



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Office of the Commissioner

Kevin Erskine
Commissioner

December 15, 2025

MEMORANDUM


TO: The Honorable Glenn Youngkin
Governor of Virginia

The Honorable L. Louise Lucas
Chair, Senate Finance & Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Gazala F. Hashmi
Chair, Senate Education and Health Committee

The Honorable Luke E. Torian
Chair, House Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Mark D. Sickles
Chair, House Health and Human Services Committee

FROM: Kevin Erskine 

SUBJECT: Report on Access to Federal Food Assistance

The attached report is submitted pursuant to Chapter 691 of the 2025 Acts of Assembly, which provides:

§ 1. That the Department of Social Services shall convene a work group with such members as it deems necessary or appropriate to evaluate methods to improve access to and maximize participation in all federal public assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture relating to assistance with food access and improving food security. The work group

shall collaborate with relevant stakeholders, including the Commission to End Hunger, to evaluate the following: (i) removing administrative barriers to applying for participation in federal public assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture relating to assistance with food access and improving food security; (ii) improving outreach to increase awareness of such programs among individuals who would otherwise be eligible to participate in such programs but may not be aware of such programs; and (iii) collecting relevant data. In conducting its work, the work group shall consider the specific needs and circumstances of different populations and demographics in the Commonwealth and how those needs and circumstances could increase barriers to program access and impact the efficacy of outreach campaigns and methods. The Department of Social Services shall report the work group's findings and recommendations to the Chairs of the House Committees on Health and Human Services and Appropriations and the Senate Committees on Education and Health and Finance and Appropriations by December 1, 2025.

Please contact me if you have questions at (804) 726-7011.

KE:kc

Attachment

cc: The Honorable Janet V. Kelly, Secretary of Health and Human Services



Improving Access to USDA- Funded Food Assistance Programs in Virginia

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IMPROVING ACCESS TO USDA-FUNDED FOOD ASSISTANCE IN VIRGINIA

A Report for the Virginia General Assembly

December 1, 2025

REPORT MANDATE

Chapter 691 of the 2025 the Act s of Assembly:

1. That the Department of Social Services shall convene a work group with such members as it deems necessary or appropriate to evaluate methods to improve access to and maximize participation in all federal public assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture relating to assistance with food access and improving food security. The work group shall collaborate with relevant stakeholders, including the Commission to End Hunger, to evaluate the following: (i) removing administrative barriers to applying for participation in federal public assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture relating to assistance with food access and improving food security; (ii) improving outreach to increase awareness of such programs among individuals who would otherwise be eligible to participate in such programs but may not be aware of such programs; and (iii) collecting relevant data. In conducting its work, the work group shall consider the specific needs and circumstances of different populations and demographics in the Commonwealth and how those needs and circumstances could increase barriers to program access and impact the efficacy of outreach campaigns and methods. The Department of Social Services shall report on the work group's findings and recommendations to the Chairs of the House Committees on Health and Human Services and Appropriations and the Senate Committees on Education and Health and Finance and Appropriations by December 1, 2025.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers several nutrition programs under three main categories, child nutrition, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and food distribution. The workgroup narrowed the focus to child nutrition and SNAP benefits, which both provide opportunities to strengthen food security.

The workgroup focused on three priority populations: older adults, students in higher learning, and families with children. The workgroup's evaluation identified persistent gaps in food assistance benefit delivery worsened by barriers to program access such as limited public awareness, complex application and eligibility requirements, and program application technology. The workgroup recommended several initiatives to:

- broaden awareness and expand education efforts in communities
- utilize program data to guide and strengthen participation
- simplify access to nutrition programs

These recommended initiatives provide a coordinated approach to increase enrollment and strengthen interagency collaboration. Making these changes increases the potential to transform access to food assistance into a seamless, dignified experience that empowers every Virginian to thrive.

About VDSS and Benefit Programs

The Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) partners with local departments of social services and community organizations, to promote the well-being of children and families across the Commonwealth. We proudly serve alongside nearly 13,000 state and local human services professionals throughout the Social Services System, who ensure that thousands of the most vulnerable residents have access to the best services and benefits available to them.

Together, we work each day to serve, empower, and create opportunities for brighter futures.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps Virginians with limited income afford the nutritious food essential to their health, stability, and well-being. By supplementing household grocery budgets, SNAP strengthens families, reduces food insecurity, and supports local economies across the Commonwealth.

DEFINITIONS

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federal program funded by the USDA. SNAP provides food and nutrition assistance to low-income households to alleviate food insecurity and promote health and well-being. SNAP supplements the grocery budget of families and individuals so they can afford to purchase nutritious food using their EBT card.

CommonHelp

CommonHelp is the Commonwealth of Virginia’s online self-service portal that enables individuals and families to screen for, apply for, and manage eligibility for a broad range of public assistance programs administered by VDSS and its partner agencies such as the Department of Medical Assistance Services (DMAS).

National School Lunch Program (NSLP)

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides low-cost or free lunches to children in public and nonprofit private schools (grades pre-kindergarten through 12th grade) and residential childcare institutions. The USDA Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) administers the NSLP and reimburses participating schools and residential childcare institutions for the meals served to students.

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides nutrition support specific to pregnant women, infants, and children up to age five. WIC is a federal program funded by USDA. It provides free healthy foods, breastfeeding support, and nutrition education. Benefits are distributed using an EBT card.

CONTACT

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Improving Access to USDA-Funded Food Assistance Programs in Virginia

SECTION 1: BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

VDSS convened a workgroup in response to Chapter 691 (House Bill 1723) of the 2025 Acts of Assembly, which directed the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) to evaluate strategies for improving access and participation in federal assistance food programs administered by the USDA.

VDSS convened an interagency workgroup to explore federally funded food programs available in Virginia. The workgroup was comprised of state agency staff and key stakeholders. An invitation to participate on the workgroup was extended to the Virginia Commission to End Hunger. The group selected the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as the primary program for further examination because it offers the greatest potential for impact.

Comprehensive data analysis led the workgroup to identify three major factors that consistently hinder participation in food assistance programs in Virginia: limited public awareness, complex application and eligibility requirements, and barriers related to program application technology. The workgroup assessed the impact of these barriers within three priority demographic areas where addressing hunger is most urgent.

The three demographic areas identified for focused analysis were the elderly (60+), students in higher learning, and families with children. These groups experience unique challenges in accessing food assistance. Strategically focusing on these three groups offers a practical and high-impact opportunity to increase participation in SNAP engagement, thereby improving participation in federally funded food programs.

PUBLIC AWARENESS

Many individuals remain unaware of the food assistance programs available to them, preventing them from realizing they may qualify for support. Older adults often assume their income exceeds eligibility thresholds and are unfamiliar with the actual guidelines. Students in higher learning frequently believe their student status makes them ineligible, and limited on-campus outreach and support leave them without clear guidance on available options. Families with children also miss opportunities to benefit from multiple food assistance programs such as SNAP, WIC, and free school meals programs, due to a lack of information about how these programs interact. Compounding these challenges is the persistent stigma associated with seeking food assistance, including feelings of judgment and shame, which discourages many eligible individuals from applying.

APPLICATION AND ELIGIBILITY RULES

Even when individuals are aware of available food assistance programs, confusion surrounding application procedures and eligibility requirements often discourages participation. Older adults frequently struggle with online application platforms, creating a significant barrier to enrollment. Students in higher learning encounter some of the most complex SNAP rules, particularly those related to employment, dependent status, and qualifying career programs. The workgroup also noted that guidance on navigating these rules is rarely communicated effectively. Families with children balance work and childcare responsibilities while many find food assistance programs as disjointed and difficult to coordinate. Many families are unaware of how food assistance programs can be leveraged together to strengthen household food security. Across all groups, the workgroup emphasized that inconsistent communication from agencies, schools, and healthcare providers leaves many Virginians without dependable and accessible information about food assistance options in their communities.

APPLICATION TECHNOLOGY

Technology barriers continue to limit access to food assistance programs. Limited internet access, complex and fragmented online platforms, and applications that are not integrated across agencies create significant obstacles for applicants. Some application processes remain paper-based, creating additional challenges for the elderly and students who may face transportation barriers in submitting forms. There are currently no data-sharing agreements in place to help identify or pre-qualify individuals for potential benefits, and the existing technology does not encompass all available food assistance programs. These challenges can prevent applicants from completing the process in a timely manner, delaying or even interrupting the receipt of benefits.

Together, these insights underscore the need for streamlined, user-friendly, and community-integrated solutions with a focus on improving access, reducing stigma to ensure all Virginians can take advantage of available food assistance programs.

STRATEGIC DEMOGRAPHIC PRIORITIZATION

To inform strategy for improving program access, the workgroup concentrated their initial analysis on three priority demographic groups. The histogram charts below (Figure 1. And Figure 2.) highlight the variance between SNAP participation and possible eligibility.

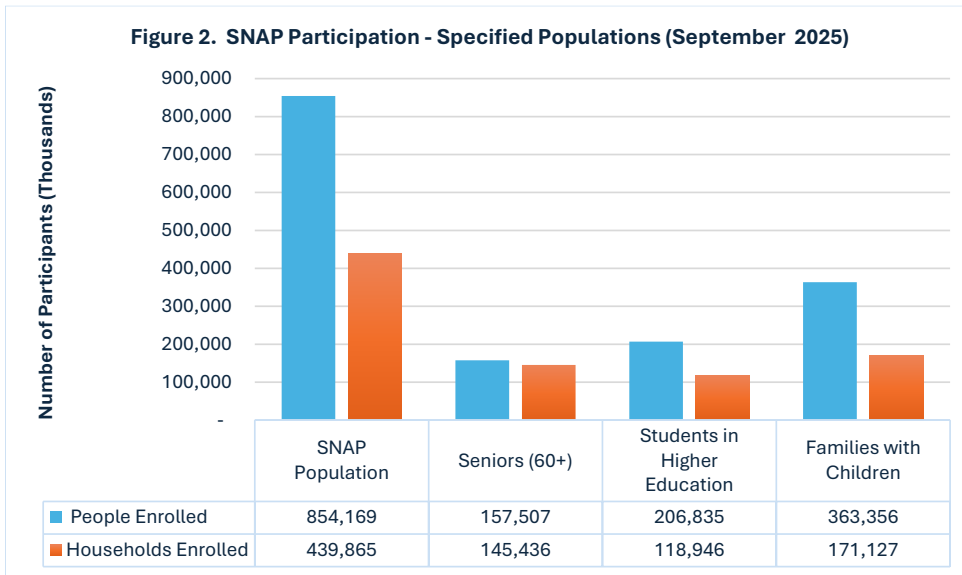
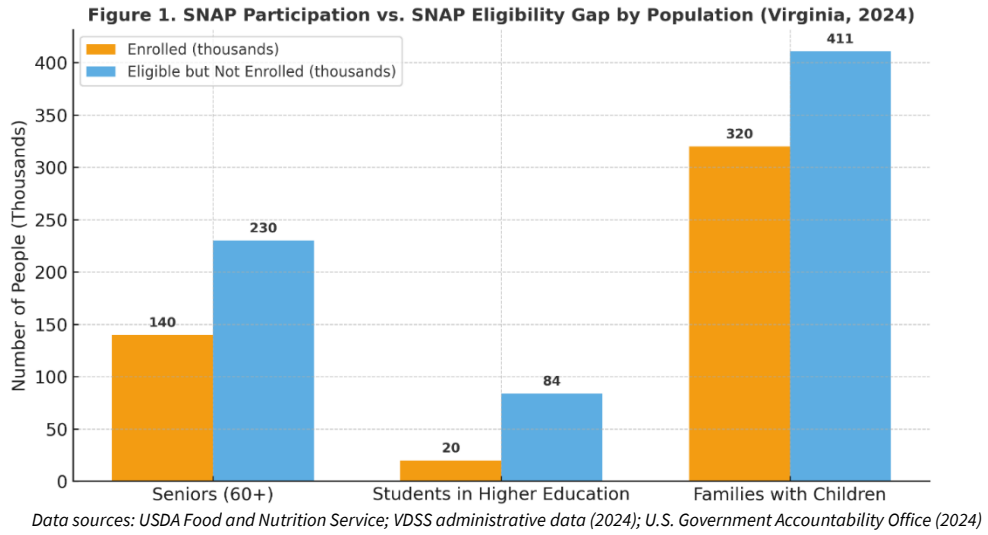


Figure 2. SNAP Participation Data for the Virginia Caseload and specific target populations
Data sources: Virginia Caseload Management System (September 2025)

THE ELDERLY

SNAP defines individuals aged 60 and older as elderly and provides them with enhanced income and expense options when determining eligibility for benefits. Food insecurity among older adults can contribute to declining health, increased medical costs, and a loss of independence. While Virginia offers a simplified SNAP application process and extended certification periods for eligible elderly, and programs such as the Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP) and enhanced medical deductions have improved access, significant barriers remain.

Many older adults remain unaware of their eligibility or assume their income disqualifies them. Complex application procedures, fragmented digital platforms, and limited technological literacy can make completing online applications challenging. Additionally, some SNAP processes are still paper-based, creating transportation barriers for the elderly who may have limited mobility or access to mailing services. Outreach efforts are inconsistent, leaving many elderly individuals without clear guidance on available programs. These factors indicate that while policy accommodations exist, specific outreach and community-based support are critical to fully realizing SNAP participation among older Virginians.

STUDENTS IN HIGHER LEARNING

Currently, only one in three students in higher learning who are likely eligible for SNAP receives benefits. This participation gap is nearly four times greater than that of the general population, where roughly 82% of eligible individuals access the program. Yet, accurately identifying eligible students is challenging due to federal rules around work requirements, enrollment status, and dependents. Participation data often relies on self-reported information and limited criteria, which can under- or overestimate the population. For example, in September 2025, approximately 207,000 higher learning students in Virginia received SNAP benefits; however, this count includes students with children or those qualifying under other categories, which may obscure the true gap in participation.

Notwithstanding the data's inherent limitations, the complexity of student eligibility necessitates specific strategies to increase participation. Proposed approaches focus on increasing program awareness, simplifying application processes, and providing institutional support to ensure eligible students can access SNAP benefits. Among those who do participate, students receive an average monthly SNAP benefit of \$576, highlighting the potential impact of improving program uptake (Figure 3). By addressing these barriers, Virginia can better ensure that eligible students have the resources they need to reduce food insecurity and support academic success.

FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

Families with children are often eligible for a variety of food assistance programs, including SNAP, WIC, and free or reduced-price school meals. This demographic accounts for almost 40% of the total number of individuals that receive SNAP benefits in Virginia. While these figures reflect significant engagement, they also underscore the large number of families who are eligible yet not accessing other food assistance programs.

Participation gaps are driven in part by fragmented program administration. These programs are managed across an array of state agencies without active data sharing agreements or systems which are not integrated, leaving families to navigate multiple applications and reporting requirements on their own. State agencies also do not have a unified method to proactively notify households when they may qualify for additional benefits, so many eligible families remain unaware of programs that could strengthen their food security. Additional barriers include household dynamics, work schedules, and childcare responsibilities, which make completing multiple applications challenging.

Addressing these challenges requires strategies that streamline enrollment, improve interagency coordination, and provide clear, consistent outreach. By connecting eligible families with all available programs and reducing administrative hurdles, Virginia can increase participation, improve nutrition, and enhance overall family well-being.

PROGRAM BENEFITS

SNAP is the largest nutrition program in Virginia and across the country. For every SNAP dollar spent, the program has been associated with providing communities with up to \$1.80 worth of economic activities [\[3\]](#).

The combined monthly issuance for SNAP benefits in Virginia for September 2025 was just under \$145,000,000.00. Families with children represented the largest population receiving a SNAP benefit issuance at just over 95 million dollars. Increasing SNAP awareness, through education and improved access, is beneficial for Virginia in terms of health and economics [\[4\]](#).

VIRGINIA EMERGENCY NUTRITION ASSISTANCE (VENA)

On October 23, 2025, Governor Youngkin authorized Executive Order 54, which launched the Virginia Emergency Nutrition Assistance (VENA) program. This state-funded initiative ensured that current SNAP households receive necessary food assistance amid the federal government shutdown. VENA provided weekly benefits equal to roughly 25% of a household's normal monthly SNAP amount and allowed SNAP recipients to receive benefits seamlessly until the federal shutdown ended and SNAP funding resumed. VENA was financed through Virginia's budget surplus at an estimated cost of about 37.5 million dollars per week, alongside an additional 1 million dollars directed to the statewide food bank network, underscoring the Commonwealth's commitment to safeguarding food access for more than 800,000 SNAP recipients during the shutdown.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of barriers across these three demographic areas highlights a consistent pattern: despite the availability of multiple food assistance programs, a combination of limited awareness, complex eligibility rules, fragmented systems and technology challenges prevents many eligible Virginians from accessing the support available through federal programs. While common themes emerge across populations, such as the need for clearer communication, streamlined application processes, and coordinated outreach, each demographic also faces distinct eligibility requirements and program rules that must be addressed individually.

To address these challenges, the workgroup recommends a series of initiatives focused on three primary barriers: a lack of public awareness, insufficient education about program eligibility, and limited access to technology. These initiatives are designed to improve access to food assistance and strengthen food security across the Commonwealth. By prioritizing these key barriers, the proposed strategies aim to maximize positive impacts for each of the strategic demographic areas.

Appendix C features a matrix of identified barriers and corresponding recommendations for each priority group, which are outlined in detail below.

ELDERLY

ENHANCE THE BASELINE SNAP SUPPORT FOR ELDERLY ADULTS

Challenge: Interest in SNAP participation remains low among the elderly, largely due to minimum benefit levels that do not adequately reflect the cost of food. This is particularly challenging for individuals with specialized dietary requirements, whose expenses significantly exceed the baseline benefit. The current minimum benefit for a one- to two-person household is \$23 [\[5\]](#).

Recommendation: Enhance baseline SNAP support for households including elderly adults to more adequately meet their food needs. Several states have implemented similar strategies to strengthen support for the elderly: New York raised its minimum SNAP benefit to \$95.00; Massachusetts increased the minimum SNAP benefit to \$50.00; and Pennsylvania increased the minimum SNAP benefit to \$40.00. Adopting comparable approaches could help improve food security among the elder population.

MOBILE APPLICATION HUB

The elderly are currently required to complete the application in both digital and hardcopy form, submitting the hardcopy to a Local Department of Social Services (LDSS). LDSS offices offer appointments for applicants to receive assistance in completing the application process.

Challenge: Lack of secure internet access and/or reliable transportation.

Recommendation: Establish a mobile hub equipped with trained staff, secure internet access, and digital devices to assist individuals in completing food assistance applications on-site. Additionally, build local partnerships with area agencies on aging, faith-based organizations, community groups, and healthcare providers to foster trust and effectively reach this population.

DATA SHARING BETWEEN MEDICAID AND SNAP

Challenge: Medicaid enrollees could potentially qualify for SNAP but are not identified due to the lack of a formal process of data sharing between VDSS and DMAS. The lack of a formal process is a missed opportunity to increase SNAP participation among older adults.

Recommendation: Create secure data-sharing agreements between DMAS and VDSS to identify Medicaid enrollees who may qualify for SNAP.

IMPROVING ACCESS FOR STREAMLINED ENROLLMENT AND SUPPORT

Challenge: The elderly face significant barriers to accessing SNAP benefits, often due to administrative hurdles such as frequent documentation requests and complex renewal processes. These challenges can be especially difficult for individuals with limited mobility or digital access.

Recommendation: Streamline SNAP policies for older adults by extending certification periods, enabling telephonic and online renewals, and offering personalized assistance through trained navigators.

STUDENTS IN HIGHER LEARNING

FAFSA APPLICATION INTEGRATION

Challenge: Many students at colleges, trade schools, and universities are unaware that certain career and technical programs qualify them for SNAP benefits. A 2024 federal law allows sharing of FAFSA (the Free Application for Federal Student Aid that determines an applicant's eligibility for grants, scholarships, work-study programs, and loans for college or career school) data with SNAP agencies to identify potentially eligible students^[6]. Despite this, implementation remains slow, as the U.S. Department of Education has yet to finalize operational guidance for states.

Recommendation: Implement a pilot program that would launch a new FAFSA-linked Student Simplified Application Project (SSAP) to streamline SNAP enrollment for college students.

FAFSA provides a reliable doorway to identify eligible college students and, with consent, prepopulate a SSAP, which will allow students to submit applications in minutes. Where permitted, the system should automatically populate key fields and use income data from the form. Virginia could implement system flags that identify potential exemption pathways such as employment, work-study participation, and parenting status. This will help ease the burden of the application completion process. FAFSA data-based efforts are dependent on the finalization of federal data sharing rules.

CAMPUS NAVIGATORS

Students experiencing food insecurity can visit food pantries, either on campus where available or in the community. Not all these food pantries are equipped with SNAP Navigators knowledgeable about the eligibility options and the complex federal requirements for this population.

Challenge: Federal restrictions on SNAP eligibility create complex, student-specific rules that cannot easily be simplified at the state level. This leaves many college students unaware, confused by requirements, and discouraged from applying.

Recommendation: Apply data-driven methodologies to identify institutions and community food pantries to staff with Campus Navigators, who act as liaisons, trained in student-specific SNAP rules. The SNAP liaison could use a pre-screening tool to determine if a student likely meets an exemption that can lead to eligibility. Campus Navigators would help navigate the complex SNAP rules, demystify the process, and reduce stigma by normalizing SNAP.

Implementation: This recommendation would involve training or reassigning existing student services staff to serve as SNAP navigators. Virginia should be ready to act quickly, possibly piloting the program at a few public universities and community colleges.

EXPAND SNAP EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING (SNAP E&T)

The SNAP E&T program helps SNAP participants gain skills and find work that moves them towards self-sufficiency. Participants have access to training and support services to help them enter or advance in the workforce.

Challenge: Many students at colleges, trade schools, and universities are unaware that certain career and technical programs qualify them for SNAP benefits.

Recommendation: Expand the SNAP E&T Program to designate more college programs as qualifying activities so that students can satisfy the exemption without working 20 hours each week. This recommendation could potentially result in more students meeting program exemptions under the SNAP E&T criteria leading to SNAP eligibility.

STUDENT DATA EXCHANGE

Challenge: Many students in higher learning are unaware that if they are eligible for student aid they may also qualify for SNAP benefits.

Recommendation: Implement a FAFSA Data Project requiring VDSS to work in collaboration with State Council Higher Education for Virginia and institutions of higher education to utilize FAFSA data to identify students with low Expected Family Contribution and Pell Grant recipients.

FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

EXPAND SNAP IN SCHOOLS STATEWIDE

Challenge: Many low-income families with children interact with schools daily but may have limited contact with local social services offices. Linking SNAP-approved families with other nutrition programs, such as National School Lunch Program, Virginia SUNBucks, and others, can help address these access barriers. Increased SNAP participation benefits families directly while qualifying more students for free school meals, boosting meal funding in schools that use the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

CEP is a non-pricing meal service option for schools and school districts in low-income areas. This program allows the nation's highest poverty schools and districts to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting household applications. Schools that adopt CEP are reimbursed using a formula based on the percentage of students categorically eligible for free meals based on their participation in other specific means-tested programs, such as SNAP and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Recommendation: Extend the SNAP in Schools initiative to more schools across the state, both private and public. This will potentially allow staff to increase awareness of families and provide education on the application process.

NUTRITION PROGRAM APPLICATION INTEGRATION

Challenge: If applicants utilize multiple food assistance programs, they currently must complete multiple applications for each program. This duplication and administrative burden discourages families from applying for food assistance programs.

Recommendation: Integrate applications for child nutrition programs to streamline access, reduce duplication and improve coordination. Provide households with clear information about their potential eligibility for other nutrition programs and explore opportunities for data sharing beyond initial application process.

LINK NUTRITION PROGRAM APPLICATION PROCESSES

Challenge: Families with SNAP eligible children are often unaware they also qualify for other child nutrition programs such as WIC, Virginia Sun Bucks, the National School Lunch Programs, and the School Breakfast Program. Currently each of these systems and application processes are separate.

Recommendation: Create a linked application system for SNAP, WIC, NSLP, School Breakfast Program, and Virginia Sun Bucks. Linking these systems to send a notification when an application is submitted qualifying applicants are queued for another program.

DATA SHARING BETWEEN MEDICAID AND SNAP

Challenge: Medicaid enrollees who could potentially qualify for SNAP are not currently identified due to the expired data sharing agreement between VDSS and DMAS, resulting in missed opportunities to increase SNAP participation among eligible households.

Recommendation: Renew secure data-sharing agreements between DMAS and VDSS to identify Medicaid enrollees who may qualify for SNAP and provide them with information on the SNAP application process. This recommendation requires the establishment of privacy-protected data-sharing agreements between DMAS and VDSS for limited-purpose SNAP outreach and application assistance.

ALL PRIORITIZED DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

IMPROVING ACCESS BY MODERNIZING SYSTEMS AND SUPPORT

Challenge: Virginia's current SNAP application and communication processes create significant obstacles for eligible residents. Many applicants struggle to submit required information and receive timely updates, resulting in delays, confusion, and missed benefits. Limited communication channels and staffing constraints further hinder applicants' ability to complete verification steps, contributing to preventable denials.

Recommendation: Strengthen and modernize SNAP technology and administrative systems to improve reliability, communication and overall applicant support. Key improvements include upgraded digital platforms, enhanced communication tools, increased staffing capacity, and clearer guidance to ensure consistent interactions between caseworkers and applicants.

STATEWIDE EDUCATION CAMPAIGN

Challenges: Currently there is a lack of public awareness around the SNAP program and misconceptions about the program alongside a persistent stigma around accessing food assistance. These two factors can discourage many eligible individuals from applying.

Recommendation: Create a statewide campaign to increase awareness and support public education of nutrition programs. The campaign could be supported through a combination of available state resources and federally authorized SNAP outreach mechanisms. Virginia currently has an Outreach Plan for SNAP with contracted partners, which includes access to USDA-approved outreach support. Additional resources could be leveraged within this framework to strengthen and expand outreach activities.

CONCLUSION

Access to food assistance programs in Virginia is limited by a combination of barriers, including low public awareness, complex eligibility rules, fragmented systems, technology challenges, and social stigma. These obstacles prevent many eligible individuals from enrolling in programs such as SNAP, WIC, and school nutrition programs.

The workgroup focused on three priority populations: the elderly, students in higher learning, and families with children. Each group faces unique challenges: the elderly may struggle with technology and mobility; students navigate complex eligibility rules and limited guidance; and families often contend with multiple, uncoordinated programs that require separate applications.

To address these barriers, the workgroup recommends initiatives focused on three key areas: increasing awareness, providing clear guidance on eligibility, and improving access to technology. These strategies aim to streamline enrollment, enhance program coordination, and reduce administrative hurdles, maximizing participation and improving food security across the Commonwealth. Appendix C presents a matrix of identified barriers and corresponding recommendations for each priority group.

APPENDIX A LEGISLATIVE MANDATE CHAPTER 691 OF THE 2025 ACTS OF ASSEMBLY

1. § 1. That the Department of Social Services shall convene a work group with such members as it deems necessary or appropriate to evaluate methods to improve access to and maximize participation in all federal public assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture relating to assistance with food access and improving food security. The work group shall collaborate with relevant stakeholders, including the Commission to End Hunger, to evaluate the following: (i) removing administrative barriers to applying for participation in federal public assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture relating to assistance with food access and improving food security; (ii) improving outreach to increase awareness of such programs among individuals who would otherwise be eligible to participate in such programs but may not be aware of such programs; and (iii) collecting relevant data. In conducting its work, the work group shall consider the specific needs and circumstances of different populations and demographics in the Commonwealth and how those needs and circumstances could increase barriers to program access and impact the efficacy of outreach campaigns and methods. The Department of Social Services shall report the work group's findings and recommendations to the Chairs of the House Committees on Health and Human Services and Appropriations and the Senate Committees on Education and Health and Finance and Appropriations by December 1, 2025

APPENDIX B WORKGROUP MEMBERS

Charlotte Arbogast–Sr. Policy Analyst, Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services

Irma Blackwell–Medical Assistance Program Manager, Department of Social Services

Kortni Boxley–SNAP Education Coordinator, Department of Social Services

Cassie Edner, Esq–Attorney /Director, VA Hunger Solutions VA Poverty Law Center

Paula Garrett–Director, Division of Community Nutrition, Department of Health

Jess Madden–Associate for Finance Policy and Innovation, State Council of Higher Education

Eddie Oliver–Executive Director, Federation of Virginia Food Banks

Dwronyel Price–SNAP Outreach Consultant, Sr., Department of Social Services

Dr. Elena Serrano–Director, Family Nutrition Program, Virginia Polytechnic University

*An invitation to participate on the work group was extended to the Virginia Commission to End Hunger, via an email to Tiffany Harris-Greene, staff contact for the Commission.

APPENDIX C RECOMMENDATION MATRIX

Identified Barrier		Recommendation
Elderly (60+)	The baseline snap support for elderly adults.	Enhance baseline SNAP support for households including elderly adults to more adequately meet their food needs.
	Transportation limits local office access.	Establish a mobile hub equipped with trained staff, secure internet access, and digital devices to assist individuals in completing food assistance applications on-site.
	Some Medicaid customers may be eligible for SNAP.	Create secure data-sharing agreements between DMAS and VDSS to identify Medicaid enrollees who may qualify for SNAP.
	Administrative hurdles, frequent inquiries and requests.	Streamline SNAP policies for older adults by extending certification periods, enabling telephonic and online renewals, and offering personalized assistance through trained navigators.
Students in Higher Learning	Students abandon applications due to time and complexity.	Implement a pilot program that would launch a new FAFSA-linked Student Simplified Application Project (SSAP) to streamline SNAP enrollment for college students.
	Answer questions and provide help.	Apply data-driven methodologies to identify institutions and community food pantries to staff with Campus Navigators, who act as liaisons, trained in student-specific SNAP rules.
	Students fail to meet SNAP requirements.	Expand the SNAP E&T Program to designate more college programs as qualifying activities so that students can satisfy the exemption without working 20 hours each week.
	Use financial aid data to identify potentially eligible students.	Implement a FAFSA Data Project requiring VDSS to work in collaboration with State Council Higher Education for Virginia and institutions of higher education to utilize FAFSA data to identify students with low Expected Family Contribution and Pell Grant recipients.
Families with children	Lack of awareness of SNAP eligibility.	Extend the SNAP in Schools initiative to more schools across the state, both private and public.
	Not accessing benefits available from other nutrition programs.	Integrate applications for child nutrition programs to streamline access, reduce duplication and improve coordination.
	Multiple applications for child nutrition are difficult to navigate.	Create a linked application system for SNAP, WIC, NSLP, School Breakfast Program, and Virginia Sun Bucks.

	Some SNAP customers may also be eligible for WIC.	Renew secure data-sharing agreements between DMAS and VDSS to identify Medicaid enrollees who may qualify for SNAP and provide them with information on the SNAP application process.
All	Access and technology are not user friendly.	Strengthen and modernize SNAP technology and administrative systems to improve reliability, communication and overall applicant support.
	Lack of awareness, education and access	Create a statewide campaign to increase awareness and support public education of nutrition programs.

APPENDIX D SOURCES

Data and analysis in this report are drawn from the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) and its partner agencies, as well as authoritative national sources including the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), the Economic Research Service (ERS), the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), the National Council on Aging (NCOA), the Virginia Poverty Law Center (VPLC), and the Federation of Virginia Food Banks. Additional information was derived from the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, No Kid Hungry’s Center for Best Practices, APHSA’s Catalyst case studies, and the Virginia Department of Health’s WIC program data.

Key references include college student food insecurity findings and FAFSA data-sharing guidance from GAO and The Hope Center [1]; SNAP participation and economic impact data from VDSS and USDA ERS [3]; senior participation and benefit adequacy analyses from VPLC and NCOA [4];

Each citation is indicated in the text by a bracketed reference (for example, [1]) corresponding to the numbered source in Appendix D. This evidentiary foundation ensures that all findings, barriers, and recommendations presented in this report are grounded in the most current and credible data available.

1. The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs. “GAO Confirms What We Already Know: Students Face Unacceptable Food Insecurity.” (Jul. 25, 2024). <https://hope.temple.edu/policy-advocacy/gao-confirms-what-we-already-know-students-face-unacceptable-food-insecurity>
2. Virginia Poverty Law Center (with Federation of Virginia Food Banks). “Respond to Senior Hunger Report.” (Sep. 9, 2024). <https://vplc.org/respond-to-senior-hunger-report/>
3. FRAC Food Research & Action Center Protect SNAP to Reduce Hunger and Strengthen Local Economies in Virginia (Feb. 2025). https://vakids.org/wpcontent/uploads/2025/03/SNAP_FactSheets_022525_VA47.pdf.pdf
4. Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS). SNAP Participation Reports (monthly tables). (Sep. 2025). [Virginia Department of Social Services September 2025 SNAP Participation Report](#)
5. Virginia Poverty Law Center (with Federation of Virginia Food Banks). “Respond to Senior Hunger Report.” (Sep. 9, 2024). <https://vplc.org/respond-to-senior-hunger-report/>

6. U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Federal Actions Needed to Help Connect College Students with Benefits (GAO-25-106000; 2025). <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-25-106000>

shall collaborate with relevant stakeholders, including the Commission to End Hunger, to evaluate the following: (i) removing administrative barriers to applying for participation in federal public assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture relating to assistance with food access and improving food security; (ii) improving outreach to increase awareness of such programs among individuals who would otherwise be eligible to participate in such programs but may not be aware of such programs; and (iii) collecting relevant data. In conducting its work, the work group shall consider the specific needs and circumstances of different populations and demographics in the Commonwealth and how those needs and circumstances could increase barriers to program access and impact the efficacy of outreach campaigns and methods. The Department of Social Services shall report the work group's findings and recommendations to the Chairs of the House Committees on Health and Human Services and Appropriations and the Senate Committees on Education and Health and Finance and Appropriations by December 1, 2025.

Please contact me if you have questions at (804) 726-7011.

KE:kc

Attachment

cc: The Honorable Janet V. Kelly, Secretary of Health and Human Services



Improving Access to USDA- Funded Food Assistance Programs in Virginia

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IMPROVING ACCESS TO USDA-FUNDED FOOD ASSISTANCE IN VIRGINIA

A Report for the Virginia General Assembly

December 1, 2025

REPORT MANDATE

Chapter 691 of the 2025 the Act s of Assembly:

1. That the Department of Social Services shall convene a work group with such members as it deems necessary or appropriate to evaluate methods to improve access to and maximize participation in all federal public assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture relating to assistance with food access and improving food security. The work group shall collaborate with relevant stakeholders, including the Commission to End Hunger, to evaluate the following: (i) removing administrative barriers to applying for participation in federal public assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture relating to assistance with food access and improving food security; (ii) improving outreach to increase awareness of such programs among individuals who would otherwise be eligible to participate in such programs but may not be aware of such programs; and (iii) collecting relevant data. In conducting its work, the work group shall consider the specific needs and circumstances of different populations and demographics in the Commonwealth and how those needs and circumstances could increase barriers to program access and impact the efficacy of outreach campaigns and methods. The Department of Social Services shall report on the work group's findings and recommendations to the Chairs of the House Committees on Health and Human Services and Appropriations and the Senate Committees on Education and Health and Finance and Appropriations by December 1, 2025.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers several nutrition programs under three main categories, child nutrition, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and food distribution. The workgroup narrowed the focus to child nutrition and SNAP benefits, which both provide opportunities to strengthen food security.

The workgroup focused on three priority populations: older adults, students in higher learning, and families with children. The workgroup's evaluation identified persistent gaps in food assistance benefit delivery worsened by barriers to program access such as limited public awareness, complex application and eligibility requirements, and program application technology. The workgroup recommended several initiatives to:

- broaden awareness and expand education efforts in communities
- utilize program data to guide and strengthen participation
- simplify access to nutrition programs

These recommended initiatives provide a coordinated approach to increase enrollment and strengthen interagency collaboration. Making these changes increases the potential to transform access to food assistance into a seamless, dignified experience that empowers every Virginian to thrive.

About VDSS and Benefit Programs

The Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) partners with local departments of social services and community organizations, to promote the well-being of children and families across the Commonwealth. We proudly serve alongside nearly 13,000 state and local human services professionals throughout the Social Services System, who ensure that thousands of the most vulnerable residents have access to the best services and benefits available to them.

Together, we work each day to serve, empower, and create opportunities for brighter futures.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps Virginians with limited income afford the nutritious food essential to their health, stability, and well-being. By supplementing household grocery budgets, SNAP strengthens families, reduces food insecurity, and supports local economies across the Commonwealth.

DEFINITIONS

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federal program funded by the USDA. SNAP provides food and nutrition assistance to low-income households to alleviate food insecurity and promote health and well-being. SNAP supplements the grocery budget of families and individuals so they can afford to purchase nutritious food using their EBT card.

CommonHelp

CommonHelp is the Commonwealth of Virginia’s online self-service portal that enables individuals and families to screen for, apply for, and manage eligibility for a broad range of public assistance programs administered by VDSS and its partner agencies such as the Department of Medical Assistance Services (DMAS).

National School Lunch Program (NSLP)

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides low-cost or free lunches to children in public and nonprofit private schools (grades pre-kindergarten through 12th grade) and residential childcare institutions. The USDA Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) administers the NSLP and reimburses participating schools and residential childcare institutions for the meals served to students.

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides nutrition support specific to pregnant women, infants, and children up to age five. WIC is a federal program funded by USDA. It provides free healthy foods, breastfeeding support, and nutrition education. Benefits are distributed using an EBT card.

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Improving Access to USDA-Funded Food Assistance Programs in Virginia

SECTION 1: BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

VDSS convened a workgroup in response to Chapter 691 (House Bill 1723) of the 2025 Acts of Assembly, which directed the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) to evaluate strategies for improving access and participation in federal assistance food programs administered by the USDA.

VDSS convened an interagency workgroup to explore federally funded food programs available in Virginia. The workgroup was comprised of state agency staff and key stakeholders. An invitation to participate on the workgroup was extended to the Virginia Commission to End Hunger. The group selected the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as the primary program for further examination because it offers the greatest potential for impact.

Comprehensive data analysis led the workgroup to identify three major factors that consistently hinder participation in food assistance programs in Virginia: limited public awareness, complex application and eligibility requirements, and barriers related to program application technology. The workgroup assessed the impact of these barriers within three priority demographic areas where addressing hunger is most urgent.

The three demographic areas identified for focused analysis were the elderly (60+), students in higher learning, and families with children. These groups experience unique challenges in accessing food assistance. Strategically focusing on these three groups offers a practical and high-impact opportunity to increase participation in SNAP engagement, thereby improving participation in federally funded food programs.

PUBLIC AWARENESS

Many individuals remain unaware of the food assistance programs available to them, preventing them from realizing they may qualify for support. Older adults often assume their income exceeds eligibility thresholds and are unfamiliar with the actual guidelines. Students in higher learning frequently believe their student status makes them ineligible, and limited on-campus outreach and support leave them without clear guidance on available options. Families with children also miss opportunities to benefit from multiple food assistance programs such as SNAP, WIC, and free school meals programs, due to a lack of information about how these programs interact. Compounding these challenges is the persistent stigma associated with seeking food assistance, including feelings of judgment and shame, which discourages many eligible individuals from applying.

APPLICATION AND ELIGIBILITY RULES

Even when individuals are aware of available food assistance programs, confusion surrounding application procedures and eligibility requirements often discourages participation. Older adults frequently struggle with online application platforms, creating a significant barrier to enrollment. Students in higher learning encounter some of the most complex SNAP rules, particularly those related to employment, dependent status, and qualifying career programs. The workgroup also noted that guidance on navigating these rules is rarely communicated effectively. Families with children balance work and childcare responsibilities while many find food assistance programs as disjointed and difficult to coordinate. Many families are unaware of how food assistance programs can be leveraged together to strengthen household food security. Across all groups, the workgroup emphasized that inconsistent communication from agencies, schools, and healthcare providers leaves many Virginians without dependable and accessible information about food assistance options in their communities.

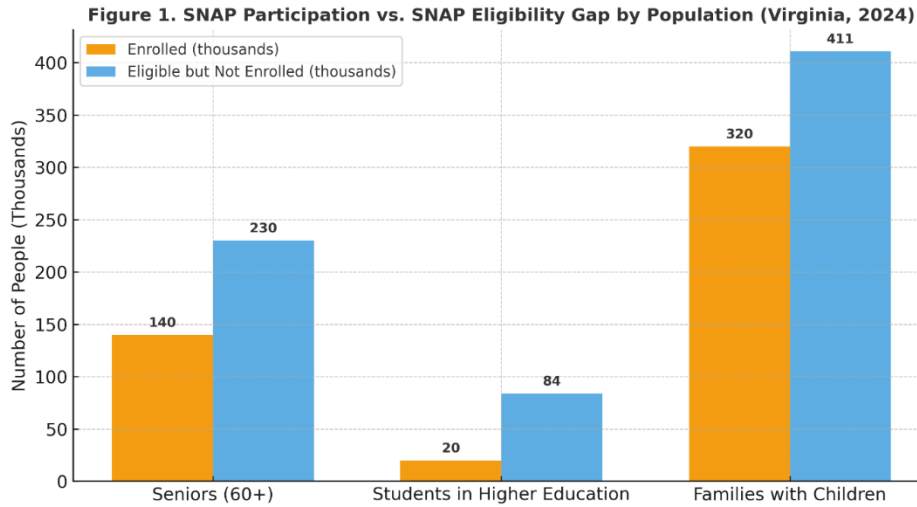
APPLICATION TECHNOLOGY

Technology barriers continue to limit access to food assistance programs. Limited internet access, complex and fragmented online platforms, and applications that are not integrated across agencies create significant obstacles for applicants. Some application processes remain paper-based, creating additional challenges for the elderly and students who may face transportation barriers in submitting forms. There are currently no data-sharing agreements in place to help identify or pre-qualify individuals for potential benefits, and the existing technology does not encompass all available food assistance programs. These challenges can prevent applicants from completing the process in a timely manner, delaying or even interrupting the receipt of benefits.

Together, these insights underscore the need for streamlined, user-friendly, and community-integrated solutions with a focus on improving access, reducing stigma to ensure all Virginians can take advantage of available food assistance programs.

STRATEGIC DEMOGRAPHIC PRIORITIZATION

To inform strategy for improving program access, the workgroup concentrated their initial analysis on three priority demographic groups. The histogram charts below (Figure 1. And Figure 2.) highlight the variance between SNAP participation and possible eligibility.



Data sources: USDA Food and Nutrition Service; VDSS administrative data (2024); U.S. Government Accountability Office (2024)

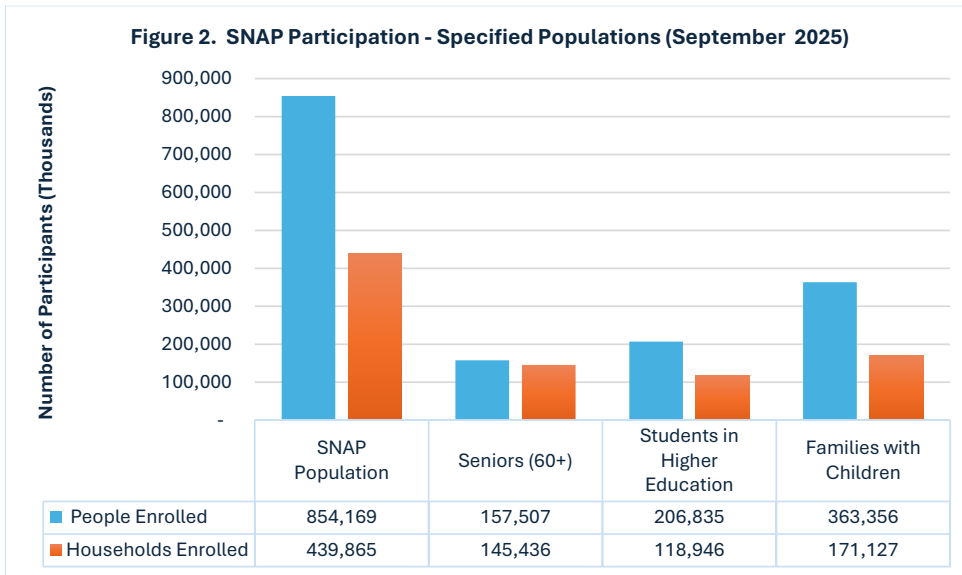


Figure 2. SNAP Participation Data for the Virginia Caseload and specific target populations
Data sources: Virginia Caseload Management System (September 2025)

THE ELDERLY

SNAP defines individuals aged 60 and older as elderly and provides them with enhanced income and expense options when determining eligibility for benefits. Food insecurity among older adults can contribute to declining health, increased medical costs, and a loss of independence. While Virginia offers a simplified SNAP application process and extended certification periods for eligible elderly, and programs such as the Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP) and enhanced medical deductions have improved access, significant barriers remain.

Many older adults remain unaware of their eligibility or assume their income disqualifies them. Complex application procedures, fragmented digital platforms, and limited technological literacy can make completing online applications challenging. Additionally, some SNAP processes are still paper-based, creating transportation barriers for the elderly who may have limited mobility or access to mailing services. Outreach efforts are inconsistent, leaving many elderly individuals without clear guidance on available programs. These factors indicate that while policy accommodations exist, specific outreach and community-based support are critical to fully realizing SNAP participation among older Virginians.

STUDENTS IN HIGHER LEARNING

Currently, only one in three students in higher learning who are likely eligible for SNAP receives benefits. This participation gap is nearly four times greater than that of the general population, where roughly 82% of eligible individuals access the program. Yet, accurately identifying eligible students is challenging due to federal rules around work requirements, enrollment status, and dependents. Participation data often relies on self-reported information and limited criteria, which can under- or overestimate the population. For example, in September 2025, approximately 207,000 higher learning students in Virginia received SNAP benefits; however, this count includes students with children or those qualifying under other categories, which may obscure the true gap in participation.

Notwithstanding the data's inherent limitations, the complexity of student eligibility necessitates specific strategies to increase participation. Proposed approaches focus on increasing program awareness, simplifying application processes, and providing institutional support to ensure eligible students can access SNAP benefits. Among those who do participate, students receive an average monthly SNAP benefit of \$576, highlighting the potential impact of improving program uptake (Figure 3). By addressing these barriers, Virginia can better ensure that eligible students have the resources they need to reduce food insecurity and support academic success.

FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

Families with children are often eligible for a variety of food assistance programs, including SNAP, WIC, and free or reduced-price school meals. This demographic accounts for almost 40% of the total number of individuals that receive SNAP benefits in Virginia. While these figures reflect significant engagement, they also underscore the large number of families who are eligible yet not accessing other food assistance programs.

Participation gaps are driven in part by fragmented program administration. These programs are managed across an array of state agencies without active data sharing agreements or systems which are not integrated, leaving families to navigate multiple applications and reporting requirements on their own. State agencies also do not have a unified method to proactively notify households when they may qualify for additional benefits, so many eligible families remain unaware of programs that could strengthen their food security. Additional barriers include household dynamics, work schedules, and childcare responsibilities, which make completing multiple applications challenging.

Addressing these challenges requires strategies that streamline enrollment, improve interagency coordination, and provide clear, consistent outreach. By connecting eligible families with all available programs and reducing administrative hurdles, Virginia can increase participation, improve nutrition, and enhance overall family well-being.

PROGRAM BENEFITS

SNAP is the largest nutrition program in Virginia and across the country. For every SNAP dollar spent, the program has been associated with providing communities with up to \$1.80 worth of economic activities [\[3\]](#).

The combined monthly issuance for SNAP benefits in Virginia for September 2025 was just under \$145,000,000.00. Families with children represented the largest population receiving a SNAP benefit issuance at just over 95 million dollars. Increasing SNAP awareness, through education and improved access, is beneficial for Virginia in terms of health and economics [\[4\]](#).

VIRGINIA EMERGENCY NUTRITION ASSISTANCE (VENA)

On October 23, 2025, Governor Youngkin authorized Executive Order 54, which launched the Virginia Emergency Nutrition Assistance (VENA) program. This state-funded initiative ensured that current SNAP households receive necessary food assistance amid the federal government shutdown. VENA provided weekly benefits equal to roughly 25% of a household's normal monthly SNAP amount and allowed SNAP recipients to receive benefits seamlessly until the federal shutdown ended and SNAP funding resumed. VENA was financed through Virginia's budget surplus at an estimated cost of about 37.5 million dollars per week, alongside an additional 1 million dollars directed to the statewide food bank network, underscoring the Commonwealth's commitment to safeguarding food access for more than 800,000 SNAP recipients during the shutdown.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of barriers across these three demographic areas highlights a consistent pattern: despite the availability of multiple food assistance programs, a combination of limited awareness, complex eligibility rules, fragmented systems and technology challenges prevents many eligible Virginians from accessing the support available through federal programs. While common themes emerge across populations, such as the need for clearer communication, streamlined application processes, and coordinated outreach, each demographic also faces distinct eligibility requirements and program rules that must be addressed individually.

To address these challenges, the workgroup recommends a series of initiatives focused on three primary barriers: a lack of public awareness, insufficient education about program eligibility, and limited access to technology. These initiatives are designed to improve access to food assistance and strengthen food security across the Commonwealth. By prioritizing these key barriers, the proposed strategies aim to maximize positive impacts for each of the strategic demographic areas.

Appendix C features a matrix of identified barriers and corresponding recommendations for each priority group, which are outlined in detail below.

ELDERLY

ENHANCE THE BASELINE SNAP SUPPORT FOR ELDERLY ADULTS

Challenge: Interest in SNAP participation remains low among the elderly, largely due to minimum benefit levels that do not adequately reflect the cost of food. This is particularly challenging for individuals with specialized dietary requirements, whose expenses significantly exceed the baseline benefit. The current minimum benefit for a one- to two-person household is \$23 [\[5\]](#).

Recommendation: Enhance baseline SNAP support for households including elderly adults to more adequately meet their food needs. Several states have implemented similar strategies to strengthen support for the elderly: New York raised its minimum SNAP benefit to \$95.00; Massachusetts increased the minimum SNAP benefit to \$50.00; and Pennsylvania increased the minimum SNAP benefit to \$40.00. Adopting comparable approaches could help improve food security among the elder population.

MOBILE APPLICATION HUB

The elderly are currently required to complete the application in both digital and hardcopy form, submitting the hardcopy to a Local Department of Social Services (LDSS). LDSS offices offer appointments for applicants to receive assistance in completing the application process.

Challenge: Lack of secure internet access and/or reliable transportation.

Recommendation: Establish a mobile hub equipped with trained staff, secure internet access, and digital devices to assist individuals in completing food assistance applications on-site. Additionally, build local partnerships with area agencies on aging, faith-based organizations, community groups, and healthcare providers to foster trust and effectively reach this population.

DATA SHARING BETWEEN MEDICAID AND SNAP

Challenge: Medicaid enrollees could potentially qualify for SNAP but are not identified due to the lack of a formal process of data sharing between VDSS and DMAS. The lack of a formal process is a missed opportunity to increase SNAP participation among older adults.

Recommendation: Create secure data-sharing agreements between DMAS and VDSS to identify Medicaid enrollees who may qualify for SNAP.

IMPROVING ACCESS FOR STREAMLINED ENROLLMENT AND SUPPORT

Challenge: The elderly face significant barriers to accessing SNAP benefits, often due to administrative hurdles such as frequent documentation requests and complex renewal processes. These challenges can be especially difficult for individuals with limited mobility or digital access.

Recommendation: Streamline SNAP policies for older adults by extending certification periods, enabling telephonic and online renewals, and offering personalized assistance through trained navigators.

STUDENTS IN HIGHER LEARNING

FAFSA APPLICATION INTEGRATION

Challenge: Many students at colleges, trade schools, and universities are unaware that certain career and technical programs qualify them for SNAP benefits. A 2024 federal law allows sharing of FAFSA (the Free Application for Federal Student Aid that determines an applicant's eligibility for grants, scholarships, work-study programs, and loans for college or career school) data with SNAP agencies to identify potentially eligible students^[6]. Despite this, implementation remains slow, as the U.S. Department of Education has yet to finalize operational guidance for states.

Recommendation: Implement a pilot program that would launch a new FAFSA-linked Student Simplified Application Project (SSAP) to streamline SNAP enrollment for college students.

FAFSA provides a reliable doorway to identify eligible college students and, with consent, prepopulate a SSAP, which will allow students to submit applications in minutes. Where permitted, the system should automatically populate key fields and use income data from the form. Virginia could implement system flags that identify potential exemption pathways such as employment, work-study participation, and parenting status. This will help ease the burden of the application completion process. FAFSA data-based efforts are dependent on the finalization of federal data sharing rules.

CAMPUS NAVIGATORS

Students experiencing food insecurity can visit food pantries, either on campus where available or in the community. Not all these food pantries are equipped with SNAP Navigators knowledgeable about the eligibility options and the complex federal requirements for this population.

Challenge: Federal restrictions on SNAP eligibility create complex, student-specific rules that cannot easily be simplified at the state level. This leaves many college students unaware, confused by requirements, and discouraged from applying.

Recommendation: Apply data-driven methodologies to identify institutions and community food pantries to staff with Campus Navigators, who act as liaisons, trained in student-specific SNAP rules. The SNAP liaison could use a pre-screening tool to determine if a student likely meets an exemption that can lead to eligibility. Campus Navigators would help navigate the complex SNAP rules, demystify the process, and reduce stigma by normalizing SNAP.

Implementation: This recommendation would involve training or reassigning existing student services staff to serve as SNAP navigators. Virginia should be ready to act quickly, possibly piloting the program at a few public universities and community colleges.

EXPAND SNAP EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING (SNAP E&T)

The SNAP E&T program helps SNAP participants gain skills and find work that moves them towards self-sufficiency. Participants have access to training and support services to help them enter or advance in the workforce.

Challenge: Many students at colleges, trade schools, and universities are unaware that certain career and technical programs qualify them for SNAP benefits.

Recommendation: Expand the SNAP E&T Program to designate more college programs as qualifying activities so that students can satisfy the exemption without working 20 hours each week. This recommendation could potentially result in more students meeting program exemptions under the SNAP E&T criteria leading to SNAP eligibility.

STUDENT DATA EXCHANGE

Challenge: Many students in higher learning are unaware that if they are eligible for student aid they may also qualify for SNAP benefits.

Recommendation: Implement a FAFSA Data Project requiring VDSS to work in collaboration with State Council Higher Education for Virginia and institutions of higher education to utilize FAFSA data to identify students with low Expected Family Contribution and Pell Grant recipients.

FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

EXPAND SNAP IN SCHOOLS STATEWIDE

Challenge: Many low-income families with children interact with schools daily but may have limited contact with local social services offices. Linking SNAP-approved families with other nutrition programs, such as National School Lunch Program, Virginia SUNBucks, and others, can help address these access barriers. Increased SNAP participation benefits families directly while qualifying more students for free school meals, boosting meal funding in schools that use the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

CEP is a non-pricing meal service option for schools and school districts in low-income areas. This program allows the nation's highest poverty schools and districts to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting household applications. Schools that adopt CEP are reimbursed using a formula based on the percentage of students categorically eligible for free meals based on their participation in other specific means-tested programs, such as SNAP and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Recommendation: Extend the SNAP in Schools initiative to more schools across the state, both private and public. This will potentially allow staff to increase awareness of families and provide education on the application process.

NUTRITION PROGRAM APPLICATION INTEGRATION

Challenge: If applicants utilize multiple food assistance programs, they currently must complete multiple applications for each program. This duplication and administrative burden discourages families from applying for food assistance programs.

Recommendation: Integrate applications for child nutrition programs to streamline access, reduce duplication and improve coordination. Provide households with clear information about their potential eligibility for other nutrition programs and explore opportunities for data sharing beyond initial application process.

LINK NUTRITION PROGRAM APPLICATION PROCESSES

Challenge: Families with SNAP eligible children are often unaware they also qualify for other child nutrition programs such as WIC, Virginia Sun Bucks, the National School Lunch Programs, and the School Breakfast Program. Currently each of these systems and application processes are separate.

Recommendation: Create a linked application system for SNAP, WIC, NSLP, School Breakfast Program, and Virginia Sun Bucks. Linking these systems to send a notification when an application is submitted qualifying applicants are queued for another program.

DATA SHARING BETWEEN MEDICAID AND SNAP

Challenge: Medicaid enrollees who could potentially qualify for SNAP are not currently identified due to the expired data sharing agreement between VDSS and DMAS, resulting in missed opportunities to increase SNAP participation among eligible households.

Recommendation: Renew secure data-sharing agreements between DMAS and VDSS to identify Medicaid enrollees who may qualify for SNAP and provide them with information on the SNAP application process. This recommendation requires the establishment of privacy-protected data-sharing agreements between DMAS and VDSS for limited-purpose SNAP outreach and application assistance.

ALL PRIORITIZED DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

IMPROVING ACCESS BY MODERNIZING SYSTEMS AND SUPPORT

Challenge: Virginia's current SNAP application and communication processes create significant obstacles for eligible residents. Many applicants struggle to submit required information and receive timely updates, resulting in delays, confusion, and missed benefits. Limited communication channels and staffing constraints further hinder applicants' ability to complete verification steps, contributing to preventable denials.

Recommendation: Strengthen and modernize SNAP technology and administrative systems to improve reliability, communication and overall applicant support. Key improvements include upgraded digital platforms, enhanced communication tools, increased staffing capacity, and clearer guidance to ensure consistent interactions between caseworkers and applicants.

STATEWIDE EDUCATION CAMPAIGN

Challenges: Currently there is a lack of public awareness around the SNAP program and misconceptions about the program alongside a persistent stigma around accessing food assistance. These two factors can discourage many eligible individuals from applying.

Recommendation: Create a statewide campaign to increase awareness and support public education of nutrition programs. The campaign could be supported through a combination of available state resources and federally authorized SNAP outreach mechanisms. Virginia currently has an Outreach Plan for SNAP with contracted partners, which includes access to USDA-approved outreach support. Additional resources could be leveraged within this framework to strengthen and expand outreach activities.

CONCLUSION

Access to food assistance programs in Virginia is limited by a combination of barriers, including low public awareness, complex eligibility rules, fragmented systems, technology challenges, and social stigma. These obstacles prevent many eligible individuals from enrolling in programs such as SNAP, WIC, and school nutrition programs.

The workgroup focused on three priority populations: the elderly, students in higher learning, and families with children. Each group faces unique challenges: the elderly may struggle with technology and mobility; students navigate complex eligibility rules and limited guidance; and families often contend with multiple, uncoordinated programs that require separate applications.

To address these barriers, the workgroup recommends initiatives focused on three key areas: increasing awareness, providing clear guidance on eligibility, and improving access to technology. These strategies aim to streamline enrollment, enhance program coordination, and reduce administrative hurdles, maximizing participation and improving food security across the Commonwealth. Appendix C presents a matrix of identified barriers and corresponding recommendations for each priority group.

APPENDIX A LEGISLATIVE MANDATE CHAPTER 691 OF THE 2025 ACTS OF ASSEMBLY

1. § 1. That the Department of Social Services shall convene a work group with such members as it deems necessary or appropriate to evaluate methods to improve access to and maximize participation in all federal public assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture relating to assistance with food access and improving food security. The work group shall collaborate with relevant stakeholders, including the Commission to End Hunger, to evaluate the following: (i) removing administrative barriers to applying for participation in federal public assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture relating to assistance with food access and improving food security; (ii) improving outreach to increase awareness of such programs among individuals who would otherwise be eligible to participate in such programs but may not be aware of such programs; and (iii) collecting relevant data. In conducting its work, the work group shall consider the specific needs and circumstances of different populations and demographics in the Commonwealth and how those needs and circumstances could increase barriers to program access and impact the efficacy of outreach campaigns and methods. The Department of Social Services shall report the work group's findings and recommendations to the Chairs of the House Committees on Health and Human Services and Appropriations and the Senate Committees on Education and Health and Finance and Appropriations by December 1, 2025

APPENDIX B WORKGROUP MEMBERS

Charlotte Arbogast–Sr. Policy Analyst, Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services

Irma Blackwell–Medical Assistance Program Manager, Department of Social Services

Kortni Boxley–SNAP Education Coordinator, Department of Social Services

Cassie Edner, Esq–Attorney /Director, VA Hunger Solutions VA Poverty Law Center

Paula Garrett–Director, Division of Community Nutrition, Department of Health

Jess Madden–Associate for Finance Policy and Innovation, State Council of Higher Education

Eddie Oliver–Executive Director, Federation of Virginia Food Banks

Dwronyel Price–SNAP Outreach Consultant, Sr., Department of Social Services

Dr. Elena Serrano–Director, Family Nutrition Program, Virginia Polytechnic University

*An invitation to participate on the work group was extended to the Virginia Commission to End Hunger, via an email to Tiffany Harris-Greene, staff contact for the Commission.

APPENDIX C RECOMMENDATION MATRIX

Identified Barrier		Recommendation
Elderly (60+)	The baseline snap support for elderly adults.	Enhance baseline SNAP support for households including elderly adults to more adequately meet their food needs.
	Transportation limits local office access.	Establish a mobile hub equipped with trained staff, secure internet access, and digital devices to assist individuals in completing food assistance applications on-site.
	Some Medicaid customers may be eligible for SNAP.	Create secure data-sharing agreements between DMAS and VDSS to identify Medicaid enrollees who may qualify for SNAP.
	Administrative hurdles, frequent inquiries and requests.	Streamline SNAP policies for older adults by extending certification periods, enabling telephonic and online renewals, and offering personalized assistance through trained navigators.
Students in Higher Learning	Students abandon applications due to time and complexity.	Implement a pilot program that would launch a new FAFSA-linked Student Simplified Application Project (SSAP) to streamline SNAP enrollment for college students.
	Answer questions and provide help.	Apply data-driven methodologies to identify institutions and community food pantries to staff with Campus Navigators, who act as liaisons, trained in student-specific SNAP rules.
	Students fail to meet SNAP requirements.	Expand the SNAP E&T Program to designate more college programs as qualifying activities so that students can satisfy the exemption without working 20 hours each week.
	Use financial aid data to identify potentially eligible students.	Implement a FAFSA Data Project requiring VDSS to work in collaboration with State Council Higher Education for Virginia and institutions of higher education to utilize FAFSA data to identify students with low Expected Family Contribution and Pell Grant recipients.
Families with children	Lack of awareness of SNAP eligibility.	Extend the SNAP in Schools initiative to more schools across the state, both private and public.
	Not accessing benefits available from other nutrition programs.	Integrate applications for child nutrition programs to streamline access, reduce duplication and improve coordination.
	Multiple applications for child nutrition are difficult to navigate.	Create a linked application system for SNAP, WIC, NSLP, School Breakfast Program, and Virginia Sun Bucks.

	Some SNAP customers may also be eligible for WIC.	Renew secure data-sharing agreements between DMAS and VDSS to identify Medicaid enrollees who may qualify for SNAP and provide them with information on the SNAP application process.
All	Access and technology are not user friendly.	Strengthen and modernize SNAP technology and administrative systems to improve reliability, communication and overall applicant support.
	Lack of awareness, education and access	Create a statewide campaign to increase awareness and support public education of nutrition programs.

APPENDIX D SOURCES

Data and analysis in this report are drawn from the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) and its partner agencies, as well as authoritative national sources including the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), the Economic Research Service (ERS), the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), the National Council on Aging (NCOA), the Virginia Poverty Law Center (VPLC), and the Federation of Virginia Food Banks. Additional information was derived from the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, No Kid Hungry’s Center for Best Practices, APHSA’s Catalyst case studies, and the Virginia Department of Health’s WIC program data.

Key references include college student food insecurity findings and FAFSA data-sharing guidance from GAO and The Hope Center [1]; SNAP participation and economic impact data from VDSS and USDA ERS [3]; senior participation and benefit adequacy analyses from VPLC and NCOA [4];

Each citation is indicated in the text by a bracketed reference (for example, [1]) corresponding to the numbered source in Appendix D. This evidentiary foundation ensures that all findings, barriers, and recommendations presented in this report are grounded in the most current and credible data available.

1. The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs. “GAO Confirms What We Already Know: Students Face Unacceptable Food Insecurity.” (Jul. 25, 2024). <https://hope.temple.edu/policy-advocacy/gao-confirms-what-we-already-know-students-face-unacceptable-food-insecurity>
2. Virginia Poverty Law Center (with Federation of Virginia Food Banks). “Respond to Senior Hunger Report.” (Sep. 9, 2024). <https://vplc.org/respond-to-senior-hunger-report/>
3. FRAC Food Research & Action Center Protect SNAP to Reduce Hunger and Strengthen Local Economies in Virginia (Feb. 2025). https://vakids.org/wpcontent/uploads/2025/03/SNAP_FactSheets_022525_VA47.pdf.pdf
4. Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS). SNAP Participation Reports (monthly tables). (Sep. 2025). [Virginia Department of Social Services September 2025 SNAP Participation Report](#)
5. Virginia Poverty Law Center (with Federation of Virginia Food Banks). “Respond to Senior Hunger Report.” (Sep. 9, 2024). <https://vplc.org/respond-to-senior-hunger-report/>

6. U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Federal Actions Needed to Help Connect College Students with Benefits (GAO-25-106000; 2025). <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-25-106000>