



July 25, 2016

Audrey Rowe, Administrator
Food and Nutrition Service
United States Department of Agriculture
3101 Park Center Drive
Alexandria, VA 22302

RE: Request for Information on SNAP Data Exchange Standardization (document 81 FR 33199)

Dear Ms. Rowe,

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) advocates for public policies and programs at the federal, state, and local levels that reduce poverty, help low-income people become economically self-sufficient, and create ladders to opportunity for all. CLASP has extensive experience working on income and work support programs at both, the federal and state levels. We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Request for Information (RFI) on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Data Exchange Standardization.

The Work Support Strategies (WSS) initiative, a partnership of CLASP, the Urban Institute, and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), highlighted ways that data can be a challenge and an asset for states administering SNAP and other work support programs. The goal of WSS was to improve the delivery of key work support benefits to low-income families (including health coverage, nutrition benefits, and child care subsidies) through more effective, streamlined, and integrated approaches. We partnered with six states (Illinois, North Carolina, South Carolina, Rhode Island, Colorado, and Idaho) to provide technical assistance and establish a community of peer support. The states were challenged to develop or improve delivery systems that were effective and efficient, while working to improve the health and well-being of low-income families. All states in the WSS initiative highlighted the importance of improved information systems, data repositories, and easy-to-access data sources in their work to streamline programs, create efficiencies, and improve program access. However, they also learned that poorly handled data can also lead to additional staff workload and client paperwork burden.

Based in part on our work on the recently completed WSS initiative, as well as the experience and expertise we have providing technical assistance to states in the capacity of a national anti-poverty organization, we have learned about the opportunities and pitfalls of data. In these comments, we outline several major principles we urge you to consider as you develop regulations regarding data exchange standardization.

Data Sharing Must Include Protections for Clients When Data Matches are Erroneous

States use data from many sources, including state data (i.e., unemployment insurance, driver's license records) and national data (i.e., social security, National Directory of New Hires). Data can make state agencies more efficient in the administration of public benefit programs, and technology has contributed to horizontal integration efforts in recent years.¹ Data has contributed to improved efficiencies and

¹ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *State Innovations in Horizontal Integration: Leveraging Technology for Health and Human Services*, March 24, 2015, <http://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/3-23-15fa.pdf>.

processes in state agencies, allowing workers to quickly verify what used to be required of beneficiaries to submit in paper form. Data matches with reliable data sources can also be an effective way to decrease errors and reduce verification burdens on agencies and public benefit applicants and recipients. However, no database is ever perfect and data can sometimes be inaccurate or out-of-date.

For example, a study done in Texas found that in only 75 percent of the cases of NDNH matches had the non-custodial parent actually worked for the employer identified, and in only 63 percent of matches was the parent still employed at that job.² While the consequences in this case are only added hassle for agencies and employers, in the context of SNAP, these inaccuracies could pose a serious barrier to SNAP receipt, particularly if clients are expected to provide additional verification to disprove a “false positive”. In another example of the inadequacies of the NDNH, client experiences in Massachusetts brought to light a number of problems in the data matching process, such as errors and discrepancies in the new hire reports and inconsistencies with simplified reporting, causing many to erroneously lose their benefits.

Recognizing that matching algorithms can fail (e.g., social security numbers may be missing or mis-entered, matches based on names can easily connect the wrong case), and that the databases accessed may contain errors, FNS should adopt the principle that data matching should never be used to deny or terminate benefits without clients being informed about the data that resulted in the loss of benefits and given the opportunity to correct any errors. A good model for this is the Social Security match to document citizenship status, where a match is treated as proof of citizenship, while an applicant who is not matched is always given an opportunity to provide an alternative form of documentation.

States should be strongly encouraged to implement data matching in ways that minimize the burden on both families and caseworkers. As noted above, Massachusetts provides an example of how burdensome a poorly implemented data match can be. Massachusetts sent automated notices to clients whenever discrepancies were detected between the state new hire registry and information housed in the casefile. Clients were required to respond to the notice, including providing documentation to support or refute the discrepancy. Although a significant number of the data matches were minor (e.g., one time payments for serving as an election monitor), erroneous or outdated, the burden on clients was substantial, and led to many clients losing benefits. This was also burdensome to state staff, as many clients contacted the agency with questions. Eventually, FNS clarified federal rules that Massachusetts was out of compliance and these processes were revised.

Finally, states should have the option of ignoring data matches when they have evidence from other sources that they have good reason to believe is more accurate and up-to-date. For example, many states now receive near real-time employment data from the Work Number and other sources. By contrast, wage data from the unemployment insurance system often lags by 3-5 months. States should not be forced to waste resources and burden clients by following up on matches that they are confident are not current, or that they have previously reviewed.

Allow For Innovation and Improvements

Over the last decade, states have increasingly developed technology to support public benefit system modernization. These improvements have contributed to decreasing application and renewal processing times, allowed individuals to access case information through client portals, collated data from multiple sources which are relevant to benefits programs, and provided ways for agencies to analyze information and outcomes. Some innovations have stemmed from requirements of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the opportunities for funding through the A-87 waiver and 90/10 funding, and in other cases states have realized that antiquated systems need to be updated to improve efficiencies.

² “Texas Study on the Accuracy of NDNH matches,” May 8, 2000, available at: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ocse/dcl_00_59g.pdf.

States have demonstrated that they are capable of developing technology to support their needs, including data matching and exchange capabilities. As FNS considers models for data standardization, we encourage seeking input directly from state agencies (and particularly those considered to have advanced and well-functioning systems) and ensuring that any standards provide the flexibility for states to continue to innovate in the future. This is especially important given that technology advances quickly in our modern world, and regulations specific to a certain system will become stagnant, similar to the IEVS and PARIS systems, which have been usurped by more efficient systems developed in recent years.

Any new requirements should be phased in over time so that they can be incorporated as data systems upgrades are made. States should not be required to spend significant amounts of money to make changes to systems that they may have plans to, or are in the process of, replacing entirely. We also urge FNS to coordinate with the Department of Health and Human Services and other federal agencies to ensure that the requirements are consistent across programs, particularly SNAP, Medicaid, and TANF.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on this important RFI, and welcome any questions you may have. Overall, we urge you to recognize that data matching, exchanges, and standardization are tools, and should be used in service of the goal of providing SNAP and other benefits more accurately and efficiently, and should not become a barrier to these goals.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Nune Phillips", written over a light blue horizontal line.

Nune Phillips
Policy Analyst