

UNDERSTANDING THE USE OF SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) ONLINE APPLICATIONS (SUMMARY)

Background

Currently, 46 of 53 State Agencies accept online applications for USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits from new applicants, and 33 State Agencies allow SNAP participants to recertify to renew their benefits online. However, the use of online applications on SNAP participation has not been thoroughly examined. The purpose of this study was to collect information about online application features, protocols and procedures used for processing online applications, and perceived advantages and challenges with using online applications.

Eight States participated in the study: Colorado (CO), New York (NY), Pennsylvania (PA), Tennessee (TN), Texas (TX), Utah (UT), Virginia (VA), and Washington (WA).

Key Findings

- All study States reported that online applications helped improve customer service.
- Insufficient funding to improve their online application process and perceived increased potential for fraud were the most reported challenges.
- The proportion of applicants submitting online applications increased as the distance to the nearest SNAP office increased.
- Most online applications had user-friendly features.

Methods

All eight States completed a survey about their online application.

Publicly available resources and internal documents such as manuals, standard operating procedures, and technical reports from study States were also reviewed. The study also assessed the usability of the websites for all eight States.

Five States – CO, TX, UT, VA, and PA – also provided administrative data (2016-2018) that was used to determine if there were any patterns in online application usage. Three States – CO, VA, and PA – provided location data to examine the relationship between online applications and location of SNAP offices.

Findings

Use of Online Applications

Based on administrative data, four States received about a third of their applications online, while one received almost two-thirds. From the survey, two States believed that the proportion of applications received online had increased over the last 3 years, while others believed the online share had remained consistent.

Across the five States that provided administrative data, the majority of applications were submitted on paper (67percent); however, the majority of denied applications were submitted online (69percent). One State reported that households that are more likely to be income-ineligible tend to apply online.

Original applications are more likely to be submitted online (52.4 percent), as opposed to on paper (47.6 percent). However, recertification applications were overwhelmingly submitted on paper (91.7 percent)

as compared to online (8.3 percent). It is possible that this is because States are required to mail recertification applications to participants, even in States that have robust online application systems.

Use of online applications varied by demographic groups. Younger or female heads of household, one-person households, and households in metropolitan areas with a population over 1 million were associated with a greater likelihood of submitting an online application.

Among the three study States that submitted location data, the proportion of applicants submitting applications increased with distance to the nearest SNAP office.

Variation in State Online Applications

A review of State online applications showed that most had user-friendly features, the most common being the ability of applicants to upload verification documents (six States). While six States allow applicants to submit their applications from a mobile device, their mobile websites are not as robust as their regular websites.

States processed online applications in different ways. In four States, the application interfaced directly with the State's eligibility determination system, while in other States, the application must be manually downloaded. In one State, data matches for eligibility determinations begin as soon as an online application is submitted.

States addressed the continued need for in-person services in numerous ways, the most common being providing kiosks in office lobbies where applicants could fill out an online application. Other services offered at these kiosks varied by State and by county in county-administered States. All States continued to provide in-person services at kiosks when needed.

States' Views on Advantages and Challenges of Online Applications

All study States (n=8) reported that online applications helped improve customer service. Other advantages reported included processing efficiencies and reduced caseworker time processing applications.

Insufficient funding to improve their online application process (n=3) and perceived increased potential for fraud were the most reported challenges (n=3). However, less than half of the States reported these. No other challenge was reported by more than two States.

Impacts on Fraud and Payment Accuracy

On the survey, five States reported that potentially fraudulent activities were more likely with online applications. The same States reported that false identification and duplicate enrollments were the most common fraudulent issues associated with online applications. Four States reported believing that online applications made it easier to submit false or misleading information in general.

Five of the States reported using online data to look for fraud in online applications. One State was planning to implement identity verification software. The remaining two States did not use online data to look for fraud.

Estimates of payment accuracy rates did not show a substantive difference between online and paper applications.

For More Information:

Urdapilleta, O., Koné, A., Mbwana, K., DeFever, R., Hoesly, L., & Ehrich, K. Understanding the Use of SNAP Online Applications. Prepared by Summit Consulting, LLC, Contract No. 12319818F0085. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Eric Sean Williams. Available online at: www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.