# Early Insights on SNAP Modernization through American Rescue Plan Investments

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) expanded significantly and made tremendous adjustments to meet the increased need from families and communities in a safe and efficient way.[1]

In March 2021, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which included $1.15 billion in additional SNAP administrative funding to support state SNAP agencies over a three-year period.[2] States have considerable flexibility in how they can use their allotment to invest in business process and technology improvements to modernize their program.[3]

The American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) partnered with the Urban Institute and Share Our Strength's Center for Best Practices to document how states are using these funds to improve customer experience, streamline access to benefits and services, and increase efficiency and effectiveness of program administration.

This brief shares findings from a November 2021 survey of state SNAP agencies about their use of the SNAP ARPA funds in fiscal year 2021, and their initial planned activities for fiscal year 2022 and 2023. This brief also draws from learnings from work groups conducted with states in early 2022.[4] The brief looks to explore the following questions:

1. How did state SNAP agencies use 2021 SNAP ARPA administrative funding?
2. What factors influenced how states used 2021 SNAP ARPA administrative funding?
3. What are states aiming to prioritize in 2022 and 2023?
4. What do early insights on implementation convey about national SNAP priorities?

Subsequent publications from this ongoing research will dive more deeply into promising practices that emerge from state's uses of the funds, and will highlight lessons learned to inform the future of SNAP administration and modernization.
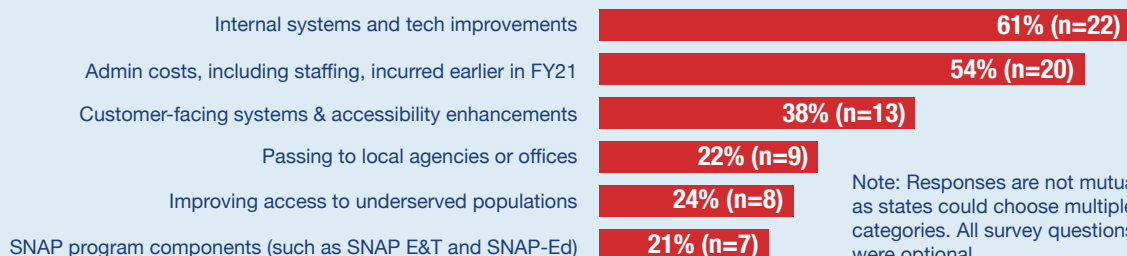
## How did state SNAP agencies use 2021 SNAP ARPA administrative funding?

While some funding was used to mitigate increased costs in response to heightened caseloads and adaptations during the public health emergency, **the majority of states used at least part of their funding to build out existing priorities for long-term system and program improvements.**

States used funds for a range of efforts to **optimize internal systems and technology, increase program access and customer experience, and invest in SNAP program components** such as SNAP Employment & Training.

*(See themes and examples on the next page.)*

### FIGURE 1: STATE SPENDING CATEGORIES FOR FISCAL YEAR 2021

| Category | Value |
|---|---|
| Internal systems and tech improvements | 61% (n=22) |
| Admin costs, including staffing, incurred earlier in FY21 | 54% (n=20) |
| Customer-facing systems & accessibility enhancements | 38% (n=13) |
| Passing to local agencies or offices | 22% (n=9) |
| Improving access to underserved populations | 24% (n=8) |
| SNAP program components (such as SNAP E&T and SNAP-Ed) | 21% (n=7) |

Note: Responses are not mutually exclusive as states could choose multiple spending categories. All survey questions were optional.

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[1] See APHSA and Johns Hopkins School of Public Health report on SNAP waivers and adaptations during the COVID-19 pandemic: https://files.constantcontact.com/391325ca001/43b432bd-bdde-4525-8e63-a1b0293de236.pdf

[2] See text of the March 2021 American Rescue Plan Act: https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1319/text

[3] See USDA Food and Nutrition Service guidance on usage of the SNAP administrative funds: https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-administrative-funding-american-rescue-plan-act-2021

[4] The research team fielded a survey to all state SNAP agencies and the District of Columbia in November 2021. Surveys were sent to APHSA state contacts and were encouraged to be shared within the agency for the best response. There were 42 total responses. All questions were optional.

# STATE THEMES AND EXAMPLES WITHIN SPENDING CATEGORIES FOR FISCAL YEAR 2021

## CUSTOMER FACING SYSTEMS

| THEMES | EXAMPLES |
|---|---|
| • Improve access to online web portals, single sign-on, and text messaging functionality<br>• Hire temporary staff/expanding statewide call centers to handle increased call volume<br>• Upgrade phone system for call centers<br>• Create post-call customer survey<br>• Modernize document submission<br>• Build a customer-facing online benefit calculator | **Arizona** implemented a single sign-on functionality for their website and improved text messaging functionality.<br><br>**Kentucky** updated their online Self-Service Portal to help encourage timely renewals and reduce reapplication churn. |

## INTERNAL SYSTEMS

| THEMES | EXAMPLES |
|---|---|
| • Enhance use of automation and artificial intelligence<br>• Update eligibility systems<br>• Improve the notice development and sharing process<br>• Maintain and improve web portals<br>• Upgrade software (SharePoint, Tableau, Adobe, etc.)<br>• Centralize mail and document imaging<br>• Develop queue management solutions to improve experience and better report on customer flow | **Alabama** developed a completely virtual training for new eligibility staff.<br><br>**Wisconsin** put funds towards a front-end update of the mainframe platform for their eligibility system. |

## PROGRAM COMPONENTS

| THEMES | EXAMPLES |
|---|---|
| • Expand SNAP-Ed programs and partnerships<br>• Develop enhanced outreach to tribal and immigrant populations<br>• Upgrade E&T providers' accounting software | **Montana** supported efforts for statewide expansion of its SNAP Employment & Training Program.<br><br>**Washington** used funds for development and distribution of informational mailers for the Department of Health Fruit and Vegetable Incentive Program. |

## IMPROVING ACCESS TO UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS

| THEMES | EXAMPLES |
|---|---|
| • Translate forms, texts, and common notices into additional languages<br>• Create Laptop Loaner Program<br>• Increase outreach to social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter<br>• Increase bilingual staff capacity<br>• Modernize local offices so those with low tech-access can access services in an eligibility office near their home | **California** increased accessibility of their customer portal for specific populations such as college students.<br><br>**Vermont** launched a reducing stigma campaign. |

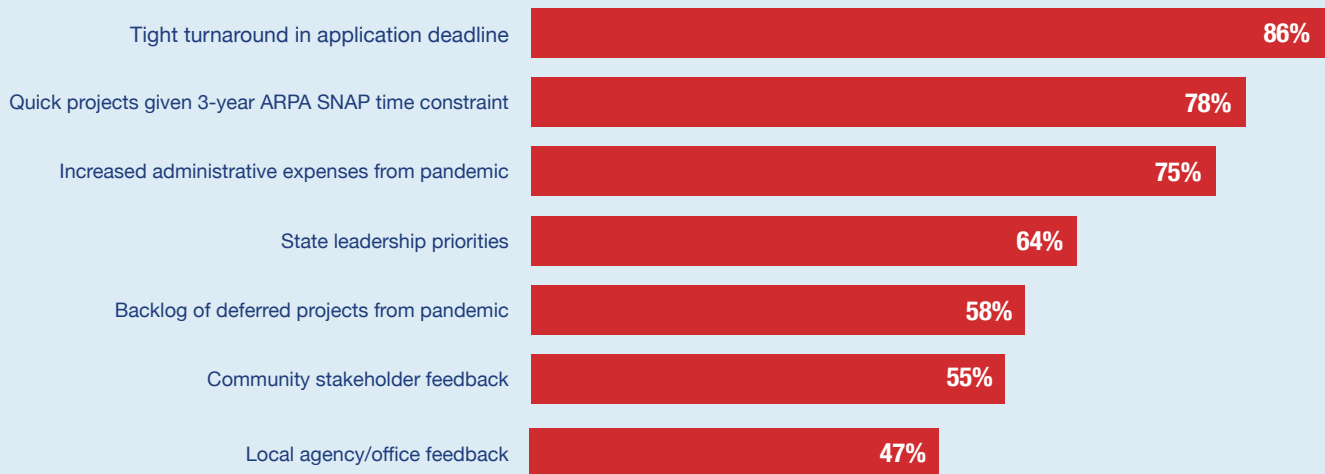# What factors influenced how states used 2021 SNAP ARPA administrative funding?

States received first year allocations on April 29, 2021 and had to obligate these funds by September 30 of the same calendar year. This short timeline significantly influenced how states allocated their first year of funding.

Financial, timing, and capacity constraints all prominently factored into what states decided to prioritize in their use of FY 2021 funding.

### FIGURE 2. INFLUENCING FACTORS IN STATE DECISION-MAKING ON ALLOCATING FY 2021 FUNDS

| Factor | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Tight turnaround in application deadline | 86% |
| Quick projects given 3-year ARPA SNAP time constraint | 78% |
| Increased administrative expenses from pandemic | 75% |
| State leadership priorities | 64% |
| Backlog of deferred projects from pandemic | 58% |
| Community stakeholder feedback | 55% |
| Local agency/office feedback | 47% |

Note: N = 36. Responses are not mutually exclusive as states could choose multiple answers. All survey questions were optional. Very and somewhat important combined; data presented only among states that chose a response. Other response options included not too important, not at all important, and N/A.

> "The quick turnaround of the funding plans during a time of major changes in the program rules due to the public health emergency made planning difficult. [We] want to incorporate SNAP recipients into the planning process but due to the time constraints we were unable to reach out directly to recipients to get their input on our state's funding choices."
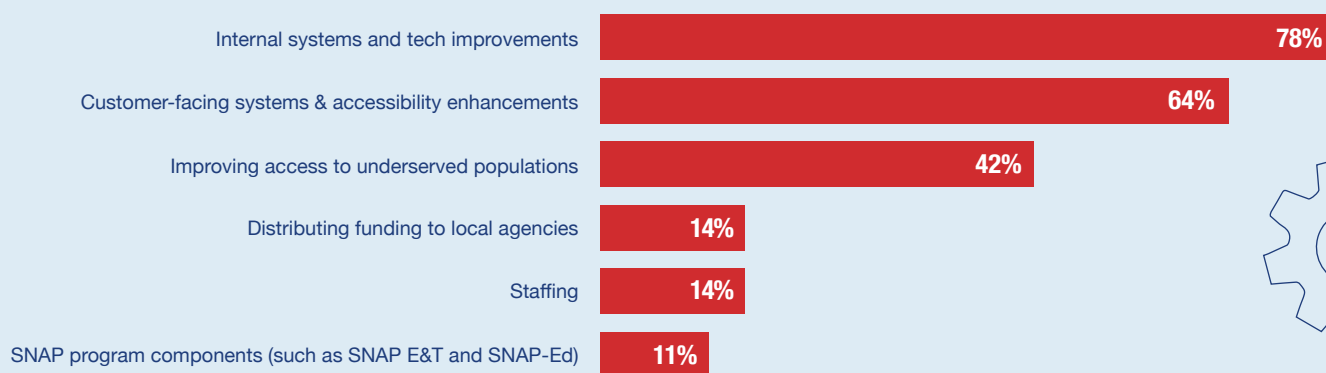>
> **– Wisconsin SNAP Agency**

# What are states aiming to prioritize in 2022 and 2023?

Agencies shared early plans for using FY 2022 and 2023 SNAP ARPA administrative funding that enabled states to **advance established priorities in addition to launching new projects** reflecting lessons learned and emerging solutions out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Planned investments focus on a range of efforts to improve **customer experience**, develop tools that enhance **case processing** capabilities, and address underlying **workforce capacity** needs.

In work group meetings, SNAP practitioners indicated the additional funding **has accelerated planned modernization** efforts, generated new opportunities to strengthen SNAP administration, and simultaneously helped states mitigate impacts from the ongoing workload capacity strains.

## FIGURE 3: AREAS OF CONSIDERED SNAP ARPA FUNDING, FISCAL YEARS 2022 AND 2023

| | |
|---|---|
| Internal systems and tech improvements | 78% |
| Customer-facing systems & accessibility enhancements | 64% |
| Improving access to underserved populations | 42% |
| Distributing funding to local agencies | 14% |
| Staffing | 14% |
| SNAP program components (such as SNAP E&T and SNAP-Ed) | 11% |

Note: N = 36. Responses are not mutually exclusive as states could choose multiple spending categories. All survey questions were optional. Staffing was not offered as a survey response category, but re-coded based on responses to the "Other" option as a commonly reported category.

## EXAMPLES OF PLANNED USES OF FUNDING FOR FISCAL YEARS 2022 AND 2023

**Georgia** is partnering with the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government to help develop a workforce pipeline by doing research across the state to inform training and certificate programs through the university system.

**Rhode Island** is improving its SNAP application experience through implementing an on-demand interview waiver, establishing one-touch case processing, and enhancing its mobile application.

**New York** is distributing a large part of their funding to local social services districts that administer SNAP to support staffing and other increases in administrative need during the continued pandemic response.

**Texas** is improving the Your Texas Benefits mobile app to help SNAP recipients manage their benefits and is investing in technology, fraud prevention, recruitment and retention to strengthen customer service and program integrity.

# What do early insights on implementation convey about national SNAP priorities?

The following insights were gathered from work groups with state SNAP agencies in early 2022, in addition to the survey conducted in Fall 2021.

## INVESTING IN WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS FOR PROGRAM RESPONSE AND RESILIENCY

During the public health emergency response, SNAP agencies have experienced major disruptions to how staff perform core duties at the same time that agencies grapple with significant and structural workforce shortages. This all comes at a time when caseloads continue to remain well above pre-pandemic levels and states transition off of pandemic-related waivers and navigate changes in other integrated benefit programs, such as the upcoming resumption of Medicaid renewals. States are focusing on recruitment and retention efforts yet are limited in their ability in the short-term to respond to the fundamental and widespread workforce impacts that confront them.

The Minnesota Department of Human Services is just one of the states that is utilizing their ARPA funding to support staff capacity by using temporary staff to plan and implement process improvements in SNAP. The agency has deployed staff to support its management evaluation team conducting root cause analysis as the state works through a corrective action plan. Additionally, staff are being brought on to support the implementation of new technology such as texting and developing new ways for clients to communicate needs such as via webforms. Finally, new staff are supporting the policy team on simplifying the reporting structure of SNAP and preparing to test out new demonstration pilots. In addition to staffing, MN is investing in creating new on-demand training modules for eligibility staff.

## HARNESSING THE POTENTIAL OF ROBOTIC PROCESS AUTOMATION

With limited ability to solve workforce capacity challenges through staffing solutions alone, states are increasingly exploring the automation of internal processes through the use of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) to create efficiencies in case processing. Some states, including Georgia and Ohio, are leveraging ARPA funding to advance these priorities by exploring and investing in the development and deployment of a variety of "bots" to perform internal case processing functions, as well as staff- and customer-facing chatbots.

Bots currently in operation across states carry out a wide array of internal case processing functions, including case reading (e.g., using computer technology to "scan" client case data for key

information to act upon), quality checks, application registration, information updates (such as address changes) for application, renewal, and periodic reporting. While they are being deployed to assist staff with clearly definable and repetitive tasks, these technologies are not generally equipped for tasks requiring judgement, nuance, or context. However, bots have shown early progress in helping eligibility workers prepare applications for worker authorization and in doing so generate more accurate and efficient service delivery.

State agencies have conducted time studies demonstrating that bots save significant staff time, which in turn allow staff to shift focus to people-focused case management. A time study on

Georgia's SNAP Renewal Bot demonstrated time savings of 22 minutes per SNAP benefit renewal process. Given the early promise of incorporating bots into SNAP case

processing functions, states are exploring broadening their use of automation in more specific case updates, tracking work requirements and time limits to generate client notices, and assisting case workers with case management in real time. As adoption of RPA expands, states are beginning to explore how they might embed equity considerations into development processes to check potential bias and inequities throughout tech development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation processes. For example, agencies are increasingly engaging diverse stakeholder groups of practitioners and clients in human-centered systems design as part of the tech development cycle to ensure bots and other technology advancements improve not only administrative efficiencies but also equitable service delivery.

## REDESIGNING SYSTEMS FOR PERSON-CENTERED SERVICE DELIVERY

Amidst staffing constraints and a shift to more remote service delivery, agencies are increasingly expanding self-service options for clients to access and manage benefits through tools like online screeners and applications, customer portals, and mobile phone apps. Creating new independent components to service delivery models often requires making enhancements to existing client-facing systems. Several states have successfully leveraged ARPA dollars to explore and begin investing in online application updates and client portal enhancements. For example, Arizona, California, Hawaii, and Rhode Island are leveraging ARPA dollars to maintain, upgrade, or transition online benefits portals. These improvements to online portals are generally meant to give clients a greater degree of autonomy and independent access to their benefits. For example, the Rhode Island Department of Human Services is automating appointment scheduling, and this new functionality will be accessible to clients, allowing people to schedule and reschedule their own benefits appointments.

State agencies are also using ARPA dollars to improve communication with clients by expanding electronic communications via text, push notification, and email. While e-notices have been in practice among SNAP agencies since 2011, and have generally not required waivers since 2017, agencies like the D.C. Department of Human Services (DC DHS) and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NC DHHS) are newly exploring e-notices, and several others are enhancing their use of electronic communication with SNAP ARPA dollars.[5]

Finally, while some states began exploring and incorporating human-centered design principles throughout business operations well before the pandemic, most agencies venturing in this terrain are much newer to this concept. Our research has uncovered a host of challenges that states face when attempting to incorporate client engagement and human-centered design principles into the process of making and evaluating systems enhancements. Common challenges for states newly working towards human-centered systems improvements with ARPA dollars include the timetable for fund disbursement (needing to spend by end of FY), capacity and expertise to fully scope and launch human-centered techniques and practices, and roadblocks around compensating individuals for their input, and/or providing incentives to participate in efforts like focus groups. There is a significant opportunity for SNAP agencies across the country to implement lessons being learned by those leading the charge on human-centered design and client engagement.

[5] https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/electronic-notice-waivers-and-options

# Looking Ahead: Opportunities for SNAP ARPA Investments to Drive Program Improvements

As states use ARPA funding to make down payments to strengthen SNAP, new investments open opportunities to improve customer experience and understand the benefits of investing in the infrastructure of SNAP. Agencies report a range of ways they are evaluating the value of their SNAP ARPA investments on customer service (e.g., customer satisfaction, effects on churn), program efficiency (e.g., application processing timeliness, staff time savings), and accountability (e.g., quality control measures, cost/benefit analysis).

As our research continues, we will explore the constraining and enabling factors that states have already identified to support states as they work to leverage short-term ARPA investments to drive long-term structural improvements in SNAP.  As this project progresses, the research team will engage in further discussion with states and other key stakeholders around the time and resources needed to modernize systems and improve customer service, as well as the underlying structural challenges states navigate, such as workforce capacity and outdated technology. Further, we will explore with states what gaps remain to modernize their SNAP programs and how they are shifting their approaches to design more equitable, human-centered services that work in support of the people they serve.
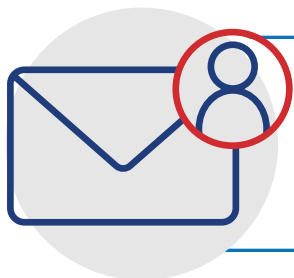
## Stay Tuned for More Resources as our Research Continues