Older Adult SNAP Access

Executive Summary

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AARP Foundation commissioned a study to understand how best to assist older adults in applying for and enrolling in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and to develop recommendations to improve SNAP participation rates. The study, conducted by Social Policy Research Associates, involved re-analysis of 193 in-depth interviews conducted in 2018 with older adults who are eligible for SNAP. The interviews were originally collected for the *Evaluation of Alternatives to Increase Elderly Access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)* report for the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service.

Profiles of SNAP Eligible Older Adults

The findings from the analysis were used to develop profiles that illustrate key factors that influence the relationships that many SNAP participants, applicants, and non-participants have with the program. These factors include geographic location, health status, and internet capabilities, as well as literacy level, veteran status, and level of social connection in the community. These profiles demonstrate that eligible older adults have a wide range of needs and situations, making it important to tailor outreach and enrollment support to their unique needs and life situations. The profiles also find that individuals who experience a life-changing event, such as a medical crisis or loss of income, are less likely to know about SNAP or to know they are eligible for SNAP, and therefore most likely to benefit from outreach that informs them about the SNAP program and offers application assistance.

The SNAP Journey

The analysis also developed a series of SNAP journeys to illustrate older adult experiences with the five main steps in the SNAP process: (1) Awareness/Outreach, (2) Application, (3) Interview/Eligibility Certification, (4) Benefit Usage, and (5) Periodic Checks and Recertification. These journeys highlight systemic barriers, service gaps, and participant “pain points” encountered by older adults, and their experiences with different policies and requirements. The journeys underscore how a mixture of individual attributes, like social isolation or low literacy, and the policies in place in particular locations, such as the Elderly Simplified Application Project, shape the ability of older adults to navigate SNAP.

Summary and Recommendations

The report suggests that several strategies may mitigate the barriers, service gaps, and pain points identified by the different profiles and participant journeys. These strategies include: (1) providing more targeted communications through USPS mail, social media, and medical personnel; (2) providing individualized assistance through older adult service providers; (3) expanding the number of states fully adopting all policy options included in the Elderly Simplified Application Project; (4) implementing a longer certification period nationwide; (5) assisting older adults with SNAP applications; (6) improving state and county SNAP outreach materials and notices to better meet the needs of older adults; (7) increasing awareness of medical expense deductions; and (8) integrating benefit systems to create a single application for multiple benefits.