



1275 First Street NE, Suite 1200  
Washington, DC 20002

Tel: 202-408-1080  
Fax: 202-408-1056

center@cbpp.org  
www.cbpp.org

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January 3, 2023

John McCleskey  
QC Branch Chief  
Food and Nutrition Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1320 Braddock Place, 5<sup>th</sup> floor  
Alexandria, VA 22314

Re: Proposed Collection: Comment Request—Supplemental Nutrition Assistance  
Program's (SNAP's) Quality Control Review Schedule Form FNS-380-1

Dear Mr. McCleskey:

I am writing to provide comments on SNAP's Quality Control (QC) Review Schedule, Form FNS-380-1, in response to the Federal Register notice of November 1, 2022 (87 Fed. Reg. 65739).<sup>1</sup> State SNAP QC reviewers and the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) use the FNS-380-1 form for three primary purposes:

- 1) to record the findings about the results of the QC review's error determination;
- 2) to collect data on SNAP participants (and non-participating household members) that is later published as a report for the public information and is available as a raw data set for researchers; and
- 3) for recording information about states' timeliness in processing SNAP initial applications and applications for recertification for monitoring purposes.

The collection of these data are necessary and essential for monitoring FNS and state administration of SNAP. Specifically, the data enables FNS to track states' program integrity in accurately issuing SNAP benefits and in providing benefits promptly to eligible SNAP households. In addition, the data collection allows FNS and the public to have statistically valid information about the individuals and households who receive SNAP benefits. We offer several suggestions in these comments for ways in which the data collection could be improved to further the purposes of SNAP.

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<sup>1</sup> The proposed FNS-380-1 can be found at <https://www.regulations.gov/document/FNS-2022-0040-0002>

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## **Collect Information about Eligible College Students**

We recommend a field be added to the FNS-380-1 for QC reviewers to provide information about participating college students. Such information would be very useful to the public and researchers, as there is widespread interest in food insecurity and SNAP participation among college students, but no reliable information about the number of college students who participate in SNAP, their characteristics, or whether the rates of college student participation in SNAP varies by state or any other factor. Moreover, college student status is a factor of SNAP eligibility that the QC reviewer needs to pursue in the course of the QC review. Thus, recording that information would not add a substantial new burden on the QC reviewer.

As an example of the policy relevance of college student participation in SNAP, see the December 2018 Government Accountability Office report, “Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits,” which assessed the extent of food insecurity among college students and their use of SNAP. That study relied on the Education Department’s National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) to *estimate* the number of potentially SNAP-eligible college students and their participation in SNAP because the Food and Nutrition Service does not have any reliable estimates of the number of college students who are eligible for or receive SNAP. That study found 2.25 million “low-income, at risk” college students participating in SNAP and some 1.8 million “potentially-eligible non-participants.”<sup>2</sup>

More than 2 million SNAP participants nationally would be about 5 percent of SNAP participants, which is a large share about which FNS lacks administrative data. By comparison, in 2019 there were a smaller number, about 1.4 million, noncitizens participating in SNAP (300,000 refugees and 1.1 million other non-citizens). This is another group for whom there is policy interest in their SNAP participation, as well as information available during the QC review because, like student status, noncitizen status is a factor of SNAP eligibility although in this case, the information is collected, providing important data on noncitizen participation in SNAP.

Moreover, FNS reported there were 2.5 million adults aged 18-49 without disabilities in childless households, sometimes referred to as ABAWDs, who may be subject to SNAP’s 3-month time limit. College students would share many of the same characteristics as ABAWDs, but many are exempt from the time limit, so the number of ABAWDs may be overstated if there are more than 2 million

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<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Larin, “Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits,” Government Accountability Office, GAO-19-95, December 2018, [Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits | U.S. GAO.](#)

college students participating in SNAP who are not excluded from FNS's estimates of the number of ABAWDs.

As mentioned, QC reviewers already are collecting and verifying information during the QC review about individuals' student status because it is an element of SNAP eligibility. There currently is a field (Element 111-Student Status) for QC reviewers to enter information about *error findings* regarding student status (i.e., based on student status an eligible person was excluded from the unit or an ineligible person was included in the unit.) There also is a way for QC reviewers to indicate that ineligible students are present in the household, but *not* participating in the SNAP unit (field 47 – SNAP Program Participation code 7). And finally, QC reviewers may indicate that individuals are exempt from work registration based on their student status (field 55 – Work Registration Status, code 9). But the QC reviewer currently does not pass along information about eligible college students in a way that FNS can tabulate the number of college students participating in SNAP.

We recommend that FNS collect information at the individual level similar to what is collected about ABAWD status and citizenship status currently. The collection could mention each of the exemptions available under section 6(e) of the Food and Nutrition Act. If FNS wanted to consolidate some of the exemptions, we would suggest the following categories:

#### **Postsecondary Student Status**

- 1- Not a postsecondary student
- 2- Part-time postsecondary student
- 3- Full-time postsecondary student, eligible based on age under 18 or 50 or older
- 4- Full-time postsecondary student, eligible based on being not physically or mentally fit
- 5- Full-time postsecondary student, eligible based on being employed 20 hours per week or more
- 6- Full-time postsecondary student, eligible based on work study
- 7- Full-time postsecondary student, eligible based on participation in workforce or employment and training program
- 8- Full-time postsecondary student, eligible based on parenting status
- 9- Full-time postsecondary student, eligible based on another exemption
- 10- Full-time postsecondary student, ineligible
- 99- Unknown

#### **Make the Initial Application and Recertification Timeliness Data Available to the Public**

Section 6 of the FNS-380-1 includes instructions and data collection about information about the timeliness of the state's most recent action on a new or recertification application. The measure of timeliness of application processing (the expedited and 30-day requirement) has been conducted annually through the QC review since 2003. Until the 2018 farm bill eliminated performance bonuses the measure was the basis of performance bonuses for states with the highest and most

improved application processing timeliness. FNS continues to use the initial timeliness measure to identify states with timeliness issues and require them to develop corrective action plans.<sup>3</sup>

Senate Agriculture Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow, in her floor statement on the 2018 farm bill, made clear that Congress expected FNS to continue to measure and publish the timeliness data even though there would no longer be performance bonuses tied the measure:

...[T]he conference report eliminated SNAP bonus payments to States out of concern that that they may have contributed to State practices that introduced bias into the quality control process. The conferees continue to think that customer service measures, such as measures of timeliness and program access, are important indicators of SNAP's success, and we expect FNS to continue to measure and publish these data for all States and to emphasize their importance in conducting program oversight. The same is true for enforcing clear standards. We are concerned that FNS is not following its own guidance with respect to how it will follow up with states whose timeliness has fallen below established Federal standards. This is important for the agency to address.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, for several years after the 2018 farm bill was enacted the 2018 and 2019 timeliness measures were not publicly available.

Beginning more than ten years ago FNS began also collecting information on recertification timeliness using the QC process and the FNS-380-1 for participating households whose most recent application at the time of the QC review was a recertification.<sup>5</sup> Recertification applications often represent more than half of all applications states process in a given month. And failure to timely process applications for recertification can result in gaps in SNAP benefits that can lead to hardship for fully-eligible SNAP households. None of the results of the recertification timeliness measure have been made public, or, to my knowledge, even shared regularly with the states so they can assess how their performance compares to the performance of their peers. If there are data inconsistencies, we urge FNS to work to resolve the issues and get to a point where they can publish the data with sufficient cautions about the reliability, as they do with other data from the FNS-380-1 in the data documentation.

In short, we recommend FNS publish the data it collects on the Form-380-1 regarding application and recertification timeliness. Collecting this data requires substantial effort on the part of state agencies and more fully sharing the data publicly would maximize the value of this effort, while also improving the transparency of what is known about SNAP performance. At a minimum the

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<sup>3</sup> Food and Nutrition Service, "Guidance for Improving State Timeliness Rates and Standardizing the Escalation Process," FNS-GD-2016-0016, March 18, 2016, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/admin/improving-state-timeliness-rates-escalation-process-guidance>.

<sup>4</sup> Statement of Debbie Stabenow on the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, 200 Cong. Rec. S7918, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/volume-164/issue-200/senate-section/article/S7918-1?s=2&r=1>.

<sup>5</sup> Food and Nutrition Service, "Measuring the Timeliness of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)," FNS-GD-2011-0053, August 30, 2011, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/measuring-timeliness-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap-applications>.

aggregated data on recertification timeliness should be shared back with the state agencies themselves so they can understand how they are performing in comparison to other states.

## **Redesign SNAP Performance Measurement to be More Human Centered**

SNAP's current performance measurement system, much of which is based on information gathered on the FNS-380-1, emphasizes preventing improper payments. States and USDA take their roles as stewards of public funds seriously and the QC process ensures there is a rigorous measurement system in place to assess the accuracy of eligibility and benefit determinations. States are assessed fiscal penalties if their payment error rates are persistently too high.

It is critical that SNAP have a strong system in place to assess and address program integrity. But it is also important that the measures states and USDA take do not undermine the program's core purpose to deliver food assistance to households that face difficulties affording an adequate, healthy diet. Currently information is not available to policymakers or the public about how well SNAP is working in terms of the *human* experience of accessing benefits. The 2018 farm bill eliminated SNAP performance bonuses, which were tied to low or improving payment error rates, participation rates among eligible people, and delivering benefits promptly within federal timelines. But states still are subject to fiscal penalties for high payment error rates, which places a disproportionate emphasis on payment accuracy over access for low-income families.

The upheaval to state operations that the pandemic has introduced has highlighted the lack of information available to states, FNS, and the public about how SNAP benefit delivery is going. FNS lacks timely information about how accessible SNAP is to eligible households at initial application or recertification. Technology presents opportunities for improved services through the telephone, online access, and texting, but the lack of in-person services is problematic for many households who lack access to technology or in states where call center operations do not receive adequate resources and other technology is not always reliable.

In collaboration with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Code for America developed a National Safety Net Scorecard to put forward a package of metrics that federal and state governments could use to track program performance over time and across states or other jurisdictions.<sup>6</sup> While ultimately federal legislation may be needed and additional research may be helpful to fully revamp SNAP's performance measurement system, we urge FNS to consider ways to incorporate some of these measures into SNAP operations, as part of the QC data collection, the Management Evaluation process, the Automated Data Processing (ADP) approval process, or through working with states individually to develop and perfect measures over time.

The measures in the National Safety Net Scorecard measure performance across three categories:

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<sup>6</sup> Code for America, "National Safety Net Scorecard: A New Framework for Assessing Safety Net Delivery," <https://codeforamerica.org/programs/social-safety-net/scorecard/the-national-safety-net-scorecard/>. A pdf of the scorecard is available at: <https://codeforamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/the-national-safety-net-scorecard.pdf>.

- **Equitable access:** These metrics help assess whether the programs are open to all eligible people. Are online, telephone, and in-person services available and accessible to all people? How difficult is it to apply? Are people who apply satisfied with their experience?
- **Effective delivery:** Measures in this category examine the smoothness of the process after a person applies. How long does it take to receive benefits? How common is it for cases to be denied for procedural reasons as opposed to reasons related to financial eligibility? Are people who remain eligible able to successfully maintain eligibility?
- **Compassionate integrity:** Finally, this category assesses whether people are receiving the benefits to which they are entitled. What share of eligible people participate? How accurate are eligibility and benefit determinations? How smooth is the appeals process?

Some states measure some of these types of metrics as part of their operations or to make the case to the public that they are running successful programs. But there is a need for leadership to make progress toward this vision through federal legislation, administrative action, and further state innovation.

### **Additional Suggestions on Data Collected on the Form-380-1**

- **Retain the change from “Sex” to “Gender” and Allow a Third Option.** The revised FNS-380-1 makes a change to refer to the “gender” of SNAP participants, instead of their “sex,” and allows a third option “x” when neither male nor female represents the individual’s gender identity. This change should be retained and FNS should assist states in changing their applications to allow them to be coded in this way so that individuals do not have to pick an option that does not correspond to their gender identity. The item also should have a note to QC reviewers similar to the instruction on “race” that the information should be taken from what the applicant entered on the application, not inferred from the QC interview.
- **Consider Adding the Source of the Application Sampled.** FNS could collect information about the source of the initial application or recertification application being sampled and whether it was submitted via online, paper, phone, or in-person via caseworker, or with the help of a community partner. The form already captures whether an authorized representative assisted with the application. But it is not clear how this information is used. A broader question that included authorized representative as one of the options could start to show trends of application sources over time and could be helpful context on how this may or may not impact the validity of some of the coding of data (e.g. regarding errors or timeliness).

Sincerely,

Dorothy Rosenbaum  
Senior Fellow and Director of Federal Policy