

## Introduction

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the cornerstone of nutrition assistance in the United States. The SNAP served an average of 40.2 million people in March 2010 – more than 1 in 8 Americans. A combination of factors – the 1996 welfare reform<sup>1</sup>, which has heightened the importance of SNAP as a safety net and a critical work support; the more recent economic downturn; and the challenges States face in serving rising caseloads with declining administrative resources – have led States to modernize the Program by making a variety of changes that affect SNAP application, case management, and recertification processes.

This summary describes the results of intensive site visits that were made in spring 2009 to 14 States with SNAP modernization activities. Modernization is defined broadly to include technological innovations as well as policy and organizational changes that affect the way SNAP is delivered to clients.

## Method

The 14 State case studies formed the final phase of this three-phase descriptive study of SNAP modernization efforts. In Phase 1 exploratory case studies were conducted in four States in spring 2007, and in Phase 2 a national survey of all States was conducted between May and December 2008. Phase 1 and 2 findings are presented in the interim report which provides a broad inventory of State modernization efforts at a given point in time.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Pub.L. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2105, was enacted August 22, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Gretchen Rowe, Sam Hall, Carolyn O'Brien, Nancy Pindus and Robin Koralek (2010). *Enhancing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Certification: SNAP Modernization Efforts – Interim Report* ([www.fns.usda.gov/fns/research.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns/research.htm)).

Several criteria were used to select the 14 States<sup>3</sup> for the intensive case studies, including type of SNAP administration, geographic representation of the modernization activities, types of modernization efforts being implemented, stage of implementation, and use of commercial or community-based partners. Colorado, the District of Columbia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Massachusetts, Mississippi, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin were studied.

## Findings

The final report focuses on findings from the 14 State case studies and includes a synthesis of information from all three phases where appropriate. Key findings from the 14 case studies are presented below:

**Goals for Modernizing:** All 14 States mentioned increasing customer access and improving efficiency as primary goals for modernizing. Other related goals frequently cited included reducing costs, managing workload, and maintaining or improving program performance.

**Factors Influencing Implementation:** States reported being driven by factors that can be grouped under economic environment, intra-agency actors, extra-agency actors, organizational restructuring, and FNS actions.

**Improving Customer Service in Local Offices:** States changed the client experience when applying for benefits or conducting SNAP-related business in the local offices. Changes typically involved creating self-service areas in the reception or waiting areas, new staffing arrangements, or adjustments to the initial service delivery procedures to reduce the need for subsequent visits.

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this study, the District of Columbia is considered a State.

**Managing Workload:** Nine States tested new strategies such as task-based systems where caseworkers were assigned to specific tasks in the certification and recertification process. Beyond improving workload management, the changes aimed to reduce cost and benefit staff and clients by improving efficiency.

**Technological Innovations:** Key activities included call centers, electronic applications, electronic case files, and document imaging. Twelve States had implemented call centers in at least some regions. These call centers provided general information, application assistance, and case status information.

Nine States developed application and benefit tools. Eight of these States released the application statewide. About half the States with online applications had electronic applications that automatically populate the State's Management Information System.

Generally, document imaging and electronic case files were created as part of the same initiative. Twelve States implemented document imaging, and 11 States now have electronic case files in at least some part of the State.

**Partnering Arrangements:** All 14 case-study States had partnering relationships—either statewide or in select local sites—with a community-based, faith-based, or national nonprofit organization. Six States reported partnering arrangements with government agencies. Only two States had partnering arrangements with businesses that provided some type of application assistance.

All 14 States implemented several modernization initiatives, because very few initiatives can stand alone. Implementing complementary policy and operational changes (such as electronic case files, document imaging, and waiving face-to-face interviews), for example, can increase the benefits realized from operating call centers.

Most of the 14 States are planning future efforts to increase customer access and participation while streamlining their administrative processes.

### General Lessons Learned

Careful planning was identified as an essential step before making modernization changes. After a careful planning process, States should roll out the modernization activities incrementally, breaking them into segments and launching each segment first as a pilot, followed by staggered implementation.

To ensure that the modernization activities are most fitting for the local offices, staff training and deliberate efforts to encourage buy-in and openness to input from the local offices and the staff should be an integral part of the process.

### For More Information

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

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

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

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