

**Food Insecurity in Philadelphia: A Model Addressing the Shortcomings of SNAP Benefits
and Reinventing the Retail Access Point in Low-income Neighborhoods**

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Abstract

Food insecurity is a prevalent concern for families across Philadelphia, largely impacting low-income and predominantly Black and Brown neighborhoods. While many organizations, such as community gardens, food rescue, food pantries, etc., aim to drive change in the food justice and food sovereignty space, none are able to work under the federal SNAP benefit framework to provide residents with properly cooked meals. The Community Grocer (TCG) is reinventing the retail-access point in underserved neighborhoods to work under the SNAP framework to provide affordable meals by leveraging food rescue operators to provide affordable meals and help neighbors transform ingredients into meals, ultimately positively impacting health outcomes.

Background

Food insecurity is a prevalent concern for thousands of families across Philadelphia. Philadelphia County, according to the most recent Meal the Gap study released in 2021, exhibits a food insecurity rate of 13.6%, surpassing the national average of 10.4%. These numbers have likely been exacerbated in the aftermath of a global pandemic as they have been in large cities across the country (Niles et al., 2020; McLoughlin et al., 2020; Kinsey et al., 2020). Moreover, the percentage of food-insecure households is considerably higher in low-income neighborhoods within the city. These neighborhoods, often predominantly Black and Brown, face a disproportionately high concentration of low-produce stores and fast food restaurants, as opposed to proper grocery stores that are more common in the suburbs (Guidry, 2014). The limited availability of fresh produce in these areas contributes to a range of diet-related diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease, significantly impacting health outcomes (Mayer et al., 2014). Thus, food insecurity is, first and foremost, a public health issue. City research shows that the same neighborhoods that have inadequate access to food are also predominantly Black and have significantly lower life expectancy and quality-of-life metrics than neighborhoods only a few miles away (Hirsch et al., 2019).

SNAP Benefits

The most recent statistics show that federal spending on food and nutrition assistance programs was \$182.5 billion in FY 2021, an increase of 49% from the previous year. These dollars support grants to organizations and cities across the nation, though the most well-known program funded is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which also reached a new high and increased by 44 percent from FY 2020 to FY 2021. The USDA has a variety of other programs that also aim to eradicate food insecurity, with varying levels of success. For example, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) helps provide balanced meals to students in public, nonprofit, and private schools, as well as residential childcare institutions. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is another USDA program that is specific to those populations. Various other federal food assistance programs target high-risk communities to prevent food insecurity and hunger, including the Summer Food Service Program and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program.

Focusing on the most common of those programs, SNAP is a federally-funded but state-managed program that allows low-income residents to purchase food. It is well-established that SNAP allows low-income residents to purchase the necessary food they need, promoting healthy living (Improve SNAP Benefits to Promote Health and Reduce Hunger, 2021). The strengths of this program are in the liberty it gives users in their food purchases, allowing customers to buy any

eligible food with their dollars. However, SNAP benefits often run out in the allotted months, long before the next payment is due. Federal SNAP calculations often do not adequately price a healthy diet and true cost of living, often forcing people to rely on low-quality foods that negatively impact their health (Gaines-Turner et al., 2019).

It is also difficult to purchase prepared meals with SNAP benefits. Cold-prepared foods, such as salads, subs, fruit cups, or ice cream cones, can be eligible for SNAP purchase as long as the retailer does not exceed 50% of sales from cold-prepared foods. However, hot foods are never eligible for purchase with SNAP benefits. This includes foods that are sold cold and prepared after purchase by the same retailer, eliminating soups, pizza, and coffee as SNAP-eligible purchases (*Retailer Eligibility - Prepared Foods and Heated Foods*, 2020).

Existing Community Solutions

Food justice is a varied space, with various neighborhood and city-wide organizations aiming to address the gaps in food insecurity policies. Some organizations focus on food rescue and redirection. Sharing Excess, for example, is a significant Philadelphia nonprofit in this space that redirects surplus grocery store food to low-income neighborhoods. Small organizations around the city take control of and manage the distribution of the rescued food. Similarly, food banks and pantries, generally managed by churches or other multipurpose communities, often have food pantries to help their communities. Generally, the issue with these organizations is that these programs can help in the short-term but have negligible impact on long-term food security.

Other organizations focus on food sovereignty, teaching communities how to grow their own foods in empty-lot community gardens. These organizations are usually focused on specific neighborhoods, often no more than five blocks. While these community gardens can supplement diets, they are also limited in their widespread prevention of food insecurity. Despite that, these greenspaces still hold value as a vehicle for education, beautifying neighborhoods, promoting more diverse eating habits, and community cohesion.

Unfortunately, none of these organizations in Philadelphia pair with governmental SNAP benefits that are already designed to supplement diets. While raw ingredients are necessary, it takes more than a homegrown spring onion to make a hot, healthy meal. Oftentimes, policymakers will argue that the solution to so-called “food deserts” is to merely build additional grocery stores in underserved areas. However, this has been shown to be an ineffective solution. Between a lack of spending power and familiarity with these food locations, oftentimes, residents do not actually change their eating habits if stores are introduced to their neighborhoods. Thus, for long-term food security impacts, a different approach is necessary.

The Model

The Community Grocer (TCG) is a community-engaged organization that works to bridge the gap between healthy meals and the limitations of SNAP benefits. By “reinventing the corner store,” TCG hopes to change the way food insecurity is addressed in major cities around the nation. TCG makes it easier to eat well, promoting nutritious habits and ultimately improving health outcomes. By combining SNAP-eligible foods and food rescue operators, therefore lowering food costs for customers, TCG becomes a scalable community market with a built-in education resource center, advocating for food justice through accessible meal solutions.

The soon-to-be under-construction TCG store, opening in West Philadelphia, will allow customers to use their benefits to access proper meals, otherwise not possible with SNAP benefits. A customer will enter the store, find a meal that suits their preferences, and check out, much like a typical store. All line items on their receipt will be SNAP eligible, ensuring all members of the community can afford TCG. Much of the store’s produce will also be rescued, lowering food waste in the city. The purchased uncooked meal from TCG can be prepared at or by one of our partner organization’s community kitchens and nutrition centers. Thus, SNAP-eligible foods can eventually be converted to hot, prepared meals by our partner organizations, largely filling in the gaps in existing grocery store structures. As TCG begins construction, the organization is focused on developing the necessary legal, technical, and financial frameworks to successfully fund and develop the store.

Conclusion

TCG considers and includes SNAP and other Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) eligible payment methods in their approach to food justice. Not only does this further promote SNAP as an option for eligible households, but it also allows those benefits to stretch further than the usual three weeks. This makes fresh meals more accessible, including the bits of butter and garnishes that otherwise are hard to obtain through existing community-engaged organizations in this space. Additionally, the food rescue component only makes meals more affordable and more environmentally and economically sustainable. Thus, TCG adapts the retail-access point in low-income neighborhoods to provide all the components of a meal. By pointing customers in the direction of a partner kitchen that can prepare those components into a fully prepared meal, families across West Philadelphia, and eventually the nation, will have access to affordable, nutritious, and hot meals.

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