

Leveraging Data and Streamlining Processes
Recommendations for SNAP in the 2023 Farm Bill

Benefits Data Trust (BDT)
June 2023

Contact:

Rachel Gershon, J.D. M.P.H.
Associate Director of Policy
rgershon@bdtrust.org

Ki`i Kimhan Powell, PhD
Senior Director of Policy
kpowell@bdtrust.org

Summary of recommendations

1. Leverage Data

#	Recommendation	Page #
1A	Promote data-sharing between state agencies by requiring the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to collaborate on guidance	4

2. Streamline Processes

#	Recommendations	Page #
2A	Authorize USDA to centralize income verification functions	5
2B	Align verification processes by leveraging self-attestation	6
2C	Add a state option to allow telephonic signatures to be recorded in writing (rather than requiring a waiver)	6
2D	Require USDA to study the landscape of states adopting mobile-friendly features on their websites and accepting mobile document uploads; offer technical assistance to states	7

3. Support Effective Outreach

#	Recommendations	Page #
3A	Allow state outreach plans to pay for number of applications submitted rather than reimbursing costs	8
3B	Allow initial state outreach plan payments to be prospective	8
3C	BDT supports increased outreach via the Outreach Pilot Programs for Older Adults, Kinship Families, and Adults with Disabilities in the Senior Hunger Prevention Act (S1036)	9

4. Modernize Quality Control (QC)

#	Recommendations	Page #
4A	Emphasize access measures in the accountability framework	9
4B	Direct USDA to create a Technical Assistance Center for Quality Control	9
4C	Permit states to align QC verification rules with selected policy options	10
4D	Permit states to leverage telephonic interviewing in the QC process	10
4E	Leverage transparency for a more effective QC process; BDT supports the American Public Human Services Association's (APHSA's) request to require that annual updates to the 310 Handbook go through a public comment period before going into effect	10

5. Give States Flexibility to Improve Customer Experience

#	Recommendations	Page #
5A	Make it easier for states to understand their options for improving benefit access; BDT recommends that the Farm Bill require USDA to publish all SNAP state plans and waiver approval documents, following the example of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS)	11
5B	Establish a Customer Experience Demonstration Project	11

6. Modernize Requirements for Specific Populations

#	Recommendations	Page #
6A	To support older adults, establish the Standard Medical Deduction, Combined Application Project, and Elderly Simplified Application Project as permanent state options	12
6B	Provide pathways and outreach for individuals enrolled in school or training; BDT recommends that the Farm Bill modernize eligibility for college students, require USDA to coordinate with the Department of Education on data sharing and outreach, and allow for a state option to average a student's work hours	12
6C	Eliminate SNAP time limits for those considered Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents	14
6D	Eliminate the five-year bar that disqualifies many lawful permanent residents from receiving benefits	14
6E	Prioritize the recommendations of Native communities, including through strengthening the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) and exploring ways that leverage both SNAP and FDPIR programs at the same time for improved nutrition security	15
6F	Add a state option to allow SNAP application processes to start before release from incarceration and encourage Employment and Training activities structured for the re-entry population	15
6G	Eliminate the federal lifetime ban on SNAP benefits for individuals with a drug-related felonies	15

Introduction

Benefits Data Trust (BDT) is a national non-profit that helps people live more independently by creating smarter ways to access essential benefits and services. BDT partners with states and health care, higher education, and training organizations to (1) Provide outreach and assistance to individuals and (2) Modernize the system for efficiency and equity.

We write these Farm Bill comments in strong support of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), an essential resource for families with positive impacts that ripple across communities. SNAP is linked to decreased mortality, reduced hospitalizations, and increased economic output - from rural America to suburban and urban centers.¹

In addition to providing essential support to families, SNAP has historically boasted a low fraud rate – as low as 14 in 10,000 households.² Congress has the opportunity to advance *true* program integrity in SNAP through a system that continues to prevent fraud, errors, and abuse while ensuring that eligible people receive SNAP assistance efficiently and equitably by reducing red tape. Please find below our recommendations for the 2023 Farm Bill reauthorization.

1. Leverage data for more efficient analysis, outreach, and verification

States can leverage the data available to them to improve access to SNAP for eligible people. **BDT is seeking clear cross-agency federal guidance to assist states in using data to improve SNAP access.**

Families in crisis do not always know the assistance available to them. Amid juggling work and caregiving responsibilities, individuals – particularly seniors and workers - sometimes miss that SNAP is an option.³ By sharing data between state agencies, states can better reach people at the point in time they need it most. When Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) researchers ran an evaluation of BDT’s work using shared data to run data-driven outreach, they found that SNAP take-up among low-income older adults *tripled* enrollment.⁴ By using data available to them, states can conduct analysis to understand their population, identify

¹ United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service. [USDA’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\) Contributed to Rural Economic Output, Jobs Following the Great Recession](#) (December 7, 2021). Seth A. Berkowitz et. al. [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Health Care Use in Older Adults](#). *Annals of Internal Medicine* 174:12 (2021). Colleen M. Heflin, Samuel J. Ingram, and James P. Ziliak. [The Effect of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program on Mortality](#). *Health Affairs* (November 2019).

² Daniel R. Cline, Randy Alison Issenberg, Congressional Research Service. [Errors and Fraud in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#) (September 25, 2018) at page 10 (“for every 10,000 households participating in SNAP, about 14 contained a recipient who was investigated and determined to have committed fraud that resulted in an overpayment that the state agency required the household to repay”)

³ USDA. [Trends in USDA Supplemental Nutrition Program Participation Rates: Fiscal Year 2017 to Fiscal Year 2020](#) (December 2022)

⁴ Amy Finkelstein and Matthew J. Notowidigdo. [Take-Up and Targeting: Experimental Evidence from SNAP](#). *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*. 134(3):1505-1556 (August 2019)

individuals likely eligible for SNAP, employ “data-driven” outreach, and streamline the verification process.⁵

Despite the promise of data-sharing, some state officials find it difficult to engage in data-sharing absent clearer federal cross-agency guidance around the practice. In the summer of 2022, BDT and the Center for Health Care Strategies conducted a 50-state survey of SNAP and Medicaid agencies. Respondents from 83 percent of states (39 of 47 responding) reported that they would like more federal guidance to help facilitate data-sharing.⁶

Based on these survey findings (and BDT’s experience with 40 data-sharing agreements with cities, states, healthcare entities, and institutions of higher education), BDT requests that the Farm Bill **promote data-sharing between state agencies by requiring the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to collaborate on guidance to facilitate data-sharing between state agencies for data driven outreach and verification purposes.** Such guidance could include: (1) A model template for data sharing agreements that has been vetted by both agencies; (2) Examples of states who are engaged in innovative data-sharing projects that USDA and HHS support; (3) A description of what data can be shared and under what circumstances; (4) A description of when consent is required for data-sharing and when it is not; and (5) Best practices for common issues that arise with integrated eligibility systems.

2. Streamline processes for states

State SNAP agencies are facing unprecedented workforce shortages, exacerbated by processes that make it harder for both workers and individuals to efficiently and effectively engage in the program. Misaligned rules make extra work for everyone. **BDT requests that the Farm Bill streamline processes through:**

2A. Authorizing USDA to centralize income verification functions. Federal data sources such as the Federal Data Services Hub offer secure, verified information that states and the federal government can use to verify eligibility in Medicaid, Advanced Premium Tax Credits, and the Basic Health Program. And yet, SNAP state agencies are left to negotiate for financial verification vendors on their own, with high costs per verification that vary by state and county. BDT recommends that Congress establish a federal data source for SNAP eligibility verification to decrease cost across government agencies, decrease the paperwork burden on individuals, and relieve pressure off the state workforce. **BDT supports the American Public Human Service Association’s (APHSA’s) recommendation for the Farm Bill**

⁵ Jeneé Y. Saffold, Bridget Gibbons Straughan, and Alissa Weiss, BDT. [Data Sharing to Build Effective and Efficient Benefits Systems: A Playbook for State and Local Agencies](#) (January 2023). See Jillian Humphries, BDT. [Data Coordination at SNAP and Medicaid Agencies: A National Landscape Analysis](#) (January 2023) (A collaboration between BDT and the Center for Health Care Strategies)

⁶ Unpublished result from the 50-state survey. For additional results from the survey, see Humphries 2023, above at note 5.

to direct the USDA to establish and maintain a national third-party income verification database that makes the most up-to-date earned income data available to states.⁷

As with all data sources, there will be times when the centralized data source described above will contain incorrect information that could affect SNAP eligibility. New income verification methods should be paired with adequate notice to the individual with information clearly communicated and an opportunity to dispute the information found in the data source.

2B. Aligning verification processes by leveraging self-attestation. When a program requires more verification than is necessary, it reduces *true* program integrity, increases administrative burden, and decreases effectiveness. In BDT’s contact center, we see how document requests are a barrier to obtaining coverage for eligible individuals. To obtain documents, our clients often must take time off from work, ask third parties to gather records (sometimes two or three times if the records received don’t contain the required information), and wait for mail delivery. On the state agency side, staff are required to painstakingly review those documents in order to verify eligibility (sometimes even in cases where pre-verified sources exist). **BDT supports a targeted approach to verification, leveraging data-matching and self-attestation, followed by verification only if the results are questionable.** One such approach, which BDT supports, is the approach taken in Senator Bob Casey’s Senior Hunger Prevention Act of 2023.⁸ The Act’s language is similar to an effective approach for self-attestation and reasonable compatibility verification in Medicaid.⁹ Such an approach targets state resources at cases most likely to be inaccurate, better protecting true program integrity.

2C. Adding a state option to allow telephonic signatures to be recorded in writing (rather than requiring a waiver). Remote application assistance is a cornerstone for secure, efficient SNAP administration. It can be leveraged to address staffing challenges and reach clients, particularly in rural communities and for people with limited mobility.¹⁰ As described above, a randomized field study conducted by economists at MIT published in the peer-reviewed Quarterly Journal of Economics found that data-driven outreach combined with

⁷ American Public Human Services Association (APHSA). [2023 Farm Bill A Roadmap for Building a More Effective, Resilient, and Customer-Centered SNAP Program](#) (March 2023); See Section 11(e)(3) of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (FNA) (7 USC 2020(e))

⁸ Section 3(b) of the [Senior Hunger Prevention Act of 2023](#) (S.1036) would revise 7 U.S.C. 2020 to state: “A State agency determining the eligibility for an applicant household under ESAP shall, notwithstanding section 11(e)(3)— (A) to the maximum extent practicable, use data matching for income verification and household size; and (B) (i) allow self-declaration by the applicant of the information required under section 273.2(f) of title 7, Code of Federal Regulations (or successor regulations); but (ii) verify, prior to certification of the household, factors of eligibility provided by the applicant that the State agency determines are questionable.”

⁹ 42 CFR 435.945(a)

¹⁰ Sonal Ambegaokar et. al., Social Interest Solutions and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. [Improving Customer Service in Health and Human Services Through Technology](#) (August 23, 2018)

telephonic application assistance tripled senior enrollment in SNAP.¹¹ BDT has conducted remote telephonic application assistance for 17 years, including following requirements for logging and keeping an audio recording of each signature for SNAP applications. While BDT has been able to successfully leverage technology to capture and store audio signature recordings, such a requirement represents a high financial and technological bar for states and non-profit enrollment assisters. USDA has successfully allowed states to use cost-effective means for capturing signatures in writing, including implementing a waiver last fall.¹² **BDT supports APHSA’s request to make it a permanent state option to permit telephonic signature to be recorded in writing.**¹³ This option, with appropriate safeguards, would potentially save states millions of dollars in added technological costs. Such an option should follow current practice for allowing states to accept telephonic applications collected by trusted third party vendors, ensuring robust and efficient public-private partnerships.¹⁴

2D. Requiring USDA to study mobile-friendly features on state websites and mobile document uploads. Adopting processes that work for smartphones leads to less red tape and more equity. For example, when Michigan simplified its Medicaid application and included “mobile-friendly features”¹⁵, the state saw decreased application time and decreased determination time.¹⁶ Research conducted by the Pew Research Center found that more than one in seven American adults are “smartphone-only” internet users, meaning that they own a smartphone but do not have traditional home broadband service. Low-income, Black, and Hispanic adults are more likely to be “smartphone-only” internet users.¹⁷ Yet, when Code for America surveyed state SNAP websites in 2023, it found that (though states have improved in recent years), less than 6 in 10 were mobile-friendly.¹⁸

Additionally, allowing for multiple modalities for accepting documents (in person, mail, electronic submission, facsimile) can facilitate an individual getting documents in on time and speed up a state’s processing time. Encouraging or requiring that states offer mobile upload (where an individual can take a picture of the requested document with their

¹¹ Finkelstein 2019. Above at note 4.

¹² USDA. [SNAP Temporary Administrative Waivers Available to State Agencies to Support Unwinding from the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency](#) (August 15, 2022)

¹³ APHSA 2023. Above at note 7; See also Section 11(e)(2)(C)(iii)(I) of FNA (7 USC 2020(e)(2)(C)(iii)(I)) and the SNAP Act of 2021 (HR 5048, 117th Congress)

¹⁴ 7 CFR 273.2; United States Department of Agriculture. SNAP Telephonic Signature Guidance (May 12, 2014); See also USDA. Accepting SNAP Applicant and Client Signatures Electronically (April 21, 2016)

¹⁵ As described by the Department of Labor and Code for America, mobile-friendly features include information scaled to fit a smartphone screen and accessible design. Department of Labor. [Ways to Approach Mobile-Friendliness](#). Dustin Palmer, Code for America. [The Missed Opportunity in Online Benefits Applications: Mobile First](#) (April 3, 2019)

¹⁶ Code for America. [Bringing Social Safety Net Benefits Online: Examining Online Platforms for all 50 States](#) (August 2019)

¹⁷ Pew Research Center. [Demographics of Internet and Home Broadband Usage in the United States](#)

¹⁸ Code for America. [The Benefits Enrollment Field Guide](#) (2023) (56% of states have mobile-friendly SNAP enrollment websites).

smartphone and submit) would further help address the issue of short document submission timeframes. **BDT recommends that the Farm Bill require USDA to study the landscape of states adopting mobile-friendly features on their websites and accepting mobile document uploads, and require that USDA offer technical assistance to states.**¹⁹

3. Support effective outreach accessible by local community groups

True program integrity is promoted when vetted, efficient outreach is allowed. The Farm Bill offers a SNAP state outreach plan model with effective features, such as allowing states to prioritize and focus on specific locations or populations and allowing for multiple-year contracts (which allows grantees to evaluate efforts and adjust to improve where needed). These features allow a variety of types of organizations to engage in state outreach plans. That said, certain State Outreach Plan features introduce barriers for participation, especially among local community-based organizations. This is important because local organizations can provide more effective outreach, with trusted relationships, informed by the culture and language of the local community.²⁰ **BDT requests that the Farm Bill promote effective outreach by:**

3A. Allowing state outreach plans to pay for the number of applications submitted rather than reimbursing costs. Under the current structure, organizations engaged in a state outreach plan are paid according to costs incurred, rather than outcomes provided. This cost reimbursement model leads to complex accounting requirements that must be staffed to ensure compliance. BDT requests that the Farm Bill allow for outcomes-based payments, for example a payment per application submitted.²¹ This ensures that the federal government gets value for its outreach payments.

3B. Allowing initial state outreach plan payments to be prospective. Under the current structure, organizations engaged in state outreach plans are paid retroactively, meaning that an organization must front the costs for outreach before getting reimbursed for 50% of eligible expenses. There are other models available, where grantees can draw down some funds ahead of time, with reconciliation occurring on a regular basis.²² This model would

¹⁹ See Sections 11(e)(2)(B)(III) and 11(e)(3) of the Food and Nutrition Act (7 USC 2020(e)(2) and (3))

²⁰ Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured. [Key Lessons from Medicaid and CHIP for Outreach and Enrollment Under the Affordable Care Act](#) (June 2013) (finding that “[c]ommunity-based organizations are able to provide culturally competent and trusted information and assistance at convenient times and locations,” noting that community based assisters can provide sustained contact with families over time, help reduce stigma, clarify eligibility rules, provide enrollment support, and improve take-up of coverage)

²¹ This is a payment to an organization, rather than an individual assister, and does not violate the prohibition in 7 C.F.R. §277.4(b)(6). For more suggestions for how the grant process could better serve the interests of improving access and encouraging coordination between programs, see the March 13, 2023 letter to OMB regarding Uniform Guidance for Grants and Agreements from the American Public Human Services Association, State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO), BDT, and others. Text available upon request.

²² For example, SNAP Process and Technology Improvement Grants allow organizations to draw down funds in advance, with quarterly reconciliation.

reduce administrative burden, free up capital, and allow more local non-profits to engage in SNAP outreach.

3C. Funding outreach for older adults. Older adults have persistently low SNAP participation rates. At the same time, as inflation cuts into fixed income budgets, rates of malnutrition and hunger among older adults are rising.²³ **BDT supports increased outreach via the Outreach Pilot Programs for Older Adults, Kinship Families, and Adults with Disabilities in the Senior Hunger Prevention Act.**²⁴

4. Modernize Quality Control

Quality control is an essential part of ensuring program integrity. As the SNAP program has changed, certain parts of the existing quality control process have become misaligned, causing extra stress on a thinly staffed workforce and setting up unnecessary hurdles to access food assistance. **BDT requests that the Farm Bill modernize the quality control system by:**

4A. Emphasizing access measures in the accountability framework. While SNAP’s current performance management system successfully operates to keep error and fraud rates low, the system could be improved in measuring how well SNAP reaches eligible families – promoting *true* program integrity. **BDT supports the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities’ (CBPP’s) proposal to redesign SNAP performance measurement to be more human centered.**²⁵ BDT asks Congress to promote the collection of data on application and recertification denials to better understand why people are unable to be determined eligible and to identify areas where individuals may be facing barriers to enrollment.²⁶

4B. Directing the USDA to create a Technical Assistance Center for Quality Control. State officials express to us that they have access to data showing where systems are encountering issues, but they do not have the resources to find the root cause of issues and make proactive plans to address them. Real-time, actionable technical assistance would decrease the administrative burden for states. **BDT supports APHSA’s proposal to direct USDA to create a Technical Assistance Center for Quality Control, separate from quality control and evaluation staff.** As envisioned by APHSA, this technical assistance would allow states to spot statistical trends and engage in root cause analysis and proactively address

²³ Phillip Reese. [The Rate of Older Californians Dying of Malnutrition has Accelerated](#). Kaiser Health News (April 13, 2023) (“Malnutrition deaths are common across America, killing at least one in 10,000 seniors annually from 2020 through 2022 in all but two states.”)

²⁴ Section 4 of the [Senior Hunger Prevention Act of 2023](#) (S.1036)

²⁵ Ty Jones Cox, CBPP. [Building on SNAP’s Effectiveness in the Farm Bill: Steps to Protecting and Strengthening the Program](#). Senate testimony Before the Senate Agriculture Committee’s Subcommittee on Food and Nutrition, Specialty Crops, Organics, and Research (April 19, 2023)

²⁶ These denials should be broken by standardized reason (e.g., missed interview). Demographics should include race, ethnicity, age, language, and disability status. Standardizing denial reasons and demographics will help identify national trends.

issues. BDT recommends that the Technical Assistance Center be centralized at USDA's Food and Nutrition Services to ensure consistent messaging and advice across regions.

4C. Permitting states to align Quality Control (QC) verification rules with selected policy options. As states have exercised flexibility in administering SNAP using various options and waivers, the QC process has remained rigid, asking questions not relevant to eligibility. **BDT supports APHSA's recommendation to permit states to align QC verification rules with selected policy options.**²⁷ Allowing the QC verification process to follow the actual rules in place at the state level would reduce administrative burden, cost, and stress on the workforce.

4D. Permitting states to leverage telephonic interviewing in the QC process. In the current structure,²⁸ the QC process includes an interview in person at the SNAP member's house. Increasing the allowability and utilization of telephone interviews for QC will better accommodate those receiving SNAP without compromising accuracy while also reducing administrative costs. Incomplete QC cases are more likely to be households that have earned income.²⁹ Work schedules create barriers to coordinating in-person interview appointments. A telephone interview option reduces this barrier and also serves to protect the safety of QC reviewers and the security of client information that could be exposed in the home.

4E. Leveraging transparency for a more effective QC process. The "310 handbook" governs the state agency QC process. BDT hears from state officials about how processes outlined in the 310 handbook don't align with how SNAP operates. For example, states are required to deny claims exactly on the 30th day (not the 29th or the 31st), even though other requirements are inconsistent with this timeframe. As discussed above in Section 4C, the QC process as outlined in the 310 handbook requires a higher eligibility threshold than exists in the actual state rules. As a result, QC findings are often not relevant to the day-to-day operations of the state SNAP program, and eligible individuals who are selected to be interviewed as part of the QC process are discouraged from accessing benefits. Given the complex and varied nature of SNAP eligibility, the process under which the 310 handbook is revised should be subject to transparency, to allow stakeholders to bring up concerns before rules are finalized. **BDT supports APHSA's request to require that annual updates to the 310 Handbook go through a public comment period before going into effect.**

²⁷ APHSA 2023, above at note 7.

²⁸ Disregarding any flexibilities due to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency.

²⁹ USDA. [Enhancing SNAP Quality Control Completion Rates](#) (January 2016).

5. Give states flexibility to improve customer experience

BDT requests that the Farm Bill support states in their SNAP customer experience improvement projects by:

5A. Making it easier for states to understand their options for improving benefit access.

There are a myriad of state options and waivers that states can pursue to streamline eligibility and enrollment. Federal agencies have innovated ways to help states understand the options available to them. For example, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) hosts a dynamic set of tools to share waiver and state plan documentation.³⁰ USDA has published a partial list of waivers and options through its website on COVID-19 state SNAP waivers and its State Options Report, which have been enormously helpful in providing accurate information to clients and understanding SNAP eligibility. **BDT recommends that the Farm Bill requires USDA to publish all SNAP state plans and waiver approval documents, following the example of CMS.**³¹ These documents can provide states and other policy makers with valuable peer learning regarding how innovation can improve SNAP and what USDA will and will not allow.

5B. Establishing a Customer Experience Demonstration Project. The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic required unprecedented ingenuity from state SNAP agencies to connect eligible individuals to assistance when the need was highest. Due to this disruption, we now know much more about what works and does not work in program administration. **BDT supports APHSA’s proposal to build on this knowledge and establish a Customer Experience Demonstration Project that allows states to customize pilots to test and evaluate changes that improve customer service.** Such a demonstration project would be designed to improve customer experience and would allow states to test ways to streamline processes (e.g., interviews, certification periods, and reporting), tested with a national independent evaluation.³² There should be safeguards to ensure that these projects lead to improved customer experience and not reduced access to benefits.

6. Modernize requirements for specific populations to improve access and reduce administrative burden

In addition to process and performance improvements listed above, changes to processes and eligibility requirements for specific populations with low participation rates are needed for improving access and reducing administrative burden. Taken together, these changes will reduce SNAP state agency workload, shorten forms, and facilitate simplified, accurate information about the SNAP program that promotes true program integrity.

³⁰ Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). [Medicaid State Plan Amendments](#) (website containing approved Medicaid State Plan amendments, by state and topic). Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. [State Waiver List](#) (website containing 1115 waiver requests, approvals, reports, and evaluation).

³¹ See 42 C.F.R. 431.416(f); CMS websites, above at note 30.

³² APHSA 2023, above at note 7.

6A. Address the low participation rates among older adults. SNAP is a powerful tool for addressing health care needs in older adults; among older adults enrolled in Medicaid and Medicare, SNAP has been associated with lower Medicaid costs and lower hospital and nursing home utilization rates.³³ **In order to address the low participation rates among older adults, BDT supports APHSA’s recommendation to establish the Standard Medical Deduction, Combined Application Project, and Elderly Simplified Application Project as permanent state options.**³⁴ Moving these available tools that have been used by states across the political spectrum³⁵ to state plan authority relieves administrative pressure on state and federal administration, while ensuring pathways to access.

6B. Provide pathways and outreach for individuals enrolled in school or training.

Increasingly, today’s college students are parents or caregivers, the first in their families to go to college, financially independent, or seeking retraining for a new career. Facing unique stressors as they juggle responsibilities at home and at school, millions of these students struggle to pay for college and afford basic needs such as food, childcare, housing, and healthcare each year. Yet in 2018, the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) conservatively estimated that nearly two million students were eligible for but not participating in SNAP and found that just 31 percent of college students who meet SNAP income limits reported receiving SNAP, a much lower share than the general population.³⁶

Students, just like the rest of the population, have to meet SNAP income, asset, and immigration eligibility rules. In addition to meeting these rules, college students must meet an exemption, in what the GAO characterizes as one of the most complex areas of SNAP eligibility. This complexity can deter students from applying and result in inadvertent denials and additional work for state staff. A broad range of organizations³⁷ have supported changing the Farm Bill to improve SNAP access to college students, in addition to two-thirds of adults (as assessed by a Morning Consult poll commissioned by the Bipartisan Policy

³³ Berkowitz 2021, above at note 1 (Higher enrollment by older adults in SNAP is associated with fewer hospital and long-term care admissions as well as emergency room visits – and an estimated Medicaid cost-savings of \$2,360 per person annually). Heflin 2019, above at note 1. (Finding SNAP receipt associated with a one to two percentage drop in mortality).

³⁴ APHSA 2023, above at note 7. See also Olivia Dean, Rachel Bleiweiss-Sande, and Andrew Gothro, AARP, and Mathematica. [Solutions: State Policies Associated with Higher Participation](#) (July 2022)

³⁵ Dean 2022, above at note 34.

³⁶ GAO. [Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits](#) (December 2018)

³⁷ Support for improving SNAP access for college students has been expressed by the Biden Administration in its White House Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. A wide number of organizations have also supported SNAP access for college students, including the American Association of Community Colleges, the American Council on Education, the Association of Community College Trustees, the Hope Center, APHSA, the Bipartisan Policy Center, the Center for Higher Ed Policy and Practice, Higher Learning Advocates, the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, the National College Attainment Network, and uAspire.

Center).³⁸ BDT recommends that Congress modernize eligibility for college students in ways that:

- (1) Ensures eligibility for the students most likely to experience food insecurity, including undergraduates deemed independent and students with no expected family contribution;
- (2) Simplifies SNAP eligibility for students, schools, and SNAP administrators, including by making it easier to identify and verify student eligibility; and
- (3) Does not expand eligibility to students with sufficient access to family income or wealth.

BDT recommends that Congress consider the following additional exemptions for college students:

- Students with **any dependents under the age of 18**, which aligns the parenting exemption with that for SNAP recipients subject to time limits under “Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents” (ABAWD) rules;
- Students who are enrolled in another **means-tested benefit** or who have an immediate family member enrolled in another means-tested benefit;
- Students with **\$0 Expected Family Contribution (as determined on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)) or the equivalent student aid index** – they are the financial aid recipients with the highest level of financial need and represent students determined under bipartisan legislation as methodology to determine those families whose income is so low that they cannot be expected to contribute anything towards their child’s college education; and
- **Undergraduate students who are considered independent** for the purposes of federal student aid include veterans, active-duty military personnel, students with a history in the foster care system, and older students.

In addition to adding exemptions for college students to access food assistance, there are a number of policies that can promote accurate information provided to students facing food insecurity. **BDT recommends that the Farm Bill:**

- Require states to clearly communicate SNAP student exemptions on their website, train their staff on SNAP eligibility for college students, and collaborate with colleges on outreach;
- Allow for a state option to average a student’s work hours over the course of a month;
- Reframe the SNAP student exclusion in the positive; and
- Require USDA and Department of Education to share data, identify students who have applied for federal financial aid and may be eligible for SNAP, and coordinate

³⁸ Bipartisan Policy Center. [Making Food and Nutrition Security a SNAP: Recommendations for the 2023 Farm Bill](#) (January 2023)

efforts to provide assistance to institutions of higher education in regularly providing outreach to students and facilitating enrollment of students in these programs. In particular, requiring state SNAP agencies to share data with the Department of Education would allow for more effective outreach and research.³⁹

6C. Eliminate SNAP time limits for those considered Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD). Since the passage of the 2018 farm bill, new evidence has come to light about the failure of ABAWD time limits in promoting work.⁴⁰ When similar requirements began in Medicaid, there were findings that the administrative costs *exceeded* any savings captured from the program, and findings that thousands of individuals *who met the work requirement* were slated to lose coverage because of the administrative hoops required report that they met the work requirement.⁴¹ **Given the new evidence that has come to light about the ineffectiveness of time limits, BDT joins CBPP, CLASP, and FRAC in requesting that the Farm Bill eliminate SNAP time limit for those individuals who are in the ABAWD category.**

6D. Eliminate the five-year bar that disqualifies many lawful permanent residents from receiving benefits. SNAP-eligible immigrants and citizen children in immigrant households experience low SNAP participation – and that low participation rate has been connected to the five-year ban for lawful permanent residents.⁴² A big barrier to addressing access among SNAP-eligible immigrants is the complexity of the SNAP immigration eligibility rules – they are hard to understand, administer, and navigate. Meanwhile, lawfully present immigrants in the five-year waiting period face hardship while building their economic future from the foundation up. A recent Morning Consult poll commissioned by the Bipartisan Policy Center found that a majority of U.S. adults agree that immigrants who are lawfully present should be able to participate in SNAP if other eligibility criteria are met.⁴³ **BDT supports the**

³⁹ See, for reference, Sec.483(c)(3) of the Higher Education Act (amended by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021), which allows the Department of Education to “enter into data sharing agreements with the appropriate Federal or State agencies to conduct outreach regarding, and connect applicants directly with, [certain] means-tested Federal benefit programs.”

⁴⁰ Laura Wheton et. al., Urban Institute. [The Impact of SNAP Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents \(ABAWD\) Time Limit Reinstatement in Nine States](#) (July 2021) (Finding that the time limit reduced SNAP participation for participants potentially subject to the time limit but does not substantially increase work or earnings).

⁴¹ Ben Sommers et. al. [Medicaid Work Requirements in Arkansas: Two-Year Impacts on Coverage, Employment, and Affordability of Care](#). Health Affairs 39:9 (September 2020) (Arkansas’ Medicaid work requirements did not result in higher employment; rather, it was associated with medical debt, delayed care, and reduced medication adherence). Jen Wagner, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. [GAO: Restrictive Medicaid Waivers Have Steep Administrative Costs](#) (October 22, 2019) (Medicaid work requirements administrative costs ranged from \$6.1 million in New Hampshire to \$271.6 million in Kentucky). Madeline Guth and MaryBeth Musumeci, Kaiser Family Foundation. [An Overview of Medicaid Work Requirements: What Happened under the Trump and Biden Administrations?](#) (May 3, 2022) (Imminent and actual overage losses ranged from 25% - 33% of beneficiaries subject to new Medicaid beneficiaries before work reporting requirements were suspended)

⁴² USDA 2022. Above at note 3. USDA. [Who is Leaving the Food Stamp Program?](#) (March 1999)

⁴³ Bipartisan Policy Center 2023, above at note 38.

Bipartisan Policy Center's recommendation to repeal the five-year restriction that bars immigrants who are lawful permanent residents from accessing SNAP.

6E. Strengthen access to food assistance for Native communities. The 2018 Farm Bill made strides towards strengthening food assistance for native communities, and the 2023 Farm Bill has the same opportunity to build on these commitments. **BDT asks that the Farm Bill prioritize the recommendations of Native communities, including through strengthening the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) and exploring ways that leverage both SNAP and FDPIR programs at the same time for improved nutrition security.**⁴⁴

6F. Facilitate successful re-entry for incarcerated individuals. Nineteen out of 20 incarcerated individuals return to the community at some point.⁴⁵ Access to public benefits after release has been linked to lower recidivism.⁴⁶ That point of re-entry can be fraught with danger – including a sky-high risk of death in the first few weeks after release; Quick access to essential services, including SNAP, can help.⁴⁷ States and localities, including South Dakota and New York City, have exercised a waiver option to start application processes pre-release.⁴⁸ **BDT asks that the Farm Bill facilitates quick access to SNAP for individuals experiencing re-entry, including by allowing a state plan option for application processes to start before release and encouraging Employment and Training activities structured for this population.** Such flexibility is emerging in Medicaid, lowering the administrative burden on states by allowing a longer runway to enrollment prior to release and engaging individuals in services while they are preparing for re-entry.⁴⁹

6G. Eliminate the federal lifetime ban on SNAP benefits for individuals with a drug-related felony conviction. Current federal law compels states to pass a statute to avoid lifetime bans for individuals with felony drug convictions. Despite evidence that access to benefits reduces recidivism and improves health, individuals with drug-related felonies face a web of

⁴⁴ See Native Farm Bill Coalition. [The Farm Bill and Indian Country: Assessing the Present and Looking Ahead](#)

⁴⁵ Ebony N. Ross et. al. [Prison and Jail Reentry and Health](#). *Health Affairs* (October 28, 2021)

⁴⁶ Crystal Yang. [Does Public Assistance Reduce Recidivism?](#) *American Economic Review*, 107 (5): 551-55 (2017) (“public assistance eligibility for drug offenders reduces one-year recidivism rates by 10 percent.”)

⁴⁷ Ingrid A. Binswanger et. al. [Release from Prison – A High Risk of Death for Former Inmates](#). *New England Journal of Medicine* 356:157-165 (January 11, 2007). Massachusetts Department of Public Health. [An Assessment of Fatal and Nonfatal Opioid Overdoses in Massachusetts” \(2011-2015\)](#) (published August 2017) (Individuals recently released from incarceration face 120 times higher risk of fatal overdose than the general population). Ross 2021, above at note 45 (an initial evaluation of a re-entry program that includes connection to SNAP showed “increased housing stability and employment, decreased legal violations, and use of fewer inpatient hospital and emergency department services and more behavioral health outpatient services”)

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Wolkomir, CBPP. [How SNAP Can Better Serve the Formerly Incarcerated](#) (March 16, 2028).

⁴⁹ See sections 5121 and 5122 of the [Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023](#) (extending Medicaid services for incarcerated minors); CMS. State Medicaid Director Letter #23-003 RE: Opportunities to Test Transition-Related Strategies to Support Community Reentry and Improve Care Transitions for Individuals who are Incarcerated (April 27, 2023) (Providing a roadmap for re-starting Medicaid coverage when individuals are approaching release)

rules – at least a dozen variations of the SNAP drug felony rule exist across the country.⁵⁰ Twenty-three states have repealed the rule completely, across geographic and political lines.⁵¹

The ban is administratively burdensome and difficult to administer for states – drug-related felony application questions are considered intrusive enough that felony quality control guidance recommends that caseworkers not ask these questions during in home appointments.⁵² A person with a criminal record faces a multitude of restrictions when seeking to live outside of incarceration; there are over 1,000 federal and state rules restricting access to government benefits for people with criminal records.⁵³ Repealing the drug felony ban at 42 USC 862a will reduce burdens on the individual and state.

BDT supports Representative Rick Crawford’s SNAP Back Act of 2023 and Senator Cory Booker, Senator Raphael Warnock, and Representative Steve Cohen’s RESTORE Act, which would repeal the federal ban on SNAP participation for people with past drug felonies.⁵⁴ BDT joins APHSA and CBPP in supporting an end to the SNAP drug felony ban.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ The Network of Public Health Law. [SNAP Drug Felony Bans: 50-state survey](#) (April 2020). Ebony N. Ross et. al. [Prison and Jail Reentry and Health. Health Affairs](#) (October 28, 2021)

⁵¹ The Network of Public Health Law 2020, above at note 50.

⁵² Section 848 of the [SNAP Quality Control Review Handbook](#) (October 2021)

⁵³ The Council of State Governments. [National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction](#)

⁵⁴ [SNAP Back Act of 2023](#) (HR 1489)

⁵⁵ APHSA 2023, above at note 7. Cox 2023, above at note 25. Ed Bolen, CBPP. [Restore SNAP for People with Drug-Related Convictions](#) (May 17, 2021)