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Too often, necessities like decent food and decent shelter become luxuries in Hawaii, out of reach of struggling families. Seventy-three percent of the islands' extremely low-income households spend more than half their income on housing, according to a new report, leaving little for groceries, utilities and transportation — costs that, like housing, are among the highest in the nation.

The federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, saves these families from abject poverty, and also eases the financial pain for households that have higher incomes but still fall below federal poverty guidelines. The benefits, provided via electronic debit cards that can be spent at grocery stores, a growing number of farmers markets and other food outlets, help keep nutritious food on the table for nearly 194,000 people in Hawaii.

The Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice has issued a new report, "Helping Make Ends Meet," that takes the state to task for failing to sign up every eligible SNAP participant, thus leaving federal funding on the table.

The state Department of Human Services counters that the report fails to present Hawaii's current, improved status, because it was based largely on data from 2011. Streamlined administrative practices, technological advancements and improved outreach have significantly increased the number of clients served since then.

In 2011, 159,644 Hawaii residents received a total of \$413 million in SNAP benefits, figures projected to reach 193,392 and \$519 million, respectively, in 2014, according to DHS. The average monthly benefit is \$218 a person, fully funded by the federal government; the cost of administering the program is split between the federal and state governments.

Still, extrapolating from the Appleseed report, Hawaii's improved status leaves about \$136 million in federal funding on the table, money that could serve upwards of 81,000 more people a year. Even if the anti-poverty advocacy center is overestimating, there's clearly a need for even greater outreach in Hawaii, especially among the working poor, senior citizens and American children of immigrant parents — all groups considered to be underenrolled based on current eligibility criteria.

Helping needy families access a federal benefit that can prevent them from falling into even worse circumstances — homelessness is but one obvious example — requires an ongoing commitment from the state to create and maintain the online tools that are a key to boosting participation by eligible residents. Thirty-five states offer online SNAP applications, and many also allow for online recertification and case management, which is more efficient from the outset and less costly to administer in the long run; states with virtually 100 percent participation swear by these online tools.

DHS expects to have an online application for Hawaii residents up and running by December 2015, an overdue improvement. The computerized upgrade also will include a prescreening tool that gives potential participants a quick estimate of their monthly benefit, information that should encourage them to follow through with the process, which includes filling out the lengthy application and providing supporting documents.

The stigma associated with food stamps also prevents some eligible people from signing up, which is especially a tragedy for the working poor. In those cases, SNAP could just as easily be considered a government handout for employers who fail to pay a living wage, or for landlords who gouge renters in a miserable housing market. While it falls to DHS to run this program, it's up to all of us to recognize that nutritious meals are no luxury for families struggling to make ends meet.

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