

frequently asked questions

SNAP and the Restaurant Meals Program

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps, is a federally funded and state-administered food assistance program. It helps low-income individuals and families with their food purchases.

How does it work?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture administers SNAP nationally through its Food and Nutrition Service. State and county agencies oversee enrollment and benefits at local levels.

Who can receive SNAP benefits?

Eligibility is determined by examining financial resources. The gross monthly income of most households must be 130 percent or less of the Federal poverty guidelines (about \$2,389 per month for a family of four). Most able-bodied adult applicants must meet certain work requirements. All household members must provide a Social Security number or apply for one. Find more information at: www.fns.usda.gov/snap/applicant_recipients/eligibility.htm.

How many people use SNAP benefits?

More than 42 million Americans—one in eight adults and one in four children—receive SNAP benefits. Approximately 86 percent of all SNAP households are

below the poverty line. SNAP enrollment has increased steadily since the recession started. Even so, many more Americans are eligible for SNAP than participate in the program. Only one of every three eligible seniors is registered for SNAP benefits; only about half of eligible Hispanics participate. Lack of awareness of eligibility is one of the common reasons people don't participate in SNAP.

How do individuals apply to receive SNAP benefits?

Applications for SNAP benefits are available at local Social Services offices. It's also possible to phone a Social Services office to request an application be sent by mail. Special accommodations are also made for seniors and others who have limited mobility. Twenty-six states now offer online applications.

What is the average SNAP benefit?

In August 2010, the average monthly benefit per person was \$133.90 and \$287.82 per household.



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How are the benefits distributed?

Benefits arrive via an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card, which looks like a standard credit or debit card. It can be used in 162,000 approved retail stores nationwide to purchase food. Electronic payment helps reduce stigma for recipients and makes it easy for food merchants to process the payment.

What can SNAP recipients buy with their benefits?

Any foods or non-alcoholic beverages can be purchased for home consumption. SNAP benefits cannot be used to buy alcoholic beverages, tobacco products or non-food items, such as pet foods or cleaning supplies. Foods that will be eaten in the store or hot foods, are generally not covered by SNAP benefits.

Can SNAP benefits be used in restaurants?

In some instances, yes. Since 1977, the Restaurant Meals Program has been a voluntary component of the Federal Food Stamps Act. It enables qualified elderly, disabled and homeless SNAP recipients to buy food at authorized restaurants. Any state or county can enroll in the Restaurant Meals Program. More information is available at: www.fns.usda.gov/snap/applicant_recipients/eligibility.htm#special.

What are the benefits of the Restaurant Meals Program?

The Restaurant Meals Program helps expand food access to those who do not have a place to store and cook food, who may not be able to prepare food or who don't have access to a grocery store. The Restaurant Meals Program currently operates in Arizona and Michigan and in a handful of California counties. Other states are also interested in participation.

What does a state need to do to participate in the Restaurant Meals Program?

No new legislation is required at either the federal or state level to participate. States must simply work with USDA to apply. Typically, the state authorities that administer SNAP notify the USDA regional Food and Nutrition Service EBT coordinator in writing of intent to participate. The state also provides a detailed plan to identify participants for the

program and to demonstrate how it will monitor the program. Restaurants in that state may then apply to be authorized to participate.

How does a restaurant gain approval to participate in the Restaurant Meals Program?

Applications vary from state to state. The restaurant owner signs an agreement with the state stipulating that the restaurant meets basic government requirements to participate, including the ability to process EBT card payments at the point of sale. There is also a USDA application to become a licensed SNAP provider. Both the USDA application and the signed state agreement are sent to the USDA field office for approval. An application must be completed for each restaurant location that wishes to accept SNAP benefits.

Restaurants cannot charge a sales or meal tax on prepared foods purchased with SNAP benefits. Restaurants must also offer low cost options and must agree not to accept SNAP benefits for gratuities.

How do restaurants get the machines and software to process SNAP purchases?

State SNAP authorities typically provide these machines at low or no cost to participating restaurants. It is also possible to integrate SNAP payments into an existing Point of Service (POS) system. The USDA Food and Nutrition Service requires the use of special software that allows the machines to process only eligible food for SNAP beneficiaries. Find more information at: www.fns.usda.gov/snap/rules/Default.htm

How do states benefit when eligible people participate in SNAP?

States receive federal funding for each person enrolled in SNAP and matching federal dollars for program administration. When eligible recipients don't enroll, they miss out on federal food dollars, and states don't get matching federal funds. A recent study found that California alone could have received nearly \$5 billion more in federal funding, but didn't because of having one of the lowest SNAP participation rates in the nation.