

FEBRUARY 2017

SCOPE | State

PROGRAM | Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

PRACTICE | Pursuant to the USDA final rule effective March 7, 2017, state agencies may use a telephone interview for SNAP applicants at initial application and recertification unless the client requests a face-to-face interview. By offering telephone interviews, states can reduce client and administrative burdens when applying or recertifying for SNAP.

WHY | Phone interviews result in less red tape for clients and state agencies, which means SNAP applications are more efficiently processed, but without adverse impacts on SNAP payment accuracy rates.

According to a [U.S. Government Accountability Office \(GAO\) study](#),¹ SNAP officials and community partners found that phone interviews are particularly helpful for the elderly and working families because they:

- ✓ reduce transportation hassles;
- ✓ eliminate barriers for applicants who cannot get to an office due to child care, work responsibilities, or mobility issues; and
- ✓ remove the stigma of visiting a public assistance office.

Agencies also benefit because they can:

- ✓ reduce administrative costs;
- ✓ decrease traffic flow in offices, which frees up staff to cover extended service hours and call centers; and

- ✓ interview more applicants, and with fewer schedule disruptions caused by no-shows.

By cutting down on the number of no-shows, states can improve their record of acting on new and recertified applications in a timely manner under federal rules.

BACKGROUND | Prior to the new final rule providing telephone interviews as a state regulatory option, all 50 states, as of 2010, had obtained waivers from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (USDA-FNS) to lift the requirement that all interviews for initial applications or recertification of SNAP be conducted face-to-face without the need for the local SNAP agency to document a hardship reason.

USDA rules now allow state agencies to use a telephone interview without the need for the state to ascertain hardship or obtain a USDA waiver. State agencies still must provide a face-to-face interview if requested by the household. State agencies that opt to provide telephone interviews in lieu of face-to-face interviews must specify this in their SNAP state plan of operation and describe the type of households that will be routinely offered a telephone interview. If a state does not adopt the option to make telephone interviews generally available, it still must provide for such an interview for individuals who meet the hardship criteria at the household's option. In any event, state agencies must provide Limited English Proficient (LEP) households with bilingual personnel during the interview.

SPOTLIGHT | California now requires all counties to offer phone interviews, a practice supported by the Western Center on Law and Poverty, California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA), and other anti-hunger groups. CFPA hosts a website called “The 411 on Phone Interviews in California,” as a resource for SNAP administrators, program analysts, and advocates across California implementing the waiver of the face-to-face interview. The “411” website includes sample documents, frequently asked questions, myths and facts, and county and community resources on phone interview policy.

TIP | Check out [USDA’s SNAP Workload Management Matrix²](#) for information on your state’s adoption of phone interviews.

KEY STEPS | Check the status of your state’s interview policy outlined in its SNAP state plan of operation to determine the parameters of its use of telephone interviews in lieu of face-to-face interviews.

To operationalize the adoption of phone interviews, efforts should focus on:

- working with states to fully implement waivers by surmounting barriers such as a limited capacity to train staff, the cost of purchasing equipment, the need to hire operators, and the need to educate potential applicants about the transition from face-to-face interviews to telephone interviews;
- advising potential applicants on how they can schedule and prepare for telephone interviews; and
- accelerating implementation efforts by building on the experiences of successful state adopters.

CHALLENGES |

- Applicants do not always receive clear information of the date and time of their phone interview;
- Local SNAP offices do not always confirm contact information or applicants’ preferred timeframes to be reached; and
- Local SNAP offices can be hard to reach (e.g., phone lines are busy, calls are dropped, voicemail boxes are full, or hold times are prohibitively long).

All of these can lead to households being denied benefits.

LESSONS |

- Supply caseworkers with special training and equipment;
- Ensure that phone lines are functioning properly and can handle the required volume of calls;
- Establish and communicate clear quality-control policies so that, regardless of how the interview is conducted, the same information and verification process will be used;
- Give applicants clear instructions for phone interviews;
- Offer interpreters for households with limited English proficiency and offer appropriate communications technology for persons with disabilities (e.g., video relay service);
- Guarantee a face-to-face interview if anyone prefers to share sensitive information in person, or if they lack a phone;
- Monitor implementation, including analyzing case approvals and denials to identify any problematic trends;
- Create call/contact centers to receive a high volume of calls and offer a range of services (e.g. office location, office hours) to more complex information (e.g., intake and change reporting);
- Encourage call/contact centers to offer “on-demand” interviews, which is when an applicant can set their own appointment, thus increasing efficiency, reducing call wait times, and providing the client with scheduling flexibility; and
- Provide sufficient staffing to handle prescheduled and “on-demand” interviews.

MORE RESOURCES

- Telephone Interviews at Initial Certification and Recertification §§ 273.2(e)(2) and 273.14(b)(3): Final Rule as Reported in *1/6/17 Federal Register*.³
- *Final rule*⁴ as reported in January 6, 2017, Federal Register.

Find out Information for Your State on Phone Interviews:

- *SNAP Workload Management Matrix*⁵ has information on which states have call/contact centers, and offer phone interviews and on-demand interviews. Information is updated every few years.

Resources to Make Your Case:

- FRAC's *SNAP webpage*
- CFPA webpage, *The 411 on Phone Interviews in California*⁶
- *Call Center/Contact Center Support for States: A Framework and Reference Guide*⁷

For technical assistance, contact:

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For more on ending hunger, read FRAC's *A Plan of Action to End Hunger in America*.

ENDNOTES

¹U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2007). *Food Stamp Program: Use of Alternative Methods to Apply for and Maintain Benefits Could be Enhanced by Additional Evaluation and Information on Promising Practices*. Available at: <http://www.gao.gov/assets/270/260290.pdf>. Accessed on December 3, 2016.

²U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2013). *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Workload Management Matrix*. Available at: <http://origin.drupal.fns.usda.gov/snap-workload-management-matrix>. Accessed on November 28, 2016.

³U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2017). *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): Eligibility, Certification, and Employment and Training Provisions of the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008*. Available at: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2017-01-06/pdf/2016-30663.pdf>. Accessed on January 9, 2017.

⁴U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2017). *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): Eligibility, Certification, and Employment and Training Provisions of the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008*. Available at: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2017-01-06/pdf/2016-30663.pdf>. Accessed on January 9, 2017.

⁵U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2013). *SNAP Workload Management Matrix*. Available at: <http://origin.drupal.fns.usda.gov/snap-workload-management-matrix>. Accessed on March 5.

⁶California Food Policy Advocates. (n.d.). *The 411 on Phone Interviews*. Available at: <http://bit.ly/TUHWWn>. Accessed on March 5, 2016.

⁷U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2011). *Call Center/Contact Center Support for States - A Framework and Reference Guide*. Available at: http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/call_center.pdf. Accessed on March 5, 2016.