



# 2021 YEAR IN REVIEW

## A Roadmap to End Hunger in Illinois

In 2021, the Commission released *From Food Insecurity to Food Equity: A Roadmap to End Hunger in Illinois*, a multi-year action plan to take meaningful steps toward ending hunger. The report sets out a three-part strategy for doing a better job of connecting food insecure people to federal nutrition programs. The *Roadmap* makes specific recommendations for leveraging technology; harnessing innovation; and strengthening collaboration.

Since the release of the *Roadmap*, the Commission has convened working groups to help advance the vision laid out in the report. In the first year after the report, the Commission and its working groups have made significant strides to take the *Roadmap* recommendations and make this vision a reality.

This report provides an overview of progress made toward *Roadmap* goals in 2021.

# HARNESSING INNOVATION

- In response to concerns about WIC access, the Commission is developing a WIC innovation grant to launch in 2022 to support community-based outreach and enrollment models to increase participation in the underutilized WIC program. Part of this outreach will include reaching families enrolled in other public benefit programs like Head Start and Medicaid.
- IDHS applied for the SNAP Elderly Simplified Redetermination Project and was approved by USDA. ESRP will simplify the SNAP redetermination process for older adults and extend the period within which they must recertify their eligibility. These changes will be implemented in fall 2022.
- IDHS welcomed an additional 6 retailers to the SNAP online program. Those retailers operate a combined 83 stores across Illinois, expanding online grocery options for SNAP participants.

# STRENGTHENING COLLABORATION

- Illinois has been using Medicaid data to enroll children in free school meals. As a result of a pilot expansion, Illinois will now begin leveraging Medicaid data to enroll children in reduced-price school meals.



- **The Commission has been working to secure permanent policy approval to process SNAP and Medicaid applications over the phone.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, Illinois leveraged a temporary policy waiver to enable state outreach plan partners to process applications over the phone without the need to submit a paper application. IDHS recently secured approval from USDA for a permanent policy change and is currently in the process of developing implementation protocol.
- **Families in need of nutrition assistance often qualify — and need — supports from additional programs.** Building on the state's existing online application portal for SNAP, Medicaid, and TANF, the Commission is working to identify opportunities to bring more benefit program applications online together in the same portal, for example WIC, LIHEAP, CCAP or other programs. The Commission has been collaborating closely with the Illinois Commission on Poverty Elimination and Economic Security to pursue an open-door portal to comprehensive public benefit program eligibility and enrollment information and referrals. Not only will this make it easier for Illinois residents to apply for more than one program at a time, it will also enable state agencies to identify where a client is enrolled in one program, for example WIC, but not another program for which they are eligible, such as Medicaid, and do targeted outreach to that client.
- **The Commission secured funding to support a statewide public-private marketing campaign.** An interdepartmental project team has been established and a consultant has been contracted to develop campaign materials and website. The campaign will focus first on specific populations and programs with low uptake: older adults and SNAP, mixed status households and SNAP, and families with young children and WIC.
- **The Commission is undertaking research to identify opportunities for cross-program promotion.** Federal program rules allow for simplified eligibility determination. For example, individuals enrolled in Medicaid are categorically eligible for WIC, SNAP, and free and reduced price meals. While this cross-program coordination has been deployed at the point of application to simplify enrollment, it has not been leveraged to proactively identify families eligible for but not enrolled in public benefit programs. For instance, only about 75% of WIC families are also enrolled in Medicaid. By leveraging data and creating collaborative systems to conduct targeted outreach to families, we can help families access all the public benefits for which they are eligible.

# LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY

- **Changes were made to enable IDHS to begin utilizing text and email communications to notify SNAP clients about important updates like appointments and renewals.** Text and email capability will be rolled out early 2022.
- **ISBE applied for and was awarded federal grant funding to develop a statewide online school meals application for lunch and breakfast.** Work on this will begin in 2022, including focus groups with parents and schools.
- **IDHS has taken first steps toward making the online SNAP/Medicaid application and case management websites mobile phone friendly.** These advancements will be made in conjunction with the next technology contract renewal in fall 2022. In the meantime, the Commission is also supporting usability testing for the SNAP/Medicaid case management portal and IDHS is planning changes to make the sign in process more user friendly.
- **IDHS secured changes to its WIC Management Information Systems contract** that open the door to making important program innovations such as allowing clients to securely upload supporting documents online and enabling WIC agencies to send secure e-communications to clients.





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