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AgeOptions Working with Partners To Reduce Elder Hunger By Streamlining SNAP Application Process



"Sometimes, I feel as if maintaining my mother's SNAP benefits is a full-time job," says Gayle, who is the primary caregiver for Ruth, her mother. Ruth is in her 80s and has dementia and a host of other problems. Her meager Social Security benefit isn't enough for her to get by, and Gayle often has to pay out of her own pocket for Ruth's basic necessities.

[SNAP](#), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps, helps individuals and families by providing a monthly benefit to purchase groceries. However, the process to apply for and stay on SNAP isn't easy and Ruth went for many months without her full SNAP benefit because of an office error. Gayle had to take time off from her job to get her mother's SNAP benefits in order after Ruth was "unfairly re-assessed," ultimately resulting in a reduction in her SNAP benefit.

Gayle and Ruth are not alone in their struggles. In Illinois, 300,000 older adults face food insecurity. SNAP is meant to make more diverse and healthy diets possible, but enrollment numbers are low. Of eligible older adults, 57 percent never enroll in SNAP.

"SNAP is becoming a tougher sell; older adults don't see the value in it when it's so hard to

apply and then maintain the benefit,” says Bailey Huffman, who works with AgeOptions’ Benefits Enrollment Center.

The good news is that Illinois has the ability to simplify SNAP with the Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP). ESAP offers states the opportunity to apply for a series of waivers aimed at reducing administrative costs and improving eligible clients’ experiences with SNAP. By applying to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s [Food and Nutrition Service](#) to waive recertification interviews, simplify verifications and increase the recertification period to 36 months, Illinois could increase SNAP enrollment for older adults and people with disabilities and reduce the administrative burden for the state’s Department of Human Services.

AgeOptions, the Greater Chicago Food Depository, Heartland Alliance and the Shriver Poverty Law Center are working together to bring ESAP to Illinois. “ESAP is a demonstration project designed to dramatically simplify the SNAP application and verification process for eligible adults aged 60 and over,” says Jonathan Lavin, AgeOptions president and CEO. He explains that Illinois has been ranked as one of the lowest states in timeliness of SNAP application processing. “ESAP is a low-to-no-cost solution. It would streamline the current SNAP application process for older adults, allowing more time for existing staff to increase accuracy when processing applications,” he says.

One early victory was the commitment by the Illinois Department of Human Services to at least extend the eligibility for SNAP benefits to two years for all recipients, although simplifying the income verification, interview requirements and frequency of eligibility determination will be best served through ESAP.

As Jon stated in a call with all the partners and the Illinois Department of Human Services, we are very pleased to see the two-year plan, but ESAP will not go away. We will continue over time to advocate that Illinois apply for the waivers.

For more information on ESAP, contact Bailey Huffman at bailey.huffman@ageoptions.org or (708)383-0258. AgeOptions is supported by the National Council on Aging in this effort, with funding from the Walmart Foundation.