

Appendix D. Focus Group Memorandum

Memorandum



Date: June 21, 2022
To: Andrew Burns, FNS
From: Carla Bozzolo, Chrissy Steigelman, and Nina Page, Insight Policy Research
Subject: Modernizing Channels of Communication with SNAP Participants
Focus Group Memorandum FINAL

A. Introduction and Study Overview

In recent years, many Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) State agencies have enhanced their use of digital and mobile communications to enable SNAP participants to access information about SNAP, receive alerts and notifications, and perform certain case management functions. This document details the findings from focus groups conducted for the Modernizing Channels of Communication With SNAP Participants project for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). This chapter presents the purpose of the study, the methodology used to conduct the study, and an overview of the focus group data collection.

1. Purpose of Study

The primary purpose of the study was to highlight best practices and lessons learned from various mobile communication strategies (MCS) implemented by SNAP. This examination will help FNS and States improve communication and identify best practices for improved program outcomes. For the purposes of this study, MCS include mobile-optimized websites, mobile apps, and SMS/text messaging.

The study team sought to examine the experiences of five States related to the development, implementation, and maintenance of MCS. These case studies complement other elements of the study aimed at providing an overview of MCS activities in all States, gathering client perspectives on MCS, and synthesizing best practices. To provide insight into client perspectives on MCS, the study team conducted 10 virtual focus groups (2 in each State) with SNAP participants who had used MCS for SNAP activities. Focus groups were conducted between October and December 2021. The purpose of the focus groups was twofold: (1) understand customers' use of MCS and (2) evaluate customer feedback on MCS.

2. Methodology

The study team at Insight Policy Research (Insight) conducted 10 virtual focus groups lasting 90 minutes each with SNAP participants who had used their State's MCS within the past 12 months. Focus groups were designed to learn more about participants' experience with MCS in their State through facilitated discussion, Zoom polls, and whiteboard exercises. If States used text messaging, Insight presented examples of text messages that States currently use, provided by State staff for feedback from participants. An overview of the MCS implemented in each State as of December 2021 appears in table

1. Insight partnered with Schlesinger Group, a market research firm, to recruit and screen participants, facilitate Zoom meetings, and distribute incentives to participants after focus group completion.

Table 1. MCS Available in Each State

State	Text Messaging	Mobile App	Mobile- Optimized Website
Kentucky	●		●
Massachusetts	●	●	●
Mississippi		●	●
New York City	●	●	●
Texas	●	●	●

1. Recruitment, Eligibility, and Participation

The procedures used to recruit focus group participants varied by State and included sending emails and texts, posting Facebook advertisements, recruiting from a list of SNAP participants, and posting on social media.

Eligible participants received SNAP benefits at the time of the focus group and had received them for at least 6 months prior; they were at least 18 years old, spoke English, and had access to high-speed internet and a device with a working web camera. Participants were also required to answer “yes” to screening questions when asked if they had accessed their State’s SNAP website, used the mobile app, and/or received any texts about SNAP on their mobile phones within the past 12 months.

Eligible individuals were invited to participate in a focus group on a designated date and time; those who agreed received a \$45 gift card for their participation. Participation rates and recruitment methods by State are displayed in table 2.

Table 2. Response Rates and Recruitment Methods by State

State	Number of Participants	Recruitment Method	Source
Kentucky	13	Emails	SNAP State agency
Massachusetts	11	Texts and Facebook ad	SNAP State agency, Schlesinger Group
Mississippi	7	Social media post	SNAP State agency
New York City	14	Emails	SNAP State agency
Texas	11	SNAP participant list and Facebook ad	SNAP State agency, Schlesinger Group

2. Data Collection Instruments

Data collection instruments included a moderator guide and a focus group eligibility screener with an embedded demographic questionnaire. Data collection instruments were finalized in July 2021 and included in the Information Clearance Request package submitted to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). To ensure instruments were easy for respondents to understand, Insight conducted pretests with three SNAP participants. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the study team determined virtual data collection to be the best approach. Insight revised data collection protocols to adjust language as needed to implement the study virtually.

Moderator guide. The moderator guide was developed to facilitate discussion that would answer the research questions and enable participants to easily share their perspectives. The guide included an overview and introduction of the study, informed consent language to obtain verbal consent from participants, and detailed exercises to understand participant experiences and preferences for using MCS for SNAP-related activities. The guide was tailored to the type of MCS available in the State (e.g., mobile app, text messaging) to accommodate the States that did not have all MCS types. Appendix B contains a complete moderator guide.

Focus Group Discussion Topics

- Reasons to use MCS for SNAP
- Reasons to avoid using MCS for SNAP
- Experience with each MCS type
- Functionality of text messaging
- Functionality of mobile app
- Functionality of mobile-optimized website
- Feedback and suggestions
- Features of most interest

Screening and demographic questionnaire. Schlesinger Group conducted screening interviews over the phone to determine participants' eligibility for the focus groups. In addition to the recruitment criteria, the screener asked about participants' access to high-speed internet and a working web camera to ensure they could successfully participate in the virtual focus group. The screener also asked about participants' use of each of the MCS available in the State.

If a participant was deemed eligible to participate in the focus group, Schlesinger Group asked questions from the demographic questionnaire embedded within the screening document. The questionnaire consisted of standard demographic questions, including age, gender, employment status, and education level. Additional questions were asked about internet access, including where participants typically accessed the internet, devices they used to access the internet, and internet payment plans.

Testing and OMB approval. To pretest the focus group protocol, the Insight team conducted an in-person focus group with three current SNAP participants. SNAP participants reported that the questions in the focus group protocol were clearly worded and easy to understand; they also noted terms and phrases that required further explanation or definition (e.g., the use of the word "incentives"). Insight revised the instruments based on feedback from the pretest.

Insight obtained OMB approval May 1, 2020 (OMB number 0584-0659). The study protocol was revised to accommodate limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to safety concerns surrounding travel, the study team opted to conduct virtual site visits rather than in-person site visits. Consequently, the team revised the data collection instruments for virtual use. The FNS Professional Responsibility Advisory Office determined that the changes were minor enough not to warrant additional OMB review.

B. Summary of Findings

This section presents a description of participant characteristics and findings pertaining to participants' knowledge of MCS, participants' experience with each type of MCS, and features of interest to participants.

1. Participant Characteristics

Fifty-six individuals participated in the focus groups. Table 3 shows demographic characteristics for participants in the aggregate and separated by State. Nearly two-thirds of participants (61 percent) had

an unlimited monthly data plan as their mobile payment method. A similar percentage of participants (63 percent) had been receiving benefits for 1 to 4 years. Most participants (70 percent) were unemployed at the time of the focus groups. These findings were generally consistent across the five case study States.

Table 3. Focus Group Participant Characteristics

Demographic Characteristics		All (%)	KY (%)	MA (%)	MS (%)	NYC (%)	TX (%)
Gender	Male	18	23	18	0	21	82
	Female	82	77	82	100	79	18
Age	18–24	4	8	0	0	7	0
	25–34	29	38	9	43	21	36
	35–50	40	46	36	29	57	18
	51–64	23	8	36	29	14	36
	65+	5	0	18	0	0	9
Employment status	Unemployed	70	69	73	57	79	64
	Employed (full time)	11	15	9	14	7	9
	Employed (part time)	20	15	18	29	14	27
Education	Grade school/some high school	4	15	0	0	0	0
	High school/GED	14	31	0	0	14	18
	Some college/technical/vocational	39	31	27	43	50	45
	Two-year degree	20	8	36	43	7	18
	College degree/higher	23	15	36	14	29	18
Number of people in SNAP household	1 person	18	0	36	0	14	36
	2–3 people	50	39	64	57	50	46
	4–5 people	27	39	0	43	36	18
	6+ people	5	23	0	0	0	0
Mobile payment method	Government-subsidized plan	9	15	9	0	14	0
	Limited monthly data plan	20	15	18	29	21	18
	Unlimited monthly data plan	61	62	73	29	57	73
	Pay-as-you-go plan	5	0	0	29	0	9
	Combination	2	0	0	0	7	0
	Doesn't pay for plan	2	0	0	14	0	0
	N/A	2	8	0	0	0	0
Years receiving SNAP benefits	1–4	63	46	64	57	64	82
	5–10	18	0	36	14	21	18
	11–19	13	38	0	29	0	0
	20+	7	15	0	0	14	0

Note: Totals may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

GED = general equivalency diploma

N = 56

2. Participant Knowledge of MCS

During each focus group discussion, participants completed a series of Zoom polls that indicated their level of understanding about MCS offered by their State and SNAP-related activities available through each MCS type (see appendix C for poll language). Tables in this section present the percentage of focus group participants who accurately indicated the availability of various MCS and functionalities in their State.

Awareness of MCS Types Available

Most participants accurately reported the availability of a mobile-optimized website and/or mobile app, but they were less accurate about the availability of text messaging (see table 4). Over a third of participants from Kentucky inaccurately reported the availability of a mobile app, which was likely because of the presence of third-party apps such as the Providers app, which is used nationwide to track electronic benefits transfer (EBT) across multiple social programs. About one-quarter of Texas and Kentucky participants knew about the text messaging option for SNAP. Mississippi was the only State without text messaging available, and all participants from Mississippi accurately acknowledged this situation.

Table 4. Percentage of Respondents Who Accurately Identified MCS Available in Their State

MCS	All (%)	KY (%)	MA (%)	MS (%)	NYC (%)	TX (%)
Mobile-optimized website	75	77*	82*	71*	93*	82*
Mobile app	71	38	91*	86*	86*	91*
Text messaging	42	23*	45*	100	50*	27*

*MCS type available in this State

Awareness of Functionality

Participants reported a high degree of awareness of what their State's MCS offered. Participants were most accurate when asked about functionality related to making changes to their case, working on their application or recertification, and communicating with SNAP staff using the mobile-optimized website and mobile app (see table 5). Out of the options provided in the poll, participants were unsure of the SNAP-related activities possible via text messaging. Most were aware if office status was shared via text (73 percent). Approximately half accurately identified whether texting was used for account change notifications (49 percent) and certification notices (47 percent). Participants were less accurate when identifying whether their State's text messaging included reporting income changes (43 percent) or verifications needed (35 percent). Comprehensive tables of participant awareness of MCS functionality by State appear in appendix D.

Table 5. Percentage of Respondents Who Accurately Identified Functionality of Mobile-Optimized Website and Mobile App

Functionality	Website	App
Check your application status	95	93
Use an eligibility screening/income benefit calculator	59	68
Start, save, and submit your application	82	41
Submit documentation about your case	71	63

Functionality	Website	App
Communicate electronically with eligibility worker	80	78
Schedule interview	55	59
Report household change	73	63
Report income change	80	56
Receive notifications about any verifications needed	54	59
Receive notifications about your certification or account changes	59	68
Check a calendar of SNAP-related due dates/receive due date reminders	36	41
Review information in a language other than English	56	61
Check EBT balance	60	63
Request an EBT card replacement	51	73
Manage your EBT PIN	51	66
Chat with customer service	76	88
Review FAQ	38	54
Locate community partners/resources	60	68
Check office hours/locations	40	61
Submit questions	75	85

EBT = electronic benefits transfer; FAQ = frequently asked questions; PIN = personal identification number

3. Participant Experience With SNAP Mobile Technology

Moderators asked participants to share reasons they would and would not want to use their mobile devices to conduct SNAP-related business.

Reasons to Use

Participants cited a variety of reasons to use a mobile device for SNAP-related activities. Primary reasons included avoiding in-person visits to local SNAP offices, cost and time savings, tracking SNAP budget in real time, and steadier access to cellular data when lacking access to broadband internet through the computer.

Avoiding in-person visits to local SNAP offices. The most cited reason for using a mobile device for SNAP-related activities across all five States was the convenience of having universal access to SNAP information. Participants from all five States found that using the app or website was faster and easier than standing in line at local SNAP offices. SNAP clients from Massachusetts, Mississippi, New York City, and Texas wanted to avoid in-person office visits, and mobile technology enabled them to do so. Fear of potential COVID-19 exposure, physical disabilities, and unreliable or unavailable transportation were all cited by participants as reasons they preferred to avoid SNAP offices.

Cost and time savings. Participants from Kentucky and Mississippi shared that completing SNAP-related activities on their mobile device saves them money. The document upload feature enabled Kentucky participants to avoid paying for postage and Mississippi participants to avoid travel expenses associated with mailing or dropping off documents to their local SNAP offices.

Real-time tracking of SNAP benefits. Participants from all States felt the EBT balance check and benefit renewal schedule features enabled them to track and budget their spending while shopping.

I would also say when it comes to computers at home or your laptop, I know in certain areas the [internet] signal might go bad. ... I know when my internet's not good I can just easily get on my phone because I always have my LTE data.

—SNAP participant, Texas

It's very useful to see the payment is already there ... [or] it's going to be this many days before it clears, and then I will have the other payment on this date so that I can schedule groceries.

—SNAP participant, New York City

Steadier access to cellular data. Participants from Kentucky, New York City, and Texas stated that cell phones tend to have a stronger signal, particularly in remote areas, compared with internet service. Participants suggested SNAP clients likely gravitate to mobile devices rather than computers because it is possible to perform SNAP-related activities without broadband internet. Some clients do not have a personal computer and rely on a shared public device, such as a library computer, to complete SNAP-related activities. When using a personal

mobile device, clients can take measures to ensure their data are private and secure.

Reasons to Avoid

SNAP participants offered a variety of reasons clients would not want to use a mobile device for SNAP-related activities, including (1) discomfort with technology, (2) security and privacy concerns, (3) MCS accessibility limitations, and (4) technical limitations of mobile devices.

Digital illiteracy. The most cited reason for refraining from use of MCS in all five States was a lack of digital literacy. Participants from Kentucky, Massachusetts, and New York City mentioned a potential age-related difference in comfort with technology.

Security and privacy. Across all ages, participants from Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi, and Texas shared concerns about security and privacy as another reason not to conduct SNAP-related business via mobile devices. Participants from Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi, and Texas pointed out that applying and managing SNAP benefits require sensitive information, such as Social Security number and date of birth. Clients may be wary to share such sensitive information on a digital platform out of fear of being targeted by scams. Participants from Massachusetts, Mississippi, New York City, and Texas shared that some clients prefer person-to-person interaction and would rather work

I don't like the idea of putting the app on my phone, because if I was to lose my phone and it got into the wrong hands, and I was signed into it, I worry that they could do something.

—SNAP participant, Kentucky

with a SNAP case worker so they can ask questions or communicate concerns, especially if the client tried to use the app or website once before and was unsuccessful.

Accessibility. Accessibility was a broad term used to describe a host of possible challenges that might make clients hesitant to rely on mobile devices for performing SNAP-related activities. Participants in New York City and Texas shared that physical challenges such as low vision and arthritis can cause difficulty in reading information or submitting documents via mobile devices. For example, small screens and text can induce eyestrain, and dexterity is required to type or scroll. Participants in New York City agreed that limited literacy could also pose a challenge when apps and websites are “text heavy.”

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It's just hard for me to see a phone. And that's just me being old, and my eyes aren't very good.

—SNAP participant, Mississippi

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Technical limitations of mobile devices. Participants from Kentucky, Massachusetts, New York City, and Texas thought that technical limitations such as unreliable internet connection or limited phone storage could affect a client’s ability to stay connected, download files or apps, and upload documents.

4. Participant Feedback on SNAP Mobile Technology

Participants reported their experiences with each MCS type. This section details responses to questions about which features they used the most, which features they found the most helpful, and suggestions for improvements to some features.

Mobile App

At the time of the study, four of the five States—Massachusetts, Mississippi, New York City, and Texas—had a mobile app. Participants from these States described how they used the app, gave feedback on the app, and offered suggestions for improvement. Specifically, they provided insight into their experiences with the mobile app, including how they learned about the mobile app, their motivation for signing up for the app, and how often they used it. Most focus group participants had used their State’s mobile app at some point.

Learning about the mobile app. Participants in all four States reported learning about the mobile app from a caseworker. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, clients typically discovered the app during a visit to the local SNAP office; during the pandemic, they usually learned about it during a phone call to a caseworker. Other methods for learning about the app included friends and family (Massachusetts and New York City), State government website (Massachusetts, New York City, and Texas), Facebook advertisements (Mississippi), and the app store (Massachusetts and Mississippi).

Signing up. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted several participants to sign up for the mobile app. Some participants indicated that they had to apply for SNAP because of the effects of the pandemic, and the app was the only way for them to upload the necessary documentation. Other participants noted challenges of getting to the SNAP office such as transportation or work schedules; the app helped them overcome these barriers.

What made me use it when I was working, I couldn't get to the office, so there was a lot of stuff online that I could just run and ... do while I was at work.

—SNAP participant, Mississippi

Frequency of use. How often participants used the app varied. Participants in Mississippi and Massachusetts said they used it to check their balance whenever they went to the store. Participants in New York City and Texas said they only used it a few times a year, when they were required to upload documents or take a specific action such as recertifying. Some participants reported that they stopped using the app completely

because they did not get accurate information (e.g., outdated application status, EBT balance that did not reflect most recent purchases).

Participants shared their experiences using the mobile app and suggestions for improvement. Participants frequently used the mobile app to upload documents, check their account balance, and complete recertification forms. Overall, participants had mixed opinions about the utility of their mobile app.

Checking EBT balance. Although participants in all States frequently used the app to check their EBT balance, they provided mixed feedback on the app's accuracy. In Massachusetts, Mississippi, and Texas, checking EBT balance was described as simple, and several participants reported their EBT balance was accurate. However, several participants across the four States noted the app was not always correct about their EBT balance or the day they were supposed to receive benefits. Participants frequently turned to the third-party Providers app as an alternative for checking their balance.

I like the turnaround time, because once you upload it, you would get, like, a text message saying, like, we received your documents. ... The next day, you could actually see what it is, just to be sure if it's ... two or three pages, you just want to be sure that all of it was uploaded. So that's pretty good.

—SNAP participant, Massachusetts

Uploading documents. In Massachusetts, Mississippi, and New York City, participants described the document upload feature as very useful and straightforward. Participants appreciated having the option to either upload a photo from their camera or take a new photo and upload it directly in the app. Receiving a notification when documents were successfully uploaded was viewed as a beneficial element of the document upload feature. However, participants in Texas indicated they were often concerned that their documents were not uploading

correctly because they did not receive a confirmation notification of document receipt.

App notifications. Notifications sent through the app to participants are intended to help manage their case information and remind them when they need to recertify or provide additional information about their household. In Mississippi, participants appreciated receiving an email notifying them they had a notice in the app about required actions. However, in New York City and Massachusetts, push notifications and text messages referencing an action in the app were not always timely, which reduced the effectiveness of that method of communication and caused confusion among participants.

Recertification. Participants in Mississippi, New York City, and Texas used the app to recertify for SNAP benefits. Overall, participants described this process as relatively straightforward. However, the application on the Texas app was described as “cookie cutter” because it failed to acknowledge special circumstances in participants’ lives, which resulted in having to contact their local SNAP office. Participants in New York City noted it was sometimes challenging to complete documents because they were unable to zoom in on text.

“If something was rejected for not being legible or being assigned to the wrong person mistakenly, the push notification would come almost 24 hours after the email notification, and that kind of defeats the purpose of a push notification.”

—SNAP participant, New York City

Convenience. The app was seen as a convenient way of conducting SNAP business because people always have access to their phone.

Suggested improvements. Participants suggested incorporating a live chat agent (Massachusetts, Mississippi, and New York City), offering more languages (Massachusetts and New York City), providing a notification when the EBT card is used (Massachusetts), and adding the ability to locate community partners of interest (e.g., food pantries, farmers’ markets) as ways to improve the app.

Mobile-Optimized Website

“But the nice thing about the app is it goes where you go. So if you’re not home, and you need to know something ... I wouldn’t want to not have the app.”

—SNAP participant, Mississippi

All five States had a mobile-optimized website at the time of the study. Participants frequently used both the website and mobile app for various SNAP-related business, depending on the functionality. Because Kentucky did not have a mobile app, participants completed all SNAP-related business through the mobile-optimized website. SNAP participants provided insight into their use of the mobile-optimized website, including how they learned about

it, the process for signing up, and their frequency of use.

Learning about the website. Several participants in Massachusetts, Mississippi, and Kentucky reported they conducted an internet search on how to apply for SNAP benefits in the State and were referred to the website. Another common way of learning about the website was from the local SNAP office through a conversation with a caseworker, a letter, or an email notification. A few participants learned about the website through word of mouth from such sources as local food pantry staff, family, and colleagues.

Signing up The process of signing up for the website in Mississippi and Kentucky was described as straightforward. Participants were required to create an account to access the website and were able to do this without the assistance of a caseworker. Difficulties getting to the local office, including inclement weather and lack of transportation, motivated participants to sign up for the website.

Frequency of use. Most participants reported using the website once or twice a year to submit documents or recertify. A few participants in Mississippi and Texas said they used the website to check their EBT balance a few times a month.

Participants' descriptions of their overall experience with their State's mobile website included positive feedback, suggestions for improvement, and preferences for using the website on their phone compared with the computer.

Checking EBT balance. Some participants used the website to check their EBT balance, but most used their State's mobile app or the Providers app for this function.

Additional information. Participants in Texas, Massachusetts, and Mississippi noted they liked the additional information the website provided compared with the app, including a frequently asked questions (FAQ) feature. Participants also liked that the website contained links to other websites with relevant information, such as Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) benefits or the location of local food pantries.

I really like the website because you get more detail, and that ability to link over to the main government pages for Texas to see more details about pandemic benefits or additional assistance, where else can I go, or food pantries or, you know, other resources.
—SNAP participant, Texas

Uploading documents. Participants in Kentucky, Mississippi, and Texas described the website document upload feature as simple and useful. Participants liked being able to submit documents on their phone because they could easily take photos and upload them. In Kentucky, participants pointed out that uploading documents through the website saved them money on postage. However, participants in New York City and Mississippi indicated they would like a way to easily view the documents uploaded in the past. Other suggested areas for improvement included notification of document receipt and the ability to upload more than one document at a time.

Application and recertification. Participants in all States frequently used the website to complete their application or recertification documents; in Kentucky and Massachusetts, participants had to use the website to complete their application. This process was sometimes viewed as easier through the website than a mobile app. Participants in all States were also able to check the status of their application on the website, and most found the feature timely and accurate. However, participants

I like the fact that you can check [the website], as opposed to having to call and sometimes maybe you have to have like an hour wait until you can actually get a live person to speak to.
—SNAP participant, Kentucky

in Kentucky noted the website's report of their application status was not always current. Participants in Mississippi reported frustration with having to download documents that contained their application status, which was sometimes difficult when using their phone.

Live chat feature. Kentucky was the only State that offered a chat feature on their website. Participants in Kentucky agreed this fast and reliable feature saved time because they did not have to go into or call the office. Participants in other States noted that being able to communicate with a caseworker through a live chat or email would be a helpful tool.

Use of website on phone. At least half of the participants in each of the States had used the website on their phone and had mixed views on their preference for using the website via their phone or computer.

Participants who preferred using the website on their phone frequently cited convenience; they always had their phones with them, and many did not regularly have access to computers. Participants also preferred to upload documents through a phone instead of a computer because most documents were already saved on their phone or they could take a new photo.

It's actually easier, because if I was on my computer and I had to upload documents, I would have to scan them on my printer.
—SNAP participant, Kentucky

In all States, the most frequently cited reason for using a computer instead of a phone was that the website was hard to view and navigate on a phone. Participants struggled with small text on the phone and noted typing on a computer was easier. Participants also mentioned the ease of downloading and saving documents as reasons they preferred to use a computer.

Text Messaging

Four of the study States—Kentucky, Massachusetts, New York City, and Texas—had implemented text messaging at the time of the study. Participants described their experiences with text messages and offered feedback on the utility of texts they received. SNAP participants provided details on how they used text messaging, including the process of signing up, frequency of messages, and text content. Those who did not use text messaging described why they did not and whether they would choose to if they knew about it.

Signing up. In Texas, New York City, and Kentucky, participants reported having to opt in to receive text messages. In New York City, participants reported opting in during the application process. Kentucky participants shared that they could select text messaging as a form of communication in the website portal.

Frequency of text messages. Participants in the four States were satisfied with the number of text messages they received. Most participants received text messages when they needed to take a

I don't feel like I get bombarded with them. I get one a month ... I find them helpful. I like getting the one reminding me about the balance or that I'm getting the benefit every month, because I can't remember when I'm getting it. And the occasional one that I get about something that I may or may not be interested in, I find helpful.
—SNAP participant, Massachusetts

particular action, such as submitting documents or recertifying. In Massachusetts, participants also received a text when their benefits became available each month and when the State was offering additional resources (e.g., broadband programs, vaccine information).

Text content. New York City, Massachusetts, and Texas used text messages to provide recertification reminders and notify participants about missing documents. In Massachusetts and New York City, participants received texts confirming application or document receipt. Participants in Texas and New

York City received texts about appointments, and in New York City, participants could confirm appointment dates and times through text. New York City and Massachusetts informed participants about office hours and closings through text messages. Participants in Massachusetts reported receiving a variety of texts, including information on P-EBT, notifications about when benefits became available, and information on vaccine availability. Kentucky SNAP participants noted the texts they received let

them know when that they had a notification in the portal; they then had to visit the website to get additional information.

Participants who chose not to use text messaging. In all States, participants who did not opt in noted text messages would be duplicative because they frequently check their email, notifications in the mobile app, or the website. Security concerns were another reason not to opt in; one participant felt the texts disclosed too much personal information, and another did not feel comfortable receiving automated texts. Some participants who were unaware that text messaging was an option said they would opt in because text messages would be timelier and more efficient than mail notifications. Others would appreciate the additional reminder.

Participants from Mississippi did not have text messaging available but reported they would opt in if given the option. Participants noted it would be helpful to receive text messages about appointment reminders, missing documentation, and information about community partners or resources. One participant said they would prefer texts to push notifications because the latter drain their phone battery. However, participants did not want excessive text messages because they would likely not pay close attention to them.

Participants who had experience with text messaging provided feedback on beneficial features and made suggestions for improvement.

I was just hoping not to miss anything, in case they sent it by mail, and I didn't see the mail or [it] got lost, but they sent it by mail and that got lost. Yeah, and the mail is very slow, and emails can go to junk or disappear. ... So you want to cover all your bases.

—SNAP participant, New York City

Additional reminders. When participants opted into text messaging, they expected the messages would provide additional reminders about deadlines and necessary actions to ensure their benefits did not lapse. In Texas, New York City, and Massachusetts, participants appreciated receiving text messages as additional reminders and often felt nudged to take necessary action. In some cases, text messages were preferred to notifications received in the mail, through email, or via push notifications because texts were timelier and more reliable.

Wording of text messages. Participants' views on text message wording varied. In Texas, New York City, and Massachusetts, some participants found the wording direct and informative. However, some participants in Texas and New York said the texts they received were sometimes phrased in an urgent manner that made the texts seem worrisome.

Security of text messages. Participants in all four States discussed security concerns about receiving information on their SNAP case through text messages. Specifically, participants worried about receiving spam text messages and about clicking links provided in texts. Participants in New York City and Massachusetts discussed the importance of consistent language across text messages and a consistent URL for the SNAP State website to reassure them the texts are coming from a legitimate

I only received one saying the recertification was going to be opening ... soon. ... So it was helpful to remind me that it's going to open, but it wasn't helpful to tell me it's happening in a week. ... I can't do anything about it, and by the time the week passes, I won't remember. So they should send it again.

—SNAP participant, New York City

source. Participants also had some concerns about including personal information in text messages. In Texas, participants preferred the messages not include personal information to ensure security. Participants in Kentucky and Massachusetts acknowledged that text messages referring them to the portal or app helped to ensure security; however, they appreciated more detail in the body of the text to know what the notification was about.

Timing of text messages. Participants reported mixed feelings about the appropriate timing of text messages. Some participants appreciated text messages coming several weeks in advance so they had enough time to collect necessary information. Others preferred a text message sent closer to the date of action, because a notification several weeks in advance was more likely to be put off and forgotten about.

5. Features of Most Interest

Participants were given a list of MCS features and asked to indicate which they were most interested in using for SNAP-related activities. The complete list of features with participant rankings by State appears in appendix D. Across all States, the five features of most interest were (1) submit documentation about your case, (2) check your application status, (3) check EBT balance, (4) chat with customer service, and (5) request an EBT card replacement. A comprehensive table of all States' rankings of features of most interest is presented in appendix D.

Features With Most Interest by State

Kentucky. The features of most interest were (1) submit documentation about case, (2) chat with customer service, (3) check application status, and (4) submit questions. Of these features, Kentucky's SNAP-related MCS currently only offer document upload and application status check. Clients do not have the option to chat with customer service or submit questions. Participants also enthusiastically shared an interest in conducting interviews online via videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom and agreed they would take advantage of a full-service mobile app that offered the same features as the website.

Massachusetts. The features of most interest were (1) submit documentation about case, (2) check EBT balance, (3) check application status, (4) communicate electronically with an eligibility worker, and (5) chat with customer service. Of these features, Massachusetts's SNAP-related MCS currently only offer document upload, EBT balance inquiry, and application status check. Clients do not have the option to initiate electronic correspondence with an eligibility worker or chat with customer service.

Participants also expressed a particular interest in the ability to locate community partners or resources, which is not part of Massachusetts's MCS. For example, one participant suggested including a farmers' market or food pantry locator based on ZIP Code for SNAP beneficiaries who would like to patronize local grocers or need emergency food assistance.

Mississippi. The features of most interest were (1) request an EBT card replacement; (2) check application status; (3) submit documentation about case; (4) start, save, and submit application; and (5) communicate electronically with eligibility worker. Of these features, Mississippi's SNAP-related MCS currently only offer application status check; document upload; and start, save, and submit application. Clients do not have the option to request a replacement EBT card or initiate electronic correspondence with an eligibility worker.

New York City. The features of most interest were (1) request an EBT card replacement, (2) check application status, (3) submit documentation about case, (4) check EBT balance, and (5) chat with customer service. Of these features, New York City's SNAP-related MCS currently only offer EBT card replacement, application status check, document upload, and EBT balance inquiry. Clients do not have the option to chat with customer service. In addition to the features listed, participants expressed an interest in conducting virtual interviews using videoconferencing software such as Zoom.

Texas. The features of most interest were (1) chat with customer service; (2) check EBT balance; (3) check application status; (4) start, save, and submit application; (5) submit documentation about case; and (6) receive notifications about any verifications needed. Texas's SNAP-related MCS currently offer all these features.

Participant Experiences With MCS and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the value of having MCS available to SNAP participants and generated more demand for these tools. Most participants were receiving SNAP benefits before the pandemic caused SNAP office closures, and they expressed universal appreciation for the minimal disruption to their benefits facilitated by the availability of MCS. Some participants noted the application and recertification process sometimes took longer in the early days of the pandemic, specifically when conducted through SNAP websites, but they believed those disruptions were likely a result of the large increase in the number of individuals conducting SNAP business electronically and have since been resolved. Participants also expressed appreciation for the ease of receiving updates through MCS about P-EBT benefits. MCS helped them know when they would receive these benefits and the amount of the benefits.

C. Conclusions and Recommendations

The following section summarizes focus group participants' experiences and preferences for using their State's SNAP MCS with corresponding recommendations for consideration.

1. Summary

Overall, participants across all States studied appreciated the availability of the MCS tools. Many of the features participants were most interested in were available from at least one of the MCS types in their State. The primary benefits of MCS cited by SNAP participants were avoiding in-person visits to local SNAP offices, cost and time savings, real-time tracking of SNAP benefits, and steadier access to cellular data than broadband internet. The primary reasons SNAP participants cited for not using MCS for SNAP-related activities were discomfort with technology, security or privacy concerns, MCS accessibility limitations, and technical limitations of mobile devices such as unreliable internet connection and limited phone storage. Most SNAP participants learned about their State's MCS from a caseworker or an internet search on how to apply for SNAP benefits. Several participants were prompted to sign up in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, either because they needed benefits to address a loss of income or because SNAP offices were closed. Participants were most interested in the ability to submit documentation, check their application status, and check EBT balance via MCS.

2. Key Takeaways and Recommendations

Several themes emerged across all 10 focus groups. These themes and corresponding recommendations are highlighted below.

Checking EBT balance. The feature most used by SNAP participants on mobile apps and mobile-optimized websites is checking EBT balances. This feature could be augmented with important and timely updates to increase the reach of these types of communications. However, some participants perceived EBT balances shown in State apps and websites as inconsistent in their accuracy (e.g., delay in balance updates from use of EBT card). Because of this perception, many SNAP participants preferred the Providers app over their State's SNAP app and website.

Recommendation

- ▶ If the State intends to use the app and the website to communicate with participants about cases and SNAP policies, ensuring EBT balances are current, accurate, and prominently displayed when clients open the app and log into their account on the website is essential.

Uploading documents. The ability to upload documents directly from mobile devices was the most appreciated feature of MCS. Participants liked the option to upload a picture already on their phones or take a new picture within the app. Some participants did not receive upload confirmation, but those who did also liked the ability to see the uploaded documents within their accounts.

Recommendation

- ▶ Ensure participants can upload documents from multiple sources, including existing pictures on their phone and pictures taken and uploaded directly to the app or website.
- ▶ Send participants confirmation of document upload.
- ▶ Make uploaded documents viewable within participants' account.

Live chat. Participants showed substantial support for a live chat feature in both the mobile-optimized website and the mobile app, regardless of whether the State currently had that feature.

Recommendation

- ▶ Incorporate a live chat function in both the mobile-optimized website and the mobile app.

Text reminders. Participants preferred to receive text messages with reminders about deadlines related to their case, electronic notices to review in their account, and appointments. They also preferred to receive these reminders 1 month and 2 weeks prior to any deadline to accommodate different

participant preferences for submitting recertification information. Participants emphasized limiting the number of text messages and said they would ignore the texts if too many were not relevant to them.

Recommendations

- ▶ Use text messages for deadline reminders.
- ▶ Use text messages for notifications of electronic notices available in participants' account.
- ▶ Use text messages for appointment reminders.
- ▶ Send reminder texts at least 1 month prior to any deadline or appointment and again at 2 weeks prior.
- ▶ Ensure that text messages are infrequent and relevant.

Links within texts. In response to security concerns, participants appreciated texts that included links to the State's website. This practice made them feel more confident in the legitimacy of the source and comfortable clicking the link.

Recommendation

- ▶ When clickable links are embedded within text messages, display the State's website in the URL.

Appendix A. Participant Screener and Demographic Questionnaire

PURPOSE: This screener will be used by State SNAP office staff or Schlesinger to assess potential participants' eligibility for the MCS user focus groups. Potential participants will be called using a list provided by the State or will be invited to call a telephone number to see whether they are eligible to participate in one of the focus groups in their areas. A member of the Schlesinger team will answer the telephone (or return the potential participant's call the next business day if after hours) and administer the eligibility screener. After administering the screener over the phone, Schlesinger will confirm and recruit eligible participants into the designated focus group. The team from Schlesinger will enter all responses into an electronic tracker. Ineligible participants will be thanked for their interest and told they are not eligible to participate.

A. Eligibility Screener Telephone Script for Returning Call

Hello, my name is [NAME] and I'm calling from Schlesinger Associates to see if you are eligible to participate in a virtual focus group discussion about SNAP's mobile services such as text messaging, mobile applications that you can download on your phone or tablet, and websites that can be viewed easily and conveniently on your phone or tablet.

The virtual focus group will be 90 minutes long, held on Zoom, and you will receive a \$45 Visa/MasterCard/Discover/Amex card for participating in the focus group discussion. There are a few questions we need to ask to determine if you are eligible to participate in the focus group. Are you interested and willing to participate in the screener? It should take less than 10 minutes.

IF YES: Thank you. I have just a few questions to ask you to see if you are eligible to participate. As a reminder, your participation is completely voluntary (not required) and will not affect your SNAP benefits in any way.

[GO TO SCREENER]

IF NO: Thank you for your time.

B. Eligibility Screener Telephone Script for Receiving Call

Hello, my name is [NAME] from Schlesinger Associates. Thank you for your call today.

As you may know, this 90-minute focus group will be held virtually via Zoom to discuss SNAP's mobile services. Mobile services include text messaging, mobile applications that you can download on your phone or tablet, and websites that can be viewed easily and conveniently on your phone or tablet. You will receive a \$45 MasterCard, Visa, American Express, or Discover gift card for participating in the focus group discussion. There are a few questions we need to ask to determine if you are eligible to participate in the focus group. Are you interested and willing to participate in the screener? It should take less than 10 minutes.

IF YES: Thank you. I have just a few questions to ask you to see if you are eligible to participate. As a reminder, your participation is completely voluntary (not required) and will not affect your SNAP benefits in any way.

[GO TO SCREENER]

IF NO: Thank you for your time.

C. Eligibility Screener Questions

1. May I have your name please?
2. Do you currently receive SNAP benefits in Kentucky?
 - a. Yes [CONTINUE]
 - b. No [EXIT QUESTIONS]
3. Have you been receiving SNAP benefits in Kentucky for at least the last 6 months?
 - a. Yes [CONTINUE]
 - b. No [EXIT QUESTIONS]
4. Are you age 18 or older?
 - a. Yes [CONTINUE]
 - b. No [EXIT QUESTIONS]
5. For SNAP cases, there is usually one person in a family that applies for benefits, submits documents, and interacts with the SNAP agency. We call that person the “head of the household.” Are you the head of the household for your family?
 - a. Yes [CONTINUE]
 - b. No [CONTINUE]
6. Is English your primary language, or can you speak English fluently?
 - a. Yes [CONTINUE]
 - b. No [EXIT QUESTIONS]
7. Do you have daily access to a device with a working webcam?
 - a. Yes, laptop/camera with webcam [CONTINUE]
 - b. Yes, tablet with camera [CONTINUE]
 - c. Yes, mobile device with camera [CONTINUE]
 - d. No device with camera [EXIT QUESTIONS]
8. Do you have daily access to high-speed internet access?
 - a. Yes [CONTINUE]
 - b. No [EXIT QUESTIONS]

9. In the last 12 months, have you received text messages on your phone about your SNAP benefits?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
10. In the last 12 months, have you used the Kentucky SNAP website on your phone to perform SNAP-related activities (e.g., to apply for SNAP or manage your case or SNAP benefits)?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

[IF THE PERSON ANSWERS NO TO BOTH QUESTIONS 9 and 10, SKIP TO THE EXIT QUESTIONS]

11. Are you able to participate in a 90-minute virtual focus group on [DATE] at [TIME]?
 - a. Yes [OBTAIN NECESSARY CONTACT INFORMATION FOR SENDING REMINDERS AND CONTINUE TO Q13]
 - b. No [EXIT QUESTIONS]

I have a few demographic questions to ask before we hang up.

12. Do you have a physical, mental, sensory, or emotional disability that may impact your ability to sit and/or look at a screen for 90 minutes?
 - a. Yes
 - i. [IF YES, PLEASE DESCRIBE]
 - b. No
13. What is your age?
 - a. 18 to 25
 - b. 26 to 35
 - c. 36 to 50
 - d. 51 to 64
 - e. 65 or older
14. What is your gender?
 - a. [RECORD RESPONSE]
15. What is your current employment status?
 - a. Employed full time (35+ hours/week)
 - b. Employed part time (1 to 34 hours/week)
 - c. Not employed

16. What is your education level?
- a. Grade school or some high school
 - b. High school graduate or GED
 - c. Some college, technical, or vocational school
 - d. Two-year degree
 - e. Four-year college degree or higher
17. Including you, how many people are currently in your SNAP household?
- a. One person (just you)
 - b. 2 to 3 people
 - c. 4 to 6 people
 - d. 6 or more people
18. Including you, how many people currently live or stay in your home regardless of SNAP status?
- a. [RECORD RESPONSE]
19. About how many years have you been receiving SNAP benefits?
- a. [RECORD RESPONSE]
20. Where do you access the internet? (Select all that apply)
- a. Home
 - b. Work or school
 - c. Friend's or relative's house
 - d. Community location (e.g., library, community center, café)
 - e. Mobile device (e.g., phone)
 - f. Other, please specify [RECORD RESPONSE]
21. What are the different devices you use to access the internet? (Select all that apply)
- a. Smartphone
 - b. Desktop or laptop
 - c. Tablet
 - d. E-reader
 - e. Smart watch
 - f. Smart TV
 - g. Other, please specify [RECORD RESPONSE]

22. What are all the ways you pay for the internet on your phone or tablet?
- a. Unlimited monthly data plan
 - b. Limited monthly data plan
 - c. Pay-as-you-go data plan
 - d. Government-subsidized phone plan (e.g., a set amount of data is provided free, and any additional amount is paid for by phone holder)
 - e. Other, please specify [RECORD RESPONSE]
 - f. Not applicable—I do not pay for the internet on my phone or tablet
23. How do you connect to the internet on your phone? (Select all that apply)
- a. Data plan
 - b. Wi-Fi connection
 - c. Other, please specify [RECORD RESPONSE]

[EXIT QUESTIONS—IF INELIGIBLE]

[IF STILL TRYING TO RECRUIT ADDITIONAL PARTICIPANTS] Do you know of any other SNAP participants who have used their cell phone to interact with their SNAP case and would be interested in participating in this discussion? Would you be able to tell them about this focus group?

- a. Yes [CONTINUE]
- b. No [CONTINUE]

Thank you very much for your time today. Based on your responses, it sounds like you are ineligible to participate at this time. However, I'd be glad to call you back if our requirements change. Would you be willing to take a call or email from us in the future?

- a. Yes: What is your full name and the best number or email to reach you [MAKE NOTE OF CONTACT INFO]? Great, thank you again for calling. We will keep you in mind for future opportunities.
- b. No: Not a problem. Thank you again for your time.

Appendix B. Focus Group Protocol

PURPOSE: The goal of the focus group will be to assess the usability of the MCS and to evaluate client satisfaction with the MCS. Insight will work with each State to recruit participants with experience using the State’s MCS and will hold the focus groups virtually. This will be a 90-minute focus group.

A. Welcome

Thank you for taking the time to join our discussion today. We look forward to talking with you during the next 90 minutes. The purpose of our conversation today is to learn about your experiences using your smartphones or other mobile devices to get information about [STATE SNAP PROGRAM]. We want to know what you like and don’t like about using your mobile devices in this way and to hear your suggestions for improving these types of communications.

The first thing we’ll do is review the consent form. [SHARE SCREEN AND DISPLAY CONSENT FORM, READ CONSENT FORM ALOUD].

Do you each agree to participate and be audio and videorecorded? [RECORD VERBAL CONSENT FOR EACH PARTICIPANT]

B. Ground Rules

Before we get started, I’d like to review a few ground rules.

- ▶ Please speak one at a time.
- ▶ If you are currently in a room with other people, please make sure you are wearing headphones so that others cannot hear our discussion.
- ▶ This is an open conversation—you do not need to keep your microphone on mute and you do not need to raise your hand. Feel free to talk whenever you have something to share.
- ▶ If you get logged out for any reason, you can log back in and rejoin the group at any time using the same link.
- ▶ We are recording this session to be sure we can accurately remember what everyone says. Only people working on the project will have access to the recordings. Neither the agency sponsoring this information collection, U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, nor [STATE SNAP AGENCY] will have access to your names or the recordings of our discussion.
- ▶ Because we are recording, please speak in a voice as loud as mine and avoid side conversations.
- ▶ I’d like to introduce my colleague, [NAME], who will be taking notes today in the event the recordings are not clear. Again, these notes will be kept private and will not identify anyone by name except as otherwise required by law.
- ▶ We need to hear from everyone today, but you don’t have to answer every question.
- ▶ There may be times in the discussion where you have a different opinion than other people, and we want to hear about that. There are no wrong answers.

- ▶ If you need to step away for some reason, please leave so that only one person is away from the group at one time—this will keep our group from being too small.
- ▶ I have many questions to cover, so I may need to interrupt you to keep the conversation moving. Please don't take it personally; it's simply to ensure we cover all our questions today.
- ▶ We invited you all here today because you each receive SNAP benefits and you live in [STATE/COUNTY], where you can interact with the [STATE SNAP OFFICE] by either receiving or sharing information using a mobile device.
- ▶ Today I want to talk about your experience using your mobile device for SNAP-related activities.
- ▶ Nothing you say today will affect your [STATE SNAP PROGRAM] benefits in any way. We aren't part of the government or your SNAP office and will not share our recordings or notes with them. We'll summarize what you say today and will not include anyone's names in our reports.
- ▶ This session is private; your names will not be associated with anything you say. Participation in this discussion is voluntary will not affect your [STATE SNAP PROGRAM] benefits in any way if you chose not to participate in part or in full.
- ▶ As a reminder, your participation is completely voluntary (not required). You can choose to answer or not answer any questions.

C. Icebreaker

Let's start by getting to know one another a little. Please go around the table and tell us—

- ▶ Your first name
- ▶ What type of smartphone or tablet you use and your favorite feature on the device
***Probe:** For example, my name is [NAME], and I use a Samsung Galaxy, and my favorite feature on the phone is the WhatsApp app because I can use it to talk to and see my new niece that lives in Florida.*
- ▶ [MODERATOR REINTRODUCES SELF AT END]

Do you have any questions before we get started? [TURN ON RECORDER]

D. Background: Introduction to MCS and Frequency of Use

Let's get started by talking about your first experience using your mobile device for activities related to SNAP.

1. What are some of the ways you can use your mobile device for activities related to SNAP?
 - a. [AFTER A FEW RESPONSES, LAUNCH POLL #1] I'm going to launch a poll, and if you could, indicate whether you think there is an app that will let you perform SNAP-related activities, text messaging to communicate with the SNAP office, and/or whether there is a website you can view on your phone or tablet to perform SNAP-related activities.

Thank you for doing that for us! Next, I'm going to launch another few polls that list different functions that some States can do with their apps, texts, and mobile-friendly websites.

[IF STATE HAS TEXT MESSAGING, LAUNCH POLL #2 AND READ EACH FUNCTION IN THE POLL ONE BY ONE]

2. Please select any SNAP-related activities you can do through text messaging with your State's SNAP office. The response options are—

- a. Confirm appointments; Account changes; Certification notice; Report income changes; Verifications needed; Office status

[AFTER THEY HAVE TIME TO RESPOND]

- b. Are there any activities we missed?

[IF STATE HAS AN APP, LAUNCH POLL #3 AND READ EACH FUNCTION IN THE POLL ONE BY ONE]

3. Please select any activities that you can perform with [INSERT STATE'S APP NAME]. I'm going to read all of the options and then give you time to respond [READ EACH OPTION ONE BY ONE].

[AFTER THEY HAVE TIME TO RESPOND]

4. [LAUNCH POLL #4] Again, please select the activities you can perform with the [STATE'S APP NAME]. Same question, just more response options [READ EACH OPTION ONE BY ONE].

- a. Are there any that we missed?

[IF STATE HAS MOBILE-OPTIMIZED WEBSITE, LAUNCH POLL #5 AND READ EACH FUNCTION IN THE POLL IF NOT ALREADY READ]

5. Please select any SNAP-related activities that you can perform on the [STATE'S WEBSITE NAME] using your phone or tablet. [IF NOT ALREADY READ] I'm going to read all of the options and then give you time to respond [READ EACH OPTION ONE BY ONE].

[AFTER THEY HAVE TIME TO RESPOND]

6. [LAUNCH POLL #6] Again, please select the activities you can perform with the [STATE'S WEBSITE NAME]. Same question, just more response options.

- a. Are there any that we missed?

[OPEN BLANK WORD DOCUMENT TO USE AS LIVE WHITEBOARD WHILE SHARING SCREEN]

7. What are some reasons SNAP participants may *want* to use their phone or tablet for SNAP-related activities? [TYPE RESPONSES ON WHITE BOARD AS PARTICIPANTS LIST THE REASONS]

Probe: *What are the benefits? For example, to save time, the ease of having information stored in one place, the ability to perform SNAP-related activities on your own time.*

8. What are some reasons SNAP participants may be hesitant to use their phone or tablet for SNAP-related activities?

Probe: *Are there data security concerns, issues, or concerns related to data plans or available memory/storage on your phone, slow access to internet in certain areas, limited coverage?*

We know that SNAP participants in your State have access to [TAILOR FOR EACH STATE: text messages related to SNAP, a mobile app for SNAP benefits and/or applications, and/or a website that can be

accessed via your mobile device]. We'd like to talk to you about how these tools work now and your experience and suggested improvements for each.

E. Functionality of Text Messaging (If Applicable)

[IF TEXT MESSAGING IS NOT A PART OF STATE MCS:] Based on our understanding, there is no official text messaging communication available between SNAP participants and the State; however, do you ever use text messaging to communicate with the SNAP local office or others who help you manage your SNAP case?

[IF TEXT MESSAGING IS A PART OF STATE MCS:]

Now I want to ask about the types of text messages you may have received from the SNAP office.

9. [LAUNCH POLL #7] Using this poll, please check whether you have ever received text messages from your local SNAP agency.

Probe: *Have you received personal messages from your local SNAP agency or case worker? Did you receive messages through an app or mobile-optimized website?*

10. Did you have to sign up, opt in, or download anything to receive these text messages?

Probe: *What made you (or someone in your family) decide to sign up for these text messages?*

11. How did you find out about the ability to receive texts related to your SNAP benefits?

12. How often do you receive text messages?

Probe: *How many times per day? Once per day? Once per week?*

13. Do you have the ability to respond to text messages/notifications, or is the messaging one-way only?

Probe [IF APPLICABLE]: *Please describe any two-way communication that occurs via text message.*

14. Now I want to ask about the types of messages you may have received from the SNAP office via text message. What kinds of messages do you remember getting? What were they about?

[SHARE SCREEN AND WRITE LIST OF TOPICS ON VIRTUAL WHITEBOARD]

15. For text messaging, what is going well and what needs improvement?

Probe: *Beyond what was already mentioned during our last exercise*

16. What do you find most useful about the text messages from the SNAP office? Why?

17. Overall, how helpful is text messaging in helping you manage your SNAP benefits? In helping to update your SNAP account?

18. Describe the popularity of SNAP-related text messaging.

Probe: *How many people do you know who are receiving these text messages?*

19. What would you change about the text messages you received from the SNAP office, if anything?

Probe: *What information was missing from the text messages you received?*

Now that we have talked about how text messaging works, we would like you to provide feedback on some of the text messages you may have received

20. [SHARE SCREEN AND SHOW DOCUMENT WITH RECENT TEXT MESSAGES SENT BY THE STATE]
Let's start by talking about what your general thoughts were about the text messages. [READ EACH BULLET ONE BY ONE]

Probe: *Do you remember getting these texts? How easy or difficult was it to open the texts, understand the information, and click any links?*

21. Was anything missing from the text messages? If so, please explain.

Probe: *Is there anything you would change about the [MCS OR FUNCTION]?*

22. How helpful were the text messages?

Probe: *What, if anything, was confusing or unclear? What could improve it?*

F. Functionality of Mobile App (If Applicable)

[IF MOBILE APP IS NOT A PART OF STATE MCS:] Based on our understanding, there is no official State SNAP mobile app; however, do you ever use mobile apps for SNAP?

IF YES: Can you tell me about the app? What types of things can you use it for?

[ONLY FOR STATES WITH A MOBILE APP]

Now I want to ask about [STATE'S SNAP APP].

23. [LAUNCH POLL #8] Using this poll, please check whether you have ever used the app.
24. Did you have to download anything to start using the app? If so, please describe the instructions for how you came upon the app and first logged in.

Probe: *What made you (or someone in your family) decide to sign up for this app?*

25. How did you find out about the app?

26. How often do you use the app?

Probe: *How many times per day? Once per day? Once per week?*

27. Describe the popularity of the app.

Probe: *How many people you know have downloaded and use the app?*

28. What things have you done on the app? [SHARE SCREEN AND WRITE LIST OF TOPICS ON VIRTUAL WHITEBOARD; STOP AT ABOUT FIVE OR SIX TASKS]
- [READ EACH ITEM OFF THE WHITEBOARD AND HAVE PARTICIPANTS RAISE THEIR HAND IF THEY HAVE DONE IT]

[CHOOSE THE THREE MOST COMMON FEATURES/TASKS TO PROBE]

FEATURE 1:

29. Tell me about your experience with [FEATURE 1].
- Probe:** What do you like about it? What would you improve about it?*
- Probe:** Are there any parts you find to be confusing or unclear?*

FEATURE 2:

30. Tell me about your experience with [FEATURE 2].
- Probe:** What do you like about it? What would you improve about it?*
- Probe:** Are there any parts you find to be confusing or unclear? What could improve it?*

FEATURE 3 [IF TIME PERMITS]:

31. Tell me about your experience with [FEATURE 3].
- Probe:** What do you like about it? What would you improve about it?*
- Probe:** Are there any parts you find to be confusing or unclear? What could improve it?*

Now that we've talked about some specific features of the app, I'd like to ask about the app overall.

32. Is there anything you would change about the app that we haven't already discussed?
- Probe:** Information you receive, functions, font size, graphics, FAQs, customer support*
33. In general, are there any parts of the app that work particularly well for you?
- Probe:** What features do you find the most helpful? Why?*
34. Overall, how helpful is the app in helping you manage your SNAP benefits? In helping to update your SNAP account?
35. Before we move on to our next set of questions, do you know of any other apps in your State that are related to SNAP or similar services?

G. Functionality of Mobile-Optimized Website (If Applicable)

[ONLY FOR STATES WITH A MOBILE-OPTIMIZED WEBSITE]

Now I want to ask about accessing the SNAP website on your phone.

36. [LAUNCH POLL #9] Using this poll, please check whether you have accessed the SNAP website on a mobile device like your phone or tablet, not just from a computer.

37. Did you have to do anything prior to logging into the website? If so, please describe the process of how you accessed the website and first logged in.

Probe: *What made you (or someone in your family) decide to use the website on your phone?*

Probe: *Was there a user agreement or consent prior to accessing the website?*

38. How did you find out about [INSERT THE NAME OF THE MOBILE-OPTIMIZED WEBSITE]?

39. How often do you use the website on your phone?

Probe: *How many times per day, per week, per year?*

40. What are all the things you have done on the website via your phone? [WRITE LIST OF TOPICS ON VIRTUAL WHITEBOARD—AS THEY LIST THEM CONFIRM THEY ARE REFERRING TO WEBSITE AND NOT THE MOBILE APP]

[READ EACH ITEM OFF THE WHITEBOARD AND HAVE PARTICIPANTS RAISE THEIR HAND IF THEY HAVE DONE IT]

[CHOOSE THE THREE MOST COMMON FEATURES/TASKS TO PROBE]

FEATURE 1:

41. Tell me about your experience with [FEATURE 1].

Probe: *What do you like about it? What would you improve about it?*

Probe: *Are there any parts you find to be confusing or unclear? What could improve it?*

FEATURE 2:

42. Tell me about your experience with [FEATURE 2].

Probe: *What do you like about it? What would you improve about it?*

Probe: *Are there any parts you find to be confusing or unclear? What could improve it?*

FEATURE 3 [IF TIME PERMITS]:

43. Tell me about your experience with [FEATURE 3].

Probe: *What do you like about it? What would you improve about it?*

Probe: *Are there any parts you find to be confusing or unclear? What could improve it?*

44. Overall, how helpful is the mobile website in helping you manage your SNAP benefits? In helping to update your SNAP account from your phone?

45. Are there any parts of the website that work particularly well for you? Especially as they relate to accessing it from your phone or tablet?

Probe: *What features do you find the most helpful? Why?*

H. Feedback and Suggestions

To wrap up, we have a few final questions about how satisfied you are with the tools your State has developed for communicating with you about SNAP via your phone or tablet and any recommendations you have for improvement.

- 46. Overall, what is going well when using your device for SNAP-related activities?
- 47. What needs improvement?
- 48. How likely would you be to recommend any of the above-mentioned tools to other SNAP participants or applicants?
- 49. What are some of the ways these tools have made your life easier?
- 50. Are there any ways they made them more difficult? In general, what more could your State be doing for SNAP participants?
- 51. [LAUNCH POLL #10] Let's now think about all the functions you wish were available in your State, whether through an app on your phone, text messaging, or a mobile-friendly website. This is the same list you were presented with before. These are the functions available in other States—some of them are available in your State, too. Regardless of whether or not they are available in your State, please take a minute to review this list and mark up to five functions you like or wish your State had. We are going to do this in two polls because of the number of options.
- 52. [LAUNCH POLL #11] For this last poll, please select up to five again. You don't have to select five, just please do not select more than that.
- 53. Do you have any other thoughts or comments about [STATE'S MCS AND/OR MCS FUNCTIONS]?

Those are all the questions I have for you today. Thank you for taking the time to participate. We'll be sending each of you an electronic gift card to the email address you used to register for this discussion. Thank you again!

Appendix C. Focus Group Polls

POLL #1 (mark all that apply):

Please select the features that you think are available in your State.

Website you can view on your phone or tablet to do SNAP-related activities

- ☐ Text message communication with the SNAP office

POLL #2 (mark all that apply):

Please select any SNAP-related activities you can do through text messaging with your State's SNAP office.

- ☐ Confirm appointments

Account changes

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Certification notice | ☐ Receive notifications about your certification or account changes |
| ☐ Report income changes | ☐ Check a calendar of SNAP-related due dates/receive due date reminders |
| ☐ Check your application status | ☐ Review information in a language other than English |
| ☐ Use an eligibility screening/income benefit calculator | ☐ Check EBT balance |
| ☐ Start, save, and submit your application | ☐ Request an EBT card replacement |
| ☐ Submit documentation about your case | ☐ Manage your EBT PIN |
| ☐ Communicate electronically with eligibility worker | ☐ Chat with customer service |
| ☐ Schedule interview | ☐ Review FAQs |
| ☐ Report household change | ☐ Locate community partners/resources |
| ☐ Report income change | ☐ Check office hours/locations |
| ☐ Receive notifications about any verifications needed | ☐ Submit questions |

POLL #5 (mark all that apply):

Please select any SNAP-related activities you can do with your State's mobile-friendly website.

- ☐ Check your application status
- ☐ Use an eligibility screening/income benefit calculator
- ☐ Start, save, and submit your application

- ☐ Submit documentation about your case
- ☐ Communicate electronically with eligibility worker
- ☐ Schedule interview
- ☐ Report household change
- ☐ Report income change
- ☐ Receive notifications about any verifications needed
- ☐ Receive notifications about your certification or account changes

POLL #6 (mark all that apply):

Please continue and select any SNAP-related activities you can do with your State's mobile-friendly website.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Check a calendar of SNAP-related due dates/receive due date reminders | ☐ Chat with customer service |
| ☐ Review information in a language other than English | ☐ Review FAQs |
| ☐ Check EBT balance | ☐ Locate community partners/resources |
| ☐ Request an EBT card replacement | ☐ Check office hours/locations |
| ☐ Manage your EBT PIN | ☐ Submit questions |

POLL #7:

Using this poll, please check whether you have ever received text messages from your local SNAP agency.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

POLL #8:

Using this poll, please check whether you have ever used the mobile app for SNAP-related activities.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

POLL #9:

Using this poll, please check whether you have ever accessed the SNAP website on a mobile device like your phone or tablet, not just from a computer.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

POLL #10 (select up to five):

Select the five features you think would be most helpful for SNAP-related activities (regardless of whether your State has them).

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Check your application status | ☐ Schedule interview |
| ☐ Use an eligibility screening/income benefit calculator | ☐ Report household change |
| ☐ Start, save, and submit your application | ☐ Report income change |
| ☐ Submit documentation about your case | ☐ Receive notifications about any verifications needed |
| ☐ Communicate electronically with eligibility worker | ☐ Receive notifications about your certification or account changes |

POLL #11 (select up to five):

Again, please select the five features you think would be most helpful for SNAP-related activities (regardless of whether your State has them).

- ☐ Check a calendar of SNAP-related due dates/receive due date reminders
- ☐ Review information in a language other than English
- ☐ Check EBT balance
- ☐ Request an EBT card replacement
- ☐ Manage your EBT PIN
- ☐ Chat with customer service
- ☐ Review FAQs
- ☐ Locate community partners/resources
- ☐ Check office hours/locations
- ☐ Submit questions

Appendix D. Supplemental Tables

Table D.1. Percentage of Respondents Who Accurately Identified Functionality of Mobile-Optimized Website

Features	All (%)	KY (%)	MA (%)	MS (%)	NYC (%)	TX (%)
Check your application status	95	100	91	100	93	91
Use an eligibility screening/income benefit calculator	59	54	55	57	50	82
Start, save, and submit your application	82	92	64	57	93	91
Submit documentation about your case	71	85	73	86	36	91
Communicate electronically with eligibility worker	80	15	73	86	100	45
Schedule interview	55	46	64	86	86	82
Report household change	73	77	82	43	64	91
Report income change	80	85	82	57	71	100
Receive notifications about any verifications needed	54	77	45	57	57	73
Receive notifications about your certification or account changes	59	77	45	71	71	73
Check a calendar of SNAP-related due dates/receive due date reminders	36	71	64	14	43	91
Review information in a language other than English	56	58	64	57	57	45
Check EBT balance	60	45	91	29	57	73
Request an EBT card replacement	51	46	91	71	29	82
Manage your EBT PIN	51	54	36	43	86	64
Chat with customer service	76	38	73	86	100	36
Review FAQ	38	85	27	43	36	82
Locate community partners/ resources	60	13	64	43	36	73
Check office hours/locations	40	69	27	43	36	73
Submit questions	75	31	64	86	86	27

EBT = electronic benefits transfer; FAQ = frequently asked questions; PIN = personal identification number

Table D.2. Percentage of Respondents Who Accurately Identified Functionality of Mobile App

Features	All (%)	KY (%)	MA (%)	MS (%)	NYC (%)	TX (%)
Check your application status	93	N/A	91	71	93	91
Use an eligibility screening/income benefit calculator	68	N/A	64	57	79	36
Start, save, and submit your application	41	N/A	27	71	86	73
Submit documentation about your case	63	N/A	9	71	86	73
Communicate electronically with eligibility worker	78	N/A	55	86	93	27
Schedule interview	59	N/A	64	100	43	64
Report household change	63	N/A	64	43	43	100
Report income change	56	N/A	64	43	29	91
Receive notifications about any verifications needed	59	N/A	64	71	64	73
Receive notifications about your certification or account changes	68	N/A	45	71	71	73
Check a calendar of SNAP-related due dates/receive due date reminders	41	N/A	27	43	57	27
Review information in a language other than English	61	N/A	82	57	57	36
Check EBT balance	63	N/A	100	57	57	73
Request an EBT card replacement	73	N/A	82	86	79	45
Manage your EBT PIN	66	N/A	64	86	79	55
Chat with customer service	88	N/A	91	100	93	27
Review FAQ	54	N/A	45	29	43	82
Locate community partners/ resources	68	N/A	73	43	100	45
Check office hours/locations	61	N/A	45	43	86	55
Submit questions	85	N/A	82	100	86	18

EBT = electronic benefits transfer; FAQ = frequently asked questions; PIN = personal identification number

Table D.3. Percentage of Respondents Who Accurately Identified Functionality of SNAP-Related Text Messaging

Features	All (%)	KY (%)	MA (%)	MS (%)	NYC (%)	TX (%)
Account changes	49	38	18	N/A	79	55
Certification notice	47	46	18	N/A	64	55
Report income changes	43	15	9	N/A	93	45
Verifications needed	35	46	9	N/A	29	55
Office status	73	13	73	N/A	79	36

Table D.4. Features of Most Interest by State

Features	All (%)	KY (%)	MA (%)	MS (%)	NYC (%)	TX (%)
Check your application status	79	77*	82*	86*	79*	73*
Use an eligibility screening/income benefit calculator	16	8*	36*	14	21*	0*
Start, save, and submit your application	68	62*	64*	71*	71*	73*
Submit documentation about your case	82	85*	91*	86*	79*	73*
Communicate electronically with eligibility worker	61	62	73	71	71	27
Schedule interview	30	23	27	57	29*	27
Report household change	36	38*	18*	43*	36*	45*
Report income change	34	38*	18*	14*	43*	45*
Receive notifications about any verifications needed	48	46*	45*	43*	36*	73*
Receive notifications about your certification or account changes	32	31*	0*	43*	57*	27*
Check a calendar of SNAP-related due dates/receive due date reminders	54	54*	18*	71	64*	64*
Review information in a language other than English	7	0*	18*	0*	7*	9*
Check EBT balance	75	62*	82*	71*	79*	82*
Request an EBT card replacement	68	46	64*	100	86*	55
Manage your EBT PIN	41	23	45	29	57	45
Chat with customer service	75	85	73	29	79	91
Review FAQ	20	23	18	29	14*	18*
Locate community partners/resources	36	31	73	14	36*	18*
Check office hours/locations	18	23	0	14	14	36*
Submit questions	63	69	64	71	64	45

*Feature available; EBT = electronic benefits transfer; FAQ = frequently asked questions; PIN = personal identification number