

Unaccompanied Youth Toolkit for High School Counselors and McKinney-Vento Liaisons

Access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/Food Stamps) for Unaccompanied Youth

Youth can receive SNAP benefits, even if they are under 18 and even if they are living separately from their parents or guardians.ⁱ

Q: How can the SNAP Program help homeless youth?

A: The SNAP Program provides benefits that people can use to buy food at grocery stores, certain retail stores, and some restaurants. Participants use a debit card called an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card to purchase food. SNAP can help improve a young person's diet by providing nutritious food. SNAP benefits also free up resources that youth can use to pay for other important things, such as housing.

Q: How does a youth apply for SNAP?

A: To apply for SNAP benefits, an applicant must fill out an application and return it to a local SNAP office. Each State has a different application. After turning in an application, the applicant will need to set up an appointment with the SNAP office and provide certain documentation at that time. If you need help finding your local SNAP office, call the national toll-free SNAP information line at 1-800-221-5689.ⁱⁱ

Q: Can youth receive SNAP benefits if they don't have a permanent address?

A: Yes. Federal regulations say that no one should be denied SNAP benefits simply because they do not have an address.

Q: Can youth receive SNAP benefits if they don't have a photo ID?

A: Yes. Federal regulations say that no one should be denied SNAP benefits simply because they do not have photo identification.

Q: Can a young person apply for SNAP without his/her parents?

A: Yes. There are no age restrictions in the SNAP program. Unaccompanied youth can apply for and receive SNAP benefits without a parent's or guardian's signature. However, in practice many SNAP offices are not aware that youth under 18 can receive SNAP benefits and may deny benefits to youth under 18. The support and advocacy of a McKinney-Vento liaison, school counselor, mentor or other adult can often make a difference.

Q: Will the youth's parents' or guardians' income be counted on his or her SNAP application?

A: No. If the youth lives separately from his or her parents or guardians, the parents' or guardians' income should not be counted. That's because SNAP eligibility is based on "household" income, not family income. A household is defined as people who buy food and prepare meals together. Youth who buy and prepare their own food should be considered their own household, even if they are staying with other people or "couch-surfing." As their own household, those youth can apply for SNAP benefits on their own.

On the other hand, youth who buy and prepare food together with others, and youth who are staying with people who provide them with food, should be considered part of the household where they are staying. The household can apply for SNAP benefits together, with the youth added to the application as part of the household.

Youth who are staying with others should discuss with the rest of the household the best way to proceed in applying for SNAP benefits. In practice, SNAP offices often ask unnecessary questions about an unaccompanied youth's parents. Advocates can help educate their local SNAP offices about the rights of unaccompanied youth to apply for SNAP on their own or with other households.

Q: Are college students eligible for SNAP?

A: They can be. Non-disabled students who are enrolled in college or another post-secondary institution at least half time are eligible for SNAP benefits *only if they meet at least one* of the following conditions:ⁱⁱⁱ

- Get TANF benefits;
- Take part in a State or federally financed work study program;
- Work at least 20 hours a week;
- Are taking care of a dependent household member under the age of 6;
- Are taking care of a dependent household member aged 6 through 11 and do not have adequate child care to enable them to 1) attend school and 2) work at least 20 hours or take part in a State or federally financed work study program;
- Are assigned to or placed in a college or certain other schools through:
 - A program under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998,
 - A program under Section 236 of the Trade Act of 1974,
 - An employment and training program under the Food Stamp Act, or
 - An employment and training program operated by a State or local government; or
- Are single parents enrolled full time in college and taking care of a dependent household member under the age of 12 (if otherwise eligible).

They must also meet standard eligibility requirements, such as legal immigration status and resource/income limits.

Q: What about students enrolled less than half time in college; Are they eligible for SNAP?

A: Students who are enrolled in college or another post-secondary institution less than half time must follow the program's standard rules, which include:

- Meeting standard eligibility requirements, such as legal immigration status and resource/income limits, and
- Registering for work, accepting suitable employment, and taking part in an employment and training program to which they are referred by the local office.

Generally, if youth do not work or participate in an employment or training program, they can receive SNAP benefits only for 3 months in a 36-month period, although some states waive this requirement.

Q: Are there special rules for youth with a disability?

A: Yes. Youth with a disability are automatically eligible for SNAP benefits, even if they are college students, if they receive state or federal disability benefits (for example, SSI).^{iv}

ⁱ See generally, *Food Stamp Act*: 7 C.F.R. 273.3(a); 7 C.F.R. 273.11(h); 7 C.F.R. 274.10(g); 7 C.F.R. 271.2 (8), (9); 7 C.F.R. 273.1(a); 7 C.F.R. 273.1(b)(1)(ii).

ⁱⁱ For more detailed information about the application process and to find your local SNAP office, go to:

http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/applicant_recipients/10steps.htm.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/applicant_recipients/students.htm

^{iv} http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/applicant_recipients/eligibility.htm#special