


THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Findings from a survey of assistance providers

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COVID-19 and its impact on the economy created a significant increase in the number of people requesting nutrition benefits in the United States as well as a host of challenges for people enrolling in benefits and the organizations that serve them. In many cases, people needing assistance could no longer visit sites that provide assistance, and those working to provide assistance had to work remotely. While this presented challenges, organizations working to reach people needing application assistance also came up with many creative solutions and new ways of working that they hope to carry forward.

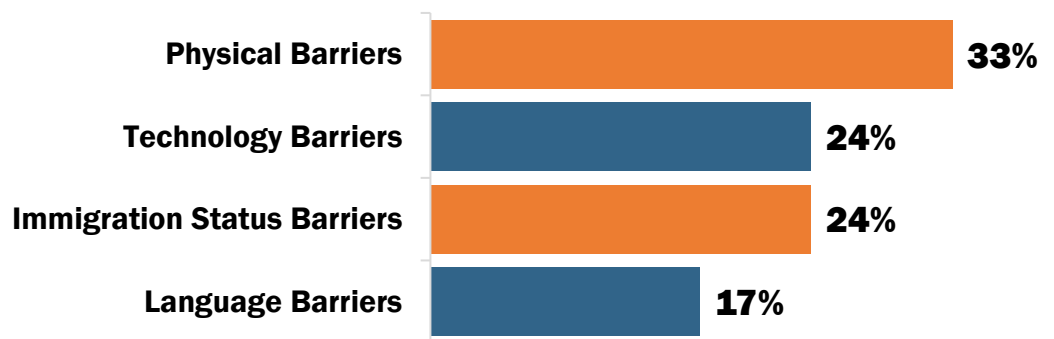
Findings from a recent survey provided deeper insight into the impact of the pandemic on these organizations and the people they serve. Survey responses highlighted challenges people experienced in trying to access benefits, ways organizations expanded to reach new populations, new methods and partnership approaches organizations implemented, and successes they've had.

The survey was administered by a group of nonprofit organizations whose work focuses on increasing access to and consumption of healthy foods, particularly for communities that have faced systemic barriers.¹ Nearly 200 individuals who work to assist with applications for federal food assistance programs responded to the survey in January 2021.

¹ Founded in 2020, the Healthy Food Community of Practice is a space for connection, learning, resource sharing, and action with a goal: help people experiencing food insecurity — particularly those facing systemic barriers — access and consume healthy foods. The community, funded by the Walmart Foundation and facilitated by Share Our Strength through its subsidiary Community Wealth Partners, is made up of 35+ organizations across the country focused on healthy food access and consumption. Learn more at: healthyfoodcommunity.org

Challenges in Accessing Benefits

Survey respondents named lack of physical location, technology, immigration status, and language barriers as challenges to accessing nutrition benefits such as Pandemic EBT, SNAP, and WIC.²



Survey respondents identified these barriers as a very significant challenge (“five” on a scale of five).

Physical Barriers

As many physical offices closed, people expressed uncertainty about the safety of leaving home to apply for benefits, letting people into their homes to assist them with the process, using public transportation to get to appointments, or going into grocery stores when benefits couldn’t be used for online grocery ordering or delivery.

Language Barriers

Much of the information about benefits enrollment is often only readily available in English. Social distancing and electronic enrollment has made it more difficult for people to find translation assistance when they need it (e.g., some web-based materials and portals were not prepared to offer multi-language functions).

Technology Barriers

The pandemic has highlighted the severity of the digital divide, and disparities in access to and use of technology impacted people’s ability to access nutrition benefits. People without reliable internet could not easily access online information, forms, or applications. When trying to reach offices by phone, people experienced long wait times, a situation especially challenging for people with limited mobile data plans. Older people and people experiencing homelessness have especially limited access to technology. Even when people did have reliable technology, many were hesitant to provide personal information over the phone or online.

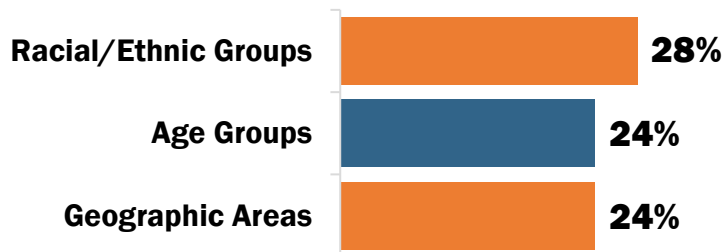
Immigration Status Barriers

Organizations working to help immigrants access benefits reported confusion over eligibility—especially for refugee families—and confusion over the public charge rule.³

² Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) is a federal program created in spring 2020 to supplement existing nutrition programs and provide meals to low-income families during closures of schools and childcare centers. The Supplemental Nutrition Access Program (SNAP) provides supplemental funding to low-income families’ food budgets. The Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides federal grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant and postpartum women and infants and children up to age 5 who are found to be at nutritional risk.

³ In February 2020, the Trump administration significantly expanded the criteria for whether applicants for permanent U.S. residency could be denied based on previous use of federal benefits. It created confusion and fear for immigrant and refugee families during the height of the pandemic. The Biden administration repealed this policy in March 2021. For more information on the public charge rule, see this update from Protecting Immigrant Families: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fbPuxkyf3oV5Zphor_uEyFunG_MOViQ2vfuxzSWX13Q/edit

Expanding Services to New Populations



Survey respondents said they expanded services within these groups/areas.

Survey respondents described the ways their organizations have expanded services to new populations. This included new racial or ethnic groups, expanded age groups, and diversified geographical areas. Many organizations saw people who were newly eligible for benefits due to the loss of employment or income. As the pandemic and its economic fallout disproportionately impacted Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) communities, survey respondents noted a disproportionate increase in need among BIPOC communities as well. Organizations also reported

increased need among undocumented individuals and families who were left out of federal pandemic relief assistance. In addition, organizations reported expanding their services to aid populations that had difficulty navigating the changes in benefits enrollment due to the pandemic, such as senior citizens and people with disabilities.

New Opportunities

The survey asked respondents to share successes they have experienced and new opportunities that emerged. Responses fell within four themes: new and expanded use of virtual approaches; increased emphasis on partnerships; new approaches to increase inclusivity; and expansion of long-standing approaches.

82%

said they increased virtual engagement methods

New and expanded use of virtual approaches.

Connecting virtually became more familiar not only among those providing benefit enrollment services, but also among those they serve. Virtual tools created efficiency and allowed organizations to expand their reach. Specific tools cited included client engagement tools (e.g., mass texting, interactive texting/chat bots), virtual document upload and application tools (made possible in some cases with waivers on in-person signature requirements), digital marketing (e.g., banner ads, website posts, and Facebook), and online referral keyword search programs, like Google Adwords.

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“We expanded our social media marketing which has expanded our outreach beyond the original communities we served and developed a customer service platform where people can call, chat, or message us live.”

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Increased emphasis on partnerships.

Survey respondents reported that solidifying working relationships with existing partners and forming new partnerships was critical to continuing to provide service. Technology made it easier to connect with partners. Forming new partnerships, especially with community-based organizations with strong relationships in the community, allowed organizations to continue to reach people and make new contacts.



“Expanding our referral program beyond our member agencies to other community partners, such as healthcare providers, schools, and local government agencies, and engaging virtually with county-based food and nutrition and human services councils have helped us reach households that do not use food pantries and might not have known about SNAP or that they could be eligible.”

“[We] translated our website and crucial documents into Spanish. Hired more Spanish speakers. Worked with partner agencies and trained them to do more outreach on their own rather than make referrals to our organization.”



New approaches to increase inclusivity.

Survey respondents cited accommodating different engagement days/times, offering diversified languages, increasing staff or volunteer support, increasing support for participants with differing physical and/or mental abilities, and increasing accessibility for a variety of cognitive abilities.

36%

said they accommodated different engagement times (evening/weekend options, expanded hours, etc.)

30%

said they offered diversified languages

25%

said they increased support for participants with differing physical and/or mental abilities

Expansion of long-standing approaches.

In addition to new approaches, many survey respondents increased emphasis on approaches they have always used to help reach people in need. They named approaches such as telephone outreach, distributing flyers through mail and in distribution boxes, traditional media outreach, and use of mobile pantries (with appropriate safety precautions).



“Flyer advertisements in community newspapers have been successful in generating calls to our Benefits Helpline.”

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic forced those that provide application assistance for federal nutrition assistance programs to approach their work differently. In-person assistance was limited or stopped completely in some instances. Staff needed to adapt quickly to meet the increased need in the community. This made service organizations think about new strategies to reach people where they are and continue to work together collaboratively.

As we are now in our second year of adapting our work to meet these changing times, survey respondents named challenges they think are likely to endure. The physical limitations caused by social distancing requirements will continue to create constraints, technology challenges will likely continue, and demand for services will likely remain high. Those working on the front lines reported experiencing burnout and exhaustion caused by the demands of the work and the challenges and isolation of working remotely.



“We've got to create a movement that makes it easier for the elderly (especially) to access federal benefits. A staff member just faxed 120 pages for a Medicaid application earlier this week. Most people wouldn't be able to navigate a SNAP application on their own, either. It's too cumbersome! The federal and state governments must put some faith in those of us on the front lines that we're screening and enrolling only those who are eligible and cut back on the red tape.”

Organizations working to assist with federal nutrition applications said they would benefit from the following:

- additional staffing;
- training for staff and volunteers on new approaches such as virtual outreach, technology, and cultural competency;
- resources to help staff stay abreast of policy changes;
- continued coordination and partnership in areas such as referrals and data sharing; and
- resources and support for staff members' mental health and well-being.

At the same time, changes brought on by the pandemic sparked collaboration and new ways of working that have streamlined processes for benefits enrollment and allowed organizations to reach new populations. As social distancing requirements in states begin to ease and many offices begin to reopen, it will be important to retain both what worked well in benefits enrollment pre-pandemic as well as the helpful innovations that have emerged in the past year in order to reach everyone who is eligible for benefits and make the enrollment process as accessible as possible.