyond a consecutive 6 weeks would make the program more accessible to clients. Clients, too, reported that the current format of 2-hour sessions over 6 weeks made participation difficult given other requirements of the programs they were in, and juggling children, work, job-seeking and other priorities.

#### 4. A professional learning community for educators.

Nutrition educators might also benefit from using group meeting time to share best practices and problems of practice with each other, in a non-evaluative setting. A growing body of research in K-12 education finds that allocating time for teachers to engage with each other in a “community of practice” has measurable impacts on student learning, and parallel results might be expected in nutrition education as well.

#### 5. Marketing tools and support

While very effective as educators, some staff struggled with identifying partner agencies and marketing the program to those agencies. Basic marketing materials and a continually updated roster of potential partner agencies that fit the general requirements of the program would help educators expand the reach of the program, and allow them to focus on program delivery which is their strength.

#### 6. Some client feedback on curriculum

Client interviews identified a few possible areas for curriculum improvement. However, considering the points above, and the limited size of the interview sample, any effort to revise the curriculum along the lines below should be undertaken with the involvement of Nutrition Educators.

Upgrading or aligning food safety with work certifications. As noted, several clients valued the safe food handling content. Several also asked if it could be enhanced to help them achieve food safety certifications that could be used for employment. In addition to clients, one community agency asked if the curriculum could be adapted to get clients certified to work in the commercial kitchen located at the agency. Given the wage and cost-of-living gap in Hawai‘i, any skill enhancement that might increase wages and employability is especially valuable.

The value of budgeting and resource management. Clients appreciated the budgeting exercises, tools, and pocket folio, but wished there was more time to practice using these together. One client commented, “I wish we could take more time with that one.” Another said she loved the budget/bills portfolio, that it “would be great to actually do it together.” A third client wondered if skipping the food demo that day would have allowed them to go deeper into using the tools. Again, given that so many households are operating on “thin margins” in Hawai‘i, developing this skill set is crucial.

Less time on physical activities. While the emphasis on physical activity was appreciated, some components were described as “too elementary” or seemed to clients, “like an interruption” of other important content. Several also commented that their physical activity was not a function of knowledge, but of time and energy. “I know it’s important, but I don’t have time to exercise.” Said one. “I’m exhausted at the end of the day” said another. These comments reflected a broader sentiment among program participants who were juggling family, multiple jobs, and sometimes issues with their own health or recovery.