

How can we decrease food insecurity among DC seniors?

Findings and Recommendations

November 2023



Contents

- ✂ Executive summary
- ✂ Background
- ✂ Finding one
 - ✂ Evidence: no single program is designed to meet seniors' full dietary needs.
 - ✂ Evidence: many seniors are not aware of the programs they are eligible for.
 - ✂ Evidence: community providers are wary of duplicative data systems.
 - ✂ Recommendation and next steps
- ✂ Finding two
 - ✂ Evidence: existing programs do not fully meet seniors' dietary, cultural, and mobility needs.
 - ✂ Evidence: strict eligibility criteria leave some seniors out.
 - ✂ Evidence: applying for and maintaining benefits can be challenging.
 - ✂ Evidence: lack of awareness, stigma, and fear keep eligible seniors from accessing benefits.
 - ✂ Recommendation and next steps

Executive summary

The DC Department of Aging and Community Living (DAACL) and The Lab @ DC set out to answer two questions:



1. Would a coordinated entry system to connect seniors to food assistance programs reduce food insecurity?
2. What barriers prevent seniors from accessing food assistance programs and what strategies beyond a coordinated entry system can we use to address them?

To answer these questions, The Lab worked to understand the food assistance landscape in DC. We met with over 50 people, including representatives from community organizations and DC government agencies and seniors. We also observed food assistance programs in action. To organize what we heard and prioritize findings, we brought together DC government staff who work on food access or with seniors. This report details our findings, recommendations, and next steps.

Executive summary

Guided by these two questions, we developed the following findings and recommendations.



Question: Would a coordinated entry system to connect seniors to food assistance programs reduce food insecurity?



Finding: A coordinated entry system would be valuable to help seniors navigate a complex food access landscape.



Recommendation: To better connect seniors to food assistance programs, DC should use and strengthen existing reference and referral tools.



Question: What barriers prevent seniors from accessing food assistance programs and what strategies beyond a coordinated entry system can we use to address them?



Finding: Limitations in current program design and outreach prevent seniors from accessing food assistance programs.



Recommendation: Existing food assistance programs and outreach should be strengthened to better meet seniors' diverse needs.

Background

The state of food security among DC seniors

11.2% of DC seniors are food insecure*

DC seniors are more likely than their younger neighbors to:

- Be disabled
- Be widowed or live alone
- Suffer from diabetes, congestive heart failure, or depression
- Live on a fixed income

These factors may make it harder for some to travel to the grocery store and prepare a meal, may place restrictions on a senior's diet, or may force tough purchasing decisions.**

There are more than a dozen food assistance programs that serve seniors in DC. These range from daily home-delivered meals to monthly boxes of pantry items to funds for seniors to use at grocery stores and farmers' markets.

- Some of these programs have waitlists.
- Others are significantly underutilized. For example, less than half of eligible seniors (48%) are enrolled in SNAP.

*Feeding America

**The State of Older Adults in the District of Columbia

Background

How this work began

In September 2022, DACL approached The Lab @ DC to help them address drivers of food insecurity among DC seniors.

Specifically, DACL asked The Lab:



1. Would a coordinated entry system to connect seniors to food assistance programs reduce senior food insecurity?
2. What barriers prevent seniors from accessing food assistance programs and what strategies beyond a coordinated entry system can we use to address them?

The vision was that a coordinated entry system might assess seniors' food needs in a standardized way and then refer them to the program(s) of best fit. As a secondary benefit, a coordinated system might help seniors enrolled in multiple programs find ones that better fit their needs, allowing them to get the same amount of food or more from fewer sources.

To understand the landscape of food access in DC, The Lab held conversations with seniors, community organizations, and government agencies, observed food assistance programs in action, and led sessions to brainstorm solutions to food insecurity. These activities provided us with a nuanced understanding of the food access landscape broadly, and the potential impact of a coordinated entry system specifically.

Background

What this work entailed

From September 2022 through February 2023, we did the following:

Conversations

- 30 staff from 12 organizations to learn about the food assistance services they provide to DC seniors and to get their thoughts on a coordinated entry system
- 13 staff from 5 DC Government agencies to learn more about how they support various food access programs
- 8 seniors in 2 group conversations to validate and add nuance to what we heard from providers

Site observations

- 6 visits to food assistance programs like community dining sites and grocery home delivery programs

Synthesis and solution generation

- 2 design sessions with staff from 4 government agencies to map the systematic forces responsible for senior food insecurity in DC and collaboratively generate solutions to address it
- 1 session with 11 seniors to discuss barriers to food access for DC seniors and generate possible solutions to address it

Finding one



A coordinated entry system would be valuable to help seniors navigate a complex food access landscape.

Supporting evidence:

- ✘ No single program is designed to meet seniors' full dietary needs.
- ✘ Many seniors are not aware of the programs they are eligible for.
- ✘ Community providers are wary of duplicative data systems.

Supporting evidence



A coordinated entry system would be valuable to help seniors navigate a complex food access landscape.

No single program is designed to meet seniors' full dietary needs.

Many food assistance programs in the District were created to be supplements, not to provide all the food a senior needs to subsist on. Some come closer to supplying enough food for a week – for example, DACL’s home delivered meals provides 14 meals per week -- while others are intended only to add to food that seniors get elsewhere -- for example, a free "farmers market" for seniors offers approximately \$10 worth of fresh produce twice a month. As a result, many seniors with limited resources are pulling together support from multiple programs.

A few food access providers noted that there may be benefits to seniors pulling together support from multiple programs. They told us that traveling to multiple food distribution points gets seniors out of the house and provides opportunities to socialize. It may also be a benefit for some seniors to pick up food multiple times per week because carrying a week’s worth of food in a single load may not be feasible.

Supporting evidence



A coordinated entry system would be valuable to help seniors navigate a complex food access landscape.

Many seniors are not aware of the programs they are eligible for.

Even though there are many lists of food access programs in print and online, some seniors remain unaware of the food supports available to them. This was evident through our conversations with seniors who had not heard of many of DC's food assistance programs. This is partly because of the sheer volume of programs. It is also because programs are run by over ten different entities, each with their own eligibility criteria, processes for enrollment, and locations for accessing the program.

Some seniors also feel embarrassment or shame participating in programs that offer food for free. Others worry they are taking food away from those who need it more. Because of historical trauma and discrimination, some seniors also distrust the government and are fearful of participating in government programs.

Supporting evidence



A coordinated entry system would be valuable to help seniors navigate a complex food access landscape.

Community providers are wary of duplicative data systems.

Community providers cautioned us against creating an entry system that simply lists available food resources. They pointed us to numerous lists, both printed and online that already exist.

Additionally, providers already use multiple databases for case management, referrals, and reporting to funders. We heard of widespread database fatigue. Providers want to see a coordinated entry system that helps them better connect their clients to resources—not another system that adds to their data entry tasks. They encouraged us to enhance an existing tool.

In touring multiple existing tools, we found one within DC Government that brings to life most of providers' and DACL's vision of a coordinated entry system. LinkU (linkudmv.org), run by DC Health, is a searchable, online tool that allows the public to find local support with housing, transit, health, employment, legal aid, and food assistance. Thanks to recent investments in the tool, LinkU now offers a comprehensive needs assessment to guide residents to programs of best fit and it allows providers to make, receive, and track direct referrals. Data on program hours and location is updated twice a year by an external contractor and providers can update information for their own sites in real-time.

Recommendation one



To better connect seniors to food assistance programs, DC should use and strengthen existing reference and referral tools.

A coordinated entry system would help seniors connect to the food assistance programs best suited for their needs and reduce potential misinformation. To avoid recreating the wheel and increasing burden on providers, DC should promote the use of LinkU—an online tool that allows seniors to search for assistance programs and for providers to make and receive referrals.



Next step:

Explore more widespread usage of LinkU

DACL is exploring ways to strengthen and promote use of LinkU. For example, DACL staff or grantees may use LinkU to help connect seniors with food resources and DACL may promote greater usage of LinkU by community providers. The more providers who can accept referrals and keep their organization's information on LinkU up-to-date, the more effective the tool will be.

Finding two



Limitations in current program design and outreach prevent seniors from accessing food assistance programs.

Supporting evidence:

- ✂ Existing programs do not fully meet seniors' dietary, cultural, and mobility needs.
- ✂ Strict eligibility criteria leave some seniors out.
- ✂ Applying for and maintaining benefits can be challenging.
- ✂ Lack of awareness, stigma, and fear keep eligible seniors from accessing benefits.

Supporting evidence



Limitations in current program design and outreach prevent seniors from accessing food assistance programs.

Existing programs do not fully meet seniors' dietary, cultural, and mobility needs.

Due to limited funding and federal restrictions, food assistance programs are often not able to offer seniors a wide selection of foods, fresh produce, culturally appropriate options, or home delivery. Choice is limited across many of DC's food assistance programs—not just choice in what foods you receive, but also in where and when you receive them.

We heard from advocates that seniors desire more say in the food that programs provide, with an emphasis on fresh produce and culturally appropriate foods. For example, when supplemental produce bags were offered with the standard Grocery Plus box of pantry items, the produce was claimed immediately. Among DC's Latino seniors, we heard that they do not always see their food customs reflected in the food offered.

More than half of DC food assistance programs require a senior to travel to a pick-up site. Transporting groceries—both getting to and from food and carrying food home—was a consistently named challenge. While some programs provide delivery to a senior's door, nearly all limit delivery to those who are homebound. But seniors don't need to be homebound to benefit from home-delivered meals or groceries. For example, the monthly Grocery Plus food boxes provide 30-40 pounds of food at distribution sites. We observed some seniors leaving behind heavier food items because they couldn't carry them home in one trip.

Supporting evidence



Limitations in current program design and outreach prevent seniors from accessing food assistance programs.

Strict eligibility criteria leave some seniors out.

Some food access programs require only that a recipient is a DC senior. For example, DACL’s community dining sites, area food pantries, and produce distribution pop-ups like Joyful Markets from Martha’s Table or the Arcadia Mobile Market don’t require demonstration of financial need.

But more than a third of DC’s food assistance programs serving seniors do have income limits. These limits are often tethered to SNAP’s criteria—net income can be no more than 100% of the federal poverty line. For a household of one, that’s \$1,133 per month or \$13,596 per year.* Seniors told us that they “earned a few dollars too many” to qualify and found these thresholds unfairly low.

Seniors who are undocumented are also left out from federal programs like SNAP.

Supporting evidence



Limitations in current program design and outreach prevent seniors from accessing food assistance programs.

Applying for and maintaining benefits can be challenging.

While some food access programs require no application or registration process, others have onerous application requirements. For example, SNAP has historically required applicants to complete a lengthy application, provide supporting documentation, and periodically recertify eligibility. These requirements can discourage seniors from applying for benefits. The District is updating their application and recertification process for SNAP for seniors and people without earned income to minimize these challenges.

Supporting evidence



Limitations in current program design and outreach prevent seniors from accessing food assistance programs.

Lack of awareness, stigma, and fear keep eligible seniors from accessing benefits.

As discussed on page 10, lack of awareness of existing programs keep many seniors from participating in food access programs.

Some seniors also feel embarrassment or shame participating in programs that offer food for free. Others worry they are taking food away from those who need it more. Because of historical trauma and discrimination, some seniors also distrust the government and are fearful of participating in government programs.

Recommendation two



Existing food assistance programs and outreach should be strengthened to better meet seniors' diverse needs.

Launching new programs means more funds going towards the running of programs rather than directly to seniors. It also adds to the number of programs seniors must navigate. Instead, DC could strengthen and promote existing programs by:

- Expanding home delivery services;
- Increasing the benefit amount or frequency of programs;
- Augmenting benefits to allow for more produce and culturally appropriate food options;
- Make programs more income inclusive; or
- Doing targeted outreach for under-utilized programs.



Next step:
Invest in SNAP outreach

Several DC Government agencies will work together to design and test an outreach strategy that promotes participation in SNAP amongst seniors. This investment is being prioritized because SNAP promotes autonomy by offering residents choice in where they shop, when they shop, and what they eat. Additionally, SNAP is primarily federally funded, so we can make a modest investment of local funds on outreach and harness millions in reoccurring federal food aid for residents. Finally, promoting SNAP capitalizes on existing work the Department of Human Services is leading through the Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP). Through ESAP, seniors and people with disabilities with no earned income are no longer required to complete interim reporting, can recertify for benefits every three years instead of every two (May 2023), and will be able to use a simplified application, taking the previous 67-page form down to 8 pages (coming early 2024).

Thank you

We are indebted to the DC residents, community advocates, nonprofit food access providers, and government staff who welcomed our questions and observations. Their willingness to speak candidly about DC's food assistance landscape made this work possible, and we hope, leads DC toward impactful next steps to addressing senior food insecurity.

Special thanks to the following community organizations: Capital Area Food Bank, CRISP, DC Central Kitchen, DC Greens, DC Hunger Solutions, Food and Friends, Iona Senior Services, Martha's Table, Terrific Inc, the University of the District of Columbia, Vida Senior Center, and YMCA.

Special thanks to the following DC Government agencies and teams: Age Friendly DC, the Department of Aging and Community Living, DC Health, the Department of Human Services, Office of Planning's Food Policy Council, and the Office of the State Superintendent of Education.