



IMPACT AREA:
HEALTH

SNAP AMBASSADORS

A **CITIES OF SERVICE** BLUEPRINT

SNAP Ambassadors is a high-impact service strategy through which the mayor's or city chief executive's office engages citizen volunteers to help increase the number of eligible people participating in SNAP and improve their ability to access nutritious foods through the program.

SNAP AMBASSADORS

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BACKGROUND

In 2014, the USDA reported that more than 48 million Americans lived in “food insecure” households, meaning that at points throughout the year they lacked sufficient food for an active, healthy life for all household members.¹ In other words, they were hungry. This picture was even worse among households with children, where roughly one in five households—which included 15 million children—were food insecure. Food insecurity has significant negative consequences for health and nutritional well-being. For children especially, the costs extend beyond the immediate concerns of hunger; insufficient access to food jeopardizes children’s long-term health, educational performance, and life chances.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the nation’s single most efficient and cost-effective tool in reducing hunger. Formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, SNAP is the largest nutrition assistance program administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).² The goal of the program is “to alleviate hunger and malnutrition ... by increasing food purchasing power for all eligible households who apply for participation.”³ The program provides monthly benefits to eligible low-income families to purchase food.⁴ The benefits are delivered through Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards, which are used like debit cards at authorized food retailers.⁵ Although certain items are prohibited, SNAP benefits allow recipients to purchase many food products.⁶

1 USDA Economic Research Service (ERR-194), Household Food Security in the US in 2014, by Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew Rabbitt, Christian Gregory, and Anita Singh, September 2015.

2 SNAP benefits are federally funded, and eligibility rules and benefit levels are determined largely at the federal level, though the program is administered by state and local entities.

3 The Food Stamp Act of 1977, as amended (P.L. 108-269).

4 SNAP eligibility rules require that participants be at or below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level.

5 All SNAP retailers must meet basic “stocking requirements”: the retailer must sell at least seven varieties of food in each of four basic categories (meat, poultry, or fish; bread or cereal; vegetables or fruits; and dairy products) on a continuous basis, and must offer perishable food items in at least three of those four categories.

6 Prohibited items include: beer, wine, liquor, cigarettes, or tobacco, as well as any nonfood items. In addition, vitamins and medicines, as well as foods that will be eaten in the store or hot foods are also restricted.





The majority of SNAP beneficiaries are children, working parents, elderly people, and people with disabilities. SNAP has also played an important role in lifting millions of people—especially children—out of poverty for the past five decades.⁷ Despite SNAP's powerful potential, millions of eligible people do not participate in the program. There are many reasons for this lack of participation. People may not know that they are eligible and/or are confused about the benefits. For some, the application process seems complicated and time-consuming. There may be additional compounding factors, such as language barriers or time and transportation barriers for the working poor. Seniors may not understand the nature of the program and choose not to apply for benefits, thinking children or families need the help more. And there is often a social stigma attached to receiving these federal benefits. Ultimately, the result is that millions of eligible people forgo nutrition assistance that could stretch their food dollars.

Outreach and education are powerful tools in overcoming barriers to SNAP participation, and city chief executives are uniquely positioned to put these tools to work. Using the SNAP Ambassadors blueprint as a guide, city leaders can use their positions of authority to raise awareness about the SNAP program in their cities. They can focus the energy of citizen volunteers to help educate target populations about the benefits of SNAP and they can build collaborative partnerships with local stakeholders to help provide structural and long-term solutions to the challenges of hunger and food insecurity.

⁷ White House Council of Economic Advisors report, Long-Term Benefits of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, December 2015





REQUIRED STEPS FOR SUCCESS

- 1** The city chief executive's office **identifies a full-time SNAP Ambassadors Coordinator** who is charged with planning the initiative, identifying resources to support the initiative, working closely with stakeholders and partners, troubleshooting when challenges arise, and collecting metrics and reporting on overall impact. Full-time staff members, AmeriCorps members, or a full-time volunteer can all be explored as a potential SNAP Ambassadors Coordinator.
- 2** The city chief executive's office **convenes and engages key stakeholders** to establish a shared understanding of:
 - how SNAP operates in the city;
 - what's working well with the current program;
 - where there might be challenges and/or barriers to participation;
 - what needs to happen for the SNAP Ambassadors initiative to flourish;
 - the ways in which volunteers can be leveraged to support the initiative; and
 - the resources available for recruiting, training, and supporting volunteers.
- 3** The city chief executive uses his or her position of authority to **raise awareness of hunger in the city** and how SNAP is a critical weapon in the fight against hunger, leading to the launch of SNAP Ambassadors. A targeted marketing strategy is created to raise awareness about the initiative.





4

Volunteers are recruited and trained to support the SNAP Ambassadors initiative by:

- Raising awareness of SNAP by providing outreach to target populations;
- Helping people understand the eligibility requirements and benefits of SNAP;
- Pre-screening low-income individuals for SNAP eligibility and/or providing SNAP application assistance;
- Building the capacity of local community partners to conduct SNAP outreach and education; and
- Helping collect impact data and track metrics.

5

The city chief executive's office **tracks and reports on required program metrics**, such as:

- the number of citizens who learned about SNAP through the initiative,
- the number of SNAP applications submitted;
- and the percent increase in SNAP recipients. (Please refer to the Executing the Plan section for information about required metrics.)





EXECUTING THE PLAN

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A DEVELOP THE INITIATIVE

1 **Convene Stakeholders** — After the SNAP Ambassadors Coordinator has been identified, and at least 4-6 months before the launch of the initiative, the city chief executive's office brings together key community stakeholders, usually over the course of several meetings. The goals of these meetings are to:

- Understand the current number of active SNAP participants and the current number of people who are eligible but not participating in the program. Find out as much as possible about who the nonparticipants are, including where they live, where they go to school, and any organizations they are engaged with (places of worship, unions, etc.).
- Discuss where and why there are gaps in SNAP participation;
- Brainstorm strategies for increasing the number of city residents who benefit from the program as informed by the identified gaps in participation;
- Identify ways that citizen volunteers can help support the SNAP Ambassadors initiative and how to recruit, train, and support those volunteers;
- Identify other partners who should be at the table.

SEATS AT THE TABLE: CONVENING KEY COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

Key stakeholders should include representatives from: the regional office of the USDA and the state agency administering SNAP; the local government agencies administering SNAP; the school district; the public housing authority; the city's Department of Health and Department of Social Services; urban farming groups, farmers' markets, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs); food banks and pantries; anti-hunger organizations focused on the SNAP program; neighborhood associations and resource centers; local businesses; faith groups; and organizations that recruit and manage volunteers.





2

Design with Purpose — With information gleaned from the stakeholder meetings, design the city's SNAP Ambassador initiative. Make sure to create an initiative that meets the city's specific needs and engages a diverse group of volunteers. Suggestions include:

- ***Build partnerships where existing programming could support the goals of SNAP Ambassadors*** — city agencies such as the Departments of Parks and Recreation or Housing often serve the target demographic at their local facilities, recreation and community centers, and public housing areas. Other appropriate partners are food pantries, local faith organizations, libraries, day camps, and schools. By working with and through these partners, volunteers can more easily connect with potential SNAP beneficiaries.
- ***Partner with local farmers' markets and the farming community to encourage healthy food choices*** — the USDA is pursuing several initiatives to improve access to healthy foods for SNAP participants, including expanding access to fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy foods through farmers' markets. More than 3,200 farmers' markets and stands across the country now accept EBT cards. Farmers' markets have events where a SNAP booth could be displayed with volunteers speaking to visitors. Farmers' markets often have a robust digital community, and SNAP information could be shared through that mechanism. Many local food banks also incorporate health initiatives into their programming that educate, support, and cultivate relationships between farmers and families who are food insecure.
- ***Promote and facilitate community kitchen demonstrations*** — to educate potential and current SNAP recipients about the benefits of securing SNAP and choosing and cooking healthy benefits. For example, [Share Our Strength's Cooking Matters](#) is used throughout the country to teach participants to shop smarter, use nutrition information to make healthier choices and cook delicious, affordable meals.





FINDING THE RIGHT PARTNERS

- City agencies can open their sites to volunteers for outreach and healthy cooking demonstrations.
- Local nonprofits and community-based organizations can host volunteers, providing opportunities for them to attend events and display materials.
- Some larger nonprofits can help secure additional support for the initiative in partnership with the city.
- Corporate sponsors and private donors should be enlisted to support SNAP Ambassadors with funds and/or in-kind donations. For example, large food service providers, restaurant franchises, health-focused foundations, and supermarket chains may be leveraged for resources to support the initiative.





B RAISE AWARENESS

1 **Activate the Bully Pulpit** — The city chief executive and other local officials should use their position of influence to raise awareness of hunger and promote SNAP Ambassadors. They can host a kick-off event that raises awareness about the program, brings key stakeholders and families together, and frames SNAP Ambassadors as a top priority for the city. In addition, city leaders can place op-eds in local news outlets, emphasize the need for decreasing hunger through SNAP in public speeches and at other events, and promote SNAP Ambassadors on the city's website, through interagency and community newsletters, and on social media.

2 **Create a Marketing Campaign** — A marketing strategy should be created to publicize SNAP Ambassadors. As part of the strategy, the city should focus on the all-too-familiar story of food insecurity and why it is important for individuals and families to participate in SNAP. In order to increase participation in SNAP, city hall should incorporate marketing that destigmatizes the need for and promotes the benefits of SNAP. Different materials may need to be developed for diverse populations (for example, creating materials in multiple languages). All of the materials should be designed to make the process to enroll as accessible and easy as possible.

In addition to a launch and announcement, the city can coordinate advertising the program on utility bills, on outbound recorded calls and PSAs, through the city's local information line, on the government television station, and the United Way's 211 information line or other compatible nonprofit channels.

3 **School Outreach** — Teachers and school administrators can be very helpful in getting the word out to families about SNAP. To that end, it is critical to develop a communication plan for schools: provide detailed information, including up-to-date information on SNAP eligibility and enrollment, for the school administrators, including specific collateral and timing for distribution to students. SNAP information can also be shared at family days and other community events.





C ACTIVATE VOLUNTEERS

1 **Volunteer Activities** – Volunteers can fulfill a variety of different functions to support and help increase SNAP participation, including:

- **Canvassing and outreach.** Lack of information is the primary barrier to participation in SNAP, but appropriate outreach and education can help increase access. Most successful outreach and education efforts take place where eligible participants are located. Volunteers can:
 - Set up booths and share outreach materials at grocery stores, farmers markets, CSAs, food pantries, and community events;
 - Deliver outreach materials to schools;
 - Canvass in targeted low-income neighborhoods and senior living centers; and
 - Partner with faith communities and community-based organizations to support their existing outreach efforts and increase their capacity.
- **Prescreening and/or screening potential applicants.** With training, volunteers can help answer questions about SNAP eligibility and, in some cases, determine their eligibility.
- **Helping applicants complete SNAP applications.** This volunteer activity requires the most training, but has been helpful in many communities.

VOLUNTEERS = PART OF THE SOLUTION

Volunteers can play key roles and help cities:

- Circulate critical information and promote overall awareness of SNAP
- Increase participation rates through education, outreach, and enrollment support
- Encourage healthy food choices with SNAP benefits
- Collect data and metrics





- **Promoting healthy food choices.**
 - Lead Cooking Matters classes and other community kitchen demonstrations;
 - Enlist farmers' markets and CSAs to participate in SNAP; and
 - Support a community garden.
- **Collecting data and metrics** is critical to understanding what's working and where mid-course corrections may be helpful. Volunteers can be easily trained to collect real-time impact metrics: see the "Calibrate and Illustrate Impact" section.

2

Volunteer Recruitment — Anyone can volunteer to do basic SNAP outreach, such as handing out flyers or making phone calls. More advanced outreach requires training, access to technology, collaboration with host locations, and a background check. When the SNAP Ambassadors Coordinator begins his or her volunteer recruitment process, he or she should begin with partner organizations who have existing volunteer networks. Aim to have diverse volunteers and recruit from within the same areas where outreach is being targeted. For example, if working in a senior facility, recruit another senior to be a part of the program. The SNAP Ambassadors Coordinator should also work to engage disconnected residents as volunteers in addition to those who are already active community members.

- **Peer to Peer** — one of the best ways to promote SNAP and increase participation in the program is to involve community members who are current or former SNAP recipients and who can share their first-hand knowledge of the program. Recruit from organizations that support SNAP to identify potential volunteers who can become personal champions for SNAP.

3

Volunteer Training

- While there are no special skills required to distribute flyers and information, training should be provided to ensure that volunteers are prepared with the most up-to-date knowledge about the program and can answer basic questions about SNAP.
- One to two days of training and a possible background check are necessary to support volunteers engaged in pre-screening and/or helping participants apply for benefits.





D CALIBRATE AND ILLUSTRATE IMPACT

Collecting substantive data is essential to assess and demonstrate the impact of SNAP Ambassadors in your city. The following outcome metrics are required:

- Overall number of people who receive education about SNAP
- Number of applications to SNAP
- % change in number of applications to SNAP over the previous year
- Number of accepted SNAP recipients and/or number of family members within the household of a new SNAP recipient
- % change in number of SNAP recipients over the previous year
- Number of volunteers supporting the program
- % change in the number of volunteers over the previous year
- Number of total volunteer hours

Optional metrics:

- Number of children from low-income families participating in the program
- Number of cooking healthy demonstrations completed
- Number of farmers' markets and CSAs participating in SNAP
- Increase in healthy food products being purchased by new and existing SNAP recipients
- Number of peer volunteers championing SNAP

In planning for data collection, ensure that:

- Responsibility for data collection is clear. While the SNAP Ambassadors Coordinator is ultimately responsible for reporting on impact metrics, he/she may not necessarily be the best person to collect the data. It's important to identify who is responsible for collecting and organizing the data.
- Data should be collected in a consistent and timely manner.
- When "pre and post" information is required, some data will need to be collected before the initiative launches.





RECOGNIZING AND THANKING VOLUNTEERS

There are many ways to recognize volunteers who contribute to making SNAP Ambassadors a success.

- Always be welcoming and energized during training and throughout the course of the volunteer project.
- Send thank you notes.
- Solicit feedback from volunteers on ways to improve implementation and, as appropriate, incorporate their suggestions for activities or enhancements.
- Once the metrics have been finalized, share the impact with the volunteers.
- Create and share progress reports to help volunteers understand how their efforts contributed to the initiative's overall and long-term success.
- Get permission to include volunteers in future newsletters and thank them and/or their organizations on social media.
- Host an event with the mayor to recognize and celebrate everyone's hard work.
- Leverage tickets to civic and cultural events as a special thank you for key volunteers





ADDITIONAL PARTNERS IN SERVICE

National Service Resources — National service participants such as AmeriCorps VISTA members can help cities improve participation in SNAP and can potentially serve as the SNAP Ambassadors Coordinator. If they are supporting a coordinator, they can help increase the number of SNAP partners and participation rates at existing sites by helping to establish partnerships and conducting outreach, assisting with operations, recruiting new sponsors and sites, leading/providing activities, and recruiting volunteers. National service participants can infuse new energy into the program, raising awareness within target communities and creating positive environments for children.





ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For general information about SNAP, see:

- USDA's comprehensive site:
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>
- Food Research and Action Center's comprehensive site:
<http://frac.org/federal-foodnutrition-programs/snapfood-stamps/>

For information about SNAP outreach, USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach>

For information about Volunteer Engagement, see the New York City Coalition Against Hunger's "Beyond the Food Drive: Ending Hunger Through Citizen Service Handbook:"
https://nyccah.org/files/BeyondtheFoodDrive_FullHandbook.pdf



Cities of Service is a national nonprofit organization that supports mayors and city chief executives to engage local communities and residents in identifying challenges and solving problems together.

We work with cities to help them build city-led, citizen-powered initiatives that target specific needs and achieve long-term, measurable outcomes that improve the quality of life for residents and build stronger cities.

An independent, nonpartisan organization, Cities of Service was started in 2009 by New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. Today, the Cities of Service coalition is comprised of over 200 cities in the US and UK, representing more than 52 million people in 45 states, and more than 10 million in the UK.

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