

Introduction

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) serves as a basic nutritional safety net for many low-income individuals and families as well as a critical support for households transitioning to self-sufficiency. Over the past decade, an array of federal options and state-initiated modifications have emerged to ensure that the Program remains accessible to all and through various means and to efficiently implement the Program in response to declining administrative resources and an increasing number of clients. To meet these goals, states are modernizing the Program by making a variety of changes that affect SNAP application, case management, and recertification processes.

This summary describes the results of a national survey on state modernization efforts that were conducted in the last half of 2008. While SNAP modernization is an ongoing process that occurs in the wider context of other benefit programs, this survey provides a snapshot for a recent point in time with focus on a single program.

Because modernization can be defined in various ways by different entities, this study defines modernization in very broad terms. It focuses not only on technological innovations but on policy, organizational, changes that affect the way SNAP is delivered to clients.

Method

This survey is part of a multi-phase study on SNAP modernization. Results from surveys of all state SNAP agencies along with samples of local program agencies and partner organizations are being made available first as an interim report. The study's final report will focus on in-depth case studies in 14 states.

As part of the surveys, respondents described what key factors were driving modernization in their states and reasons or goals for implementing specific modernization efforts.

Respondents also provided additional detail about the modernization activities that were implemented.

Findings

By 2008, modernization activities were widespread across the states. Almost every state had implemented policy options or waivers to reduce reporting or documentation requirements, office procedures to facilitate program access, technological innovations, and information sharing activities. About half of all states implemented organizational changes.

The majority of respondents reported that increased staff caseloads were the top reason for modernization initiatives in general. Economic downturns, state legislation, and staff turnover in local SNAP office also contributed. In contrast, customer service, improved program access, and increased program participation drove the implementation of specific modernization efforts.

While all states had implemented or planned to implement at least one customer access activity, they typically implemented multiple customer access activities together. Most frequently, these included combined program applications, submission of application and recertification material by fax, and expanded local office hours.

The most visible technological innovations were the use of online application tools and call centers. A little over 40 percent of the states enabled SNAP clients to complete an application electronically, but not all of these allowed applicants to submit applications electronically. Call centers operate in a centralized location where clients receive information through an automated system or from a knowledgeable SNAP employee. About 40 percent of states had also implemented or were pilot-testing call centers at the time of the survey.

The most common organizational change was the involvement of community-based partners to provide program information and/or application assistance. Many states contracted with other organizations to develop, implement or manage technology applications. Almost 67 percent of states also contracted for services related to outreach and application assistance.

On the whole, the modernization initiatives were viewed very positively – although states tended to rate specific modernization efforts more positively than did local office staff. Increased overall Program participation and participation of certain subgroups were the greatest successes attributed to modernization efforts.

General Lessons Learned

Many state and local office respondents emphasized the importance of planning and adequate time to test and refine program changes prior to implementation. In addition, involvement of staff at every level was described as necessary for successful roll-out.

For More Information

Gretchen Rowe, Sam Hall, Carolyn O'Brien, Nancy Pindus, and Robin Koralek. (2010). *Enhancing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Certification: SNAP Modernization Efforts – Interim Report*. Prepared by the Urban Institute, for the Food and Nutrition Service (available online at www.fns.usda.gov/ora).

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.)

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, DC 20250-9410, or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.