

2010

Program Access Toolkit



Supplemental
Nutrition
Assistance
Program

Putting Healthy Food
Within Reach

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

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INTRODUCTION

Objectives

Outreach vs. Access

Use of this Toolkit

INTRODUCTION TO THE ACCESS TOOLKIT

OBJECTIVES

PROGRAM ACCESS is critical to the success of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; formerly the Food Stamp Program). Easy access to SNAP applications, local offices, and eligibility requirements is essential to connecting people with SNAP benefits. Improved program access helps decrease barriers to participation and increase the number of people who apply and are found eligible for SNAP, which can ultimately lead to increased food security among low-income families.

For the purposes of this **TOOLKIT**, we define program access as the quality and efficiency of operations within the SNAP local office that improve the connection of eligible persons to SNAP. Applying for benefits, gathering verification, participating in interviews, submitting change reports, and completing recertifications can affect whether eligible families enroll in and remain on SNAP. The sensitivity of policies and practices of local offices to the needs of these households can influence whether they will apply for SNAP or continue their cases. Therefore, the activities of local offices may increase or decrease program access.

While many discussions of SNAP program 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 encourage clients to continue receiving SNAP benefits as long as they remain eligible.

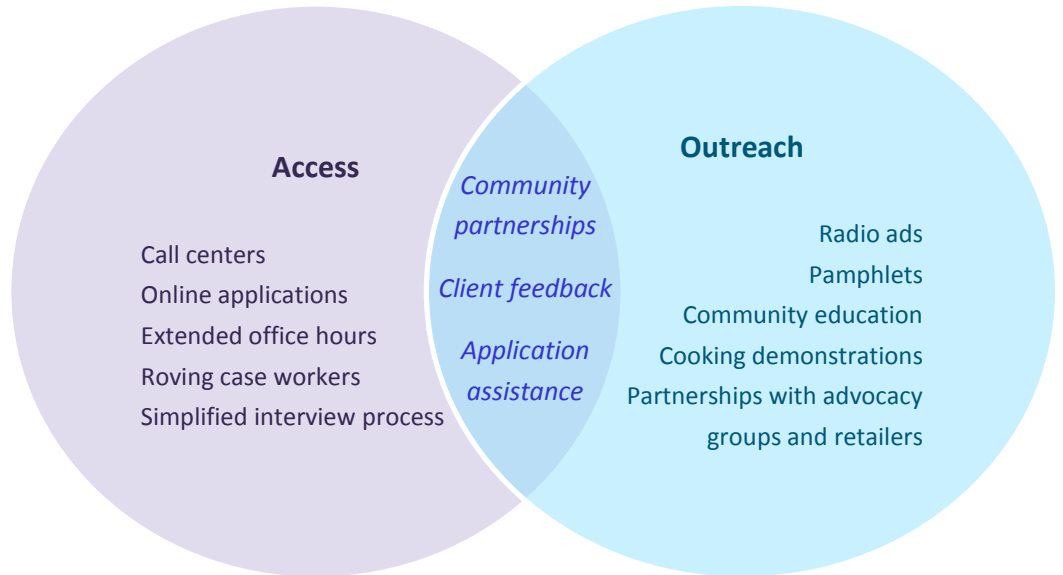
OUTREACH VS. ACCESS

Program access and **OUTREACH** are commonly confused. While some policies or procedures may be classified as both program access and outreach, program access and outreach are different. Outreach increases the reach of SNAP by enhancing awareness of the program's existence, eligibility requirements, and benefits. Outreach activities focus on recruitment, advertising, and education. By contrast, increasing program access involves changing local offices to decrease barriers in applying for SNAP so eligible households receive benefits and can easily maintain their cases. Operations that increase program access include activities such as streamlining office procedures or using technology (e.g. electronic applications or call centers) to improve the application process.

Program access focuses on improving internal processes and procedures to make it easier to apply for benefits, as well as enabling eligible people to receive

benefits. Examples of increased access to SNAP benefits may include extended office hours, out-stationed workers online applications, improved application forms, and additional accommodations to applicants with language barriers or disabilities. For more information on access and outreach activities, please see the below figure.

FIGURE 1: ACCESS COMPARED TO OUTREACH ACTIVITIES AND POSSIBLE OVERLAP



USE OF THIS TOOLKIT

State agencies can use this toolkit to help identify methods to expand program access in their communities. This toolkit provides State agencies and local offices with specific examples of policies and procedures that they can use to improve program access. State agencies 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 **VITAL** part of SNAP.

This toolkit provides various methods for increasing 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 encourage clients to apply for SNAP benefits.

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. Measures to improve local office processes include extended office hours, transportation vouchers and 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
- Transportation Vouchers
- Translation Services
- Workflow Analysis
- Application Triage
- Targeted Interviews
- Interviews by Appointment
- Telephone Interviews
- Home Visit Interviews
- Automated Voice Response Systems
- Partnerships with Community Organizations to enter application information and arrange interview (See *Community Partner Interviewer Projects* for more information)

State agencies should reexamine current procedures to determine which office procedures best increase 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. Family friendly spaces and careful budgeting of time can increase the likelihood that low-income families will come to the local SNAP office and apply for benefits.

Extended office hours

EXTENDED OFFICE HOURS increase 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

New York City has made some of its SNAP offices open later to accommodate working households. In each of the five boroughs, the city has one office with extended hours. These offices are open until 6pm on most weekdays, 7 pm one day a week and from 9am to 5pm on Saturday. All other offices are open Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 4pm. The extended weekday hours and additional weekend hours increase 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 and enough room in the aisles for strollers or wheelchairs.

Onsite childcare & transportation vouchers

CHILDCARE increases access to SNAP by allowing clients with young children to get to the local SNAP office without having to worry about 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

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.

interviews and maximize a caseworker's time with the client by providing children with space to play.

TRANSPORTATION VOUCHERS can be a means to get vulnerable populations in the door of a SNAP office. Vouchers provide needy clients the means to return for interviews or to return documents for verification. Local offices in Baltimore, MD assist applicants with travel by providing bus vouchers for return visits.

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.

Workflow Analysis

STAFF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT for local offices can increase access, improve efficiency, and streamline operations. This process is often referred to as workflow analysis. Workflow analysis 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. Workflow analysis 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 in the lobby and red cases for a 60-90 minute interview in a back office. 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.

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 (i.e. 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.

Automated Voice Response System

Automated voice response systems 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. As of fall 2008, thirteen states were using automated voice response systems.

ORGANIZATIONAL MODIFICATIONS

Roving caseworkers

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

Tennessee used a SNAP Participation Grant to implement a roving caseworker program in 2005. Research prior to the project revealed several barriers for potential applicants, such as transportation, costs, time, and misunderstandings about eligibility. The Tennessee Roving Caseworker Project was designed to reduce the barriers of hard-to-reach populations by using a mobile office. Caseworkers visited client's homes and communities, equipped with cell phones and wireless enabled laptops. An evaluation of the project demonstrated a high degree of satisfaction for both clients and caseworkers. The program required funding beyond the State budget, however, and it is not likely to be a long-term solution without additional funding.

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.

POLICY CHANGES

Overview of State Options

Policy Changes

Procedural Changes

POLICY AND PROCEDURAL CHANGES

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. 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. These options include changes to State policy as well as procedural changes.

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

Policy Changes

- Simplified Reporting
- Simplified Definitions of Income and Resources
- Vehicle Exclusion
- Simplified Housing Costs (Homeless)
- Simplified Standard Utility Allowance
- Simplified Determination of Deductions
- Simplified Food Stamp Program for TANF Households
- Waiver of Face-to-Face Interview
- Waiver of Expedited Case Interviews
- Categorical Eligibility
- Transitional Benefits

Procedural Changes

- Electronic Application Filing
- Call Centers
- Document Imaging
- Telephone Interviews

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](#)²

² 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>

POLICY CHANGES

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 increase 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.

Simplified Definitions of Income and Resources

States can align SNAP income and resource policy with Medicaid or TANF policies. States may exclude funds from income if Medicaid and TANF do not count the funds as income, unless the income is 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. As of this writing, 36 State agencies have simplified definitions of income and resources. Further guidance can be found in the [final rule](#) on the simplified definitions of income and resources.³

FNS encourages all State agencies to adopt **broad-based categorical eligibility** to improve program access and simplify the administration of SNAP.

Categorical Eligibility

EXPANDING CATEGORICAL ELIGIBILITY is another promising way to enhance access to SNAP and improve program operations. States can use expanded categorical eligibility to create a de facto increase in the asset and gross income limits. Expanding categorical eligibility can make more low-income families eligible for benefits and promote asset accumulation among all low-income households. In addition to improving families with low incomes access to SNAP, expanding categorical eligibility can simplify State policies and reduce the potential for errors.

Current regulations require State agencies to make households categorically eligible for SNAP if the household receives a cash benefit, such as public assistance or Supplemental Security Income. FNS refers to this type of

³ The final rule on simplified definitions of income and resources can be found at: <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2010/pdf/2010-815.pdf>

categorical eligibility as traditional categorical eligibility. The regulations also provide State agencies with the option to implement broad-based or narrow categorical eligibility.

BROAD-BASED CATEGORICAL ELIGIBILITY refers to the policy that makes most, if not all, households categorically eligible for SNAP because they receive a non-cash TANF/MOE funded benefit or service, such as an informational pamphlet or 800-number. **NARROW CATEGORICAL ELIGIBILITY** refers to the policy that makes a smaller number of households categorically eligible for SNAP because they receive a TANF/MOE funded benefit, such as childcare or counseling.

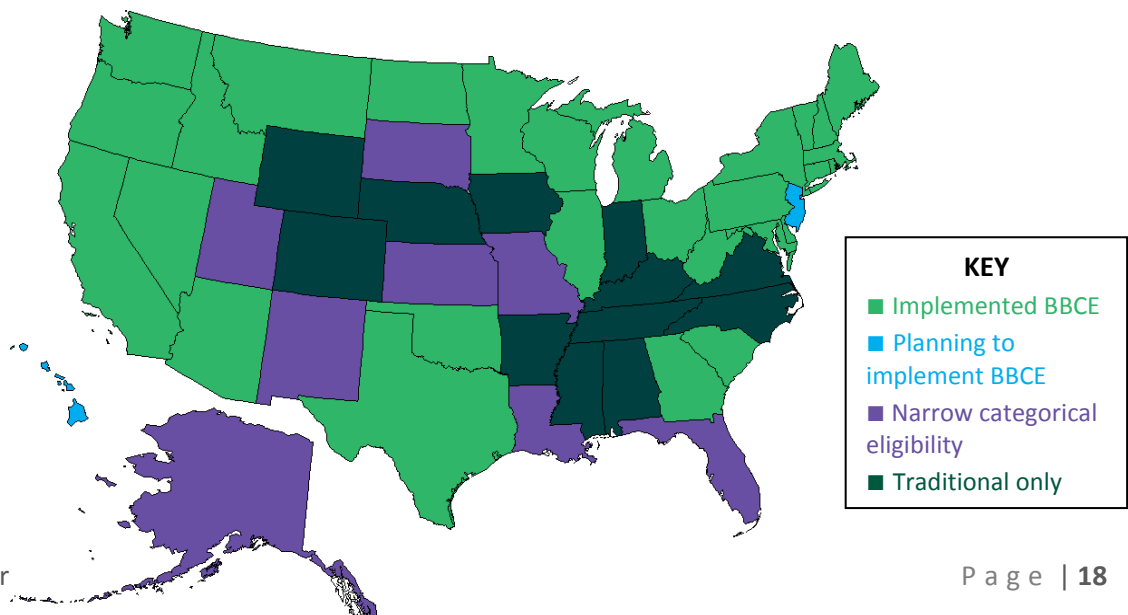
Through the TANF program used to confer categorical eligibility, State agencies may create a de facto increase in the gross income and asset limits. Under categorical eligibility, income and resources are deemed from the TANF program's limits. Many State agencies that have implemented categorical eligibility have eliminated the resource limit altogether.

Broad-based categorical eligibility cannot limit eligibility; it does not impose a gross income limit on seniors and disabled households. Households with seniors and disabled members who are not eligible for the TANF program used to confer categorical eligibility may apply for SNAP under regular program rules.

Categorically eligible households must still meet 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.

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) encourages all States to consider implementing broad-based categorical eligibility as a way to improve program access and simplify the administration of SNAP. We are pleased that over half of States have implemented broad-based categorical eligibility, as of the fall 2009. For more information on which State agencies have implemented broad-based categorical eligibility, please see the map below.

STATES WITH BROAD-BASED AND NARROW CATEGORICAL ELIGIBILITY



Broad-based categorical eligibility can provide SNAP benefits to families with income slightly above the regular gross income limits, but with high expenses. Families with incomes above 130% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPG) may still receive a meaningful SNAP benefit. The table below shows that households with high expenses (shelter costs, dependent care expenses, and medical costs) can receive a significant SNAP benefit.

Household Size	Gross Income	Deductions	Benefit
4 person	135% FPL	Shelter(\$950)	\$128.58
3 person	135% FPL	Medical (\$100) Shelter (\$750)	\$117.81
3 person	150% FPL	Shelter (\$1,100)	\$95.41
4 person	165% FPL	Shelter(\$1,200) Dependent Care (\$100)	\$50.33

If you are interested in implemented broad-based categorical eligibility, please contact your regional office for more information.⁴

FNS promotes broad-based categorical eligibility because it:

1. Benefits States and families hurt by the economic crisis
2. Supports States with rising caseloads and shrinking budgets
3. Expands the reach of SNAP by increasing access

Implementing broad-based categorical eligibility can help States:

1. Simplify the administration of SNAP
2. Decrease time used to verify resources
3. Reduce errors

⁴ For more information, please visit: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/rules/Memo/2009/093009.pdf>

PROCEDURAL CHANGES

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 county 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, and the office has sufficient phone lines.

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 option have not reported an impact on error rates after the implementation of telephone interviews.

→ **Familiarize staff with equipment.**

Headsets are crucial. Workers in Alabama were initially skeptical about telephonic interviews. The State equipped each eligibility worker with a head set prior to statewide implementation of telephone interviews. After adjusting to the equipment, eligibility workers were more enthusiastic about telephone interviews

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.⁵

In the fall of 2009, the State of Pennsylvania received an outreach grant to demonstrate the use of telephonic applications and signatures to increase SNAP access for elderly adults. Elderly adults in the Philadelphia metro area will be the target audience. Applicants will contact a **CALL CENTER**, complete their application over the phone, and verbally sign the application. The call center will then send applicants a copy of the application information to allow for any changes or corrections.

For more information on electronic applications, call centers, and document imaging, please see the following section entitled, "**TECHNOLOGY IMPROVEMENTS.**"

⁵ This memo can be accessed at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/rules/Memo/2009/020309.pdf>

TECHNOLOGY IMPROVEMENTS

Overview

Call Centers

Electronic Application Filing

Joint Information Sharing

TECHNOLOGY IMPROVEMENTS

OVERVIEW

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 increased access because States can identify potentially eligible participants and create a system for automatic enrollment.

Although some households eligible for SNAP may not have access to a computer with internet access, individuals can access public computers at local libraries, community centers, and community based organizations. Additionally, some States have service centers or kiosks with computers and internet access so clients can apply for benefits or check the status of their applications if they do not have access to a personal computer.

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 answering system
- Online applications
- Simplified applications
- Document imaging
- Electronic signatures
- Telephonic signatures
- Online assistance
- Online application tracking
- Service centers or kiosks with access to computers and internet access

- Language services
- Screening tools
- Information/data sharing by connecting different agencies' systems
- Internal information sharing capacity to shift cases between counties and balance workload

CALL CENTERS

CALL CENTERS can increase program access by streamlining phone calls to local offices. 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 increase program access because applicants have one number to call for interviews and application questions. For call centers to increase program access effectively, SNAP households must know that they should call the call center and not their worker.

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, and training needs of call center staff.

Example: San Francisco 2006 Participation Grant

SAN FRANCISCO HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY, in partnership with various community-based and faith-based organizations, received a \$1 million Program Participation Grant from FNS to establish a phone bank, a web-based screening and application tool, and remote enrollment and recertification sites in neighborhoods throughout the city. With the grant, San Francisco created a food assistance call center, established a web-based application, and strengthened community partnerships.

The **PHONE BANK** provides recertification services to on-going participants and information, pre-screening, and application services to potential participants. After San Francisco implemented the call center, project administrators worked to ensure the call center operated efficiently by indentifying problem areas and adjusting phone bank operations. These improvements included ensuring there were adequate bilingual workers throughout day, improving the poor quality of call recordings, determining the most efficient number of intake workers and the number of workers who work with current clients.

San Francisco created their **ONLINE APPLICATION**.⁶ The web-based screening and application tool allows individuals to submit an application on-line. The electronic application is available in English, Spanish, and Chinese.

⁶ For more information on San Francisco's online application, please visit <https://www.benefitssf.org>

Applicants can apply for SNAP and Medicaid using the same online application and download applications for WIC, School Meals, Earned Income Tax Credit, and the Working Families Credit.

ELECTRONIC APPLICATION FILING

State agencies have the option to provide potential applicants with **ONLINE APPLICATIONS**. As of July 2009, 21 States had statewide online applications; three States have online applications for only specified counties. 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 increase program access because they are easily **ACCESSIBLE** to anyone with computer access. Online applications can increase 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, etc. Additionally, online applications allow households to submit their application at any time.

Online applications 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. In Florida, the majority of SNAP applications are submitted online. To address the challenge of expedited interviews, the State received a waiver to issue benefits to expedited cases prior to the eligibility interview.⁷

⁷ The Florida waiver was approved in September of 2009 for a period of 18 months. The waiver is limited to those households who meet the criteria for expedited service. Under the terms of this waiver, the State agency will attempt to contact expedited benefit households at application. This waiver only applies to those applicants whose identity can be verified and are submitting their initial application. For more information, contact your FNS Regional Office.

JOINT INFORMATION SHARING

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.

Examples of information sharing include participation grants and Combined Application Projects (CAP). For more information on CAPs, please look at “Combined Application Projects (CAP),” under the heading, “Demonstration Projects.”

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 increase 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 sudden and drastic changes do not occur.

Successes & Roadblocks for Joint Projects

With funding from a 2006 Participation Grant, the State Information Technology Consortium (SITC) attempted to develop a computerized joint application system with the Virginia Department on Aging Meals on Wheels Program. After SITC had developed their automated system, the Virginia Department on Aging switched system vendors. Unfortunately, SITC’s developed system could not be easily integrated into the new system. Developing a new system was too costly and the project was not able to create a joint application.

Despite the abovementioned setbacks, SITC successfully implemented an automated data sharing system with the Virginia Legal Aid Society. The system uses data from the Legal Aid’s phone and online intake systems to populate SNAP applications. The system then transmits the applications to the appropriate local SNAP office. Unfortunately, this system requires upkeep costs and the involved agencies will need to secure additional funding to sustain the project.

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.

PILOT & DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

Participation Grant Pilot Projects

Demonstration Projects

Washington Tribal Eligibility Determination Project

Elderly Simplified Application Project

Community Partner Interviewer Projects

Combined Application Projects (CAP)

PARTICIPATION GRANT PILOT PROJECTS

OVERVIEW

The Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 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 the SNAP Participation Grants, frequently emphasizing community partnerships, projects to reach under-served populations and to increase 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 Participation Grants have supported a number of strategies that improve access:

- Mobile caseworkers & mobile technology
- Internet screening tools that interface with multiple benefit forms (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

INTEGRATED APPLICATIONS

INTEGRATED APPLICATIONS allow clients to apply for multiple programs with one streamlined application. Integrated applications can increase 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.

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.

APPLICATION KIOSKS

APPLICATION 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.

Example: Nevada's Implementation of Kiosks

The Nevada Department of Human Resources and the Food Bank of Northern Nevada used their SNAP Participation Grant to develop a system capable of interfacing grocery store SNAP application kiosks with county welfare offices. Outreach workers visited grocery stores to assist with application at kiosks and the State initiated a marketing campaign to promote use of the kiosks.

While the project did encounter some challenges, such as software problems, staffing shortages and vandalism to the kiosks, it did increase overall access to SNAP applications.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS can be powerful tools to increase program access. The Minnesota Department of Human Services, in partnership with fifteen Community Action Agencies, used a SNAP Participation Grant to streamline 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, SNAP being just one.

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 increased SNAP participation rates for seniors 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 an outreach 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 advise clients and offer information.

Best practices of community partnerships:

- **SCREEN** all clientele for SNAP eligibility.
- **BUILD 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.
- **STRONG TRAINING PROGRAMS** are necessary to equip community partner staff with accurate information of SNAP policies and procedures.

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 administrative waivers, demonstration projects involve waving a specific section of the Food and Nutrition Act (the Act) of 2008 in order to improve the way SNAP functions.

Since sections of the Act are waived, 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.

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, reflecting a longstanding Executive Branch policy. If the demonstration project's benefits exceed the benefits under the traditional SNAP program, the project is not cost-neutral. The State may make adjustments to 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.

DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS THAT INCREASE PROGRAM ACCESS

This section describes four types of demonstration projects that increase program access: Combined Application Projects (CAP), Community Partner Interviewer Demonstration Projects, Elderly Simplified Application Projects, and Tribal Eligibility Demonstration Projects.

Washington Tribal Eligibility Determination Project

This demonstration project was implemented in 2009 and allows an Indian Tribal Organization (ITO) to conduct certification for SNAP. Before the demonstration project began, the ITO already operated a TANF tribal program. The Washington State Agency also negotiated with Medicaid to allow the ITO to conduct Medicaid certifications. During this demonstration project, the ITO will be comparable to the local State agency welfare office. This project improves program access because Tribal members no longer need to apply for TANF and SNAP at different locations and provide two sets of verifications.

Elderly Simplified Application Projects

These projects simplify SNAP applications for elderly or disabled households with no earned income. No face-to-face interview is required. Information reported in the application is verified through data matches for income, Social Security numbers, and non-citizen status. Alabama, Florida, and South Carolina have elderly simplified application projects.

Community Partner Interviewer Projects

Community partner interviewer projects allow community based organizations to complete SNAP interviews, collect verifications, and submit verifications to the State agency. These projects allow State agencies to reach populations that would otherwise be difficult reach through a traditional local office (e.g. homeless, eligible immigrants, non-English speaking). Allowing employees or volunteers from community based organizations to conduct the interviews for SNAP applicants can also save States time and resources. In times of rising caseloads and strapped resources, these types of demonstration projects may alleviate some of the burden on States.

Community partner interviewer projects require strong and continued commitment from State agencies and community-based organizations. Community partners completing the interview must comply with all certification and process regulations. These requirements necessitate extensive training and strong oversight on the part of the State agency.

Previously, FNS provided administrative waivers to State agencies that wished to allow community based organizations perform interviews. After re-examining the legal authority, FNS decided that these projects could only be granted under the demonstration authority.

Although community partner interviewer projects have existed for a number of years, they have never been fully evaluated. The current demonstration projects will be thoroughly evaluated for error rates, program access, timeliness, and client satisfaction.

As of early 2010, FNS has approved community partner interviewer demonstration projects for the following States:

- **MICHIGAN’S COORDINATED ACCESS TO FOOD FOR THE ELDERLY (MICAFFE)** MI had an administrative waiver to allow staff at senior centers and food pantries conduct the interview for SNAP applicants. The application and verifications are then sent to the local office. In 2009, FNS approved MiCAFFE as a demonstration project.
- **FLORIDA AND SECOND HARVEST FOOD BANK OF CENTRAL FLORIDA:** In June 2009, FL implemented a demonstration project that allows personnel from the Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida to complete SNAP interviews.
- **NEVADA AND THE FOOD BANK OF NORTHERN NEVADA & HELP OF SOUTHERN NEVADA:** Nevada had an administrative waiver to allow community partners to conduct the initial SNAP interview. In 2009, FNS approved Nevada’s demonstration project.
- **MINNESOTA AND VOLUNTEER AGENCIES (VOLAG):** Minnesota had an administrative waiver and now has a demonstration project waiver to allow community partners in VOLAGs to perform the initial SNAP interviews for refugees.

Spotlight: Florida and Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida

Florida recently implemented a community partner demonstration project with the Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida. This project serves three counties in central Florida. Outreach staff from the food bank set up in various community locations with laptops, portable scanners, and wireless cards. People who want to apply for SNAP through this project can make appointments or show up at the designated location.

The outreach worker pre-screens each applicant to provide the applicant with an idea of whether the applicant may be able to qualify for SNAP. The outreach worker helps the applicant apply for SNAP using the online application and interviews the applicant. The outreach worker scans the verifications into the computer, checks to make sure the images come out clearly, and electronically faxes the verifications to the processing center. The food bank staff has partial access to Florida’s eligibility system and can track the progress of each applicant’s case. This staff of nine is able to assist and interview about 30 SNAP applicants each day.

The scanning center receives the scanned verifications; two workers at the scanning center work on cases for this demonstration project. The workers attach the scanned verifications to the case number and verify that the documents are visible. The information is then sent to the processing center. At the processing center, the worker processes the application and makes an eligibility determination.

State considering Community Partner Interview Demonstration Projects should ensure the following:

1. Commitment from community based organization (CBO);
2. Suitable technology to make the project effective and efficient;
3. Appropriate implementation plan that controls for setbacks and timing issues;
4. Constant monitoring of project cases to decrease errors and ensure project's success;
5. Size of project is suitable for amount State can commit to supervising and managing;
6. Designated pilot areas;
7. Training plan for CBO staff; and
8. Selected local office or State contact for CBO staff to call with any questions.

COMBINED APPLICATION PROJECTS (CAP)

Description

17 State agencies currently operate CAP Projects

Combined Application Projects (CAP) are projects designed to help to improve the delivery of food assistance to elderly and disabled Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients. These projects simplify the SNAP application process for SSI recipients. Verifications from the Social Security Office are accepted by SNAP and no further interview is required.

Although a CAP must be cost neutral to the Federal government, it cannot cause a significant number of recipients to receive much lower benefit levels than they would otherwise receive.

As of Spring 2010, seventeen States were operating CAP demonstrations (Arizona, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Virginia, and Washington). Two were approved, but not implemented (Maryland and Wisconsin). One was pending approval (West Virginia). Five States (Delaware, Idaho, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Utah) were invited to submit proposals.

There are two CAP models:

- **STANDARD MODELS** are simplified joint application process with the Social Security Administration (SSA) as individuals apply or recertify for SSI. Within the Standard Model, there are two variations:
 - **STANDARDIZED BENEFIT AMOUNTS:** bases benefit amounts on shelter expenses and other income, or
 - **STANDARDIZED SHELTER EXPENSES:** bases benefit amounts on whether shelter expenses are high or low.
- **MODIFIED MODELS** do not require coordination with the SSA. States use data exchange system to enroll SSI recipients.

Promising Results of CAP

CAP projects have increased the number of SNAP applications and recertifications processed by SSA. See the following charts for more information.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS AND RECERTIFICATIONS PROCESSED BY THE SSA IN STATES WITH AND WITHOUT CAPS

	# of Applications & Recertifications	Percent of Total
CAP States	34291	93%
No CAP in State	2408	7%
TOTAL	36699	100%

From October 2009 to March 2010, States with CAPs made up 93% of the applications and recertifications processed by the SSA. Washington and Massachusetts made up 66% of all applications and recertifications processed by the SSA.

TABLE 2: TOP TEN STATES WITH THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS PROCESSED BY THE SSA

State	# of Applications & Recertifications	Has a CAP?
MA	14651	Y
WA	9516	Y
FL	4583	Y
SC	1675	Y
MS	1027	Y
PA	647	Y
NY	623	Y
TX	454	Y
IL	386	Y
NC	312	N
OH	302	N

From October 2009 to March 2010, eight of the top ten States with the highest number of SNAP applications processed by the SSA have CAPs.

Benefits of CAP Projects

- **IMPROVE SNAP PARTICIPATION AMONG DISABLED AND ELDERLY:** CAP projects help increase the number of disabled and elderly individuals who participate in SNAP. Historically, households with elderly and disabled members have been underrepresented in the SNAP recipient population.
- **SIMPLIFIED PROCESS:** The simplified CAP application is easier for the Social Security worker to complete with the information already provided for the SSI application. Since the application is completed at the SSA office, the SNAP office should have little need for follow-up with the household.
- **NO FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS:** Since the application is completed at the SSA office, the local SNAP office does not need to complete an additional face-to-face interview.

LESSONS LEARNED & FUTURE STEPS

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE STEPS

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 in SNAP. States should work with local community groups, advocacy groups, local officials, local offices, and residents 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 community's needs and desires. Without buy-in from the local community, projects designed to improve program access may not succeed or do as well as they could.

GOOD COMMUNICATION IS ESSENTIAL.

Frequent 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 partnering with a specific agency or group, States should ensure that they have a contact person who will keep the State apprised of any changes that may affect the project.

SIMPLE STEPS CAN IMPROVE ACCESS TO SNAP.

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 to implement. Small steps, like changing the layout of the office, require few additional resources, but can successfully improve low-income families' access to SNAP.

STRONG LEADERSHIP IS CRUCIAL TO THE SUCCESS OF ANY CHANGE.

State agencies wishing 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 why 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 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.

Access to SNAP applications, offices, and benefits is of crucial importance to the success of SNAP. 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. Once we identify barriers that prevent eligible low-income families from applying for SNAP, we can try to remedy those barriers so that all households eligible for SNAP receive it.

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 question their policies and procedures to reduce barriers that restrict low-income families from applying for or receiving SNAP.

FURTHER 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.¹
- 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.¹
- 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.¹
- FNS offers annual opportunities for [SNAP Program Participation Grants](#). Grant announcements are usually announced in March and applications are in May or June.¹