

Nutrition advocates trying to increase food stamp enrollment in Douglas County

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Several organizations are working to increase local enrollment in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in the hopes it will increase access to healthy food in Douglas County.

Douglas County has a low participation rate in SNAP, commonly known as food stamps. Only 27.3 percent of eligible residents were enrolled in the program in 2011, the most recent year the state has data available. Just over 8,300 Douglas County residents receive SNAP benefits, nearly half of them children.

Access to healthy foods has been identified as one of the five areas of need in the county over the next five years, according to the community health plan, [Roadmap to a Healthier Douglas County](#). The local wellness coalition, [LiveWell Lawrence](#), has a work group dedicated to expanding access to healthy foods across the county. Roughly 18,000 people in Douglas County don't have consistent access to nutritious food, [according to Feeding America](#).

Local nutrition advocates view the low SNAP participation rate as an opportunity to get money for groceries into the hands of low-income residents.

"We think it makes sense since that assistance is there to help people receive the nutrition their families need," said Christina Holt, chairwoman of the Health Food for All work group and a director in the [Work Group for Community Health and Development](#) at Kansas University. "Plus, it's good for the local economy. When people are receiving SNAP benefits, they use those benefits to purchase food from local vendors."

Some argue that the low participation rate can be explained, in part, by Douglas County's large population of Kansas University students. College students generally aren't eligible for food stamps unless they have small children or work at least 20 hours a week.

"Counties with large colleges or military bases show up with very low rates due to the number of college students and others who generally do not apply for food assistance," said Theresa Freed, spokeswoman for the Kansas Department of Children and Families. "Sedgwick County (87.9 percent enrollment) is an exception to this rule because it has a higher population of low-income residents to offset the college population."

Local groups have identified other barriers to SNAP enrollment, including an overly cumbersome application process and the sense of shame that can come with seeking government benefits.

"There's a lot of misinformation out there," said Ellen Feldhausen, spokeswoman for the [Harvesters Community Food Network](#), which serves Douglas County. "People do not stay on SNAP forever; the average length of time is a few months. There is a very low rate of error and fraud. And SNAP lasts most families 2.5 weeks out of the month — the benefits are very low. But that misinformation contributes to the stigma that makes people reluctant to sign up for SNAP."

Also, people often don't apply because they don't realize they're eligible or may have been denied enrollment years earlier, when the guidelines were different, said Shelley Paul, SNAP outreach coordinator for Harvesters (that organization has a hotline — 877-653-9522 — where callers can find out whether they may be eligible for SNAP). As of now, the benefits are

generally available to households earning less than 130 percent of the poverty level (roughly \$15,171 for a single person or \$31,005 for a family of four).

To increase participation in the federal program, local nutrition advocates have proposed training employees at social service agencies to assist with SNAP signup, providing more outreach at public events, holding a SNAP enrollment day and partnering with the schools to pass out information on SNAP to families who receive free or reduced-cost lunches.

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