



BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER

# Executive Summary

## Leading with Nutrition: Leveraging Federal Programs for Better Health

*Recommendations from the BPC SNAP Task Force*

In 2017, the Bipartisan Policy Center launched a 13-member task force to explore strategies for promoting healthy nutrition through public programs and policies related to food and health. The task force focused on opportunities to strengthen and improve the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which currently provides food assistance to more than 40 million Americans each month at an annual cost of approximately \$70 billion. As the nation's largest food program, SNAP and its predecessor, the Food Stamp Program, have played a vital role in alleviating hunger and poverty in the United States for decades.

While food security remains a key policy priority, recent years have also seen increased awareness of the direct link between diet quality and health—and growing concern about high rates of obesity and related chronic diseases in the United States. These trends have many complex causes, among them a food environment that often promotes less nutritious choices and changing work-life demands that make it more difficult, especially for many low-income families, to access fresh ingredients and prepare healthy meals. Against this backdrop, states and the federal government, which together provide millions of Americans—including many SNAP recipients—with health care coverage through Medicaid and Medicare, are in a unique position to make a difference. Their efforts to increase nutrition awareness, promote a healthier food environment, and support better diet choices, especially among vulnerable populations, could have far-ranging benefits for all Americans with a shared stake in improving health outcomes and reducing health care costs.

**The task force's specific recommendations, summarized below, target four distinct areas of opportunity: (1) prioritizing nutrition in SNAP, (2) strengthening the SNAP-Education Program, (3) aligning SNAP and Medicaid, and (4) coordinating federal and state agencies and programs.**

*The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides food assistance to more than*

  
**40 MILLION  
AMERICANS**  




*costing approximately*

**\$70 BILLION  
EACH YEAR**



*Efforts to increase nutrition awareness, promote a healthier food environment, and support better diet choices could have far-ranging benefits for all Americans and improve health outcomes and reduce health care costs.*



# Recommendations

## PRIORITIZE NUTRITION IN SNAP

### **1. Make diet quality a core SNAP objective.**

SNAP's current core objectives (food security and fiscal integrity) should be continued and supplemented with an additional, congressionally mandated focus on diet quality and healthy nutrition.

### **2. Eliminate sugar-sweetened beverages from the list of items that can be purchased with SNAP benefits.**

Specifically, the agriculture secretary, in consultation with the health and human services secretary, should produce a careful and precise definition of sugar-sweetened beverages to remove from the list of items that can be purchased with SNAP benefits.

### **3. Support healthy purchases by continuing and strengthening incentives for purchasing fruits and vegetables.**

Research shows that positive incentives for healthy eating, when paired with restrictions on SNAP-eligibility for sugar-sweetened beverages, are more effective than either intervention by itself. Pilot programs should continue to explore effective ways to encourage increased consumption of fruits and vegetables.

### **4. Authorize funds for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to conduct a range of evidence-based pilots to improve SNAP participants' diets.**

Specifically, the task force recommends \$100 million over five years to pilot comprehensive, multipronged interventions that address the core objectives of diet quality, food security, and fiscal responsibility.

### **5. Consolidate USDA authority over the agency's nutrition standards and nutrition-education efforts.**

The pending merger of the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) and the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP) is the ideal moment to consolidate responsibility for overseeing the FNS's nutrition and public health missions through a new FNS deputy administrator/CNPP director position.

### **6. Authorize the USDA to collect and share store-level data on all products purchased with SNAP funds.**

Collecting and sharing store-level SNAP food-purchase data would provide the appropriate level of detail to answer key public health and programmatic questions while avoiding the privacy concerns of collecting purchase data on individual recipients.

### **7. Strengthen SNAP retailer standards to improve the food environment for all shoppers.**

The USDA should implement new stocking rules that increase the availability of healthy foods at SNAP retailers. In addition, the USDA should study the feasibility of including evidence-based product-placement strategies and restrictions on the marketing of unhealthy products in SNAP retailer standards.



SNAP-Education TOOLKIT

## STRENGTHEN SNAP-EDUCATION

### 1. Create a robust SNAP-Education infrastructure to support implementation and evaluation of the program.

Priorities include enhancing technical assistance from the USDA regional offices, reducing planning and reporting burdens, restructuring state reports to focus on program impact, developing new tools and components, and sharing best practices.

### 2. Realign the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) to enable it and SNAP-Education to work synergistically while avoiding duplication.

Currently, the scope of EFNEP overlaps with that of SNAP-Education. Changing EFNEP's mission from direct nutrition education for the public to instead focus on (1) training SNAP-Education administrators and programmatic staff on nutrition, physical activity, and obesity prevention; and (2) evaluating obesity-prevention strategies and interventions would help states implement more effective, evidence-based programs for improving diet quality among SNAP recipients.



## ALIGN SNAP AND MEDICAID

### 1. Coordinate SNAP and Medicaid to improve nutrition and diet-related health outcomes.

The USDA and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should use their waiver authorities to encourage states to experiment with promising strategies for improving health and nutrition through SNAP.

### 2. Work across congressional agriculture and health committees to better align SNAP, Medicaid, Medicare, and other federal programs to improve the health of participants.

Joint hearings and select committees could be helpful in identifying potential synergies; a more ambitious and transformational step would be to move toward portfolio budgeting in which all nutrition- and health-related programs, expenditures, and tax policies are considered together.

### 3. Prioritize nutrition within the Medicaid program.

This could comprise expanding screening and counseling services, testing the use of incentives to improve nutrition, and including outcome-based measures of malnutrition in quality-based payment systems.



## COORDINATE FEDERAL AND STATE AGENCIES AND PROGRAMS

### 1. Align programs and data collection related to food and nutrition across the USDA and other federal agencies.

Food assistance, nutrition education, and research programs should be aligned across federal agencies, including the Health Resources and Services Administration, the Indian Health Service, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Defense Department, the Veteran's Health Administration, and the Commerce Department.

### 2. Reduce barriers to sharing data and coordinating outreach across state-administered federal programs.

Federal agencies should clarify how states may use and share data generated by administering different federal programs; in addition, the Office of Management and Budget should explore methods for allocating state administrative costs that promote more data sharing and more efficient outreach.

### 3. Adopt modern technologies for state program administration.

The ability to contract with a broader range of transactions processors would help states modernize SNAP electronic benefits transfer technology and reduce program costs. Updated benefits management and enrollment systems could also improve data sharing and program performance.

# Conclusion

By providing food security for millions of low-income Americans, SNAP is already delivering important public health benefits. But research also points to substantial opportunities for improving diet quality and health among SNAP recipients. Given the clear links that exist between nutrition, chronic disease, and rising health care costs, task force members believe these opportunities must not go untapped. We recognize that some of our proposals may be controversial and that broader and deeper changes will be needed over time to achieve a healthy food environment and healthy nutrition for all Americans.






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Clearly, there is bipartisan interest in addressing the intertwined challenges of health and poverty, and broad support for the proposition that public programs should deliver maximum benefits. We are confident that these recommendations can provide a foundation for strengthening SNAP, SNAP-Education, and other federal programs in ways that improve nutrition, promote better health outcomes, and reduce health care costs while continuing to effectively meet the food assistance needs of America's most vulnerable citizens.



Read the full report and recommendations at:  
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