



Excellent Service for All

Innovation in the Food Stamp Program

Access, Outreach, Payment Accuracy, Nutrition Education, Certification Policy & Quality Control

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service
Mid-Atlantic Region
Food Stamp Program

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National Participation Rate Increases

The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced recently that the national participation rate for the Food Stamp Program increased for a third consecutive year. The new data indicates that the program served 60 percent of eligible participants in fiscal year 2004, an increase of 4 percent from the previous fiscal year.

Of the 38 million individuals who were eligible for benefits in an average month, 23 million chose to participate. The Food Stamp Program provided 71 percent of the benefits that eligible individuals could receive. Participation rates were higher than average among families with children and people in the poorest households.

To view or download a report on the national participation rate, published by the Food and Nutrition Service's Office of Analysis, Nutrition and Evaluation, access this website: www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/recentreleases.htm.

The increase in the national participation rate is a reflection of the dedication and hard work of federal, state and local food stamp staff and faith- and community-based partners, to reach more people. We need to continue these aggressive efforts to bring the program to the millions who do not participate. Throughout this newsletter, you'll find outreach and access ideas.

Congratulations to the Virgin Islands and Delaware

USDA Awards Performance Bonuses for Exemplary Payment Accuracy

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently announced the state agencies that will receive performance bonuses for achieving the lowest and most-improved active and negative error rates in fiscal year 2005.

Of the states within the Mid-Atlantic Region, the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services will receive \$188,353 for its 2.11 percent active error rate. The Delaware Department of Health and Social Services will receive \$602,771 for lowering its negative error rate 6.63 percentage points from the previous fiscal year. The New Jersey Department of Human Services and the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare narrowly missed bonuses for active error rates.

In fiscal year 2005, the active error rate was 5.84 percent nationally, and the negative error rate was 6.91 percent nationally. ➔

Lowest Active Error Rates

South Dakota	1.19%
Virgin Islands	2.11%
Washington	2.72%
Nevada	2.86%
North Carolina	2.97%
North Dakota	3.59%
Alabama	3.68%
Massachusetts	3.88%
Montana	4.05%
Kansas	4.37%

Most-Improved Active Error Rates

		% Difference
Washington	2.72%	4.90%
Nevada	2.86%	4.65%
Alabama	3.68%	4.32%

Because Washington, Nevada and Alabama ranked among the states with the lowest and the most-improved active error rates, they cannot receive a performance bonus for each category; therefore, Massachusetts, Montana and Kansas also will receive a performance bonus for the lowest active error rate.

Lowest Negative Error Rates

Nebraska	0.20%
South Dakota	0.27%
Minnesota	0.59%
Montana	0.73%

Most-Improved Negative Error Rates

		% Difference
Delaware	6.38%	6.63%
Vermont	5.81%	4.45%

The U.S. Department of Agriculture also awards performance bonuses to state agencies for highest Application Processing Timeliness Rate and best and most-improved Program Access Index (participation). The awardees will be announced in September 2006.

West Virginia

Achieving USDA performance bonuses

The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR) had the distinction of earning two high performance bonuses this past year from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

West Virginia Program Access Index

The Program Access Index is basically the ratio of individuals who participated to the number of individuals with income below 125 percent of poverty (100 percent of poverty in fiscal years 2003 and 2004). DHHR raised its Program Access Index 20.9 percentage points from fiscal year 2003 to fiscal year 2004 and received a performance bonus of \$1,150,513 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In addition to the standard practice of determining what programs the applicants could be eligible for, DHHR officials cite these activities as likely contributors to serving more people:

- Implementation of an on-line pre-screen and application function*
Through the Information Network for Resident Online Access and Delivery of Services, or inROADS, individuals can pre-screen to determine potential eligibility and apply for the Food Stamp Program, Children's Health Insurance Program and Medicaid for Children and Pregnant Women. Staff members promote inROADS at conferences and county offices, and they train community organizations on how to use the system, which has been available since November 2003.
- Development of an access questionnaire for organizations*
DHHR surveyed grassroots organizations in selected districts. The survey requested information on barriers to food stamp participation and asked for suggestions to improve program access and whether the organizations would like to receive information about food stamp eligibility. During the course of two years, DHHR mailed 346 surveys and received a response from 39 percent of the organizations. They believed their populations had ready access to the program, but said the most common barriers were lack of transportation, knowledge about the income and asset limits and a benefit amount that is too low.
In response, staff members from the state and county DHHR provide materials and answer eligibility questions at community events. Staff members take applications at least once a month in remote areas of Kanawha and Fayette counties. Wayne County developed a comprehensive list of organizations throughout the region to match customers to all available resources. Summers and McDowell counties share information about the program with a variety of community partners. Conducting telephone interviews also has been promoted to overcome many barriers to participation.

West Virginia was one of four states that received a bonus for most-improved Program Access Index in 2004, and one of six states that received a bonus for best Application Processing Timeliness Rate in 2004.

West Virginia Application Processing Timeliness Rate

The Application Processing Timeliness Rate is the percentage of new food stamp applications that are processed within the seven- and 30-day timeframes during the measurement year. DHHR processed 97.54 percent of cases timely in fiscal year 2004 and received a performance bonus of \$740,788 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

DHHR officials say one of the major contributing factors is their eligibility system, RAPIDS, which has safeguards to remind eligibility specialists when application deadlines are near. Because EBT cards are mailed, it is especially important that cases be processed well before the 7th or 30th day to allow for mailing time. RAPIDS sends alerts to eligibility specialists, supervisors, etc., to assist in timely processing of all benefits and overall caseload management. The types of alerts (example: Application Pending 25 Days) and their triggers are constantly added and revamped. The eligibility specialists must take action in order to “clear” most of the alerts. Some alerts will re-appear daily until the action is taken. The supervisors receive alerts when eligibility specialists have not taken action in a specified amount of time. Close monitoring of the alerts helps to identify and solve problems. As a part of the food stamp management evaluation process, the alerts for each supervisor are reviewed to determine whether applications have been pended 25 days or beyond. If applications are pended past 30 days, corrective action is required.

Local offices have devised organizational systems for the paper applications, which allow them to track the due dates. That way, the eligibility specialists can quickly see which cases are due that day and take the appropriate action.

All new applicants are screened for expedited service the day they apply. If they are eligible for expedited service, they are seen as soon as possible that same day or very shortly thereafter. If they are not eligible for expedited service, they are seen that same day if time permits, or they are scheduled for another day. EBT cards are mailed to households eligible for expedited service, but every effort is made to see these applicants the day of application. If the household already has an EBT card, benefits are just loaded upon approval.

Other DHHR controls for application processing include limiting office traffic by designating one day each week for eligibility specialists to process cases (and screen all walk-ins for expedited service and emergency applicants), and emphasizing deadlines during training sessions for eligibility staff. **To swap information, contact Sarah Young, West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, (304) 558-8290, sarahyoung@wvdhhr.org.**



Developing a Business Case for Increasing Participation in the Food Stamp Program

At the request of state food stamp agencies, the Food and Nutrition Service developed a set of materials that addresses the benefits of increasing participation.

One of the four documents shows how even a small increase can make a big difference - a 5 percentage point increase in participation nationwide would mean 1.8 million more low-income people would have an additional \$1.2 billion in benefits per year to purchase nutritious food, and \$2.2 billion in new economic activity would be generated. A chart provides this information for each state. The calculation methodology is described step-by-step in another document. There also is information on how the program helps low-income people, communities, businesses and workers.

The materials can be downloaded from this website of the Food and Nutrition Service: www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/business-case.htm.

Tips to Conduct Interviews by Telephone

A thorough and timely exchange of information between a food stamp customer and a well-prepared eligibility specialist, with little or no inconvenience to either party -



- That's the definition of a telephone interview as described by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) to its eligibility staff.

DPW conducts telephone interviews for all recertifications (through a waiver from the Food and Nutrition Service) to simplify the process for customers and eligibility staff.

Kevin Fedors of DPW's Staff Development designed an extensive training package on interviewing by telephone. The materials were based in part on suggestions from the Excellence in Service Committee (DPW staff members of different levels and classifications, whose mission is to ensure the best quality service for customers and eligibility specialists).

Kevin walks us through a typical training session on this alternative to the face-to-face interview.

The training session begins with an exploration of the impact telephone interviewing will have on the work of the eligibility specialists and their customers.

The objectives for the training are to enable the trainees to state the value of an effective telephone interview; prepare the customer for an effective telephone interview; prepare himself or herself for an effective telephone interview; and conduct an effective telephone interview.

Throughout the day-long training, ideas that make telephone interviewing easier, more effective and efficient for the customers and the eligibility specialists are identified and discussed.

The Good, the Bad and the Excellent, a video starring staff members of the Philadelphia County Assistance Office, provides a springboard for discussion. One segment depicts a face-to-face interview in which everything has gone wrong. The trainees are asked to record their observations of the video. They discuss the ways in which the incidents in the video could affect the customer/eligibility specialist relationship during future encounters. The trainees also look at what would have happened if the interview had been conducted by telephone.

The other segment of the video presents a telephone interview, and the trainees are asked to judge whether different is better.

The trainees are reminded that time, energy and unnecessary work can all be saved *only if* the eligibility specialist prepares in advance to ensure the best possible telephone interview. Proper preparation involves the eligibility specialist, the workspace and the customer.

To prepare yourself

- Advise peers of your interview schedule. (This will help to eliminate most distractions and interruptions and allow you to concentrate on what the customer is saying. Your colleagues will be respectful of this - they also will require the same consideration from you when they are interviewing.)
- Prepare your desk and mind to be clutter-free and organized during the interview.
- Remove all other records from your workspace.
- Have the necessary materials at your fingertips, i.e., case record, application, forms, narrative, pens, pencils, etc.
- Have the computer screens up and running.
- Keep a list of on-line verification sources available, if needed.
- Have your prepared questions and needed verification list nearby.
- At the conclusion of the interview, take the time to walk away from your desk and focus on the next interview.

To prepare your customer

- Explain how the process will differ from the face-to-face interview.
- Ask the customers to post the time and date of the interview in a place where they will see it and remember it.
- Remind them to set aside ample time for the interview so the interview will proceed more effectively without interruptions.
- Explain that you will send a detailed list of everything they should send before the interview.
- Explain the importance of them returning these items by the deadline indicated in the letter.
- Ask them to conduct the interview in a quiet part of the house, turn off the radio, televisions, pagers, etc.
- Ask them to give children something to do during the interview.
- Ask them to have a pen and paper on hand to take notes or write questions.
- Ask them to prepare a list of questions prior to the interview.
- Remind them to ask questions if they do not understand what is being discussed.

To conduct the interview

- Accept the fact that you will no longer be able to rely on visual cues but will need to listen for tone and the actual content of the customer's words.
- Use a script to open and close the interview to ensure that all questions are discussed and relevant points are made. Practice your script with another eligibility specialist and in your mind before the interview starts.
- Build a "mental movie" of how the interview will progress.
- Insulate yourself as best you can from outside interruptions during the interview.
- Use active listening techniques. Provide feedback after an applicant answers a question; use statements such as, "This is what I'm hearing..." and "Help me to understand..."
- Listen for inconsistencies, which can be indicated by delayed responses, long pauses and "um" and "ah" in conversations, and ask follow-up questions.
- Confirm understanding by asking questions until clear on all issues, and ask the customer to confirm your understanding by repeating it to you.
- Be clear and ask open-ended questions. Don't be afraid to ask multiple questions about a particular subject, especially if there is doubt or confusion.
- Identify and only request information necessary to determine eligibility.
- At the conclusion, ask, "Is there anything else you need to tell me?", or "Do you understand what we have accomplished today?", or "Do you have any questions for me?"
- Use a wrap-up checklist.
- Be specific and consistent about deadlines for verifications.

To swap information, contact Kevin Fedors, Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, (717) 772-7846, kfedors@state.pa.us.

More Tips to Conduct Interviews by Telephone



The Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) has been expanding access to the Food Stamp Program since 2002 when it increased the use of telephone interviewing. Since then, DTA, which traditionally has a low payment error rate, has been completing a large proportion of certification and recertification interviews of non-public assistance households by telephone. Its food stamp caseload is more than 220,000. DTA staff members, Lauren Arms, FSP assistant director for outreach, and Mary Ann Marshall, FSP assistant director for implementation, provide the following information about what they learned along the way to this change from the common in-person interview.

Expanding Access

In 2002, DTA implemented a very liberal interpretation of “hardship” conditions, which gave the agency the option to conduct a telephone interview with more types of households.

To increase access to the Food Stamp Program further, DTA requested and received approval from the Food and Nutrition Service to conduct all recertification interviews by telephone. When this began in fiscal year 2005, the error rate for telephone interviews jumped; however, it significantly decreased shortly thereafter as DTA training on effective telephone interviewing kicked-in. The final error rate for the fiscal year was 3.88 percent, which was 8th in the nation and best in the states within the Northeast Region of the Food and Nutrition Service.

DTA now screens every application for possible hardship, with a focus on non-walk-ins. The paper and website applications for food stamps include a check-box to indicate hardship.

Future plans include the collection of two telephone numbers on paper and website applications and recertification forms, the latter of which will be pre-filled with currently verified information.

Getting Started

A detailed implementation plan is extremely important, and many stakeholders need to be involved. Quality Control staff plays a critical role in correctly identifying errors related to telephone interviews. An assessment of telecommunication capabilities is a must in order to determine whether improvements are needed or critical items such as headsets must be purchased. Good office layout also is key; eligibility specialists need a workspace in which they are able to devote their full attention to the interview.

Some staff members adapt more readily and comfortably than others. Training is critical, even for the staff members who are excellent at interviewing in-person. Some areas to address in training: preparation, verbal introduction, effective questions, loss of body language clues and personal contact, change in relationship with customers, active listening and time management in relation to scheduling interviews at the convenience of the customers and reaching them.

To swap information, contact Lauren Arms, (617) 348-5452, lauren.arms@state.ma.us; and Mary Ann Marshall, (617) 348-5439, mary.ann.marshall@state.ma.us.

Phone Interview Tips Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance for Eligibility Staff

Preparation

- Prepare as much as possible for the telephone interview prior to contact.
- Find the previous case record, if any.
- Access the computer system to read the narrative and summary, and check whether the previous history or information has an effect on current eligibility (external matches, program violations, sanctions).
- Get appropriate screen prints from other systems (Bendex, SDX, SAVE), review information submitted by the customer and note discrepancies.
- Enter as much information as possible from the application into the computer system.
- Make note of unanswered questions that need completion.
- Have desk aides handy.

Introduction

- Introduce yourself and provide your title and name of your office.
- Verify to whom you are speaking.
- Ask if the time is convenient; if not, set another date and time.
- Explain that the purpose of the call is to acknowledge the request for application, answer questions about the application and process and complete the application.
- Use a calm, patient tone.

Interview

- Ask for clarification when you do not understand something.
- Ask open-ended questions, and avoid the use of leading questions.
- Anticipate and block interruptions.
- Re-state what the customer says.
- Offer information relevant to the interview.
- Ask for the best time to reach the customer, if additional information is needed.

Summary

- Be sure to answer questions.
- Schedule a follow-up call when needed.
- Summarize the next steps.
- List the needed verification documents and acceptable timeframes for submission, and tell the customer you will provide assistance, if needed, to obtain verifications.
- Provide your telephone number and the best time to reach you.
- Thank the customer and provide reassurance to provide assistance.

FOOD STAMP PROGRAM Products★Services

Radio Advertisements

The Food and Nutrition Service's radio advertisements to increase participation in the Food Stamp Program are airing again. You'll hear them July through August in locations around the country. There are three in English and two in Spanish. Air time is great - you don't have to be up well before the crack of dawn or have insomnia to catch them. In Baltimore, for example, the ads are running 6 a.m. through 7 p.m.

For the states within the Mid-Atlantic Region, the advertisements are providing the national toll-free number of the Food Stamp Program because the messages spill to other states. Take advantage of this opportunity to coordinate some of your outreach activities with the airing of these professionally-produced advertisements.

Promising Practices

The outreach promising practices of food stamp providers nationwide are available at this website of the Food and Nutrition Service: www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/promising/default.htm. Each idea includes a contact from whom you can get additional information. The Food and Nutrition Service is working to make the site searchable by category/keyword. If you would like to add a promising practice to the collection, send a brief description of your strategy to susan.sheets@fns.usda.gov.

Outreach Toolkits

The outreach toolkits were featured in the Spring 2006 edition of *Excellent Service for All*. Anyone getting started in outreach and those who are seasoned will agree the outreach toolkits are a valuable asset.

There is a toolkit for state and local food stamp offices and another for partners. Both are full of ideas, templates and resources to help share information about food stamp benefits with eligible non-participants, potential partners, government officials and the public.

Both toolkits have "how-to" sections on partnerships, promising practices and resources. The toolkit for partners also includes an extensive section on media outreach. Both can be downloaded from this website of the Food and Nutrition Service: www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/tool-kits.htm. Printed copies will be available within a few months. Each will contain CDs of templates and resources and a video, *Community Hunger Champions – Helping People Eat Right When Money's Tight*, which highlights the role of eligibility specialists in case management and their link between customers and food stamp benefits. It also features the connection between eligibility specialists and the multitude of organizations and businesses that interact to enroll eligible people in the Food Stamp Program.

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