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# The SNAP GAP:

Why income-eligible individuals  
are not enrolling in SNAP

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## Table of Contents

### Introduction

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	3
INTRODUCTION .....	4
<i>Hunger in Central Texas</i> .....	4
<i>SNAP program services</i> .....	4
<i>Low enrollment</i> .....	4
SNAP ENROLLMENT MAPS .....	6
<i>Methods for development of maps</i> .....	6
<i>Analysis</i> .....	6
<i>Results</i> .....	7
KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS.....	12
<i>Methods for conducting key informant interviews</i> .....	12
<i>Analysis</i> .....	12
<i>Results</i> .....	13
FOCUS GROUPS AND INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS.....	21
<i>Methods</i> .....	21
<i>Data Collection</i> .....	22
<i>Analysis</i> .....	22
<i>Results</i> .....	23
DISCUSSION .....	34
APPENDICES .....	36
<i>Appendix A: Key Informant Interview Guide</i> .....	36
<i>Appendix B: Focus Group Guide – SNAP Non-participants</i> .....	38
<i>Appendix C: Focus Group Guide – SNAP Participants</i> .....	36
<i>Appendix D: Demographic Survey</i> .....	40
REFERENCES .....	41

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## INTRODUCTION

### Hunger in Central Texas

In 2012, food insecurity -- or lack of consistent access to enough nutritious food to meet the needs of all household members because of insufficient money or other resources for food -- was experienced by approximately 17.6 million households in the United States (U.S.) [1]. Food insecurity places individuals at greater risk for engaging in less healthful dietary behaviors and consuming fewer servings of fruits and vegetables (F&V) and dairy foods, and fewer nutrient-dense foods compared to individuals who are food secure [2,3]. A strong relationship between food insecurity and poverty exists, with higher rates of food insecurity and hunger occurring among individuals with lower socioeconomic status (SES) [2].

### SNAP program services

SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) aims to help qualifying low-income individuals and families meet basic nutritional needs and afford a balanced diet. The SNAP program is the largest program in the hunger safety net, and is run by the United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (USDA-FNS). In Texas, SNAP is administered at the state level by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) [4,5]. To apply for SNAP benefits, Texas residents can apply at a local HHSC office, or visit participating organizations designated to inform people on how to apply and access benefits. Online applications can be completed at [YourTexasBenefits.com](http://YourTexasBenefits.com).

In order to be income-eligible for SNAP, individuals must meet specific income requirements based on the federal poverty level, and benefits are based on family size. Services offered to SNAP participants include a monthly allowance of food benefits in the form of credit on an EBT card (i.e. Lonestar Card) that can be used like a debit card at eligible SNAP retailers [5]. Services also include SNAP-Ed, evidence-based educational programs that teach participants how to eat healthier, how to make their food dollars stretch further, and promotes physical activity. SNAP-Ed funding is awarded to local community organizations and institutions and statewide agencies [4].

A report by the USDA that details the effect of SNAP participation on food security (2013) found that individuals entering the program were more food insecure than those participating in the program for 6 months, a trend confirmed by both cross sectional and longitudinal data [6]. Children living in SNAP households are found 20% less likely to experience food insecurity, and 35% less likely to experience poor general health [7]. Those participating in SNAP may also have lower annual health care expenditures, according to a recently published study.

### Low enrollment

In both the U.S. and in Texas, available SNAP funding is not fully accessed. In February 2017, national SNAP participation decreased to its lowest monthly level since 2010 at 13% of the eligible population using SNAP [8]. In Texas, participation rates dropped 7.1% between February 2012 and February 2017 [8]. Texas was ranked among the 15 lowest states for reaching eligible SNAP individuals in 2014. In 2013, only 58% of eligible Travis County residents were enrolled in SNAP; slightly lower than the national average of 60% [7]. This amounts to \$166,697,359 lost in SNAP benefits and \$298,388,273 in lost economic activity annually in Travis County [7]. This is money lost to hundreds of SNAP retailers, including grocery stores, supermarkets, convenience stores and farmers markets.

Research trying to determine barriers to SNAP participation has been conducted [9]; however, the reasons for low participation rates among the income-eligible population are still not clear. More research is needed regarding the characteristics of the income-eligible but non-participating population in order to determine the main barriers to participation in SNAP. In addition, more specific information is needed to create location-specific messaging to increase awareness of SNAP and SNAP benefits.

**Purpose of Study:** The overarching goal of this study was to produce information that can be used to develop a successful media campaign targeting priority areas in the City of Austin/Travis County. The goal of the media campaign will be to increase the number of income-eligible individuals who enroll in the SNAP program. More specifically, we completed 3 activities: 1) used GIS methods to create a map of Travis County indicating % of individuals who are income-eligible for SNAP but not enrolled; 2) conducted interviews with key informants from organizations who provide SNAP enrollment assistance; and 3) conducted focus groups with income-eligible but not enrolled and enrolled SNAP participants to explore barriers to SNAP enrollment. This report describes each activity, the methods used to obtain results, the results and a discussion. Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Texas Health Science Center was obtained before commencement of the study (**HSC-SPH-17-0477**).

## SNAP ENROLLMENT MAPS

### Methods for development of maps

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) are computer-based systems for capturing, organizing, displaying and analyzing geographically-referenced data. GIS represents a powerful tool for identifying and addressing spatial health and socioeconomic patterns and disparities. Using ArcGIS version 10.3 (Redlands, CA: ESRI, 2014), a series of tabular data sources were spatially merged for map generation. The merged data included sociodemographic indicator variables from the 5-Year American Community Survey (2011-2015) and SNAP enrollment data for Fiscal Year 2016. These two tabular data sources were integrated to a spatial platform by merging zip codes (common geo-identifier) to a spatial layer in shapefile format. A series of choropleth maps (color gradient maps denoting spatial densities) were then generated using the spatial analyst and spatial data management tools of ArcGIS, showing the spatial distribution of SNAP income-eligible residents by zip code, within Travis County, as well as the actual enrollment numbers by zip code. Finally, a map showing a visual representation of the under-utilization of SNAP (areas where SNAP enrollment is lower than SNAP eligibility) was built.

### Analysis

#### Indicator Variables

##### *SNAP Eligibility*

For the creation of the maps, SNAP eligibility is defined as those living 130% or more below the poverty line. The American Community Survey provides information on the number of residents per zip code living 125% and 185% below the poverty line. Thus, the indicator variable for the number of residents per zip code living 125% below the poverty line was used to estimate the spatial distribution of income-eligible residents for the SNAP program in Travis County. A second map using the number of residents who live 185% below the poverty line, per zip code, was also generated. This, to understand the spatial distribution of extreme poverty in Travis County, and of eligibility for TANF (defined as being those living 185% below the poverty line). TANF eligibility supposes automatic SNAP eligibility.

##### *SNAP enrollment*

2016 Fiscal Year monthly data of snap enrollment by zip code was provided by Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) via the City of Austin. Average yearly enrollment numbers were estimated by zip code.

### *SNAP Under-Utilization*

Under-utilization by zip code was calculated as the difference between the number of income-eligible residents for SNAP code minus the average number of people enrolled to SNAP, over the total number of income-eligible people. This can be expressed with the following formula:

$$\begin{aligned} & \% \text{ of SNAP eligible residents that} \\ & \text{do not enroll to the program} \\ & = \\ & \frac{\# \text{ of eligible residents}^* - \text{Mean yearly SNAP enrollment in 2016 FY}}{\# \text{ of eligible residents}} \end{aligned}$$

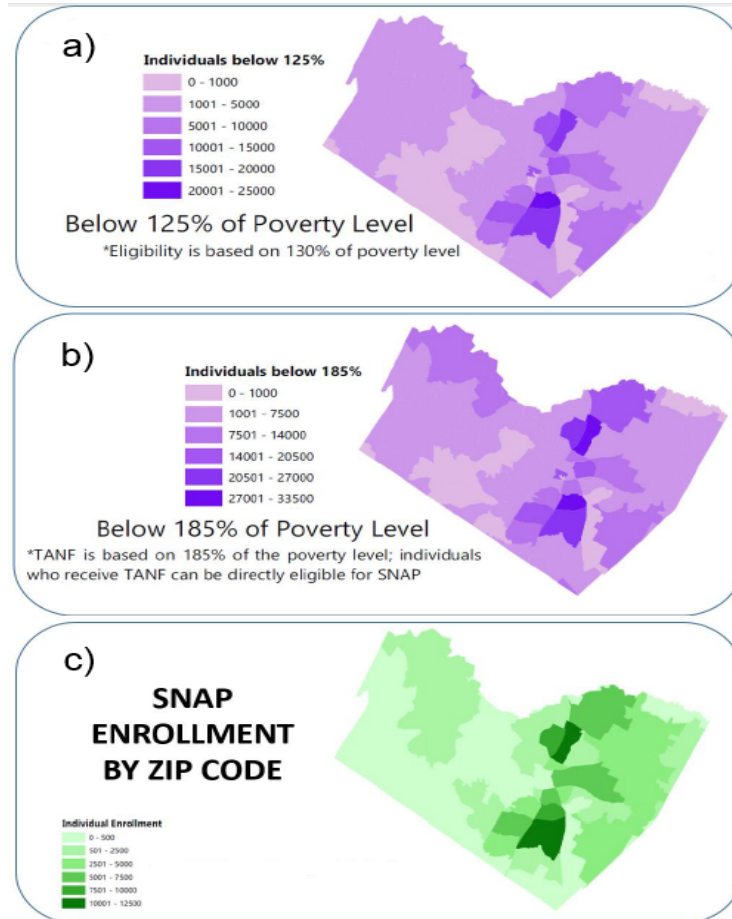
\*ACS data 5-Yr 2011-2015 data, number of people living per  
zip code below 125% of poverty

## Results

### Maps

#### *SNAP Eligibility and Enrollment*

The following maps show the proportion of the population in Travis County, Texas, by zip code, a) living 125% below the poverty line (closest approximation to SNAP eligibility, based on being 130% below the poverty line); and b) living 185% below the poverty line (representing extreme poverty, and TANF eligibility, which supposes automatic SNAP eligibility); and c) enrolled to SNAP in 2016.



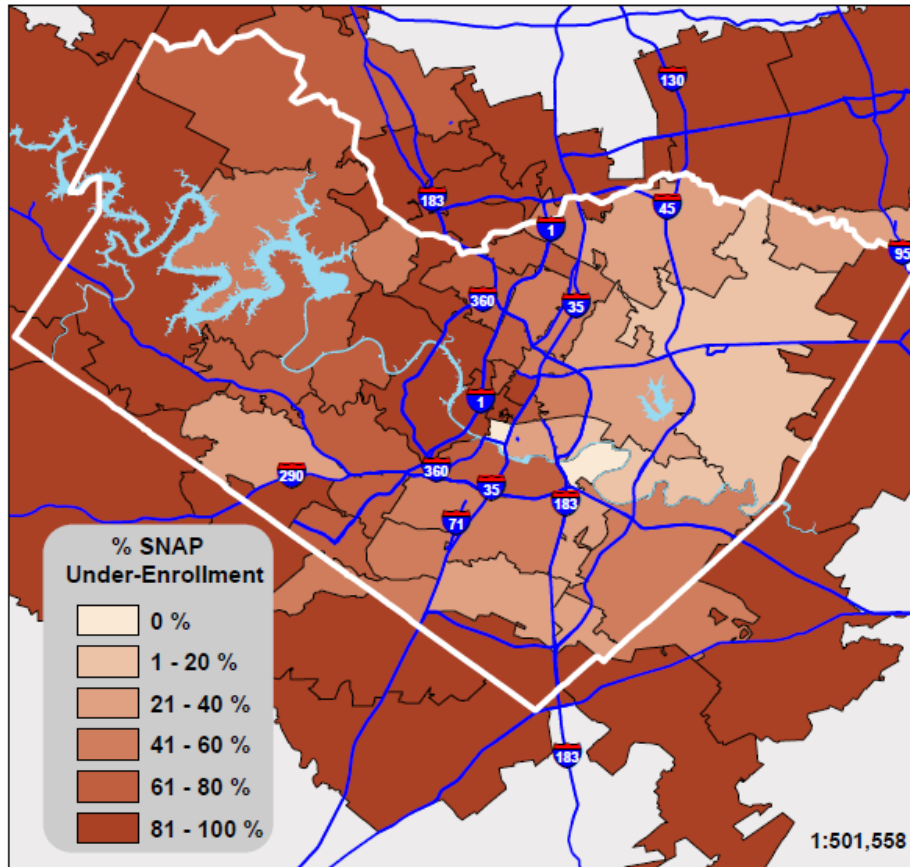
As shown by the maps above, and as anticipated, the areas of the city with higher proportions of residents income-eligible for SNAP, as well as with higher numbers of SNAP enrollment, are concentrated in what is known as the Eastern Crescent – an area of Austin characterized by high levels of poverty and adverse socioeconomic markers (low income, low education levels, and recently, gentrification). The Eastern Crescent has also historically been home to minority groups in the city, and in particular, of the Hispanic and African-American communities.

### *Snap Under-Utilization*

Because mapping the areas of Travis County with high proportions of income-eligible SNAP participants and with high enrollment numbers is not sufficient to determine which specific geographic areas need targeted actions to optimize SNAP enrollment, we conducted an additional spatial analysis to determine the percentage of non-enrolled SNAP but income-eligible residents per zip code. The results of this analysis are shown in the map below.



**Percentage of residents by zip code who did not enroll to SNAP in FY2016, given that they were eligible to enroll\***



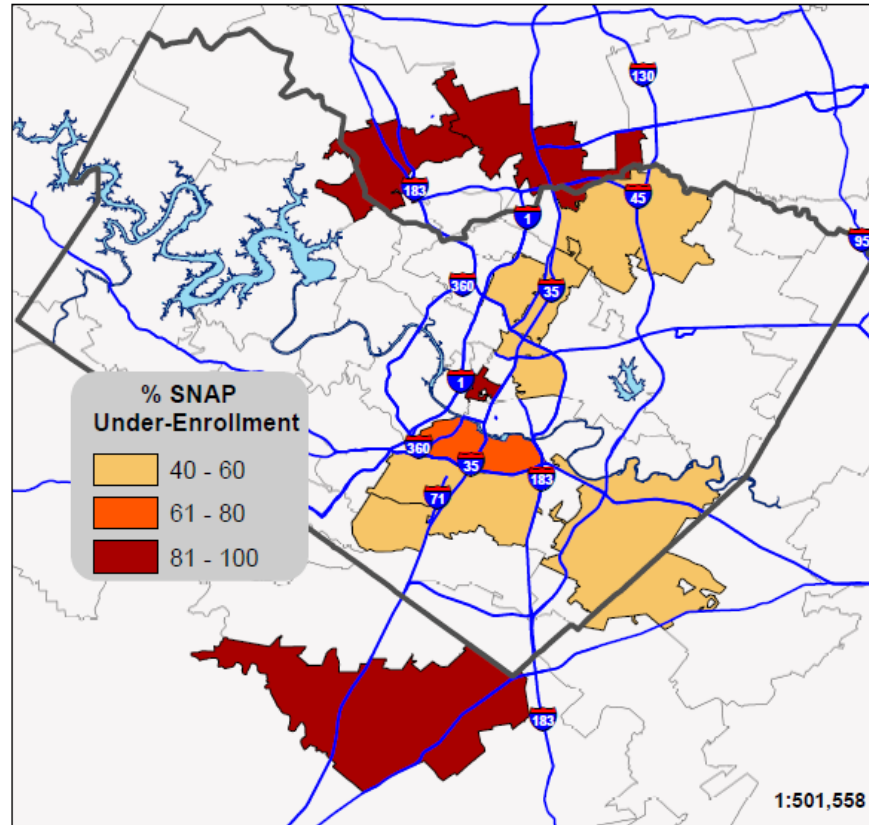
\*Eligibility to SNAP is defined as being 130% below the poverty line. Data from the 5-Year American Community Survey (2010-2014) was used to determine SNAP eligibility. The ACS includes number of residents per zip code living 125% below the poverty line, which was used to estimate SNAP eligibility.

As shown by the SNAP under-utilization map above, the highest levels of SNAP under-enrollment are concentrated in the Western region of Travis County. This area is characterized by having high socioeconomic status as measured by indicators such as income and educational attainment, with a low proportion of residents living below the poverty line. Therefore, it appears that in Travis County SNAP utilization is the lowest in areas with very few income-eligible residents living in otherwise high-income areas.

Because such diagnosis could lead to the allocation of resources to optimize enrollment in richer areas of the city, and given the expected low number of total income-eligible SNAP residents in said areas, a second spatial analysis was conducted. In this second spatial analysis of SNAP under-utilization, we identified the zip codes where two conditions were met: a) the zip code had at least 5000 SNAP income-eligible residents, and b) at least 40% of SNAP income-eligible residents did not enroll to the program. The purpose of this additional analysis was

to more precisely target areas where under-utilization of SNAP is proportionally high among a base population of substance (5000+ income-eligible residences), which would justify targeted actions. The results of this analysis are shown in the map below.

**Zip Codes with 5000 or more SNAP-eligible residents\*  
and where under-enrollment is 40% or higher**



\*Eligibility to SNAP is defined as being 130% below the poverty line. Data from the 5-Year American Community Survey (2010-2014) was used to determine SNAP eligibility. The ACS includes number of residents per zip code living 125% below the poverty line, which was used to estimate SNAP eligibility.

As shown by the under-utilization map above, conditioned on a base population of at least 5000 SNAP income-eligible residents per zip code, the areas of the city with high rates of under-enrollment are localized within the Eastern Crescent area of Austin. However, it is clear that under-enrollment is not evenly distributed across the Eastern Crescent, and that targeted actions could result in a more optimal utilization of the SNAP program. The map above shows that critical actions to encourage enrollment are needed in the Northern and Southern boundaries of Travis County (under-utilization rates of over 80%). The only area of the inner-city with extreme (over 80%) levels of under-utilization is the University of Texas campus. This is likely reflective of students having no or low income. However, college student populations represent a transient life-stage and are not reflective of those most at need for social assistance programs such as SNAP. Therefore, in

terms of the inner-city, the zip codes which warrant strategies to maximize program utilization are those located immediately south of the Colorado River (under-utilization rates of between 61 to 80%). Other areas with substantial levels of under-utilization (40-60%) are shown in the map, and are mainly concentrated east of interstate highway 35, or to the North or South of loop 360.

## KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Key informant interviews were conducted with 10 individuals who had practical knowledge about SNAP enrollment from hands on enrollment assistance in their positions. These interviews assisted in the finalization of the focus group questions and also led to collaboration in recruiting for several of the focus groups conducted.

The key informant interview included questions related to the process of enrolling in SNAP and the perceived ease and difficulty for individuals to enroll. Demographics were also collected from each key informant, including age, gender, ethnicity/race, and position in organization. Appendix A contains the interview questions for the key informant interviews.

### Methods for conducting key informant interviews

In order to recruit our key informants, all community centers that assist individuals in SNAP enrollment, found on the Community Partner Program website, along with the Latino Healthcare Forum, and the Central Texas Food Bank were contacted, per the suggestion of the Director of the Texas Hunger Initiative. The appropriate contact person was identified within each organization and each was explained the project and invited to take part in an individual interview. Interviews were conducted either in-person (n=6) or over the phone (n=4). Each interview lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to one hour. In one case where time was limited, three interviews were conducted at one time in a group setting. Each key informant was asked to fill out a short demographic survey at the start of the interview, and was offered a \$20 gift card at the end of the interview as a *thank you* for their time. In some cases interviewees were not allowed to accept the incentive due to their employment policy. When possible, interviews were audio recorded. Careful notes were taken for those interviews that were not recorded.

### Analysis

A description of each organization associated with each key informant was assessed and reported. Upon completion of the key informant interviews, audiotaped interviews were transcribed by trained research staff.

In order to describe the sample, frequencies for specific variables on the demographic questionnaire were calculated. The qualitative data analysis consisted of creating a coding scheme based on the interview questions and a set of decision rules to standardize the coding procedure. Two independent coders coded passages from each translated transcript into primary conceptual categories with subcategories for reoccurring themes. Organization of coded and sub-coded passages of the transcribed text was examined, and differences in coding were resolved through consensus by the two coders. Emergent themes were identified through frequency of coding within similar contexts and across interviews [10].

## Results

### *Organization sites*

The following agencies were helpful in providing key staff that were involved in SNAP assistance:

#### Meals on Wheels

Meals on Wheels is a national agency that provides meals to qualifying elderly and disabled individuals and assists with other community programs and services. Meals on Wheels of Central Texas (MOWCTX) is best known for their signature meal program. Every weekday, the kitchen staff prepares nutritious meals that are delivered by dedicated volunteers. Providing a holistic approach to services ensures that older adults and people with disabilities maintain their independence when food alone is not enough to live independently. The agency offers a wide array of free supportive services. Nine case managers go out into the community and assess the needs of potential clients, using a Consumer Needs Evaluation protocol. Those who need the additional benefit of SNAP are referred to Social Services Coordinators at the Central Texas Food bank to assist with application. Approximately 3,200 people a year participate in the home delivered meal program through MOWCXT.

In addition, there are 14 City and County congregate sites where MOWCTX serves meals to elderly and disabled groups on a daily basis, as well as other activities and services. At some of the City of Austin sites, a monthly food pantry happens, and there are opportunities for signing up for SNAP periodically. Currently, an average of 1,600 unduplicated people participate in the congregate meal sites on a yearly basis.

More information regarding Meals on Wheels of Central Texas can be found at this webpage: <https://www.mealsonwheelscentraltexas.org/>

#### Central Texas Food Bank

The Central Texas Food Bank is the largest hunger relief charity in Central Texas serving 21 counties with the help of 250 partner agencies. Alongside serving millions of meals to the community annually and providing low cost food to partner agencies, one of the main services provided is to assist in application assistance for federally funded resources including Medicaid (adults, children, people with disability, age 65 or older), Chip Prenatal, TAMF, Healthy Texas Women's Program (HTW), and SNAP.

The Social Services Department of the Central Texas Food Bank is primarily responsible for application assistance. They assist both out in the community at school sites and food pantries, as well as once a week with walk-ins at their main office. When they interview for clients they screen for all of the above federally

funded programs as a part of one application submitted online at [www.mytexasbenefits.org](http://www.mytexasbenefits.org). If there are any additional services needed (i.e. WIC, job services, utility services) they will refer clients to those services.

The central office is open from 8am-5pm, however, due to wide coverage demands and a limited staff they are out in the community the majority of the week, with the exception of the walk-in hours once a week. Appointments for walk-ins can be set at the receptionist desk or over the phone. Individuals can also go to Health and Human Services office one mile away and apply for SNAP in a computer lab from 8am-5 pm.

At the food pantries and school sites, appointments can be made ahead of time to receive priority attention or people can wait to be seen. Food Bank representatives bring all of the necessary equipment to assist clients in applying for benefits online. All of their staff is bilingual (English & Spanish). Not all food pantries offer this service. Depending on the site, some have regular visits from Food Bank representatives, and others offer the service on an on-demand basis when receiving calls from food pantry coordinators. Less than 10% of food pantry clients usually seek assistance with federal benefits in one day.

More information regarding the Central Texas Food Bank can be found at this webpage: <https://www.centraltexasfoodbank.org/>

### Caritas

Caritas is an Austin based non-profit, whose mission is to end homelessness for people in Greater Austin. They do this by helping people find safe housing, get access to groceries, jobs that provide a reliable living wage, and educational opportunities to learn life skills. Their hours are from 8am-5pm on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays; 9am-7pm on Tuesdays and 9am-2:30pm on Fridays.

As a part of their Refugee Resettlement Program, Caritas staff provide support for the first 6 months of resettlement, and assist people to complete their 'My Texas Benefits' application online in order that they get the health and food benefits that they qualify for.

In-house case workers assist in the finalization of 'My Texas Benefits' applications. Each caseworker sees from 10-15 clients a week or 30-40 clients a month. About a third of these clients have specific questions about SNAP applications.

More information regarding Caritas of Austin can be found at this webpage: <https://www.caritasofaustin.org/>

### City of Austin Neighborhood Centers

Neighborhood Centers are located around North, East and South Austin, and provide a variety of social services to low- and moderate-income families in need. They provide Basic Services (i.e. food pantries and application assistance),

Seasonal Services (i.e. income tax assistance and Thanksgiving baskets), Social Services (i.e. crisis intervention and case management), and Health Services (i.e. health screenings and immunizations). Other assistance includes food assistance from the Capital Area Food Bank and job application assistance.

The hours and volume of clients at each center vary depending on the location. The East Austin Neighborhood Center is open from 8am-6pm Monday-Thursday, and 8am – 12pm on Fridays. At this center, they see approximately 30-50 clients every week in regards to application assistance. The St. John’s Community Center is open from 9am-9pm Monday-Thursday, 7am-9:15pm on Fridays, and 10am-9pm on Saturdays. They see approximately 10 clients a day for application assistance. At these centers, caseworkers assist with ‘My Texas Benefits’ applications by helping to gather paperwork, fill out the actual application, and forwarding it along to the Health and Human Services office.

More information regarding Austin area Neighborhood Centers can be found at this webpage: <http://www.austintexas.gov/department/neighborhood-centers>.

#### *Key Informant Participant demographics*

<b>Average Age</b>	48.6
<b>Gender</b>	<b>n (%)</b>
<i>Male</i>	4 (40%)
<i>Female</i>	6 (60%)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
<i>African American</i>	2 (20%)
<i>Hispanic</i>	5 (50%)
<i>White</i>	3 (30%)
<b>Average Years in SNAP enrollment</b>	5 years



### *Interview themes*

The following themes were found throughout the key informant interviews:

- *Document requirements*
- *Technology barriers*
- *Low benefits for the effort required*
- *Challenges with Health & Human Services Office*
- *Misunderstanding of the Program*
- *Immigration/Deportation Issues*
- *Stigma/Pride*
- *Transportation issues*

Solutions to some of these challenges were also offered by key informants. Below are the major themes and supporting data from the interviews, *according to significance* as stated by the key informants.

#### *Document requirements*

Documentation requirements proved to be a common issue as reported by the key informants. They felt the application was burdensome and confusing for many, especially those with multiple family members or multiple jobs. An application that includes the Medicaid and SNAP sections is over 18 pages long. Individuals must have an ID, proof of Social Security Number (SSN), proof of income (for the past 90 days), proof of address and any additional resources. Without assistance in applying, people tend to get frustrated and give up, not knowing where to find all the information required. One key informant said: *“The income part is complex and people get stuck there.”* And another said, *“people will fill out half and just return them and say – ‘here, I don’t know what to do with this.’ ”*

The process can be lengthy and if mistakes are made or clients are misinformed when they are assisted with the application, this can lead to a lot of back and forth and time wasted.

#### *Technology Barriers*

According to the key informants, lack of access to and skills on the computer were definitely barriers in applying for SNAP, especially among the elderly. As one key informant shared, *“The elderly or people with mental disabilities don’t have an advocate... they don’t have the ability to navigate the system. The initial application is not difficult but the follow-up can be difficult... A lot of the clients don’t know how to use the computer – a lot of that info is on the community partner webpage and it is even difficult for us to navigate, I know clients are frustrated with it.”* While another remarked, *“Technology is a barrier. If you’ve never touched a computer,*



*it's harder for people to get help with the process. There is an assumption that technology is available."*

The concern of access was repeated by another key informant, *"If you have a family that has no computer access that's another barrier... not everyone has a smart phone. Or if you only have a certain amount of minutes, an interview will eat up your minutes."* The same person also felt, *"computer literacy is another issue. Logging into the website causes trouble. If they attempt to log in a few times unsuccessfully they'll get locked out. Or they will get stumped midway. They will have to come in and remedy this in person."*

For others, particularly the homeless population, the main issue was about consistent access to a phone or address. Three people remarked on this:

*"Some people don't have cell phones, miss the call and cant figure out how to get back in touch. Homeless people do not have address for correspondence."*

*"Homeless do not have a phone to do interview. They must get a bus pass and go to HHS office personally. With a phone call interview, they have 10 days to interview, 30 days before they put application in the trash. A very low number of applications probably get approved from homeless shelters."*

*"If a person doesn't have a phone, they will still get letter in the mail and they are expected to find a place where they can use a phone."*

#### *Few Benefits for the Effort Required*

A primary concern, as heard by the key informants from the clients, was that the SNAP benefits, were simply insufficient compared with the trouble of applying.

Because many of the elderly are homebound and chronically ill, they are unwilling to go through the application process for such a small amount of money. One key informant stated, *"Elderly clients that are on pension or Social Security say what's the point, they can only get \$16 a month.... They have a lot of bills that HHS doesn't take into consideration – i.e. school debt, furniture bill – that people are frustrated about."* And another key informant who works primarily with elderly mentioned, *"Senior citizens that we want to close the gap for... we encourage them to apply for SNAP but they are reluctant because they were told that their friend applied and it took them a ton of time and lots of paperwork for \$20."*

For others, the trouble lies in the length of the application. *"SNAP adds on a whole other section, and many of questions are uncomfortable and time consuming. Sometimes they start and just feel like it's not worth it and drop it,"* remarked one key informant. Another key informant felt that both the application and processing time was too long, remarking, *"The process is too lengthy, sometimes they need food now. We help with referrals to food pantries in these cases... Sometimes*

*applications take up to an hour depending on household members and documents, so sometimes time is problematic.” Another caseworker stated that they “see lots of people that could use the SNAP benefits, but when it gets to the application process and length of time to get the app going, that is a huge deterrent. When some places they can get emergency food stamps that day.”*

### Challenges of the Health and Human Services (HHS) Office

Several key informants that were part of the community partner program sites, directly assisting people in applications, felt personally frustrated by the inefficiencies at HHS and voiced others’ concerns: *“We aren’t determining eligibility. We don’t know when they will get called. We can’t follow up on an application and we don’t have any type of relationship with the people who are processing application to be able to say where they are in the process. In a way it is beyond our purview...It would be nice to know who to contact to get answers for these people. It is difficult when applying to navigate that system; you are on hold forever and you can’t get ahold of anybody... It would be easier for us if it was less cumbersome in how the community partner program sites access it [the application]”* Others cited a *“long wait time at HHS”* and *“incorrect information given to clients in the lobby.”*

This leads to clients returning to the partner sites frustrated and without solutions. One key informant stated: *“People are afraid to go to the government office. They will return to the food bank when they have a bad experience with HHS.”* A main concern of one key informant was the frequent caseworker mistakes made at HHS, such as: *“incorrectly input information, incorrect knowledge of policy, not understanding which documents are needed (i.e. leases),”* or *“simple mistakes (i.e. person marked as student that wasn’t, making him not eligible),”* or *“policy mistakes made (i.e. workforce development sign up when they are not in the program, which can lead to cancellation of benefits when they don’t come to training.”* These mistakes *“create hours and hours of makeup work.”*

### Misunderstanding of the Program

It was evident to the key stakeholders that many people simply do not understand how SNAP works. *“There is a misunderstanding of the program and there are not enough people to educate them about the program.”* When changes happen, such as an increase in benefits or eligibility qualifications, this information does not get disseminated widely enough. For example, people who have a drug use history can now apply for benefits and could not before, but many are not aware of this change.

There are also misunderstandings about income. If they previously did not qualify, often individuals will not come back. One key informant stated, *“Another barrier is people assume they won’t qualify because they have applied before and been turned down. They don’t realize income guidelines change every year. Once*

*they've been told no, they don't reapply again."* And another said, *"People are worried they don't qualify because of income."* The key informants felt the promotional materials were *"still too complex,"* particularly for the elderly and disabled population.

### Immigration/Deportation Issues

Client advocates were concerned that the immigrant/undocumented population was *"nervous," "scared"* and *"worried"* to put their information out there in order to apply. This concern had improved lately, however, due to dissemination of correct information. *"There was a time when people were not coming because of the ISIS scare,"* remarked one key informant. Another person mentioned, *"the unknown about legal status was driving stigma. They believe that applying for food stamps is illegal."*

### Stigma & Pride

Several key informants felt many people did not approach them at events because there is *"pride or stigma associated with the program."* *"People see it as a 'welfare program,' which creates some stigma... This issue comes up all the time."* This happens *"especially if they are coming in groups. If they are just one, it's easier for them to come up, but if they are coming in a group they are a little reluctant."*

### Transportation

Although this did not seem to be a major issue, depending on the location, transportation is sometimes an issue. According to one individual when referring to the food bank application site, *"Transportation is an issue...it's a little difficult. Two bus lines, one stop is across the street and it's a little iffy – they just have to run. Sixty percent of people come in car and 40% take the bus... It's accessible by bus if you're able to walk."* Another person remarked that getting to the HHS sites was *"always difficult"* if you didn't have a car. Three other key informants however, felt their sites were fairly easy to get to by bus or car.

### Solutions Presented

Many helpful suggestions to improving SNAP among Travis County residents were presented by the key stakeholders. Solutions that can be addressed by a media campaign include:

- Simpler educational and promotional materials for the low-literate/elderly
- Awareness campaigns for immigrants regarding eligibility
- Informational campaigns for updated SNAP eligibility qualifications

Other important suggested solutions, which will necessitate more system level changes include:

- A one-stop shop for application
- Individualized follow-up, tailored to the applicant
- A shorter application
- A dedicated partner line for contacting HHS
- Better training for caseworkers at HHS
- More staff at partner sites dedicated to helping people apply for SNAP
- Auto-populate information for renewal applications and multiple-family member applications
- Longer hours at food pantry sites where people can apply
- Application sites at all schools

## FOCUS GROUPS AND INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

### Methods

Focus group sessions were interactive group discussions guided by open-ended questions using a standardized focus group protocol which lasted approximately one hour.

A handful of SNAP participant interviews were completed individually. In these cases an abbreviated version of the focus group guide was made into an interview guide for people who are recruited after seeing an enrollment officer about applying for SNAP. These interviews were conducted on the spot, following the same protocol (consent and interview in a private room).

#### *Development of focus group questions*

The socio-ecological model was used as the theoretical framework for the focus group questions. This model posits that individual behavior (in this case enrolling for SNAP benefits) is influenced by factors at different levels including intrapersonal (e.g. attitudes towards SNAP), interpersonal factors (e.g. how do friends feel about SNAP), organizational factors (e.g. do you have access to enrollment through organizations that you commonly go to), community factors (e.g. do you have access to enrollment in your community), and policy factors (e.g. how easy or difficult is it to enroll)? Questions were developed to specifically examine participants' perceptions about the benefits of SNAP and the barriers to SNAP enrollment. Two separate sets of questions were developed, one for un-enrolled SNAP income-eligible participants and one for SNAP-enrolled participants. These questions can be found in the Appendix.

#### *Development of demographic survey*

A short socio-demographics survey (e.g., race/ethnicity, sex, age, participant employment, and food security status) and media usage behaviors (e.g. social media and smart phone usage) was administered before the focus groups or interviews begin. The demographic questions were drawn from another study conducted with a very similar population [3].

#### *Recruitment strategy*

Several of our key informants assisted in the recruitment and coordination of focus groups and interviews. A handful of the individually interviewed participants were recruited during the Central Texas Food Bank walk-in hours. Focus groups were held at several food pantry sites in Travis County sponsored by the Central Texas Food Bank, as well as several Meals on Wheels Congregate Feeding sites. A low-income housing location in Central Austin was also selected as a site for several

focus groups. A description of each site as well as participant demographics are presented in the results section.

At the food pantry and Meals on Wheels sites, flyers were distributed ahead of time, encouraging people to sign up for the focus groups the following weeks. The flyers stated the purpose of the focus groups and the inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria for participation are: 1) income-eligible for SNAP enrollment 2) responsibility for purchase of most household food, and 3) ages 18-65 years.

At the Food Bank and low-income housing site, participants were approached and asked if they would like to participate (after an explanation of the study and a review of inclusion criteria) either in a focus group or individual interview.

### Data Collection

Before the start of each session, research staff obtained written informed consent from all participants. All study materials were available in both English and Spanish. At the start of the focus groups and interviews, participants first completed the socio-demographics survey. All focus groups and interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, with the exception of one focus group in which the recorder stopped working part of the way through. Interviews and focus groups lasted anywhere from 15-30 minutes. For participating in the focus groups, participants were given a gift certificate card to a local grocery store worth \$20.

The interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish. Spanish focus groups were conducted by a trained, fluent Spanish speaker or by a trained English speaker accompanied by a bilingual translator. No more than 10 people were recruited for a focus group in order to maintain an intimate group dynamic.

### Analysis

Upon completion of the focus groups and interviews, the audiotapes were transcribed by trained research staff. Spanish interviews and focus groups were translated into English by a native Spanish speaker.

In order to describe the sample, frequencies for specific variables on the demographic questionnaire were calculated. The qualitative data analysis consisted of creating a coding scheme based on the focus group questions and a set of decision rules to standardize the coding procedure. Two independent coders coded passages from each translated transcript into primary conceptual categories with subcategories for reoccurring themes. Organization of coded and sub-coded passages of the transcribed text was examined, and differences in coding were resolved through consensus by the two coders. Emergent themes were identified through frequency of coding within similar contexts and across interviews and focus groups [10].

## Results

Fifty-six individuals participated in either focus groups (n=52) or interviews (n=4) at 6 different sites in Travis County. Approximately the same number of interviewees were currently enrolled and not enrolled in SNAP. Sixty-six percent of participants identified their ethnicity as Hispanic, 16% as White, 12% as African-American and 4% as Multi-ethnic. Eighty-seven percent of the participants were female and 11% male. Seventy-three percent of the participants were ranked as either having medium or high food insecurity. Participants lived in various parts of Travis County, including Del Valle, Manor, Central Austin, and South Austin. Demographics can be seen in more detail in table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of Participants (N=56)

<b>Average Age (mean)</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>Education</b>	
<b>Gender</b>	<b>n (%)</b>	<High school grad	25 (45%)
Male	6 (11%)	High school grad	15 (27%)
Female	49 (87%)	Some college	5 (9%)
Blank	1 (2%)	College grad	4 (7%)
<b>Ethnicity</b>		Graduate Degree	4 (7%)
African American	7 (12%)	Blank	3 (5%)
Hispanic	37 (66%)	<b>Employment</b>	
White	9 (16%)	Doesn't work outside home	21 (38%)
Multi-ethnic	2 (4%)	Retired	13 (23%)
Blank	1 (2%)	Full time	10 (18%)
<b>SNAP Eligibility</b>		Part time	7 (12%)
Income-Eligible	31 (55%)	Blank	5 (9%)
Non income-eligible	9 (16%)	<b>Language</b>	
Unsure	14 (25%)	English	25 (45%)
Blank	2 (4%)	Spanish	27 (48%)
<b>SNAP Status</b>		Multilingual	3 (6%)
Enrolled	20 (36%)	Other	1 (2%)
Unenrolled	30 (53%)	<b>Social benefits</b>	
Unsure	1 (2%)	SNAP	18 (32%)
Blank	5 (9%)	Medicaid	22 (39%)
<b>Marital Status</b>		WIC	7 (12%)
Married	23 (41%)	Other	11 (20%)
Widowed	9 (16%)	None	11 (20%)
Divorced	8 (14%)	Blank	6 (11%)
Single	11 (20%)	<b>Food Insecurity</b>	
Separated	1 (2%)	High	18 (32%)
Live w Partner	1 (2%)	Medium	23 (41%)
Blank	3 (5%)	Low	6 (11%)
<b>Access to a car</b>		Unsure	4 (7%)
Yes	34 (61%)	Blank	5 (9%)
No	17 (30%)		
Blank	5 (9%)		

### *Communication and Social Media Usage*

More than half of the participants (57%) had a smart phone and over half reported preferring a phone call (59%) above other modes of communication. Texting was also a popular form of communication for 21% of the participants. Over half of the participants preferred Facebook as a social media platform, however a quarter reported not using social media platforms at all.

*Table 2. Communication & Social Media Preferences of Participants (N=55)*

Smartphone?		<i>Postal Mail</i>	3 (5%)
Yes	32 (57%)	<i>Blank</i>	7 (13%)
No	22 (39%)	Social Media Preference	
Blank	2 (4%)	<i>Facebook</i>	33 (59%)
Communication Preference		<i>Instagram</i>	4 (7%)
<i>Phone</i>	33 (59%)	"Cell"	3 (5%)
<i>Text</i>	12 (21%)	<i>None</i>	11 (20%)
<i>Email</i>	5 (9%)	<i>Blank</i>	6 (11%)



*Focus group and interview themes***Barriers to applying for SNAP**

A small percentage of people interviewed expressed appreciation of SNAP, and the majority of these people were currently participating in SNAP. The remaining majority of participants had many things to share about frustrations with the SNAP program, including general perceptions and challenges in applying for and using the SNAP benefits.

Four main themes emerged:

- Benefits are not sufficient to meet needs
- Frustrations with people taking advantage of benefits
- Burden of the application process and maintenance of benefits
- Relative ease of food pantries compared to SNAP benefits

The table below lists the four main themes in order of significance with corresponding key quotes, separated by site of focus groups or interviews.

Table 3. Focus group and interview themes in order of significance with corresponding quotes from 4 different site types (n=participant number).

	Congregate sites (n=24)	Food pantries (n=22)	Low-income housing (n=6)	Individual interviews (n=4)
Benefits not sufficient to meet needs	<p>“It should be worth more”</p> <p>“I was gettin’ that [SNAP]. I stopped it myself. \$16 didn’t help me in no kinda way.”</p> <p>“And by the time you finish paying...they don’t realize that by the time you finish paying your rent, the light, your water, your cell phone, things like that... just barely making it. That’s why a lot of people are going to the pantries, that’s the only way you can make it. That’s the only way... and it is so sad for us to go because they don’t want to help you... because you go to a limit and they don’t want to help you.”</p> <p>“We are living with Austin, and things aren’t cheap here. And people have to buy everything. So people have to pay extra for all the things in order to live, like rent, property taxes and gas... but then they don’t have enough money to buy food and they don’t qualify because of income. It’s like a catch 22 situation [others agreeing in background]. If you think of senior citizens, we are on a fixed income - social security and Medicare.”</p>	<p>“They [young parents] get lots more money than me. I know this because I work and they work and the only difference is they have a child or two. And they make far more money than I do. And they get all of this. And I can’t work because I’m injured, and another thing is I’m older and people don’t want to hire older people. So, it makes it hard. And for them to just give me \$16.”</p> <p>“Now the food stamp process will not give you food stamps according to how much you make. And that’s ridiculous because we are seniors.”</p>	<p>“Years ago I did and I never qualified except one time to get a loaf of bread and that’s it. It wasn’t much”</p> <p>“...but like I said, it’s not worth it because you only get 20 pesos for food stamps...”</p> <p>“Like, her she’s a mother and she applying for all of her kids, but sometimes those benefits don’t reach everyone. You go to the store with \$100 for example, you are not going to come back with anything!! Meat is expensive!”</p>	<p>“Yes, it has been a little complicated to gather all the documents that they ask for. It’s been a little difficult, but we try to get together to get the things that they ask for, so that we can receive the benefits, because it’s a lot of help for us.”</p>

	<p>“Unfortunately it’s the borderlines, like the ones I just mentioned... when there is fixed income. You know nothing is there. You pay your mortgage and your bills and there’s really nothing left.”</p> <p>“Even though we don’t have many resources, it’s still hard to get SNAP. To apply you have to get certified documents which cost money that we don’t have.”</p>			
<p>Frustration with people taking advantage of benefits</p>	<p>“Well, my thoughts are... that it has helped a lot of people that deserve to be helped. But there has been a lot of abuse in it too. Maybe that shouldn’t be in the recording.. But I’ve seen abuse too.. Like people that don’t really need it. And they’re buying stuff that they shouldn’t buy. Or using them for other things.”</p> <p>“I worked for the IRS for 16 years and I was aware of people getting food stamp cards and they were selling them for drugs and alcohol. And the poor kids that needed food never got it.”</p> <p>“...I sure see a lot of kids, that they are young and they can work and they got about 5 or 6 kids and havin’ more and that’s where they go and get their food stamps. And us, that we really need it, we get nothin’. And that’s a shame, that’s a bloody shame.”</p> <p>“Yeah, but you go the food stamp office and you see people with</p>	<p>“They [young parents] get a lot of food stamps. Then on top of that, they take part of their food stamps and they sell them for cash. I know that for a fact, yes. I’ve seen that happen so many times. I’ve seen them come to me and try to sell them to me.”</p> <p>“They [young parents] get lots more money than me. I know this because I work and they work and the only difference is they have a child or two. And they make far more money than I do. And they get all of this. And I can’t work because I’m injured, and another thing is I’m older and people don’t want to hire older people. So, it makes it hard. And for them to just give me \$16.”</p> <p>“I’ve seen where the wife goes in and they’ll get like two baskets full of food. Then the husband goes behind and gets cases of beer. If you can afford to buy cases of beer...”</p>	<p>That’s the thing...sometimes I feel like people that have a family, they give them a hard time, and people that can actually work, they don’t want to work and are homeless out on the street. And they go up there and get their benefits in a heartbeat and all they’re doing is selling them or doing something crazy. And sometimes, it’s kinda frustrating.</p>	<p>n/a</p>

	<p>new cars and there you go driving your old clunker...and they've got their pretty nails... where do you think they get that money? Do you think they stand on the street corner?? somethin' is not right!!"</p>	<p>"It would be easier if they put a lot of these mommy factories to work. Because all their doing is having babies after babies so they can get more and more food stamps, so they can go and sell them. Or they can supply their own... brothers and sisters, everybody in the neighborhood. And, then when they do this, they get money back from their brothers and sisters. If they could make them go to work, go to school. This would stop them from having too many babies for one, and from going and getting our benefits, because that's the reason that elders cannot get as much..."</p>		
<p><b>Burden of application process and maintaining benefits</b></p>	<p>"I get a lot of hassle and they want me to bring them the papers on time, and if I don't have them on time then they set me up for another further day later. And for what? It costs money for gas. Money to get the certificates that I need. And in a years time, they don't reimburse me for all the costs that I have. Each certificate costs like anywhere from 50-25 dollars... They need certificates from when you were divorced, marriage license. It has to be notarized, all of that. And it costs money. I really can't afford that."</p> <p>"Plus a lot of people are really not that computer savvy. Everything is on computers now and they don't like to give you a written application. They will but they don't want to, they really don't</p>	<p>"They have this class you are supposed to take when you sign up for SNAP and you are not working. If you don't attend this class, then they cut you off. Ok, when you live out here and you have no ride, you can't get to that class. And you gotta take \$20 with you, just to get to this class. And if you don't make it to this class, then they chop you off and they fine you. They take you off of your last month of food stamps because you couldn't get to this class. And it's a class on how to look for a job. I don't even know because I haven't been to the class because I can't ever get there because I live all the way out here..</p> <p>"I applied at Health and Human Services, at the main office here off of...by Walmart. And here, the</p>	<p>"oh gosh, they put you all kinds of changes. Like, you have to get your HR form, send it to them....they have to verify it, make sure you're telling the truth and you have to send it in."</p> <p>"Sometimes they give us the run around... they say I have three different case numbers. I guess each caseworker that's helped us puts a different case number.. So, half of the time I reapply they're having to look in my other case. And I say, it's not my fault, I do everything I'm supposed to. So they make a lot of mistakes."</p> <p>"But now, I feel like it's hard on everybody, because at first you used to get an appointment in the mail. But now, they changed it. They are not letting you know</p>	<p>"The application process takes a long time, sometimes up to 1-2 months. Sometimes I think it would be so much better if it was shorter. Because sometimes a person needs the help and it takes a long time. So I would like it if it was faster, the process, so that the [food] assistance comes faster."</p> <p>"The phone call was easy. They called me in the house and as I don't work it's easy to answer the call. Sometimes the call takes a long time, like 40 minutes."</p> <p>"Honestly, what stopped me was the phone call. I was in classes and we went back</p>

	<p>want too....not everybody's computer savvy, you know what I mean? So, that to me is one of the biggest issues.”</p> <p>“Everything is now on the computer and it's really difficult. You have to be able to scan in your documents and have a computer with internet access. And know how to use the computer. They don't help us do it so it is impossible.”</p> <p>“The people who sometimes help don't always speak English and we know a little English.”</p>	<p>lady that comes here, she reapplied for me and it's just been a hassle. I'm too old to be frustrated with all of that in the first place. I'm too angry with all the other things that go on.”</p> <p>“A person helped me. I couldn't do it myself. And when they call you for an interview, they ask you one or two questions. Now you can do it on the phone.”</p>	<p>when they are going to call. You gotta answer that phone call, if not then you just get denied. Like when you have an appointment with an advocate for the food stamps for your renewal. They'll call you, but if you just failed to miss the appointment for some reason.. Like if you are at work or something.... one time I was at work and I missed it, and I got papers in the mail saying that I was denied because I picked it up and I didn't even know it.”</p>	<p>and forth for a while trying to get a hold of each other and then they just dropped my case. It seems like there should be a more effective way to get people benefits. I don't really understand what the purpose of the phone call is anyway? To prevent fraud? A little crazy how easy it was to sign up for health insurance, but not for food assistance, also something essential.”</p>
<p>Relative ease of food pantries and other food assistance compared to food stamps</p>	<p>“I live in government housing and don't qualify for food stamps, and it's difficult for me because the only person who works is my son who has his own family too. We are refugees... and we have limited income. When there is a food pantry we come with a lot of bags.”</p> <p>“All of us [at the congregate sites] use food pantries! There is a food pantry at that location once a month, there is a program called Hope for senior citizens, there is meals on wheels, and there is St. Agnatus Catholic church also gives out food on South Congress.”</p> <p>“But thank God we've got pantries that can help us.”</p>	<p>“It's a big pain sometimes. I'm like I'll give up, I'll go to the pantry.”</p> <p>“It is far more easier for me to come over here [to the food pantry] and get food that is going to last me a week instead of going and getting the food stamps and run to the store to use my \$16 and what am I gonna get? A piece of meat, and maybe 3-4 vegetables?”</p> <p>“Yeah, if it wasn't for these pantries, I couldn't make it.”</p> <p>“A lot of people I know that depend on the pantries...”</p>	<p>“You know, sometimes when you need help in the moment you go to food pantries and they'll give you food there.”</p>	<p>“I do have to go look for food in other places when I do not have the SNAP right away. I will look around or ask a girlfriend. There is a place called Su Primera where they give food away once a month.”</p> <p>“It's all been very good and helpful [SNAP]. It's covered my food expenses. I don't go to food banks or anything else because all the kids are in the house and it's too much trouble.”</p> <p>“We signed up for the free lunch program. It wasn't worth it to keep pursuing [SNAP] because there are other options.”</p>

	<p>“You can go to the one they give fresh food to, the first Monday of the month. And then the one on the park come every second Friday... and then there’s other places they give you and you can go there.”</p> <p>“We have Brighter Bites in the school, but they aren’t in every school, that gives us lots of produce and doesn’t make us fill out anything.”</p>			
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### Benefits not sufficient to meet needs

Individuals interviewed, particularly at the food pantries and congregate sites, did not feel satisfied with the amount of benefits offered through SNAP compared to the actual need of individuals. This sentiment was echoed particularly among the elderly groups and individuals. Individuals reported receiving anywhere from \$16-\$20 a month for benefits, which according to them did not correspond with the living expenses in Austin. Several people had benefits previously but admitted that they decided it was not worth it to continue applying because of the low benefits.

Several individuals with children or multiple people in their family also expressed that they were frustrated with the amount they received not corresponding with their need.

In multiple groups, there were individuals that had tried to apply and were turned down or were aware of the income limits and knew they were not eligible who felt frustrated about being on the fringe and needing the assistance.

### Frustration with People Taking Advantage of Benefits

Many individuals were extremely frustrated with what they felt was abuse of the system. People with many children were the target of these complaints, and those that were elderly or disabled felt they were creating an imbalance in the system that they felt was unfair.

At four out of five of the different sites, people cited personal stories or hearsay of abuses by others of their SNAP benefits (i.e. lying to case workers, selling food stamps). Other people felt it was unfair that parents with children received a large amount of benefits and felt they were undeserving and indiscriminating in their purchases.

There was a general misunderstanding of why certain people qualified for more benefits but didn't appreciate them, whereas the elderly and disabled who truly needed the benefits were not given enough to meet their needs.

### Burden of Application Process & Maintaining Benefits

Concerning the process of applying for food stamps, those that had food stamps currently were generally satisfied with the application process, but admitted that the process could be lengthy and a hassle which was a burden when in need of food.

The burden of documents was expressed many times among the different groups. One person mentioned a cost associated with gathering all the documents needed (notarizing, gas costs, etc.) that didn't correspond with the benefit allowance. Another individual felt confused by what was needed and that sometimes mistakes were made with documents at HHS that made the process lengthier. Another person mentioned never being able to meet the requirement of a class because of the costs associated with getting there and a disability, and losing her benefits because of it.

The technology of the new application system seemed to be a large burden. Not everyone is computer literate or has access to a computer, internet and scanning. They then have to pay for this service to try to enroll.

Others that had been through the process previously, had mixed feelings about the phone call interview. Some shared that it was convenient, and others felt it was a burden especially if you didn't have a regular schedule. One person remarked:

*“Honestly, what stopped me was the phone call. I was in classes and we went back and forth for a while trying to get a hold of each other and then they just dropped my case. It seems like there should be a more effective way to get people benefits. I don't really understand what the purpose of the phone call is anyway? To prevent fraud? A little crazy how easy it was to sign up for health insurance, but not for food assistance, also something essential.”*

Those that had been assisted through the process, either at the Central Texas Food Bank or with a client advocate at the Meals on Wheels sites, were more favorable about the process of applying. As one woman expressed:

*“For me, everything has been easy [process of applying for SNAP] because I brought all the documents they asked for and here [at the Food Bank] they've helped me a lot. I've been coming here for four years, and I like it and I've recommended to many people that they come here – my friends my acquaintances – because they help you a lot here to fill out the paperwork. They speak Spanish and I like that they speak Spanish. People are well attended to. They've never told me no, they've always helped me. It's very important for me this place. I like it because at this place they help you a lot; I cannot write very much and here they help me to write a lot of things. It's very important.”*

#### Relative ease of food pantries compared to SNAP benefits

Participants noted that local food pantries are often utilized to supplement food needs, and the majority cited that food pantries are easier to use and more accessible than SNAP benefits. People knew exactly where food pantry sites are and how frequently they can be served by them. More appreciation and gratitude was expressed about the food pantries compared to complaints.

Several of those individuals who said they knew that they could not qualify for SNAP benefits because they were on the income “fringe” relied on food pantries to help them, admitting that they could not make it without them.

A young single parent living on student loans felt that with the trouble of applying, and the many other options of food assistance for her and her child that had less overhead (i.e. free lunch program), it was easier to pursue those than finish her SNAP application.



### Other barriers

Other frustrations were expressed that held slightly less weight in the scope of the conversation, including:

- Transportation (costs associated with reaching application sites or lack of bus routes)
- Mistrust & frustration of the SNAP system (conspiracy theories regarding difficulty of applying, mistakes and inefficiencies HHS, frequently changing policies, confusion about requirements)
- Misunderstanding of the program (who is income-eligible and how they can be used)
- Legal concerns (people had been concerned earlier in the year about legal implications, but knew now that their children could legally receive SNAP)

### **Solutions presented by participants**

#### More benefits

Individuals in most focus groups and interviews expressed the concern that the benefits should be more for all people and that the application process should be less complicated and time consuming. This was a special request, especially of the elderly individuals, that benefits meet their food needs.

#### Communication

Most individuals felt that flyers or word of mouth would be the best way to disseminate new information about the SNAP program. Partner advocates (i.e. Meals on Wheels or Central Texas Food Bank staff) at food pantry and congregate feeding sites were reliable sources of new information.

Others felt that receiving letters in the mail would also be an effective way of learning about new information.

On the other hand, people felt that receiving news online and phones would be prohibitive, with the exception of a few individuals.

It was mentioned by several individuals that it would be helpful to see the diverse types of people receiving food assistance; to see case studies of people like them who received food assistance and it helped them for that period of time that they really needed it. They felt this would be important to reduce stigma and create hope for those that may need the assistance for a short period of time.

One person remarked: *“Some people may need food assistance more long term. Some people like me may just need it for a few years to help with a lack of income due to circumstance. I am a single parent and have been living on student loans and I felt like*

*other people could use the assistance more than me, so I just dropped it after trying and failing to get someone on the phone for my interview. I didn't realize there are such a large percentage of people that are eligible that don't apply. That might've changed my attitude towards applying."*

## DISCUSSION

The overarching goal of this study was to produce information that can be used to develop a successful media campaign targeting priority areas in the City of Austin/Travis County. The goal of the media campaign will be to increase the number of eligible individuals who enroll in the SNAP program. To produce this information we conducted 3 activities: 1) created GIS methods to create a map of Travis County indicating % of individuals income-eligible for SNAP but not enrolled; 2) conducted key informant interviews with key informants from organizations who provide SNAP enrollment assistance; and 3) conducted focus groups with income-eligible but not-enrolled and enrolled SNAP participants to explore barriers to SNAP enrollment.

Based on the GIS maps, it is clear that the areas of the city with high rates of under-enrollment are localized within the Eastern Crescent area of Austin. More specifically, the critical areas where more effort to encourage enrollment are needed are in the Northern and Southern boundaries of Travis County (under-utilization rates of over 80%). In addition, the zip codes which warrant strategies to maximize program utilization are those located immediately south of the Colorado River (under-utilization rates of between 61 to 80%). Other areas with substantial levels of under-utilization (40-60%) are mainly concentrated east of interstate highway 35, or to the North or South of loop 360.

The only area of the inner-city with extreme (over 80%) levels of under-utilization is the University of Texas campus. This is likely reflective of students having no or low income. Because some college students are eligible for SNAP benefits, further research to specifically study barriers to SNAP enrollment with this population is warranted.

For next steps, it will be very important to determine the target population in the specific zip codes. After this is established, then a more tailored marketing plan based on age, ethnicity etc. can be created.

Based on the data provided by the key informants and the focus group participants, it is clear that there are some issues that can be addressed by a media campaign while there are others that cannot. A general lack of knowledge about SNAP benefits was very evident among many of the participants and an effective awareness campaign could be very useful to clarify specific issues.

- A clearer understanding of the process of applying for SNAP
  - Who is eligible
  - Where to apply
  - How to get help

- How long the process takes
- What amount of benefits can be received
- How they can be used

In addition, increasing confidence in the SNAP program will be very beneficial.

- Reinstating trust and confidence in the program
  - Clearing doubts about abuse
  - Reassuring the public that those who work in government offices care about their food security
  - Reassuring public that they want people to apply for and receive benefits
  - Showing examples of relatable individuals that have applied and it has helped them in a difficult time.

Other significant barriers/attitudes may be more difficult to change with a media campaign although the attitude that *the benefits are not worth the trouble of applying* can potentially be changed via a media campaign by pointing out the amount of food that can be purchased with certain amounts of money. In addition, highlighting the use of double SNAP dollars at farmer's markets will be important.

Other barriers such as the length of the application or the complex back-and forth to complete the application are system level barriers that will need to be addressed using different strategies. For example, developing an application that can be translated into any language and will serve multiple purposes (i.e. application for different programs) could be extremely efficient and encourage many more individuals to apply for SNAP benefits.

In closing, a general sentiment by focus groups participants was an appreciation about getting to express their frustrations about food assistance in general, and particularly the SNAP program. Perhaps these conversations need to happen on an ongoing basis in the City and the County. This may clear up misunderstanding and also may increase confidence and positive attitudes towards the SNAP program.

## **APPENDICES**

**Appendix A: Key Informant Interview Guide**

**Appendix B: Focus Group Guide – SNAP Income-Eligible Non-participants**

**Appendix C: Focus Group Guide – SNAP Income-Eligible Participants**

**Appendix D: Demographic Survey**

## **Appendix A: Key Informant Interview Guide**

### **SNAP COA Key Informant Interview Questions**

#### **A. SERVICES PROVIDED**

1. What are some of the services your center provides?
2. How many clients does the center see every day/week?
3. What are the hours of the center?
4. How many people inquire about SNAP every week?
5. How does the process of SNAP enrollment work at your center?
6. What type of assistance do you provide?
7. How many people (percent?) successfully apply for SNAP every week?

#### **B. BARRIERS TO APPLYING FOR SNAP**

1. Based on your experience, what are the most common barriers for individuals to enroll in SNAP?
2. How easy do you think it is for most individuals to get to the center?
3. Is childcare provided?
4. Are the hours allotted for applying for SNAP sufficient in your opinion for the demand?
5. Do you see any other barriers in applying for SNAP?
6. Do your clients mention any barriers in applying for SNAP?
7. What do you think would make it easier to apply for SNAP?

## Appendix B: Focus Group Guide Non Participants

### SNAP COA Focus Group Guide - Non (SNAP) Participants

#### Introduction

*Thanks everyone for coming today. You all are participating in a study that is funded by the City of Austin that aims to understand how people are experiencing the application process for receiving federal SNAP benefits. Your answers today will contribute to this research. As a thank you for your time and thoughts, you will be receiving a small gift card at the end of the focus group interview. The interview should take about 1 hour. In order to capture everyone's responses and not be caught up in note taking, we will be recording the interview. Everything you share today will be kept confidential and anonymous, and we ask that participants also respect this confidentiality rule. Is everyone ok with that? Before we begin, does anyone have any questions?*

#### Questions

- 1) Let's start off with a fun question: *What is your favorite type of food?*
- 2) Ok, now we'll get into the reason why we're here – to hear your thoughts about receiving federal food benefits, which will refer to during this focus group as SNAP?
- 3) Is everyone here aware of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, known as SNAP?
  - a. Prompt: Can you share with us what you know about it?
- 4) Has anyone ever thought about applying to receive SNAP?
- 5) Are you aware of the locations where you can apply for SNAP in your neighborhood?
- 6) Have you ever visited these sites?
  - a. What are some of your impressions on visiting these sites?
  - b. How is the customer service there?
  - c. For those of you that have been, was there something that happened that prevented you from applying for SNAP?
- 7) If you haven't ever visited these sites, is there any specific reason why?
  - a. Prompt: Are they convenient/inconvenient?
  - b. Prompt: Are there costs associated with visiting them (parking/childcare/etc)?
- 8) If you have had SNAP before but do not currently, is there any reason why?
  - a. Prompt: Was it not that helpful?
  - b. Did you not use it to its fullest?
  - c. Prompt: Was it hard to renew?
- 9) Are there any other ways that you receive support for feeding your family that you consider being easier than using SNAP? (i.e. friends, churches, food handouts, other loans or food assistance from other sources).

## Appendix C: Focus Group Guide Participants

### SNAP COA Focus Group Guide - Non (SNAP) Participants

#### Introduction

*Thanks everyone for coming today. You all are participating in a study that is funded by the City of Austin that aims to understand how people are experiencing the application process for receiving federal SNAP benefits. Your answers today will contribute to this research. As a thank you for your time and thoughts, you will be receiving a small gift card at the end of the focus group interview. The interview should take about 1 hour. In order to capture everyone's responses and not be caught up in note taking, we will be recording the interview. Everything you share today will be kept confidential and anonymous, and we ask that participants also respect this confidentiality rule. Is everyone ok with that? Before we begin, does anyone have any questions?*

#### Questions

- 10) Let's start off with a fun question: *What is your favorite type of food?*
- 11) Ok, now we'll get into the reason why we're here – to hear your thoughts about your experience applying for the SNAP program. Just to make sure doubly sure that everyone is in the right place, is everyone here currently receiving SNAP benefits?
- 12) Great, let's begin with how you found about SNAP.
  - a. *How many people here were referred to SNAP by a service provider (ask them to raise their hands and count the number)?*
    - i. *Who were the service providers that referred you?*
  - b. *How many people were referred to SNAP by a friend?*
  - c. *How many people found out about SNAP by themselves (i.e. by doing research online, following up with a flyer, etc.).*
    - i. *How did you find out how to apply for SNAP?*
- 13) Now I'd like to ask you some questions about the actual application process – can someone share their experience of what that was like to apply for SNAP?
  - d. *Did anyone have any different experience than this (listen to all stories)?*
  - e. *Were you pleased/unhappy with this experience?*
  - f. *If you had to do it again, how do you think it could be easier for people?*
- 14) Now I would like to move into some questions about your experience with using SNAP?
  - g. *Where do you usually use your SNAP benefits? (make sure everyone has a chance to share – ask at the end if there are any other places people use their benefits).*
  - h. *Have you experienced any issues with using your SNAP benefits at these places?*
- 15) *When your SNAP benefits run out, do you plan to apply again for SNAP?*
- 16) *Has anyone personally experienced any stigma related to using their benefits?*
- 17) *Do you have any last thoughts you'd like to share?*

## Appendix D: Demographic Survey

### City of Austin SNAP Questionnaire

Please answer these questions for yourself.

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your gender?     Male                       Female
3. What is your ethnicity/race?
  - White (not Hispanic)
  - Hispanic or Latino (including Mexican-American, Central American, and others)
  - Black or African American
  - Native American or American Indian
  - Asian / Pacific Islander
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Are you eligible for SNAP benefits?     Yes                       No                       I don't know
5. Are you enrolled?     Yes                       No                       I don't know
  - a. If NO, have you ever attempted to enroll?     Yes                       No
6. What is your marital status?
  - Single (never married)
  - Married
  - Divorced
  - Separated
  - Widower
  - Living with your partner
7. Do you have access to a car?             Yes                       No                       Sometimes
8. What is the highest grade or year of education that you completed?
  - Less than 8th grade
  - Finished 8th grade
  - Some high school
  - High school graduate/GED
  - Some college or vocational school
  - College graduate
  - Graduate or professional training (e.g. masters, doctorate)
9. What is your employment status?
  - More than full-time (more than 8 hours/day or 40 hours/week)
  - Full-time (about 8 hours a day or 40 hours a week)
  - Part-time (less than or equal to 20 hours per week)
  - I do not work outside the home
  - Retired
10. What language do you speak at home MOST of the time?
  - English
  - Spanish
  - Chinese
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
11. Which of the following federal benefits does your family currently receive?
  - None
  - Texas Supplemental Assistance Program (SNAP) (Food stamps/Lonestar card)
  - WIC (women, Infants, Children)
  - Medicaid
  - Free/reduced lunch for your child
  - Texas Temporary for Needy Families (TANF)
  - TexCare Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
12. Do you have a smart phone?             Yes                       No
13. What is your preferred mode of communication?     Phone call             Text message     Email                       Other \_\_\_\_\_
14. What social media do you use? (Mark all that apply)
  - Facebook
  - Instagram
  - Snapchat
  - Twitter
  - Tumblr
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_

15. In the last 12 months, which option best describes your household?	Often True	Sometimes True	Never True	Don't Know
a. I worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. The food that we bought just didn't last, and we didn't have money to get more.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



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