

Purpose: BECR facilitates new and innovative research on the application of behavioral economics theory to healthy food choice behaviors that would contribute to enhancing the nutrition, food security, and health of American consumers. BECR is particularly interested in promoting healthy and cost-effective food choices for participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

Vision: To use behavioral economics principles and strategies to promote healthy, economical food choices among WIC and SNAP recipients and the general public through research, capacity building, and dissemination.

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Research on Behavioral Economics-Based Promotion of Healthy Food Choice in a Retail Setting: Can Results Inform SNAP-Ed Practice?

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Emerging research suggests that behavioral economics-based strategies to promote purchase of healthy foods may be effective approaches to improving diets and health.^{1,2} Such strategies could be especially valuable to lower-income consumers such as the more than 44 million lower-income Americans participating in USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as of 2016.³ For such consumers, tight budget constraints mean they must choose carefully to select foods that are both healthy and economical.

USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Education, popularly known as SNAP-Ed, offers an opportunity to translate findings from behavioral economics/healthy retail research into interventions that could reach a broad audience of low-income Americans. SNAP-Ed operates in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, and the Virgin Islands with a budget of more than \$400 million in fiscal 2017. Its goal is to “improve the likelihood that persons eligible for SNAP will make healthy food choices within a limited budget and choose

physically active lifestyles consistent with the current *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and MyPlate.”⁴ SNAP-Ed employs a mix of strategies and works in a range of settings including supermarkets and other food retailers in low-income neighborhoods, serving primarily low-income consumers. SNAP-Ed is legally required to use evidence-based intervention strategies; therefore, SNAP-Ed leaders are keenly interested in research that suggests promising new approaches. Nevertheless, there may be a communication gap between researchers and practitioners that limits efforts to translate research into effective practice. This brief describes strategies for communicating research findings to program managers and practitioners in USDA’s SNAP-Ed program, potentially leading to new intervention approaches that could impact the well-being of the many Americans reached by the SNAP-Ed program.

Local Agencies Implement SNAP-Ed within Federal Guidance Parameters

Within each State, SNAP-Ed operates through one or more implementing agencies such as Cooperative Extension Services, health departments, food banks, and other community organizations.^a SNAP-Ed implementing agencies have flexibility to tailor the specific activities they will pursue, subject to program regulations and guidance, and approval of their education plans by USDA. Although SNAP-Ed implementing agencies have flexibility in the activities they pursue, Federal guidance requires that states incorporate policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change strategies into their SNAP-Ed plans. As part of their PSE strategies, implementing agencies can work in a wide range of environmental settings, including food retail. There are criteria that retail interventions must meet when SNAP-Ed dollars are used. Interventions should promote food choices consistent with Federal dietary guidance and SNAP consumers’ budget constraints.⁵ Interventions are required to be conducted in stores that serve predominantly low-income consumers, and follow guidelines for allowable activities and costs, as summarized in a previous BECR Brief.⁶

Like all SNAP-Ed activities, a retail-oriented intervention needs to be evidence-based. SNAP-Ed has developed the [SNAP-Ed Evaluation Framework](#)⁷ to guide program evaluations. The evaluation framework consists of 51 indicators that span the multiple types of activities SNAP-Ed can fund and provides guidance for using those indicators, such as suggested outcome measures and recommended tools. SNAP-Ed implementing agencies and researchers evaluating SNAP-Ed programming are encouraged to use the [SNAP-Ed Evaluation Framework](#)⁷ and its accompanying [Interpretive Guide](#)⁷ in selecting indicators, measures, and evaluation tools to use in establishing an evidence-base for interventions. A number of the indicators from this framework are appropriate for use to evaluate retail-based interventions (see Table below for specific indicators).

^a State SNAP-Ed Contacts and implementing agency contact information can be found at <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/state-contacts>

Associated SNAP-Ed Evaluation Framework Indicators

Indicator number	Indicator description
ST5	<i>Need and Readiness to implement PSE intervention</i>
ST6	<i>Presence of Champions</i>
ST7	<i>Organizational Partnerships</i>
MT5	<i>Nutritional Supports</i>
LT5	<i>Nutrition Supports Implementation</i>
LT9	<i>Resources Leveraged</i>
LT10	<i>Planned Sustainability</i>
MT12	<i>Social Marketing</i>
LT12	<i>Statewide/local improvement in Food Systems</i>

It can be challenging for SNAP-Ed directors to find evidence-based programming that meets their needs. To assist them, USDA has developed mechanisms to facilitate peer-to-peer resource sharing among the SNAP-Ed community. The *SNAP-Ed Connection* (<https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/>) is a web portal that SNAP-Ed providers can turn to for a range of resources. The SNAP-Ed Library allows users to share emerging and practice-tested materials, such as examples of impact reports, nutrition education activities, and social marketing campaigns. Researchers who have developed intervention resources such as these that could be employed in SNAP-Ed can submit their materials at <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/snap-ed-library/submission-form>.

USDA also developed a searchable SNAP-Ed Toolkit to help SNAP-Ed implementers identify well-tested interventions.⁸ The Toolkit contains a collection of interventions that have all undergone expert review and the evidence-base of each has been thoroughly evaluated, vetted, and labeled. Researchers who have developed intervention approaches and resources, including research or evaluation evidence of effectiveness, could benefit from submitting their interventions for review and possible inclusion in the SNAP-Ed Toolkit. However, the process

for submitting interventions for consideration for the Toolkit is being revised and new interventions are not currently being accepted for consideration for inclusion.

Translating Research Findings into Evidence-Based Practice

If a research finding appears to have potential for evidence-based practice, but more work is needed to develop and test an intervention program based on its principals, a researcher may be able to work with an interested SNAP-Ed agency to further develop the intervention program. SNAP-Ed programs may implement and evaluate emerging interventions that show promise based on their underlying theory and approach but have not yet been fully evaluated in the field. In doing so, SNAP-Ed agencies could work with the researcher to develop implementation materials, conduct the intervention, and evaluate it. Some or all of the costs associated with program implementation and evaluation may be covered by SNAP-Ed funds, subject to approval by USDA as part of the State's annual plan. In addition, SNAP-Ed agencies could provide the researcher with guidance on how to design the evaluation to be congruent with the SNAP-Ed Evaluation Plan, increasing the likelihood that the program could feasibly be integrated into SNAP-Ed practice.

Researchers who are interested in pursuing this opportunity may contact State implementing agencies to discuss the potential for collaboration. State SNAP-Ed plans run from October 1 to September 30 of each year. Plans are developed in the Spring and Summer of each year, so it is best for researchers to contact State SNAP-Ed coordinators in early Spring. Researchers interested in collaborating with SNAP-Ed implementing agencies to provide evidence to support the implementation of evidence-based healthy retail interventions may find the following resources of use:

- [Directory of State-level SNAP-Ed Coordinators](https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/state-contacts). The individuals can connect researchers to SNAP-Ed implementers interested in including healthy retail interventions in their SNAP-Ed plans. Access at: <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/state-contacts>
- SNAP-Ed Guidance 2017: This annually-updated document provides great detail on what activities and costs can be covered with SNAP-Ed funds. Access at: <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/administration/snap-ed-plan-guidance-and-templates>
- [Nudged: Behavioral Economics in the Healthy Retail Environment - Working within the SNAP-Ed Context](http://www.rnece-south.org/#/training/archived): This webinar provides an overview of potential behavioral economic strategies and includes details on SNAP-Ed allowable costs and activities. Access at: <http://www.rnece-south.org/#/training/archived>.

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