

Increasing Food Security for the Homebound Elderly in New Brunswick

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The logo for Rutgers University, featuring the word "RUTGERS" in a large, red, serif font. The letter "R" is stylized with a long, sweeping tail that extends downwards and to the left.

This report describes a year-long project designed to increase the number of homebound seniors in New Brunswick who are enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This was accomplished through a partnership between two Rutgers University units and a local Meals on Wheels agency (Meals on Wheels in Greater New Brunswick; MOWGNB), which involved both research qualitative interviews about SNAP with MOWGNB clients, as well as screening interested clients.

This project is important because many homebound elderly are eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; formerly known as “Food Stamps”), a food assistance program that helps enrolled individuals afford nutritious foods, improving their overall nutrition and food security. However, the rate of enrollment in SNAP by elderly Americans (aged 60 and older) is quite low--there are an estimated 144,000 elderly individuals eligible for SNAP in New Jersey (NJ), with a participation rate of just 34% (Cunningham, 2010). This is less than half the *overall* participation rate (72%) of Americans eligible for SNAP (Leftin, Eslami, & Strayer, 2011). Not surprisingly, hunger is a significant problem for this population—over 5 million (11.4%) homebound elderly in the US are food insecure (Ziliak et al, 2008).

This project investigated a novel means of increasing this population’s SNAP enrollment levels by partnering with MOWGNB, a community groups that has daily access and strong ties to this otherwise hard to reach population. The project resulted in a number of important outcomes. A number of MOWGNB clients were screened for SNAP, and the majority of those screened (85%) were found to be eligible. In addition, the research component of the project provides an understanding of the unique barriers facing homebound seniors who receive home-delivered meals. Finally, a replicable protocol for conducting the screenings will be shared with local and national audiences.

The collaborative team includes the following partners: Rutgers Department of Human Ecology (Cara Cuite, Shane Prate, Meera Dhawan and Connie Hallman); Rutgers Collaborative NJ Learning to End Hunger (NJLTEH; Amy Michael, Mehreen Ismail, and Samira Gross); MOWGNB (Shareka Fitz); and the homebound elderly New Brunswick residents who are clients of MOWGNB (approximately 60 individuals at a given point in time).

METHODS

The research project had three distinct components. We conducted two rounds of interviews (one designed to understand barriers to SNAP screening and a subsequent one to understand perceptions of the screening process). Simultaneously, NJ LTEH was conducting SNAP screening and enrollment. Each of these components is addressed separately below.

Interviews. All interviews were conducted in English in the clients' homes. Each interview participant was given \$25 in cash as an incentive, and all interviews lasted between 20 minutes and an hour.

Round 1 Interviews. In December 2012 and January 2013, we conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with current MOWGNB clients. This interview asked about awareness of SNAP and perceived barriers to SNAP enrollment.

Round 2 Interviews. In April, May and June, 2013, we conducted 10 semi-structured interviews. We tried to interview all of those clients that had been screened for SNAP, however, not all of them were willing or able to participate in the interview process, so some interviews were conducted with new clients or clients that had refused or not been offered SNAP screening. These interviews focused on the screening procedures, where relevant, as well as an evaluation of our brochure and educational materials.

SNAP Screening and Enrollment Assistance. At the same time that Round 1 interviews were being conducted, we developed a protocol for Rutgers NJLTEH students to screen all interested MOWGNB clients for SNAP eligibility, and help to enroll those that are eligible. Clients were called about the screening by the NJLTEH intern (all calls were made from the Program Director's MOWGNB office to keep the names and numbers confidential). If a client agreed to be screened, the intern and Program Director went to the client's home to conduct the screening. Using a laptop to connect to the NJ OneApp website (<https://oneapp.dhs.state.nj.us/>), individuals were able to find out whether or not they were likely to be eligible for SNAP, and could get their application started. The intern followed up with the clients by telephone, sometimes multiple times, and helped the clients, as needed, to submit supporting documentation.

RESULTS

Response rate and sample disposition for interviews. For Round 1 interviews, we called a total of 21 people and interviewed 10, for a response rate of 47.6% and a cooperation rate of 71.4%. For Round 2 Interviews, we called a total of 23 people, and interviewed 10, for a response rate of 43.4% and a cooperation rate of 71.4%. Descriptions of the sample are below.

Table 1. Demographics of Interview Samples

	Round 1	Round 2
Sex (% Female)	50%	60%
Age	Mean: 75 Range: 60-91	Mean: 75 Range: 65-81
Monthly Income	Mean Income: \$1,493-\$1,868 Range: \$500-\$3000	Mean Income: \$1,436 Range: \$851-\$2,000
Marital status	10% married 20% single 40% widowed 20% divorced 10% multiple or unsure	30 % Married 0 % Single 20 % Widowed 20 % Divorced 30 % Multiple or unsure
Education	10% Less than HS 50% HS Degree 20%: More than HS 20% College degree/ higher	20% Less than HS 50% HS Degree 30% More than HS 0% College degree/ higher
Body Mass Index	BMI Mean: 28.67 BMI Range: 22-36	BMI Mean: 30.26 BMI Range: 23-43

Perceptions of SNAP. Most clients say that they have never heard of “SNAP” or “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,” including many of those currently enrolled. All clients were aware of the Food Stamp program, and referred to the program as Food Stamps in conversation. This is something that must be considered in all future communications, including

with those already enrolled. Very few clients report having used other food assistance program such as the Senior Farmer's Market Nutrition Program, and most haven't heard of that program.

Barriers to SNAP screening and enrollment. Social stigma of SNAP enrollment did not seem to be a concern among this population. Wanting to be self-reliant was more of a theme, as one client who agreed to screen and then later changed his mind and said, "I don't need the government to take care of me." A few criticized public assistance programs, but more because they felt that others take advantage of the system. The vast majority said they gladly accept the help if eligible.

In terms of commonly believed myths about SNAP, there were a few misperceptions found within this population. There was some uncertainty about whether it was possible to receive both Meals on Wheels and SNAP, and some believed that they might have to pay back any SNAP money they received. Many did not realize that SNAP applications could be done without going to the office, and one gentleman in a wheelchair actually took a bus down to the office to check on his SNAP application between when he was screened by us and when he completed our interview.

Food shopping and food needs. Most clients do not do their own shopping, and most but not all have someone they would trust with a SNAP Electronic Benefit card to redeem SNAP on their behalf. Clients expressed a lot of interest in free grocery delivery. Most had no experience with food delivery but some had experience with pharmacy deliveries. This would be an area that is ripe for a New Brunswick grocer. Many order restaurant food over the weekends. A few clients reported that MOWGNB provides all the food they need.

Screening and enrollment. In addition to conducting the interviews, project staff created and used a protocol for SNAP screening for MOWGNB clients. The NJ LTEH office created the protocol in collaboration with the MOWGNB, which used the NJ OneApp website. Once that was in place, we called to schedule screenings. We found that 21% of the clients called about screening reported that they were already enrolled in SNAP (in addition, from the Round 1 interviews, two clients were currently enrolled, and three had been enrolled but weren't currently). SNAP enrollment information was not previously collected by MOWGNB, but in part because of this project, it is now going to be asked as part of the intake questionnaire (as of July

2013). The table below indicates the number of clients contacted and screened for SNAP benefits.

Table 2. SNAP Enrollment

	Number of people	% of those contacted
Contacted and asked to screen for SNAP	39	100
Already enrolled in SNAP	8	21
Declined to screen –not interested	18	46
Agreed to screen	13	33
For those who agreed:		% of those who screened
Submitted screening online	13	100
Found to be ineligible during screening	2	15
Found to be eligible during screening	11	85
Assisted post-screening	2	15
Confirmed enrolled	4	31
In process or unconfirmed	7	53

Problems encountered in the screening and enrollment process. During the second round of interviews, after the NJLTEH interns had begun screening the clients for SNAP, the researchers encountered clients that were frustrated with the enrollment process. After determining that they were eligible for SNAP through the initial screening process, there were often delays and miscommunications with the County that left the clients frustrated with the development of their SNAP benefit applications. Project staff assisted where possible, and we also found clients who had asked outside social workers help them (e.g., from the Veterans Administration and Visiting Nurses).

Exacerbating this problem, we sometimes found that clients did not know who the SNAP screener was or that they were coming from MOWGNB. On more than one occasion when we asked if the clients had been called to screen for SNAP, some who had been called said no. And some of those whom our NJLTH intern had screened did not recall or realize that they had been

screened by anyone having to do with MOWGNB. “My mind is not too good, so many of them have been here,” said one client. There is a definite sense that multiple people from multiple places are reaching out to these clients, and it is very hard for them to keep track of who is who, and where they are in the application process. Some who were eligible at screening subsequently lost letters from the County or couldn’t find the necessary documentation once it was requested.

OUTCOMES AND DISSEMINATION

The most immediate outcome of this project is that 13 MOWGNB clients were screened and 11 were found to be eligible for SNAP benefits. It has been harder to ascertain who has been enrolled, though we have confirmation that four clients are currently enrolled as a result of our screening. This, in addition to the two who were receiving benefits but did not know it, means that the project has increased the food and financial security of at least six MOWGNB clients. Other outcomes include age- and population-appropriate SNAP educational materials, specific to the concerns and challenges facing seniors in New Brunswick. These will be made available to MOWGNB and other County home delivered meal recipients (this will be done once 2013-14 LTEH funding is confirmed and we know if it will be possible to continue the SNAP screening in the future). Another key outcome is the development of the screening protocol, which can be used in the future by MOWGNB and by other agencies. This screening and enrollment protocol will work throughout Middlesex County (pending LTEH funding) and can be adapted for other municipalities. Two unexpected outcomes include that MOWGNB has changed its screening protocol to include questions about SNAP enrollment, so that it can better identify potentially interested and SNAP eligible new clients. Finally, a New Brunswick senior apartment building has requested that we conduct SNAP screenings for their clients, which we hope to do in late summer, 2013.

In terms of dissemination at the community level, we reported on the project in the July, 2013 MOWGNB newsletter (mailed to volunteers and other involved individuals). At the national level, we have been invited to report on our final findings and recommendations in the MOWAA newsletter, which is sent to MOW agencies around the country. In addition, we have been tentatively invited by the MOWAA Vice President for Grants and National Resource Center

to participate in a national webinar for MOW agencies about helping clients enroll in SNAP as well as to include our report in their online National Resource Center. This, in addition to planned academic publications, will help MOW agencies and other interested parties to benefit from the lessons we have learned in New Brunswick and enroll more eligible homebound seniors in SNAP around the country.

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