

EVALUATION OF ALTERNATIVES TO IMPROVE ELDERLY ACCESS TO THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) (SUMMARY)

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides nutrition assistance to eligible low-income individuals and households in need. Prior research has found that many older Americans have trouble accessing a nutritious diet and that eligible elderly individuals have consistently participated in SNAP at about half the rate of the overall eligible population.

USDA has implemented waivers and demonstration projects that aim to reduce barriers to participation, reduce administrative burden, and improve elderly access to SNAP. These include:

- **Combined Application Projects (CAPs)**, which streamline the SNAP application process for recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI).
- **Standard Medical Deductions (SMDs)**, which simplify the process by which elderly or disabled households deduct eligible medical expenses.
- **Elderly Simplified Application Projects (ESAPs)**, which streamline the application and recertification process.
- **Recertification Interview Waiver**, which waives the recertification interview for certain households and is often part of an ESAP.
- **36-Month Certification Waiver**, which extends certification periods for certain elderly and disabled households and is often part of an ESAP.

Methodology

This study examined some of the key food and financial challenges, as well as factors that influence SNAP participation choices, among elderly people. It also assess how nine States implemented the five interventions described above, and their impacts. The study had three components:

- **Study of Elderly Participant Perspectives** collected data from elderly individuals via semi-structured, in-person interviews and focus groups.

- **Study of State Interventions** collected data through site visits, interviews with key stakeholders, and review of relevant documents.
- **Study of Intervention Effects** included quantitative analysis of SNAP administrative data to assess impacts of the interventions on applications, caseload size, churn, and, for some interventions, average benefits.

Study States and Interventions					
Study States	SMD	CAP	ESAP	Recertification Interview Waiver	36-Month Certification
Alabama	✓		✓		
Arkansas	✓			✓	✓
Florida		✓	✓		
Massachusetts	✓	✓		✓	
Nebraska				✓	
New York		✓			
North Dakota	✓				
Pennsylvania		✓	✓	✓	
Washington		✓	✓		

Note: Not all States checked above were able to provide adequate data for the Study of Intervention Effects.

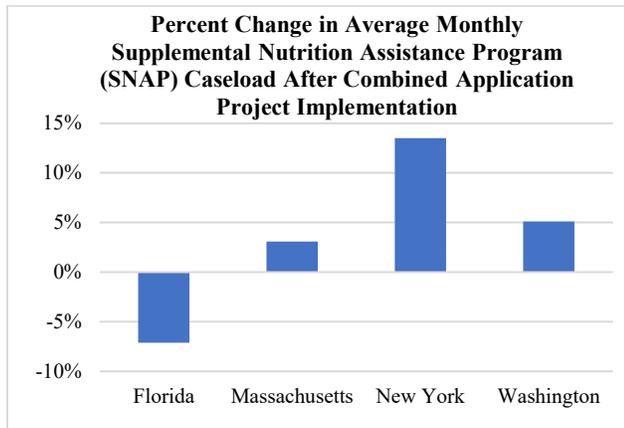
SMD = Standard Medical Deductions;
CAP = Combined Application Projects;
ESAP = Elderly Simplified Application Projects

Findings

Health problems, limited mobility, housing instability, and ongoing financial stress contributed to economic insecurity among elderly populations, as learned through focus groups and interviews with elderly individuals.

Lack of program information, misperceptions about costs of applying and benefit amounts, cognitive limitations, and social factors like stigma contributed to lower participation rates among eligible elderly populations. These findings echo previous research on elderly participation in SNAP.

CAPs were associated with an increase in elderly participation in three of the four study States. Most of the increase was from mass enrollment of SSI participants in SNAP at the beginning of the project. In Florida, which did not automatically enroll elderly SSI participants, the elderly caseload decreased. This may have been a result of modernization efforts being implemented simultaneously.

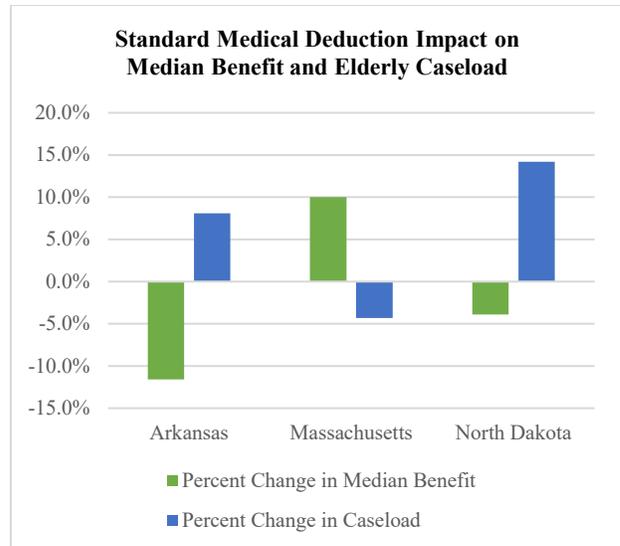


CAPs impact on program churn is less clear. Although the longer certification periods and simplified process in CAPs were expected to reduce churn, results were mixed across the States.

Staff and elderly individuals spoke positively about CAPs' streamlined processes. Many elderly CAP participants reported that they valued having a "one-stop" experience where they could receive SNAP benefits together with SSI with no additional effort.

The effects of SMDs varied: elderly caseload, but not median benefit, increased in two of the three study States. Median benefit amounts did increase in a third State, but elderly caseload decreased.

State and local staff reported that the SMD simplified the medical deduction process. However, there was some inconsistency in implementation within and across States.



Note: During ESAP2 annual reporting and initial interview requirements were waived, and both were reinstated in ESAP3.

Elderly SNAP participants in States with the SMD were more aware that they could deduct their medical expenses, although they still often needed assistance with the deduction.

ESAPs are expected to increase SNAP caseloads and reduce churn among elderly, but results were inconsistent across States. ESAPs were often implemented as part of a larger effort to modernize systems or re-engineer business processes, which may have clouded these results or led to inconsistent implementation of ESAP components within States.

In States that implemented the recertification interview waiver, there was a negative effect on caseloads and no significant impact on churning, although it was expected to increase the elderly caseload and reduce churn. In most States, system changes needed to identify cases eligible for the waiver were delayed or not implemented. As a result, some elderly participants had unnecessary recertification interviews.

Evidence from the Alabama ESAP suggests that removing annual reporting requirements contributed to lower churn rates and higher caseloads, while reinstating this requirement (along with the initial interview) reversed those effects. Removing these requirements may also have unintended impacts on household benefits, but this study did not examine those impacts.

Impacts of Alabama Elderly Simplified Application Projects (ESAPs)		
	Effect on Caseload	Effect on Churn
ESAP2	6.7%	-42.3%
ESAP3	-8.3%	218.9%

Operating two or more interventions had a positive impact on SNAP caseloads. Operating a CAP with at least one other intervention had a positive effect on new applications. However, this same combination also tended to increase churn.

For More Information

Levin, Madeleine, et al. (2020). *Evaluation of Alternatives to Improve Elderly Access*. Prepared by Social Policy Research Associates for the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2020. Available at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis>.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.