

# Eldercare Q&A

January, 2018

## Closing the Food Stamp “SNAP Gap”

### Q: Are a lot of eligible elders not getting food stamps?

**A.** Yes. More than 40% of low-income elders eligible for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known as “food stamps,” are not on the program.

SNAP provides food and nutritional benefits to one out of every nine people in Massachusetts, including elders and people with disabilities. A recent study by Mass General Hospital found that participation in SNAP reduced annual health care costs by \$1,400 per person per year. Seniors with poor nutrition are at greater risk for health conditions like chronic heart disease, depression, diabetes, and asthma. Another study showed that access to SNAP benefits reduces the likelihood of admission to a nursing home by 23%.

The SNAP program is also good for our Massachusetts economy. The \$1.2 billion in SNAP benefits spent annually at grocery stores, supermarkets, and farmers markets throughout the Commonwealth creates an economic stimulus of around \$2 billion into the local economy. An additional \$1 billion in SNAP spending would generate 8,900 full-time jobs.

Each October, the federal government makes adjustments to SNAP benefits. This year SNAP benefit levels were slightly reduced due to the drop in the consumer price index for food costs. The minimum benefit for one person decreased from \$16 to \$15, and the maximum benefit for one person fell from \$194 to \$192.

SNAP advocates in Massachusetts have been working hard to close the “SNAP Gap,” which is the number of people who

are eligible for SNAP—but are not on the program. Over 150,000 adults in Massachusetts age 60+ receives SNAP, which is roughly 10% of the elderly population. Nearly half (48%) of Massachusetts SNAP households include members who are elderly, or have severe disabilities.

But according to the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute and confirmed by a data match conducted by the Baker Administration, in 2016 there was a “SNAP Gap” of over 600,000 people who were on Medicaid, but not on SNAP—including 106,000 elders--most with incomes below 100% of the federal poverty level.

Under federal rules, elderly or disabled people can claim out-of-pocket medical expenses as a deduction to raise their SNAP benefit—but the majority of elder and disabled SNAP recipients in the Commonwealth who qualify for this medical deduction don’t use it. In addition to insurance and any hospital or doctor costs, they can claim out-of-pocket costs like vitamins, eye glasses, hearing aids, over the counter” medicine chest items, and mileage from driving to doctors and pharmacies. Elders can also use private or public housing costs, utility costs, and dependent care costs to raise their SNAP benefits.

To find out how to apply for SNAP benefits, call the state Department of Transitional Assistance at 1-877-382-2363. If you want to appeal a SNAP decision, local Legal Services offices may be able to provide advice or representation. Go to <http://www.masslegalhelp.org/>