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Massachusetts tries to enroll more seniors in food stamps with new Holyoke-based unit

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In this Friday, March 17, 2017 photo a sign advertises a program that allows food stamp recipients to use their EBT cards to shop at a farmer's market in Topsham, Maine. Republican governor Paul LePage

and several Republican legislators nationwide say they hope that Republican President Donald Trump will support banning food stamps to purchase junk food like soda. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty)
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By **Shira Schoenberg**, sschoenberg@repub.com

For an elderly person, applying for food stamps can be difficult. The application is complex, calls to customer service involve new case managers every time, and documents must be organized and submitted. Seniors may not know about deductions and may think applying is not worth the hassle.

In January, the state will open a statewide senior assistance office at its location on Front Street in Holyoke, which will be dedicated to helping seniors sign up for the benefits they are eligible for. State officials are also making a renewed effort to track down seniors who are eligible for food stamps but have not enrolled.

"We think having a dedicated senior unit will go a long way toward dealing with the nuances of dealing with seniors and the unique nature of working with senior cases," said Department of Transitional Assistance Commissioner Jeff McCue.

Advocates for seniors and low-income individuals say the outreach is necessary, as many seniors who are eligible for public assistance find it hard to apply. Some lost benefits due to problems with the state's modernization of its food stamp system.

According to data compiled by the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, which focuses on poverty law, there are 106,000 adults over age 60 who are on MassHealth and are likely eligible for food stamps but have not signed up. Another approximately 125,000 seniors are not eligible for MassHealth, based on their income, but may be eligible for food stamps. Advocates refer to this as the "SNAP gap" -- the gap between the people eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and those who actually obtain benefits.

"A lot of seniors in the commonwealth that are very low income, and are not in nursing homes, are eligible for and not getting SNAP," said Pat Baker, senior policy analyst at the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute.

The senior assistance office in Holyoke will employ up to 20 case managers and three supervisors focused exclusively on seniors. There will also be a client assistance coordinator to help seniors with disabilities.

The state is paying \$1.5 million to staff the center, which does not include the cost of phone lines, office space and mailings.

The goal, McCue said, is "to deal with a group that we think has trouble navigating what's a fairly rigid and sometimes difficult to navigate system to be food secure through SNAP." McCue said the extra efforts will make the department "more customer friendly" to seniors.

The Department of Transitional Assistance already published a new application for seniors with more relevant questions and a larger font size.

The senior assistance office will staff a phone line dedicated to seniors. Seniors will not have to go through an automated phone tree to reach a person, and staff will be trained in the particular needs of seniors.

State officials will also begin an outreach campaign to contact seniors who appear eligible for food stamps due to their participation in MassHealth and ask them if they want to apply.

Additionally, the state has always worked with community partner agencies, which are social service agencies that help people fill out food stamp applications. Agency staff are trained to ensure people submit the proper paperwork and claim the maximum benefits they are eligible for. The agencies are partly reimbursed by the federal government.

On Oct. 1, the state added 14 Councils on Aging, which work with seniors, to its community partners.

"We have the relationships already built. We know how to interview older adults, work with them, work with other family members in getting paperwork processed," said Donna Popkin, director of member services for Massachusetts Councils on Aging.

The councils submit the applications and are reimbursed for approximately half the cost of their staff time.

Popkin said the process of applying for benefits is cumbersome, and many seniors do not understand how to get maximum benefits. For example, seniors might not know they can deduct medical expenses when reporting income.

Some councils work regionally. For example, an Adams Council on Aging is helping seniors in other Berkshire communities. Worcester and Ware are among the communities that have Councils on Aging trained to process food stamp applications. Councils in Pittsfield and Great Barrington will begin in January.

McCue said the Department of Transitional Assistance became aware of the unique needs of seniors after a legislator requested information about SNAP recipients with high balances on their electronic benefits cards. The department found that many of those recipients were low-income seniors who forgot their pin number, lost their card or could not get to a grocery store.

McCue said seniors have high rates of falling off food stamps, then rejoining the program. "It's an indicator that seniors are having trouble getting on benefits and staying on benefits to which they're eligible," McCue said.

Baker said another problem is the caseload drop that occurred after Massachusetts modernized its SNAP system. The state instituted a data matching system that kicked people off SNAP based on an online check with Department of Revenue data. However, many people were unenrolled who were actually eligible. A modernization of the phone system made it harder to reach customer service. The department took steps to fix the problems, but many people lost benefits.

"A lot of people, I think particularly older adults, suffered from the state's modernization in 2014-2015," Baker said.

The issue is important because the population is aging. According to the Executive Office of Elder Affairs, Massachusetts' elderly population is expected to increase by 48 percent between 2004 and 2024. A 2016 study by the University of Massachusetts Boston Gerontology Institute found Massachusetts ranked second to Mississippi in the inability of older adults living alone to meet their basic needs, due to high costs of housing, food, health care and transportation.

Carolyn Villers, executive director of the Massachusetts Senior Action Council, said food is one place seniors cut corners when they cannot afford basic needs or medication. "Maximizing benefits for people that are eligible is really important," Villers said.

She noted that because food stamps are federally funded, increasing participation does not hurt the state budget.

Villers said streamlining and simplifying the application process is important, as is reducing stigma and ensuring people who are eligible for the program know they are eligible. She would like to see the state reach out not only to people on MassHealth but to participants in other state programs who could be eligible for SNAP.

Villers said ideally, there would be a common application for all welfare programs. State officials have been discussing that for years. But McCue said developing a common application is "incredibly challenging," since different programs have different standards for income, eligibility and household size.

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