SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Improved Oversight of State Eligibility Expansions Needed

Why GAO Did This Study

Over the last 10 years, participation in the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) SNAP, previously known as the Food Stamp Program, has more than doubled, and costs have quadrupled. Since 1999, USDA has allowed states to expand SNAP eligibility by adopting BBCE policies, which make households that receive services funded by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, such as a toll-free number or brochure, categorically eligible for SNAP. Under BBCE policies, states are able to increase federal SNAP limits on household income and remove limits on assets. Although USDA has encouraged states to adopt BBCE to improve SNAP access and administration, little is known about the effects of these policies. GAO was asked to assess: (1) To what extent are households that would otherwise be ineligible for SNAP deemed eligible for the program under BBCE? (2) What effect has BBCE had on program costs? (3) What are the program integrity implications of BBCE? GAO analyzed data from USDA, selected states, and other national sources; conducted site visits to 5 states; and interviewed federal, state, and local officials, as well as others with knowledge of SNAP.

What GAO Found

In fiscal year 2010, GAO estimates that 2.6 percent (473,000) of households that received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits would not have been eligible for the program without broad-based categorical eligibility (BBCE) because their incomes were over the federal SNAP eligibility limits. The characteristics of these households were generally similar to other SNAP households, although they were more likely to work or receive unemployment benefits. BBCE removes asset limits in most states, and while reliable data on participants’ assets are not available, other data suggest few likely had assets over these limits. Although BBCE contributed to recent increases in SNAP participation, other factors, notably the recent recession, had a greater effect.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that USDA review state procedures for implementing BBCE, disseminate guidance to states on certifying SNAP households as eligible for school meals, and revisit its guidance on SNAP reporting requirements to ensure they address all households. USDA generally agreed with GAO’s recommendations.

View GAO-12-670. For more information, contact Kay Brown at (202) 512-7215 or brownke@gao.gov.