Improving SNAP and Medicaid Access: SNAP Interviews

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

CLASP
Policy solutions that work for low-income people

To determine if a household is eligible for SNAP, states must conduct an interview at application and at recertification, typically at least once per year. Successfully completing the interview is essential to ensuring that eligible clients receive food assistance. Reducing missed interviews reduces the need for households to reapply for benefits and for eligibility workers to reprocess redundant paperwork. Although there is no one-size-fits-all approach to completing interviews, agencies have increased the number of interviews completed within mandated timeframes using the following promising practices.

Increasing SNAP Interview Completion Rates

Agencies typically conduct a combination of scheduled and unscheduled, walk-in and telephone interviews. Most agencies allow phone interviews; however, if applicants request an in-person interview, the state must still offer it. In general, SNAP agencies will complete more interviews when they use a flexible interview process that accommodates a household's schedule and have different options for conducting the interview (phone and in-person). Examples of such flexibility include:

When the client is in the SNAP office or on the phone, agencies can conduct the interview while the client is there and available:

- If a client walks into an eligibility office to apply or recertify, conduct a *same-day interview* while the client is in the office.

- If clients can apply or recertify over the phone (using a telephonic signature), conduct the interview *while the client is on the phone* to complete the whole process in one step.

  Note: only state/county eligibility workers can conduct interviews, which may have implications for call center staffing.

Agencies can also conduct an *un*scheduled interview by trying to reach the client or allowing the client to call the SNAP office at their convenience.

- When an application or recertification is received, make a *cold call* to see if the client is available right then to complete the interview. Contact information is most likely to be accurate closer to the date of application.

  › Clients may screen calls. Some agencies have found it effective to *leave a message* saying why they are calling and then try calling again in a few minutes. To increase the likelihood that clients pick up the call, agencies will want to be sure that the *caller ID* correctly notes the state agency vs. a general number or "blocked caller."

  › Send a *text message* to let the client know that a caseworker will be calling soon to conduct the interview.

  › Make *multiple calls* at different times over a few days to try to reach the client.

- Use a *call-in model*, where clients are instructed to phone a call center to complete their interview within a certain number of days after submitting their application or recertification. These are referred to as "on-demand" interviews.

  › States may get an *on-demand interview waiver* to conduct all interviews on-demand or can use a *call-in model without a waiver* by still scheduling an interview time but offering the client the option of calling in any time before the scheduled interview.

State Spotlight

New York City On-Demand Interviews

The New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) identified eligibility interview challenges, including that 20 percent of SNAP applications were denied for missed interviews and that excess staff time was spent scheduling and rescheduling interviews. In response, HRA piloted on-demand interviews for SNAP recertifications and created new outreach materials — an online message instructing clients to call for their interviews after submitting their recertification form, along with emails, texts, and robocalls reminding clients to call in for their interview. Clients are instructed to complete their recertification form online or at a local office and then call the SNAP Interview Phone Line to complete their interview. During the pilot, HRA saw an increase in the number of interviews completed at recertification and a decrease in agency workload from scheduling, rescheduling, and making multiple attempts to reach the client by phone. Following success with the recertification interviews, HRA expanded on-demand interviews to new applicants.

If the agency schedules an interview:

- Allow clients to *select an interview time* that works for them through a mobile app or online portal rather than assigning them a time.

- Send a *text reminder* before the scheduled interview.

- For SNAP recertification interviews, *call clients at the scheduled time* even if they have not returned their recertification form to conduct the interview and remind them to send in their recertification form.

Making the Most out of SNAP Interviews

Interviews are an opportunity for SNAP agencies to clarify information reported on applications or recertification forms, collect verification documents, and answer client questions. Agencies can make the most out of the client interview by:

- Trying to resolve all verification issues during the interview so workers can approve the case during or shortly after the interview (if eligible). This reduces the times an agency must touch a case. Use electronic data sources wherever possible to verify eligibility information. If verification documents are needed:

  › Provide a way for clients to submit verification documents to the eligibility worker during a phone interview. This may include emailing documents to the worker or electronically uploading documents through an app or agency website.

  › Use collateral contacts to verify eligibility information with third-party sources. This may include calling an employer to verify income or contacting a provider to verify medical expenses. Clients can give the third parties consent to release this information to the eligibility workers while the client is in the office or on the phone.

- Screen clients for eligibility for other assistance programs, like Medicaid and child care assistance, and help with the applications or make referrals.

⚠ Look Out!

- Be sure the call center has sufficient capacity before switching to a call-in model. It's ineffective and increases frustration if clients can't get through or have long wait times. Consider a dedicated queue for clients calling for an interview and increase call center staffing capacity during times of the month when there will be a high volume of recertification calls.

- Many clients have limited minutes available on their mobile phones and may be unable to wait on hold or may be out of minutes at the time of their interview. Work with cellular providers to exclude calls to and from the human service agency from a client's minutes, and/or allow for a call back option when wait times are high so clients don't have to use minutes waiting on hold.

- Clients may not answer calls from blocked or unidentified numbers. Make sure outbound calls from the agency appear on clients' phones as coming from the human services agency so they are more likely to answer.

Key Data Points to Consider

- Number (and percent) of missed interviews at application and recertification by type (e.g., in-person vs. phone, households with earned income vs. households with no earned income).

- Number (and percent) of applications and recertifications denied for a missed interview.

- Percent of clients who are reached through a cold call.

- Call center metrics including:

  › Wait times to complete an interview, and

  › Deflection rates (callers who are told to call back later and not allowed to wait on hold).

- Number (and percent) of applications and recertifications resolved during or immediately after the interview (without pending the client for further verification).