

Addressing Food Insecurity: Connecting Extension Programming with Food Assistance Programs

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Introduction

Nutrition assistance programs provide food and resources to adults and children in the United States to increase food security and reduce hunger. By supplementing the food budget of participants, these programs help individuals and families purchase and consume nutritious foods. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FNS), in partnership with state and tribal governments, administers programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Each year, these nutrition assistance programs administered by the USDA FNS reach one in four people in the United States (USDA FNS, n.d.). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Community Living also administers the Older Americans Act Nutrition Programs (OAANP), which promotes food security and wellbeing for older adults. SNAP is the largest federal nutrition assistance program, reaching over 39.7 million people in the United States in 2018. SNAP reaches vulnerable populations, helping reduce poverty and increase food security (Food Research & Action Center [FRAC], n.d.). Eighty-one percent of the households that receive SNAP include children, older adults or an individual with a disability and over half (57 percent) of SNAP recipients are female (USDA FNS 2019). This fact sheet provides an overview of some of the important nutrition assistance programs available in Tennessee and information about how Extension professionals can connect with these programs through Extension programming to help increase food security among Tennesseans.

Benefits of Participation in Nutrition Assistance Programs

Nutrition assistance programs play a critically important role in preventing hunger and supporting the health and wellbeing of people of all ages. Participation in nutrition assistance programs provide many benefits to individuals and families. Some examples of the benefits of participation in nutrition assistance programs are listed below.

Participation in SNAP may:

- Improve the physical and mental health of participants.
- Improve diet quality among participants.
- Protect against obesity (FRAC 2017).
- Reduce food insecurity in households with children (Gundersen, Kreider, & Pepper, 2017).

WIC participation has been associated with:

- Fewer infant deaths.
- Improved dietary intake among children, pregnant women and postpartum women.
- Improved cognitive development in children (USDA FNS 2013).

Participation in the OAANP may help participants:

- Stay in their own homes.
- Eat healthfully.
- Improve their health (Kowlessar, Robinson, & Schur 2015).

Nutrition assistance programs convey economic benefits as well by stimulating economic activity. During times of a slowing economy, an additional \$1 billion in SNAP benefits is estimated to increase the gross domestic product, the total value of goods and services produced by a nation during a given year (Miriam-Webster 2021), by \$1.54 billion and supports 13,5650 additional jobs, including 480 jobs in agriculture (USDA ERS 2019).

Barriers to Participation in Nutrition Assistance Programs

Despite the benefits of nutrition assistance programs, there are challenges for participants. Some of these challenges include:

- Lack of awareness about benefits and how to apply.
- Difficult application processes.
- Language barriers.
- Difficulties accessing program offices due to transportation challenges and/or limited hours of operation.
- Perceptions of discrimination by program personnel and/or food retail staff.
- Social stigma associated with using nutrition assistance programs (Sano, Mammen, & Oliver, 2018).

Some organizations provide services to reduce barriers for participation in nutrition assistance programs and help consumers navigate the application process for these programs. For example, Tennessee’s Aging Nutrition Program provides SNAP outreach services to help older adults complete the SNAP application process.

Nutrition Assistance Program Details

Program Name	Brief Description	Eligibility Requirements	Services	Resources to learn more
Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, provides resources that help households supplement their monthly food budgets. The program allows participants to purchase food at participating stores and select online retailers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income: Eligibility is based on income and other resources. • Citizenship: Must be a U.S. citizen, U.S. National or qualified alien. All members of the household must have a social security number or proof of application. • Work Requirements: If participants are able-bodied and 16-59 years old, they must register for work, participate in the Employment and Training Program (if offered), accept offers of employment and cannot quit a job. Participants who are between the ages of 18 and 59 years old and who do not have dependents may have additional work requirements. 	SNAP provides recipients with an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card to purchase food at participating retailers. The amount each household receives depends on their resources, income and household size.	SNAP in Tennessee Info and Application www.tn.gov/humanservices/for-families/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap.html Tennessee Justice Center-SNAP www.tnjustice.org/snap/ SNAP Eligibility Information: www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility
Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)	WIC provides food assistance, nutrition education and referrals to pregnant, postpartum and breastfeeding women, infants and children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender, Pregnancy and Age: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pregnant women • postpartum women (up to six months after birth or the end of pregnancy) • breastfeeding women (up to infant’s first birthday) • infants (up to infant’s first birthday) • children (up to child’s fifth birthday) • Nutrition Status: Participants must be considered at “nutrition risk.” • Income: Eligibility is based on income (185 percent of federal poverty level). 	WIC provides participants with an EBT card to purchase select foods at participating food retail stores. For women who do not fully breastfeed, WIC provides iron-fortified infant formula. The foods that can be purchased with WIC benefits are determined by a variety of factors, including pregnancy status, breastfeeding status and the age of children receiving benefits.	USDA Eligibility Screening tools: wic.fns.usda.gov/wps/pages/preScreenTool.xhtml For a WIC appointment in Tennessee: www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/fhw/wic/redirect-wic-for-participants.html USDA WIC FAQ: www.fns.usda.gov/wic/frequently-asked-questions

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WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program (WIC FMNP)	WIC FMNP provides checks to WIC participants to use for locally produced fruits, vegetables and herbs.	Must be a WIC participant living in one of the following counties: Coffee, Hickman, Knox, Lincoln, Madison, Maury, Moore, Rutherford or Sullivan.	WIC FMNP issues checks to participants to exchange for fruits, vegetables and herbs at designated farmers markets and roadside stands.	WIC FMNP in Tennessee: www.tn.gov/content/tn/health/health-program-areas/fhw/farmers/wic-fmnp.html
Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)	CSFP works to improve the health of low-income older adults by providing nutritious foods to supplement the diets of older adults.	Age: Older adults (60+) Tennessee Eligibility Locations: Must live in Davidson, Dyer or Shelby County. Income: Must meet the income guidelines (at or below 130 percent of the poverty guidelines).	Commodity food packages supplement the diets of older adults with nutritious USDA foods. Programs may also provide nutrition education and referrals to health services.	USDA CFSP Fact Sheet: www.fns.usda.gov/csfp/csfp-fact-sheet CFSP in Tennessee: www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/fhw/wic/redirect-wic/csfp.html
Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP)	SFMNP provides checks to low-income seniors to purchase locally grown fruits, vegetables, honey and herbs.	Age: Older adults (60+) Must live in Davidson, Dyer, Shelby, Hamblen or Warren counties and be eligible for CSFP.	The SFMNP provides older adults with checks to exchange for fruits, vegetables and herbs at designated farmers markets and roadside stands.	SFMNP in Tennessee: www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/fhw/farmers/senior-fmnp.html
Older Adults Act Nutrition Programs (OAANP)	The Older Americans Act Nutrition Program offers services to provide nutritious meals, socialization, nutrition education and counseling to older adults 60 and over. Services include congregate meals and home delivered meals.	Age: Older Adults (60+) Congregate Meals: Also available to spouses at no cost Home Delivered Meals: For sick or homebound older adults (eligibility determined by in-home assessment).	The Older Adults Act Nutrition Program provides services through the following: Congregate meals sites: Healthy meals served at senior centers, community centers and other locations. Home delivered meals (sometimes called “Meals on Wheels”) to homebound older adults. Safety checks are performed during meal delivery.	Aging Nutrition Program in Tennessee: www.tn.gov/aging/our-programs/nutrition-services.html Search for a congregate meal site: www.tn.gov/content/tn/aging/our-programs/nutrition-services/congregate-meal-sites.html Contact your local area Agencies on Aging and Disability to learn about home delivered meals: www.tn.gov/content/tn/aging/resource-maps/tennessee-area-agencies-on-aging-and-disability.html
The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)	TEFAP supplements the diets of low-income individuals and families, including older adults, by providing emergency food assistance at no cost. The USDA purchases nutritious USDA foods and provides TEFAP foods to state distributing agencies, based on the number of unemployed persons and the number of people with income below the federal poverty level.	Income: Recipients must provide proof of income eligibility to receive foods distributed for use at home. Tennessee Residency: Recipients must be a resident of Tennessee. Congregate meals served by organizations that primarily serve eligible audiences are not required to ask participants to complete an application to determine eligibility.	In Tennessee, the Tennessee Department of Agriculture provides TEFAP foods to community action agencies and food banks, which distribute TEFAP foods to consumers or use the foods to serve meals in congregate settings.	TEFAP in Tennessee: www.tn.gov/agriculture/departement/administration/commodity-distribution/emergency-food-assistance-program.html TEFAP Agencies in Tennessee: www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/agriculture/documents/commodity/AgEacTefapCounties.pdf

Program Name	Brief Description	Eligibility Requirements	Services	Resources to learn more
National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and National School Breakfast Program (NSBP)	<p>The National School Lunch and National School Breakfast Programs assists public and nonprofit private schools and residential childcare sites to provide low-cost or free lunches to qualifying students.</p>	<p>Income: Household's income determines eligibility for free or reduced-price meals.</p> <p>Other: Children who meet the definition of homeless, runaway or migrant qualify. Children enrolled or in a federally funded Head Start program qualify.</p> <p>Community Eligibility: When a school or district has a significant number of students qualify for NSLP they may be able to offer free meals to all students.</p>	<p>The program provides support for schools and childcare sites to offer free and reduced-priced meals for qualifying students. Qualifying schools may also receive training and assistance for nutrition professionals to prepare nutritious meals.</p>	<p>Tennessee NSLP and Income Eligibility Guidelines: www.tn.gov/education/health-and-safety/school-nutrition/free-and-reduced-price-meals.html</p> <p>USDA NSLP Frequently Asked Questions: fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/NSLPFactSheet.pdf</p>
Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT)*	<p>P-EBT is part of the COVID-19 pandemic government response. P-EBT provides support in the form of EBT funds, for use at qualifying food retail sites, to help families with children receiving free and reduced-price school meals.</p>	<p>Students must qualify for NSLP free or reduced-price school meals. This includes students in schools that provide free meals to all students (Community Eligibility).</p> <p>Students should not have received free or reduced-priced meals at school because school is closed or has been operating with reduced attendance or hours for at least five consecutive days in the current school year.</p> <p><i>(Schools and school districts collect and submit information on students who are eligible).</i></p>	<p>To date, there have been three rounds of P-EBT delivery for participants. EBT cards were mailed to qualifying families during round one and covered school meals lost in March-May 2020. Benefits are put on the EBT card each round. Benefits vary by family and student and are based on each student's school learning situation.</p>	<p>P-EBT Frequently Asked Questions and Information: www.tn.gov/humanservices/covid-19/p-ebt-and-covid-19-faqs.html</p> <p>P-EBT Tennessee Justice Center: www.tnjustice.org/p-ebt/</p>
Summer Feeding Programs Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Feeding Option (SSO)	<p>SFSP is administered by the Tennessee Department of Human Services.</p> <p>SSO is administered by the Tennessee Department of Education in school systems that participate in NSLP or SBP.</p>	<p>Age: Youth under the age of 18. SFSP also serves individuals over age 18 who participate in school programs for persons with disabilities.</p> <p>Income: SFSP serves children in low-income areas. SSO serves children within school attendance areas where at least 50 percent of the children are eligible for free or reduced lunch.</p> <p>SSO can also serve migrant and camp populations.</p>	<p>The SFSP and SSO provide free healthy meals and snacks to youth during the summer through sponsoring sites.</p>	<p>Frequently Asked Questions: www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/frequently-asked-questions#6</p> <p>Information and Find a Site: www.tn.gov/humanservices/children/dhs-nutrition-programs/learn-about-the-summer-food-service-program.html</p> <p>TN SSO program: www.tn.gov/education/snp-resources/snp-programs.html</p>

*P-EBT is an example of a federal nutrition assistance program administered in response to rising food insecurity among people in the United States resulting from a global pandemic. The USDA also administers the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP) in response to natural disasters.

Connecting Extension Programming with Food Assistance Programs

A major distinction between Extension and food assistance programs is the type of assistance offered. Food assistance programs offer food, or resources to obtain food, while Extension provides education. Part of that education includes teaching families about the programs available, who is eligible, where they can apply, the criteria for participation and where in the community they go to receive services.

Extension is a critical partner for food assistance programs since most programs need nutrition education for their clientele. An important part of becoming food secure involves learning how to select and prepare healthy foods and manage the food resources provided by food assistance programs.

Creating strong connections with food assistance programs requires a plan for partnering, cultivation of strategic partnerships and providing complementary programming. Extension programs have close links to people in communities and can identify people in need of resources through Extension programming.

Cultivating Strategic Partnerships. Partnerships with agencies providing food assistance should be beneficial for Extension and for partners. This will require a mutual understanding of the mission of Extension and partnering agencies and a clear set of expectations. Do not assume that these agencies know about Extension and our capacity to deliver educational programming. This requires regular contact among agencies to keep partners informed. One way this can happen is through the formation of TNCEP coalitions or advisory groups, which puts Extension agents and professionals in contact with organizations that address food insecurity at the access level. Both Extension and program partners can provide outreach to families to encourage participation in both Extension nutrition programming and food assistance programs. It is important to remember that the role of Extension is to provide as much education and information as possible to individuals and families that sign up for food assistance programs in order to help them be successful. Some examples are:

- Promoting food assistance programs at health fairs, school events and community festivals.
- Hosting cooking demonstrations.
- Handing out flyers to families about resources available to them.
- Writing press releases.
- Posting on social media.

Partnerships are essential in identifying needs and connecting people and programs to helpful resources. For example, while TNCEP does not distribute food directly, the nutrition education programs target SNAP eligible audiences. SNAP Outreach programming is conducted through many local food pantries where eligible clients can learn how to apply for food stamps. A partnership with a food pantry therefore provides an opportunity to reach individuals and families with nutrition education and practical advice on how to access direct food benefits. Community groups such as refugee resettlement agencies, community action committees and others often have the capacity to help people fill out applications that might otherwise be a barrier to applying for and receiving benefits. Staying connected to nonprofits and service agencies in your area is key to linking people with those who can help.

Extension also can be a facilitator of cross-sector partnerships with other groups to address food insecurity. Local government, health care agencies, community development corporations and youth-based organizations are examples of organizations that may provide additional programming, opportunities to develop greater community links or opportunities to leverage funding.

Providing Complementary Programming. There are several examples of complementary programming that Extension can provide in addition to program outreach. Extension can provide nutrition education through SNAP-Ed TNCEP and EFNEP. These programs use several curricula that include food resource management such as Cooking Matters, Eat Well Feel Well and Eating Smart and Moving More. Programs such as Farmers' Market Fresh and Healthy Plate encourage use of locally grown food to save money. Teaching families to plant in community and school gardens also increases their food resources. Many of these programs include food demonstrations that give families an opportunity to taste healthy recipes before spending their limited funds.

Plan for Partnering with Food Assistance Programs. When you have examined the issues facing families in your communities and identify food insecurity as an issue you plan to address, include this in your Individual Annual Plan. This issue easily fits under the Tennessee Issue (State Action Agenda) "Resources" because you are preparing families to obtain and manage their food resources effectively. Food security falls under the impact (topic) "Manage resources for healthy diets." Under this topic there are four indicators to report your outcomes: 1) planning meals, 2) using strategies to manage their food budgets, 3) using locally produced foods, and 4) utilizing trained volunteers. Under the collaborators/partners section of the plan, list agencies who provide food assistance for programs you plan to implement.

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