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Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Application and Recertification Policies

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You asked what the national standards are for processing timelines of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program applications. Additionally, you asked how frequently states require recipients to recertify and why a six-month period was established in Alaska. You also asked if any states allow contracted partners to update certain recipient information.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is managed by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), a section of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), but administered by the *social services departments of each state*. State agencies must comply with *federal SNAP laws* but also exercise some discretion in policymaking. A requirement for agencies to share data with the FNS under *7 CFR 275.2(d)* assists the tracking of states' application processing timeliness (APT) and other quality control indicators. However, the pandemic created disruptions to program management and data collection resulting in less current information than previous years.

Application Processing Timeliness

Office operations and application processing are outlined in *7 CFR 273.2*, subsection *(g)(1)*, which reads in part:

Thirty-day processing. The State agency shall provide eligible households that complete the initial application process an opportunity to participate (as defined in *§ 274.2(b)*) as soon as possible, but no later than 30 calendar days following the date the application was filed, except for residents of public institutions who apply jointly for SSI and SNAP benefits prior to release from the institution in accordance with *§ 273.11(i)*. An application is filed the day the appropriate SNAP office receives an application containing the applicant's name and address, which is signed by either a responsible member of the household or the household's authorized representative.

Eligible households that do not receive benefits within thirty days due to an agency delay are entitled to receive retroactive benefits under *7 CFR 273.2(h)*. Additionally, agencies are required to offer expedited benefits within seven days to those who meet the criteria outlined in *7 CFR 273.2(i)*.

According to 7 CFR 273.2(a)(2), “The application process includes filing and completing an application form, being interviewed, and having certain information verified.” However, 7 CFR 272.7(d) allows modification of the application process in areas of Alaska designated as rural under *subsection (b)* “to accommodate the unique demographic and climatic characteristics” of those areas.”

The FNS’s *Reported Application Processing Timeliness* from fiscal year (FY) 2019, the most recent available, grades states on their ability to meet the thirty-day processing deadline. However, applicant-generated delays, like those caused by incomplete applications, may be counted as late despite department compliance.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, timeliness and decision cycle times were improving in Alaska; however, recent *internal performance measures* from the Department of Health (DOH) Division of Public Assistance indicate application processing has slowed and waiting periods have increased.¹ In FY 20, 92 percent of all initial, expedited, and recertification applications were processed on time. Data for the first part of FY 23 shows timely application processing has decreased to 47 percent, 39 percent, and 25 percent, respectively. During this time, waiting periods have increased from an average of nine days to 44 days.

According to *The Snap Timeliness Study*, a FNS report released in February 2019, business processes and a lack modernization often create barriers to timeliness.² The following four practices are identified as increasing APT:

- (1) establishing clear performance targets or goals for improving APT,
- (2) holding workers accountable for overdue cases in the worker’s performance reviews or decisions about the worker’s employment status,
- (3) training staff about new application processing procedures, and
- (4) monitoring APT performance either weekly or monthly.³

Although all states monitor and evaluate their SNAP programs, it is difficult to ascertain a national average for processing times due to inconsistencies in data reporting. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), a nonpartisan research institute, released *SNAP Online: A Review of State Government SNAP Websites* in November 2022, which offers an overview and links to manuals, information, and

¹ This document was imbedded in the KTOO article *With Thousands Waiting, State Says Food Stamp Backlog Won’t Improve Any Time Soon* (Footnote 8). It is likely a result of a records request as information posted on the DOH *Division of Public Assistance Dashboard* is less comprehensive.

² Page 41, United States Department of Agriculture, “The Snap Timeliness Study: Final Report”, February 2019, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNAP-Timeliness.pdf>.

³ Page v, United States Department of Agriculture, “The Snap Timeliness Study: Final Report”, February 2019, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNAP-Timeliness.pdf>.

statistics for each state. For example, the Department of Health and Human Services of North Carolina provides *Application Timeliness Weekly Reports*. In Massachusetts, far more comprehensive monthly *Performance Scorecards* from the Department of Transitional Assistance include a significant number of measures, including monthly call volume, average wait times, and average number of days to process new SNAP applications, which peaked around fourteen days in March of 2020.⁴

Certification Periods

Guidelines for certification periods are promulgated under *7 CFR 273.10(f)*, but states have discretion when establishing reporting and certification procedures. The USDA's *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2019* reports Alaska's average certification period length was 7.3 months whereas the national average was 14.7 months.⁵ A similar analysis for *FY 20* was calculated twice: once with data from October 2019 through February 2020 and again for June through September 2020, to denote the onset of the pandemic.⁶ The average certification in Alaska rose from 7.6 months to 8.2 months during this time, while the national average decreased from 15.1 months to 14.6.

According to the FNS's most recent *State Options Report*, published in May 2018, Alaska is one of four states that has adopted a maximum certification period of six months under simplified reporting options.⁷ As you may be aware, DOH Commissioner-Designee Heidi Hedberg testified during the *January 24, 2023 Senate Health and Social Services Committee meeting* on the department's intent to extend certification periods from six to twelve months. This change requires modernization of the aging Eligibility Information System (EIS), a process currently underway with an implementation target of May or June 2023. Also mentioned was the possibility of pursuing *Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility*, which allows further program flexibility and streamlining. More information can be found in *The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): Categorical Eligibility* by the Congressional Research Service.

⁴ Page 5, Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, Performance Scorecard, December 2022, <https://www.mass.gov/lists/dta-performance-scorecards#2022-performance-scorecards-by-month->.

⁵ Page 84, Table B.2, United States Department of Agriculture, "Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2019," March 2021, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/Characteristics2019.pdf>.

⁶ Page 127, Tables B.2.a, United States Department of Agriculture, "Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2020," June 2022, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/Characteristics2020.pdf>.

⁷ Alaska's average is higher than six months because of the ability to certify certain homes with elderly or disabled adults under *7 CFR 273.10(f)(1)*.

Page 11, United States Department of Agriculture, "State Options Report," October 1, 2017, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/snap/14-State-Options.pdf>.

Access to Recipient Information

Privacy protections for SNAP participants can be found in *7 CFR 272.1(c)* which restricts the disclosure of personally identifying and other confidential information. However, under *7 CFR 272.7(c)*, fee agents—paid agents not employed by the state—may be authorized in rural Alaska, “to make applications available to low-income households, assist in the completion of applications, conduct required interviews, secure required verification, forward completed applications and supporting documentation to the State agency, and provide other services as required by the State agency. Such services shall not include making final decisions on household eligibility or benefit levels.”

Due to the restriction for fee agents to be utilized in *rural* areas only, establishments such as the *Food Bank of Alaska* are designated as “outreach partners.” An outreach team is granted access to information in a database compliant with federal privacy laws but may not input or change information.

Trends and Strategies

Increased SNAP participation and *temporary program waivers* in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in a number of impacts state agencies are still navigating today. When Alaska’s public health emergency officially ended in June 2022, thousands of SNAP recipients whose reporting requirements had been waived since the onset of the pandemic were required to recertify, resulting in 8,000 applications submitted in August alone.⁸ Although applicants whose recertification was delayed by the department are entitled to retroactive benefits through *7 CFR 273.14(e)(1)*, a group of Alaskans recently filed a class action lawsuit against the DOH claiming it has failed to deliver services and subjected SNAP participants to ongoing hunger.⁹ Despite recently hiring dozens of new employees to address the backlog, DOH is reportedly working on November 2022 applications in February 2023.¹⁰

In an effort to relieve administrative burden, and improve APT and certification periods, the 32nd Alaska Legislature passed *HB 168* in 2022, requiring DOH to create an electronic system for applying for and renewing SNAP benefits, which most states have already implemented according to the bill’s *sponsor*

⁸ Stremple, Claire, “With Thousands Waiting, State Says Food Stamp Backlog Won’t Improve Any Time Soon,” *KTOO*, December 21, 2022, <https://www.ktoo.org/2022/12/21/with-thousands-waiting-state-says-food-stamp-backlog-wont-improve-any-time-soon/>.

⁹ Phu, Lisa, “Lawsuit Says Alaska Department of Health Exposed Thousands to Hunger Risk By Not Giving Food Aid,” *KTOO*, January 21, 2023, <https://www.ktoo.org/2023/01/21/lawsuit-says-alaska-department-of-health-exposed-thousands-to-hunger-risk-by-not-giving-food-aid/>.

¹⁰ Maguire, Sean, “Alaska Gov. Dunleavy Presents Amended State Budget With Deficit Topping \$400 Million,” *Anchorage Daily News*, February, 15, 2023, <https://www.adn.com/politics/2023/02/15/alaska-gov-dunleavy-presents-amended-state-budget-with-deficit-topping-400-million/>.

statement.¹¹ As mentioned above, system modernization is underway but incomplete. Although the document is somewhat dated, FNS has previously outlined *Best Practices for Online SNAP Applications*.

The DOH backlog of applications, are likely attributable to a combination of systemic issues, the pandemic, a lack of trained staff, and a *cyberattack* on the DOH website, which have collectively strained the system.¹² ¹³ These issues do not, however, appear to be unique to Alaska. A December 2022 USDA *memo* to all SNAP state agencies expresses concerns about delayed electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards due to mailing issues and limited office operations. In 2022, Florida hired hundreds of employees to alleviate a backlog of delayed SNAP applications.¹⁴ Additionally, rising theft of electronic benefits led to a 2022 federal mandate for states to enhance security and reimburse certain victims using federal funds.¹⁵

The recently established *National Accuracy Clearinghouse (NAC)*, designed to streamline data sharing amongst states to identify duplicate applicants, is predicted to enhance APT. State agencies have been given until October 2027 to comply.¹⁶ State legislatures have also amended policies to increase SNAP efficiencies. In 2021, New Jersey passed three bills: *A 2281* simplified and streamlined enrollment for seniors, *A 4240* allows registration over the phone, and *A 5880* authorizes the development of a mobile app for registration and tracking of benefits. In Texas, *SB 224* made several changes including shortening forms, extending certification periods, and allowing registration by phone for seniors or those experiencing disabilities.

We hope this is helpful. If you have questions or need additional information, please let us know.

¹¹ This change is not yet reflected on BASIS (*AS 47.25.980*).

¹² Stremple, Claire, "State Workers Say Chronic Understaffing Caused Food Stamp Backlog," *KTOO*, January 2, 2023, <https://www.ktoo.org/2023/01/02/state-workers-say-chronic-understaffing-caused-food-stamp-backlog/>.

¹³ Stremple, Claire, "With Thousands Waiting, State Says Food Stamp Backlog Won't Improve Any Time Soon," *KTOO*, December 21, 2022, <https://www.ktoo.org/2022/12/21/with-thousands-waiting-state-says-food-stamp-backlog-wont-improve-any-time-soon/>.

¹⁴ Saeidi, Mahsa, "Florida Brings in Hundreds More Workers to Process Delayed SNAP Benefit Applications," February 7, 2022, <https://www.wfla.com/8-on-your-side/florida-brings-in-hundreds-more-workers-to-process-delayed-snap-benefit-applications/>.

¹⁵ Povich, Elaine, "States Scramble to Replace Ripped-off SNAP Benefits," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 15, 2023, https://www.stltoday.com/news/national/states-scramble-to-replace-ripped-off-snap-benefits/article_07bd8a17-0408-52ce-a082-9378b937b5f8.html.

¹⁶ Federal Register, United States Department of Agriculture, "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Requirement for Interstate Data Matching to Prevent Duplicate Issuances", October 3, 2022, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2022-10-03/pdf/2022-21011.pdf>.