Efforts to Increase Access to SNAP for Homebound Seniors through Purchasing and Delivery Services

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Americans aged 60 and over account for nearly 1 in 10 participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; formerly the Food Stamp Program), though less than half of eligible, low-income elderly adults participate in the program. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), which administers SNAP, has taken steps in recent years to improve enrollment processes and timeliness, and to increase access to foods for this population.

This IMPAQ Issue Brief explores a new FNS rule governing SNAP food retailers that will allow purchasing and delivery (P&D) services of SNAP foods to homebound participants and participants with a disability. We also outline the potential impact and challenges of implementing this new rule.

ISSUE
As the U.S. population continues to age, we have seen dramatic increases in the number of seniors and elderly (defined as 60 years and older for this paper) who live in poverty. Food insecurity – the inability to meet food needs on a regular basis – for adults over age 60 increased by 66% from 2001 to 2013, with 5.4 million seniors experiencing food insecurity in 2013. Food insecurity for seniors is greater among the disabled (34%), Blacks and Hispanics (31%) and those with incomes below the poverty line (46%). Food insecurity has been associated with poor nutrition and poor health status among the elderly, as well as higher prevalence of chronic conditions, medication non-adherence, and hospital readmissions. Despite these trends, only about 4 in 10 low-income, eligible seniors participate in SNAP.

As aging-in-place initiatives seek to ensure that seniors have the resources and services they need to live independently in their homes and communities, it is vital that federal programs such as SNAP reach and serve those eligible for its benefits.

POLICY
At the 2015 White House Conference on Aging on July 13, 2015, U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary, Tom Vilsack announced plans to increase access to groceries for homebound seniors and people with disabilities by allowing government and nonprofit agencies to accept SNAP benefits as payments for purchasing and delivering groceries. The proposed rule was initially authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill and expands the definition of “retail food stores” so that agencies providing purchasing and delivery (P&D) services may directly receive SNAP benefits in exchange for food.

Under these new provisions, agencies authorized as SNAP P&D retailers must charge participants the price paid for foods delivered, and are prohibited from marking up food costs. P&D retailers, however, may charge a delivery fee to participants that
cannot be paid with SNAP benefits. FNS has proposed that the fee not exceed 25% of the total cost of the foods delivered, up to a maximum of $20 per delivery. FNS will also allow P&D retailers to set a minimum food purchase, up to $50 per delivery.

This effort to authorize P&D retailers builds upon existing provisions aimed at increasing access to prepared, nutritious meals for low-income seniors living in communities, including authorization of public and private communal dining facilities and meal-delivery services as authorized SNAP retailers. This new program has the potential to provide additional access to food for millions of homebound seniors and adults with a disability.

POTENTIAL IMPACT
One population that may be able to easily access P&D services are seniors currently receiving home-delivered meals through services provided by the Older American Act (OAA). IMPAQ analyzed data from the 2013 National Survey of OAA Participants, which included interviews with recipients of OAA home-delivered meals. Among the 841,000 OAA participants represented in the study, 59% reported difficulty going outside the home and 80% had incomes that made them eligible for SNAP. That they skipped at least one meal in the past 30 days (12%) or did not always have enough money or “food stamps” to buy the food they needed (33%). Nearly 50% of SNAP participants receiving home delivered meals reported that they did not always have enough money or food stamps to buy the foods they needed. An assessment of homebound seniors’ ability to pay for P&D services will be crucial to whether this expansion has the desired effect on nutrition and hunger.

While OAA participants represent one group of seniors with a high level of need, it is imperative that steps be taken to ensure that all of the estimated 3.5 million homebound seniors in need of nutrition assistance services are being reached and not only those who are already receiving services.

CHALLENGES
Ultimately, the success of authorizing P&D retailers to increase access to foods for homebound seniors and adults with a disability depends on a number of critical factors:

- Homebound seniors and adults with a disability must be enrolled in SNAP to benefit from this improved access to foods. Low SNAP enrollment among seniors remains a big challenge for FNS in alleviating hunger and ultimately meeting the goals and objectives of the SNAP program. Reasons for low SNAP participation are discussed in the IMPAQ
Issue Brief, *Missed Opportunities: Lifting Barriers to SNAP Participation among Eligible Seniors.*

- Participants must have the capacity and resources to prepare meals at home. Among seniors receiving OAA home-delivered meals, 45 percent reported difficulty preparing meals on their own. For SNAP P&D to be successful, those eligible must be able to prepare foods purchased with SNAP or have assistance in doing so.

- Participants must be able and willing to pay even the minimal fees that will be charged for P&D services. More than one-quarter of SNAP participants receiving OAA home-delivered meals reported that they had to choose between buying food and buying medication in the previous month (26.9%). The cost of P&D services will be a major factor in participants choosing to use them.

- The P&D services themselves must be accessible and easy to use. As P&D services are developed, FNS should consider the details of how participants will order food items and communicate their needs to P&D retailers, taking into account the wide range of conditions and disabilities that may make it difficult for seniors to leave their homes. P&D retailers, for instance, may want to take advantage of efficient and cost-effective technological methods for receiving and organizing food orders, such as online ordering, but low-income seniors, in particular, may not have access to computers and the Internet or may avoid new technologies for other reasons.

**WHAT'S NEXT**

FNS plans to pilot test the program expansion by authorizing up to 20 P&Ds in FY16 under a one-year trial period. The goal of the pilot program is to examine and incorporate lessons learned into guidance for future P&D retailers and, presumably, a national roll-out. During this trial period, FNS will have a unique opportunity to address the challenges identified above through a comprehensive process and impact evaluation of the P&D services authorized. Additionally, an in-depth study of the needs of older, homebound seniors and adults with a disability may also shed light on additional needs and services related to food purchasing, meal preparation, and access to foods that can aid FNS in better reaching and serving homebound seniors and adults with a disability.

## REFERENCES


