



Customer Experience Demonstration Project: Understanding What Works for Individuals and Families



In APHSA’s comprehensive [list of recommendations for the 2023 Farm Bill](#), we shared the new concept of establishing a Customer Experience Demonstration Project to test and evaluate different strategies to improve customer experience in accessing or maintaining SNAP benefits. Especially over the last few years, there have been several new flexibilities offered in SNAP—but there has yet to be a comprehensive evaluation or focus on what these changes meant to actual customers.

Do customers benefit from more virtual options and less frequent touches from eligibility staff, or do they have questions and thoughts about how this can be done better?

Are there other pain points that people experience when trying to get SNAP that aren’t on the national radar?

How can we make getting benefits and staying on them easier for people, and reduce the instances of denials or needs to reapply for procedural issues?



At the end of the day, the goal of SNAP is to increase food and nutrition security for people with low incomes. Yet only 82% of people who are eligible are enrolled—with even lower participation rates for people who are working (74%) and people who are elderly (42%).¹ This demonstration project would allow states to examine where there is red tape that prevents people from making it through the eligibility and recertification processes, and how they can best cut through it to meet their customers with what they really need.



What Problems Could a Customer Experience Project Address?

In response to increased caseload demands and shifts in the availability of virtual and in-person services during the pandemic, Congress and USDA authorized a variety of time-limited program waivers.² However, these changes were made during an unprecedented period of disruption in the program and little evidence exists to understand how these changes impact different customers' experience in SNAP and program integrity. This proposed pilot would establish a cohort of states to test alternative methods to streamline processes and remove barriers for people in accessing and maintaining SNAP benefits. With a team of state agency representatives, customers, and research contractors, outcome measures would be defined at the beginning of the project and should focus on equitable and improved customer experience. Independent findings from the pilot would provide critical insights for Congress and USDA to inform future policymaking.

This idea for a demonstration project is centered around the fact that there is **no one-size-fits-all approach to improving customer service**. Each state agency is unique in the systems they operate, the staffing models they use, and the priorities they establish, and communities across the country are in need of different resources. Through a Customer Experience Demonstration Project, state teams made up of SNAP agencies, relevant partners, and customers themselves, will have the opportunity to propose and test tailored ideas of how to best improve their program for individuals and families.

Potential Projects Could Include:	
	Adjusting reporting, interview, or staffing procedures.
	Aligning enrollment processes for specific populations (e.g. veterans, elderly, disabled, households with children) between SNAP and other human services programs such as Medicaid.
	Simplifying the calculation for allowances and deductions.
	Lengthening certification periods for people who are chronically homeless.
	Implementing ideas that have been shared by customers about how to make the SNAP application process less burdensome for them.

How Would this Demonstration Project Work?

The Customer Experience Demonstration Project should fund a cohort of states to undertake projects that aim to meet the goal of improving experience with applications and/or certification for a broad or specific group of their SNAP customers. The cohort should fund five to eight states of differing size and service models to test a variety of projects on diverse populations.

The legislation should direct the USDA to conduct an independent evaluation across participating states to understand impacts on customer experience, program integrity, and cost. This evaluation should then result in a Report to Congress, and point to promising practices for consideration of future adoption. To ensure that customer voice is incorporated throughout the project process, funding should be designated specifically for compensation for these team members but should not affect their SNAP benefit, if applicable.



Potential Projects Must:



Focus on reducing barriers for households: This Demonstration Project must maintain a clear focus on the people who are applying for and accessing SNAP, with a focus on those populations that have inequitably struggled to apply and access SNAP in the past. States may have ideas for projects that have come up through customer journey mapping, feedback through surveys or focus groups, trends that have come up in churn data or from denied applications, or other methods of hearing from customers about what they need.



Aim to maintain and/or strengthen program integrity: The goal of this pilot is to support individuals and families in better accessing what they are eligible for, and not to create new eligibility options. Any awarded projects would still be subject to normal quality control procedures, and will be reviewed within the national evaluation to understand if the changes resulted in higher error rates. The evaluators should also look to understand any trends or root causes for significant changes in error rates.



Be created in partnership with the state agency, their customers, and the evaluators:

To ensure that any awarded projects are set up to meet their intended goals, projects and metrics must be established in partnership with the state, current or recent customers of the SNAP program for that state, and the designated evaluation team of the pilot. Each of these members of the team have unique expertise that will be critical to a successful project and should be engaged along each step of process from idea creation and target population identification, creation of metrics to understand changes in customer experience, and validating evaluation and final reports.

The concept for this demonstration was created in partnership with a group of state SNAP agencies from across the country. To further discuss the ideas behind this demonstration project idea and how it could be included in the 2023 Farm Bill, please reach out to [Matt Lyons](#), Senior Director of Policy and Practice, or [Chloe Green](#), Senior Policy Associate for Food and Nutrition Services.

Read APHSA's [full list of recommendations for the 2023 Farm Bill](#). To see the latest in our policy brief series, *The Path Forward: State and Local Policy Priorities for the 2023 Farm Bill*, and our blog series, *Making the Sauce: Ingredients for People-Powered Policymaking*, check out our [website](#).

Endnotes

- ¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture. SNAP Participation Rates by State. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/usamap>
- ² Congress. Families First Coronavirus Response Act. Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6201/text>