

**2022**

**STATEWIDE DISCUSSIONS  
AROUND SNAP & DOUBLE UP  
FOOD BUCKS: FOCUS GROUPS  
AND REGIONAL CONVENINGS**



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Texas, with some of the fastest growing population centers in the country, is experiencing increased pressure on affordable cost of living, hitting low-income residents especially hard when it comes to basic needs like food. Natural disasters like the Texas Winter Storm in 2021, which devastated much of the state, further exacerbated disparities in food security. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federal program and considered the largest safety net for individuals who have limited access to food. In Texas, approximately 1.5 million households receive SNAP benefits (12% of total population). SNAP incentive programs are publicly or privately funded initiatives that encourage SNAP clients to spend more of their benefits on fresh fruits and vegetables (often at farmers' markets) by providing a financial incentive for doing so. To address inequity in access to healthy food, Sustainable Food Center (SFC) has been working in partnership with organizations across the state to launch and support Double Up Food Bucks (DUFEB), a SNAP incentive program, at local farmers' markets and grocery stores. Since the start of DUFEB in one market in Austin in 2012, there has been an increase to over 50 participating locations in the state of Texas!

The overarching goal of this project was to inform recommendations for the DUFEB Program enhancement including ways to bolster the program's reach, delivery and ensure fidelity across multiple geographies.

This was accomplished by two activities: 1) collecting in-depth qualitative information from SNAP participants about several issues, including their experience with SNAP and DUFEB and their opinions towards potential policies related to incentivizing the purchase of healthy foods using SNAP, and 2) engaging the voices and opinions of stakeholders representing community organizations, local government, and the private sector, in developing strategies to increase access to healthy food through SNAP.

Six focus groups were conducted with current or past SNAP participants across six out of eleven public health regions, as defined by Texas Department of State Health Services: Central Texas, West Texas, Rio Grande Valley, North Texas, East Texas, and the Gulf Coast. Key takeaways of the focus group were:

- In general, participants felt the SNAP application process was arduous and the amount of monthly benefits received did not meet their household need.
- A desire for increased SNAP benefits was echoed across all focus groups as were the suggestions of allowing purchase of non-food essential items, such as toilet paper and diapers, allowing purchase of ready-to-eat meals and hot items from grocery and corner stores, and ability to purchase food online with SNAP benefits.

- The DUFEB initiative was not a program with which many participants were familiar. Those who have heard of it and used the program were extremely appreciative of the program and credited greater consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables to the program. Those who have not heard of the program asked for more information and shared their interest in using the program.
- Some mentioned that they sometimes had difficulty getting to the location where they could use the DUFEB benefits and that they wish the location was closer and/or more places offered DUFEB.
- Taxing unhealthy foods was seen as negative, even if the tax revenue would benefit SNAP participants, because this was seen as "unfair" to people who are not on SNAP. However, increasing incentives while limiting the amount of unhealthy food items such as sodas SNAP participants can purchase with benefits was seen as positive.

Six regional stakeholder convenings were held in the same six public health regions that coincided with those where the focus groups were conducted. Stakeholders included city department staff, DUFEB-implementing partners, non-profit representatives, local food retail businesses, community and faith-based organizations, and farmers' market operators. Four key takeaways of the convenings were:

- Texas government support for local SNAP incentive programs is key to success, including new ordinances, and a local SNAP fund should be created.
- The gap between the current and potential reach of the SNAP incentive program is significant and could be remedied with greater outreach programs.
- Building a healthy food fund through a sugar-sweetened beverage tax is not a desirable strategy in Texas, mirroring answers provided by focus group participants. However, this strategy may be effective on a local level.
- There are ethical challenges with limiting peoples' food choices through a disincentive approach (such as taxing unhealthy foods) even when paired with an incentive.

Overall recommendations for increasing access to nutritious foods, based on statewide focus groups with SNAP participants and stakeholder groups, include:

- Build a statewide SNAP incentive fund.
- Increase amount of funds to SNAP participants.
- Create new ordinances that provide support for incentive programs.
- Increase SNAP statewide outreach campaign and expand online purchasing options.
- Expand DUFEB to more cities in Texas and more vendors in each city.
- Increase DUFEB awareness, which in turn will increase program adoption.
- Allow purchase of store-prepared ready-to-eat meals, hot items, and certain non-food household items from grocery stores and convenience stores with SNAP benefits.

# INTRODUCTION

## Food Insecurity in Texas

Food insecurity, defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active and healthy life, is one of the most significant social determinants of health and a major contributor to health disparities (1-4). Food insecurity is primarily rooted in poverty and systemic inequalities, which have been perpetuated by unjust policies that leave marginalized communities without equitable access to food (5). Food insecurity also is directly linked to unhealthy dietary intake (4), and consequently associated with many diet-related chronic conditions including coronary heart disease (6,7) and type 2 diabetes mellitus (8,9). Due to increased health care costs, food insecurity is estimated to cost the United States (U.S.) over \$182 billion per year (10).

In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) indicated that 10.5% (38 million) of U.S. households were food insecure (11). While USDA has reported that there was not an increase in overall food insecurity from 2019-2020, food insecurity has more than doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic for certain groups, such as Black and Hispanic households. As of June 2021, prevalence is still higher than pre-pandemic levels (12,13). In Texas, food insecurity prevalence doubled from 13% in 2019 to 31% in July of 2020, and is still above pre-pandemic levels (13).

## SNAP services

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) aims to help low-income individuals and families meet basic nutritional needs and afford a balanced diet. SNAP is the largest program in the hunger safety net, and is run by the United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (USDA-FNS). In Texas, SNAP is administered at the state level by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) (14,15). In order to be income-eligible for SNAP, individuals must meet specific income requirements based on the federal poverty level, and benefits are based on family size. Services offered to SNAP participants include a monthly allowance of food benefits in the form of credit on an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card (i.e. Lonestar Card) that can be used like a debit card at eligible SNAP retailers (15).

Services provided by HHSC also include SNAP-Ed, evidence-based educational programs that promote physical activity and that teach participants how to eat healthier, and how to make their food dollars stretch further. SNAP-Ed funding is awarded to local community organizations and institutions and statewide agencies (14).



A report by the USDA that details the effect of SNAP participation on food security (2021) found that individuals entering the program were more food insecure than those participating in the program the previous 12 months (16). The amount of SNAP benefits, informed by USDA's Thrifty Food Plan, increased starting October 2021. This was the first year the reevaluation was not required to be cost neutral but based on current dietary guidelines, consumption patterns, food composition data, and current food prices. Households on average saw an increase in benefits from \$12-\$16 per person per month; however, this increase has been insufficient to improve access to nutritious food in 21% of US counties (17).

## Double Up Food Bucks

Double Up Food Bucks (DUFb) is a national program developed by the Fair Food Network and implemented in 28 states. DUFb allows SNAP/WIC\*/FMNP\*\* recipients to receive additional funding by matching dollars (\$1 to \$1 match) spent on fresh fruit and vegetables (in Texas up to \$30) at participating farmers' markets, mobile markets, farm stands, and grocery stores. All SNAP participants are automatically eligible for DUFb and roughly 35,000 Texas households utilized the program in 2021 (out of 1.5 million SNAP households in Texas). In Texas, the DUFb program is currently implemented at direct-to-consumer outlets such as farmers' markets and farm stands in many localities, particularly in urban areas of North Texas, Central Texas, West Texas and the Gulf Coast. The program is also currently operating at eight grocery stores, located in the West and North Texas Regions. However, DUFb access is limited or non-existent in rural, highly food insecure areas of Texas, particularly East Texas and the Rio Grande Valley.

## Purpose of this project

The purpose of this project was to obtain more in-depth information from SNAP participants about awareness of and attitudes toward DUFb, usage of DUFb, and opinions on proposed policy recommendations to strengthen nutrition security through SNAP. The project also engaged and obtained opinions of regional stakeholders representing community organizations, local governments, and private sector in developing strategies to increase access to healthy food through SNAP and assessed their opinions on proposed healthy SNAP policy recommendations. The data will serve to 1) build the capacity of entities throughout Texas interested in providing SNAP incentives in their respective communities to meet wider statewide food security and health needs, and 2) inform recommendations for healthy SNAP strategies, such as DUFb program enhancement, including ways to bolster the program's reach and delivery.

\*The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides federal grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age 5 who are found to be at nutritional risk. \*\* The WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) is associated with WIC. Eligible WIC participants are issued FMNP coupons that can be used to buy eligible foods from farmers, farmers' markets or roadside stands.

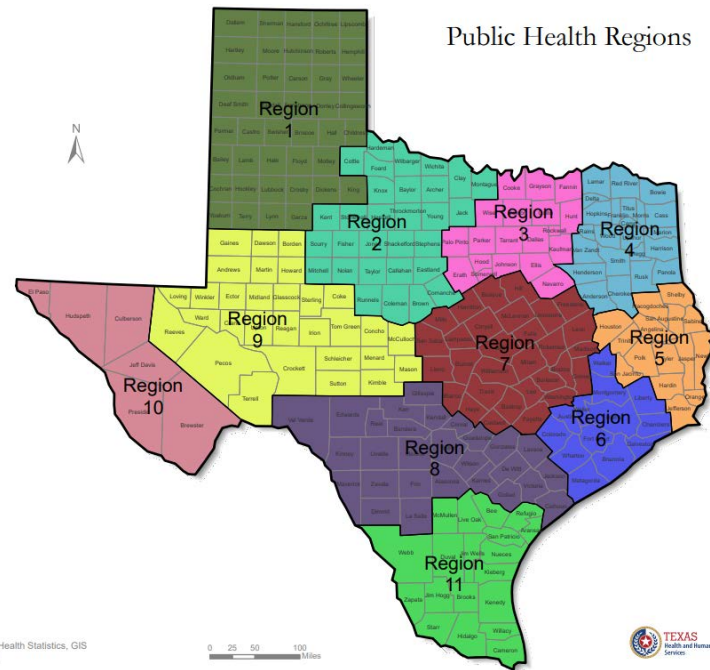


# PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT- FOCUS GROUPS

Focus group participants were recruited from six public health regions of Texas with the assistance of SFC partners. Recruitment flyers were tailored for each specific region (see Appendix) and distributed at food banks, farmers markets and a wellness center. A targeted Facebook ad was made specifically for recruitment of North Texas participants. All six focus groups were held between July 20, 2021 through September 15, 2021, with four of the focus groups being over Zoom and two held in-person outdoors.

Eligibility criteria of focus group participants included being a Spanish or an English speaker,

minimum age of 18 years old, living in the geographic area of one of the six regions, and currently or ever being enrolled in SNAP. Participants were requested to be available for an hour-long discussion at a pre-set date and time, willing to share their thoughts and opinions of the SNAP application process and SNAP benefits, proposed SNAP policies, and DUFBS. As compensation for their time, each participant was provided a \$50 Amazon gift card.



## Central Texas

Central Texas focus group participants resided either in Austin, San Antonio, or Waco. This was the first focus group for this study, held virtually on 7/20/21, and included only English speakers.



## West, East, & North Texas

West Texas, East Texas, and North Texas focus groups were conducted in English, virtual, and held on 7/29/21, 8/26/21, and 9/15/21, respectively.



## Rio Grande Valley and Gulf Coast

Participants from Rio Grande Valley met at the Linear Park, Brownsville, on 8/14/21, while participants from the Gulf Coast met at Houston's Food Bank Pavilion on 9/11/21.

# PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS – FOCUS GROUPS

All potential participants were called prior to their respective focus group to receive an overview of the upcoming focus group discussion, provide consent to participate, ask any questions, and answer a few demographic questions, including questions related to food insecurity. A total of 43 participants across the state of Texas joined the six focus groups. Majority were female, Hispanic, and low-income, ranging in age from 22 to 64 years (median age 38). The majority of individuals (76.7%) had at least one child under the age of 18 living in the household, 51% lived with at least one other adult, and most participants reported having at least a high school education. When asked to list all food assistance currently receiving or having received in the past 12 months, 38 individuals reported receiving SNAP benefits, 25 reported having a child on the free/reduced lunch program, 25 used food pantries/food banks, and 18 listed receiving WIC. A church and community garden were mentioned as "other" types of assistance.

Figure 1: Demographic data for focus group participants



Table 1. Food Insecurity rates of focus group participants

| Focus Group Region   | Number of Participants | Food Insecurity % in the last 12 months |
|----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Central Texas        | 5                      | 60%                                     |
| West Texas           | 7                      | 71%                                     |
| Rio Grande Valley    | 11                     | 82%                                     |
| East Texas           | 4                      | 100%                                    |
| Gulf Coast           | 9                      | 100%                                    |
| North Texas          | 7                      | 86%                                     |
| All regions combined | 43                     | 84%                                     |

\*Demographic information of regional convening stakeholders was not collected.

# FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Questions asked during the focus group were adapted from the "Engaging Arkansas Stakeholders to Improve SNAP's Public Health Impact: Focus Group Facilitation Guide".\* The questions were translated into Spanish by a bilingual/native Spanish-speaking Evaluation Team staff member and submitted to University of Texas Health Science Center (UTHealth) Institutional Review Board (IRB). The project received an "exempt" status due to the research qualifying as "no risk" or "minimal risk" to study participants and research activities falling in one of the exempt categories defined by federal regulations (IRB NUMBER: HSC-SPH-20-1028). Both the English and the Spanish facilitation guides with the focus group questions can be found in the Appendix.

Each focus group started with researchers welcoming the group, introducing themselves and their fellow co-facilitator, and reminding the participants about the types of questions that were going to be asked. Facilitators explained there were no right or wrong answers and that all points of view were equally welcome. Once everyone agreed to participate and agreed to be audio recorded, the discussion began.

The hour-long discussions all started with the same question, "Tell me about your experience applying for SNAP." Individuals were probed for whether anything made it more or less difficult, whether the current benefits met their and their family's needs, items they would like to purchase with their Lone Star Card but were not SNAP-eligible products, and how these SNAP benefits support their health.

Conversations continued into discussing the DUFEB program, policymakers' proposal on additional SNAP incentives paired with restricting purchases of sugary drinks, a soda tax with revenue earmarked for helping SNAP participants buy healthy foods, and other ideas on how fruit and vegetable consumption can increase among Texas SNAP participants.

All six focus groups were transcribed, and when needed, translated into English. Two researchers conducted thematic analyses individually and convened to reach a consensus. The following pages will explore themes in detail and provide quotes capturing the essence of each question.

\*2021\_29-12\_CSPI\_SNAP\_Report\_Final.pdf, arhungeralliance.org

# FOCUS GROUP THEMES: SNAP APPLICATION

To receive SNAP benefits, a person must apply and submit supporting documentation, such as a Social Security card and earnings, interview with a representative from the Department of Human Services, and submit any additional documents, if asked during the interview, within 10 days of the interview. SNAP benefits are limited to a 3-month period for individuals without children, 6 months to those with children, after which point the recipient must complete a renewal application. **The majority of the focus group participants expressed difficulty with the application process and frustration with the length of the application process.** Many people said it takes them hours to complete the online application and can take just as long to try to get an interview. For those who miss the interview call, it can take few more months to get another one. For those with questions and needing to speak to someone, the wait time is usually over an hour. Additionally, for Spanish speaking participants, the online translations often are not correct and the translator during the phone interview may fail to translate sentences spoken by the recipient. **The feeling that the interviewer or the SNAP benefits advisor does "not care" about the recipient was uttered throughout the different focus groups.**

Lack of a computer, printer, or a scanner can hinder the application process as well. Even for tech-savvy individuals, the process is cumbersome. Participants expressed knowing SNAP eligible individuals who abandoned the application process halfway through because it was so arduous.

There were ideas on how to improve the application process such as: auto-populate the fields, lower wait times to speak to a SNAP benefits advisor, and Zoom meetings to provide assistance.

"Tiresome part is how long the actual application is... this may be like three to five hours of my time because we have a large family"

# FOCUS GROUP THEMES: SNAP FUNDS

Participants deeply wanted to understand how benefits were calculated and why monies received at times did not match what they were told they would receive. The theme of geographic consideration and cost of living in different cities kept occurring in some of the focus groups. Most participants agreed food cost has been increasing, and those living in high-cost cities expressed desire for SNAP regulators to take cost of living into account when calculating benefits.

Most of the participants stated the amount of SNAP benefits received was not enough to cover the cost of household food expenditures. They mentioned organic produce was priced higher from conventional and in general the nutritious

"Prior to the pandemic, I would say that our food costs were not being met through SNAP. Not even close for our family of five, we were getting about \$80 a month. Once the pandemic hit and we started getting those extra benefits, our food costs have been covered."

food costs more. In addition, while SNAP funds assisted with their food budget, the benefits are exhausted early in the month. The Pandemic EBT benefit boost distributed during the COVID-19 pandemic came as a great relief to participants who were able to cover the cost of food for the month and save some of their money--which in turn came in handy when unexpected expenses occurred, such as during the Texas Winter Storm. A question posed to all participants around SNAP funds was: Are there items you would like to be able to purchase with you SNAP benefits that you currently cannot? Three major ideas emerged from all six groups:

## 01. Additional Funds, Items, & Locations

No one was opposed to receiving more funds in an effort to cover one month's worth of food. Participants unanimously expressed desire for SNAP benefits to extend to household items and other necessities such as personal hygiene products, shampoo, laundry detergent, toilet paper, and baby items. Participants also would like to see more vendors, such as road-side produce sellers and small neighborhood stores, with EBT-only POS (point of sale) equipment to process SNAP transactions, as well as expansion of online retailers, such as Amazon, who accept SNAP.\*

## 02. Hot Prepared Foods

An idea that kept circulating around different focus groups was the ability to purchase hot prepared foods, such as rotisserie chicken, from grocery stores. The majority of participants stated that working parents who have limited time available to them every night could really benefit from this. In addition, individuals who are experiencing homelessness as would seniors who are unable to prepare meals would especially benefit from this option.

"I would like to be able to buy hot meals, because when I leave work, I pick up my child from daycare, come home and cook all the time, it takes a lot of time and it gets very late."

## 03. Health

Participants were appreciative of the SNAP program and acknowledged the benefits of eating healthy food via SNAP dollars. Furthermore, the money normally spent on food replaced by SNAP funding allowed for payment of other bills, which in turn, as stated by some participants, played a part in reduction of individual's stress levels.

\*At the time of publication, SNAP online purchasing is being piloted in Texas. The only retailers currently approved to participate are ALDI, Amazon, H-E-B, and Walmart.

# FOCUS GROUP THEMES: DOUBLE UP FOOD BUCKS

Active in 28 states, Double Up Food Bucks (DUFB) is a model for healthy food incentives matching SNAP EBT dollars spent on fresh fruits and vegetables. The program is offered from farmers' markets to grocery stores, and anyone on SNAP is automatically eligible.

"Never even knew that was possible or I would have used it. I never knew that was available when you and I spoke yesterday. Like that's the first I've ever heard of that."

Most participants in the focus groups were unaware of DUFB. Few individuals thought the program only existed in places like California and a few thought it was either no longer available or not offered near them.

Those who had used the program exuberantly spoke of DUFB. Not only did they explain the program to the group, they also mentioned where in their town one is able to receive the matching SNAP funds and would encourage other participants to try it. The few participants who were familiar with DUFB remembered the wooden chips provided at farmers' markets. They shared with the group that the current "money" one gets at a farmer's market is a coupon like "monopoly money" and is not as durable as previously used chips.

All individuals who learned of the program were excited to hear of the initiative and requested more information on where in their hometown they can receive DUFB. Participants were also keen on seeing DUFB expanded to more locations near them. One participant had heard of the program but had not used it, stating that the farmers' market is on the south side of town and she, living on the north side and without reliable means of transportation, did not have the means of going there during the days/ times it was open.



*"My kids love [DUFB] because we go and spend our \$30 if it's doubled to \$60. So each of my children get's \$20 to spend and it's a highlight of their week."*



# FOCUS GROUP THEMES: PROPOSED POLICIES

The last set of questions centered around soliciting ideas from participants on ways of improving healthy eating through SNAP and discussing ideas being introduced by policymakers around SNAP and healthy eating. For each of the three policymakers' proposals, there was consensus among participants. The first idea, excluding ability to purchase sugar sweetened beverages (SSB) with Lone Star Card, a Texas Electronic Benefit Transfer card that provides access to SNAP, was met with acceptance. Participants mentioned a desire to be healthy and expressed not purchasing much, if any SSBs. Some Spanish-speaking participants grew up with SSBs, particularly sodas, in their household and shared how SSBs were ubiquitous in their culture. **The majority of participants were in support of a policy which would prohibit SNAP participants to use SNAP benefits to purchase SSBs as they realize the negative health impacts after years of SSB consumption.** Many also thought it would be beneficial to have nutrition classes to show people what one can substitute for SSBs and teach people how to eat healthy. However, there were a few people who did not agree and suggested instead to place a *limit* per month on how much money can be spent on SSBs using SNAP benefits. **When asked if they would feel differently if the inability to purchase SSBs with SNAP meant more money on their SNAP card, the answers were overwhelmingly positive.**

**A proposed SSB tax was met with rejection.** In general people do not like to be taxed. One individual was concerned for the SSB companies and any jobs that could be lost. When participants learned the tax would make the fruits and vegetables more economical for SNAP recipients, as the money from the tax would lower the cost of fruits and vegetables for SNAP participants, majority found that to be unfair. The low-cost produce should be available to everyone, and not just for SNAP participants, was the resounding reply.

**Table 2. Input on suggested policies**

| Policy Idea                                                               | Feedback                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Sentiment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Inability to buy SSB with Lone Star Card                                  | Most participants do not drink SSBs and were in support of a policy that did not allow purchase of SSBs with Lone Star Card; few did not like having their options limited and instead asked for a limit on amount of SSBs that can be purchased. | "If you feel like having a soda, then buy it out of pocket"                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Inability to purchase SSB but extra \$ on Lone Star Card for healthy food | Participants were in great support                                                                                                                                                                                                                | "I think it'll probably make a difference for a lot of people that don't eat healthy foods and like this is an incentive so they might start, you know, gravitating towards more healthy food"                                                                           |
| SSB tax with revenue earmarked for SNAP produce incentives                | Participants were in opposition                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"If they put more taxes on soft drinks, they will soon tax bread"</li> <li>"I find it unfair that's for someone who does not receive SNAP benefits, unable to also get that deal [lower cost of fruit and vegetables]"</li> </ul> |

# PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT- REGIONAL CONVENINGS

SFC identified community partners who could serve as the Lead Community Partner in Central Texas, West Texas, Rio Grande Valley, North Texas, East Texas, and Gulf Coast - all the regions in which focus groups were conducted. The Lead Community Partner from each region was tasked to invite organizations and individuals in their networks to attend the respective regional convening. Lead Community Partners were selected based on their capacity to reach local stakeholders. As a result of their community connections, each successfully engaged a diverse group of community representatives from multiple sectors. The work of all attendees supported low-income community members. The regional stakeholder convenings were held between May and July 2021.



## **Central Texas**

21 attendees who composed of researchers, city staff, DUFB implementing partners, and non-profit representatives

## **West Texas**

10 attendees who comprised of grassroots community organizations, schools, farmers' market operators, DUFB implementing partners, and local businesses

## **Rio Grande Valley**

12 attendees who comprised of city staff, local business, DUFB implementing partners, community organizations, and faith-based organizations

## **North Texas**

21 attendees who work in community organizations, county extension office, food bank, DUFB implementing partners, local government, and the private sector

## **East Texas**

13 attendees who were operators of several farmers' markets, food banks, and community-based organizations

## **Gulf Coast**

40 attendees representing non-profit organizations, healthcare sector, local government, food bank, health advocacy groups, and DUFB program implementing partners

# REGIONAL CONVENING QUESTIONS

Each regional convening started with an SFC representative welcoming the group, providing an overview of the Double Up Food Bucks/SNAP incentives landscape in the region, and giving a recap from the Statewide Convening. The 60-minute facilitated discussion addressed the following questions in each regional convening:

- What priority populations or areas are not currently being served by a SNAP incentive program in our region? What are barriers to participating?
- What specific opportunities exist in our region to build better a program that reaches more families?
- What steps need to be taken to develop a grocery DUFEB program that prioritizes Texas-grown produce?
- What areas of opportunity exist in our region that could be initiated or bolstered by government (local, county, or state) funds?
- What are your perceptions about encouraging the purchase of healthy foods through a combined incentive/disincentive model for SNAP purchases (e.g., 30% cost increase on SSB, 30% cost reduction on fruits and vegetables)?
- What are your perceptions about a sugar-sweetened beverage tax to help fund nutrition incentive programs?

Notes were taken during each discussion and emailed to all the attendees after the meeting. Key elements were found throughout the six regional convenings and follow focus group themes below.

# REGIONAL CONVENINGS THEMES

## 1. Regional stakeholders expressed that government support for local SNAP incentive programs is a key to success.

- Central Texas has a thriving DUFB SNAP-incentive program. The program's success is attributed to several factors, including the longevity of the program, which launched in Austin in 2012, the City of Austin's ongoing investments in the program, and the network of community partners and community members supporting outreach and engagement efforts.
- In the Rio Grande Valley, there is strong interest in building a healthy food fund. Newly elected city commissioners are interested in meeting again with our groups to discuss opportunities to build local support for the program.
- The North Texas region has experienced some policy changes related to increasing access to farmers' markets. Previously, farmers' markets were required to operate on privately owned land. Now, farmers markets are considered public events and can operate on certain areas of city property. Partners in the North Texas region continue to engage with local leadership to identify policy opportunities to increase access to healthy food amongst the most vulnerable populations in the Dallas/Fort Worth area.
- West Texas has opportunities to build relationships with local leaders, particularly through the Chamber of Commerce. The DUFB program in West Texas holds strong partnerships with grocery retail companies who have a vested interest in healthy food access for low-income communities. These businesses are now being engaged to discuss opportunities to advocate for a local healthy food incentive fund in Lubbock.
- All regions cited that the DUFB Texas program would be most successful if it was universally available at farmers' markets and grocery stores.
- All regions agreed that both a local and a state strategy would be necessary to secure sustained support for the program.

**Recommendation 1.1:** Engage Texas cities and counties to support the creation of new city ordinances that provide financial support for local SNAP incentive programs.

**Recommendation 1.2:** Build a SNAP incentive fund in the state of Texas.

## 2. Stakeholders expressed that the gap between current and potential reach of SNAP incentive program participation is significant.

- All regions identified specific community groups that are not currently being reached by their local SNAP incentive program. These included seniors and people with disabilities, college students, people experiencing homelessness, home-bound people, people with limited access to transportation, and youth. Stakeholders cited the need for a coordinated, statewide outreach campaign as well as increased local outreach efforts. The Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), the SNAP-administering agency for the state, has the ability to expand outreach for the populations they serve. In addition to being the SNAP administering agency for Texas, HHSC administers SNAP-Ed, which teaches people how to stretch their SNAP dollars and how to shop for and cook healthy meals, through their statewide network of community partners. HHSC is therefore well poised to expand their messaging to include SNAP incentive programs.
- While there are many farmers' markets in the East Texas region, the region does not currently have a SNAP incentive program in operation. All participating farmers' market operators in this region expressed interest in becoming SNAP-enabled in order to increase their reach in communities, and in further expanding their services through DUFB once SNAP-enabled.
- Stakeholders recommended expanding SNAP-online purchasing options to include small retailers.
- Several regions, the Rio Grande Valley, West Texas, North Texas, and Central Texas in particular, cited local food infrastructure improvements would be needed to support a vibrant and inclusive local food system. Specifically, these regions recommended the development of infrastructure to aggregate and distribute locally produced food (e.g., food hub, cooperative models).

*"The program would need to expand to all stores in order to not have restriction around communication with SNAP participants."*

**Recommendation 2.1:** Engage Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) to support SNAP incentive programs, particularly in the form of outreach.

**Recommendation 2.2:** Develop innovative solutions to increase access to SNAP incentive programs

## 3. Stakeholders agreed that building a healthy food fund through a sugar-sweetened beverage tax is not a desirable strategy in Texas but may be feasible at the local level.

- Stakeholders noted that a sugar-sweetened beverage tax\* could be a viable option at the local level, and the revenue could fund a variety of public goods, including nutrition incentives, public parks, etc. The sugar-sweetened beverage tax was of particular interest to leaders at the City of Brownsville in the Rio Grande Valley.
- The majority of participants and community leaders across all regions had reservations about increasing taxes, especially a statewide tax. The greatest concern amongst these groups is that the tax would unfairly impact marginalized communities that do not have access to healthy foods.

**Recommendation:** Explore opportunities to build a healthy food incentive fund within Texas municipalities.

*"Taxing people without increasing access to healthy food to their community is weird. We need to work creatively to not unfairly target groups who are already underserved."*

\*SSB tax would be an excise tax levied on manufacturers and distributors.

#### 4. Stakeholders generally believe that a combined incentive/disincentive model for SNAP purchases is not desirable.

- Stakeholders in all regions cited ethical challenges with limiting peoples' food choices.
- Stakeholders representing the public health community believe that a combined incentive/disincentive model is ineffective in changing purchasing behavior.
- Stakeholders in the Rio Grande Valley were particularly concerned about marketing and advertising of sugary drinks, which makes it challenging for communities to make healthy choices.
- Stakeholders representing the grocery retail sector highlighted the challenges with this approach, naming that the combined incentive/disincentive approach could hurt their relationships with their customers and vendors/partners. Grocery sector partners indicated that the approach would be challenging from a point-of-sale perspective and could drive shoppers to take their business elsewhere.
- Stakeholders in all regions celebrated the success of their current SNAP incentive programs and expressed desire to see the program grow and expand, both within their region, and statewide, without tying incentives to disincentives.

**Recommendation 4.1:** Continue efforts to strengthen the existing SNAP incentive program, Double Up Food Bucks Texas.

**Recommendation 4.2:** Reform marketing practices of sugary drink in order to promote health in retail settings.



# CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Focus groups with past and present SNAP participants were held in six different regions of Texas. In congruence with the focus groups, Sustainable Food Center led six regional convenings with stakeholders representing community organizations, local government, and the private sector. The purpose of the focus groups and regional convenings was to ascertain SNAP participants' experience with SNAP, DUFB, and potential policies incentivizing purchase of healthy foods and to engage community stakeholders' voices in developing strategies to increase access to healthy food.

Everyone participating in the focus groups was appreciative of the SNAP benefits received but most people expressed concerns over the long and arduous application process, Spanish translation not being adequate, and the funds provided not covering cost of food, especially with rising food costs. Assistance with the application was desired by some participants as was clarification on how SNAP funds were calculated and allocated. Most persons attending the focus groups were keen on changes to the SNAP program, mainly allowance of hot prepared food purchase items (ready-made meals), expansion of places that accept SNAP (such as small neighborhood stores and road-side vendors), and consideration of geographic location when calculating benefits.

The Double Up Food Bucks initiative was largely unknown to participants. The few who had used the program had overwhelming positive things to share, and those who learned of the program exuberantly requested information on where in their hometown they can take advantage of the program. Participants also wanted to see DUFB expanded to not only more farmers' markets, but grocery stores as well. **Given such enthusiasm for the program and fervor for information, DUFB has an opportunity to reach many more people in the state of Texas who are low-income, face food access challenges, and are food insecure. Promotion and raising awareness of the program are critical to success and expansion to more locations would ensure greater usage.**

Education themes kept coming up throughout discussions. While participants were not big soda drinkers, they thought it was important to have classes for those who are in order to teach them best-nutrition practices. Soda tax with revenue earmarked for SNAP incentives and health initiatives was not desirable, but increased SNAP dollars for greater produce purchase was, as was limiting the amount one can purchase sodas with SNAP monies.

The work of all 117 attendees of regional convenings advocates for low-income community members. There was a consensus that government support is key to a successful DUFB program. Partners all across the state are engaging with policymakers, local businesses, and farmers' markets to bolster the DUFB program. There was also a general agreement that the gap between SNAP participants and DUFB users is significant. As was the opinion of SNAP participants, so too was it of regional convening stakeholders that better outreach of DUFB is needed. Community leaders in all regions had reservations about a sugar-sweetened beverage tax but a few acknowledged it could be a viable option in some municipalities. Furthermore, stakeholders in all regions cited ethical challenges with limiting peoples' food choices and did not think SNAP funds should only apply to healthy food.

The SNAP participants and the advocates at the convening aligned on many things, except that SNAP participants supported the combined SNAP incentive and disincentive approach while advocates did not. Future work can more closely examine why these groups had differing opinions about this strategy.

In synopsis, three key themes emerged from **both the regional stakeholder convenings and focus groups with SNAP participants**: need for greater government support, greater SNAP reach, and increased DUFB expansion and promotion. Further details on the three themes are found in Table 3.

01

## **Government support**

Recommend building a statewide SNAP incentive fund, increasing funds to SNAP participants, and creating new ordinances that provide support for incentive programs

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02

## **SNAP reach**

Recommend SNAP statewide outreach campaign and expansion of online purchasing options

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03

## **DUFB expansion**

Recommend growth and expansion of the Double Up Food Bucks program to more cities in Texas and more vendors in each city

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Table 3. Level of Support for Healthy Eating Strategies

|                                                                                       | SNAP<br>Participants | Convening<br>Stakeholders |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>Government Support</b>                                                             |                      |                           |
| Simplify SNAP application                                                             | ✓                    | --                        |
| Increase SNAP funds to participants                                                   | ✓                    | ✓                         |
| Statewide SNAP fund creation                                                          | --                   | ✓                         |
| Creation of local ordinances for support of DUFB                                      | --                   | ✓                         |
| <b>SNAP Reach</b>                                                                     |                      |                           |
| Expand SNAP outreach & awareness campaign                                             | ✓                    | ✓                         |
| Expansion of online retailers who accept SNAP                                         | ✓                    | ✓                         |
| Expand SNAP to include essential non-food items                                       | ✓                    | --                        |
| Purchase of ready-made meals from grocery & convenience stores                        | ✓                    | --                        |
| <b>DUFB Expansion and Promotion</b>                                                   |                      |                           |
| Expansion of DUFB to more Texas cities                                                | ✓                    | ✓                         |
| More retailers and vendors to participate in DUFB                                     | ✓                    | ✓                         |
| Stronger marketing campaign around DUFB                                               | ✓                    | ✓                         |
| <b>Purchase of Sugar Sweetened Beverages</b>                                          |                      |                           |
| Eliminating purchase of SSBs with SNAP benefits                                       | ⊘                    | ⊘                         |
| Eliminating the purchase of SSBs while providing more money for fruits and vegetables | ✓                    | ⊘                         |
| Limiting SSBs purchase with SNAP benefits                                             | ✓                    | ⊘                         |
| Taxing SSBs to decrease cost of fruits and vegetables for SNAP participants           | ⊘                    | ⊘                         |

✓ High Support

⊘ Low Support

-- Not Discussed



# *Next Steps*

Given the existing, and growing, need for food incentives across the state, SFC and its partners envision a robust statewide Double Up Food Bucks program across the state where families can access fresh, healthy foods to feed their families without worry. SFC will lead the effort to draft proposed bills, regulations, or other vehicles that will either direct the state to establish a fund for SNAP incentives or provide direction for support through alternative means such as technological improvements or community outreach and engagement. SFC will integrate learnings and recommendations from these community engagement efforts to develop a policy vision and grassroots campaign strategy, identify legislative champions, draft legislation, and prepare program champions for the upcoming 88th Texas Legislative Session, which will commence in January 2023. The support of these strategic partnerships, including program participants, will be essential to the on-going success and long-term sustainability of Double Up Food Bucks Texas.



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# APPENDIX

## Recruitment Flyer



Share your thoughts on SNAP  
& Double Up Food Bucks  
benefits!

Join us **Wednesday, Sept. 15, at 7pm** in an online discussion with 10-12 individuals to help us learn about Double Up Food Bucks benefits & potential new incentives!

**You will receive a \$50 gift card as a thank-you for your time**

### TO PARTICIPATE

*you must...*

- be current or past SNAP recipient
- live in or around Dallas, Fort Worth, Arlington or surrounding cities
- be at least 18 years of age
- speak English

**Focus groups will be...**

- 60 minutes
- confidential
- involve no risk
- held over Zoom

### EMAIL US

*to learn more and sign up for the focus group:*

[aida.alibegovic@uth.tmc.edu](mailto:aida.alibegovic@uth.tmc.edu)



## Focus Group Facilitation Guide

Good afternoon/evening and welcome to our session. Thanks for taking the time to join us to talk about your experiences with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, while living in {Insert geographic region relevant to study}. My name is \*\*\*, and assisting me is \*\*\*. We're both with University of Texas Health Science Center. We have invited you here today to better understand your experiences with accessing nutritious food through SNAP as part of a research study. We'd like to hear what you think about potential changes to the SNAP program. We want to know what your experiences have been, what you like, what you don't like, and how the program might be improved. We are having discussions like this with several groups across the state of Texas. You were invited because of your participation in SNAP. Please keep in mind that there are no wrong answers; also, please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. Keep in mind that we're just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful. We are going to record this session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. Before we start, please let us know if you agree to take part in this research and if you agree to the recording. We will need a verbal consent from everyone. (\*Facilitator to receive consent from individuals.\*) We're going to start recording now. Before I ask you a little bit about your experiences applying for SNAP and learning about the program, let's find out who is here today; please, if you don't mind, everyone state your first name.

1. Tell me about your experience applying for SNAP.
  - a. Facilitator to ask: Did anything make it difficult? Did anything make it easier?
2. Do you feel the money you get from SNAP is enough to meet your family's needs?
  - a. Why or why not?
3. Are there items you would like to be able to purchase with your SNAP benefits that you currently cannot?
  - a. Facilitator to state: this could include non-food items or other food items you maybe want to purchase but cannot afford
4. Do you think that your SNAP benefits support your health? Please explain.
5. How do SNAP benefits open up room in your budget for other needs that support your health?
  - a. Facilitator to state: other needs such as essential household items, clothing, personal care, housing, transportation, healthcare, utility bills
  - b. Do you buy more healthy items because of your SNAP benefits?
6. Some stores and farmers' markets offer extra SNAP benefits to buy fresh fruits and vegetables, like for every dollar you spend on fresh fruit or vegetables you get an extra dollar to spend there, or you may get a set of coupons to buy more fresh fruit or vegetables. Probe:
  - a. Has anyone used this kind of program ( in Central Texas, for example, it's called DUFEB)
  - b. What did you like about it?
  - c. Is there anything that you didn't like about it?
  - d. How did it affect what you bought?
  - e. How long have you been using the program?

7. For those who haven't had these incentives, what are your thoughts? Would you like to have additional SNAP benefits specifically to buy fresh fruits and vegetables?
8. For everyone, would you like to get extra SNAP benefits to use for other items besides fresh fruits and vegetables—like for frozen fruits and vegetables, for whole wheat bread and other whole grains, or for milk?
9. Lawmakers in some states are considering a policy where you would receive extra SNAP benefits for buying healthy foods, but you will be unable to buy sugary drinks using your SNAP benefits. [Note to moderator: this does not include 100% juice, flavored milk or diet soda]
- What are your thoughts on this idea?
  - How would this affect what you/ your family buys/ drinks?
  - Would you feel differently if the incentive for not purchasing soda was extra money on your SNAP EBT card every month that could be used to purchase all foods (other than sugar-sweetened beverages) and not restricted to only fruits and vegetables?
10. One last idea to ask you about: some lawmakers are discussing a tax on sugary drinks. This tax would be about 1 cent per ounce, so a 12 ounce soda can would be taxed an extra 12 cents. This would affect everyone who buys soda, not just people using SNAP. The money from the tax would lower the cost of fruits and vegetables for SNAP participants.
- What are your thoughts on this idea?
11. Do you have any other thoughts on how SNAP could make it easier for you to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables or fruits and vegetables overall—including frozen and canned?
12. Do you have any other thoughts on how SNAP could make it easier to purchase other healthy foods (give examples: whole grain products, low-fat dairy, lean protein, etc.)
13. Do you have any other thoughts on how SNAP could discourage people from buying candy, sugary drinks, and other junk food?
14. If you had the power to make any changes to current SNAP programs in Texas, what changes would you make?

Buenas tardes/noches y bienvenidos a nuestra sesión. Gracias por tomarse el tiempo de unirse a nosotros para hablar sobre sus experiencias con el Programa de Asistencia de Nutrición Suplementaria, o SNAP, en {Inserte la región geográfica relevante para estudiar}. Mi nombre es \_\_\_\_\*\*\*\*, y mi asistente es \_\_\_\_\*\*\*\*. Ambos formamos parte del Centro de Ciencias de la Salud de la Universidad de Texas. Como parte de un estudio de investigación, los hemos invitado aquí hoy para comprender mejor sus experiencias con SNAP y el acceso a alimentos nutritivos a través de este programa. Nos gustaría conocer su opinión sobre los posibles cambios en el programa SNAP. Queremos saber cuáles han sido sus experiencias, que le gusta y como se podría mejorar este programa. Estamos haciendo grupos de discusión como este a través del estado de Texas. Usted fue invitado por ser participante del programa de SNAP. Tenga en cuenta que no hay respuestas incorrectas: Además, siéntase libre de compartir su punto de vista incluso si difiere con lo que han dicho los otros participantes. Tenga en cuenta que nos interesan tanto en los comentarios positivos como negativos y, en ocasiones, los comentarios negativos son los mas útiles. Vamos a grabar esta sesión porque no queremos perdernos ninguno de sus comentarios. Antes de comenzar, queremos saber si está de acuerdo en participar en esta investigación y si está de acuerdo con la grabación. Solo necesitaremos un consentimiento verbal. (\*Facilitador recibirá consentimiento verbal de los individuos.\*) Comenzaremos a grabar ahora mismo. Antes de preguntar sobre su experiencia al solicitar SNAP y aprender sobre el programa, conozcamos a los demás del grupo. Todos por favor digan su nombre.

1. Hablemos sobre su experiencia al solicitar SNAP.

a. Preguntar: ¿Que lo hizo difícil? ¿Qué ayuda a hacerlo más fácil?

2. ¿Siente que el dinero que recibe de SNAP es suficiente para satisfacer las necesidades de su familia?

a. ¿Por qué si o por qué no?

3. ¿Hay artículos que le gustaría poder comprar con sus beneficios de SNAP y que no puede?

a. Sugerencia: esto podrían ser artículos no alimenticios u otros artículos alimenticios que tal vez desee comprar, pero no pueda pagar

4. ¿Cree que sus beneficios de SNAP apoyan su salud? Por favor explique.

5. ¿Como los beneficios de SNAP ayudan con su presupuesto para otras necesidades que apoyan su salud?

a. Sugerencia: otros artículos esenciales para el hogar como, ropa, cuidado personal, vivienda, transporte, atención médica, facturas de servicios públicos

b. ¿Compra más productos saludables gracias a sus beneficios del programa de SNAP?

6. Algunas tiendas y mercados de agricultores ofrecen beneficios SNAP adicionales para comprar frutas y verduras frescas, como por cada dólar que gasta en frutas o verduras frescas, obtiene un dólar extra para gastar allí, o puede obtener un juego de cupones para comprar más. frutas u hortalizas frescas.

Investigación:

a. ¿Alguien ha utilizado este tipo de programa? (por ej. En el Centro de Texas se llama Double Up Food Bucks/Doble Dolar)

b. ¿Qué es lo que le gusta de esto?

c. ¿Hay algo que no le gusto?

d. ¿Como afecto en los que compro?

e. ¿Cuánto tiempo ha estado usando este programa?

7. Para aquellos que no sabían de estos incentivos ¿Qué piensan?, ¿Les gustaría tener beneficios adicionales de SNAP para comprar frutas y verduras frescas específicamente?

8. Para todos, ¿les gustaría obtener beneficios adicionales de SNAP para usar en otros artículos además de frutas y verduras frescas, como frutas y verduras congelados, pan integral y otros cereales integrales o leche?

9. Los legisladores de algunos estados están considerando una política en la que recibiría beneficios adicionales de SNAP por comprar alimentos saludables, pero no podrá comprar bebidas azucaradas con sus beneficios de SNAP. [Nota para el moderador: esto no incluye jugo 100% natural, leche con sabor ni refrescos dietéticos]

a. ¿Qué opinan de esta idea?

b. ¿Como esto afectaría a las bebidas que usted o su familia compran?

c. ¿Se sentiría mejor si el incentive para no comprar refrescos, fuera dinero extra cada mes en su tarjeta de SNAP EBT y que pudiera usarse para comprar todos los alimentos (excepto bebidas azucaradas) y no solo restringirse a frutas y verduras?

10. Una última idea para preguntarle: algunos legisladores están discutiendo un impuesto adicional a las bebidas azucaradas. Este impuesto sería de 1 centavo por onza aproximadamente, por lo que una lata de refresco de 12 oz costaría 12 centavos a adicionales. Esto afectaría a todos los que compran refrescos, no solo a las personas que usan SNAP.

a. ¿Qué opina de esta idea?

11. ¿Tiene alguna otra idea de cómo SNAP podría facilitarle las compras en general de frutas y verduras frescas, congeladas o enlatadas?

12. ¿Tiene alguna otra idea como SNAP podría facilitar la compra de otros productos saludables? (dar ejemplos: productos integrales, lácteos bajos en grasa, proteínas magras, etc.)

13. ¿Tiene alguna otra idea sobre como SNAP podría evitar que las personas compren dulces, bebidas azucaradas u otras comidas chatarras?

14. Si tuvieran el poder para hacer cambios en el programa actual de Texas SNAP ¿qué cambios haría?