

# Barriers to food access for seniors in the District



One in nine seniors in the District is food insecure, meaning they lack reliable access to enough food to live a healthy and active life.<sup>1</sup> This issue is a priority for District government because food insecurity can take a heavy toll on a senior's health and wellbeing. Food insecure seniors are at higher risk of chronic health conditions like depression, asthma, and diabetes.<sup>2</sup>

The Lab @ DC and the Department of Aging and Community Living [worked together](#) to understand why some seniors in the District are food insecure and how we might help more seniors access nutritious food. We spoke with staff at nonprofit organizations and government agencies that offer food assistance and with seniors themselves. More details on who spoke with and what we learned can be found at [\[link to final report\]](#).

## Key Findings

There are many reasons why seniors in the District are food insecure. Those reasons fall into two categories: 1) **challenges that seniors face purchasing, transporting, and preparing meals**; and 2) **challenges that seniors face accessing food assistance programs**.

**1 Challenges that seniors face purchasing, transporting, and preparing meals.** Compared to their younger neighbors, District seniors face unique difficulties when paying for groceries, traveling to and from stores, and cooking meals.

**Personal financial constraints.** One in six seniors in the District has an income below the federal poverty level.<sup>3</sup> Many District seniors live on fixed incomes. This means some seniors are forced to make difficult decisions like whether to pay for their medications versus for food.

**Challenges traveling to and transporting groceries.** Both getting to and from groceries and carrying food home can be hard. This is because some seniors can't drive, don't have a car, have limited public transportation options, or struggle to lift heavy food items. These challenges reaching healthy food are even greater for seniors who live in neighborhoods without high-quality grocery stores nearby.

**Difficulty preparing food at home.** Nearly a quarter of District seniors are disabled.<sup>4</sup> For seniors who are frail or disabled, standing for long periods to cook or using a stove may be unsafe. Some seniors also lack the equipment to store and prepare meals, such as refrigerators or microwaves.

<sup>1</sup>James P. Ziliak, and Craig Gundersen. "The State of Senior Hunger in American in 2021: An Annual Report." April 2023.

<sup>2</sup>National Council on Aging. (2022, April 15). *Get the facts on food insecurity and older adults*.

<sup>3,4</sup>The Office of the Budget Director Council of the District of Columbia. 2020. "The State of Older Adults in the District of Columbia."

## 2

**Challenges that seniors face accessing food assistance programs.** There are more than a dozen programs in the District that offer seniors food at low or no cost. Some of these programs, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), are underutilized. Barriers that prevent seniors from accessing these programs include:

**No single assistance program is designed to meet seniors' full dietary needs.**

Many food assistance programs in the District were created to be supplements, not to provide all the food a senior needs to subsist on. As a result, many seniors with limited resources are pulling together support from multiple programs.

**Lack of awareness of available programs.** Even though there are many lists of food assistance programs in print and online, some seniors are unaware of the food supports available to them. This gap is partly because there are so many different programs run by different organizations and each has their own eligibility criteria, processes for enrolling, and locations for accessing the resource.

**Existing programs do not fully meet seniors' dietary, cultural, and mobility needs.**

Due to limited funding and federal restrictions, food assistance programs are often unable to offer a wide selection of foods, fresh produce, or culturally appropriate options. Most programs that offer delivery limit services to seniors who are homebound, even though many others could benefit.

**Strict eligibility criteria.** More than a third of food assistance programs that serve District seniors are limited to those with very low incomes. Some programs also exclude seniors who are undocumented due to federal requirements.

**Challenges applying for and maintaining benefits.** Some public benefit programs like SNAP have historically required seniors to complete lengthy applications, provide supporting documentation, and periodically recertify eligibility.<sup>1</sup> These requirements can discourage seniors from applying for benefits.

**Negative perceptions of food assistance programs.** Some seniors feel embarrassment or shame participating in programs that offer food for free. Others worry they are taking food away from those who they believe need it more. Because of historical trauma and discrimination, some seniors also distrust the government and don't want to participate in government programs.

To learn more about how the District is working to address these barriers to food security see the [final report](#).

<sup>1</sup>DC is updating their application and recertification process for SNAP for seniors and people with disabilities without earned income to minimize these challenges.