



U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service

Guide to Improving Notices of Adverse Action (NOAAs)

September 18, 2014 (FINAL)

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Introduction

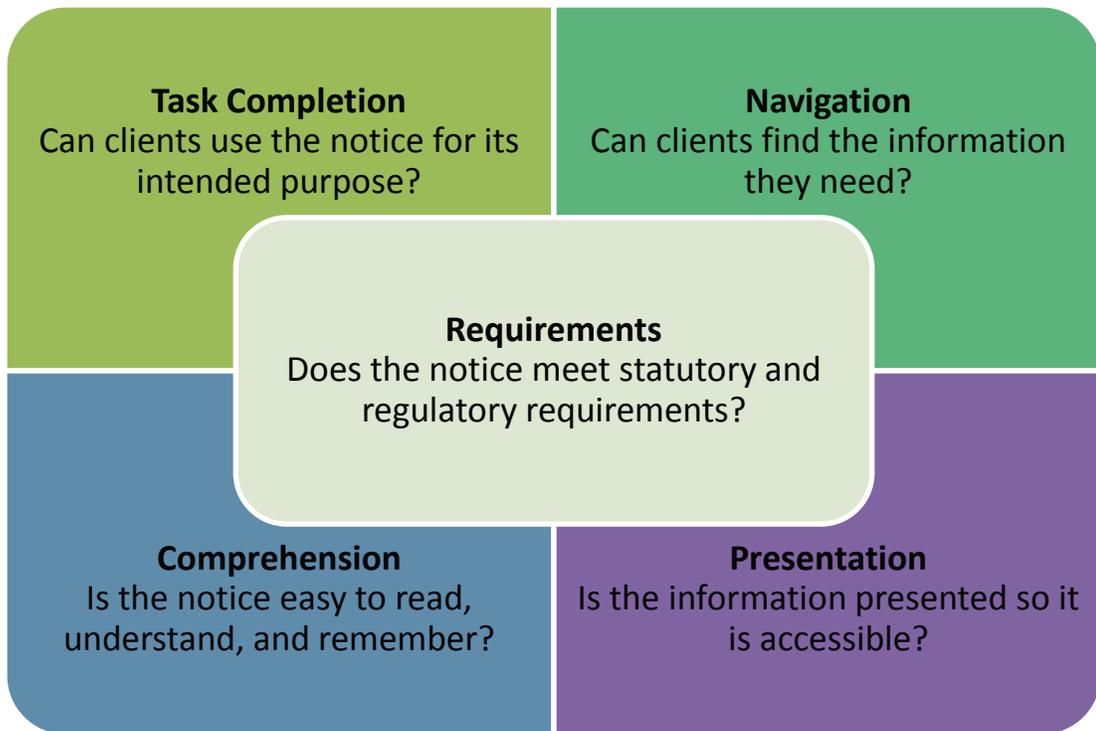
What is this Guide?

Both clients and State Agency workers often struggle with SNAP Notices of Adverse Action (NOAAs). For workers, it can be difficult to convey State Agency decisions and the reasoning behind them—especially when the situation is complex. For clients, it can be difficult to read and understand notices that deal with benefit decisions—especially when they convey bad news, such as a denial or termination, as clients are under great stress if they have been receiving benefits or have applied for benefits. Working within automated systems also imposes constraints on the tone of the notices as well as how they look.

In all cases, State Agencies can benefit from a targeted process to both evaluate and improve notices. This guide was developed to help State Agencies create more effective, client-focused notices. The guide allows you to (1) evaluate NOAAs to see how well they work for clients; and (2) improve them using proven plain language and information design techniques. In addition, the guide contains models for general notices—providing you with some basic language and formatting examples that can be adapted to notices.

What Makes a Good NOAA?

We can only gauge the effectiveness of a notice by viewing it through the eyes of your clients. Clients are the ultimate judge of whether a notice “works.” A good notice is not just legal, it is also *usable*—meaning that it can be read easily, understood quickly, and used to take appropriate action. To create a good notice, one must go beyond legal, statutory, and regulatory requirements and address the four basic areas of plain language:



- **Task Completion. Can clients use the notice appropriately for its intended purpose?** Task completion refers to how well a notice tells clients what the decision is, why the decision is being made, and what they can do next. It focuses on how well the notice answers key questions and guides clients to important next steps that they can act on confidently.
- **Navigation. Can clients find the information they need?** Navigation refers to how logically the information in a notice is grouped, ordered, and marked so that clients can see what is important. It includes elements like white space, a predictable format, and headings.
- **Presentation. Is the information presented so it is accessible?** Presentation refers to how well the information is presented to make reading easier and less burdensome. It includes elements such as headings, font type and size, and other graphics.
- **Comprehension. Is the notice easy to read, understand, and remember?** Comprehension refers to how easy words and concepts are to understand. It includes elements such as sentence level, active versus passive voice, and other plain language techniques.

- **Requirements. Does the notice meet regulatory and statutory requirements?** NOAAs must always be legally accurate and meet the federal regulatory, statutory, and regulatory requirements.

How Do You Use This Guide?

This guide is designed to help a State Agency use plain language to improve NOAAs. To use the guide:

1. Use the interactive checklist to assess NOAAs across the nine plain language principles. See *Appendix A. Notice Scorecard*.
2. Identify aspects of NOAAs that are opportunities for improvement according to the scorecard.
3. Link to areas of the guidance that will help you improve those aspects of NOAAs.
4. Finally, look at the model notices in *Appendix B. Full Notice Samples*. These models contain a sample format and language that can be used in designing NOAAs. These notices include examples of common reasons for actions. Although they do not cover the entire range of reasons that you will encounter, you can use the recommendations and techniques covered in this guidance to craft different types of responses.

In some cases, State Agencies may need to work with their legal counsel when creating language in response to state law or a court ruling. The goal in these situations should be to create a legally accurate notice that also uses plain language so that it will be easily understood by clients.

What Else Can You Do to Create Good Notices?

Often we become close to our subject matter and have a hard time seeing notices through the eyes of our clients. Reasons, actions, words, and concepts regarding SNAP that are easy for *us* to understand may not be so simple for the average person reading our notices. One way to check the notices you develop is to “test” them by showing them to clients to see if they understand the reasoning, words, and concepts. We strongly encourage you to use focus groups of SNAP participants and applicants. In a typical focus group, you gather 4-12 individuals and show them

different notices while asking them questions. The individuals you test with can show how easy or difficult the notice is to read and understand as well as point out areas of confusion. They can also make suggestions of ways to improve the notices for the average person. The group will generate many useful observations, insights, and recommendations.

Task Completion

Can clients use the notice appropriately for its intended purpose?

Task Completion helps clients complete tasks or understand what they need to do as a result of getting a notice. Research in information design has established that people come to a notice with questions—about why they have received the notice, about the implications and impact on them, about what the next steps are, and most importantly, about what they should do. Organizing the notice to answer a client's initial questions helps clients find and understand the key information. This focus on task completion transforms notices from merely providing information to helping initiate appropriate action. A notice that does well in task completion makes it clear to clients exactly what they need to do, even if no action is needed.

Principle 1. Put the key information up front and make it both clear and direct.

A notice should have one main, clear message for it to be useful to clients. In short, it should tell clients both the proposed action (*e.g.*, you will not receive benefits) **and** the reason for the proposed action (*e.g.*, you did not show up to your required interview for participation in the program) in easily understandable language.

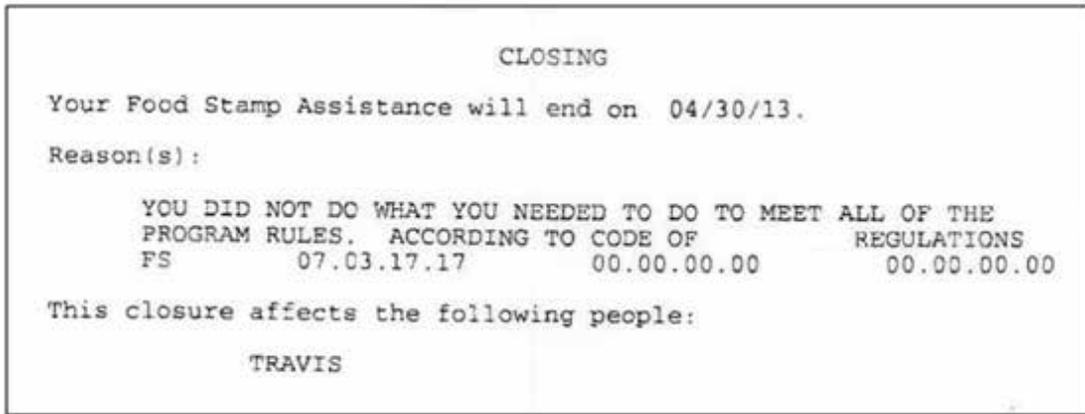
Provide the decision and reason upfront.

Clients most often receive notices because the State Agency has made a decision. Therefore, the most important information is (1) the decision, and (2) the reason for that decision. Often, however, this information is not clear. Some notices provide a basic reason like, “gross income exceeds limit,” but provide no further explanation besides references to the statutory and regulatory citations. On the other hand, some notices provide a list of possible reasons for the decision and then check off the one that applies—providing far too much information for clients to wade through. In other words, notices often provide either too little information—or too much—for clients to understand what happened.



Do Not Do This!

The notice below provides a broad, basic reason for the change, but fails to fully explain *why*, saying only “You did not do what you needed to do to meet all of the program rules.” In addition, this notice requires clients to look up regulations to learn more.



In some notices, the information provided includes *too much* detail. This can be a result of the sentence structure and the overuse of “and/or” construction. Because of too many “and/ors,” clients cannot easily understand why benefits are being reduced. In other instances, notices provide information in a table, but provide so much extraneous information that clients may not easily find the critical or relevant information. This information can add another layer of complexity and distraction. In other notices, the initial information on the first page may be clear, but when clients go deeper into the notice, they face an overabundance of information.



Do Not Do This!

Some notices, use the term “and/or” to provide the client with the reason for the reduction in benefits. For example: “**Receipt of or increase in unearned income**” and “**decrease in or loss of monthly allowable shelter and/or utility costs.**” This combination of reasons is confusing because clients will not know which applies to them.



Do Not Do This!

In the notice below, the “denial” is stated in the first statement with a “why” reason. However, the notice lists ALL potential reasons for denial and places an “XXX” next to the one that applies. Although the list could help clients, in this case, the format is difficult to understand because it provides additional information that clients do not need. Because notices with this characteristic are often computer-generated on a legacy system, the key information is further hidden by the archaic formatting.

SNAP DENIAL

YOUR APPLICATION FOR SNAP BENEFITS RECEIVED ON DECEMBER 12, 2013 HAS BEEN DENIED BECAUSE OF THE REASON INDICATED BELOW.

 XXX YOU VOLUNTARILY WITHDREW YOUR APPLICATION.

 YOU FAILED TO COOPERATE IN DETERMINING YOUR ELIGIBILITY.
EXPLANATION

 YOU DO NOT MEET THE DEFINITION OF A HOUSEHOLD OR SEPARATE HOUSEHOLD AS ESTABLISHED BY FEDERAL REGULATIONS.

 EVERYONE IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD IS A NON-QUALIFIED ALIEN.

 OTHER REASONS:

PLEASE READ THE BACK OF THIS NOTICE FOR INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS OR NEED ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT TEST WORKER AT 1234567891.
NOTICE #F201



Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Identify the decision and/or the reason for the notice and put those pieces of information up front.
2. Make sure the notice has enough information for clients to understand what happened.
3. Remove all extraneous information. Extraneous information includes any information that (1) does not directly relate to a client’s case, (2) contains citations to regulations, and (3) uses complex calculations. Again, as a “check,” give the notice to a focus group of clients or applicants to see if they can clearly understand both the proposed action AND the reason for the notice.

We have made a decision regarding your SNAP benefits because your circumstances have changed. This letter outlines our decision and what you can do.

What is our decision?

We are stopping your SNAP benefits because you failed to respond to our request for contact on [DATE XX/XX/XXXX]. Your benefits will stop on [DATE XX/XX/XXXX].

What can you do?

Call us at the number above if you need another copy of the request or would like to discuss our decision.

Make calculations simple and clear.

Most American adults have low levels of quantitative literacy—in fact, 22% of adults are Below Basic (indicating they possess no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills) in quantitative literacy.¹ Because of this low prevailing literacy level, State Agencies should avoid including complex quantitative calculations in notices. Some states, however, must include calculations in response to court rulings or other state requirements. If this is the case, calculations must be both accurate and as simple as possible. The calculations should include only the most important numbers and should define any terms that a typical client would not know.



Do Not Do This!

The following notice provides a very complex benefits calculation to the client. Complex calculations are difficult for clients to understand and do not add a lot of value. The additional information complicates the look and feel of the notice by taking up more space and providing complex numbers that are difficult for clients to understand.

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). *The Condition of Education 2007* (NCES 2007–064), Indicator 18.

FS 01 (FR)
 Your Food Stamp benefits will change from \$217.00 to \$173.00 effective MAY 01, 2013 because:

- RECEIPT OF OR INCREASE IN UNEARNED INCOME
- DECREASE IN OR LOSS OF MONTHLY ALLOWABLE SHELTER AND/OR UTILITY COSTS.

SUPPORTING LAW(S) OR REGULATION(S) : 7CFR273.9(b)(2) 7CFR273.9(d)(6)

For Food Stamps, the only change required to be reported is when your household's gross monthly income is more than the amount listed below for any calendar month. This change must be reported by the 10th of the month following the change.

Income limit \$2,069.00. (You must report if your monthly gross income is more than this amount.)

SUPPORTING BUDGET CALCULATION			
REGIN : 06/01/13 END :			
GROSS MONTHLY INCOME LIMIT	:	\$2069.00	
NET SELF-EMPLOYMENT INCOME	:	\$.00	TOTAL GROSS INCOME
ADDTL GROSS EARNED INCOME	:+	\$1180.16	GM EARN DSRG
TOTAL GROSS UNEARNED INCOME	:+	\$307.11	GM SUPPT DSRG
FARM LOSS	:-	\$.00	EARNED INCOME DEDUCTION
TOTAL GROSS INCOME	:=	\$1587.27	STANDARD DEDUCTION
TOTAL MEDICAL COST	:	\$.00	CHILD SUPPORT PAYMENTS
MEDICAL THRESHOLD	:-	\$.00	EXCESS MEDICAL EXPENSES
EXCESS MEDICAL EXPENSES	:-	\$.00	ALLOWABLE DEP CARE COST
TOTAL DEPENDENT CARE COST	:	\$.00	ADJUSTED INCOME
ALLOWABLE DEP CARE COST	:	\$.00	
SHELTER COST	:	\$247.00	ALLOWABLE SHELTER DEDUCT
UTILITY COST	:+	\$278.00	NET ADJUSTED INCOME
SHELTER/UTILITY COST	:-	\$625.00	
50% OF ADJUSTED INCOME	:-	\$600.12	MAX NET MONTHLY INCOME
EXCESS SHELTER/UTILITY COST	:-	\$24.88	PARTICIPATING AG SIZE
			THRIFTY FOOD PLAN
			30% OF NET ADJUSTED INCOME
			MONTHLY ALLOTMENT
			LESS RECOUPMENT
			RECURRING MONTHLY ALLOTMENT



Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Simplify the calculations to include only the most important information the client needs to know.
2. Organize the calculations so that the client can easily see how the numbers work together. For example, organizing numbers by "Income," "Bills," etc., can help the client understand what the numbers mean.
3. Use simple words to define the numbers. For example, instead of "deductions," you can say "costs that lower your income," or instead of "resources," you can say "cash you have on hand or in checking and savings accounts."
4. If you use a difficult word, define it. For example, the term like "gross unearned income" is not familiar to most clients. When using a term like this, include a definition in parentheses right after it.

Your Household's Reported Income and Bills

Here is a list of the income and bills that we have on file for your household.

 Income	
Who has income?	When and how much? As of Sep. 2012
<input type="text"/> Job: MEMORIAL NURSING HOME	\$815.76 every other week
<input type="text"/> Job: Z1 CONSTRUCTION	\$345.00 every other week
<input type="text"/> Child Support Received	\$89.50 each month
<input type="text"/> Child Support Received	\$89.50 each month

Principle 2. Emphasize what clients can do.

Having provided the decision and reason up front, a good notice then focuses on identifying the actions that clients could or should take to address, change, and/or resolve the situation. The easiest way to provide this information is to answer the key questions clients might have such as:

- What can I do next?
- Who can I call?
- What if I disagree?
- Where can I get more information?

Together, the answers to these questions give clients the information they need to move forward.

Ensure client actions are overt and on the first page or immediately after the reason or decision.

In most of the notices, it is not overtly clear what clients need to do as a result of the notice. Sometimes a client simply needs to provide more information or reschedule an interview, and, in cases like these, simple action statements are useful. Action statements can:

- Tell clients what kind of missing information to submit. For example, if the client submits XXX pieces of information by a certain date, the State Agency can restore benefits.

- Tell clients they need to have an interview.
- Remind clients that they can reapply for benefits.
- Tell the clients who they can call with questions.

For an action statement to be most useful, it should be highlighted and displayed prominently on the first page—immediately after the decision and reason are presented. If an action statement is clear, but buried on page 2 or 3, it still might be missed. Notices should also include all of the action information in one place without sending a client to different parts of the notice to get more information.

 **Do Not Do This!**

In the notice below, the information is well laid out, but to get complete information, clients must go further into the notice. Setting the notice up in this way moves the burden and effort to the clients to find complete information.

Which benefit?	Status of your benefits?
 Health Care	As of Sep. 01, 2012, at least one person in your home will have a change in health care benefits. Please see Your Health Care Benefits page to learn more.
 	As of Sep. 01, 2012, your monthly benefit will go down from \$514.00 to \$370.00. Please see Your  Benefits page to learn more.
<i>If you don't agree with this decision, you have the right to a Fair Hearing. Please see the last page of this letter to learn more. You may also talk with the agency above.</i>	



Do Not Do This!

The notice below states that “you failed to provide information needed to determine eligibility” but does not explain what this information is or where to find it.

NOHI	NOTICE HISTORY	070913 14:04
ENGLISH**		
CASE NAME:		CASE NUMBER:
PROGRAM: FS	BENEFIT MONTH: 0313	DATE PRINTED: 031113
FROM:	TAYLOR STREET SERVICE CENTER	
DENIAL FOR FAILURE TO PROVIDE		
DEAR MR/MS		
YOUR APPLICATION FOR FOOD STAMPS RECEIVED ON JANUARY 30, 2013 HAS BEEN DENIED BECAUSE YOU FAILED TO PROVIDE INFORMATION NEEDED TO TO DETERMINE ELTGIBILITY.		
IF YOU PROVIDE THE REQUESTED INFORMATION ON OR BEFORE THE 60TH DAY FROM THE DATE OF APPLICATION, YOUR APPLICATION FOR FOOD STAMP BENEFITS WILL BE PROCESSED. IF YOU ARE ELIGIBLE, YOUR FOOD STAMP BENEFITS WOULD BEGIN ON THE DATE YOU PROVIDED THIS INFORMATION.		
IF YOU DISAGREE WITH THIS ACTION YOU MAY REQUEST A HEARING AS EXPLAINED BELOW. IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS, PLEASE CALL YOUR FOOD STAMP ELIGIBILITY WORKER, OR THE CENTER ON ()727-5355.		
SCREEN 1 OF 2		



Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Identify the tasks or actions that clients need to take as a result of the notice.
2. Put the tasks or actions into procedural steps—to make it easier for clients to follow.
3. Display the information on tasks or actions prominently near the front of the notice so it is among the first information clients encounter.

What can you do?

Call us at the number above if you need another copy of the request or would like to discuss our decision.

Make it clear what clients can or should do if they disagree.

After explaining step by step what tasks or actions clients need to take as a result of the notice, the notice should help clients understand what recourse they have if they disagree. This information, usually included in a fair hearing section, should clearly answer the following questions:

- What is a fair hearing?
- In what situations can a client ask for a fair hearing?
- By when must a client ask for a fair hearing?
- How can a client ask for a fair hearing?
- What happens to a client's benefits while waiting for a fair hearing?
- Can a client get free legal help?

Most people do not know about fair hearings and their appeal rights. Clear and succinct information in this section will not only give clients the guidance they need, it will also save the State Agency time in answering phone calls from clients who are confused about their rights. A clear, free-standing section on fair hearing rights will also address a range of legal and regulatory requirements.



Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Identify what clients can do if they disagree with the decision.
2. List the steps to request a fair hearing.
3. Be as specific as possible for the steps to request a fair hearing.
4. Provide contact information for clients to call for more information.

Your Right to a Fair Hearing

What is a fair hearing?

Any time you disagree with a decision taken on your SNAP case, you have the right to request a fair hearing with an official who is required by law to review the facts of every case in a fair and objective manner.

In what situations can you ask for a fair hearing?

You can ask for a fair hearing if:

- You apply for benefits and are denied, or
- You disagree with a decision on your case, or
- You believe your benefits were not calculated correctly.

By when must you ask for a fair hearing?

For SNAP decisions:

- If we closed your case or denied your request for benefits, you must appeal within 90 days following the date of the notice.
- If we changed your benefit amount, you can appeal anytime within your certification period.

For TANF or Medicaid decisions, you must request a hearing within 30 days of the date this notice was mailed.

How do you ask for a fair hearing?

To request a fair hearing: [State can fill in specific procedures in a numbered list]

- 1.
- 2.

What happens to your benefits while you wait for your fair hearing?

If you request a fair hearing within 10 days [OR other time period] then you can continue to receive benefits unless you opt out and tell us you do not want them. However, it is important to know that:

- **If the case is not decided in your favor**, any benefits that you received during this time that you were not entitled to must be paid back.

Place contact information in a prominent position and ensure it is clear and specific.

Currently, some State Agencies only provide generic contact information on their notices, such as a phone number to call to “report or obtain information.” In other notices, the contact information is scattered throughout the notice. For example, some notices provide the worker’s phone number up front as part of the letterhead/heading on the first page of the notice but make no explicit reference or statement to tell clients to contact that person for questions or more information. In addition, some State Agencies only provide local numbers. A few State Agencies provide web site information where clients can go to view their case information.

The most effective notices (1) provide clear contact information—both telephone and web site—in a prominent place; (2) tell clients under what circumstances they should call; and (3) explain who will answer the call (either a case worker, call center, or a member of the State Agency team).



Do Not Do This!

In the following notice, the contact information is buried at the bottom of the first page. The phone number is not labeled and, therefore, it is unclear whether this phone number should be used for questions or if this number is for the case worker identified to the right of the phone number.

NOTICE FOR:

THIS NOTICE IS BASED ON FACTS FOR
JUNE, 2013

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP):

YOUR SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) CASE HAS BEEN CLOSED
FOR JUN 01, 2013 BECAUSE:

THERE ARE NO ELIGIBLE PEOPLE IN THE HOME.

[REDACTED] HAS RECEIVED THREE MONTHS TIME LIMITED SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION
ASSISTANCE BENEFITS AND IS NOT EXEMPT OR MEETING THE WORK REQUIREMENTS.

[REDACTED] CAN MEET THE WORK REQUIREMENTS BY COMPLETING ONE OF
THE ACTIVITIES LISTED BELOW:

- * BE EMPLOYED AT LEAST 20 HOURS A WEEK, OR
- * PARTICIPATE IN WORKFORCE INVESTMENT ACT (WIA)
PROGRAM AT LEAST 20 HOURS A WEEK; OR
- * PARTICIPATE IN A TRADE ADJUSTMENT ACT (TAA) PROGRAM
AT LEAST 20 HOURS A WEEK; OR
- * PARTICIPATE IN A COMMUNITY WORK EXPERIENCE JOB FOR THE REQUIRED
NUMBER OF HOURS.

REMEMBER THAT YOU MAY CONTINUE TO USE YOUR EBT CARD TO SPEND ANY REMAINING
BALANCE IN YOUR EBT ACCOUNT.

MAY 07, 2013

TERESA
BENEFITS EDUCATION

TELEPHONE NUMBER

OR TOLL FREE



Do Not Do This!

In the following notice, no clear contact information is provided anywhere on page 1. In fact, the only contact information provided is for an outside legal counsel. It is also unclear what a client can do next. It suggests looking at the last page of the notice, but it does not provide clear steps on this first page.

DATE MAILED:
TO: U012154 03 04192011
AM 12 C022224 C 02

NOTICE TO DENY YOUR FOOD STAMP APPLICATION

We are denying your application which you filed on APRIL 18, 2011.

This is because we look at all the income your household receives each month to see if you can get food stamp benefits. When you applied, you told us that your household receives a total of \$*5274.00 a month in earned and unearned income. The maximum amount of gross income a food stamp household of 3 can have and still receive food stamps is \$*2823.00. Your income of \$*5274.00 is greater than this amount of \$*2823.00. Households which contain an elderly and disabled member are not subject to the gross income eligibility test, but are subject to the net income eligibility test. The attached page explains how we figured your food stamp household income.

IF YOU DO NOT AGREE WITH THIS ACTION, YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO ASK FOR A HEARING. READ THE LAST PAGE OF THIS NOTICE TO SEE HOW TO ASK FOR A HEARING.

The rule we followed to take this action is 10:87-6.16(C).

You can get a copy of this rule if you ask your worker for it.

You may reapply for food stamp benefits at any time.

IF YOU WISH FREE LEGAL COUNSEL, CONTACT:
LEGAL SERVICES, INC. 348-4200



Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Identify *who* clients should contact as well as *how* to contact them using clear and direct phone numbers.
2. Provide as specific information as possible, preferably: a contact name, a contact phone number, and when to call that number. This could be an individual, such as a case worker, or a call center. If you have different numbers to call for different information, list those numbers together in the same place.
3. Place contact information in a prominent place. Generally, the top right hand corner of a notice is a good place for this information as many readers are trained to look towards the top of a page for contact information.
4. Make sure any references to the contact information throughout the notice direct clients to the location of the contact information. Even if the information seems redundant, it is helpful to direct clients to the same place rather than making them hunt for the information.



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX
Notice Type: Notice of Denial
Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at
XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Navigation

Can clients find the information they need?

For a notice to work, clients must be able to see the structure of the notice and orient themselves to find the information they need. Navigation is the visual roadmap of a document. It helps clients see the relationship of each piece of information to others. With this map, clients can more easily navigate the notice and understand what they need to do. When it comes to documents, people prefer a strong and clear visual structure. A visual structure helps people find information more quickly; it helps them distinguish major points from minor points; and it helps them see how the different parts of the notice relate to each other. Making the logical structure of the notice visible ultimately makes the notice feel more approachable and ensures that clients can understand the information.

A notice with good navigation starts with a clear, logical structure. It then uses tools, like a strong visual layout and white space, to help clients see that structure. Finally, it uses signposts—like headings—to guide the clients through the structure. Good navigation helps clients understand where they are in the notice, where they need to go, and how to get there. A strong, visually designed notice combines all of these elements together to effectively enhance the overall structure of the notice.

Principle 3. Use a clear visual grid to help clients see both the individual notice pieces and the whole.

How the notice looks and feels is usually less about the amount of information the notice has and more about how that information is structured. When a notice looks crowded, cluttered, and intimidating, it is often because the notice lacks a clear structure and layout that organizes the information visually. Even a notice with a great deal of information can be easy to read if the writer uses a strong grid to organize the elements on the page.

A grid is the vertical layout of the page or the visible structure the notice fits into if you were to draw vertical lines from the top to bottom of the page. Your grid is like a

skeleton for the notice. It holds all of the elements together in a cohesive layout. A grid should be used consistently throughout the notice and should clearly show the hierarchy of information—including the main points and the sub-points. It should organize space on the notice so that clients can scan the notice and understand its structure, how each piece of information relates to another, and what pieces of information are more important than others.

Create a grid.

A strong grid with planned white space is one way to help show the hierarchy of information. The grid should organize space on the notice so that clients can scan the notice and understand its structure—seeing how the pieces relate to one another. When a notice does not have a strong grid, it makes the notice appear disorganized or busy.



Do Not Do This!

In the notice on the next page, each of the red lines show where a new piece of information starts. With so many different “start points,” the notice does not use a clear grid. The notice does use some grouping of information but the overall effect is not a strong graphical structure. In addition, it does not use headings or transition words to show the logical link between paragraphs.

FS RECERTIFICATION DENIED

Your food stamp recertification application received on APRIL 25, 2013 is denied.

Your application is denied because of the reason checked below.

- XX
- 1) You did not attend the interview we scheduled for you. If you still want to apply for food stamps, you must contact this office for another interview appointment. This action is based on Food Stamp Manual Section 604-2.
 - 2) You did not give us all the items we asked for in a previous notice. These items are listed below. This action is based on Food Stamp Manual Section 604-2.
 - 3) Your income exceeds the limit for the Food Stamp Program. is your monthly income. is the income limit for the Food Stamp Program. This action is based on Food Stamp Manual Section 603-2.
 - 4) Your resources exceed the limit for the Food Stamp Program. is the value of your countable resources. is the resource limit for the Food Stamp Program. This action is based on Food Stamp Manual Section 602-2.
 - 5) Other reasons explained below. in the Food Stamp Manual supports this action.

WE TRIED CALLING YOU ON MAY 28, 2013 FOR YOUR SCHEDULED FOOD STAMP INTERVIEW AT 2:00 PM BUT WERE UNSUCCESSFUL IN REACHING YOU. IF YOU QUESTIONS CONTACT 1-800-478-2850 OR FAX 1-877-451-2923.



Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Create a grid for the notice. Many different grids can work well. Consider setting up a grid that allows you to add major headings in a left column and the rest of the text on the right. Though there is no set “formula” for creating a grid, the grid you use should work to make the notice more organized and predictable for clients.
2. Generally, limit the number of columns on a grid to no more than 5-7 to reduce visual confusion. Strong and clean vertical lines reduce reader fatigue by helping clients scan the notice more easily and comfortably. Remember, you do not necessarily need to have a perfectly symmetrical grid. Sometimes

a perfectly symmetrical grid can be as boring and distracting as a poorly organized grid.

3. Make sure that the same types of information start on the same columnar lines (headings, paragraphs, tables, examples, etc.).
4. Assess the notice grid. As in the notice below, take your notice and draw a vertical line (from the top of the page to the bottom) every time a question starts or a box is used, creating columns. If you have a page that is all text—meaning there are no tables or other organizers—your page itself will represent a grid. If you have tables on a particular page, each table is its own grid. This simple exercise will help you see if your grid has too many columns.



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX
Notice Type: Notice of Denial
Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at
XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Dear XXXXXXXXXXX,

We have made a decision regarding your SNAP benefits. This letter outlines our decision and what you can do.

What is our decision?

We have denied your request for SNAP benefits because your net income is higher than the limit for this program. Net income is the total amount of your household's income after deductions.

What if you disagree with our decision?

If you disagree with our decision there are several things you can do. You can:

1. **Call us at the number above.** Have this letter and your case number ready when you call.
2. **Request a Fair Hearing.** You have the right to ask us to review our decision at a fair hearing. Read the section on "Your Right to a Fair Hearing" on the next page.

Where can you get more information?

You can call us at the number listed above. Be sure to have this letter and your case number ready. You can also look at our web site, www.yourstatewebsite.gov, for general information.

Use white space to support the grid.

White space in the notice helps clients recognize the groups of information and see how they relate to the rest of the notice. White space on the notice is space that is not being filled—it is space between headings, paragraphs, and sections that delineates them from each other. White space is not “empty” space; in fact, clients actually “read” white space as much as they read words. White space is an important navigational tool that helps guide clients’ eyes and reduces reading fatigue.

Many notices incorporate white space but white space is not always used effectively to help visually organize sections and items. Some notices also have odd white spacing between paragraphs of text. When used well, white space helps to reinforce the overall grid in the notice.



Do Not Do This!

In the notice below, although there is ample white space, it does not effectively help guide the client’s eyes. No methods are used to help guide the client, and it is hard to tell where the important information is located.

Case Name: **Sample Change**
Case Number: **114088149**
Date: **03/15/2011**
DHS Office:
Specialist:
Phone: **964-2152**
Fax: **964-1206**
Specialist ID:

SAMPLE CHANGE
235 S GRAND AVE

NOTICE OF CASE ACTION

Please read each page of this notice carefully.

We have reviewed your application or case. The actions that affect your case are listed in this notice.

Comments From Your Specialist About This Notice

Specialist may type personalized message to client, for example: Congratulations on your promotion! I've budgeted your extra hours and your raise into your Food Assistance.

Benefit Summary

(more information about your benefits follows this summary)

FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Period	Action	Benefit	Household Size
04/01/2011 - 02/29/2012	Decreased	\$ 16.00/mo.	1





Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Incorporate white space in the notice. Use white space to visually separate sections of the notice as well as the individual items that users must complete. The point of white space is to help users see what belongs together and what does not. It also helps users keep their place when reading a lot of information in a paragraph or page.
2. Follow the guidelines for white space. White space must:
 - Reinforce the grid.
 - Establish relationships between pieces of information.
 - Be used predictably to guide clients' eyes to important information.
3. Use the right balance of white space and text. As a rule of thumb, you should aim for 50% of the page to have text and 50% to have white space.
4. Use your grid to identify where white space can be added. Separate groups of information—sections, paragraphs, and individual items—with predictable amounts of white space. Do not forget to include white space in the form of a margin around your text. Although adding white space may seem to elongate the notice and use less of the page, it will greatly help users delineate information.
5. Review your white space after all the text is in place to see if it provides a more uniform and predictable organization. If it does not, assess why and start over.



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX
Notice Type: Notice of Denial
Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at
XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Dear XXXXXXXXX,

We have made a decision regarding your SNAP benefits. This letter outlines our decision and what you can do.

What is our decision?

We have denied your request for SNAP benefits because your net income is higher than the limit for this program. Net income is the total amount of your household's income after deductions.

What if you disagree with our decision?

If you disagree with our decision there are several things you can do. You can:

1. **Call us at the number above.** Have this letter and your case number ready when you call.
2. **Request a Fair Hearing.** You have the right to ask us to review our decision at a fair hearing. Read the section on "Your Right to a Fair Hearing" on the next page.

Where can you get more information?

You can call us at the number listed above. Be sure to have this letter and your case number ready. You can also look at our web site, www.yourstatewebsite.gov, for general information.

Principle 4: Group related information together and use descriptive headings.

One important way to help clients manage the amount of information they have to process is to structure the information into related groups. These groups make the information more manageable and help people process it quickly and accurately. These groups of information should be given headings to help show the overall structure. Headings are visual cues that reinforce the structure of the notice and show clients the major sections. Without headings, clients will not have a way to see

how information is grouped in the notice and how the groups of information relate to each other.

Additionally, headings are most useful when they are phrased in ways that match what a user would actually think and ask. A heading that says “Action” is one step in letting clients know what happened. However, a heading that says “What action did we take on your case?” or even “What did we do?” is even more helpful to clients because it grounds the information in “who is doing what”—which is the type of information people look for when they read.

Use headings to guide clients.

Many notices attempt to group like information together. However, most do not use headings to guide clients and help them better find and locate key information, such as the action, the reason, and what clients can do next. Question headings are particularly helpful because clients naturally come to documents with questions. You can help clients find the information they want and answers they need by using question headings that match the questions clients may have.



Do Not Do This!

The notice below uses headings that are difficult to see, are in all capital letters, and are not particularly descriptive or useful. In addition, the headings do not help reinforce the hierarchy of the information. For example, the title of the document, “NOTICE OF ADVERSE ACTION” is very similar to the “APPEAL RIGHTS” heading whereas “APPEAL RIGHTS” is actually a subheading within the overall notice.

NOTICE OF ADVERSE ACTION

Termination Action

We have found that your household no longer qualifies for the benefits you have been receiving for the following program(s):

Your SNAP case will be terminated effective SEP 01, 2013

This change is made because:
YOUR HOUSEHOLD INCOME EXCEEDS THE AGENCY
LIMIT FOR A HOUSEHOLD OF ONE.

APPEAL RIGHTS

You or your representative may request a fair hearing if you disagree with any action taken on your SNAP or cash assistance case. You may choose anyone you like to present your case at the hearing. For SNAP, you can request a hearing on any action by us or a loss of benefits which occurred in the prior 90 days. In addition, after you are certified for benefits, you can request a fair hearing to dispute the current level of benefits at any time within your current certification period. For CASH PROGRAMS you must appeal WITHIN 30 DAYS. If you wish for your SNAP or cash benefit to continue until the hearing, you must appeal WITHIN 10 DAYS from the date the notice was sent. If, however, the appeal is not settled in your favor, you will be required to repay the benefit received while the appeal was being processed.



Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Ensure you have grouped like information together. Often, your paragraph has already grouped like information together, but check if you need to further separate the information into another paragraph to make it simpler.
2. Think of a heading that will help describe what information is contained in the paragraph so a client who is skimming can easily tell what information is included in that section.
3. Ensure your headings are parallel in structure, to the extent possible. For example, try to phrase them all as question headings. If you are unable to phrase them as questions, at least try to phrase them consistently. For example, "SNAP Information," "Our Decision Information," and "Appeal Process Information."
4. Use question headings wherever possible.

Why are you receiving this notice?

We are providing an update about your SNAP benefits.

We are putting your SNAP case on hold because you did not provide the information we asked for.

What can you do?

You can provide us with the following information.

1. [LIST HERE]
2. XX

If you provide this information within 60 days of the date you applied, your application can be completed. After that time, you will need to complete a new application for benefits.

You can also call us at the number above if you would like to discuss this decision more.

Where can you get more information?

You can call the caseworker listed above. Be sure to have this letter and your case number ready. You can also look at our web site, www.yourstatewebsite.gov, for general information.

Presentation

Is the information presented so it is accessible?

Part of the overall goal in creating an effective notice is to create an *accessible notice*: one that helps put clients at ease. Presentation tools like larger font size, effective icons, bulleted lists, and clear emphasis make notices easier to read, to understand, and to use. These tools also help to underscore the overall structure and logic of the notice.

A notice with good presentation elements uses fonts that are clear and legible. It also uses upper and lower case letters for both headings and text. To help important information stand out, a notice with good presentation elements effectively uses bullets to help highlight that information. It also employs emphasis techniques like bold and italics without overusing them. Finally, a notice with good presentation uses color, shading, or icons as non-verbal cues to clients. A strong and accessible notice combines these elements to enhance both the structure and logic of the notice.

Principle 5. Ensure the font type and size is easy to read and use.

To keep notices short, some State Agencies reduce the font size to get all of the text to fit on a certain number of pages. The result is that the notice is unreadable for most clients, especially the elderly. In general, it is best to use at least a 10-point type for the basic text and a larger font size for headings (usually at least 2 points larger than your text). Sans Serif fonts like Arial or Lucida Sans have an open look that is easier to read because of their large x-height.

In typography, the x-height refers to the distance between the baseline and the mean line in a typeface. Generally, this corresponds to the height of the letter x in the font. The ratio of the x-height to the body height is one of the main defining characteristics of typeface appearance and readability.

Use readable fonts.

When text or headings are emphasized by using all upper case letters, clients have more difficulty deciphering them because people decipher words by shape, as well as by the sequence of letters. Using all capital letters can also seem like shouting. Using upper and lower case letters for text and headings makes the information easier for clients to read and reduces reading fatigue. With upper and lower case letters, clients increase their reading speed by 13–20% and it saves space. Upper case letters take up to 30% more space than lower case letters.



Do Not Do This!

The notice below is a computer-generated notice that uses a bolded courier-type font in all capital letters that is difficult to read.

```
NOTICE OF NO RETURN OF INTERIM REPORT

YOU HAVE FAILED TO MEET THE INTERIM REPORTING REQUIREMENTS BECAUSE YOU
FAILED TO SUBMIT YOUR INTERIM REPORT FORM WHICH WAS DUE BY THE 5TH OF
THIS MONTH.

IF YOU DO NOT PROVIDE THE COUNTY OFFICE WITH A COMPLETED INTERIM
REPORT FORM WITHIN 10 DAYS FROM THE DATE OF THIS NOTICE,

_ _ YOUR TANF CASE WILL BE CLOSED EFFECTIVE THE FIRST OF NEXT MONTH.

_XXX_ YOUR SNAP CASE WILL BE CLOSED EFFECTIVE THE FIRST OF NEXT MONTH.

IF YOUR CASE IS CLOSED DUE TO FAILURE TO SUBMIT A COMPLETED INTERIM
REPORT BY THE EXTENDED FILING DATE AND IF YOU WISH YOUR CASE TO BE
REINSTATED, YOU MUST SUBMIT A COMPLETED INTERIM REPORT BEFORE THE END
OF THE MONTH IN WHICH BENEFITS ARE TERMINATED. IF YOUR COMPLETED
```



Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Choose a font for your text. Use a font size of at least 10 points for the basic text in the notice. Do not choose your font only by point size because different fonts in the same point size may be different sizes. Remember that the elderly population may need a larger point size. Try out different fonts and “test” them with individuals in your office to see which is most readable.
 - a. Here is text in 12 point. Arial
 - b. Here is text in 12 point. Lucida Sans Unicode
 - c. Here is text in 12 point. Times New Roman
 - d. Here is text in 12 point. Book Antiqua
 - e. Here is text in 12 point. Palatino
2. Choose a font for your headings. Use a larger font size for your headings (usually at least 2 points larger than your text).
3. Use upper and lower case letters for text and headings. Look for all upper case letters in the notice, and replace those areas with upper and lower case text. If you need to emphasize your headings, use a larger font or a different font. To emphasize embedded text, use bold or italics.

The model on the next page uses font types and sizes that are easy to read and use and limits the use of all capital letters throughout the notice. In addition, the statement about getting the notice in a larger print or another format is in a larger font size so clients who need that information are more likely to see it.



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX

Notice Type: Notice of Pending Status

Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at
XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Dear XXXXXXXXX,

Why are you receiving this notice?

We are providing an update about your SNAP benefits.

We are putting your SNAP case on hold because we were not able to process it within the normal 30-day timeframe.

What can you do?

You do not need to do anything. We will continue to process your case. If you qualify for benefits, they will start from the date that you applied.

You can also call us at the number above if you would like to discuss this situation with us.

Where can you get more information?

You can call the caseworker listed above. Be sure to have this letter and your case number ready. You can also look at our web site, www.yourstatewebsite.gov, for general information.

Principle 6. Use additional graphical elements to support the client.

Graphical elements, such as bullets, icons, consistent color, and shading can help clients see important information, as can limited use of emphatic techniques, like bold and italics. In general, bullets can break out lists of information or highlight important options for the client. Lists of information that are embedded in sentences lend themselves to being revised as a bulleted list. It also makes sense to bullet critical information or options that clients should pay attention to. If the sequence matters, it is better to use numbered lists.

Use graphic elements effectively.

Notices rarely use graphical elements to support the notice and help clients. This is especially true for notices produced on legacy systems, which are generally unable to accommodate many graphical elements. However, some State Agencies are able to force the system to use its limited capability, generally by employing a symbol such as a “dash” or “asterisk” to represent bullets. The most frequently used graphical element overall is bullets. Use bulleted lists to help clients see important information more easily. Bullets can be used to break out lists of information or to list important options that you want clients to see more easily.



Do Not Do This!

In the following notice, very important information is presented in a dense section called “Administrative Hearings.” The section demonstrates how without presentation techniques to break up information, it looks unreadable, challenging, and dense.

ADMINISTRATIVE HEARINGS

If this letter says your benefits are going to be denied, reduced (this includes recovery due to an overpayment), closed or suspended and you feel policy was incorrectly followed, you may ask for an administrative hearing. A SNAP hearing may be requested orally or in writing. At the administrative hearing meeting the action and your reasons for disagreeing will be reviewed. If you ask, the local staff will help you in setting up a local meeting or in asking for the administrative hearing. For SNAP benefits, the local meeting shall in no way delay or replace the fair hearing process. You have the right to be represented by a legally authorized representative, including a lawyer admitted to practice in or a relative, friend, or other spokesman. You must notify if you will be represented by a legally authorized representative. You may also call the local office to find out if free legal advice is available. will not be responsible for paying any legal fees or charges. 7 CFR 273.12; 7 CFR 273.15: 42-2-102, 42-2-103, 42-2-104, 42-2-106, 42-2-109, 42-2-112, 42-2-202, 42-4-106, POWER, Chapter 1.



Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Review sections of dense information (such as the prior example) and look for ways to simplify the information. Ask questions to reduce text, such as: is all of this information necessary? What can be cut out and still maintain legal accuracy?
2. Once you have simplified text, think about ways to present the information visually with bullets or numbered lists. Lists of information that are embedded in sentences naturally lend themselves to being revised as a bulleted list; lists that are procedural in nature lend themselves to being revised as a numbered list. Be sure not to overuse these techniques, however; if you use too many bulleted and numbered lists, then they will lose their power as an emphatic technique in the notice.
3. Keep your bullet style simple. As a rule, use simple, filled-in squares or circles for bullets. Even large em dashes (—) can work well if your system does not have the capacity to use more complex symbols.

In what situations can you ask for a fair hearing?

You can ask for a fair hearing if:

- You apply for benefits and are denied, or
- You disagree with a decision on your case, or
- You believe your benefits were not calculated correctly.

By when must you ask for a fair hearing?

For SNAP decisions:

- If we closed your case or denied your request for benefits, you must appeal within 90 days following the date of the notice.
- If we changed your benefit amount, you can appeal anytime within your certification period.

For TANF or Medicaid decisions, you must request a hearing within 30 days of the date this notice was mailed.

How do you ask for a fair hearing?

To request a fair hearing: [State can fill in specific procedures in a numbered list]

- 1.
- 2.

Use effective formatting techniques.

In some notices, the formatting undercuts the presence of the key information. Formatting includes elements like emphatic techniques (all caps, underlining, bolding, italics, etc.), color, and icons. When such formatting techniques are overused, the notice will appear cluttered and your clients will not be able to easily decide which information is important and which is not. When formatting techniques are underused, the notice will lack critical guideposts that help clients find important information.



Do Not Do This!

In this notice, there is an overuse of emphatic techniques. It uses all caps, underlining, bolding, italics—and combinations of all four. Because so much emphasis is used, it is hard to know what is important or where the eye should go.

THE FOLLOWING STEPS MAY HELP RESOLVE YOUR DISAGREEMENT:

- Speak with your assigned Eligibility team or the supervisor over your case.
- IF YOU STILL WANT TO REQUEST A FAIR HEARING, PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING:

DEADLINE AND LEGAL ASSISTANCE: (Section 125-1)

- **Deadline:** A fair hearing will not be granted unless you **request it within 90 days of the date of the notice with which you disagree**; or within the certification period for Food Stamps.
- **Legal assistance or other help:** You have the right to bring an attorney or any other person to the fair hearing. You may also be entitled to free legal assistance from Legal Services. Their telephone numbers are: (801) 328-8891 (); (801) 394-9431 (); or 1-800-662-2538 (toll free). You may also receive a referral for legal advice from the Lawyer Referral Service at (801) 531-9075. The Department of Workforce Services cannot assist you with finding or providing an attorney. If you have an attorney, the Department is not responsible for and will not pay the attorney fees.

CONTINUATION OF YOUR BENEFITS: (Section 125-3 #2)

- Some types of assistance can be continued pending a hearing if the **request for continued benefits is made within 10 days of the date of the notice with which you disagree**.
- Benefits **will not** be continued for a review closure or application denial.
- Financial Assistance and Child Care Assistance will not be continued pending a fair hearing.
- If the fair hearing decision supports the Department's action and you are not successful in any further appeal of that decision, you **will have to pay back any continued benefits**. The Department of Workforce Services will seek to collect any amounts paid to you or on your behalf. For Medicaid, this will include the premium payments to the HMO, if applicable, and premium payments to the mental health provider, even if you did not receive medical or mental health services. Any other medical services received on a fee-for-service basis will also be subject to recovery.

I **DO NOT** WANT MY BENEFITS CONTINUED I **DO** WANT MY BENEFITS CONTINUED (Section 125-1 #3)



Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Use emphatic techniques, such as bold and italics, to highlight important information. When too much information is emphasized, the notice will appear cluttered and your clients will not be able to easily decide which information is important and which is not.
 - Look for important elements, such as contact information or important dates to respond by, that are appropriate to emphasize.

- Be selective about where you choose to use emphatic techniques and keep most of your text in a standard font.
 - Use emphatic techniques sparingly. Once you decide which elements are important in the notice, use either bold or italics to set them apart. Avoid using underlining because it is hard to read.
2. Use color or shading as non-verbal cues to help clients navigate the notice. Color and shading can underscore groupings of information—as long as you do not overuse the techniques.
- Use color, if possible, to show groupings of information, such as different program information, or to highlight important information, such as contact information or important dates. Using color will often be a budget decision as it is more expensive.
 - Use shading to show groupings of information when color is not possible. Shading can be more versatile, less expensive, and it can still help clients see groupings. For example, you might shade any place that has directions. One disadvantage to shading: if you have to photocopy the notices, the shaded sections may not copy well.
3. Use icons as non-verbal cues to help clients through the notice. Icons can be especially useful for delineating different benefit program information.
- Use icons to help show clients information about the different benefit programs for which they have applied or are getting information on.
 - Find icons that are easily recognizable to the widest group of people. Ask different people inside and outside your office to view the icons and give feedback—this will help you ensure you have chosen graphics that work.

Why are you receiving this notice?

We received your request for the following benefits, and we want to let you know our decisions.

Which Benefit?	What is our decision?	Why did we make this decision?
 SNAP	Denied.	Your net income is higher than the limit for this program. Net income is the total amount of your household's income after deductions.
 TANF	Denied.	Your net income is higher than the limit for this program.

Comprehension

Is the notice easy to read, understand, and remember?

Comprehension is about how easy the information—primarily within sentences—is for clients to understand. Sentences convey basic information: who did what to whom. However, writers do many unintentional things that can confuse, distort, and muddle this very basic information. Writing reflects the process of thinking—a process that is rarely straightforward, especially when the topic is complicated or difficult. SNAP notices contain complex information—telling clients about issues like denials, terminations, or changes in benefits. However, just because the content is complex in nature does not mean that the writing should be. There are easier ways to present even the most complex information; notice writers can keep the sentences short, simple, and active and use common words, define them adequately, or provide examples.

Principle 7. Keep sentences short, simple, and active.

Complex sentences force the client to do the “work” and find the relevant information. They usually contain several ideas and place information between the subject and the verb—forcing clients to store many pieces of information in their memories before they can connect the related elements. Writers often use many words where one or fewer will do because they do not want to leave anything out or because they want to comply with legal or statutory requirements. Additionally, passive voice—which is when the subject of the sentence is hidden—tends to creep into documents when writers want to sound official.

Reduce the number of words in sentences.

When sentences are longer than 22–25 words, they are more difficult for low-literacy clients to decipher and understand. Many notices contain sentences with more than 25 words, primarily in the fair hearing section—which tend to include legal aspects of

the notices. Even when sentences are not more than 22-25 words, they still often use more words than needed to make the point.

Do Not Do This!

The following sentence is 61 words long—which is far too long and complex for the human brain to easily break down and understand.

“If you are currently receiving benefits and you request a fair hearing by the expiration date, you will continue to receive benefits at the current level until the end of your current certification period or until the resolution of the appeal, whichever is earlier, unless you indicate you do not want to do so by checking one of the blocks below.”

Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Identify long sentences like the one above.
2. Read through the notice out loud to listen for long, drawn out sentences. A good rule is: if someone has to read a sentence more than once to understand it, then the sentence is too long. You may even want to count the number of words in your sentences or use the “Review/Word Count” function in MS Word to do it automatically. Sentences with more than 28 words can usually be edited down by taking out unnecessary words and by breaking them into shorter sentences.
3. Revise sentences to be shorter. Some ways to revise are:
 - Say out loud what you think the long sentence is trying to get across. Usually, the translation you say aloud will be more simple and direct than what is written.
 - Rethink the content—is everything in the sentence necessary? You may be able to eliminate words by simplifying the content you include.
 - Cross out any words that are excessively long, confusing, or difficult to understand.
4. As you edit, make sure that your shorter sentences still retain their meaning and are technically accurate.

What happens to your benefits while you wait for your fair hearing?

If you request a fair hearing within 10 days [OR other time period] then you can continue to receive benefits unless you opt out and tell us you do not want them. However, it is important to know that:

- **If the case is not decided in your favor**, any benefits that you received during this time that you were not entitled to must be paid back.
- **If the case is decided in your favor**, your benefits will be reinstated. If you did not continue to receive benefits, you will receive a retroactive payment.

Write in active voice.

In an active sentence, the Doer/Action/Receiver match the Subject/Verb/Object. These are the easiest sentences to understand because the meaning matches the structure. Active sentences are shorter, simpler, and more powerful. They are also easier to understand because the client can clearly “see” the doer of the action. When you reverse this structure by writing in the passive voice, your sentences become more vague and complex. Readers expect the subject and the “doer” to match up; when that does not happen, they get confused. For example, here is a strong sentence (note that the Doer/Action/Receiver match the Subject/Verb/Object).

Subject	Verb	Object
You	did not send	required information.
↑ Doer	Action	↑ Receiver

Now look at the same sentence in passive voice. In this passive sentence, the doer is no longer the subject—and, in fact, the doer is not even represented in the sentence. The doer is only implied and not stated.

Subject	Verb	Object	
Required information	has not been sent.		<i>[by whom?]</i>
Doer	Action	Receiver	



Do Not Do This!

The following statements from notices all use passive voice, making it hard to tell who the “doer” is and making the action less clear to the client.

- “Failure to provide a complete report and all the required verification by the Notice Expiration date listed above will result in the closure of your Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) effective XXXX.”
- “Your SNAP benefits have been reduced...”
- “Household benefits for the following household member(s) and program(s) are denied for one or more of the reasons listed below.”



Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

Find and revise passive sentences. To do this, you can:

1. Find passive sentences that have a form of the verb “to be” and a helper verb. Forms of the verb “to be” include: am, are, is, was, were, be, been, and being. The phrase “was distributed” is an example of this.
2. Find passive sentences that have no doer or sentences that include an action but no doer. These are flags for passive voice.
3. Revise the passive sentences to be active. To do this, rewrite the sentences so that they have a clear doer to match the action. By using the basic sentence structure of Subject/Verb/Object and keeping the doer as the subject, you can help ensure that your sentences are active.

Untangle complex sentences.

In a notice, you want the basic element—the sentences—to be as easy to understand as possible. The simplest way to do this is to maintain a basic sentence structure. Let us look at an example of what can happen in a complex sentence. In the sentence below, it is hard for the client to understand what needs to happen because the Subject/Verb/Object are hidden due to all of the other conditional information around it. Note how the core of the sentence is sandwiched between other conditional information.

“If your case is closed due to failure to submit a completed interim report by the extended filing date and if you wish your case to be reinstated, you [SUBJECT] must submit [VERB] a completed interim report [OBJECT] before the end of the month in which benefits are terminated.”

You will usually need to write sentences longer than three words, but you should still focus on keeping the Subject/Verb/Object close together. This sentence structure is easier to understand, particularly for people with low functional literacy levels.

Notices often do not break down complex conditional information (if, then, and, but) into shorter sentences or phrases using bulleted lists that place the consequence at the beginning of the sentence and the conditions at the end. This method is effective in breaking down complex information into more manageable parts.

Some language in notices cannot be easily paraphrased or replaced. For example, State Agencies may be mandated to use specific statements or clauses that cannot be revised. State Agencies should work to make sure plain language explanations are included.



Do Not Do This!

The following sentences demonstrate complex conditional statements:

- “If a hearing request is received before this action’s effective date or within 13 days of this notice date, whichever is later, or if you show good reason why it wasn’t, you may have your benefits continued until the hearing decision is made, or if you are receiving Food Stamps, until your certification is complete, whichever happens first.”
- “If your case is closed due to failure to submit a completed interim report by the extended filing date and if you wish your case to be reinstated, you must submit a completed interim report before the end of the month in which benefits are terminated.”



Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Look for complex sentences. Complex sentences are usually long, contain several ideas, or contain difficult and unfamiliar concepts. Additionally, complex sentences are often conditional in nature, so look for and circle the words “if,” “then,” “but,” and “however.”
2. Find the core information. You want the Subject/Verb/Object to contain your key information. Long, complex sentences often spread the key information into clauses and prepositional phrases. Put your important information in the Subject/Verb/Object structure.
3. Break complex sentences into shorter, more active sentences. Using more than one sentence or a bulleted list will also help clients understand the information better.
4. Make sure that your new sentences have the Subject/Verb/Object close to each other. Sentences that put clauses and phrases between these core parts of a sentence become complex.

Principle 8. Use common words, definitions, or examples.

When we talk to one another, we do not use words like “verification,” “disqualification,” or “countable resources.” Instead, we naturally use basic words that we believe others will understand. When we do have to use a difficult word, we instinctively explain it in easier words if we sense that our audience does not understand. When we write, we often abandon these natural instincts to simplify our speech. Instead, we write using unfamiliar words that are more official and legal in nature. In terms of notices, complex, legal-sounding words more easily comply with laws and regulations—but using them can alienate clients, especially those of low-literacy.

We have made a decision regarding your SNAP benefits because your circumstances have changed. This letter outlines our decision and what you can do.

What is our decision?

We are stopping your SNAP benefits because you failed to respond to our request for contact on [DATE XX/XX/XXXX]. Your benefits will stop on [DATE XX/XX/XXXX].

What can you do?

Call us at the number above if you need another copy of the request or would like to discuss our decision.

Use words that clients use or define complicated terms.

Often, words that mean something to a State Agency worker will mean nothing to a typical client. When jargon is used and not defined, it can render important information meaningless. A good example is the concept of a “fair hearing.” The term “fair hearing” likely does not mean much to clients. When a notice says “see page 2 for fair hearing information,” clients may not think it applies to their situations and overlook it. However, when a notice uses language like “see page 2 for information about what you can do if you disagree with our decision,” it describes what the hearing information is about and why it might apply to clients.

Many notices rely on legal terms to convey information to clients. These terms may conform to statutory or regulatory requirements, but they are likely not meaningful to clients. In each case, State Agencies could use simpler terms or include plain language definitions.

Additionally, not all clients will know even common acronyms. For example, while FAQ is familiar to most English speaking clients, non-English speaking clients may not understand the term. When possible, avoid using acronyms, including for program names. When acronyms are used, write out the full phrase the first time it is used in each major section, followed by the acronym in parentheses.



Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Use focus groups to determine the words that are difficult for clients to understand. Ask questions about comprehension and make note of what phrases are most confusing.
2. Since it is often easier to “hear” difficult words than to see them, read the notice out loud. As you do, listen for words that you might use as a SNAP worker, but that your clients may never have heard of. Listen for words that end in “-ment,” “-ion,” and “-ance”—these are often verbs that have been made into passive nouns, for example, “the establishment of” instead of “we established.”
3. Replace complex words with ones that your clients would use in everyday speech, and replace passive nouns with active verbs.

4. Replace unfamiliar words with simpler ones. When you find difficult words or phrases, think about different ways to replace them using language that clients would know.
5. Look for acronyms and remove them when possible. If it is not possible to remove an acronym, then write out the full phrase the first time it is used in each major section, followed by the acronym in parentheses.

Sometimes a notice will require you to use legal or technical words that do not have simple substitutions or cannot be replaced. In short, you cannot always replace difficult words or concepts with simple ones. However, you can do your best to explain complex topics using plain language.

1. Define difficult words or phrases to allow clients to understand the concept you are writing about without being tripped up by your language.
2. Use definitions to explain words and phrases that will be especially difficult for clients, such as “gross income,” “power of attorney,” or “authorized legal guardian.” To avoid confusing clients, concepts like these should be briefly defined when you first introduce them. Make sure that your definitions are written in plain language using words your clients would use. After defining them once, these terms can then be reused throughout the notice.

Remove references to regulations.

Many notices use references to federal and state regulations within the body of the text. These references tend to interrupt the flow of information and make it harder for clients to find important information. In general, references to regulations are not used by clients and, therefore, are of limited use to them. Such references are not required by FNS, but sometimes are included for other legal reasons. The legal benefit of including these references should be weighed carefully against the cost to client comprehension.



Do This!

Summary of Best Practices

1. Remove references to the regulations whenever possible.
2. If you are unable to remove references to regulations:
 - Include a summary of the regulation content by way of explanation.
 - Make sure the references are as direct and helpful as possible so clients can easily find the regulations instead of having to sort through a large document of regulations written in legalese.
 - Put them in a place that is not competing with other important information. Make sure that the references paraphrase the regulation and do not interrupt the flow of the important text.

Other Requirements

Are other regulatory requirements met?

Principle 9. Address all relevant policies and regulations.

State Agency notices have several federal regulatory and policy requirements with which they must comply. This section lists these requirements and some other “best practices” for State Agencies to ensure they address these additional requirements and adhere to best practices.² Please note that specific notices may have more requirements than those listed here.

- 9.1 **[Required]** Is the action or proposed action explained in easily understandable language?
- 9.2 **[Required]** Is the reason for the proposed action explained in easily understandable language?
- 9.3 **[Required]** Is the telephone number of the SNAP office (toll-free number or a number where collect calls will be accepted for households outside the local calling area) provided?
- 9.4 **[Required]** Is the name of a person to contact for additional information provided? (if possible)
- 9.5 **[Required]** Does the notice provide information on the availability of continued benefits?
- 9.6 **[Required]** Does the notice provide information on the liability of the client for any overissuances received while awaiting a fair hearing if the hearing official's decision is adverse to the household?
- 9.7 **[Required]** Does the notice advise the client of the availability of any individuals or organizations that provide free legal representation?

² State Agencies may also have *state-specific* requirements with which they must comply. We were unable to address any state specific requirements but have provided some guidance on some of the other regulatory requirements.

- 9.8 **[Required]** Does the notice mention the right to file a fair hearing, a definition of what a fair hearing is, and how to ask for one?
- 9.9 **[Strongly Recommended]** Does the notice tell the client what to do if the client has questions?

Appendix A. Notice Scorecard

			Yes	Somewhat	No
Task Completion: Can clients use the notice appropriately for its intended purpose?					
Principle 1. <i>Put the key information up front and make it clear and direct.</i>	1.1	Is the proposed action explained in easily understandable language?			
	1.2	Is the reason for the proposed action explained in easily understandable language?			
	1.3	Is the notice focused on answering the key questions clients may have?			
Principle 2. <i>Emphasize what clients can do.</i>	2.1	Does the notice explain up front what the client needs to do as a result of the notice?			
	2.2	Does the notice clearly explain what the client should do if he/she agrees, disagrees, or does not understand the proposed action?			
	2.3	Is the contact information provided in a prominent position?			
			Yes	Somewhat	No

Navigation: Can clients find the information they need?

Principle 3.
Use a clear visual grid to help clients see both the individual notice pieces and the whole.

3.1	Is the overall hierarchy of the notice visible to the client?			
3.2	Is the layout based on a predictable grid?			
3.3	Is white space used to visually organize sections and items?			

Principle 4.
Group related information together and use descriptive headings.

4.1	Is the information grouped into smaller topical paragraphs that have headings?			
4.2	Does each heading in the notice clearly describe the information in the paragraph that follows it?			
4.3	Does each heading specifically outline what information is coming in the paragraph below it?			

			Yes	Somewhat	No
Presentation: Is the information presented so it is accessible?					
Principle 5. <i>Ensure the font type and size is easy to read and use.</i>	5.1	Is the font clear and legible?			
	5.2	Is the font size easy for most clients to see and read?			
Principle 6. <i>Use additional graphical elements to support the client.</i>					
	6.1	Do emphatic techniques like bold, italics, and bullets highlight important information without overuse?			
	6.2	Do visual elements (consistent color, icons, and shading) help the client navigate the notice?			
	6.3	Are graphical elements used to enhance the notice and not interfere with it?			

			Yes	Somewhat	No
Comprehension: Is the notice easy to read, understand, and remember?					
Principle 7. <i>Keep sentences short, simple, and active.</i>	7.1	Does the notice simplify complex sentences?			
	7.2	Are sentences kept under 25 words?			
	7.3	Are sentences written using active voice?			
Principle 8. <i>Use common words, definitions, or examples.</i>	8.1	Does the notice use words clients would use in everyday speech?			
	8.2	Are difficult words and concepts defined?			
	8.3	Is legal language clear and simple to understand, especially for the right to a hearing?			
	8.4	Do sections build logically on the previous ones?			
	8.5	Do regulatory citations add to the overall comprehension of the notice (both if legally required or not)?			

			Yes	Somewhat	No
Requirements: Are other regulatory requirements met?					
Principle 9. <i>Address all relevant policies and regulations.</i>	9.1	Is the proposed action explained in easily understandable language?			
	9.2	Is the reason for the proposed action explained in easily understandable language?			
	9.3	Is the telephone number of the SNAP office (toll-free number or a number where collect calls will be accepted for households outside the local calling area) provided?			
	9.4	Is the name of a specific person to contact for additional information provided? (if possible)			
	9.5	Does the notice provide information on the availability of continued benefits, where applicable?			
	9.6	Does the notice provide information on the liability of the client for any overissuance received while awaiting a fair hearing if the hearing official's decision is adverse to the household?			

		Yes	Somewhat	No
9.7	Does the notice advise the client of the availability of any individuals or organizations that provide free legal representations			
9.8	Does the notice mention the right to file a fair hearing, a definition of what a fair hearing is, and how to ask for one?			
9.9	Does the notice explain what to do if the client has questions?(strongly recommended)			

Appendix B. Full Notice Samples



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX

Notice Type: Notice of Denial

Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at
XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Dear XXXXXXXXXX,

We have made a decision regarding your SNAP benefits. This letter outlines our decision and what you can do.

What is our decision?

We have denied your request for SNAP benefits because your net income is higher than the limit for this program. Net income is the total amount of your household's income after deductions.

What if you disagree with our decision?

If you disagree with our decision there are several things you can do. You can:

1. **Call us at the number above.** Have this letter and your case number ready when you call.
2. **Request a Fair Hearing.** You have the right to ask us to review our decision at a fair hearing. Read the section on "Your Right to a Fair Hearing" on the next page.

Where can you get more information?

You can call us at the number listed above. Be sure to have this letter and your case number ready. You can also look at our web site, www.yourstatewebsite.gov, for general information.

Your Right to a Fair Hearing

What is a fair hearing?

Any time you disagree with a decision taken on your SNAP case, you have the right to request a fair hearing with an official who is required by law to review the facts of every case in a fair and objective manner.

In what situations can you ask for a fair hearing?

You can ask for a fair hearing if:

- You apply for benefits and are denied, or
- You disagree with a decision on your case, or
- You believe your benefits were not calculated correctly.

By when must you ask for a fair hearing?

For SNAP decisions:

- If we closed your case or denied your request for benefits, you must appeal within 90 days following the date of the notice.
- If we changed your benefit amount, you can appeal anytime within your certification period.

For TANF or Medicaid decisions, you must request a hearing within 30 days of the date this notice was mailed.

How do you ask for a fair hearing?

To request a fair hearing: [State can fill in specific procedures in a numbered list]

- 1.
- 2.

Can you get free legal help?

Yes. You can get free legal help in the following ways: [State can fill in specific methods]



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX

Notice Type: Notice of Termination

Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at
XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-800-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Dear XXXXXXXXXX,

We have made a decision regarding your SNAP benefits because your circumstances have changed. This letter outlines our decision and what you can do.

What is our decision?

We are stopping your SNAP benefits because you failed to respond to our request for contact on [DATE XX/XX/XXXX]. Your benefits will stop on [DATE XX/XX/XXXX].

What can you do?

Call us at the number above if you need another copy of the request or would like to discuss our decision.

What if you disagree with our decision?

If you disagree with our decision there are several things you can do. You can:

1. **Call us at the number above.** Have this letter and your case number ready when you call.
2. **Request a Fair Hearing.** You have the right to ask us to review our decision at a fair hearing. Read the section on “Your Right to a Fair Hearing” on the next page.

Where can you get more information?

You can call us at the number above. Be sure to have this letter and your case number ready. You can also look at our web site, www.yourstatewebsite.gov, for general information.

Your Right to a Fair Hearing

What is a fair hearing?

Any time you disagree with a decision taken on your SNAP case, you have the right to request a fair hearing with an official who is required by law to review the facts of every case in a fair and objective manner.

In what situations can you ask for a fair hearing?

You can ask for a fair hearing if:

- You apply for benefits and are denied, or
- You disagree with a decision on your case, or
- You believe your benefits were not calculated correctly.

By when must you ask for a fair hearing?

For SNAP decisions:

- If we closed your case or denied your request for benefits, you must appeal within 90 days following the date of the notice.
- If we changed your benefit amount, you can appeal anytime within your certification period.

For TANF or Medicaid decisions, you must request a hearing within 30 days of the date this notice was mailed.

How do you ask for a fair hearing?

To request a fair hearing: [State can fill in specific procedures in a numbered list]

- 1.
- 2.

What happens to your benefits while you wait for your fair hearing?

If you request a fair hearing within 10 days [OR other time period] then you can continue to receive benefits unless you opt out and tell us you do not want them. However, it is important to know that:

- **If the case is not decided in your favor**, any benefits that you received during this time that you were not entitled to must be paid back.

- **If the case is decided in your favor**, your benefits will be reinstated. If you did not continue to receive benefits, you will receive a retroactive payment.

How do you opt out of receiving benefits while you wait for your fair hearing?

[State can fill in specific procedures in a numbered list]

Can you get free legal help?

Yes. You can get free legal help in the following ways: [State can fill in specific methods]



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX

Notice Type: Notice of Reduction of Benefits

Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at
XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Dear XXXXXXXXXX,

We have made a decision regarding your SNAP benefits. This letter outlines our decision and what you can do.

What is our decision?

We are reducing your SNAP benefit amount from [\$XXX] to [\$XXX] because you have reported that a member of your household has left.

What can you do?

Call us at the number above if you would like to discuss our decision.

What if you disagree with our decision?

If you disagree with our decision there are several things you can do. You can:

1. **Call us at the number above.** Have this letter and your case number ready when you call.
2. **Request a Fair Hearing.** You have the right to ask us to review our decision at a fair hearing. Read the section on “Your Right to a Fair Hearing” on the next page.

Where can you get more information?

You can call us at the number listed above. Be sure to have this letter and your case number ready. You can also look at our web site, www.yourstatewebsite.gov, for general information.

Your Right to a Fair Hearing

What is a fair hearing?

Any time you disagree with a decision taken on your SNAP case, you have the right to request a fair hearing with an official who is required by law to review the facts of every case in a fair and objective manner.

In what situations can you ask for a fair hearing?

You can ask for a fair hearing if:

- You apply for benefits and are denied, or
- You disagree with a decision on your case, or
- You believe your benefits were not calculated correctly.

By when must you ask for a fair hearing?

For SNAP decisions:

- If we closed your case or denied your request for benefits, you must appeal within 90 days following the date of the notice.
- If we changed your benefit amount, you can appeal anytime within your certification period.

For TANF or Medicaid decisions, you must request a hearing within 30 days of the date this notice was mailed.

How do you ask for a fair hearing?

To request a fair hearing: [State can fill in specific procedures in a numbered list]

- 1.
- 2.

What happens to your benefits while you wait for your fair hearing?

If you request a fair hearing within 10 days [OR other time period] then you can continue to receive benefits unless you opt out and tell us you do not want them. However, it is important to know that:

- **If the case is not decided in your favor**, any benefits that you received during this time that you were not entitled to must be paid back.

- **If the case is decided in your favor**, your benefits will be reinstated. If you did not continue to receive benefits, you will receive a retroactive payment.

How do you opt out of receiving benefits while you wait for your fair hearing?

[State can fill in specific procedures in a numbered list]

Can you get free legal help?

Yes. You can get free legal help in the following ways: [State can fill in specific methods]



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX

Notice Type: Notice of Pending Status

Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at
XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Dear XXXXXXXXXX,

Why are you receiving this notice?

We are providing an update about your SNAP benefits.

We are putting your SNAP case on hold because you did not provide the information we asked for.

What can you do?

You can provide us with the following information.

1. [LIST HERE]
2. XX

If you provide this information within 60 days of the date you applied, your application can be completed. After that time, you will need to complete a new application for benefits.

You can also call us at the number above if you would like to discuss this decision more.

Where can you get more information?

You can call the caseworker listed above. Be sure to have this letter and your case number ready. You can also look at our web site, www.yourstatewebsite.gov, for general information.



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX

Notice Type: Notice of Pending Status

Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at
XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Dear XXXXXXXXXX,

Why are you receiving this notice?

We are providing an update about your SNAP benefits.

We are putting your SNAP case on hold because we were not able to process it within the normal 30-day timeframe.

What can you do?

You do not need to do anything. We will continue to process your case. If you qualify for benefits, they will start from the date that you applied.

You can also call us at the number above if you would like to discuss this situation with us.

Where can you get more information?

You can call the caseworker listed above. Be sure to have this letter and your case number ready. You can also look at our web site, www.yourstatewebsite.gov, for general information.



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX
Notice Type: Notice of Required Verification
Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Dear XXXXXXXXXX,

Why are you receiving this notice?

When you apply for benefits, we need to collect some information from you. This information can include any or all of the items listed below, and it will help us decide your benefit amount if you are approved for SNAP.

Please review the list below carefully to ensure that you have all of the information that we need to decide your case.

We will need the following information for you and anyone in your household applying for benefits (your household is anyone who lives with you and purchases and prepares food with you).

Type of information	What are some types of materials you can bring us?
1. Proof of identity	Drivers licenses, passports, State-issued ID cards, birth certificates
2. Proof of residency (where you live)	Rental or mortgage agreement, utility bills, or statements from your landlord, family or friends
3. Proof of social security numbers	Social security cards
4. Proof that non-citizens in your household who are applying for benefits are eligible	Social security cards, passports

In addition, you may need to provide other materials depending on your situation.

We may need proof of your status, if:	Type of information	What are some types of materials you can bring us?
Someone in your household is receiving disability payments	Proof of disability	SSI or SSDI checks, SSI or SSDI eligibility letter
You have resources or assets (including checking or savings accounts)	Proof of resources that you listed	Bank statements
You have income (including income from work, gifts, Social Security, and assistance payments)	Proof of your income before taxes and exemptions (gross income)	Pay stubs, bank statements, statements from your employer
You have housing costs	Proof of costs you pay for your home or shelter	Rental or mortgage agreements
You have utility costs	Proof of your utility expenses (heating, cooling, electricity, gas, water, trash collection, and phone)	Utility bills, statements from your landlord, statements from the bill holder
You pay for the care of a child or dependent of any age	Proof of your child or dependent care expenses	Child or dependent care bills
You pay child support	Proof of your child support expenses	Legal decree of your child support obligation, statements from your child support recipient
Someone in your household is over the age of 59 or disabled	Proof of medical expenses for disabled household members, or household members over age 59.	Medical bills, prescription bills
You are working	Proof of your work hours	Pay stubs, statements from your employer
You are 18-49 years old and a student	Proof of student status	Enrollment forms, transcripts, statements from your school

We may need proof of your status, if:	Type of information	What are some types of materials you can bring us?
You are an able-bodied person under the age of 50 with no dependents	Proof that you are working at least 20 hours per week; or are participating in a work program 20 hours per week; or are participating in a workfare program	Pay stubs, statements from your employer, enrollment forms for a work training program

What time periods should your documents cover?

The documents you provide to us should cover [insert time period] immediately before you applied for benefits.

When do you need to provide this information?

You will need to provide proof of your circumstances before you can receive benefits. Be prepared to submit any of the documents on the list above that apply to you by [insert date here]. You may also bring documents to your interview. One type of document may prove many things. For example, your utility bills may be used to prove your residency and utility expenses. During your interview, your caseworker will provide more information on submitting these documents and inform you of any other information that we need to process your application.

What if you do not provide the information we need?

If you do not provide this information, then we cannot provide you with benefits. However, if you are having trouble getting the required information, we can help you. Please contact us at the number listed above if you need assistance.

Where can you get more information?

You can call us at the number listed above. You can also look at our web site, www.yourstatewebsite.gov, for general information.



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX
Notice Type: Notice of Denial
Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Dear XXXXXXXXXX,

Why are you receiving this notice?

We received your request for the following benefits, and we want to let you know our decisions.

Which Benefit?	What is our decision?	Why did we make this
 <p>SNAP</p>	<p>Denied.</p>	<p>Your net income is higher than the limit for this program. Net income is the total amount of your household's income after deductions.</p>
 <p>TANF</p>	<p>Denied.</p>	<p>Your net income is higher than the limit for this program.</p>

What if you disagree with our decision?

If you disagree with our decision there are several things you can do. You can:

1. **Call us at the number above.** Have this letter and your case number ready when you call.
2. **Request a Fair Hearing.** You have the right to ask us to review our decision at a fair hearing. Read the section on “Your Right to a Fair Hearing” on the next page.

Where can you get more information?

You can call the caseworker listed above. Be sure to have this letter and your case number ready. You can also look at our web site, www.yourstatewebsite.gov, for general information.

Your Right to a Fair Hearing

What is a fair hearing?

Any time you disagree with a decision taken on your SNAP case, you have the right to request a fair hearing with an official who is required by law to review the facts of every case in a fair and objective manner.

In what situations can you ask for a fair hearing?

You can ask for a fair hearing if:

- You apply for benefits and are denied, or
- You disagree with a decision on your case, or
- You believe your benefits were not calculated correctly.

By when must you ask for a fair hearing?

For SNAP decisions:

- If we closed your case or denied your request for benefits, you must appeal within 90 days following the date of the notice.
- If we changed your benefit amount, you can appeal anytime within your certification period.

For TANF or Medicaid decisions, you must request a hearing within 30 days of the date this notice was mailed.

How do you ask for a fair hearing?

To request a fair hearing: [State can fill in specific procedures in a numbered list]

- 1.
- 2.

Can you get free legal help?

Yes. You can get free legal help in the following ways: [State can fill in specific methods]



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX
Notice Type: Notice of Termination
Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at
 XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Dear XXXXXXXXXX,

Why are you receiving this notice?

We have made a decision about your SNAP and TANF benefits because your circumstances have changed. This letter outlines our decision and what you can do.

Which Benefit?	What is our decision?	Why did we make this decision?
 <p>SNAP</p>	<p>We are stopping your SNAP benefits on [DATE XX/XX/XXXX].</p>	<p>You did not respond to our request for contact on [DATE XX/XX/XXXX].</p>
 <p>TANF</p>	<p>We are stopping your TANF benefits on [DATE XX/XX/XXXX].</p>	<p>You did not respond to our request for contact on [DATE XX/XX/XXXX].</p>

What can you do?

Call us at the number above if you need another copy of the request or would like to discuss our decision.

What if you disagree with our decision?

If you disagree with our decision there are several things you can do. You can:

1. **Call us at the number above.** Have this letter and your case number ready when you call.
2. **Request a Fair Hearing.** You have the right to ask us to review our decision at a fair hearing. Read the section on “Your Right to a Fair Hearing” on the next page.

Where can you get more information?

You can call the caseworker listed above. Be sure to have this letter and your case number ready. You can also look at our web site, www.yourstatewebsite.gov, for general information.

Your Right to a Fair Hearing

What is a fair hearing?

Any time you disagree with a decision taken on your SNAP case, you have the right to request a fair hearing with an official who is required by law to review the facts of every case in a fair and objective manner.

In what situations can you ask for a fair hearing?

You can ask for a fair hearing if:

- You apply for benefits and are denied, or
- You disagree with a decision on your case, or
- You believe your benefits were not calculated correctly.

By when must you ask for a fair hearing?

For SNAP decisions:

- If we closed your case or denied your request for benefits, you must appeal within 90 days following the date of the notice.
- If we changed your benefit amount, you can appeal anytime within your certification period.

For TANF or Medicaid decisions, you must request a hearing within 30 days of the date this notice was mailed.

How do you ask for a fair hearing?

To request a fair hearing: [State can fill in specific procedures in a numbered list]

- 1.
- 2.

What happens to your benefits while you wait for your fair hearing?

If you request a fair hearing within 10 days [OR other time period] then you can continue to receive benefits unless you opt out and tell us you do not want them. However, it is important to know that:

- **If the case is not decided in your favor**, any benefits that you received during this time that you were not entitled to must be paid back.

- **If the case is decided in your favor**, your benefits will be reinstated. If you did not continue to receive benefits, you will receive a retroactive payment.

How do you opt out of receiving benefits while you wait for your fair hearing?

[State can fill in specific procedures in a numbered list]

Can you get free legal help?

Yes. You can get free legal help in the following ways: [State can fill in specific methods]



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX
Notice Type: Notice of Reduction of Benefits
Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Dear XXXXXXXXXX,

Why are you receiving this notice?

We have made a decision regarding your benefits. This letter outlines our decision and what you can do.

Which Benefit?	What is our decision?	Why did we make this decision?
 <p>SNAP</p>	<p>We are reducing your SNAP benefit from [\$XXX] to [\$XXX].</p>	<p>You reported that a member of your household has left.</p>
 <p>TANF</p>	<p>We are reducing your TANF benefit from [\$XXX] to [\$XXX].</p>	<p>You reported that a member of your household has left.</p>

What can you do?

Call us at the number above if you would like to discuss our decision.

What if you disagree with our decision?

If you disagree with our decision there are several things you can do. You can:

1. **Call us at the number above.** Have this letter and your case number ready when you call.
2. **Request a Fair Hearing.** You have the right to ask us to review our decision at a fair hearing. Read the section on “Your Right to a Fair Hearing” on the next page.

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What is a fair hearing?

Any time you disagree with a decision taken on your SNAP case, you have the right to request a fair hearing with an official who is required by law to review the facts of every case in a fair and objective manner.

In what situations can you ask for a fair hearing?

You can ask for a fair hearing if:

- You apply for benefits and are denied, or
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- You believe your benefits were not calculated correctly.

By when must you ask for a fair hearing?

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- If we closed your case or denied your request for benefits, you must appeal within 90 days following the date of the notice.
- If we changed your benefit amount, you can appeal anytime within your certification period.

For TANF or Medicaid decisions, you must request a hearing within 30 days of the date this notice was mailed.

How do you ask for a fair hearing?

To request a fair hearing: [State can fill in specific procedures in a numbered list]

- 1.
- 2.

What happens to your benefits while you wait for your fair hearing?

If you request a fair hearing within 10 days [OR other time period] then you can continue to receive benefits unless you opt out and tell us you do not want them. However, it is important to know that:

- **If the case is not decided in your favor**, any benefits that you received during this time that you were not entitled to must be paid back.

- **If the case is decided in your favor**, your benefits will be reinstated. If you did not continue to receive benefits, you will receive a retroactive payment.

How do you opt out of receiving benefits while you wait for your fair hearing?

[State can fill in specific procedures in a numbered list]

Can you get free legal help?

Yes. You can get free legal help in the following ways: [State can fill in specific methods]



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX
Notice Type: Notice of Pending Status
Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at
 XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Dear XXXXXXXXXX,

Why are you receiving this notice?

We have made a decision about your SNAP and Medicaid benefits. This letter outlines our decision and what you can do.

Which Benefit?	What is the status?	Why?
 <p>SNAP</p>	<p>On hold.</p>	<p>You did not provide the information we asked for.</p>
 <p>TANF</p>	<p>On hold.</p>	<p>You did not provide the information we asked for.</p>

What can you do?

You can provide us with the following information.

Which Benefit?	What information do you need to provide?
 <p>SNAP</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. [LIST HERE] 2. XX 3. XX
 <p>TANF</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. [LIST HERE] 2. XX 3. XX

If you provide this information within 60 days of the date you applied, your application can be completed. After that time, you will need to complete a new application for benefits.

You can also call us at the number above if you would like to discuss this decision more.

What if you disagree with our decision?

If you disagree with our decision, you can call us at the number above. Have this letter and your case number ready when you call.

Where can you get more information?

You can call the caseworker listed above. Be sure to have this letter and your case number ready. You can also look at our web site, www.yourstatewebsite.gov, for general information.



STATE AGENCY ID

Notice ID: XXX XXX XXX
Notice Type: Notice of Pending Status
Notice Date: XX/XX/XXXX

For questions, please call: Zebulon Bruno at
 XXX-XXX-XXXX

Web site: www.yourstatewebsite.gov

If you have a disability and need this letter in large print or another format, please call our helpline at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) services are available at 1-XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Dear XXXXXXXXXX,

Why are you receiving this notice?

We have made a decision about your SNAP and Medicaid benefits. This letter outlines our decision and what you can do.

Which Benefit?	What is the status?	Why?
 SNAP	On hold.	We were not able to process it within the normal 30-day timeframe.
 TANF	Processing.	

What can you do?

You do not need to do anything. We will continue to process your case. If you qualify for benefits, they will start from the date that you applied.

You can also call us at the number above if you would like to discuss this situation with us.

What if you disagree with our decision?

If you disagree with our decision, you can call us at the number above. Have this letter and your case number ready when you call.

Where can you get more information?

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