Proposed Project: Barriers to SNAP Enrollment

Background. The COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated a sharp increase in unemployment and food insecurity across the country. In El Paso, the unemployment rate grew from 4% in January to 15% in April. In June 2020, the unemployment rate was 10%, with just over 35,000 individuals unemployed. Food insecurity also has increased. In 2018, Feeding America reported that 15% of El Paso County's residents were food insecure.[1] In 2020, El Paso County's food insecurity rate is expected to increase to 20.4%.[2] That jump will account for tens of thousands of new residents who are food insecure in El Paso County.

The federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) provides benefits for income-eligible residents for food purchases. Participation in SNAP by eligible Texans occurs at a rate of 73%.[3] This gap between the federal SNAP dollars available and the utilization of that benefit results in millions of underutilized benefits in El Paso. In January 2020, the total SNAP payments in El Paso County totaled $16,599,410.[4] The underutilized SNAP dollars in that one month topped an estimated $6.1 million.

Barriers to SNAP Enrollment. Low SNAP enrollment at the individual level has been associated with a number of factors, including:

- Age, particularly the elderly
- Race/ethnicity, in particular Hispanic
- Perceived stigma
- Working full-time during nontraditional hours
- Working more than one job
- Lack of knowledge, motivation, or confidence in how to apply
- Lack of citizenship

In El Paso, 10 organizations serve as Community Partners for Texas Health and Human Services to offer SNAP benefits enrollment assistance. As these critical community organizations have shifted to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations have in some cases moved away from benefits enrollment assistance to respond to El Paso's immediate needs, such as emergency food distribution and COVID-19 testing. In addition to continuing capacity challenges, it is unclear whether eligible individuals know where to look for help with SNAP enrollment or that they are eligible at all. Anecdotally, Kelly Memorial Food Pantry and others

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[1] Feeding America, Food Insecurity in El Paso County, http://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2018/overall/texas/county/el-paso (last visited Sept. 16, 2020).
[2] Feeding America, The Impact of Coronavirus on Food Insecurity, https://www.feedingamericaaction.org/the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-food-insecurity/ (last visited Sept. 17, 2020).
[3] USDA, Estimates of State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates in 2016, https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/Reaching2016.pdf (last visited Sept. 16, 2020).
[4] Texas Health and Human Services, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Statistics, https://hhs.texas.gov/about-hhs/records-statistics/data-statistics/supplemental-nutritional-assistance-program-snap-statistics (last visited Sept. 17, 2020).

have shared indications that stigma, difficulties with enrollment, lack of accurate information, and anticipated low benefits keep eligible individuals from seeking SNAP benefits.

Proposed Project. To effectively address and remove the barriers to SNAP enrollment in El Paso County, UTHealth will conduct a two-phase project. In Phase 1, UTHealth will conduct a short-term survey of SNAP-eligible El Paso residents to answer three critical questions:

(1) Why aren't eligible El Pasoans applying for SNAP benefits?
(2) How do eligible El Pasoans want to get enrollment information and assistance?
(3) What is the best way to reach eligible El Pasoans who are not enrolled in SNAP?

In Phase 2, using the results of the data collected, UTHealth will design and execute an outreach campaign to address the barriers to SNAP enrollment. Phase 2 will further draw on data collected in Phase 1 to develop a sustainable plan to increase capacity for SNAP enrollment of eligible residents of El Paso County.

Phase 1 – SCOPE OF WORK

UTHealth will conduct a short-term survey to gather the information needed to understand and develop an effective outreach strategy that aims to increase SNAP enrollment. The survey will gather information on barriers to SNAP enrollment for eligible residents throughout El Paso County (perception, awareness, concerns, knowledge of SNAP enrollment process, accessibility of resources, etc.). Data gathered from across El Paso County will inform the multimedia countywide outreach effort to increase SNAP enrollment and leverage existing community assets. The campaign will be designed to effectively reach SNAP-eligible residents and provide resources that will best boost successful SNAP enrollment.

Estimated Project Budget – PHASE 1

ITEM	PURPOSE/DETAIL
Graduate Research Assistant	20 hours/week for 3 months (research, data analysis, outreach campaign design)
12 Students	15 hours/week for 5 weeks (on-site data collection)
Program Manger	20 hours/week for 3 months (coordinate and manage site schedule)
Tablets	Provided in-kind by UTHealth Center for Community Health Impact (data collection)
Internet Hotspots	$42/month (4 for data collection)
Laptop	For use by research teams for data collection
Supplies	PPE and other supplies for students
Survey design, coordination, analysis, outreach design	Provided in-kind by UTHealth Center for Community Health Impact (includes coordination of SNAP enrollment efforts by existing Community Partner organizations)
	ESTIMATED TOTAL $35,038

PROPOSED TIMELINE – PHASE 1

DATE	PURPOSE/DETAIL
10/5/20	Project Funded by El Paso County. Select sites and times for data collection. Submit survey design for IRB approval.
10/12/20	Hire and train 12 students to collect data at designated sites. Finalize on-site data collection schedule.
10/26/20	Begin on-site data collection.
11/20/20	Conclude on-site data collection.
11/30/20	Compile and analyze collected data.
12/30/20	Submit draft report, analysis, and recommendations.
Ongoing	Collect information on current SNAP enrollment assistance offered by 10 Community Partners in El Paso County. Manage scheduling for data collection. Research regarding outreach campaigns for SNAP enrollment in high-utilization states.