

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 23, 2020

Human Services Shares Latest Public-Assistance Enrollment Data, Reminds Pennsylvanians that Safety Net Programs are Available

Harrisburg, PA – Today, Department of Human Services (DHS) Secretary Teresa Miller reminded Pennsylvanians that safety-net programs are available to individuals and families who are struggling to afford food or access health care. While program enrollments have steadily climbed since the pandemic first affected Pennsylvania in March, there has not been an overwhelming surge of applications to date. However, in a briefing with Pennsylvania reporters, Sec. Miller said there is reason to believe that this slow, steady climb in SNAP enrollment could soon see a much steeper incline.

“Millions of people across this country have lost their jobs, or experienced a cutback in their hours, as a direct result of COVID-19’s unprecedented assault on our way of life. While we are all in this together, and we will beat this thing together, we are also all struggling under our own individual circumstances that none of us predicted six months ago,” Secretary Miller said. “SNAP and Medicaid are here for anyone who’s struggling to afford food or access health care. These are basic needs that we all have, and any one of us could find ourselves in need of some help one day.”

Applications for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid can be submitted online at www.compass.state.pa.us. Applications are processed within six days on average for SNAP and 11 days on average for Medicaid. Once a benefit is approved, it can be immediately accessed.

Enrollment statewide for Medicaid has increased by about 145,000 people since February, for a total enrollment of about 2.98 million in June -- a 5.1 percent increase.

Enrollment for SNAP statewide has increased by about 166,000 people since February, for a total enrollment of about 1.9 million in June -- a 9.6 percent increase.

[According to a New York Times article that published this past Sunday](#), between February and May, SNAP enrollment grew by 17 percent nationwide. One out of every eight Americans uses SNAP to purchase food, according to the Times. That’s still fewer people than during the height of the Great Recession.

But, as the Times pointed out: “Unless Congress acts this month, about 20 million Americans will lose a \$600 weekly bonus to unemployment checks. Since that bonus disqualifies most people from SNAP, its elimination could add millions to the rolls.”

SNAP currently helps more than 1.9 million Pennsylvanians, including about 700,000 children, about 690,000 people with disabilities, and about 300,000 older adults, expand purchasing power to ensure their household has enough food to avoid going hungry. Inadequate food and chronic nutrient deficiencies have profound effects on a person’s life and health, including increased risks for chronic diseases, higher chances of hospitalization, poorer overall health, and increased health care costs.

Children who have enough to eat go on to have higher graduation rates, increased adult earnings, and improved health outcomes in their adult life. Older adults who are enrolled in SNAP are healthier, hospitalized less and are less likely to go to a nursing home. As the nation faces the COVID-19 pandemic, access to essential needs like food is more important than ever to help keep people healthy and mitigate co-occurring health risks.

In late April, the U.S. Census Bureau launched a weekly household pulse survey to collect data on Americans' experience with employment status, spending patterns, food security, housing, physical and mental health, access to health care, and educational disruption during the COVID-19 crisis. [According to the most recent survey](#), 10.8 percent of Americans and 8.9 percent of Pennsylvanians are experiencing food scarcity at this time. In Pennsylvania, that represents more than 850,000 people.

“With record levels of unemployment and widespread economic uncertainty, the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank has seen a drastic increase in demand for assistance,” said Joe Arthur, Executive Director of the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank. “Programs like SNAP are critical for helping people get access to food when their cupboards are bare. Food banks cannot handle this hunger crisis alone.”

SNAP also supports the Pennsylvania economy, with more than 10,000 authorized retailers participating in SNAP across Pennsylvania. These retailers processed approximately \$2.6 billion in SNAP benefits in 2018 according to the United States Department of Agriculture. These funds directly support Pennsylvania's food retailers and farmers growing and producing agricultural products. Pennsylvania also recently joined a federal pilot program that allows SNAP recipients to use their benefits to order food online. Four retailers are currently participating in the program, and those retailers saw about \$6.5 million in online purchases by Pennsylvanians in the first month.

In May 2019, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) published [a study](#) on the influence of SNAP redemptions on the economy and county-level employment in the time leading up to, during, and after the Great Recession. This study found that SNAP redemptions could have a greater economic stimulus impact than other forms of government spending per dollar spent, especially during a recession, because they are paid directly to low-income individuals. For instance, the grocery subsidies deliver food directly to tables along with a financial return into rural supermarkets and small businesses in those communities.

“The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is a lifesaving, effective anti-hunger program which helps one in eight Americans afford a basic diet. In addition, the vital program benefits food retailers, their employees and families, and the economy as a whole,” said Matthew Kemeny, Director of Communications and Media Relations for the Pennsylvania Food Merchants Association, which represents thousands of grocery store and convenience store locations as well as distributors, consumer packaged goods companies, wholesaler member companies and more. “A recent change which now allows SNAP recipients to order groceries online will go a long way toward helping provide families with quality food while helping keep shoppers and employees more protected from COVID-19.”

For more information on public assistance programs available in Pennsylvania, visit www.dhs.pa.gov.