

06/27/07

SUBJECT: Food Stamp Program Pandemic Flu Planning

TO: All Regional Administrators
Food and Nutrition Service

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) recently devised guidelines for the operation of key nutrition programs, including the Food Stamp Program (FSP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Child Nutrition Programs (CN), Food Distribution Program (FD), during a pandemic flu. We have attached the FSP Guidelines. These new guidelines will be posted on the FNS Disaster Assistance website at www.fns.usda.gov/disasters/disaster.htm.

The Food Stamp Program Pandemic Flu Planning Guidelines are intended to help State agencies continue to deliver the FSP under the unique conditions that may be experienced during a flu pandemic. During peak periods of a pandemic flu, up to 40 percent of the workforce is expected to be absent and may need food assistance. Adding to the complexity of benefit delivery, the key public health intervention to slow the spread of the disease will be social distancing, which will prevent State agencies from using many standard procedures, like face-to-face interviews.

The Disaster Food Stamp Program is likely to be the primary nutrition assistance response during a human pandemic, as it enables a flexible response to a pandemic, it allows recipients to consume food at home rather than in congregate settings, and it can provide maximum benefits to families with children to help compensate for the loss of free and reduced price school and child care meals.

The guidelines explain flexibilities State agencies can request from FNS as part of a DFSP to aid persons affected by the pandemic flu. Some flexibilities listed are ones that are already available for use in DFSP operations following common types of disasters. New flexibilities, namely waiving the face-to-face interview altogether and filing DFSP applications by telephone, internet, or mail, are being made available exclusively for response to the pandemic flu and are not available for use after other kinds of disasters.

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If you have questions about the Food Stamp Program Pandemic Flu Planning Guidelines, please contact Melissa Daigle Katz at 703-305-2501.

/s/

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Attachment

Food Stamp Program Pandemic Flu Planning Guidelines

Disaster Food Stamp Program as the Primary Nutrition Intervention

During a pandemic flu, the key public health intervention to slow the spread of the disease will be social distancing. As schools and day care centers may be closed for up to three months, a large number of parents will be absent from work to care for their children. Added to the numbers of individuals who are sick or caring for those who are sick, up to 40 percent of the workforce is expected to be absent during peak periods of the pandemic and may need food assistance.

A human pandemic is likely to receive a Presidential disaster declaration which provides the authority needed to approve State requests for a Disaster Food Stamp Program (DFSP). The DFSP is likely to be the primary nutrition assistance response during a human pandemic for the following reasons:

- It enables a flexible response to a pandemic.
- It strengthens the nutrition assistance safety net through provision of food that can be consumed at home rather than in congregate settings.
- It can provide maximum benefits for low income families with children to help compensate for the loss of free and reduced price school and child care meals.

Operation of the DFSP during Pandemic Conditions

State agencies will need to deliver the DFSP under a combination of conditions unlike those of any other disaster. State agencies will not be able to certify applicants at mass application/issuance sites or at local offices due to restrictions on social gathering and will need to accommodate a greatly increased workload with up to 40 percent of their staff absent from work.

To streamline certification and issuance during a pandemic flu, the Food and Nutrition Service can make the following policy flexibilities available to State agencies that request a DFSP.

Interviews

Current flexibilities with regular FSP:

- Substitute telephone interviews for face-to-face interviews.

New flexibility with a disaster waiver:

- Waive interviews altogether for all applicant households.

Applications

Current flexibilities with regular FSP:

- Allow clients to submit applications by internet or mail.

Flexibility with a disaster waiver:

- Use the standard DFSP application, edited to suit the nature of the disaster.

New flexibilities with a disaster waiver:

- Allow clients to submit DFSP applications by internet or mail.
- Allow clients to initiate and secure a filing date for their DFSP application with a telephone interview. Clients would need to later submit a signed application to avoid denial.

Verification

Flexibilities with a disaster waiver:

- Reduce or eliminate verification of items that are not mandatory (only verification of identity is mandatory for the DFSP).

Certification Periods

Flexibilities with a disaster waiver:

- Use standard one-month DFSP certification periods and extend as needed if pandemic conditions and/or social distancing continue.

Issuance and Redemption

Current flexibilities:

- Allow participants to use the phone, fax, or internet to pre-order items.
- Allow participants to have “drive-through” service at their grocery store to avoid contact with others. Drive-through service necessitates the use of handheld EBT readers.
- Allow participants to use internet-based food ordering and home grocery delivery by redeeming benefits through the manual voucher process.
- Partner with home meal delivery programs, such as *Meals on Wheels*-style services, for benefit delivery using the manual voucher process.

Assess Your Capabilities

FNS suggests taking the following steps to assess your State’s capability to deliver benefits during a pandemic flu:

Get Involved in State Pandemic Planning.

See www.PandemicFlu.gov

- Get copies of your State's plan
- Get information on any planning or training activities
- Get contact information for State planners
- Join the State pandemic planning team and stay involved in their readiness activities

The use of social distancing

- What conditions will trigger the use of social distancing?
- How long is social distancing expected to last?
- What social distancing principles must you adopt for your own workplace?

State plans to distribute food to needy households

- How will food banks and pantries operate?
- If they fail to operate, will your DFSP be the only source of food resources in your community?

Grocery store operation

- What adaptive measures are planned by grocers in your state? These might include drive through service, home delivery, and internet or phone orders.

Explore how you can adjust your certification system.

Mail

- Can your mailed application system (mailroom, mail distribution, key entry of application data) accommodate the anticipated volume of applications?

Telephone

- What volume of incoming and outgoing calls can your telephone system accommodate?
- What happens when the system is overloaded? Do callers get a hold message, busy signal, or are they disconnected? Can they leave a message and receive a call back?
- Do you have a staff person answering the main line or automation that will allow clients to proceed to their intended destination without having a bottleneck at a reception?
- Do you have call center software that allows you to track calls and distribute calls to staff?
- Do you have the capacity for automated calls to clients to give them information about changes to policy (like extended certification periods) so that they will not need to contact you?

Internet

- Do you have an internet application for clients?
- Do you have manual or automated distribution of received internet applications to workers?
- Do your servers have the capacity to handle greatly increased web traffic?

Automatic Notices

- Can you quickly adjust or disable the automatic notice system so that you do not send notices to clients that unintentionally increase your workload? Example: recertification notices sent to clients when certification periods have been extended or notices telling clients to appear at the local offices for interviews, instead of telephone interview directions.

Staffing

- Estimate what percent of your community’s workforce will be absent from work during various stages of the pandemic. See www.cdc.gov/flu/tools/fluworkloss/ for an online tool.
- Which administrative or technical activities are non-urgent and can be postponed until after the pandemic has ended?
- How will you train staff that will temporarily transition from non-urgent tasks to essential ones?
- Do you have work-at-home technology or policies that will allow your staff to continue to operate the FSP remotely?

Determine your issuance needs.

- Can you provide centralized mail issuance of EBT cards if you don’t already?
- Do you have enough EBT cards on hand to accommodate a potential increase in caseload?
- Consider pre-pinning EBT cards so that the number of calls to the customer call center is reduced.
- Do grocers need hand held EBT card readers to accommodate drive-through service or will manual vouchers suffice? If manual vouchers are used, is there an adequate supply already available to grocers or could new supplies be generated quickly and in grocers’ hands to use for drive-through or delivery sales?
- Will grocers in your area allow for internet-based food ordering and home grocery delivery with the use of an EBT food stamp debit card (without the entry of a PIN)? Currently, the commercial industry does not support the use of debit card payment over the internet when PIN-entry is required, but grocers can use manual vouchers, which allow a signature to substitute for a PIN.

Pandemic Flu Resources

Resource	Source	Purpose
www.PandemicFlu.gov	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services	State-by-State pandemic flu planning guidance for the workplace, the community, and individuals. Checklists, guides, copies of State plans, State-level contacts, and more.

www.cdc.gov/flu/tools/flu-workloss/	Centers for Disease Control	FluWorkLoss estimates the potential number of days lost from work due to an influenza pandemic. Users can change almost any input value, such as the number of workdays assumed lost when a worker becomes ill or the number of workdays lost due to a worker staying home to care for a family member. Users can also change the length and virulence of the pandemic so that a range of possible impacts can be estimated. FluWorkLoss provides a range of estimates of total workdays lost, as well as graphic illustrations of the workdays lost by week and percentage of total workdays lost to influenza-related illnesses.
www.cdc.gov/germstopper/work.htm	Centers for Disease Control	Downloadable tip sheet on workplace hygiene.
www.cdc.gov/flu/workplace/	Centers for Disease Control	Workplace posters, flyers, and online info for employee use.