

June 23, 2005

SUBJECT: FNS – Need To Be Prepared for Requests for Food Stamp Disaster Program

TO: Regional Administrators
Food and Nutrition Service

Last year saw new record highs for benefits issued and people served under Food Stamp Disaster Programs. Unfortunately, long range forecasters are predicting another bad year for natural disasters.

We urge you to encourage all your State agencies to familiarize themselves with the Disaster Food Stamp Program (DFSP) concept of quickly addressing the immediate food needs of disaster victims with streamlined eligibility determination and benefit issuance procedures. We hope that all State agencies will have a disaster response plan in effect to enable them to quickly respond when disaster strikes. Proper planning can eliminate excessive time reviewing DFSP policy options.

When a State agency has a well understood disaster response plan in place, it will be ready when the need arises. Ideally, as soon as a State agency gathers data from the disaster site, it should determine need, decide on the appropriate response, and submit a request for approval to the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). Within 2 weeks from the disaster event, the State agency should have a strong disaster response evident in the affected areas and be in a position to accept and process applications for 5 to 7 days. When the emergency has been addressed, the State agency should tie up any loose ends and close down the disaster operation by submitting its final report (FNS-292), and executing its Integrity Plan.

Hopefully, we can all learn from our recent experiences with disasters so that we can improve our response time and provide assistance in the most efficient and effective manner possible.

When things have not gone smoothly with State agency responses in past disasters this has generally been due to a lack of planning and/or a failure to execute an existing plan. All State agencies need to have a disaster response plan in place because it's extremely difficult to put one together during a disaster event. State agencies need to appreciate that the DFSP is a resource for meeting the immediate needs of disaster victims. It should not be viewed as a vehicle for restoring losses after immediate emergency needs have been provided.

Recent disaster experiences have shown that it can be very helpful when State agencies have established relationships with power companies who can be called upon to identify areas of power outages and the number of residential customers affected. In this regard,

State agencies that made pre-disaster contact arrangements with disaster management agencies were able to obtain solid data to establish need.

Fully exploring staffing needs, potential out-of-state resources, and the adequacy of the number of processing sites can speed up response time and reduce excessive processing or delays in applications after closure of the application period.

Please take this opportunity before disaster strikes to review with your State agencies the concept and requirements of the FNS DFSP.

We hope to update FNS Handbook 320, which covers the DFSP, by the end of July and are soliciting suggestions from State agencies for improving its effectiveness as a tool in responding to disaster situations. Handbook 320 in its present form does, however, remain an excellent DFSP guide and we hope that you will encourage your State agencies to familiarize themselves with its contents and follow its procedures.

/s/

Clarence H. Carter
Deputy Administrator
Food Stamp Program