

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM: COVID-19 IMPACT

**LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND
FAMILY SERVICES**

PERFORMANCE AUDIT SERVICES

**Informational Brief
March 27, 2023**

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March 27, 2023

The Honorable Patrick Page Cortez,
President of the Senate
The Honorable Clay Schexnayder,
Speaker of the House of Representatives

Dear Senator Cortez and Representative Schexnayder:

This informational brief describes changes to the Department of Children and Family Services' Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, including how COVID-19 impacted participation, benefit amounts, and program administration. This brief is intended to provide timely information related to an area of interest to the legislature or based on a legislative request. I hope this brief will benefit you in your legislative decision-making process.

Respectfully submitted,



Michael J. "Mike" Waguespack, CPA
Legislative Auditor

MJW/aa

SNAPCOVID-19





Informational Brief

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: COVID-19 Impact

Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services

MICHAEL J. "MIKE" WAGUESPACK, CPA

Audit Control# 40230012

Performance Audit Services - March 2023

Background

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Louisiana’s unemployment rate grew from 5.2% in February 2020 to 13.1% in April 2020,¹ and the total number of state unemployment claims increased by more than 2,000%, from 16,798 on February 29, 2020, to 366,798 on April 25, 2020.² Because of this, the number of individuals on public assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) increased. The United States Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), which oversees SNAP at the federal level, offered states temporary changes and “flexibilities”³ during the COVID-19 pandemic to expand eligibility, to increase benefit amounts, and to ease program administration by suspending interviews and certain quality control requirements. The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) administers SNAP in Louisiana. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to SNAP participation, benefit amounts, and program administration are detailed below.

Why We Compiled This Informational Brief

In response to House Resolution 248 of the 2022 Regular Legislative Session, we conducted this review to identify impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the SNAP program.

Informational briefs are intended to provide more timely information than standards-based performance audits. While these informational briefs do not follow all *Governmental Auditing Standards*, we conduct quality assurance activities to ensure the information presented is accurate. We met with DCFS and incorporated its feedback throughout this informational brief. See Appendix A for DCFS’ response.

What We Found

Increased Participation. The number of SNAP recipients increased 27.5%, from 769,768 prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 to a high of 981,751 in January 2021. According to DCFS, the increase in participation was primarily attributed to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment and wages, which resulted in more households becoming eligible for SNAP.

In addition, FNS flexibilities allowed states to extend certification periods, which are the length of time a SNAP recipient is eligible to receive benefits before

¹ United States Bureau of Labor and Statistics, as of March 24, 2021.

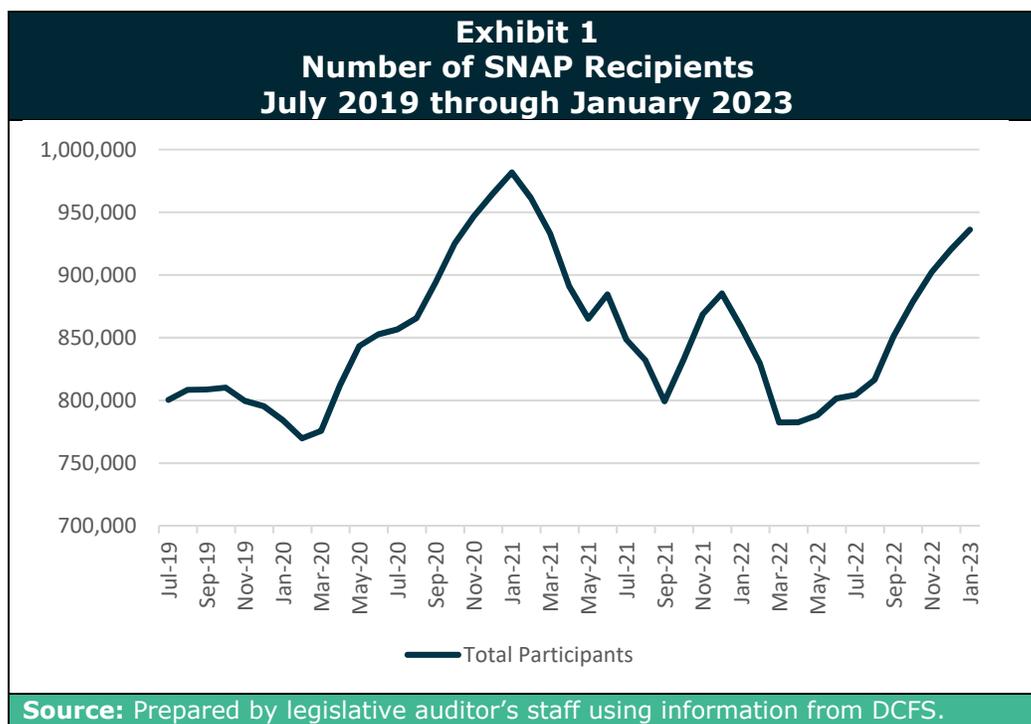
² To further combat the spread of COVID-19 in Louisiana, Governor John Bel Edwards issued a Stay-at-Home Order on March 22, 2020, directing all Louisiana residents to shelter at home and limit movements outside of their homes beyond essential needs.

³ FNS approved flexibilities to assist states in ensuring ongoing access to SNAP despite rising caseloads and challenges associated with social distancing and remote operations.

they are required to re-submit proof that they are still eligible (most commonly 12 months), which means SNAP cases were not closed and recipients were not removed from SNAP at the same rate as prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. DCFS stated that it began requiring SNAP recipients to report certain changes in circumstances affecting eligibility in February 2023, and certification periods and reporting requirements will return to normal starting in February 2024. DCFS expects to see a reduction in participation in March 2023 as it begins to close cases.

FNS also expanded SNAP eligibility for certain college students. This expanded eligibility is tied to the COVID-19 pandemic Public Health Emergency (PHE) and will end when the PHE ends on May 11, 2023. However, students certified under this expanded eligibility will remain eligible until the end of their certification period. According to DCFS, 19,357 students were certified under this expanded eligibility.

As of January 2023, there were 936,112 SNAP recipients in Louisiana. Exhibit 1 shows the change in the number of SNAP recipients from July 2019 through January 2023, while Appendix B shows the number of SNAP recipients, average number of recipients per household, total benefits, and average benefit amounts per household over the same timeframe.



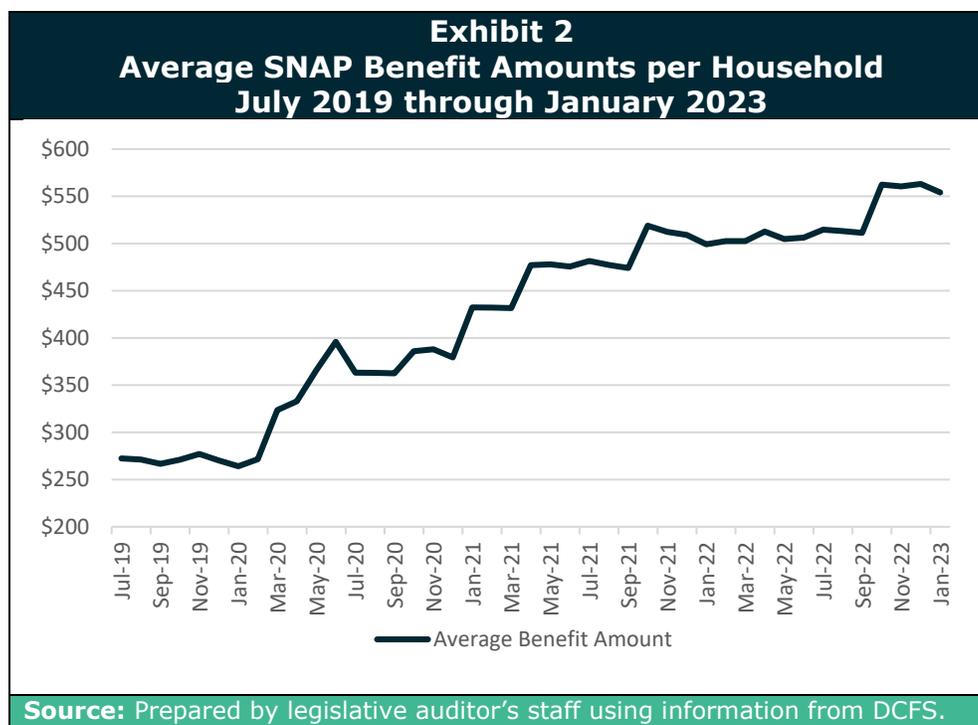
Increased Benefits. The Federal government pays the full cost of SNAP benefits. Average benefit amounts increased 107.0%, from \$272 per month per household prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 to \$563 in December 2022. Benefit amounts increased in three ways during this time:

- Congress approved temporary emergency allotments for SNAP households beginning in March 2020 as part of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. Households received emergency allotments of at least \$95 per month. Emergency allotments ended on February 28, 2023. According to DCFS, from March 2020 through December 2022, it issued more than \$2.0 billion in emergency allotments, or \$59.5 million each month to 418,084 households per month on average.
- Congress provided a temporary 15.0% increase in maximum SNAP benefits which, according to FNS, resulted in an average increase of \$30 in SNAP benefits per recipient per month. This increase ended on September 30, 2021.
- Separately, and not related to the COVID-19 pandemic, in August 2021 FNS announced it had completed the congressionally-mandated revision of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), the basis for SNAP benefits, which increased benefits an average of \$36 per recipient per month starting in October 2021.⁴ According to FNS,⁵ for federal fiscal year 2022, benefits were projected to increase 27.3%, from \$1.595 billion to \$2.030 billion.

The increase in average benefit amounts combined with increased recipients resulted in a 160.7% increase in total recipient benefit amounts paid monthly from \$98.2 million prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 to \$256.0 million in January 2023. Exhibit 2 shows the average SNAP benefit amounts per household from July 2019 through January 2023, while Appendix B shows the number of SNAP recipients, average number of recipients per household, total benefits, and average benefit amounts per household over the same timeframe.

⁴ These revisions account for items such as inflation and incorporating changes to dietary guidance and updated information on food composition, consumption patterns, and food prices.

⁵ FNS estimate as of August 2021. These amounts do not include emergency allotments.



Program Administration. In addition to the flexibilities taken to extend certification periods described previously, DCFS also implemented other flexibilities related to the administration of the SNAP program,⁶ as described below:

- *Waived interviews.* SNAP recipients must meet various eligibility criteria including financial requirements related to income and resources, and other criteria such as residency requirements. SNAP applicants submit documents to support they meet criteria and complete an interview to verify information and answer additional questions. Interviews were waived as part of COVID-19 flexibilities between March 2020 and April 2022.⁷ DCFS stated that it transitioned back to interviewing recipients in May 2022.
- *Quality control.* Federal regulations⁸ require DCFS to have a system for monitoring and improving its administration of SNAP. As a part of that system, DCFS conducts quality control (QC) reviews of SNAP cases. Federal QC requirements were suspended between March 2020 and June 2021 as part of COVID-19 flexibilities. DCFS conducted QC reviews for July 2021 cases and then received a waiver for QC reviews of August 2021 cases due to Hurricane Ida. DCFS stated that it transitioned back to its regular QC process for September 2021 cases.

⁶ The impact of some of these flexibilities was discussed in a previously issued LLA report. See [https://app.lla.state.la.us/publicreports.nsf/0/81a8cf9a2ac671bb86258965005b5181/\\$file/00000d26a.pdf?openelement&.7773098](https://app.lla.state.la.us/publicreports.nsf/0/81a8cf9a2ac671bb86258965005b5181/$file/00000d26a.pdf?openelement&.7773098)

⁷ Interviews were conducted in July 2020, July 2021, and August 2021.

⁸ 7 Code of Federal Regulations 275.1

APPENDIX A: MANAGEMENT'S RESPONSE



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John Bel Edwards, Governor
Terri Porche Ricks, Secretary

March 22, 2023

Michael J. "Mike" Waguespack, CPA
Legislative Auditor
1600 North Third Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70804

Dear Mr. Waguespack:

The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has reviewed your COVID-19 Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Impact Informational Brief. We appreciate your team's efforts to produce this report.

The Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services responded to record food needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks in part to the flexibilities and benefit increases provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. These federal changes allowed DCFS to process 5 times the regular number of SNAP applications in the initial months of the pandemic, to eliminate many of the barriers to assistance for families in need, to provide food assistance to a record number of Louisiana households, and to increase funds to Louisiana's retailers in a time of economic uncertainty.

We are grateful to our federal, state and local partners for helping us serve a record number of Louisianans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Terri Ricks".

Terri Ricks
Secretary

cc: Eric Horent, Undersecretary
Ashley Sias, Assistant Secretary, Division of Family Support

An Equal Opportunity Employer



APPENDIX B: SNAP STATISTICS JULY 2019 THROUGH JANUARY 2023

This appendix details the number of recipients, average number of recipients per household, total benefits, and average benefit amounts per household from July 2019 through January 2023.

| Month/Year | Recipients | Average Recipients per Household | Total Benefits | Average Benefit Amounts per Household |
|----------------|------------|----------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| July 2019 | 800,537 | 2.16 | \$101,054,470 | \$272.38 |
| August 2019 | 808,512 | 2.16 | \$101,566,025 | \$271.15 |
| September 2019 | 808,663 | 2.15 | \$100,094,322 | \$266.64 |
| October 2019 | 810,219 | 2.15 | \$102,150,061 | \$271.04 |
| November 2019 | 799,661 | 2.14 | \$103,410,634 | \$277.15 |
| December 2019 | 795,445 | 2.14 | \$100,595,188 | \$270.22 |
| January 2020 | 784,203 | 2.14 | \$96,994,426 | \$264.10 |
| February 2020 | 769,768 | 2.13 | \$98,215,777 | \$271.61 |
| March 2020 | 775,789 | 2.14 | \$117,422,944 | \$323.56 |
| April 2020 | 812,290 | 2.11 | \$128,286,911 | \$332.85 |
| May 2020 | 843,377 | 2.10 | \$146,959,436 | \$365.86 |
| June 2020 | 852,693 | 2.09 | \$161,378,257 | \$395.87 |
| July 2020 | 856,684 | 2.07 | \$150,086,275 | \$363.20 |
| August 2020 | 865,683 | 2.09 | \$150,369,423 | \$363.06 |
| September 2020 | 893,998 | 2.08 | \$155,599,033 | \$362.49 |
| October 2020 | 925,182 | 2.08 | \$171,971,222 | \$385.97 |
| November 2020 | 946,837 | 2.07 | \$177,240,152 | \$387.98 |
| December 2020 | 964,857 | 2.06 | \$177,294,681 | \$379.38 |
| January 2021 | 981,751 | 2.06 | \$206,325,975 | \$432.34 |
| February 2021 | 961,263 | 2.06 | \$202,102,427 | \$432.12 |
| March 2021 | 933,149 | 2.05 | \$196,019,791 | \$431.55 |
| April 2021 | 891,012 | 2.06 | \$206,618,461 | \$477.10 |
| May 2021 | 865,141 | 2.06 | \$200,848,184 | \$477.93 |
| June 2021 | 884,500 | 2.07 | \$203,404,264 | \$475.58 |
| July 2021 | 848,529 | 2.08 | \$196,528,914 | \$481.45 |
| August 2021 | 832,088 | 2.07 | \$191,607,547 | \$477.19 |
| September 2021 | 799,307 | 2.06 | \$184,088,833 | \$474.11 |
| October 2021 | 832,728 | 2.05 | \$210,525,371 | \$518.84 |
| November 2021 | 868,670 | 2.05 | \$216,731,579 | \$512.27 |
| December 2021 | 885,321 | 2.05 | \$219,644,927 | \$509.03 |
| January 2022 | 858,731 | 2.05 | \$209,606,162 | \$499.17 |
| February 2022 | 829,462 | 2.04 | \$204,453,916 | \$502.56 |
| March 2022 | 782,530 | 2.04 | \$192,966,483 | \$502.58 |
| April 2022 | 782,613 | 2.05 | \$196,022,404 | \$512.70 |
| May 2022 | 788,192 | 2.05 | \$193,730,984 | \$504.68 |
| June 2022 | 801,625 | 2.06 | \$196,993,634 | \$506.17 |

| Month/Year | Recipients | Average Recipients per Household | Total Benefits | Average Benefits per Household |
|---|------------|----------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|
| July 2022 | 804,411 | 2.06 | \$201,036,619 | \$514.70 |
| August 2022 | 816,411 | 2.06 | \$203,774,789 | \$513.09 |
| September 2022 | 851,067 | 2.05 | \$211,874,257 | \$511.36 |
| October 2022 | 878,378 | 2.05 | \$241,435,915 | \$562.29 |
| November 2022 | 902,255 | 2.04 | \$247,892,357 | \$560.42 |
| December 2022 | 920,319 | 2.03 | \$254,755,657 | \$563.05 |
| January 2023 | 936,112 | 2.03 | \$256,043,025 | \$554.03 |
| Source: Prepared by legislative auditor's staff using information from DCFS. | | | | |