SNAP MAKES A DIFFERENCE FOR RHODE ISLAND FAMILIES

The Role of SNAP: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federal program which provides benefits to eligible low-income families and individuals to help them afford healthy food and stretch their overall food budget. It delivers funds via an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card, which can be used to purchase eligible food items at participating stores. SNAP is the largest federal nutrition assistance program, reaching approximately 40 people in Fiscal Year 2018 [1]. Ninety two percent of SNAP benefits go to households with incomes at or below the poverty line [2]. It is designed to respond changes in the economy; enrollment in SNAP increases where there is greater need during times of economic crisis, and contracts as the economy strengthens [3]. It is a necessary lifeline for many families who would otherwise not be able to afford adequate food. Between 2009 and 2012, SNAP kept 37,000 Rhode Islanders, including 16,000 children, out of poverty [4]. However, there is plenty of evidence to support that Rhode Islanders are still struggling to meet their nutritional needs. A growing body of research has focused on an association between diet-related disparities and worse health outcomes among SNAP participants [5]. As a result, developing innovative strategies to promote healthy eating and improve nutrition outcomes among this group has become an important public health priority.

Nutrition Incentives Overview: Nutrition incentives provide bonus dollars to individuals to encourage the purchase and consumption of healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables. Research has shown that nutrition incentives can be especially impactful for low-income households, who have tighter food budgets and are disproportionately affected by diet-related disease. Specifically, in SNAP participants, incentive programs have proven to be effective at preventing chronic disease, increasing life expectancy, and reducing healthcare costs [6]. Incentives have been offered to SNAP participants in a variety of settings, including farmers markets, mobile markets, corner stores, smaller grocery stores, and large supermarket chains. A number of different models for these incentives have been piloted throughout the country. In general, financial incentives for healthy foods have been shown to increase healthy food purchases [7], having many benefits for the consumer, retailers, and farmers. Exploring ways to support nutrition incentive programs in Rhode Island was identified as a key strategy to ensuring food security in Rhode Island’s food strategy [8].

Current Rhode Island SNAP Incentive Programs: Rhode Islanders can currently benefit from SNAP incentives at farmers markets and mobile markets through two programs in the state. These programs are focused on reducing the high cost of fruits and vegetables, one of the major barriers to healthy eating for low-income individuals. Bonus Bucks, offered to shoppers using SNAP benefits at all farmers markets operated by Farm Fresh Rhode Island,
provide a 100% match on grocery purchases to spend on fruits and vegetables. Through this incentive, customers increase their purchasing power to be able to afford and consume more healthy produce, a behavior that is associated with a lower risk of obesity, heart disease, diabetes and other chronic conditions. Food on the Move, a program of the Rhode Island Public Health Institute operates similarly. Instead of being distributed matching dollars, Food on the Move shoppers using SNAP receive a 50% discount on their fruit and vegetable purchase. Also, Food on the Move is a mobile market. The Food on the Move truck keeps produce fresh, strategically travelling to low-income communities where there is otherwise little to no access to healthy produce.

**Impact:** Both of these programs have demonstrated success in making healthy foods more affordable and accessible to low-income individuals. Farm Fresh Rhode Island reports that since 2009, over $368,000 in Bonus Bucks have been distributed to SNAP shoppers for the purchase of healthy produce at farmers markets; in 2018 alone, Bonus Bucks helped 2,800 shoppers increase their ability to buy fresh produce [9]. Food on the Move has had a similar impact. Eighty percent of the program’s shoppers receiving SNAP reported eating more fruits and vegetables than they normally would due to the incentive provided [10]. Both programs also promote community engagement, an important component to social health. Additional evidence on the long-term effects of these programs is needed, particularly in the areas of healthcare cost savings and outcomes.

**Expansion to Retail Settings:** Although these programs are important components to increasing healthy food access, there is still much work to be done in this area. First, it is important to note that the majority (i.e., over 80 percent) of SNAP benefits are used in large supermarkets [11]. This is evidence to suggest that the current SNAP incentive programs in Rhode Island are not sufficient. In order to reach the larger population of SNAP recipients and maximize the impact of nutrition incentives these models should be expanded into retail settings, specifically, large chain stores. A number of states in various regions of the country have piloted programs expanding these incentives into retail outlets. Rhode Island is now in the process of planning how SNAP incentives can be implemented into grocery stores statewide. Key stakeholders from private, public, and non-profit sectors are involved in the conversation to ensure the most effective program design that will have a lasting impact on the nutrition and health of Rhode Island families.

**References**