

## **Best Practices for Getting SNAP to Disaster Victims**

**SCOPE** | State, County, Local

**PROGRAM** | Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

**PRACTICE** | The federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) can be tapped to help individuals and communities recover from natural or man-made disasters. Advocates can work with federal and state partners to get temporary Disaster SNAP (D-SNAP) benefits to households not already participating in SNAP and replacement and supplemental SNAP benefits to current SNAP participants adversely affected by disaster.

**WHY** | In a disaster's aftermath, people often have new and urgent needs for food and other assistance. This is particularly the case for low-income people who are less likely to have savings and other resources to draw on during such a difficult time. D-SNAP and replacement

and supplemental SNAP benefits provide critical support to households struggling to access food during a disaster. Having a disaster plan will position the state to act effectively when a strategy is most needed. States with disaster plans can:

- simplify the process of applying and receiving SNAP benefits for disaster victims;
- allow more households to qualify for D-SNAP by taking into account their short-term disaster-related expenses;
- permit states to more efficiently and comprehensively aid their residents after a disaster; and
- bring federal dollars that generate economic activity for communities recovering from a disaster.

### **SPOTLIGHT**

After the federal government turned down Maryland's request to implement D-SNAP in Somerset County, which had been hit hard by Hurricane Sandy, advocacy from the congressional delegation and Maryland Hunger Solutions (MDHS) helped get that decision reversed. Once the declaration was secured, efforts to highlight the availability of D-SNAP benefits included a visit to the affected area by Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) and a "Food Resource Day," sponsored by MDHS, AARP MD, Maryland Food Bank, and the Maryland Department of Human Resources. During the latter event, the groups provided D-SNAP information and application assistance.

[http://www.mdhungersolutions.org/pdf/storm\\_sandy\\_food\\_resource\\_day\\_jan2013.pdf](http://www.mdhungersolutions.org/pdf/storm_sandy_food_resource_day_jan2013.pdf)

**BACKGROUND** | SNAP is the nation's first line of defense against hunger. It is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and operated by State SNAP agencies.

Benefits are loaded onto Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards, which are similar to debit cards. SNAP benefits are 100 percent funded by the federal government; administrative expenses are shared on a nominal 50/50 basis between USDA and the states. According to research from the USDA Economic Research Service, each \$1 in federal SNAP benefits generates \$1.79 in economic activity.

When a natural or man-made disaster occurs, the president may make a national declaration of a disaster as well as authorize the use of individual assistance as a means of disaster relief. The latter action allows states to request approval from USDA for D-SNAP.

SNAP's entitlement structure allows it to respond effectively to changes in need, whether due to economic downturns or disasters

## KEY STEPS

**Prepare:** State SNAP agencies are required to have disaster plans and should reach out to community- and faith-based organizations about them, especially because these organizations often have a high level of trust and rapport with community members. During a time of emergency, these organizations can help disseminate information and assist with prescreening applicants for D-SNAP. State agencies should have a plan in advance of a disaster and communicate any updates to stakeholders, including community groups, EBT processors, and SNAP food retailers. To obtain a copy of the state disaster plan, contact the State SNAP agency.

**Mobilize:** In certain situations in advance of a disaster, state agencies may request authority from USDA to aid potential victims by requesting a waiver for early issuance of the next month's SNAP allotment so households can stock up on food and water.

After disaster strikes, state agencies should do an assessment of the extent of the disaster and consider the range of options for relief under federal rules. An agency's needs assessment should include gathering information from utility companies about the location and duration of any power outages. For those zip code areas without power for four hours or more, state agencies should seek a USDA waiver to load replacement benefits onto EBT cards automatically for regular SNAP households residing in those zip code areas. The amount of the replacement benefits will vary depending on the circumstances, including whether the outage occurs early or late in a SNAP issuance cycle.

## SPOTLIGHT

Informational activities and application assistance can help get D-SNAP to those who qualify. For example, after Hurricane Sandy, the Food Bank For New York City partnered with AARP New York on a tele-town hall for AARP members in affected zip codes and provided them referrals to application assistance including D-SNAP via the Food Bank's hotline.

<https://frac.peachnewmedia.com/store/seminar/seminar.php?seminar=20757>

## SPOTLIGHT

Louisiana and Florida have streamlined D-SNAP operations by offering an online D-SNAP pre-registration process. As soon as possible after a disaster strikes, clients can pre-register by phone or internet, so that they may enter an express line upon arrival at an application site. After the client provides proof of identity, the D-SNAP worker links the electronic application to an EBT card. The client leaves with the EBT card in hand and receives notification of eligibility by mail. The mailed notification includes the EBT card's PIN, though this information also is accessible online. <http://www.dss.state.la.us/index.cfm?md=newsroom&tmp=detail&articleID=733>

In the event of a presidential disaster declaration, the State SNAP agency should submit a request to USDA to operate D-SNAP to serve disaster victims not enrolled in regular SNAP. Typically, D-SNAP is offered after the first responder phase of a disaster, when food retailer operations are back to normal, and when there has been time to let key stakeholders, the press, and the public know how victims can apply for the benefits. Families may be displaced from their homes or be unable to use their kitchen due to power outages or other disaster-related conditions. As such, State SNAP agencies should seek USDA waivers and work with SNAP retailers to allow households affected by the disaster to use SNAP benefits to purchase hot, prepared food.

D-SNAP enrollment sites should be accessible to the public and staffed sufficiently. Volunteers may be able to help with greeting applicants and fill in other support roles, while caseworkers, including caseworkers borrowed from other counties or states, can enroll D-SNAP applicants. D-SNAP application sites are usually open for one week, but can be open longer when need warrants an extended application period.

Households that qualify for D-SNAP will receive benefit amounts equal to those for SNAP households of their size. If the state agency implements a D-SNAP for disaster victims not on SNAP, it should also seek to provide supplemental benefits to bring disaster households on SNAP up to that maximum allotment level. While a D-SNAP benefit period typically ends after 30 days, there are exceptions. For example, three months of D-SNAP benefits were provided to Hurricane Katrina victims in 2005; more recently, two months of D-SNAP benefits were provided to Louisiana flood victims in 2016.

## SPOTLIGHT

North Carolina received a particularly effective and easy-to-administer SNAP waiver allowing for the automatic replacement of benefits without requiring SNAP households to report a loss of food to their local offices. Following Hurricane Matthew's landfall in October of 2016, North Carolina obtained a waiver to automatically replace 50 percent of a month's worth of benefits for all SNAP recipients in select counties. The replacement benefits were simply posted to each recipient's EBT card with no special action required by the client. The waiver provided replacement benefits to many people quickly and easily, while SNAP households experiencing more severe disaster-related hardships retained the option to apply for further benefits. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/north-carolina-disaster-nutrition-assistance>

**Promote:** SNAP state agencies and community partners should disseminate information about D-SNAP and other disaster relief broadly, including through traditional and social media. After D-SNAP ends, it is likely many households that received D-SNAP assistance were eligible for regular SNAP prior to the disaster, but not participating. State agencies and advocates should work to assist SNAP-eligible households in transitioning from D-SNAP to SNAP.

**Recognize:** It is important to recognize the positive efforts that USDA, State SNAP agencies, EBT contractors, SNAP retailers, and community groups take to leverage federal disaster aid for hard-hit people and communities. Sharing lessons learned as well as recommendations are good ways to maintain efficacy. Other actions could include issuing a report, writing letters to the editor, and meeting with State SNAP agency officials.

## CHALLENGES

Much of the federal nutritional relief available can only be tapped if the State SNAP agency seeks and receives the authority to provide D-SNAP benefits and supplemental SNAP benefits for those victims. Another challenge is the logistics of implementing D-SNAP, including getting the word out to stakeholders and community members, given all of the disruptions to regular communication channels that often take place during a disaster.

## LESSON

Advocacy can be pivotal for whether a state seeks and receives authority to leverage federal SNAP assistance for disaster victims. Advocates should be in touch with the State SNAP agency and other public officials about the options available to the state and educate them about the importance of taking the appropriate options.

State agencies can plan ahead to streamline D-SNAP operations. They also can work with community groups to get the word out about D-SNAP.

## MORE RESOURCES

- FRAC's *An Advocate's Guide to the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP)*: <http://www.frac.org/research/resource-library/advocates-guide-disaster-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-d-snap>.
- FRAC's D-SNAP webinar: <http://frac.peachnewmedia.com/store/streaming/seminar-launch.php?key=a7wIV%2BfMHzQXuA%2BVkDu1Y%2Fk8kPXNw3x1ewbtokoU09A%3D>
- FRAC's SNAP in the Aftermath of Disaster: Advocacy and Outreach Best Practices webinar: <https://frac.peachnewmedia.com/store/seminar/seminar.php?seminar=20757>
- FRAC's A Program that Works: Disaster SNAP (infographic) <http://frac.org/research/resource-library/disaster-snap>
- USDA's *Disaster Outreach* (guide): [https://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/disaster\\_outreach.pdf](https://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/disaster_outreach.pdf)
- USDA-FNS has aggregated all of the paperwork state agencies need to apply for a disaster waiver into one website section: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/d-snap-resources-state-agencies-and-partners>
- USDA's *The Year of the Flood*: <https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2016/09/13/year-flood>