

Timeliness in the SNAP Application Process

Introduction

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) identifies Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) application processing timeliness (APT) as one of four critical program performance measures. Every year, States with the best and most improved program performance receive bonus awards based upon provisions in the Food and Nutrition Act (the Act) and SNAP regulations. However, while several States have maintained high program performance, many have struggled and national APT rates have not improved.

FNS tracks the APT rate through the quality control system. While some States have expressed concern about how APT is calculated, it is clear that too many households applying for SNAP do not receive their benefits within the statutory timeframes. FNS requires States with low APT rates to take corrective action but it is not clear that these actions have led to improved APT rates. This document outlines best practices that support high APT rates and is intended for use by FNS Regional Offices in providing assistance to States.

Report on High Performing States

Early in 2013, FNS surveyed nine States with demonstrated success in achieving and maintaining a high degree of compliance with the APT standards. FNS designed the survey to look for best practices in State application and certification processes that could be shared with other States. This report summarizes the most important results of the survey.

The report discusses the importance and role of:

- Leadership;
- Managing the certification process (processing the application, interviews, and verification);
- Business process reengineering; and
- SNAP policy.

The appendix also provides some contextual information concerning the surveyed States.

While this report provides some details about each high performing State's process, it is important to note that the reasons for success are strikingly similar. Even though there is no single action or approach that applies to all States' situations, adapting the underlying concepts that are common among these high performing States should lead to improved performance in any State.

BACKGROUND

The Act entitles all eligible households to benefits within 30 days of application, or within 7 days, if they are eligible for expedited service. Although States process the majority of SNAP applications within these timeframes, an unacceptably high percentage of applications are not processed timely. FNS recognizes that 100 percent compliance is not realistic, but it does expect States to strive for full compliance and requires States with an APT rate less than 90 percent to take corrective action.

There are many reasons States have difficulty meeting the processing standards for SNAP applications, including the dramatic caseload increase over the last 5 years. Sudden caseload increases or cuts in State staffing can contribute to processing delays and backlogs. However, our examination of States with high APT rates over the last several years indicates that State administrative and business practices may allow States to maintain healthy timeliness rates even with increased caseloads and decreased staffing levels.

Beyond the statutory mandate, APT is an important measure of a State's administration and of program access. Since the majority of SNAP households include children and/or elderly members, getting benefits to this vulnerable population as soon as possible should be the primary objective of every State's certification process. Failure to issue timely benefits can put these families at risk of increased food insecurity.

FNS SURVEY OF HIGH PERFORMING APT STATES

FNS surveyed nine States that have maintained high APT rates for several years to identify how they were able to achieve that success. The survey identified several common themes that contributed to high APT rates despite differences in State's application and certification processes.

The surveyed States share challenges similar to those of other States, including caseload growth and reduced or limited State resources. Only two of the nine surveyed States were able to increase staff levels as caseloads grew. Some of the States surveyed recently reengineered their SNAP business processes, while others have not. However, as discussed below, all of the surveyed States examined and made improvements to their application processes. All but one of the surveyed States are State administered (as opposed to county administered). Most importantly, these States have found ways to process cases within the statutory timeframes, establishing that it can be done despite administrative and structural differences. The following sections summarize themes and provide examples that other States may adapt to improve their own APT.

Leadership in the High Performing States

The surveyed States credited leadership from top officials as a foundation of their success. The common characteristics of this leadership included: making APT a priority, supporting changes in operation to improve processes, and obtaining the necessary resources. Following are some examples from the States:

District of Columbia – The Deputies for Quality Assurance and Program Operations have partnered to ensure commitment from leadership in establishing APT as a priority goal. Together, with team members, they develop strategies, train staff, and monitor outcomes.

Idaho – Idaho leadership is an essential part of making APT a priority. Leadership not only defines clear performance targets and goals, but also provides the business model, resources, and support to ensure each office implemented the new service delivery models. Deputy Administrators have visited each office and regularly monitor performance.

Kentucky – SNAP agency leadership has always maintained APT as a high priority goal. Leadership is consistently supportive of new ideas and new engineering practices that will improve APT.

New Mexico – The commitment from leadership began as a project formed by several workgroups comprised of field staff from every level, including policy, QC and Management Evaluation staff.

Oregon – State leadership fully supports business process reengineering (BPR) to increase APT and to improve client satisfaction and the overall client experience. Leadership has supported this process by establishing a Continuous Improvement Unit to focus BPR efforts and support of modernization projects.

Managing the Certification Process

To achieve a high level of APT, the surveyed States implemented a variety of approaches to translate leadership priorities into action. States examined processes and underlying policies, identified areas for improvement, and implemented changes. In some cases, the States overhauled their certification process while others made less dramatic changes.

The most important aspects of the approaches used by States were to: 1) eliminate or modify steps in the certification process in order to improve efficiency; and 2) complete each step as soon as possible. Examples of these approaches include:

- The immediate triage and/or screening of applicants to determine what they need and to direct them where to go;
- Conducting the interview on the same day the application is filed; and
- Verifying as much as possible at the time of the interview.

Many States used the generic term, “same day service,” to describe the approach of starting and finishing a household’s application process in a matter of hours instead of days. States that promote “same day service” may not certify all households within one day, but they attempt to process all applications quickly so that backlogs can be avoided and more time is available for cases that require more attention.

To accomplish “same day service,” the people and paper flow must be streamlined and organized. This requires an examination of the policies and procedures currently in place and may result in making a number of minor changes or can result in a fundamental shift in the SNAP certification process. Making these changes often requires modifications to longstanding policy and practices. While waivers of Federal regulations have helped, changes in States policies and practices often have a more significant impact.

The three primary activities in the application process are: 1) completing the application; 2) conducting the interview; and 3) obtaining verification. Each of these activities consists of several steps that can be examined to identify opportunities to improve efficiency.

Acting on applications

Assigning applications quickly and efficiently appears to be a consistent practice among the high performing States included in the survey. Increased flexibility in assigning cases and different tasks to workers appears to support this practice. Streamlining the application itself by reducing its size, simplifying the language and clarifying directions can also help reduce the amount of time required to screen applications and conduct interviews. Some examples from the high performing States:

Idaho –Idahoans can apply at any office and a worker can take action on any case. Anyone at the office is encouraged to participate in a focused interview. If an applicant cannot stay, the applicant completes an application and schedules an interview. Idaho aims to have 80 percent of cases processed the day of application. Mailed applications are routed to the Statewide application team and an interview is scheduled within 3-4 days; processing time averages 8 days for mail-in applications. Applications entitled to expedited service follow the same procedures; cases usually receive benefits the same day because most verification is postponed. Idaho has not had any expedited service applications that exceed the 7 day timeliness standard.

Kentucky –Kentucky implemented a simplified SNAP application on its website to provide quicker service. If applicants are eligible for expedited service, they are encouraged to complete the application and interview that day. If the applicant cannot be interviewed that day, an interview is scheduled within 2 days to complete the application face-to-face or by telephone. Kentucky processes expedited applications by the 3rd day.

Minnesota – Minnesota encourages same day interviews because the applicant is already in the office. Minnesota tries to limit the number of people that have to “touch” the application because it takes time to for each person to review the case and get “up to speed.”

New Mexico – Offices have greeter stations to identify the client’s needs and to collect documents. The intake process allows caseworkers to screen clients for expedited service and conduct an interview that day. If a case is processed with postponed verification, it is sent to the pending unit for follow up monitoring. If a client is entitled to expedited services, workers process the application immediately. All drop-off applications are screened the same day.

Oregon – Oregon provides same day or next day service for all applicants regardless of eligibility for expedited service. Trained support staff may process an expedited application if necessary.

West Virginia – Once the worker receives an application, the worker calls the applicant to conduct an interview. If all calls to the applicant are unsuccessful, an appointment is created in the eligibility system.

Conducting Interviews

Conducting the interview as soon as possible allows the State and applicant a greater opportunity to complete the application process timely and decreases the risk of exceeding the mandated processing time limits. While it is common practice to offer same day service to applicants entitled to expedited service, several of the high performing States apply this approach to all cases. Many of the States surveyed reported that allowing telephone interviews for the majority of cases supported their efforts to schedule an interview quickly after the office receives an application. Some examples from the high performing States:

Idaho – Anyone applying for SNAP in an office is routed to an eligibility worker for a focused interview. During the focused interview, the worker attempts to verify what he or she can, through data interfaces and collateral contacts, to make a same day decision.

Kentucky – Each household is encouraged to file an application and complete an interview the day it contacts the SNAP office, regardless if the contact is in-person or by telephone. If the applicant cannot stay to complete the application and interview, the worker schedules an interview the day the application is received. If the household is eligible for expedited services, an appointment is scheduled to complete the application within 2 days. If the household is not eligible for expedited services, an appointment is scheduled within 15 days.

Mississippi – Expedited individuals must be interviewed the application date or the next day.

Massachusetts – Workers contact applicants by phone on the day of application for an interview and schedule the interview by mail if client can't be reached by the end of day.

New Mexico – If the worker processes the application at initial intake, no additional interview is needed. If the worker does not process the application at initial intake, the worker sends an appointment notice to the client and schedules the interview within 10 days.

Oregon – Oregon has a same day/next day model for all applicants whether they are expedited or not. Applications that are received in-person from the applicant are offered an interview for

that same day (goal is within 30 min) or for next day. Workers call online applicants the day or next day of receipt and offer an immediate phone interview or schedule one for a later date.

Obtaining Verification

The surveyed States reported verifying as much as possible at first contact by making additional data sources available to workers and by educating applicants about what documents are required and encouraging them to bring documentation to the office. Some examples from the high performing States:

Idaho – Idaho implemented a new eligibility system and additional automated tools to improve the agency’s ability to verify and approve applications and recertifications quickly. Idaho attempts to verify all information during first client contact to minimize the number of times a customer must return or mail information. Workers utilize State and Federal data sources, make collateral contacts, and allow the clients to access information on the web during the interview process. Only after these methods are exhausted is an application pending waiting for verifications from the client.

Kentucky – Kentucky implemented relaxed verification requirements to ease the burden on the recipient and to allow for quicker approvals. Prior to requesting verification from an applicant, the worker has several electronic programs available that may verify income and other eligibility requirements.

Oregon – The process for obtaining verification has not changed with implementation of the same day/next day service concept. Workers utilize all online and available verification sources to prevent pending cases unnecessarily. Oregon informs applicants about what verification they will need to provide

New Mexico – New Mexico modified its verification requirements for resources, shelter expenses, utilities, and child care deductions to allow client statement as acceptable verification unless the statement was questionable.

Business Process Reengineering – From Case to Process Management

Several of the surveyed States have gone through a process that restructured their basic work flow and their workers’ responsibilities to develop more efficient operations. In some instances, complete business process reengineering (BPR) initiatives have been completed, while in others, States have less formally identified and implemented a variety of improvements to the SNAP application process. Some States have only conducted BPR in certain areas of the State. Process improvement continues to be pursued in many of the States.

While improved efficiency may be the primary goal of BPR, improved timeliness is consistently a key result. Another outcome of BPR is often the reorganization of SNAP caseloads from specific cases being “owned” by individual caseworkers to teams of workers being responsible for defined categories of cases or certain functions. In some States, any worker has access to the entire caseload and can take action on any case in the State. This allows States to more quickly direct work to available staff and avoid delays and backlogs.

Idaho – Idaho leadership has created new positions around BPR to ensure BPR was integrated to the management structures of SNAP. As part of BPR, Idaho tries to make a "one touch" decision, focusing the State’s attention on a customer applying for benefits. This approach ensures that the customer provides and the worker verifies as much information as possible during that first visit to make an eligibility decision on the date of application. The case is assigned to the individual conducting the focused interview. If a case is pended because a worker needs additional verification documents any worker can complete or finish the case when the verifications are received. However, the case stays with that individual assignment to ensure tracking for timelines and task completion. Once a case has been processed, it moves to a maintenance caseload where it is serviced by processing centers. The processing center ensures all changes reported are acted on in a timely manner and that all re-evaluations are completed when due. Workers in the processing center receive work based on availability.

Kentucky – Currently, Kentucky operates under a caseload model where a caseworker “owns” a case from beginning to end and is responsible for all applications, recertification, and case changes. Kentucky is in the process of implementing several new business processing initiatives moving to a more task oriented structure. These initiatives are currently being piloted throughout the State to include regional call centers and creation of specialized units for intake, processing, recertification, etc. within each county or counties.

Massachusetts – Intake/Ongoing model has been implemented in some offices. This model allows workers to use specialized skills at application, rather than managing multiple tasks. These changes have increased efficiencies for certification staff (intake/ongoing) to process cases more quickly, reduced wait times for clients (including case triaging in waiting rooms), provided more support for clients completing applications to move clients through the application more quickly, and created options for clients (telephone interviews) that helped clients avoid office visits.

New Mexico – New Mexico moved away from a caseload model to a process model. Each office has teams based on specific processes: Customer Service, Intake, Pending, Processing, and Recertification. SNAP caseloads are organized by process queue. This is tracked with the State’s electronic narrative which identifies when an application is routed from one process to another.

Oregon – In 2009, Oregon implemented a new intake model for field offices. The model includes rotation of eligibility staff to balance workload and allow for more processing time. The

model assigns a time for the interview based on the programs being applied for and requires staff to complete the interview and all other portions of the case (i.e. gather verification, case notation and benefit issuance) before beginning a new interview. During the rollout of this model, staff was trained on Lean Performance Management concepts. This model has allowed most field offices to provide same day/next day service for interviews and initial application processing.

Oregon has also implemented the Ongoing Paperwork Model to process paperwork by priority rather than chronologically. Paperwork is ordered by: “one”—clients with no benefits or with a break in benefits; “two”—clients at risk of a break in benefits; and “three”—all other clients. Management assigns workers according to the number of priority one and two documents in order to process all priority one and priority two documents same day/next day.

State and Federal SNAP Policy and Procedures

While policy changes can facilitate process changes and help align SNAP rules with other programs, the policy choices made by the high performing States do not differ significantly from other States. Most States have moved from face-to-face to telephone interviews as standard procedure and adopted simplified reporting. The operational and procedural changes States make appear to have the most significant impact; particularly the flexibility in distributing work that results from document imaging and electronic case files models.

Idaho – The on-demand interview waiver is critical to the timeliness in both the application and re-certification process. All policy options help improve APT when done in the context of New Service Delivery. The most significant change that improved Idaho’s timeliness and performance was moving decisions to the front end of the process, same-day service, and program integration. Tools such as document imaging and on-line case management were critical tools to facilitate the process, but the business process changes were most significant in making improvements to service levels. Idaho believes that anytime it can integrate policies and programs, it has better outcomes for families.

Kentucky – The face-to-face interview waiver and the document imaging option have effectively helped streamline the State’s processes. The face-to-face interview waiver provides the applicant with additional flexibility and results in fewer discontinued cases. Document imaging allows workers to locate the verification immediately and reduces the possibility of losing verification.

ADVICE FROM HIGH PERFORMING STATES ON MOST CRITICAL PROCESS CHANGES

In conclusion, the surveyed States provided a few helpful recommendations to other State agencies seeking to improve their APT. Below are a few direct quotes from the States.

Idaho – *“Start with your business processes. Find technology and policy changes that support a new service delivery model. Don't expect either of them to be the silver bullet as the real change comes in transforming **HOW** you do the work. Same-day service, decisions made at the first point of contact, and good case management standards and practices.”*

Kentucky – *“Systems need to be automated so that workers receive notification for case actions due and allowable timeframes should be shortened to complete an application.”*

Mississippi – *“Tracking applications and ongoing training with emphasis on timeliness by staff meetings, webinars, and monthly conference calls.”*

New Mexico – *“The process of interviewing a client at initial contact made a significant impact on application timeliness and customer satisfaction.”*

Oregon – *“Use available State options and waivers to simplify the application process. Reach out to States that have implemented process improvement changes or modernization projects. Waiving the face-to-face interview requirement improved staff application processing efficiencies. Simplified utility allowances and simplified deductions (for self-employment) had a major impact due to less pending for verifications on these items. Less pending and increased phone interviews together, drastically improve processing times. This coupled with the same day/next day application processing model completely revitalized application processing times.”*

APPENDIX

TABLE 1: STATE REPORTED OPTIONS AND WAIVERS THAT HELPED IMPROVE APT¹

Option/ Waiver	DC	ID	KY	MA	MN	MS	NM	OR	WV
WAIVERS									
Face to face interview waiver		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Unscheduled interview waivers (on-demand interviews)		✓							
Averaging student hours waiver		✓	✓	✓					
24-Month certification periods for elderly and disabled		✓		✓	✓				
Waiver of recertification interview for elderly or disabled with no earned income							✓		
OPTIONS									
Simplified definition of income and resources		✓	✓	✓		✓			
Simplified standard utility allowance		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Simplified determination of deductions		✓		✓				✓	
Call centers		✓			✓				
Online case management		✓							
Online application				✓	✓				✓
Document imaging		✓	✓		✓	✓			
Program integration		✓	✓		✓				
Broad-based categorical eligibility							✓		

¹ Not a comprehensive list—only covers the specific policy waivers and options that the surveyed States believed helped improve APT. Enlarged **blue** checkmarks signify what the States identified as being most helpful.

TABLE 2: STATE REPORTED OPERATIONAL CHANGES THAT AFFECT APT

Operational Change	DC	ID	KY	MA	MN	MS	NM	OR	WV
Business process reengineering (BPR)		✓					✓	✓	
Some important process improvements, but not quite BPR	✓			✓	✓				
Leadership established APT as a priority	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Ongoing monitoring of APT by leadership	✓	✓					✓		
Track applications and provide reports	✓	✓				✓			
Staff monitored on APT (held responsible for overdue cases)		✓	✓			✓	✓		
Same day service (e.g. interviewing the household during first contact)	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Encourage same day decision making		✓					✓		
Online application				✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Document Management		✓					✓	✓	
All offices have same processes	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Case banking	✓	✓			✓		✓		✓
CBO Involvement			✓	✓			✓	✓	

TABLE 3: 6-MONTH APT RATES FOR THE SURVEYED STATES'

	7/11 to 12/11		10/11 to 3/12		01/12 to 06/12		04/12 to 09/12		07/12 to 12/12	
	Rate	Upper Bound	Rate	Upper Bound	Rate	Upper Bound	Rate	Upper Bound	Rate	Upper Bound
DC	95.98	98.71	95.59	99.04	94.76	97.92	97.53	99.48	98.54	100.18
ID	99.38	100.59	99.11	100.85	99.42	100.55	98.54	100.18	98.71	100.49
KY	97.18	99.62	94.89	98.58	96.22	98.64	97.16	98.89	97.33	99.28
MA	96.04	99.84	93.15	98.95	94.62	99.21	91.02	95.35	86.09	92.41
MN	95.24	98.96	95.56	99.81	94.20	98.10	92.20	95.87	90.80	95.24
MS	95.07	98.63	96.94	100.35	96.12	99.45	95.07	98.05	94.00	97.80
NM	98.03	100.24	97.22	100.32	98.29	100.21	98.15	99.95	98.05	100.23
OR	96.39	99.22	96.04	99.84	95.49	99.02	93.64	96.76	93.71	97.48
WV	97.56	100.29	96.94	100.35	95.33	98.71	92.05	96.04	89.05	94.28

TABLE 4: YEARLY APT RATES AND RANKING FOR THE SURVEYED STATES'

State	2006		2007		2008		2009		2010		2011	
	Rate	Rank										
DC	95.9	6	93.5	14	95.4	7	97.1	1	99.0	1	96.3	8
ID	83.1	43	80.0	48	91.3	16	95.1	10	98.2	2	99.1	1
KY	97.7	2	94.8	10	94.4	9	96.1	3	93.4	12	99.1	1
MA	98.8	1	99.3	1	97.7	2	96.1	4	94.5	9	94.9	10
MN	87.9	34	92.6	19	90.3	24	88.5	26	91.4	20	93.1	13
MS	88.9	30	88.3	30	85.9	32	88.9	25	90.5	20	91.5	21
NM	92.6	21	91.0	21	87.9	27	95.9	7	97.1	4	98.6	3
OR	93.7	15	91.9	18	89.8	21	93.5	12	97.1	3	96.5	7
WV	96.7	4	98.4	2	96.2	4	96.3	2	95.9	5	96.7	5