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Behavioral Science Interventions Could Increase SNAP Comprehension and Awareness Among Military Families

Colleen Heflin, Hannah Patnaik, Leonard Lopoo, and Siobhan O’Keefe

Food insecurity is more common among military families than the general population,¹ and the transition from active service to civilian life is a time of heightened risk.² The Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) is designed to support food security among low-income families. However, many eligible military and veteran families do not enroll in the program.³ Low enrollment is believed to be due to a lack of information about SNAP benefits and eligibility, stigma, and administrative barriers, such as requiring an interview with a case manager as part of the enrollment process. As a result, these households miss out on a vital source of food support.

This brief highlights findings from our recent survey conducted to assess the potential for behaviorally informed strategies to improve SNAP uptake among military families transitioning to civilian life. Using a sample of U.S. veterans, caregivers, and persons living below the federal poverty line, we evaluated participants’ comprehension of relevant food support information presented on an informational flyer. We compared a flyer designed by the Department of Defense Transitional Assistance Program (DoD-TAP) with informational flyers designed by our research team. The redesigned flyers use behavioral principles, such as simplification (simplifying the information provided about SNAP), social norming (highlighting that other veterans also use this program to reduce any stigma and encourage shared experiences), and loss aversion (emphasizing how much monetary support they may be foregoing). All flyers are provided in the Appendix of this brief.

KEY FINDINGS



Lack of information and administrative barriers prevent many military families from enrolling in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) despite a heightened risk of food insecurity during the transition from active service and civilian life.



SNAP informational flyers designed with behaviorally informed strategies, such as simplification, social norming, and loss aversion reduce the cognitive load on military families and decrease their reading time by 30%.



Clear and concise information about the SNAP program on flyers increased military families’ knowledge about SNAP benefits by 11 percentage points and increased knowledge about where SNAP benefits can be used by 8.5 percentage points.

Simplified Flyers Reduce Cognitive Load on Military Families

Based on our data, survey respondents spent around 40 seconds reading the SNAP flyer designed by DoD-TAP. In contrast, respondents who received the redesigned flyer reported an average reading time of 28 seconds. These results demonstrate the importance of presenting clear and concise information about the SNAP program on flyers to minimize cognitive load on veterans transitioning to civilian life.

Clear and Concise Flyers Improve Comprehension of SNAP Benefits

Despite spending 30% less time reading the redesigned flyer, survey respondents who received the redesigned flyer reported an increase in SNAP comprehension, compared to those who read the flyer created by the DoD-TAP. Specifically, comprehension increased by 11 percentage points on knowledge of SNAP monthly benefit amounts and by 8.5 percentage points on where SNAP benefits can be used.

Behavioral Science Strategies are Needed to Improve SNAP Uptake Among Military Families

Military families transitioning to civilian life are vulnerable to experiencing food insecurity.

Administrative barriers, such as difficulty accessing information about SNAP eligibility, present obstacles to food security for military families. The findings from our experiment show that applying behavioral science principles to informational flyers can increase awareness and comprehension of SNAP as a vital resource, while also reducing the cognitive load placed on veterans and their families. These findings can be used to help inform future decisions related to improving SNAP uptake among military and veteran families, particularly in designing the materials provided to transitioning active-duty members to help support them during that difficult period.

Data and Methods

We conducted four randomized survey experiments from January 2022 to August 2023 using a sample of 5,000 U.S. veterans, caregivers and persons living below the federal poverty line across the United States. Participants were randomly assigned and given 8 minutes to read either the original or modified version of a SNAP information flyer from the Transitional Assistance Program. The modified versions were created based on behavioral science information strategies such as simplification, social norming, and loss aversion. After reading the flyer, both the control and treatment group participants responded to a set of questions used to evaluate the differences in flyer comprehension. Questions measured comprehension of details regarding SNAP eligibility, benefit size, and redemption. Respondents were also asked about their likelihood of applying for SNAP.

References

1. Rabbitt, M. P., and Smith, M.D. (May 2021). *Food Insecurity Among Working-Age Veterans*, ERR- 829, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.
2. Mobbs, M. C., & Bonanno, G. A. (2018). Beyond war and PTSD: The crucial role of

transition stress in the lives of military veterans. *Clinical psychology review*, 59, 137-144.

3. Keith-Jennings, B., and L. Cai. (2020). *SNAP Helps Almost 1.3 Million Low-Income Veterans, Including Thousands in Every State*, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Washington, DC.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Original TAP Flyer

Getting Started with Food and Nutrition Services

In support of your Whole Health and well-being, this guide will help you understand the healthy food classes and nutrition services available from VA and USDA, and help you apply for food assistance benefits if needed.



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Choose VA

Are you and your family members getting enough nutrition?

VA's Nutrition and Food Services (NFS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) are working together to address Veterans' nutritional needs and food insecurity.

What is food insecurity?

Food insecurity means your access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources.

What programs are available to me and my family members?

Some of the programs available to Veterans and their family members include:

- USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – Helps low-income individuals and families buy nutritious food with an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card, which appears similar to a debit card.
- USDA SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) - SNAP recipients can receive services through the SNAP E&T Program which helps participants gain the skills, training, or work experience they need to increase their ability to obtain regular employment and meet the needs of employers.
- VA MOVE! – A Weight Management Program that is available to every Veteran receiving VA health care and provides Veterans with a variety of ways to participate in a comprehensive lifestyle intervention.
- WHA Healthy Teaching Kitchen - A VA program thru which Veterans learn to prepare, cook, and eat healthy dishes that support nutrition and self-care.
- WHA Whole Health - A VA program that empowers and equips you to take charge of your health and well-being. It centers around **what matters to you**, not what is the matter with you. This means your health team will get to know you and develop a personalized health plan specifically for you, taking into account your values, needs, and goals to live your best life.

NOTE: You do not need to be enrolled in the VA system to participate in SNAP. For more information, please visit: www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility

HOW DO I APPLY FOR SNAP?

You must apply for SNAP in the state where you currently live because each state has a different application form and process. A member of your household must contact your state agency directly to apply.

WHAT DO I DO IF I AM PHYSICALLY UNABLE TO GO TO A SNAP OFFICE OR CONTACT THE OFFICE?

If you are unable to go to or call your local SNAP office and do not have access to the internet, you may have another person act as your authorized representative by applying and being interviewed on your behalf. You must designate your authorized representative in writing.

Note: Please contact your SNAP state agency directly to apply and to request information about the status of your application. USDA FNS does not process applications or have access to case information.

WHERE CAN I GET MY STATE SNAP INFORMATION?

You can contact your state agency by visiting your local SNAP office, visiting your state agency's website, or calling the toll-free SNAP information Number at 1-800-221-5689. You can find your state SNAP agency online at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-directory>

How do I get into VA Nutrition and Food Programs?

What you eat is very important to your health. Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDNs) provide nutrition education and counseling for Veterans across VHA's health care facilities and most clinics. There are many programs, telehealth visits, groups, or individual appointments available to you. Visit <https://www.nutrition.va.gov> to learn more.

How do I get help from a Dietitian?

RDNs are VA's food and nutrition experts. RDNs have special training to offer medical nutrition therapy and work as part of the health care team and Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT) in the treatment and prevention of disease. RDNs promote healthy lifestyle choices and create personal nutrition plans for individuals of all ages using a Whole Health approach. To contact a dietitian:

- Call your local VA to schedule an appointment
- Ask your local VA about same day appointment availability
- Ask your VA PACT or health care team for a referral
- Send a secure message via MyHealthVet by signing in at: www.myhealth.va.gov/mhv-portal-web/home

How do I avoid gaining weight or how do I lose weight?

MOVE! is a weight management, health promotion program designed to improve the lives of Veterans. MOVE!'s core ideas—encouraging healthy eating behavior, increasing physical activity, and promoting even small weight losses—are easy to follow and based on the latest nutrition science. With the help of your MOVE! care team, you can reduce health risks, prevent or reverse certain diseases, improve your quality of life, and even live longer! For more information about MOVE! visit www.move.va.gov

What foods should I eat?

MyPlate is the Federal nutrition symbol, developed by the USDA that serves as a general healthy eating guide on what and how much to eat from each of the five food groups – fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, and dairy. To learn what the right amounts are for you to eat and drink based on your age, sex, height, weight and activity level, etc. Get your own MyPlate Plan at www.myplate.gov/myplateplan.

MyPlate encourages simple ways to get started on eating healthy. Download the Start Simple with MyPlate app on your phone to set simple, achievable, daily goals to help you eat healthy or visit www.MyPlate.gov for more tips and resources to get started today.

OTHER QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE

How do I know if I am eligible for SNAP?

You must meet certain income and resource requirements to be eligible for SNAP and receive benefits. If your state agency determines you are eligible to receive SNAP benefits, you will receive benefits backdated to when you submitted your application.

Are there other USDA programs my family and I may be eligible for?

You or your family members may be eligible for assistance through other USDA programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, the Summer Food Service Program and USDA food distribution programs. Please visit the USDA FNS website at: www.fns.usda.gov/partnerships/military-veteran-families for a complete listing of nutrition assistance programs that may be available to you.

Helpful Links

USDA SNAP
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility>

USDA SNAP E&T
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/et>

VHA NFS FOOD INSECURITY:
https://www.nutrition.va.gov/Food_Insecurity.asp

VHA NFS RECIPES:
<https://www.nutrition.va.gov/Recipes.asp>

GET HELP FROM A DIETITIAN
https://www.nutrition.va.gov/Get_Help_from_a_Dietitian.asp

WHOLE HEALTH
<https://www.va.gov/wholehealth>

VA MEDICAL CENTER LOCATOR
<https://www.va.gov/find-locations>

WIC
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic>

MYPLATE
<https://www.choosemyplate.gov>

Appendix B: Experiment Flyer 1 Shortened Version of the Original Flyer

Behavioral Intervention:

The primary intervention with this alternative is simplification. We pared down the programs to focus on the SNAP program exclusively.

Getting Started with Food and Nutrition Services

In support of your Whole Health and well-being, this guide will help you understand the healthy food classes and nutrition services available from VA and USDA, and help you apply for food assistance benefits if needed.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Choose VA

Are you and your family members getting enough nutrition?

VA's Nutrition and Food Services (NFS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) are working together to address Veterans' nutritional needs and food insecurity.

What is food insecurity?

Food insecurity means your access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources.

What programs are available to me and my family members?

Some of the programs available to Veterans and their family members include:

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Helpful Links

USDA SNAP
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility>

NOTE: You do not need to be enrolled in the VA system to participate in SNAP. For more information, please visit: www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility

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You must apply for SNAP in the state where you currently live because each state has a different application form and process. A member of your household must contact your state agency directly to apply.

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If you are unable to go to or call your local SNAP office and do not have access to the internet, you may have another person act as your authorized representative by applying and being interviewed on your behalf. You must designate your authorized representative in writing.

Note: Please contact your SNAP state agency directly to apply and to request information about the status of your application. USDA FNS does not process applications or have access to case information.

WHERE CAN I GET MY STATE SNAP INFORMATION?

You can contact your state agency by visiting your local SNAP office, visiting your state agency's website, or calling the toll-free SNAP Information Number at 1-800-221-5683. You can find your state SNAP agency online at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-directory>

CONTACT US **VISIT US ONLINE** VA.gov **GIVE US A CALL** 1-800-221-5683 **VISIT US IN PERSON** at your local VA Medical Center

Appendix C: Experiment Flyer 2

Simplified Version of the Original Flyer with Veterans Image

Behavioral Intervention:

We added a photo of a service member and his child to the previous simplified flyer. The photo breaks the blue/white color scheme. In addition, the photo is meant to help readers identify with the program and reduce stigma. It shows that this is a program designed to help veterans AND their families.

Getting Started with Food and Nutrition Services



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs



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Helpful Links

USDA SNAP
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility>

NOTE: You do not need to be enrolled in the VA system to participate in SNAP. For more information, please visit: www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility



HOW DO I APPLY FOR SNAP?

You must apply for SNAP in the state where you currently live because each state has a different application form and process. A member of your household must contact your state agency directly to apply.

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Note: Please contact your SNAP state agency directly to apply and to request information about the status of your application. USDA/FNS does not process applications or have access to case information.

WHERE CAN I GET MY STATE SNAP INFORMATION?

You can contact your state agency by visiting your local SNAP office, visiting your state agency's website, or calling the toll-free SNAP Information Number at 1-800-221-5628. You can find your state SNAP agency online at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-directory>

CONTACT US VISIT US ONLINE VA.gov GIVE US A CALL 1-800-221-5689 VISIT US IN PERSON at your local VA Medical Center

Appendix D: Experiment Flyer 3 New Design of Food Assistance Flyer Key Information Only

Behavioral Interventions:

In addition to the simplification and the photo, this flyer incorporates social norming. Notice the red banner. First, we used a new color to draw attention to it. The banner incorporates social norming - many veterans use the program. This design was included to reduce stigma. We also included the average benefit amount (\$400) so veterans could understand the magnitude of the benefit. We wanted the veterans to understand that it is worth the administrative burden to apply. We also included some information on eligibility since many believe they are ineligible.

Access the food benefits you earned and join the over 1 million veterans who already participate in SNAP.

What is SNAP? → A program that provides you with **additional income** to purchase food of your choice for you and your family.

How does it work? → You receive an **electronic benefit transfer card (EBT)**, like a debit card, for use at participating grocery stores.

Are you eligible? → Income limits to qualify vary by state and family size. If your monthly income is below the range listed by your family size, you may be eligible for SNAP.

Family Size	Monthly Income Limit
1	\$1,395 - \$2,146
2	\$1,887 - \$2,903
3	\$2,379 - \$3,660
4	\$2,870 - \$4,416



Do you sometimes worry that your food will run out before you have money to buy more?

You could be benefiting from an additional \$400 a month for your family's food needs.

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

How do you apply? → Apply online in the state where you currently live: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-directory>

If you qualify for SNAP, you are likely eligible for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Woman's Infants and Children (WIC) and free or reduced-price lunch within schools.

Appendix E: Experiment Flyer 4 New Design of Food Assistance Flyer Highlighting Earned Benefits

Behavioral Interventions:

This flyer is quite similar to the previous one. We move a few items around. The red banner provides a loss frame. Behavioral science literature has repeatedly shown that people are more likely to respond to something they believe they have earned rather than something they may qualify for. We are attempting to prompt their “loss aversion” with this banner.




Do you sometimes worry that your food will run out before you have money to buy more?

 If so, you're not alone.

 Each year over **1 million** veterans use SNAP to support their food needs.

 Visit VA.gov for more information.

**Veterans,
Access the food benefit you earned!**

Getting Started with SNAP

- What is SNAP?** → The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides eligible families with the nutritious foods their family needs from their local grocery store. Families use an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card, like a debit card, to purchase food.
- What are the benefits?** → The average monthly benefit in 2021 for a household was \$400. These funds can be used to purchase food at SNAP-participating grocery stores.
- Are you eligible?** → Income limits to qualify vary by state and family size. If your monthly income is below the range listed by your family size, you may be eligible for SNAP.

Family Size	Monthly Income Limit
1	\$1,395 - \$2,146
2	\$1,887 - \$2,903
3	\$2,379 - \$3,660
4	\$2,870 - \$4,416

- How do you apply?** → You can apply in the state where you currently live. You can find your state SNAP agency:
 1. Online at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-directory>
 2. Call 1-800-221-5689 to ask for more info

If you qualify for SNAP, you are likely eligible for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Woman's Infants and Children (WIC) and free or reduced-price lunch within schools.