

TO: Pennsylvania State Representatives and Senators
FROM: Dr. Aditi Vasan and DanaRose Negro, [PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia](#)
SUBJECT: Improving Access to WIC and SNAP Benefits to Support Child Health

Many families in the Commonwealth struggle to afford the food they need to stay healthy. As pediatricians and child health researchers, we know that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) play a vital role in [promoting child health and development](#) and [alleviating food insecurity](#).

Despite their known benefits, both WIC and SNAP are underutilized by low-income individuals and families, both across the United States and here in Pennsylvania. In 2024, only [61% of eligible participants](#) in Pennsylvania received WIC benefits, meaning almost 4 in 10 families did not get the health-promoting benefits they needed. Nationally, [88% of SNAP-eligible individuals nationally were enrolled](#) in SNAP in 2022 – the highest national SNAP coverage rate to date – but there is large variation in coverage rate across states, counties, and demographic sub-groups.

We recently conducted a [qualitative research study](#) to better understand beneficiary perspectives on WIC and SNAP, in order to inform interventions that could close these eligibility to enrollment gaps. We interviewed 40 parents of children cared for in the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) Primary Care Network to understand their perspectives on benefits of and barriers to WIC and SNAP participation, and their recommendations for how these programs could be improved to increase uptake.

In this memo, we summarize themes from our findings and suggest opportunities for policy improvement.

SNAP and WIC play a critical role in supporting families in Pennsylvania

Many families shared how much they appreciated the support they received from WIC and SNAP. In particular:

- With WIC, families shared that they appreciated receiving funds that they could use to purchase nutritious food, which is often more expensive than less healthy options. They also appreciated the nutrition education provided through the WIC program, including breastfeeding support and education regarding how to improve their children's diets.
- With SNAP, families shared that they appreciated being able to buy food that aligned with their dietary preferences. Several families noted that having SNAP benefits allowed them to purchase healthier foods, including fruits and vegetables, for their children and to make sure their children did not have to go hungry.

WIC benefits should be more flexible and easier to redeem

Many parents expressed frustration with WIC's stringent [product criteria](#), such as rigid size and brand limitations, which can be especially challenging during crises like the [formula shortage](#). These restrictions often prevent families from fully using WIC benefits.

In addition, parents noted that redeeming WIC benefits can be an uncomfortable experience. They reported challenges in identifying WIC-eligible products at grocery stores and stigmatizing interactions in the checkout line.

Policy Recommendations: *Families in our study suggested that more consistent labeling of WIC items in grocery stores and eliminating product size restrictions could help ease shopping challenges and reduce their frustration.*

There is a need to reduce stigma in the WIC and SNAP enrollment process

Across both WIC and SNAP, caregivers described encountering stigma, especially during enrollment and in-office interactions. Many participants emphasized the need for respectful treatment and streamlined processes to reduce the feeling of being “othered” while seeking assistance. Multiple families shared experiences of perceived poor treatment by county assistance office workers, consistent with [other studies’ findings](#). Specifically, those we interviewed shared:

- “A lot of the workers need to be trained better to make people feel [SNAP] is a program that can help you instead of making them feel like they’re less than because they’re on this program.”
- “It’s not good to already be in a stressful life situation and then have to go into these atmospheres where the workers aren’t friendly, too. So maybe more training for the workers to learn how to deal with people in high stress situations in a more professional and courteous manner.”

Policy Recommendations: *Workers involved in the WIC and SNAP enrollment processes should receive standardized training and support focused on making families feel comfortable applying for and accessing benefits and providing them with thoughtful, family-centered, trauma-informed care. In addition, state agencies should consider tracking rates of initial enrollment and re-enrollment and then providing individual caseworkers and/or county assistance offices with incentives for increasing their enrollment and re-enrollment rates.*

Ensure SNAP reaches working families in need

Families on the financial edge often find themselves just above program eligibility thresholds, which do not consider high costs of living and essential expenses. We heard from study participants that [the income cutoffs for SNAP eligibility](#) prevented some parents from accessing benefits, despite facing food insecurity.

Many families shared with us stories of having to choose between paying bills, like rent, gas, and car payments, and buying enough food for their children, after losing access to SNAP. Families who maintained their SNAP benefits spoke about their experiences with large benefits reductions after small increases in their income, a phenomenon known as SNAP [“benefits cliffs”](#) and identified in [previous studies](#).

Policy Recommendations: *SNAP income eligibility criteria should reflect the economic reality for working families. In particular, Pennsylvania should maintain their current SNAP income eligibility requirement (200% of the Federal Poverty Level) to help ensure low-income families can in the Commonwealth can receive the benefits they need to feed their children. Pennsylvania has also eliminated the federal asset test for SNAP, and we recommend continuing this policy in order to ensure SNAP benefits remain accessible to families in need.*

Simplify SNAP recertification

Navigating SNAP recertification can be daunting. Many families described unexpectedly losing benefits despite still being eligible, often due to complex paperwork required to certify and recertify or due to frequent errors in processing, which put them at risk of losing vital support. Policies that [simplify recertification](#) and [reduce the burden of interim eligibility reporting requirements](#) have been shown to improve SNAP participant retention. The families we spoke with noted:

- “It is a headache with the food stamps, the caseworkers, they don’t always put everything in the computer right. And so then sometimes, they cut your food stamp and stuff like that, and then you don’t know why and have to try to figure it out... Sometimes, you send the information in wrong and then it’s confusing. And then, they’re also just constantly switching off working without calling you or letting you know.”
- “Recently, my [SNAP] benefits were cut off and I didn’t get a notification or nobody called me. Nobody sent me a letter. They just cut them off because they said that I needed to send them some type of paper, but I didn’t get a notification of it that they were getting cut off... I didn’t have a job and we didn’t have any money, so we were trying to scramble around to find ways to get food for my daughter.”

Policy Recommendations: *Simplify recertification processes, consider extending SNAP renewal periods to allow families to keep their benefits longer, and use automated notifications to make it easier for families to know when they need to renew their benefits and minimize the administrative burden on caregivers and on the state.*

Enhance digital access for enrollment and benefit management

Caregivers expressed enthusiasm for online enrollment and mobile app-based benefit management, finding these options less stigmatizing and more convenient and accessible than in-person options. For instance, the WIC app helps families track eligible items and updates.

Policy Recommendations: *Pennsylvania WIC and SNAP programs should continue to offer and enhance the opportunities for remote enrollment and recertification processes, as well as the online resources available for families.*

We appreciate the opportunity to share our research findings. We would be happy to further discuss our work and suggested policy opportunities.

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