

IDENTIFYING PROGRAM COMPONENTS AND PRACTICES THAT INFLUENCE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) APPLICATION PROCESSING TIMELINESS (APT) RATES (SUMMARY)

Background

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest program in the domestic hunger safety net. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) oversees SNAP at the Federal level, while the States carry out the day-to-day administration and are responsible for certifying households and issuing benefits.

An important aspect of SNAP administration is ensuring that eligible households have timely access to SNAP benefits. The law entitles all eligible households to SNAP benefits within 30 days of application, or within 7 days, if they are eligible for expedited service. FNS monitors the States' application processing timeliness (APT) rates. While States are required to process all SNAP applications within the 7-day and 30-day standards, FNS considers an APT rate of 95 percent or above as acceptable Timely performance, an APT rate of 90 percent to 94.99 percent as Untimely performance, and an APT rate below 90 percent as Very Untimely performance. FNS requires States with Very Untimely APT rates to develop and implement a corrective action plan and may subject such States to financial penalties.

The number of States that were Timely doubled between Fiscal Years (FY) 2012 and 2015 (Table 1). However, only 10 States were Timely in FY 2015.

Table 1. State Application Processing Timeliness (APT) Status by Fiscal Year (FY)

Fiscal Year (FY)	Number of States by APT Status		
	Timely	Untimely	Very Untimely
FY 2012	5	19	27
FY 2013	7	21	23
FY 2014	3	19	29
FY 2015	10	22	19

Through a survey of all 50 States and the District of Columbia (N=51), this study sought to identify factors associated with timely application processing and to determine best practices for facilitating high APT rates. The study objectives were: (1) describe SNAP policy and operational procedures, (2) identify SNAP management practices that impede or facilitate APT, and (3) describe associations between SNAP management practices and APT.

Methods

Two groups of respondents were surveyed: (1) SNAP directors in 51 States (State Survey), and (2) SNAP managers in local offices in five selected States – Connecticut, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nevada, and Washington (Local Survey).

The State Survey collected information on the State's use of administrative waivers, demonstration projects, policy options, business process reengineering, and workflow analyses. The Local Survey queried local office managers about office operational procedures, specifically procedures for receiving applications and entering into their eligibility system. Both surveys asked about modernization initiatives; use of performance-based incentives or penalties; changes in actions, practices, or processes; and potential barriers that could affect APT. The period covered by the surveys was 2012 through 2015.

Findings

Between FY 2012 and FY 2015, States demonstrated improvements in SNAP APT performance. The number of States that achieved Timely APT status doubled from 5 to 10 States (Table 1) and the mean APT rate increased by 3.5 percentage points from 86.68 percent to 90.18 percent (Table 2). More than half of the 51

States demonstrated some improvement in their APT rate during this time.

Table 2. Mean Application Processing Timeliness (APT) Rates by Fiscal Year (FY)

	Mean APT Rates for 50 States and the District of Columbia			
	FY 2012	FY 2013	FY 2014	FY 2015
Mean (percent)	86.68	87.71	86.93	90.18

The study did not find any specific management practice that led to a statistically significant difference in APT rate. These findings of no difference may have resulted in part from the relatively small sample sizes available for statistical analysis when comparing States with and without a particular practice by APT status. Additionally, the study did not include caseload-to-staffing ratios, which may be an important contributor to APT rates, because States could not uniformly provide these data.

Some States strategies to prioritize timeliness which were associated with high APT rates: (1) establishing clear performance targets or goals for improving APT, (2) holding workers accountable for overdue cases in the worker’s performance reviews or decisions about the worker’s employment status, (3) training staff about new application processing procedures, and (4) monitoring APT performance either weekly or monthly.

States reported several practices they felt improved APT. States most frequently described the Telephone Interview in lieu of the Face-to-Face Interview Waiver as having a positive effect on APT. States also felt implementing Business Process Reengineering (BPR) initiatives, workflow analyses, or process management strategies resulted in workflow improvements in existing SNAP certification processing procedures. Some States also transitioned toward new task-based certification processing models to improve timeliness.

States reported they felt modernization initiatives could improve APT. The four most salient were: (1) Modernize computer system (seven States); (2) Automate verification in real time (six States); (3) Implement online applications/mobile applications (three States); and (4) Automate case tracking (three States).

For More Information

Drilea, S., Shusterman, G., Marcotte, A., Pearson, C., and Wilson, H. (2018). Identifying Program Components and Practices That Influence Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Application Processing Timeliness (APT) Rates. The SNAP Timeliness Study: final report. Prepared by WRMA, Inc. for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, February 2019. Available online at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/ops/research-and-analysis>