

ASSESSMENT OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF AN INTERVIEW TO SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY AND BENEFIT DETERMINATIONS (SUMMARY)

Background

USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) regulations require State eligibility staff to conduct interviews with households prior to certification or recertification for benefits. These must be conducted face to face unless the State determines that a telephone interview is acceptable due to a hardship situation. However, over the last decade, the vast majority of States have applied for and received waivers that allow telephone interviews without the need to document household hardship. Currently 47 States are using these waivers.

Some have suggested that all eligibility interviews, including telephone interviews, should be eliminated because they require substantial staff resources and increase States' administrative burden for SNAP. This study assessed whether eliminating the eligibility interview would have adverse effects on client and worker outcomes by evaluating demonstration projects in two States — Oregon and Utah. The study examined how key outcomes, such as program access, payment accuracy, and administrative costs, vary with and without an interview at both certification and recertification.

Demonstration Background

North Carolina, Oregon, and Utah applied for and received grants from the Food and Nutrition Service in September 2011 for conducting demonstration projects. However, North Carolina implemented major information technology systems changes, making it unable to comply with the evaluation requirements and, therefore, was excluded from the study.

Study States were granted waivers to eliminate eligibility interviews at certification and

recertification for up to 20 percent of their SNAP caseload for the 15-month demonstration period (September 1, 2012, to November 30, 2013). Oregon implemented the demonstration (no interview) in five sites. Utah implemented the waiver statewide by randomly assigning 20 percent of SNAP applicants and participants to the demonstration.

Data Sources and Analysis Methodology

Data sources included semistructured interviews with State and local administrators, front-line staff, and community organizations; administrative data (monthly caseload files from September 2010 to November 2013); client surveys and interviews; staff time-use surveys; and SNAP quality control-type reviews.

To calculate program effects, a comparison group design was used in Oregon—a difference-in-difference approach to compare changes in five demonstration sites with the comparison counties that conducted interviews—and a randomized controlled design was used in Utah.

Key Findings

Most staff in Oregon and Utah reported favorable experiences with the demonstration. State-level staff and local office supervisors were more positive about the demonstration, while eligibility workers and front office staff shared the more challenging aspects of eliminating the interview. Most State staff also believed there was little adverse effect on their performance measures. Staff perceived that effective elements of the demonstration included:

- Reduced time for benefit determinations
- Improved access to SNAP benefits

However, staff also felt that the demonstration

posed challenges, such as:

- Difficulty processing incomplete applications or collecting information from complex cases such as households with earnings;
- Difficulty processing cases for other assistance programs in Utah; and
- While workload shifted between staff in Oregon, overall burden was not reduced.

The elimination of the eligibility interview did not have a major effect on client outcomes overall. Differences, if any, were small.

Application/recertification volume:

- There was no effect on the overall number of applications or recertifications submitted in Oregon.
- The number of expedited applications increased in Utah by 2.7 percentage points, likely due to the State's practice of screening all demonstration applications for expedited service.

Timeliness:

- Time to process applications increased in Oregon and Utah, reducing application timeliness.

Approvals/denials:

- Application approval rates in both States were not affected overall, but recertification approval rates decreased slightly in Oregon.
- The demonstration did not affect denial or case closure rates overall, but the distribution of denials and closures changed. In Utah, income-related denials increased and procedural denials decreased. In Oregon, procedural case closures decreased.
- Churning decreased by 3 percentage points in Utah, suggesting that the recertification interview may be a barrier. There was no effect on churning in Oregon.

Client characteristics/satisfaction:

- Fewer demonstration applicants reported earned income overall.
- There was no effect on benefit amount determinations at certification or recertification.

- Client satisfaction was high among demonstration participants, but low among those denied benefits.

Impacts on staff performance and costs were limited:

- Eliminating the interview did not produce measurable savings in staff time and costs. In Oregon, the work appeared to shift from eligibility workers to front office staff. In Utah, it took eligibility workers nearly twice as long to process demonstration applications (1.9 hours versus 1.1 hours) due to additional time needed for verifying client information.
- The demonstration did not appear to negatively affect error rates and may, in fact, have increased accuracy in both States. Demonstration-related case error rates were significantly lower in Oregon and Utah, and payment error rates were lower in Utah.
- In both States the most common reason eligibility workers contacted demonstration clients was for earned income (40 percent of all contacts in Oregon and 45 percent in Utah), consistent with eligibility workers reporting that households with earnings were the most complex cases.

In summary, the study suggests that the contribution of interviews to eligibility and benefit determination is mixed. Eligibility interviews may improve application timeliness and the likelihood that applicants will report earnings. Eliminating the interview may reduce error rates and program churning. Application approval and denial rates and the accuracy of benefit determinations were similar for cases with or without the interview.

For More Information

Rowe, Gretchen, Andrew Gothro, Elizabeth Brown, Lisa Dragoset, and Megan Eguchi. *Assessment of the Contributions of an Interview to SNAP Eligibility and Benefit Determinations*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, April 2015. Available online at www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.