2013

Program Access Toolkit

SNAP
Putting Healthy Food Within Reach

USDA
Supplemental
Nutrition
Assistance
Program

A GUIDE FOR STATES AGENCIES ON IMPROVING ACCESS TO THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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Last Updated: March 2013

Any additions have been marked with 🏅**NEW**

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ACCESS TOOLKIT

OBJECTIVES

The **SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM** (SNAP) provides vital support to eligible low-income families in need of nutrition assistance. Some low-income families may be eligible for SNAP but do not participate because they do not know how to access benefits, where to apply, or are intimidated by the application process. Improvements to **PROGRAM ACCESS** help decrease these barriers and can lead to increased food security among low-income families.

This toolkit covers a range of practices that can be implemented at the local level as well as policies and procedures at the State level. A household's experience in applying for benefits, gathering verification, participating in the certification interview, submitting change reports, and completing recertifications can affect whether eligible families enroll in and remain on SNAP. Local offices are a key part of this process. The sensitivity of policies and practices of local offices to the needs of these households can influence whether they will apply for SNAP or recertify.
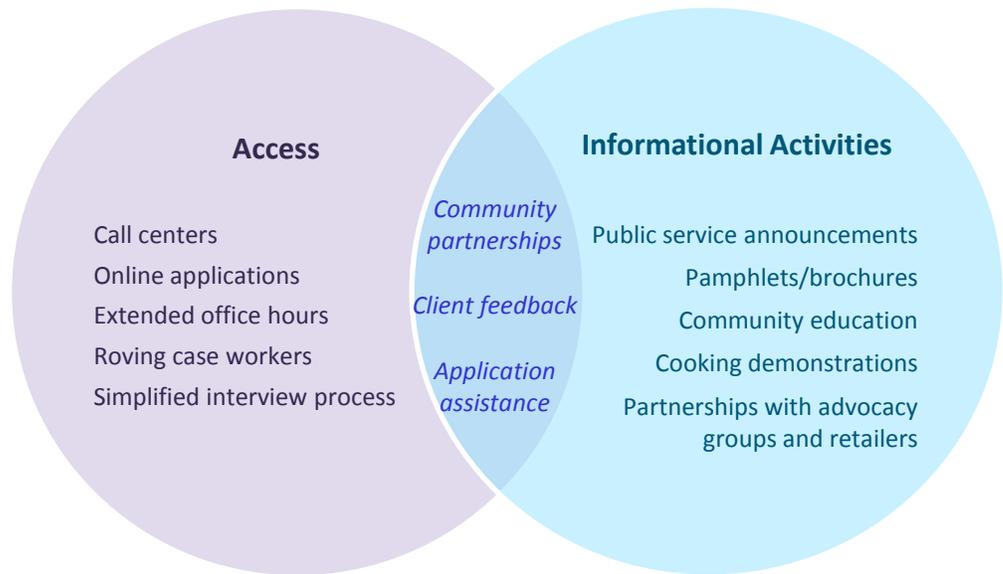
While many discussions of SNAP access focus on access in relation to initial applications, access also includes the retention of eligible SNAP recipients. Therefore, this toolkit addresses methods State agencies and local offices can use to support clients in continuing to participate as long as they remain financially eligible and choose to do so.

DEFINING ACCESS

Program access focuses on improving internal processes and procedures to reduce barriers for low-income families. Examples of improved program access may include extended office hours, out-stationed workers, online applications, improved application forms, and additional accommodations for applicants with language barriers or disabilities.

Program access and **PROGRAM INFORMATIONAL ACTIVITIES** are sometimes confused. Program informational activities increase the reach of SNAP by enhancing awareness of the program's existence, eligibility requirements, and benefits. By contrast, increasing program access involves changing local offices and policies to decrease barriers in applying for SNAP so eligible households can apply for and receive benefits and can easily maintain their cases. Figure 1 illustrates the difference and overlap of program access and program informational activities.

Access

Call centers
Online applications
Extended office hours
Roving case workers
Simplified interview process

Community partnerships

Client feedback

Application assistance

Informational Activities

Public service announcements
Pamphlets/brochures
Community education
Cooking demonstrations
Partnerships with advocacy groups and retailers

USE OF THIS TOOLKIT

State agencies and local offices can use this toolkit to help identify methods to improve program access. State agencies and local offices can easily implement some of these methods, while other methods may require additional planning, approval, or resources. Regardless of the method, program access is a CRITICAL aspect of SNAP.

This toolkit provides various methods for improving access to SNAP. Specifically, we discuss changes that State agencies can make to local office processes, local office policies, improvements in technology, demonstration projects, and participation grant pilot projects.

Unfortunately, despite best efforts by State agencies and local offices, some practices actually limit low-income families' access to SNAP. These practices may include the requirement to produce finger imaging before receiving SNAP benefits or locating the offices in areas that are difficult to reach via public transportation.

We encourage State agencies and local offices to examine their current policies and procedures and identify modifications that can improve the ability for more people to access SNAP benefits. We support State agencies changing their business practices to create policies that are client-focused, have staff buy-in, and reduce access barriers.

LOCAL OFFICE PROCESSES

Overview

Office Procedures

Organizational modifications

LOCAL OFFICE PROCESSES

OVERVIEW

Local office operations and procedures play a large role in program access. Staff training, application availability, convenience, and intuitive technology influence the perceived obstacles and barriers to SNAP benefits for prospective applicants and clients. Changes to local office operations and procedures can range from simple to complex structural changes. Ways to improve local office processes may include extended office hours, onsite childcare, application triage and targeted interviews. Other modifications, such as mobile caseworkers, home visit interviews and employee skill-building exercises, require more effort, but are effective at improving access.

Here are some options for office procedures that improve program access; greater detail is provided in the pages that follow.

- Extended Office Hours
- Office Layout
- Onsite Childcare
- Translation Services
- Business Process Reengineering
- Application Triage
- Targeted Interviews
- Interviews by Appointment
- Telephone Interviews
- Home Visit Interviews
- Automated Voice Response Systems
- Partnerships with Community Organizations

State agencies should reexamine current procedures to determine which office procedures best improve access to SNAP benefits for eligible households in their State and local areas. Workload is an important component to improved access and local resources determine the capacity to these modifications. When considering changes to local office procedures, decision makers must weigh the impact each change will have on staff workloads and office efficiency. The following local office options are client-focused approaches to increasing access.

OFFICE PROCEDURES TO IMPROVE ACCESS

Local offices can implement many different types of office procedures to improve access. These activities can include anything from changing the physical layout of the office to implementing new policies or procedures that make it easier for low-income families to apply for SNAP benefits.

Extended office hours

EXTENDED OFFICE HOURS improve access to SNAP by providing clients with access to caseworkers and the SNAP office outside of the typical work hours for clients or prospective clients to speak with a caseworker. Extended office hours are particularly important for the working poor and individuals with an authorized representative who may work during the week. Households with earned income are more likely to complete the application process at offices with extended office hours.[1]

For example, some State agencies have made their offices open at alternative times to accommodate working households. Some States have extended office hours until 6 or 7 PM on weekdays or are open on weekends. The extended weekday hours and additional weekend hours improve access for the working poor.

Office set-up

The design and LAYOUT OF A SNAP OFFICE can affect program access. It is important to have sufficient seating, space for lines to form, and privacy for interviews. If clients enter an office and see long lines with no place to sit, they may leave without submitting an application. Small touches, such as the way the chairs are set up or the direction the line is formed, can make a big difference in the atmosphere of a local office. It may also be beneficial to have a play area for small children.

Onsite childcare

CHILDCARE improves access to SNAP by allowing clients with young children to get to the local SNAP office without having to arrange outside supervision of their children. Interviews can take an hour or longer. It can be difficult for children to sit through the entire interview. Childcare services can be used to streamline interviews and maximize a caseworker's time with the client by providing children with space to play.

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[1] Bartlett, S., Burstein, N. & Hamilton, W. *Food Stamp Program Access Study: Final Report.* U.S Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, and Abt Associates Inc. 2004.

Translation services

TRANSLATION SERVICES provide clients with the opportunity to complete an application or talk to a caseworker in their native language. By law, State agencies must provide translation services to all SNAP applicants but there are different approaches a State agency may take. Translation services include applications in different languages, bilingual caseworkers, and bilingual call centers. These services improve a household's ability to apply for benefits and receive the appropriate amount of benefits.

Minnesota, for example, has an electronic database with SNAP applications in Hmong, Somali, Vietnamese, Lao, Oromo, Khmer, Arabic, Spanish, Russian, and Serbo-Croatian. Minnesota also contracts outside vendors to provide in-person or telephone translation services. These measures ensure clients understand what they are being asked to provide and can improve access while decreasing processing error.

Business Process Reengineering

STAFF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT for local offices can improve access, improve efficiency, and streamline operations. This process is often referred to as workflow analysis. Business process reengineering is an internal or contracted study of office operations and the identification of areas for workflow improvement. This process can be used to identify redundancies, unnecessary office procedures and wasted resources. **STAFF BUY-IN** is important for a successful workflow analysis. Business process reengineering can lead to new training and development activities for office staff. These development activities can help familiarize caseworkers and administrators with new policies or procedures. Development activities also reinforce ownership over office operations.

Promising Practice: New Mexico's Process Management

Amid rising caseloads, low staffing levels, rising error rates, New Mexico successfully changed the way it processes SNAP cases. New Mexico recognized that although staff wanted to help SNAP applicants feed their families, they were limited by a flawed system. The State agency decided to attempt to change the way it processes SNAP cases by piloting the changes.

The State agency realized that instead of having each eligibility worker manage cases, they should implement teams charged with specific tasks. New Mexico created a two-track triage team, paperwork and processing team, and a maintenance team. The **TWO-TRACK TRIAGE TEAM** splits applicants into two categories: routine and low-risk cases (green) and complex cases (red). Triage staff schedule green cases for a 30-40 minute interview and red cases for

a 60-90 minute interview in order to more efficiently manage time. The **PAPERWORK AND PROCESSING TEAM** reduced the amount of paperwork generated by standardizing processes across offices to ensure that eligibility workers received the appropriate documents. The **MAINTENANCE TEAM** handles recertification and changes.

Through these changes, New Mexico eliminated appointments to satisfy clients and save workers time that would otherwise be lost from no-shows. New Mexico implemented a paperless system. New Mexico also designated specific staff at phone banks to perform intake, recertification interviews, and answer case questions.

The pilot office shows very promising results. The changes to process management lead to reductions in application wait times, reduced lobby wait times, and improved quality assurance. Application processing timeliness improved (from an average wait time of 20 days to 6.2 days). Many applicants can now complete their interaction with the local SNAP office in one visit. Staff appeared more satisfied and supervisors have the ability to mentor and be involved.

Application Triage & Targeted Interviews

APPLICATION TRIAGE is a process whereby eligibility workers quickly review and separate applications into categories in order to prioritize applications. These categories may include expedited, non-expedited, complicated, categorically eligible, or needing translation services. Screening and categorizing applications upon receipt helps caseworkers **PRIORITIZE APPLICATIONS** and allocate time appropriately. Some offices using a triage approach have caseworkers who specialize in complex versus categorically eligible applications. Other offices use the application triage approach to distribute work evenly across staff.

The benefit of application triage and targeted interviews is that staff can spend more time on error-prone cases. This approach can result in **BETTER CUSTOMER SERVICE** and ultimately improved access. In using this organizational model, State agencies and county office must balance the need for application assistance, case error rate and office efficiency.

Promising Practice: Florida's Application Triage

Florida uses application triage to designate applications as either "green track" or "red track" cases. Red track cases are prone to greater error at the outset and require a longer interview (e.g. cases with a history of program violation in the past). Green track cases are those prone to less error and interviews take less time.

Florida also trains its staff for specific application processing tasks. Staff members are specialized in interviews, determining eligibility or monitoring cases as opposed to one caseworker handling a case through certification. This has streamlined office operations in local offices.

Specialization of Tasks

Local offices may designate certain tasks to distinct units improve workflow. A **VERIFICATION UNIT** focuses exclusively on verification documents. This allows customers to get in and out of the office quickly, preserves caseworker time for interviews and case management, and improves office efficiency. Some offices have eligibility workers that specialize in complicated policy areas, such as immigration policy. The immigration policy expert works with applicants who have immigrant household members.

Caseload banking, or **CASELOAD SHARING**, is where workers share SNAP cases based on specialized functions or workload demands. Similar to the application triage described in Florida, this design allows workers to shift workload based on pressing office demands. This system can reduce stress for workers and is effective when caseloads are rising while staffing remains static. Local offices must consider the training needs of caseworkers and how accountability for case changes and management will be ensured.

ORGANIZATIONAL MODIFICATIONS

Mobile caseworkers

The intent of **MOBILE CASEWORKERS** is to bring SNAP offices into the community. A mobile caseworker visits multiple community sites (such as recreation centers, food banks, and religious institutions) to intake applications and conduct certification interviews. A mobile caseworker program may require additional resources and technology to implement the program successfully.

In Essex County, New Jersey Department of Citizen Services, Division of Welfare obtained a grant to purchase and convert a recreational vehicle (RV) into a four-room mobile SNAP office. In partnership with local food retailers, food banks, and others, county eligibility workers park the RV at a variety of locations county-wide to conduct day and weeklong onsite SNAP application and interview activities. The concept became so popular that other New Jersey welfare offices began to request use of the vehicle. Today, the mobile SNAP office travels statewide staffed by the respective county welfare office employees.

Location of Office

The location of a local office can have a large effect on how easy it is for low-income households to access SNAP benefits. A local office should be easily accessible by public transportation from all areas the office intends to serve. Local offices should also have easy parking and be accessible by major roads. Offices that are difficult to reach may deter low-income families from applying for and obtaining SNAP benefits. Although States may not have the ability to change the location of a current local office, States should consider public transportation, easy parking, and accessibility by major roads when determining new local office locations.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS can be powerful tools to improve program access. SNAP State and local agencies can collaborate with many organizations so low-income families who are eligible for SNAP are aware of the eligibility requirements and the process of applying for benefits. Collaboration between like-minded organizations already providing services to the low-income community enables States and local agencies to reach families where they are most comfortable. Below are some examples of successful partnerships.

The Minnesota Department of Human Services, in partnership with fifteen Community Action Agencies, used grant money to seed a project that streamlined the application process by incorporating initial SNAP applications, recertification applications, and change reporting into one system. Applicants gained access to a number of assistance programs, including SNAP.

The project helped establish the VISIONS application, which enabled community partners to assist potential clients enter information once and apply for numerous benefit programs at once. This project led to an increase in eligible seniors that received benefits by 12.7%, and by 27% for overall SNAP participation.

The State of Wisconsin is collaborating with local libraries and technical schools to reach the WORKING POOR. The State received a Federal grant in fall of 2009 to train librarians and staff at technical colleges in guiding potential SNAP applicants through the online application. Staff at these locations will not conduct interviews or determine eligibility of clients, but they will be able to offer information about SNAP eligibility requirements and how to apply.

> *Best practices of community partnerships:*
>
> → **S CREEN** all clientele for SNAP eligibility.
>
> → **B UILD RELATIONSHIPS** with potential clients prior to screening and application at community centers. In Minnesota, caseworkers introduced themselves and their agency to seniors at a dining center during an initial visit with subsequent follow ups to provide more information about the program and begin applications. This approach built trust and familiarity.
>
> → A high degree of **COORDINATION AND COMMUNICATION** is necessary to work successfully with community partners and program stakeholders.
>
> → Provide a **PROGRAM SUMMARY** with the main points to clarify any confusion over SNAP eligibility and participation.
>
> → **S TRONG TRAINING PROGRAMS** are necessary to equip community partner staff with accurate information of SNAP policies and procedures and ensure open communication.

KIOSKS

Application Kiosks

A PPLICATION KIOSKS are simple computers that contain SNAP applications and can be placed in local offices, community partners' offices, or any location frequented by those who may be eligible for SNAP, such as food banks. Application kiosks improve access to SNAP because applicants can apply for benefits in many locations without needing computer access. States that wish to implement application kiosks should make every attempt to ensure an applicant's privacy and consider maintenance costs.

Kiosks in local offices are beneficial because they can streamline local office procedures that benefit applicants, such as reducing the amount of time spent waiting in line, permitting clients to sign in themselves, and allowing clients to send their caseworkers messages. Further, some kiosks can be advanced enough to allow the client to report changes or apply through an online system.

Since some clients may not have experience using computers, States that implement kiosks should ensure that there are appropriate training materials or staff persons assigned to answer questions. Some States have allowed volunteer groups to station in lobbies to help clients use the kiosks.

Check-In Kiosks:

Some State agencies have elected to provide CHECK-IN KIOSK stations in the lobby to allow SNAP applicants to check themselves in for their appointments or other client services. With these kiosks, clients do not have to wait in line at reception and are able to see how long they will need to wait until they are able to see the eligibility work. The kiosks also allow the local office to track its workflow and wait times. States or local offices considering such kiosks should recognize that some client training may be necessary, especially for those who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with technology. They should also consider the initial and maintenance costs associated with the check-in kiosks.

INTEGRATED APPLICATIONS

INTEGRATED APPLICATIONS allow clients to apply for multiple programs with one streamlined application. Integrated applications can improve access because clients only need to complete one application and may learn they are eligible for programs that they were not previously aware. States must be cautious that integrated applications actually simplify the application process for applicants rather than require them to provide unnecessary information and documentation.

Under SNAP regulations, integrated applications must contain language that clearly affords clients the option of answering only those relevant to the program(s) they are applying for. This requirement is at 7CFR 273.2(b)(1)(ix). One way States do this is by identifying SNAP only questions. States may also design online applications that tailor the application based on the programs the client selects.

Example: Maryland Integrated Application

The Maryland Department of Human Resources (MDHR) collaborated with The United Way of Central Maryland to create a statewide web-based screening and application tool. The Service Access and Information Link (SAIL) allows clients to apply for SNAP, cash assistance, Medical Assistance and the Prescription Drug Benefit Program. Individuals or community-based organizations can access SAIL and complete benefit applications. SAIL users are able to apply for benefits outside office hours and apply for multiple benefits at one time.

MDHR worked with The United Way of Central Maryland to install computer devices and printers at United Way locations. The agency also worked with United Way to design posters and outreach materials for clients and obtained feedback to design a user-friendly web-system.

TECHNOLOGY IMPROVEMENTS

Overview

Call Centers

Electronic Application Filing

Joint Information Sharing

TECHNOLOGY IMPROVEMENTS

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE TECHNOLOGY

Technology provides States and localities with INNOVATIVE and WIDE-REACHING ways to improve program access. Technology can reach populations that may have difficulty visiting the local offices, such as working households, elderly or disabled households, and households with transportation difficulties.

Technology can also serve as a simple way to SHARE INFORMATION between programs or organizations that serve populations potentially eligible for SNAP. Information sharing can lead to improved access because States can identify potentially eligible participants and create a system for automatic enrollment.

While technology may have significant initial investment COSTS, the costs should diminish with time. In the end, technology may be a way to reduce long-term costs. Many of these technological strategies have the added bonus of decreasing the amount of staff time necessary for each case. In times of rising caseloads and shrinking State budgets, technological strategies may save States valuable time and money. Specifically, workers may spend less time on data entry, have fewer phone calls that can be easily answered by status updates or frequently asked questions, and have fewer important documents lost.

TECHNOLOGY STRATEGIES to improve program access may include:

- Call centers
- Automated Voice Response Systems
- Online applications & application tracking
- Electronic and/or telephonic signatures
- Online assistance & online case information
- Simplified applications
- Document imaging
- Online application tracking
- Service centers / kiosks with access to computers and internet access
- Check-in Kiosks
- Language services
- Screening tools
- Information/data sharing between multiple government agencies' systems
- Electronic case file management
- Telephone Interviews*
- Electronic notices*
- On-Demand Interviews*

All the above with an asterisk (*) currently require a waiver.

NEW *Call/Contact Centers*

CALL CENTERS/CONTACT CENTERS can improve program access and improve service delivery by streamlining phone calls. Call centers can be used for any or all of the following purposes: reporting changes, processing alerts, handling participant phone calls, conducting callbacks, and performing certification or recertification interviews. Call centers improve program access because applicants have one number to call for interviews and application questions. For call centers to improve program access effectively, SNAP households must know that they should call the call center and not their worker.

CALL CENTER TYPES

CENTRALIZED: one large facility handling all calls for the State

DECENTRALIZED: two or more facilities operating independently – each facility may handle certain regions or functions

VIRTUAL: two or more facilities, or home workers, virtually connected with seamless call routing and appears as a centralized operation

The advantages of call centers include immediate assistance to clients, the preservation of caseworkers' time for case management, and an equal caseload distribution across the State. When planning to establish a call center, States and counties should ensure the call center has sufficient resources to handle the anticipated workload. State agencies must also consider the technology costs, necessary software, training needs of call center staff, and how best to promote the call center to clients. The most successful call centers have implemented **DOCUMENT IMAGING**.

FNS has provided an extensive overview of call/contact centers in the FNS' Call Center/Contact Center Support for State: A Framework and Reference Guide. Any State considering a call or contact center (or making improvements to an existing center) should consider all advantages and considerations. Please see the most recent State Options report for more information about how States have implemented call or contact centers.

Example: Utah's Virtual Call Center and Web Portal

NEW

UTAH DEPARTMENT OF WORKFORCE SERVICES streamlined its administrative structure by consolidating eligibility operations across the State to improve operational efficiency and program access. The major changes include consolidating call center operations to a virtual call center that processes all cases in the State and an enhanced web portal allowing clients to conduct most of their business online.

All contact with an eligibility worker in the State is through the **VIRTUAL CALL CENTER** or via online chats. The virtual call center model allows over a third of the staff, from various geographical places, to work from home. All staff are connected virtually. Incoming calls are first passed through an interactive voice response (IVR) system. The IVR directs callers to appropriate queues and allows clients to report changes or obtain basic information about their case without having to speak with an eligibility worker. Clients can also complete their initial certification and recertification interviews through the call center. In addition to IVR technology, the Utah also has a centralized **DOCUMENT IMAGING** system allowing all staff to access case records.

Utah's **MYCASE WEB PORTAL** provides applicants the ability to pre-screen for SNAP and submit an application anywhere with internet access. myCase allows clients to submit their recertification forms and submit changes. Clients are also able to access notices electronically and lookup case information such as application status or benefit levels. An integrated chat features allows clients to speak with eligibility workers through a chat window if they have questions while accessing their case. Finally, myCase allows third-party access to allow community partners and other client advocates in order to assist clients who have trouble applying on their own.

The streamlined operations have dramatically altered how clients interact with SNAP. The shift from local offices to a virtual call center and web portal has improved access for those comfortable with technology. Local employment offices and partnerships with various community organizations across the State provide an alternative for clients looking for face-to-face interaction. These centers provide internet access and telephones to complete application and case functions. Staff members also provide application assistance.

Automated Voice Response System

Automated voice response systems, also known as Interactive Voice Response systems (IVR), provide clients with **24-HOUR ACCESS** to information about the program. An additional benefit of automated voice response systems is that workers are not interrupted to answer basic program questions and can focus on assisting clients with more complex needs. Counties and States wanting to use this technology should consider the programming and technology challenges of such a system.

Telephonic Signatures

TELEPHONIC APPLICATIONS AND SIGNATURES are a useful alternative to paper and electronic applications. The Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 approved the use of telephonic signatures, so no waiver is required for the use of this technology. States may use telephonic signatures to assist clients with the completion of their application. There are rules in place to ensure clients have an opportunity to correct information on their application and clients have

ten days to submit any changes to the information they provided over the phone. FNS released a policy memo on the use of telephonic signatures.[2]

Online Applications

State agencies have the option to provide potential applicants with ONLINE APPLICATIONS. Currently, the majority of States have statewide online applications. Most States allow applicants to submit an electronic or "e-signature." Other States allow applicants to apply online, but require applicants to submit an additional form with a pen signature before the State will authorize benefits.

Electronic applications improve program access because they are easily ACCESSIBLE to anyone with computer access. Online applications can improve program access to households who cannot easily get to a local office for an application, such as working households, households with difficulty obtaining transportation, households with disabled members, etc. Additionally, online applications allow households to submit their application at any time.

When online applications populate the data from the application directly into the State system, they reduce the amount of time workers must spend completing data entry. Some States have ways for clients to check the status of their online application, allowing clients to see whether their application has been approved without needing to contact the local office.

If the online application is not connected to the State data system, the online application will be less efficient because eligibility workers will have to complete additional data entry. Further, it may be difficult to complete an expedited case within the Federal time limits because the client is not in the office. State agencies should consider these factors when designing online application systems.

FNS has released guidance on online applications. The guidance should be useful to any State wishing to create or update an online application. Please see the most recent State Options report for more information about how States have implemented online applications.

Electronic notices waivers are very useful with any online application. Please see the waiver section for more information.

NEW Document Imaging

Many State agencies have decided to implement DOCUMENT IMAGING, a method of scanning documents to convert them into digital images and stored way to rely less on paper the process of scanning paper documents and converting them to digital images that are then stored in an electronic format. This technology allows State agencies to create paperless or less paper intensive certification systems, cutting the expenses and space requirements associated

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[2] This memo can be accessed at http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/rules/Memo/2008/082908.pdf

with the storage and maintenance of certification record documentation and increasing the efficiency of the certification process. This technology may be used to scan permanent verification documents (such as birth certificates or alien registration), temporary verification (such as wage stubs, rent receipts, or band statements), or entire case records (including signed applications, monthly report forms, or submitted change report forms).

JOINT INFORMATION SHARING

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

1. **Technology is always CHANGING**

✓ If connecting with another agency's system, ensure that there is constant communication between all parties.
✓ Failure to have consistent communication may lead to problems, such as changes to an older system that make a new system, still under development, incompatible with the old system.

2. **Keep the TARGET POPULATION in mind**

✓ Ensure the technology is easy for the SNAP population to use.
✓ If targeting a specific group, such as the elderly, ensure that the information is applicable and easy for the target group to read and understand.

INFORMATION SHARING between organizations that serve similar populations or have like missions is mutually beneficial. With information sharing, States and localities may be able to gain access to underserved populations. Joint computer systems, shared access to computer systems, and joint applications are all forms of information sharing.

An example of information sharing includes Combined Application Projects (CAP). For more information on CAPs, please look at "Combined Application Project (CAP)," under the heading, "Combined Application Project (CAP)"

Information sharing can be an innovative and POWERFUL tool to gain access to underrepresented groups in SNAP. Through advances in technology and streamlined applications, many States have been able to improve access to SNAP by improving administrative procedures between agencies (e.g. CAP). Sharing information forges alliances between programs and can be mutually beneficial to involved agencies.

Some partnerships may be with established Federal agencies, while other partnerships may be with smaller and less established community based

organizations. State agencies should be cautious of potential changes to systems not within their own control. Partnering agencies can switch systems, go out of business, or lose the resources necessary to maintain the project. Additionally, joint information sharing projects may have more upkeep costs than changes within one's own system; States may be faced with system updates that require additional funding. States should make every effort to be in constant communication with partners to ensure that there is a lead-time to prepare for system changes.

POLICY CHANGES AND WAIVERS

State Options

Waivers of the Regulations

Demonstration Projects

POLICY CHANGES AND WAIVERS

The Options and Waivers Summary Chart in Appendix A provides additional information on opportunities for improving access.

STATE OPTIONS

Overview

There are many policies that States can use to improve program access. These policy options provide States with flexibility to best meet the needs of their population. These options include changes to State policy as well as procedural changes. Many of these policies are State options and can be implemented when a State chooses. Other policies require additional approval from FNS through administrative waivers.

States may use the following **STATE OPTIONS** to improve program access, expand eligibility, simplify the enrollment process, reduce reporting requirements, and improve client retention:

State Options

- Simplified Reporting
- Simplified Definitions of Income and Resources
- Vehicle Exclusion Policies
- Simplified Housing Costs (Homeless)
- Simplified Standard Utility Allowance
- Simplified Determination of Deductions
- Simplified Food Stamp Program for TANF Households
- Narrow or Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility
- Transitional Benefits

For more information on these State options and which States have implemented these options, please review the most recent State Options Report and the Workload Management Matrix[3]

Simplified Reporting

Simplified reporting is an excellent way to improve program access. Simplified reporting reduces the household's reporting requirements; households are required to report changes in income between certifications only when total countable income rises above 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Simplified reporting can improve program access because households are not required to report changes frequently, making the process less burdensome on the household. Simplified reporting can also improve case retention and benefit stability because the reporting requirements are less burdensome.

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[3] A copy of the State Options Report can be found at: http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/government/Policy.htm
The Modernization Matrix can be found at: http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/government/pdf/matrix.pdf

Simplified Homeless Housing Costs

Some State agencies have elected to use a standard deduction of $143 per month for homeless households with some shelter expenses. This deduction improves access to vulnerable homeless households because it makes it unnecessary for them to itemize their specific expenses. It also is beneficial to State agencies because eligibility workers do not have to justify the level of the homeless shelter cost deduction.

Please see the most recent State Options report for more information about how States have implemented this option.

ALIGNING WITH OTHER PROGRAMS

Simplified Definitions of Income and Resources

States can align SNAP income and resource policy with Medicaid or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) policies. States may exclude any income not counted under Section 1931 of Medicaid and TANF unless the income is from wages, salaries, benefits from major assistance programs, regular payments from a government source, worker's compensation, child support payments, and other types determined countable to insure fairness in eligibility determinations. States may also exclude resources as long as the resources do not include cash, licensed vehicles, and readily available funds.

Please see the most recent State Options report for more information about how States have implemented this option. Further guidance can be found in the final rule on the simplified definitions of income and resources.[4]

Aligning Vehicle Rules

States have the option of aligning the SNAP vehicle rules with the vehicle rules used in their TANF programs if the policy would result in a lower attribution of household assets. This policy option allows State agencies to exclude the fair market value of all vehicles in the household entirely. Other States have implemented the policy option by excluding at least one vehicle per household or by raising the standard vehicle exemption (currently at $4,650 as of this writing) from the fair market value.

Please see the most recent State Options report for more information about how States have implemented this option.

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[4] The final rule on simplified definitions of income and resources can be found at:
http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2010/pdf/2010-815.pdf

Transitional Benefits

TRANSITIONAL BENEFITS provide States with the ability to help support families as they move off TANF cash assistance. These transitional benefits can be continued for up to five months in an amount equal to the amount received by the household prior to TANF termination with adjustments for the loss of TANF income. Certification periods can be extended through the last transitional month. States chose to implement transitional benefits in a variety of ways.

Please see the most recent State Options report for more information about how States have implemented this option.

Broad-based Categorical Eligibility

Broad-based categorical eligibility (BBCE) BBCE is an optional policy that allows States to align the asset test with that of their TANF program. Many households that have been hurt by the economic downturn and who have modest resources may be eligible for SNAP under BBCE. BBCE allows families to secure their hard earned assets, but still receive food assistance during tough economic times until they can get back on their feet. However, they still must have incomes low enough to qualify for a benefit and meet all other eligibility criteria.

Categorically eligible households must still meet all other SNAP eligibility requirements. These SNAP requirements include (but are not limited to) intentional program violations, failing to comply with work requirements, immigration status, students, and institutionalization.

WAIVERS OF THE REGULATIONS

Overview

Waivers of the SNAP regulations at 7CFR are also called administrative waivers. Waivers of the regulations require State agencies to seek approval from FNS by submitting a request through the FNS regional office. The regional offices forward the waiver requests to the national office for approval.

State agencies generally request waivers for one of three reasons:

- To increase State agency flexibility in regards to the administration of SNAP;
- To improve efficiency and effectiveness of their program; or
- To be consistent with the State program approved under title IV-A of the Social Security Act (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families or TANF).

Regulatory waivers may not be inconsistent with the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (the Act) or result in the material impairment or statutory or regulatory rights of recipients or potential recipients.

Examples of waivers of the regulations that improve access are:
- Reinstatement waiver
- On-demand interview
- Electronic notices waiver
- Averaging student hours waiver
- Face to face interview waiver
- Interview scheduling requirements waiver
- Waiver of recertification interview for elderly or disabled households with no earnings

This section describes several waivers of the regulations that improve access to SNAP. Information on the electronic notices waiver can be found under the Technology Section.

Telephone Interviews

States may request a waiver of the requirement that all households receive a face-to-face interview, either at initial certification or at recertification. In lieu of the face-to-face interview, interviews are conducted by telephone, although the State still retains the option of conducting a face-to-face interview if it is determined that one is appropriate, or if the applicant requests a face-to-face interview. Eligibility workers gather the same information and take the same actions during a telephone interview as during a face-to-face interview.

Telephone interviews can reduce the number of no-show interviews and reduce the number of clients waiting in a local office lobby. Telephone interviews are more convenient to clients, especially for those who work. State agencies may

also use this option to promote teleworking and alternative office designs. To promote telephone interviews, State agencies and county offices must ensure staff members have the proper equipment, such as headsets, that the office has sufficient phone lines, and that all security and privacy requirements are met.

Transitioning to Telephone Interviews:

→ **Address common myths and worker concerns.**
Policy changes require a shift in known and trusted practices. Addressing common concerns early in the process will ease implementation of a new policy or practice. For example, some State agencies find that workers are reluctant to conduct eligibility interviews over the phone because they believe clients are more likely to lie about information over the phone. State agencies can reassure workers that States with this option have not reported an impact on error rates after the implementation of telephone interviews.

→ **Familiarize staff with equipment.**
Workers will feel more comfortable with new equipment after having the chance to try it out and train with it. In one State, workers were initially skeptical about telephonic interviews. The State equipped each eligibility worker with a headset prior to statewide implementation of telephone interviews. After adjusting to the equipment, eligibility workers were more enthusiastic about telephone interviews

On-Demand Interviews:

States with **ON-DEMAND WAIVERS** must have a call center. Households are provided with a window of days to call the call center to complete the SNAP interview. The interview is not scheduled. The waiver can promote access because it provides the clients with the flexibility to call at their convenience.

Electronic Notices Waiver

Some States with electronic applications have requested waivers to issue notices electronically to households that request to receive email communication from the State agency. These States may issue the following notifications electronically: Notice of Missed Interview, Notice of Denial, Notice of Required Verifications, Notice of Eligibility, Notice of Expiration, Notice of Request for Contact, and Notice of Adverse Action. States are required to send notices related to overpayment claims, intentional program violations, and fair hearings through the Postal Service.

ELECTRONIC NOTICES WAIVERS (otherwise known as e-notice waivers) can benefit States by reducing postage costs. The waivers benefit SNAP households because the households can receive time-sensitive notices quickly and homeless households can receive notices without having a physical address.

States considering e-notice waivers must have a **SECURE WEBSITE** that households may log into to access the e-notices directly. The e-notices may not be sent directly to the household's email address because of security concerns. Households that opt to receive electronic notifications must be able to opt-out at any time.

DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

Overview

Demonstration projects provide State agencies with a way to test strategies to increase the efficiency of SNAP or to improve the delivery of benefits to eligible households. Unlike waivers of the regulations at 7 CFR (i.e. administrative waivers), demonstration projects may involve waving a specific section the Act in order to improve the way SNAP functions.

Demonstration projects must contain a thorough evaluation to determine effectiveness. Evaluations of demonstration projects should assess payment accuracy, program access, and customer service. FNS uses these evaluations to determine whether the project should continue or whether it will approve similar projects in other States. These evaluations can be quite extensive, so FNS cautions any interested State agency to expect devoting significant staff time towards research and generating reports.

The Act requires that demonstration projects be time limited; projects cannot last for longer than five years unless FNS approves an extension. Each demonstration project must be cost neutral to the Federal government. If SNAP benefits issued as part of the demonstration project exceed the benefits under normal program rules, the project is not cost-neutral. The State may adjust benefits or deductions to attain cost neutrality.

By statute, demonstration projects cannot alter the definition of timely service, deny benefits to an otherwise eligible household, provide benefits in cash, allow households to use benefits for anything other than the purchase of food, or change the gross income limit. Allowable projects must improve program administration, increase self-sufficiency among recipients, test welfare reform, or result in greater conformity with the rules of other programs.

This section describes four types of demonstration projects that improve program access: Elderly Simplified Application Projects, Standard Medical Deduction Projects, and Combined Application Projects (CAP).

Elderly Simplified Application Projects

These projects simplify SNAP applications for elderly households with no earned income. Projects include:
- No interview;
- Shortened application;
- Verification through data matches, no additional verification required unless information is questionable; and
- 36 month certification periods with annual contact.

Note: Citizenship must be verified.

These projects appeal to State agency staff and low-income elderly participants because the application process is simple and straight-forward. Most State

agencies centralize the application process because the target population is small and it is easier to train a small number of staff on this process.

Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina administer elderly simplified application projects.

Standard Medical Deductions Demonstrations

This demonstration project allows the State agency to provide a standard medical deduction to households with an elderly and/or disabled member that has out-of-pocket medical expenses greater than $35 per month. These projects simplify the verification of medical expenses and can provide a critical boost in benefits to vulnerable households.

In 2012, twelve States operated a standard medical deduction demonstration project: Arkansas, Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Texas, Virginia, Vermont and Wyoming.

Because some project households may get higher benefits with an SMD than they would with an actual medical deduction, the State agency must offset the cost of this project. State agencies typically maintain cost-neutrality for these projects by reducing the Standard Utility Allowance (SUA) by a few dollars.

FNS will work with State agencies interested in a standard medical deduction to identify an appropriate offset but here is a general overview of how cost-neutrality is determined:

SAMPLE COST-NEUTRALITY CALCULATION:

A. Proposed standard medical deduction	$170
B. Total number of SNAP households that qualify	100
C. Average medical expenses of households in line B	$101
D. Effect of using standard medical deduction (($170-$35)-$101)	$34
E. Monthly increase in SNAP benefit based on effect of the SMD ($34*.3 Benefit Reduction Rate), truncated	$10
F. Monthly cost of SMD (line B * line E)	$1000
G. Proposed SUA offset:	$10
H. Households receiving SUA	350
I. Households at Shelter Cap	25
J. Households affected by SUA offset	325
K. Savings with $10 SUA reduction (($10 *.3)* line J)	$975
L. Monthly Cost of Project (line F – line K)	$25

Combined Application Projects (CAPs)

Description

Combined Application Projects (CAPs) involve a partnership between the Social Security Administration (SSA), FNS and State SNAP agencies to streamline SNAP application procedures for elderly and disabled Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients. Information from the SSI application is used to generate a SNAP application and to calculate a standardized benefit. No further interview is required and households are certified for either 24, 36, or 48 months.

18 State agencies currently operate a CAP

CAPs must be cost neutral to the Federal government and evaluations are conducted annually. Also, CAPs cannot cause a significant number of recipients to receive much lower benefit levels than they would otherwise receive.

As of May 2013, eighteen States were operating CAPs (Arizona, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Virginia, and Washington).

There are two types of CAPs:

- **S TANDARD CAP:** If an SSI applicant or recipient wants to participate in the CAP, SSA asks the client addition questions during the SSI interview and an application is electronically sent to the State SNAP agency.

- **M ODIFIED CAP:** State SNAP agency uses the SSI/State Data Exchange (SDX) system to identify eligible CAP households. The State SNAP agency sends a completed application to the eligible household and clients have the option of signing the application and mailing it back to the State SNAP agency.

Benefits of CAPs

- **IMPROVE ACCESS TO SNAP AMONG THE ELDERLY AND DISABLED**: Historically, households with elderly and disabled members have been underrepresented in the SNAP recipient population. CAPs help improve the number of elderly and disabled individuals that have access to SNAP.

- **ONE-STOP SHOP:** The CAP application is easier for the SSI recipient to complete compared to applying for SNAP separately at the local SNAP office. Since all information is verified at the SSA office, the SNAP office does not need to follow-up with the household for additional information.

- **NO ADDITIONAL INTERVIEWS:** Since an interview was conducted at the SSA office, the local SNAP office does not need to complete an additional interview.

STATES WITH COMBINED APPLICATION PROJECTS

KEY
- No CAP
- Has a CAP
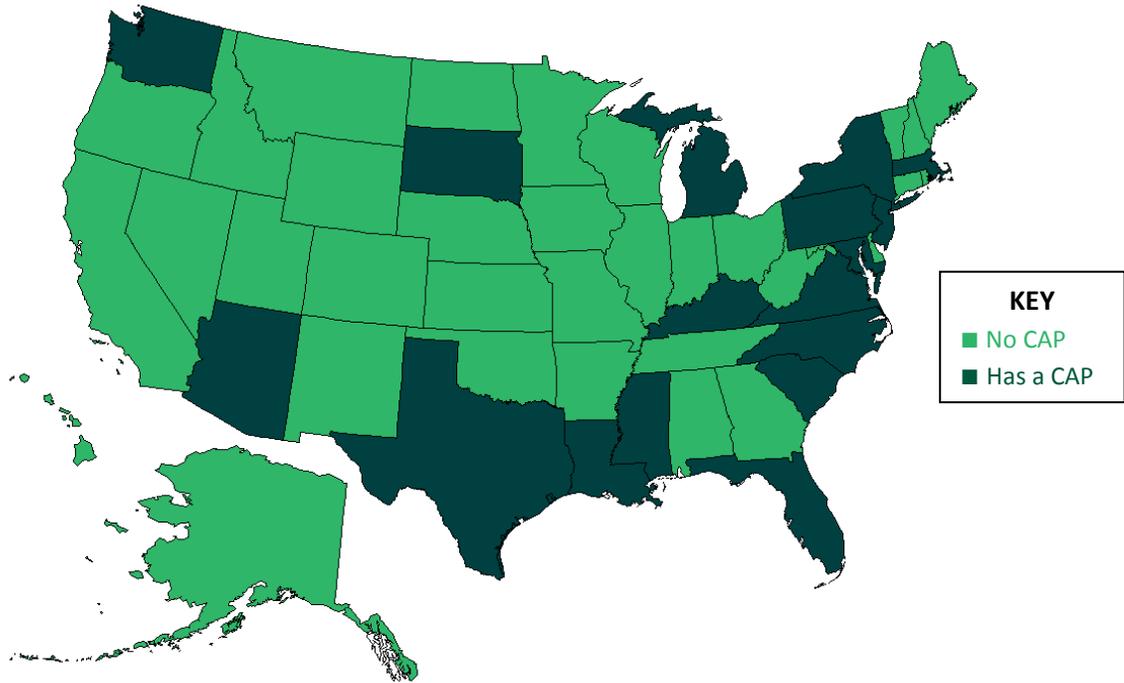
LESSONS LEARNED & FUTURE STEPS

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE STEPS

FUNDING FOR INNOVATIONS

There are several ways that State agencies may obtain money to fund their ideas to improve access.

Process and Technology Improvement Grants

The Food and Nutrition Act authorizes USDA to award $5 million annually in grants to State and local governments, as well as private non-profit organizations, public health groups and educational entities, for projects aimed at simplifying SNAP application and eligibility systems or improving the access of eligible households to SNAP benefits. FNS establishes annual priorities for these grants, frequently emphasizing community partnerships, projects to reach under-served populations and to improve the retention of eligible SNAP participants. FNS also encourages grant applicants to submit innovative proposals. Innovation is not exclusively an idea that has "never been done"; rather, an innovative project can be the first-time application of proven techniques or strategies in one locality that improved access in another community. The SNAP Process and Technology Improvement grants have supported a number of strategies that improve access:

- Mobile caseworkers and mobile technology
- Multi-benefit internet screening tools that interface (integrating applications)
- Online application systems
- Process Improvement Strategies
- Customer Call Centers
- Application Kiosks
- Partnering with Community Based Organizations to perform SNAP application assistance
- Document Imaging

Lessons Learned

Partnerships are vital to the success of any project.

Partnerships are crucial to the success of any project designed to improve program access. States should work with local community groups, advocacy groups, local officials, local offices, and SNAP participants to determine which steps would best improve program access in that State or community. Community groups can provide State agencies with insight into the local resources and needs. Without buy-in from the local community, projects designed to improve program access may do as well as they could.

Good communication is essential.

Good communication between States and collaborating partners is essential for the success of any project. Many projects designed to improve program access have been unable to reach completion because communication stalled. When States partner with community organizations, both parties should designate a specific project contact and schedule regular meetings to touch base and discuss changes and/or challenges that may affect the project.

Simple steps can improve access.

Although some methods of improving access to SNAP involve costly or major changes (such as systems changes), there are ways to improve access that are relatively simple for States and local offices to implement. Small steps, like changing the layout of the office, require few additional resources, but can successfully improve access.

Strong Leadership is crucial to the success of any change.

State agencies wishing to improve program access must ensure they have strong leaders committed to the success of program changes. Strong leaders foster an atmosphere of open communication that supports innovative ideas and encourages commitment from all involved parties. Without strong leadership, glitches in the plan or implementation of the project or policy can put its progress at risk.

Support staff through training and continued engagement.

Substantial changes to the way a State agency operates can drastically change the daily tasks of an eligibility worker. State agencies must pay careful attention to staff affected by policy or project changes to ensure that employees understand the importance of such changes. Continued engagement between State agencies and affected staff can reinforce the need for changes and support staff through the transition. State agencies must provide appropriate training to key staff affected by the changes or working on the project designed to improve program access. Training may include familiarizing staff with any new equipment or technology, answering questions, and reaffirming how the

changes or project will improve service delivery. Without adequate training and support, employee satisfaction may decline and staff may not be committed to the success of those changes.

LOOK TO OTHER STATE AGENCIES FOR ADVICE AND EXAMPLES.

Other State agencies are a great resource for State agencies interested in making changes to improve program access. State agencies can help other State agencies develop projects or policies, supply ideas, and provide advice. State agencies can help each other avoid drawbacks and support each other throughout the implementation of the policy or project. Travel funds are available to facilitate inter-State relationships.

FUTURE STEPS

States can easily implement some strategies to improve program access but others require more careful planning and resources. If you have questions about any of the strategies mentioned in this toolkit or would like more information on another State's project, please contact your FNS regional office. Your regional office will put you into contact with other States and help you design policies and procedures that best fit your State.

Ensuring that low-income households have access to the food assistance they need is one of FNS' top priorities. We encourage States and local offices to reexamine their current policies and procedures to identify methods that could improve their community's access to SNAP benefits.

We also encourage State agencies to use State exchange funds to travel to other States and learn how those States are improving access to SNAP in their communities.

Methods to improve program access are not static. As technology continues to advance and times change, promising new strategies will emerge. States should continually evaluate their policies and procedures to reduce barriers that restrict low-income families from applying for or receiving SNAP.

APPENDIX A

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

FNS offers a number of resources and tools that help States determine how to improve access to SNAP benefits.

- The "Improving SNAP Application Forms: An Assessment Guide" is a tool to help States revise their SNAP applications.[5]

- The SNAP Managing Workload Matrix focuses on policies and procedures for managing workloads during times of limited resources and rising caseloads. Many of the policies and procedures mentioned in this toolkit are also discussed in the Managing Workload Matrix; the Matrix describes advantages and considerations for each policy and procedure and identifies States currently using the policy or procedure.[6]

- FNS maintains the What's New segment of the SNAP website, where States and local offices can find policy updates and guidance memos. Although these memos are usually provided to State agencies, this website can be a good reference.[7]

- FNS offers annual opportunities for SNAP Process and Technology Improvement Grants. Grant announcements are usually announced in March and applications are in May or June.[8]

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[5] Link to Improving SNAP Application Forms: http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/government/pdf/assessment-guide.pdf
[6] Workload Management Matrix is available at: http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/government/pdf/matrix.pdf
[7] What's New web page: http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/whats_new.htm
[8] Information on FNS grant opportunities are available at http://www.grants.gov/

OPTIONS AND WAIVERS SUMMARY CHART

	Target Audience	Summary	Benefit
Policy Options			
Simplified Reporting	Stable households	Households are only required to report when income exceeds 130% of poverty between certification periods.	• Reduces State administrative burden • Improves case stability
Categorical eligibility	All; working poor	Extends eligibility to households receiving TANF benefits or TANF-funded non-cash benefit	• Streamlines administrative process
Telephonic signatures	All; elderly and/or disabled		• Reduces State administrative burden • Eases household burden
Regulatory Waivers			
Reinstatement	All; ongoing households that fail to recertify	Allows households whose cases have been closed to forego a second application and interview provided they submit any missing forms or verification within 30 calendar days of the date the case was closed	• Reduces State administrative burden and prevents churning • Eases household burden
Face-to-Face Interview	All; elderly, disabled, and working households	Waives the State agency requirement to document household hardship prior to conducting a phone interview	• Eases household burden
On-Demand Interview	All; working households	Waives the State agency requirement to schedule an interview, allowing households to call anytime within specified hours for interviews	• Eases State administrative and household burden

Electronic Notices	Households that prefer the use of email to paper mail	Waives the State agency requirement to send written notices	• Reduces State administrative burden and cost • Improves access to case information for clients who prefer email
Averaging student hours	Working students	Allows students who work at least 80 hours per month to average those hours in order to meet the 20 hours per week minimum requirement	• Eases household burden
Waiver of recertification interview for elderly or disabled households with no earned income	Households in which all members are elderly or disabled and have no earned income	Allows the State agency to waive the recertification interview for households in which all members are elderly or disabled and have no earned income	• Eases State administrative and elderly or disabled household burden
Demonstration Projects			
Elderly Simplified Application Projects	Elderly and/or disabled with no earned income	Simplifies the application and verification process; waives the interview; extends certification to 36 months	• Simplifies application process • Eases burden on elderly/disabled households
Standard Medical Deductions	Elderly and/or disabled	Provides a standard medical deduction to households with medical expenses greater than $35	• Reduces verification burden for State and household • May increase benefits for elderly and/or disabled
Combined Application Projects	SSI recipients (elderly and/or disabled)	Streamlines application process for SSI recipients; may provide a standardized or simplified benefit amount	• Eases household burden