What could make it easier to sign up for SNAP?

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SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps), provides funds for grocery purchases to around 40 million people across the United States each year. As a nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming access to social services, mRelief leverages technology to streamline access to SNAP.

So far this year, 284,416 unique individuals across the United States have completed mRelief's simplified SNAP eligibility screener. Most of these people found mRelief through a Facebook advertisement or one of our SNAP outreach partners. After completing the screener, if their household was likely eligible for SNAP, we connected them to the best way to apply.

Many of these individuals will receive a text message survey from us. These surveys help us better understand their experience after completing the screener. For this study, we analyzed 1,804 survey responses submitted between January 1, 2022 and September 6, 2022. Our analysis focused on a single question within a larger survey sent to ten percent of individuals who screened likely eligible. The question of interest is open-ended and asks, **"How could we make it easier to sign up for SNAP?"**

Results

Using an **inductive approach to data analysis**, we tagged each survey response with a series of qualitative codes. This qualitative analysis allowed us to translate these responses into actionable insights. Below, we discuss the primary insights (e.g. themes) that we identified from these responses.

INFORMATION GAPS

Client responses suggest that it is a struggle to understand the enrollment process and to find information. Many responses indicated confusion about the process from start to finish. Applicants also shared a clear desire for more frequent application status updates after submission. At the decision stage, there was a request for more transparency about how their benefit determination is made (i.e., the benefit amount for approved applicants; and a denial reason for unapproved applicants).

> "**I think I missed the window** that I had to do it in that they only gave me like a week. **I need to know where to send my ID and pay stub information** because I no longer have that paperwork." —*Client In Colorado*

Several applicants also indicated that they wished they had more support in the enrollment process. This may suggest that there are information gaps about support services available to applicants. For example, in many areas, states offer application assistance over the phone, or assistance is available through community-based organizations like mRelief and our enrollment partners. The SNAP enrollment process could be made easier by increasing awareness of the options available to complete and submit an application both with and without assistance.

> "**Have someone to talk to instead of doing it all online.** I applied last year and had the paperwork relaxed [sic] in February, so I am waiting for the paperwork in the mail to fill out again and send back, plus I also applied for Medicaid and have not heard back on it." —*Client In Texas*

SNAP AGENCY STAFF SUPPORT

Many of the themes we identified are intersecting. This is the case for many clients who shared that they found it difficult to contact their local SNAP agency when searching for information. Clients' reasons for contacting their agency included getting updates on their application, scheduling an interview, and following up on their case determination. Navigating the process for contacting the agency was especially difficult for applicants who expressed low levels of digital literacy or

unreliable access to phone or internet service. These clients often rely on updates through the mail but can also often benefit from text message or email updates that can be read when they have phone or internet access.

> "**Is there a number to call.** I'm not computer savvy. Thank you." —*Client In Pennsylvania*

The low capacity of support from state agency staff is likely compounded by factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Agencies, like the **Department of Children and Families in Florida**, have widely reported dealing with staff shortages while servicing increased caseloads. Having reliable access to information about the enrollment process and the status of a SNAP application could help lighten the load for staff at local agencies. Clients would like to proactively hear from the agency about next steps in the enrollment process following application submission.

> "Nobody ever calls me back or sends a letter. This is at the least the third time I've applied online. I've tried for over a year. I have a case and worker because I have Medicaid. **I just never ever hear anything back about SNAP.**" —*Client In Virginia*

COMPLEX PROGRAM RULES

Many clients shared that the enrollment process would have been made easier through more lenient and straightforward SNAP eligibility criteria. Clients expressed that the income limit is too low and the asset limits too restrictive.

Further, they shared that basing eligibility on gross income, instead of net income only, does not paint the full picture of their need. Intersecting with the prior themes, the enrollment process could be made easier by helping clients better understand program rules, and at a policy level, by streamlining rules through **categorical eligibility** (where being eligible for or enrolled in one program means you are eligible for another) and other policy vehicles.

> "Increase the monthly amount that I make to be eligible. I can't pay my bills and can't afford groceries. We are eating rice some nights or fries **but they still say I make too much.**" —*Client In Georgia*

Clients also expressed interest in quickly determining their eligibility for SNAP benefits. This both affirms the demand for quick eligibility screening, and suggests that there is room for improvement to mRelief's digital screening tool.

STRESSFUL AND UNDIGNIFIED PROCESS

The length and complexity of the SNAP enrollment process can add undue burden to clients. Clients recounted how the time-intensive application process and long waiting periods to receive updates caused frustration. Clients also shared document retrieval and submission is a pain point. Clients described how they must overcome several barriers to receive SNAP benefits and weigh the costs and benefits of undergoing the enrollment process of applying and continually recertifying.

> "**I am going to put stamps on hold for right now.** I have to be trying to look for a place to live, I'm fixing to be homeless." —*Client In Kentucky*

Opportunities exist to streamline the process of SNAP enrollment. For example, by increasing transparency throughout the process, clients can better prepare for each step and decide what they currently have the time and energy to complete.

Similarly, by providing multiple avenues for accessing support to apply, individuals with a lack of internet, phone, or transportation access, or who have low digital literacy can choose the best way to apply based on their circumstances.

"IT WAS EASY" OR "I DON'T KNOW"

Many clients responded to the question with no suggestions or with a testimonial praising the process. These findings suggest that the process of accessing SNAP benefits works for many clients. Clients described how they found the process easy to understand and straightforward. This suggests that for some, the existing process works well.

> "**It's easy to apply but hard to get approved.**"
> —*Client In Texas*

Another common response from clients was that they did not know how the enrollment process could be improved. This could suggest that the question asked is unclear. It could also relate to the theme of information gaps, meaning that clients may need more instruction or clarity on the process in order to articulate an answer.

Recommendations

PROVIDE CLEAR INFORMATION ABOUT EACH STAGE OF ENROLLMENT

SNAP applicants struggle to understand the enrollment process and the status of their application after submission. Outreach workers and organizations like mRelief can fill in the information gaps by providing clear guidance at each step of the process. State and local SNAP agencies can help clients better understand where they are in the process through proactive messaging about what, if any, actions are still needed from the client and at what point they might expect to hear the outcome of their application.

INCREASE FUNDING TO IMPROVE CUSTOMER SERVICE

In some states, applicants are asked to call their local agency to complete an interview and to call a hotline with any questions. However, many SNAP offices are currently understaffed and unable to keep up with the demand. This leads to long wait times and poor customer service. Agencies need more funding to properly staff support centers. Providing more transparency on current wait times and active waivers (e.g., when interviews are not required) would also help minimize the impact of low staff support.

As a safety net program, many individuals apply for SNAP during the most stressful periods of their lives. The difficulty in accessing information, obtaining support, and completing the enrollment process adds stress to an already stressful circumstance. By funding local SNAP outreach organizations, states can help to bridge the gaps and ensure that everyone who is eligible and in need can access benefits.

PROVIDE DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT CASE DECISIONS

Many clients indicated that they felt the SNAP program is unfair or that their circumstances were not properly reflected in their benefit determination. Compounding the issue of complexity in benefit determinations is the reality that many decision letters provide little information about how a decision was made. Providing a more transparent, itemized account of what data and policies (in plain language) were used to determine eligibility would help applicants better understand the program rules.

Conclusion

mRelief clients shared clear feedback on how to make enrollment easier. However, many clients also noted that they have no trouble accessing benefits or are unsure how these processes can be improved. Future research is needed to better understand what is working well for these clients and use those insights in order to better meet the needs of all.

We have already identified several next steps internally to improve our technology solutions to address some of these themes. For example, we are building out a client dashboard to better illustrate the entire enrollment process and share information about where the client is in that process. We are also building out new resources for our clients around navigating document submission and other elements of the application process to address barriers related to digital literacy. Finally, we continue to prioritize identifying and partnering with local community-based organizations that can provide personalized SNAP application assistance in their communities.

Technology has the power to transform social services for the inherent dignity of all. The results of this study present several opportunities for mRelief to increase access to SNAP benefits and develop features that may better serve SNAP recipients. Through developing tools that can improve the enrollment process for SNAP, centering client support, and advocating for policy and infrastructure change, we are ensuring that anyone can access food without it contributing to the already stressful circumstance of poverty.

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ABOUT mRELIEF

mRelief is a nonprofit technology organization working nationwide to help people gain access to social services and eat with dignity. Our services have connected more than 1,3000,000 families to social services and unlocked over $1 billion in food benefits.