



Strengthening **SNAP** on a Dime



Detroit Food
POLICY COUNCIL

Executive Summary

Overview

“Strengthening SNAP on A Dime” engaged stakeholders from throughout Michigan to develop strategies that would encourage healthier choices by people using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Problem

The negative health effects of regularly drinking sugar sweetened beverages are well-documented. Encouraging people to lessen their consumption of SSB and increase their consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables (FFV) is a long-standing policy challenge. People who use SNAP buy sugar sweetened beverages (SSB) at a slightly higher rate than non-SNAP users. Finding policy interventions that preserve the dignity of SNAP participants, while encouraging them to make healthier choices, requires thoughtful planning with people who use SNAP at the center, rather than lobbyists, politicians and policymakers leading the charge.

The Project

In 2018, the Center for Science in the Public Interest began leading statewide convenings with SNAP stakeholders to develop SNAP participant-led recommendations for improving public health through SNAP. In 2021, CSPI issued subgrants to community-based organizations in seven states to lead more discussions with SNAP participants and stakeholders through focus groups and convenings. The Detroit Food Policy Council (DFPC) was selected for one of these subgrants.

Six focus groups facilitated by DFPC members and staff were held as follows: three in Detroit, two in Grand Rapids, and one in Marquette for a total of 21 participants. In addition to the focus groups, the DFPC disseminated an online survey and interviewed key informants -- two retailers and two policy professionals. DFPC and CSPI also hosted a statewide convening which brought together stakeholders from across the state to offer feedback on the findings and explore potential next steps.

Results: Several themes emerged through the various paths of information gathering that the DFPC pursued during this project. The most recurrent are:

- SNAP recipients are extremely resistant to anything that smacks of government control or overreach. Freedom of choice was very important;
- There is broad concern about SNAP benefit adequacy;
- SNAP users would like more flexibility in using their SNAP dollars on non-food necessities such as cleaning supplies, as well as health care items such as vitamins and supplements;
- They have a strong desire to eat a healthy diet and are interested in educating themselves further about how to do so.

One of the most commonly agreed upon ideas was to expand Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) incentives to cover more healthy foods, such as whole grain bread and low-fat dairy. Expanding an already-familiar program might be a more effective way to reach the desired outcome of discouraging SSB consumption and encouraging healthy eating among SNAP recipients.

Introduction

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is one of the most effective and widespread anti-poverty programs available to people with low incomes. It is designed to expand and contract as need fluctuates, with participation in SNAP growing when the economy falters and falling as employment rates rise. In Michigan, 1.3 million people received federal SNAP benefits through Michigan's Food Assistance Program as of February 2020 ⁽¹⁾. Rates of SNAP participation vary across the state, with rates higher in more populated areas and lower in less dense ones. With the steep and sudden job losses created by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, participation in the program rose sharply. The federal government moved to meet this increased need by providing a 15% increase in SNAP benefits across the board. Michigan also brought every SNAP recipient up to the maximum for their family size, regardless of whether they would typically receive the highest benefit level. Michigan also piloted the Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) program, which sent an EBT card directly to families to replace the free or reduced-price lunch children would have been receiving at schools had they been open. In districts, such as Detroit, that have community eligibility, so that every child receives lunch free of charge without regard to income, every student's household received P-EBT funds.

As pandemic enhancements started to phase out, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) recalculated the Thrifty Food Plan in August 2021. The Thrifty Food Plan reflects the average price of a "food basket" including essential items for a healthy diet. The price calculation for the Thrifty Food Plan had not been updated since July 2006. This update resulted in an increase in the average SNAP benefit from a pre-pandemic average of \$121 per person per month to \$169 per person per month after the expiration of all pandemic enhancements, which are due to end within the year.

Overall, SNAP is associated with better health outcomes for participants. They are more likely to report their health as very good or good as well as have fewer sick days and fewer doctor visits than people who do not participate in SNAP ⁽²⁾. However, people who use SNAP spend proportionately more on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) than people who do not use SNAP. SSB rank second in most frequently purchased foods with SNAP dollars, while they rank fifth for non-SNAP transactions ⁽³⁾.

¹ "Additional food assistance for 350,000 Michigan families approved in response to COVID-19 emergency; SNAP work requirements also temporarily waived." *Michigan.gov*, <https://www.michigan.gov/coronavirus/0,9753,7-406-98163-523398--,00.html>

² Gregory, Christian and Deb, Partha, "Does SNAP improve your health?" *Food Policy*, 2015, vol. 50, issue C, 11-19, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2014.09.010>

³ Garasky, Steven; Mbwana, Kassim; Romualdo, Andres; Tenaglio, Alex; Roy, Manan. "Foods Typically Purchased by SNAP Households." Prepared by IMPAQ International for USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, November 2016. www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis





Heavy consumption of SSB can lead to a host of health problems. People who consume SSB daily are at higher risk for heart disease, diabetes and tooth decay ⁽⁴⁾.

Encouraging people to lessen their consumption of SSB and increase their consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables (FFV) is a long-standing policy challenge, particularly within SNAP. Finding policy interventions that preserve the dignity of SNAP participants, while encouraging them to make healthier choices, requires thoughtful planning with people who use SNAP at the center, rather than lobbyists, politicians and policymakers leading the charge.

Many experts have proposed strategies to leverage SNAP to improve diet quality and the food environment. ⁽⁵⁾ CSPI began exploring ways to encourage healthier eating through SNAP in 2018. CSPI began leading statewide convenings with SNAP stakeholders to develop SNAP participant-led recommendations for improving public health through SNAP and to identify a state or locality that might be interested in pilot testing a program that pairs increasing SNAP purchasing power with not including SSB among SNAP-eligible products. Pilot tests are currently being developed in Iowa and Virginia. In 2021, CSPI issued subgrants to community-based organizations in seven states to lead more discussions with SNAP participants and stakeholder through focus groups and convenings. DFPC was selected for one of these subgrants. In early 2021, DFPC began identifying partners throughout the state and forming a strategy to recruit focus group participants to share their thoughts on a set of potential policy interventions.

Methods and Results

Focus Groups

Beginning in spring of 2021, DFPC partnered with three key contacts to set up focus groups: Gleaners Community Food Bank in Detroit; Marquette Food Co-Op in the Upper Peninsula; and Our Kitchen Table, a food justice organization in Grand Rapids on the west side of the state. The focus groups were discussions with current or recent (within the last two years) SNAP participants to assess how the program can help improve healthy behaviors and access to healthy food. Six focus groups facilitated by DFPC members and staff were held as follows: three in Detroit, two in Grand Rapids, and one in Marquette for a total of 21 participants. Groups were held using the Zoom video conferencing platform. All participants were female. All were at least 18 years of age with approximately half being senior citizens. The majority were Black, with one Latinx and two White women. (This demographic information is based on observable characteristics as we did not request demographic data from focus group members.) Groups lasted approximately an hour and a half and ranged from one to eight participants. Participants were compensated with a \$50 Visa gift card for their time.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, March 11). "Get the Facts: Sugar Sweetened Beverages and Consumption." Cdc.gov, <https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/data-statistics/sugar-sweetened-beverages-intake.html>

⁵ Bleich SN, et al. Strengthening the public health impacts of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program through policy. *Annu Rev Public Health*. 2020;41:453–80.

Focus group questions were adapted from a sample script from another CSPI grantee as well as the specific policy proposal the DFPC was interested in testing ⁽⁶⁾. Focus groups were recorded on Zoom and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. From there, DFPC staff reviewed the transcripts for themes and assigned each theme a code. Codes were keyed to each question and numbered accordingly. For more complex information, each theme was assigned a subcategory and, occasionally, a sub-subcategory. For example, an open-ended question about ideas participants had for making it easier to eat more healthily on SNAP elicited several answers regarding making it easier to purchase healthier foods. These were coded 9.1 if they mentioned FFV, 9.11 if they mentioned frozen or canned fruits and vegetables, and 9.111 if they mentioned other healthy foods or drinks such as non-dairy milks or whole grain breads. This captured more specificity about what participants meant by “healthy” foods that they would like to be able to purchase more easily with their SNAP dollars.

Survey

In addition to the focus groups, the DFPC disseminated an online survey using the SurveyMonkey platform, with questions adapted from the focus group questions. This was promoted through the DFPC’s social media as well as through our partners’ communication channels and the Michigan Local Food Council Network. There were 29 respondents who completed the survey, with the greatest distribution of residents coming from Southeast Michigan. They were current SNAP recipients or had received SNAP within that last two years. The survey was open from fall of 2021 to January of 2022.

Key Informant Interviews

Further information was gathered through key informant interviews with two policy professionals in order to gather their insights about the potential political advantages and drawbacks of the various policy ideas being tested. One interviewee works for a statewide organization and focuses on statewide SNAP policy, while another works for a nationwide food justice organization and focuses on state policy around food access more broadly. The DFPC also held two key informant interviews with Detroit grocery store owners. Detroit store owners tend to be more dependent on shoppers using SNAP than other stores in the state⁽⁷⁾. The DFPC wanted to gauge their feelings about how proposed SNAP changes would affect their businesses if they were to be put into effect.

Convening

After these activities, DFPC hosted a convening with stakeholders from partner organizations to discuss the findings from the focus groups, survey, and key informant interviews. Approximately 30 people attended the convening representing academia, government, food access, education, healthcare, and foundations. After a presentation of focus group data, stakeholders gathered in smaller breakout groups to discuss their opinions on the policies presented to the SNAP participants and key informants. Together as a large group, all convening attendees shared their recommended healthy SNAP strategies, and consensus was determined through a ranked-choice poll.

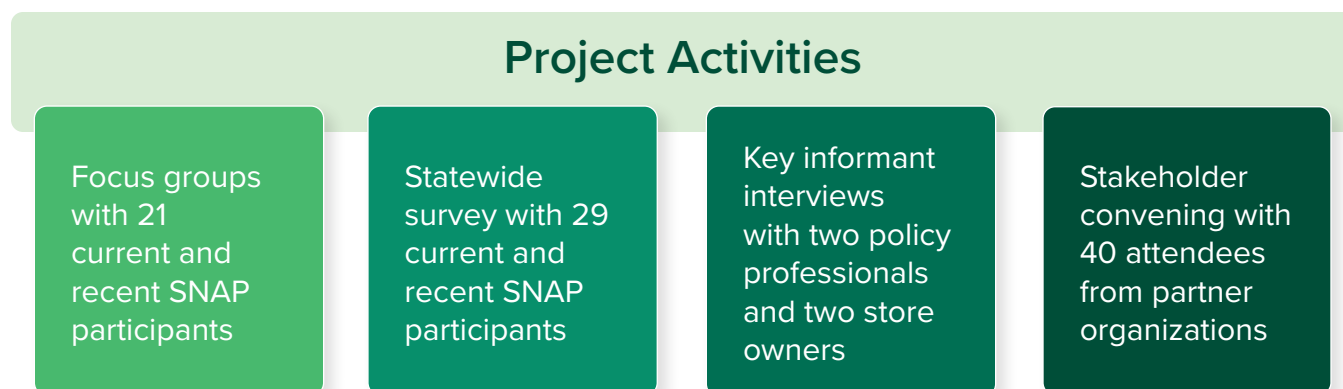


Figure 1: Summary of activities for DFPC’s Strengthening SNAP on a Dime project

⁶ Dundon, K., Noori, K., Tiwari, T., Long, C., Stadter, S., Prewitt, T. E., & English, E. (2021). Engaging Arkansas Stakeholders to improve SNAP’s Public Health Impact. Arkansas Hunger Solutions.

⁷ Allnut, B. (2018, July 19) “Detroit Shows How Cuts to SNAP Affect Entire Communities.” Civil Eats <https://civileats.com/2018/07/19/detroit-shows-how-cuts-to-snap-affect-entire-communities/>



Results from SNAP Participant Focus Groups and Survey

Results from SNAP Participant Focus Groups and Survey

Responses varied between focus group participants and survey respondents. In some cases this was because the questions were asked somewhat differently in focus groups and in the survey. This was because the focus groups required a more conversational tone and allowed for interviewers to clarify questions if need be; however, survey questions needed to be brief and clear for easy comprehension. Occasionally, similar questions drew significantly different responses from focus group participants and survey respondents. In those cases, we surmise this reflects a lack of understanding of the question on the survey, or a desire to complete a fairly lengthy survey quickly.

Focus groups

The opening question asked participants what they buy first when their SNAP card reloads each month. Of 27 coded answers, 48% mentioned FFV, 44% mentioned other fresh foods such as meat and milk, 18% mentioned non-sugar sweetened beverages, and one participant mentioned gluten-free foods for a child with a gluten allergy (Figure 2).

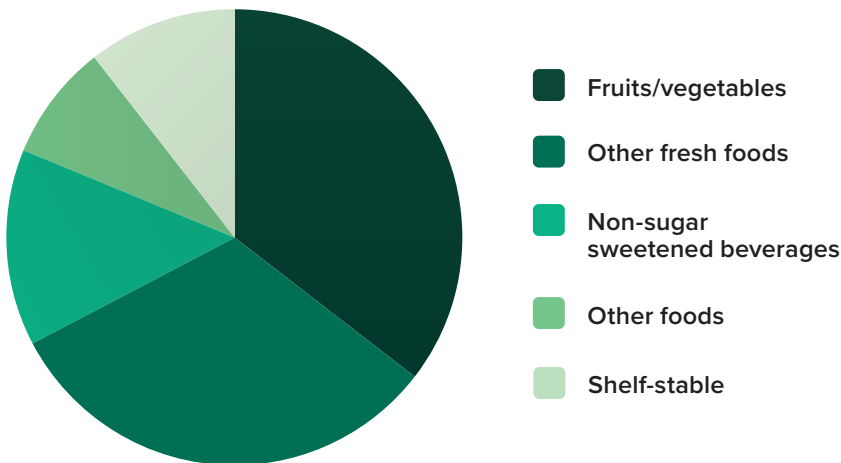


Figure 2: Focus group participants buy...

Participants were twice as likely to stock up on staples when their SNAP cards reloaded than they were to try and stretch it throughout the month. A significant majority of focus group participants (i.e., 61%) did not find their benefits adequate to meet their food needs throughout the month, versus 23% who did.

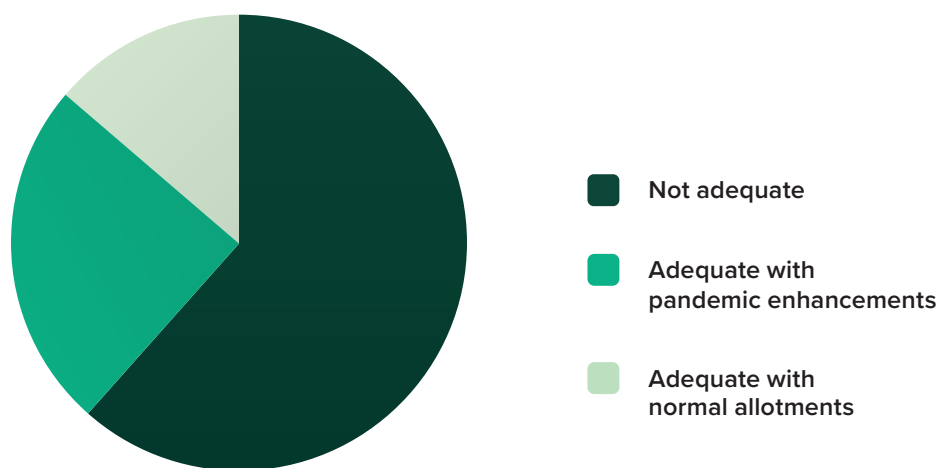


Figure 3: Focus group participants found their benefits....

Additionally, 14% of focus group participants said the benefits were adequate because of the various pandemic enhancements, but had not been in the past. Of participants who mentioned a pandemic benefit boost, about half said they purchased more of the same foods that they typically would have, while the other half said they purchased different foods that they typically could not afford or were willing to try because of the expanded benefit. They also overwhelmingly stated that they would like to purchase other items with their SNAP benefits. More specifically, about half of focus group respondents said they would like to purchase non-food items such as cleaning supplies, diapers or vitamins and 40% said they would like to purchase additional food items such as hot prepared foods.

Survey

These questions were worded differently in the survey and not every answer was comparable. Survey respondents were asked “When your EBT card reloads, what are some of the first things you buy with that money?”

Most respondents simply answered “food” and some responded with non-food items, that are not covered by SNAP, such as clothing. This indicates that SNAP not only help participants buy food, but also helps free up household income for use on other household items.

Again, the question about stocking up when the SNAP card reloads or trying to make the money stretch throughout the month was asked as a multiple choice question on the survey: “When your EBT reloads: I stock up on certain things right away; I try to stretch it out through the month; I use the money to take advantage of sales and store or freeze food for the future; I buy mostly packaged foods such as frozen dinners, frozen or canned vegetables, or rice and pasta; I buy mostly fresh fruits, vegetables, and meat or meat alternatives.”

More respondents said they tried to stretch out the funds throughout the month rather than stock up on groceries at the beginning of the month, considerably different than the focus group answers. While 42% said that they bought mostly packaged goods, 21% responded that they tried to take advantage of sales and store or freeze food for the future – a common response in the focus groups as well, which likely reflected a desire to have some food available even if SNAP and personal funds ran out. Only 10% said they purchased FFV. Survey respondents were more likely than focus group participants – 84% versus 23% – to say they felt their benefits were adequate to meet their families’ needs. However, 70% of survey respondents said they sometimes or always ran out of SNAP funds before they bought all the food they needed for the month, which suggests one or the other question may not have been clear. Respondents were invited to elaborate on a subsequent question. Responses included: “Because of the epidemic, families have lost income and cannot afford daily expenses” and “because there are so many things to buy, the subsidy is not enough.” Almost three-quarters, or 74% of survey respondents said they would like the flexibility to purchase other items, including non-food items, with SNAP funds.

Focus Groups

When it came to focus group participants' buying behavior around healthier foods and sugary beverages, we found that most people are using SNAP funds for FFV, especially with the boost to benefits in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 4).

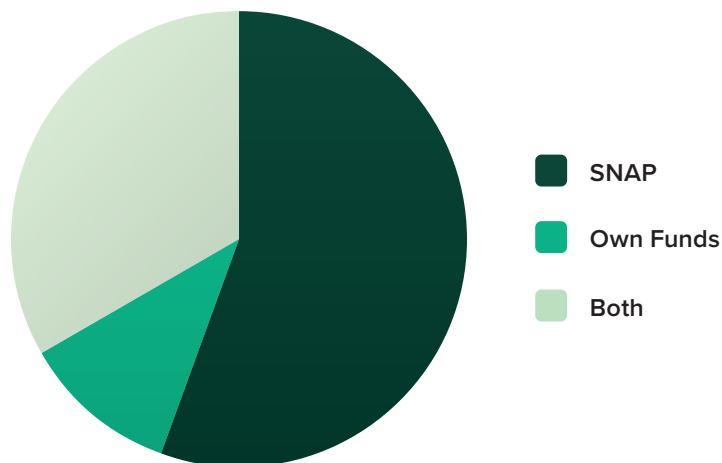


Figure 4: FFV Purchases with SNAP dollars

Of the nine participants who answered the question, five used SNAP funds, three used both and one only used their personal funds. Focus group participants were also asked what kinds of beverages they purchase using SNAP (Figure 5). Most respondents said they did not purchase SSB with SNAP funds, but 20% did mention a specific SSB product in response to the question about how often they bought SSB with SNAP funds. However, answers such as “juice” or “Gatorade” were coded as SSB if the participant did not specify the type they purchased (e.g., 100% juice). Participants may be buying lower-sugar or “diet” versions of these drinks.

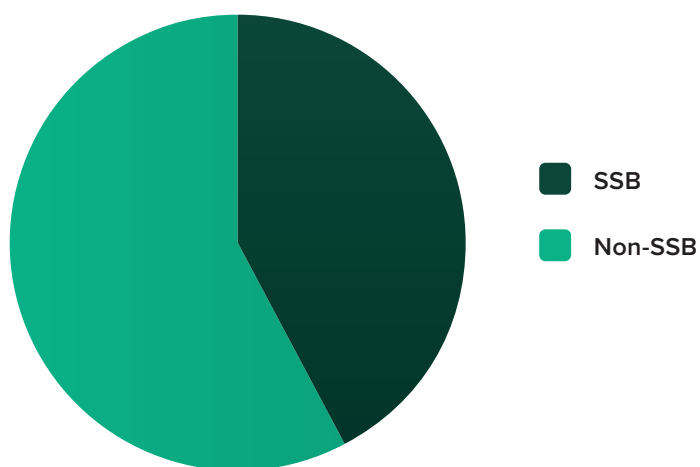


Figure 5: Beverage Purchase with SNAP funds

Survey

The question about using SNAP funds to buy FFV was posed slightly differently in the survey: “How often do you buy FFV with NON-SNAP funds?” This was asked to get an idea of how frequently participants buy FFV with their own resources versus how often they buy them with SNAP. Of those, 47% said they buy FFV with non-SNAP funds a few times a month, 26% said they buy them weekly and 21% responded “once a month.” Conversely, when respondents were asked how often they buy FFV with SNAP funds, 58% said once a week and the rest of the responses were split evenly between “once a month or so” and “every time I shop using SNAP.” Similarly, survey respondents were asked specifically about the types of beverages they bought with SNAP funds. Plain milk and 100% fruit juice were the most popular answers, with 47% and 37% of respondents mentioning them specifically. Flavored milks were the most popular sweetened beverage, with 37% of respondents stating they use SNAP funds to buy them. Juice drinks or “juice cocktails” were the second most popular choice, with 21% of respondents saying they purchase them with SNAP funds.

Produce Purchase Incentive

In both the survey and focus groups, we asked questions about Double Up Food Bucks (DUFB) to gauge participants’ interest in a SNAP incentive aimed at encouraging healthy eating and to see if people would use incentives if available. DUFB was piloted in Michigan by Fair Food Network in 2014 and now operates as a federally funded nutrition incentive program. At farmers’ markets, participants can swipe their SNAP card for a certain amount of money, which will be returned to them as tokens and matched with tokens that can be used on any Michigan-grown fruits or vegetables. In stores, administration of the program varies, but typically matches funds spent on a particular FFV with a coupon that is good for a future purchase of FFV. Half of the focus group participants used the program (Figure 6). Of those who did not, the largest proportion did not use it because they were concerned about the cost of FFV available through the program.

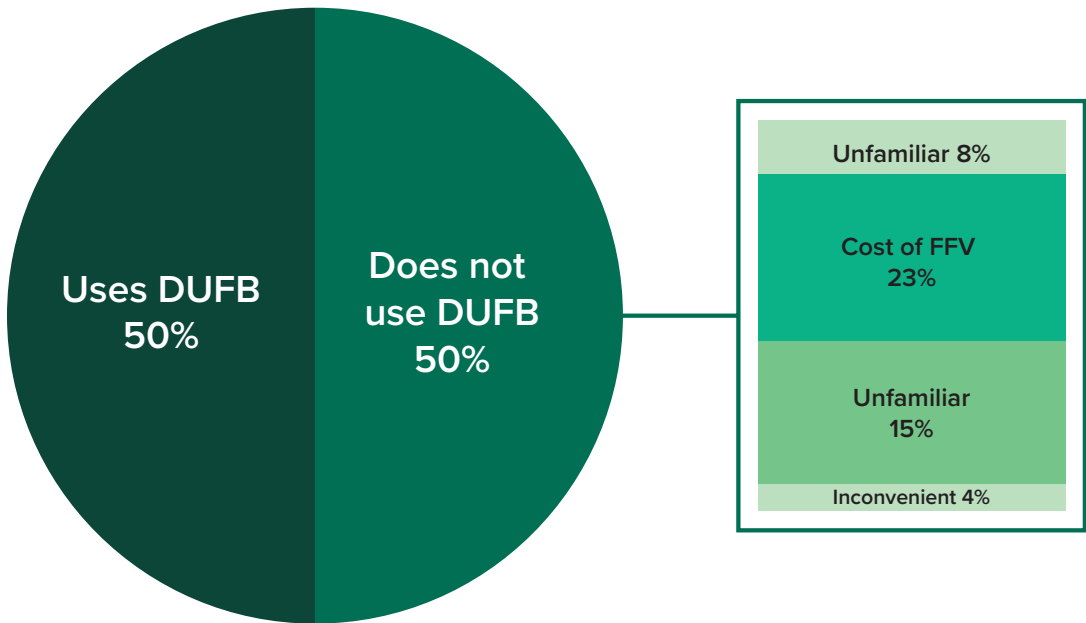


Figure 6: Participant Use of DUFB with reasons for nonuse

We also asked for participants’ feedback on the idea to offer an expanded version of DUFB that would allow incentives on other healthy foods, such as whole grains, lean proteins and canned or frozen fruits and vegetables processed without sugar. The response was generally favorable, with five out of six (86%) of focus group respondents expressing an opinion indicating interest in participating in such a program. Currently, DUFB does not include these types of foods, and the federal program that funds it (GusNIP) is limited to encouraging fruit and vegetable purchases. However, a local pilot program to expand eligible foods could be funded through other methods. A SNAP waiver would be necessary to launch such a program.

Policy Proposals

Focus Groups

The three policy proposals that were tested with the focus groups received mixed reactions, both within the groups and between groups. There was no significant difference between geographical areas in their responses, but there were significant differences between individual groups.

Policy Proposal #1 (P1) asked participants if they would be interested in participating in a version of SNAP that prohibited using SNAP funds to buy SSB, but provided more money to be spent on FFV. This policy idea was mostly unpopular with the focus groups, with only three people reacting favorably to it. The majority expressed concern that it was an attempt of the government to control the choices of SNAP recipients. The few favorable comments said that it would likely curb soda consumption and encourage FFV consumption by making it more difficult for people to purchase sugary beverages and easier for them to buy FFV since the policy would allow extra funds for them. “People are buying those things [SSB] because they’re cheap. If I can buy a gallon of [juice] drink for my family for 99 cents, but the real juice is 4.99, and they only give you 28 oz., what are you going to pick?” said one Detroit participant.

A follow-up question that asked about expanding this proposed SNAP concept to include all healthy foods such as whole grains and low-fat milk was received much more favorably, with 63% saying they would approve of a version of SNAP that excluded soda, but offered more money for this wider variety of foods.

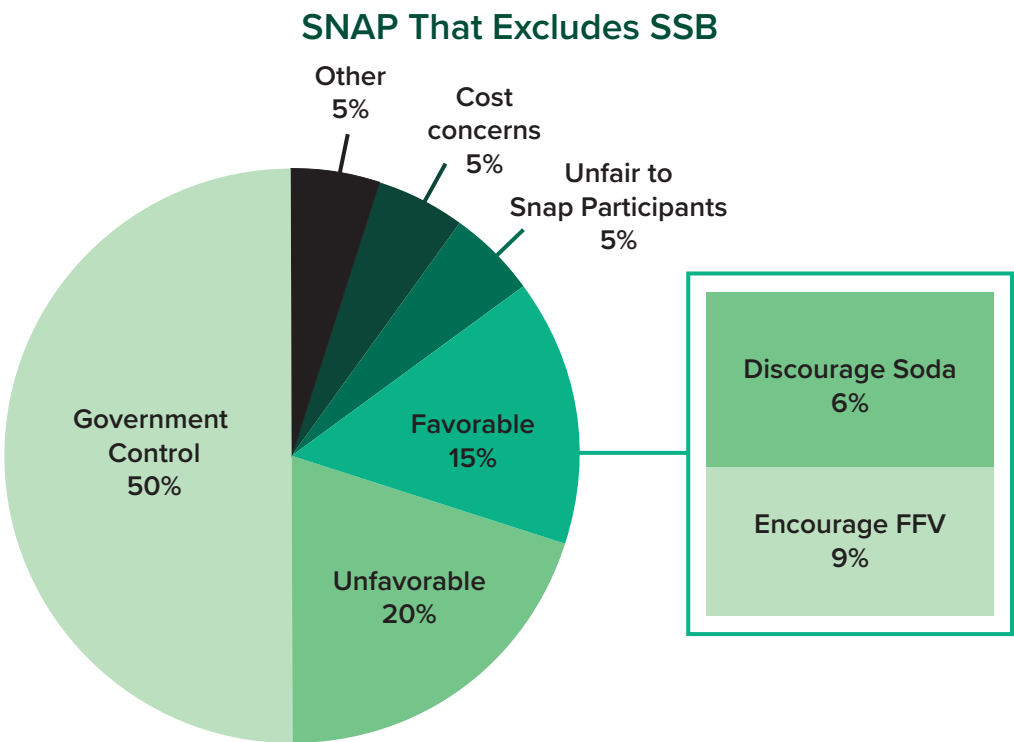


Figure 7: Responses to Policy Proposal #1





Policy Proposal #2 (P2) posited a version of SNAP that would make FFV 30% cheaper and soda and SSB 30% more expensive. This proved fairly popular to focus group participants, with just fewer than half (48%) expressing favorable opinions. The most common favorable reason noted was that it would discourage soda (14%) and encourage FFV (11%). Unfavorable opinions were evenly divided between concerns over raising prices, concerns regarding the government’s “being overly controlling of SNAP recipients, and a general sense of the policy” being unfair to SNAP recipients. Many people also expressed concerns over raising prices on anything when inflation has had such an effect on so many people due to the pandemic. “I don’t think they should raise the price on anything because people are struggling as it is to buy food. So, why would they increase the price of sugary drinks or increase the price on anything, like vegetables or sugary drinks,” said one Detroit participant.

SSB 30% more expensive, FFV 30% cheaper

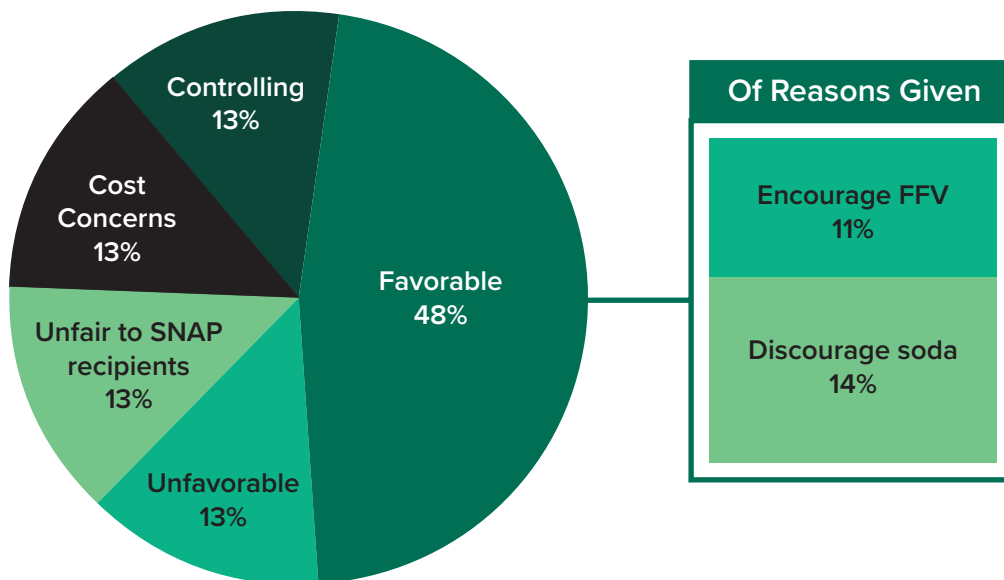


Figure 8: Responses to Policy Proposal #2

Policy Proposal #3 (P3) asked participants to provide feedback on an idea to raise a tax on soda that would be based on container size, with a few cents for small cans or bottles and topping out at 10 cents for the largest containers. That tax would then go into a fund that would provide matching funds to SNAP recipients for FFV purchases, similar to DUFV. Currently, state law prohibits local taxes on SSB, but statewide taxes are not prohibited. Opinion on this plan was more closely divided, with 57% of answers being favorable and 43% unfavorable. The most common favorable answer mentioned by 25% was that it would encourage FFV consumption and discourage soda consumption (21%). Among unfavorable responses, the largest number did not specify a reason (22%) with the second most common reason for disliking the idea being government overreach. A Grand Rapids participant who supported the idea said: “I think that a tax on sugar would make people think twice. It would, in a lot of cases, be an effective deterrent to help people who want to cut sugar out of [their] diet or decrease the amount of sugar that they have for themselves and their family or children.” A participant who disapproved raised concerns about taxing SSB: “[You’re] just finding any which way to make some money out of this situation that is already taking place and it’s not cool.”

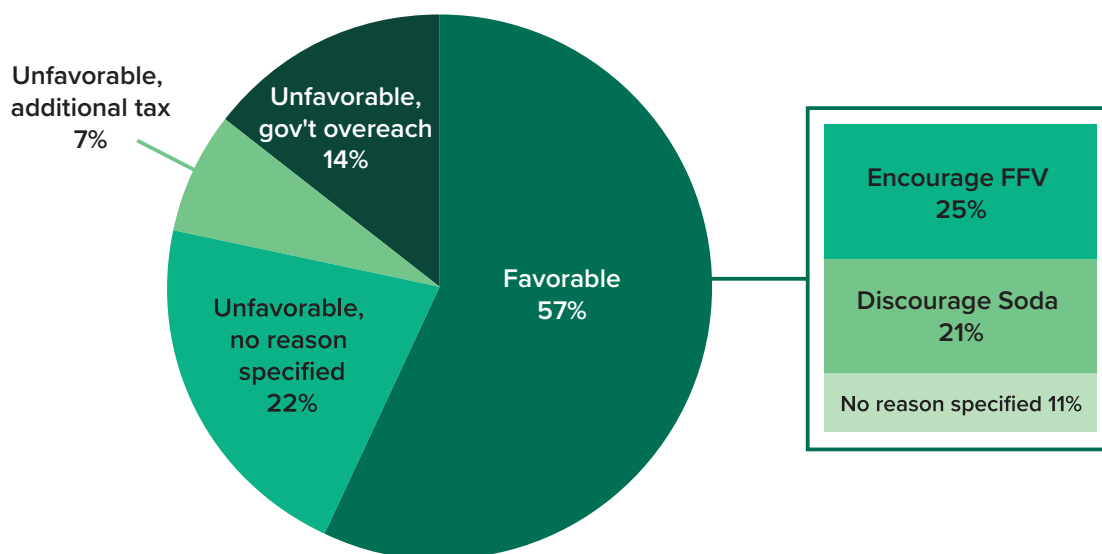


Figure 9: Dedicated Tax on SSB



Survey

In the survey, 100% of respondents reported having used DUFB. We did not ask favorability or unfavorability questions on the survey; however, we did ask how it affected what they bought. 37 percent said they bought more fruits; 26% said they purchased more fruits and vegetables, while 21% said they bought more vegetables. 15% said it did not affect them 100% of survey respondents would be interested in doing so.

Finally, we wanted to ask participants about what they would change about SNAP if they could, and how it could better facilitate healthy eating.

Focus Groups

Among the focus group participants, the two most popular suggestions were for SNAP to offer nutrition education to participants, and for SNAP to allow online ordering and delivery. While the USDA and the state of Michigan are experimenting with allowing some retailers to offer online ordering and delivery for SNAP users, it is not a viable option for many of the participants because they live in a city without access to those retailers. For example, there is no Walmart located near the Detroit city limits, and the program does not include the independently owned grocery stores on which most Detroiters rely. Beyond those two topics, responses varied greatly. Several participants discussed the need for SNAP caseworkers to work more productively with clients. Others brought up the health benefits of the increased food security SNAP provides.

Survey Respondents

We asked the survey respondents the questions in a slightly different way because surveys lack the conversational nature of focus groups. First, respondents were asked for further thoughts on how SNAP could make it easier to purchase fruits and vegetables (including frozen and canned), or ways SNAP could make it easier to purchase other healthy foods, or discourage purchasing sugary drinks. Responses were open-ended. Responses included a suggestion that stores place advertising near the sugary drinks in the store pointing out their effect on weight, and several responses suggested that sugary drinks be more expensive to discourage consumption.

The final question on the survey asked respondents if they had any further thoughts on their experiences eating healthy food on SNAP, with a short open-ended answer. Most people mentioned fruits and vegetables; interestingly, one respondent said they lost a great deal of weight eating healthily on SNAP and no longer have diabetes.





Survey

Support for all three policy proposals was much stronger across the board for survey respondents, with 95% saying Policy Proposal #1 would mean they could buy more FFV. There was also very high support for Policy Proposal #2 with 79% saying they would use this version of SNAP if it were available. Of the multiple choice answers provided, the most popular reasons given were: “I would like to save money on fruits and vegetables” (35%) and “I don’t drink sugary beverages” (28%). Of those who did not like the idea, the most common reasons chosen from the multiple choice portion of the test were: “It wouldn’t make people drink less soda” (50%) and “It’s not fair to make people pay more for sugary beverages if they are on SNAP” (30%).

Surprisingly, there was 100% support for Policy Proposal #3 among survey respondents. Respondents were asked a follow-up short answer question asking why (or why not) they approved of this version of SNAP. The most common open-ended answer was that it would make fruit and/or vegetables cheaper to buy.

Results from Retailer Key Informants

An important stakeholder group in SNAP policy is retailers, especially independent retailers which are much more prevalent in Detroit than chain grocery stores. The retailers we spoke to were fairly skeptical of the impact that SNAP incentives aimed at discouraging SSB would have on their businesses. Both are located in the city of Detroit and rely heavily on customers’ using SNAP at their stores. One retailer saw the percentage of SNAP business increase to 42% in 2021, up from 29% in 2019 (the year before the pandemic spurred increases in the amount of SNAP benefits people were receiving). The other store relies on SNAP for 80% of its business and reported increased sales since the SNAP increases began.

Both stores participated in DUFB, one with a customer card and the other with paper coupons. Both reported the program was very popular with both customers and staff. Customers appreciated the opportunity to get more produce for a lower cost when they shopped at the store. Employees found the program easy to manage because it was programmed directly into the register or linked to a customer’s card.

Retailer #1 explained that his store has a scanning process that checks every item in the store for correct prices and allows them to fix glitches or inaccurate information. Both retailers agreed that reprogramming the scanners to reflect any of the price changes associated with the tested policy interventions would not cause an undue burden. They are able to work with any changes to DUFB without any issues, and find that the increased sales continue to make the program attractive.

Retailer #1 supported the idea behind Policy Proposal #1, which would disallow soda purchases on SNAP, but allow increased money for FFV. Retailer #2 was skeptical that customers would be accepting of anything that restricted their choices. Retailer #1 expressed support of government programs such as SNAP being used as a tool to encourage healthier choices, while stopping short of supporting additional taxes. They said: “The government’s supposed to help people get healthier, and by allowing people to have these sugar drinks, it’s causing way more health issues. So, people who live in the United States should be living a longer life and be happier with their health. We’re allowing poison. I mean, basically, that’s what it comes down to after a while. When a customer walks in and buys three or four or five 3-liter, 2-liter bottles of pop, that’s not good.”

Any SNAP Policy Proposal would carefully need to address the concerns of retailers, especially any sort of voluntary program such as Policy Proposal #1. Grocery retailers in the city of Detroit are extremely important to their neighborhoods and run at a very thin profit margin. They are concerned with the health of their customers as well as their businesses, and could be powerful allies in making change.

Results from Policy Key Informants

We interviewed two key informants, both of whom are well-versed in SNAP policy. Key informant #1 (KI1) works on SNAP policy for a statewide organization and key informant #2 (KI2) works for a national food justice organization. Neither was particularly enthusiastic about the potential for a campaign to raise taxes on SSB. Michigan has a powerful beverage lobby that successfully worked to pass a law that banned local SSB taxes and would assuredly fight a statewide tax. KI2 suggested that making soda, candy and other sugary foods taxable could be an effective way to raise revenue that could then be directed to more food assistance programs.

KI1 suggested that working for more immediate issues would have more of an impact on people who use SNAP. For example, they echoed the concerns of several focus group participants about the need for increased online ordering or grocery delivery. Addressing benefit adequacy – another significant concern for focus group participants and survey respondents – was a more pressing issue. The dignity of SNAP users, and the need to center equity in any discussions of policy change, was a recurring theme with both interviewees. KI1 expressed empathy for the lack of choices many people who use SNAP can face, choices proscribed by insufficient incomes and lack of food access. “Denying people who use SNAP the same choices as anyone else has seemed unfairly punitive,” they said.



Results from Convening

In January 2022, the DFPC and CSPI hosted a convening of stakeholders from across Michigan to present findings from the project and gather feedback on the policy ideas presented. Breakout groups addressed each individual policy idea after they were presented and explained by DFPC staff.

Policy Proposal #1 engendered mixed feelings. A key takeaway from the breakout group was that it may have limited impact because many people who would choose this option may already follow a healthier diet and limit sugary beverages.

Policy Proposal #2 raised some major concerns among the stakeholders. While they acknowledged the importance of encouraging healthier choices and discouraging unhealthier ones, the group was concerned about it feeling too punitive to raise prices on sugar. “We don’t want to ostracize the community we are trying to serve,” said one participant. Even though it might cause people to buy less soda, charging 30% more for it could crowd out other healthier choices on limited SNAP funds.

Policy Proposal #3 drew some interesting insights from focus group participants. For example, one participant pointed to Michigan’s bottle deposit law, which levies a 10-cent surcharge per container of soda, beer and other bottled beverages. It has been in place since the 1970s and has become widely accepted; a SSB surcharge could do so as well. They also cited the need for public health advocates and food security advocates to present a united front on this proposal.

Attendees participated in a ranked-choice poll and voted on these policies as well as other strategies raised by attendees. **Increasing SNAP benefits was the clear preference of respondents (Fig 10), with making it easier to enroll in SNAP and expanding online ordering as the second and third most popular ideas, respectively.**

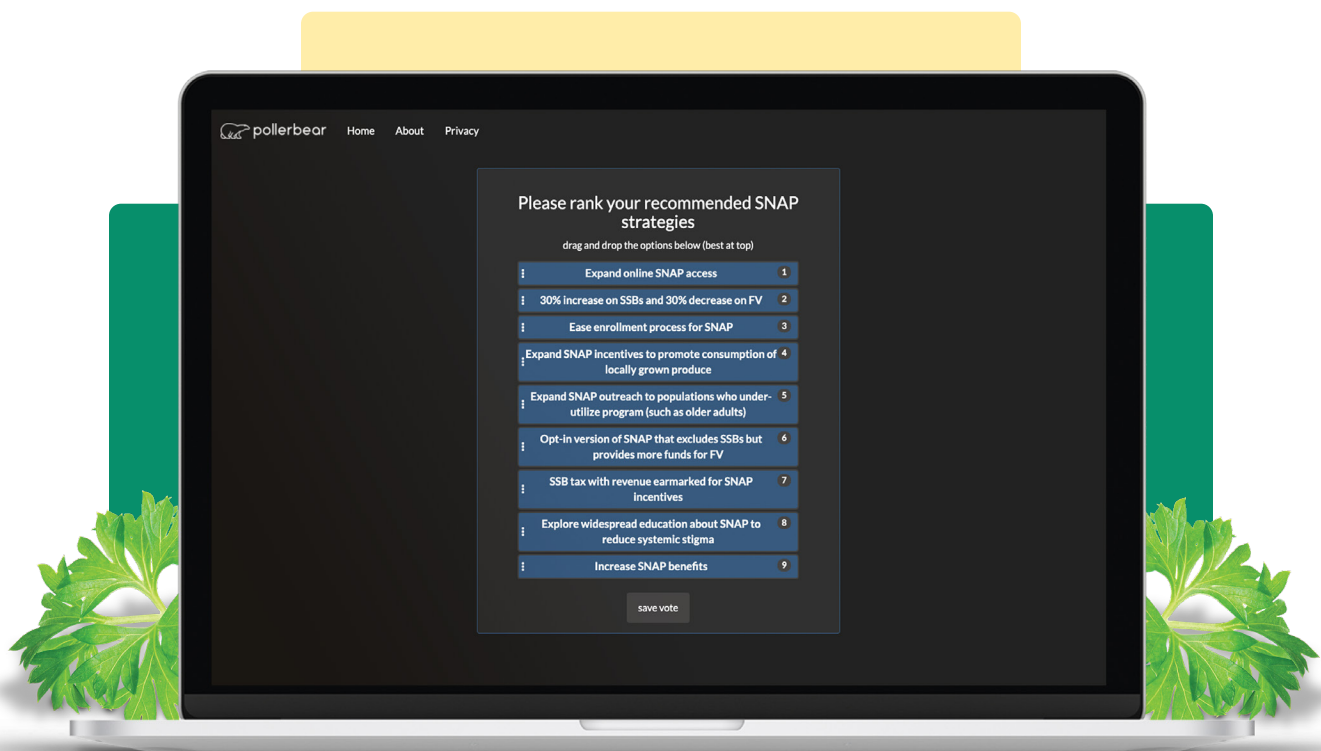


Figure 10: Flash poll of convening attendees

Conclusion

The policy ideas tested through this project need some refining. The information gathered during this project is limited by a small sample size. Recruiting participants to talk to a stranger on Zoom about SNAP, which is often stigmatized, was a challenge faced by the DFPC and our partners. That said, several themes emerged through the various paths of information gathering that the DFPC pursued during this project. The most recurrent are:

- SNAP recipients are extremely resistant to anything that has the earmarks of government control or overreach. People who work with SNAP recipients also want to ensure that they have as much freedom of choice as possible;
- There is broad concern about SNAP benefit adequacy, even though the recalculation of the Thrifty Food Plan will help blunt the effects of pandemic enhancements going away;
- SNAP users would like more flexibility in using their SNAP dollars on non-food necessities such as cleaning supplies, as well as health care items such as vitamins and supplements;
- They have a strong desire to eat a healthy diet and are interested in educating themselves further about how to do so.

While there is broad agreement that SNAP policy needs to encourage healthy eating among people who use it, there is not one universally agreed upon idea of how to accomplish that. All of the policy ideas tested had some significant drawbacks. One of the most commonly agreed upon ideas was to expand GusNIP nutrition incentives to cover healthier foods, such as whole grain bread and low-fat dairy. This would accomplish the goal of encouraging healthy eating by making it more affordable to do so. Focus group participants repeatedly pointed out that unhealthy foods are cheaper and more readily available than healthier choices, so offsetting that added cost would encourage healthier eating. Incentive programs have proven very popular in Michigan. Expanding an already-familiar program might be a more effective way to reach the desired outcome of discouraging SSB consumption and encouraging healthy eating among SNAP recipients.

In order to effect this change, DFPC will continue this work by sharing the findings in this report with lawmakers, stakeholders and the public to gather additional feedback and build support. DFPC plans on eventually partnering with a statewide “backbone” organization that could more easily organize across Michigan in order to build support for a pilot program expanding nutrition incentives. This group would work to refine the details of proposed policy changes and organize support among the legislature and community members, as well as communicate the benefits of any proposed changes. DFPC would also leverage existing relationships with state and local lawmakers to explore the possibility of including a pilot program that would test out expanding nutrition incentives to include a wider variety of foods.

DFPC is founded on principles of food justice, food sovereignty and equity. Because of that, ensuring benefits are adequate and that the dignity and rights of self-determination of SNAP users is centered is the most important guiding principle of any policy change.

Acknowledgments

This project was supported by a grant from Center for Science in the Public Interest. We also want to acknowledge our partners Gleaners Community Food Bank, Marquette Food Co-Op, and Our Kitchen Table for their assistance in recruiting and promoting focus groups, and Bree Bode for her assistance in promoting the survey. Asha McElroy, who holds the youth seat on the Detroit Food Policy Council, was indispensable to the success of this project. And finally, thank you to our focus group participants from Detroit, Grand Rapids and Marquette; we are honored by your sharing your experiences with us.

Appendix

Focus Group Script

Focus Group Script: Name

Intros

Explanation of Project: Good 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 Michigan. My name is Amy Kuras, and assisting me are Kibibi Blount-Dorn and Asha McElroy. We're with the Detroit Food Policy Council. We are working with the Center for Science in the Public Interest to test out some proposed changes to SNAP rules that would make it easier to eat healthy. We're going to ask you some questions about how you decide what to buy with your SNAP dollars, and how it could work better for you. This information will go into a report that will be shared with policymakers and the public and eventually be the basis of a campaign for change. We will be sharing our results during the process and you will have the opportunity to comment.

We are having discussions like this with several groups across Michigan. You were invited because of your participation in SNAP and participation in (program partner).

Please keep in mind that there are no wrong answers but rather differing points of view. 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.

To facilitate our discussion, and to make sure that everyone is comfortable, we have a short list of rules. [Facilitator reads list]. Are all of these clear? Do we need to add any rules?

[on slide]

- Feel free to speak your mind
- Be respectful
- Focus on our discussion (please turn off your cell, go somewhere quiet where you can concentrate)
- One voice at a time
- What is said here stays here

We are going to record this session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. If you would not like to be recorded, please let us know now through a private message, and we will follow up with you separately.

As a reminder, please mute yourself whenever you are not talking using the small microphone icon in the bottom left of your screen. Please also change your name to just include your first name by walking through the process on the screen (slide with photos of how to change name).

If you have any comments you would like to make or questions, you can also include those using the chat option. Well, let's begin. I will start the recording and then we will go around the table and do introductions. (Kibibi starts recording) Tell us your first name, and (how many people live in your household/what brought you here today).

Icebreaker for this week: What is your favorite food for a holiday BBQ?

We want to know about your experience using SNAP and how well these funds cover your family food needs.

When your EBT card reloads, what are some of the first things you buy with that money?

Do you feel your current benefits meet your family's needs?

Follow up: Why or why not?

Are there items you would like to be able to purchase that you currently cannot?

Probe: this could include non-food items or other food items you maybe want to purchase but cannot afford.

Do you stock up on certain things when your EBT reloads, or do you try to stretch it out through the month? Do you run out of money on your EBT card before you buy all the food you need?

Pandemic SNAP has boosted benefit levels for many families. Have you seen an increase in your SNAP benefits? (follow up) Have you been able to purchase more food, or different foods?

Now we want to understand people's buying habits around buying sugar sweetened drinks and fresh fruits and vegetables, whether or not you use SNAP funds to buy them. How often do you buy fresh fruit or vegetables with your SNAP dollars? Or do you use other funds to buy them?

What kinds of beverages (juice, milk, water) do you buy with your SNAP funds? Do you ever buy sugar sweetened drinks with your SNAP funds, specifically? By sugar sweetened drinks we mean pop, sweetened juice, sweet teas, powdered drink mix, etc.

Thank you so much for your feedback so far. We will now discuss SNAP policies that impact costs of various items you may be purchasing. Policymakers are considering different ways to make nutritious food more available and affordable for SNAP users. We are now going to walk through some of their ideas for policies and ask for some of your feedback.

In Michigan the Double Up Food Bucks program offers extra SNAP benefits at stores and farmers markets to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. 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.

- a. Probes:
 - i. Has anyone used this kind of program?
 - ii. What did you like about it?
 - iii. Is there anything that you didn't like about it?
 - iv. How did it affect what you bought?
 - v. For how long? (Just that shopping trip, or subsequent trips as well?)
- b. 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?
- c. 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?

Lawmakers in some states are considering a policy where you would receive extra SNAP benefits—like more money for fruits and vegetables—as an incentive to use a version of SNAP where sugary drinks are no longer SNAP-eligible foods. [Note to moderator: this does not include 100% juice, flavored milk or diet soda]

- a. What are your thoughts on this idea?
- b. How would this affect what you/ your family buys/ drinks?
- c. 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?

Another idea proposed by some lawmakers would be to automatically make all fruit and vegetable purchases 30% cheaper and sugary drinks 30% more expensive when purchased with your SNAP EBT card.

- a. What are your thoughts on this idea?

One last strategy to ask you about: some lawmakers are discussing using a tax on sugary drinks to help make fruits and vegetables cheaper to buy with SNAP benefits. This tax would top out at 10 cents for the biggest beverages and stop at a few cents for the smallest ones. This would affect everyone who purchases sodas, not just people using SNAP. The money generated from the tax would go towards allowing fruits and vegetables to be cheaper for SNAP participants at grocery stores.

- a. What are your thoughts on this idea?

Do you have any other thoughts on how SNAP could...

- a. Probe on any not yet mentioned:
 - i. Make it easier to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables? More fruits and vegetables overall—including frozen and canned?
 - ii. Make it easier to purchase other healthy foods (give examples: whole grain products, low-fat dairy, lean protein, etc.)
 - iii. Discourage people from buying candy, sugary drinks, and other junk food?

If you had the power to make any changes to current SNAP programs in Michigan, what changes would you make?

- a. Probe for one of the above policies

Is there anything that we missed, or didn't discuss, that you would like to tell us about?

Appendix 2

Thank you for agreeing to answer this survey about your experiences with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, while living in Michigan. We will be asking about your experiences using SNAP; how you choose what to buy with your SNAP dollars, and your opinions of some potential policies that would encourage healthy eating among SNAP participants. Your opinions and observations will help ensure that any changes to SNAP policy reflect the needs of participants.

This survey is being conducted by the Detroit Food Policy Council as part of a grant from the Center for Science in the Public Interest to study potential SNAP policy changes. We will be using the information you share with us to create a report that will be shared with policymakers and advocates. We will share initial findings from the focus groups we conduct, as well as the draft report, with participants and you will have an opportunity to comment if you choose to share your name and contact information. No identifiable information about you will be used in this report. Anything you share about your identity will remain confidential and never be shared outside the research team.

Detroit Food Policy Council is not affiliated with any organization that determines eligibility for SNAP benefits or the amount of benefits you receive. Your SNAP benefits will not be affected in any way by participating in this survey.

If you complete this survey, you will be eligible for a drawing for a \$50 gift card. We will need your name and address in order to send you the gift card, if your name is drawn. This information will be stored separately from survey information and destroyed at the completion of the project. We ask that you complete the entire survey to receive the card; however, you are not obligated to provide feedback or any other information once you have submitted the survey.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Amy Kuras, Detroit Food Policy Council, at amy@detroitfoodpc.org or recruitmentsnapfocusgroup@gmail.com.

First, we need to ask a few questions for our

What is your age group?

- 18 to 29
- 30 to 60
- 60 or older

Are you a resident of Michigan?

- Yes
- No

How many people currently live in your household?

Adults

Children 0-5

Children 6-18

Have you used SNAP benefits while living in Michigan? For how long?

Yes, in the last two years

Yes, more than two years ago

No

Now we want to know about your experience using SNAP and how well these funds cover your family food needs.

When your EBT card reloads, what are some of the first things you buy with that money?

Do you feel your current benefits meet your family's needs?

Why or why not?

Are there items you would like to be able to purchase that you currently cannot, either food or non-food (such as diapers or cleaning supplies)?

Yes

No

What kind of items?

When your EBT reloads:

I stock up on certain things right away

I try to stretch it out through the month

I use the money to take advantage of sales and store or freeze food for the future

I buy mostly packaged foods such as frozen dinners, frozen or canned vegetables, or rice and pasta

I buy mostly fresh fruits, vegetables, and meat or meat alternatives

Do you run out of money on your EBT card before you buy all the food you need?

Yes, always

Yes, sometimes

No

How often do you buy fruits and vegetables with NON-SNAP funds?

Weekly

A few times a month

Once a month

Rarely

Now we want to understand people's buying habits around buying sugar sweetened drinks and fresh fruits and vegetables, whether or not you use SNAP funds to buy them.

How often do you buy fresh fruit or vegetables with your SNAP dollars?

Every time I shop using SNAP

Once a week or so

Once a month or so

Rarely

What kinds of beverages (juice, milk, water) do you buy with your SNAP funds?

- 100 percent fruit juice
- Plain milk
- Flavored milk (like chocolate or strawberry)
- Bottled water
- Flavored water drinks
- Sugar sweetened soda or pop
- Diet soda or pop
- Juice drinks or juice cocktails made with less than 100 percent juice
- Sweet tea or coffee drinks
- Unsweetened tea or coffee drinks
- Powdered drink mixes

We will now ask about SNAP policies that impact costs of various items you may be purchasing. Policymakers are considering different ways to make nutritious food more available and affordable for SNAP users. We are now going to walk through some of their ideas for policies and ask for some of your feedback.

In Michigan the Double Up Food Bucks program offers extra SNAP benefits at stores and farmers markets to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. For every dollar you spend on fresh fruit or vegetables you may get tokens worth an extra dollar to spend at a farmers' market, or you may get coupons to buy more fresh fruit or vegetables.

Have you used this kind of program?

- Yes
- No

How did it affect what you bought?

- I bought more vegetables
- I bought more fruit
- It didn't affect my choices

Would you like to get extra SNAP benefits to use specifically for other healthy items besides fresh fruits and vegetables—like whole wheat bread and other whole grains, or for low-fat milk?

(short answer)

Lawmakers in some states are considering a policy where you would receive extra SNAP benefits—like more money for fruits and vegetables—as an incentive to use a version of SNAP where sugary drinks are no longer SNAP-eligible foods. This does not include 100% fruit juice, flavored milk or diet soda.

Would this affect what you/ your family buys/ drinks (with any funds, not just SNAP)?

- Yes, we would buy more fruits and vegetables
- Yes, we would by more of other foods
- No (Why?)

Another idea proposed by some lawmakers would be to automatically make all fruit and vegetable purchases 30% cheaper and sugary drinks 30% more expensive when purchased with your SNAP EBT card.

- Would you use this alternative version of SNAP?
- Yes Go to why
- No Go to why not

Why?

- People should drink less soda
- It rewards healthy choices
- I would like to save money on fruits and vegetables
- I don't drink sugary beverages
- I could buy more fruits and vegetables
- Something else

Why not?

- It's not fair to make people pay more for sugary drinks if they use SNAP
- It wouldn't make people drink less soda
- It would hurt people financially
- Prices are already too high
- Something else (blank)

One last strategy to ask you about: some lawmakers are discussing using a tax on sugary drinks to help make fruits and vegetables cheaper to buy with SNAP benefits. This tax would top out at 10 cents for the biggest beverages and stop at a few cents for the smallest ones. This would affect everyone who purchases sodas, not just people using SNAP. The money generated from the tax would go towards allowing fruits and vegetables to be cheaper for SNAP participants at grocery stores.

Do you like this idea?

- Yes (go to Why)
- No (got to why Not)
- Why?
- Why not?

Do you have any other thoughts on how SNAP could make it easier to purchase fruits and vegetables, including frozen and canned?

How about ways SNAP could make it easier to purchase other healthy foods (whole grain products, low-fat dairy, lean protein, etc.)? Discourage people from buying candy, sugary drinks, and other junk food?

If you had the power to make any changes to current SNAP programs in Michigan, what changes would you make?

Thank you for completing our survey. If you would like to be entered into the drawing for a \$50 gift card, please fill out your name and address on the next page. If you would like to see the findings from this research project, please check the box. As a reminder, this information will be stored separately from your answers and not associated with them in any way. records.

