

SNAP and NEW: PATHS Telephone Conference

On May 6, 2009, Legislative Chair Patricia Rivers hosted a telephone conference that included NEW: PATHS members nationwide and representatives from SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). This Teleconference was the culmination of several months coordination that started last year at the NEW:PATHS Training Conference in Anaheim. Attending from SNAP were: Sandy Clark, Tom O'Connell, Vicky Robinson, Patrick Lucrezio, Jennie Nelson, Larry Tropp, Lizz Webber, Arianne Steed, and Linda Jupin. Attending from NEW: PATHS: Patricia Rivers (Maryland), Ellen Sevall, Coleen Collins, and Alice Sullivan (Wyoming), Donalda Biscar and Jacquelyn Lincoln (California).

Opening comments were made by Sandy Clark, Chief, Certification Policy Branch and Patricia Rivers, Legislative Chair of NEW: PATHS.

The discussion included comments by Patrick Lucrezio about the Stimulus Package that had been recently signed into law. This package increased Food Stamp benefits by 13%, suspended ABAWD time limits until October 1, 2010 to provide benefits to individuals struggling to find employment in this difficult economy, and increased funding for Program Accountability and Administrative Expenses. The most recently signed Farm Bill was mentioned. Regulations were currently being written and will be published in 2010.

Thomas O'Connell spoke at length about FNS awareness that States were struggling with mounting caseloads as SNAP responds to growing needs for food assistance. As State budgets become tight, few States are able to add staff to manage the greater demand. SNAP is recommending that States may consider reviewing certification policies to support more effective caseload management.

- Longer certification periods combined with less frequent reporting requirements will reduce the need for more frequent recertification. Under Simplified Reporting, many States have opted for 6-month certification periods rather than an alternative 12-month period with a 6 month interim report. The shorter certification periods have become popular because State systems generally close cases automatically in the absence of a recertification. On the other hand, a longer certification period with an interim report allows States more flexibility to keep eligibility household connected to SNAP and may reduce caseload churning.
- States may wish to review their verification requirements to determine if verification of specific documents can be relaxed.
- Third, more efficient interview practices can be realized through the greater use of telephone interviews.
- States may want to consider requesting a waiver to enable households who are terminated during a certification period to be reinstated without filing a new application. (Benefits would need to be prorated for the first month). This can reduce the work involved in re-establishing eligibility for households.

It was emphasized that FNS recognizes the challenges faced by State agencies during this time and will continue to work with States to explore policies to promote efficiencies in workload management.

Our discussion moved to FNS recently devised guidelines for the operation of key nutritional programs, including the Food Stamp Program, during a pandemic flu. This is in response to the current concerns over the H1N1 Flu virus. The Food Stamp Program Pandemic Flu Planning Guidelines are intended to help State agencies continue to deliver the FSP under the unique conditions that may be experienced during a flu pandemic.

Lastly, we moved to a list of questions that had been submitted to FNS representatives during the Training Conference in Anaheim for their response.

1. Are there any upcoming changes in the Household Composition/purchase and prepare together policies?
 - a. There are no current plans for changes as this is a part of FNS status. The next Farm Bill in 2012 may be a place to start that process.

2. What is the likelihood of eliminating the resource evaluation in Food stamps as is currently done in Medicaid and TANF?
 - a. Resource limits, like household definitions are law – it may be possible to look at expanding categorical eligibility.
3. Are there any plans to look at shelter expenses differently in the future?
 - a. Some States are able to give low income applicants minimal Home Energy Assistance Payments (HEAP) which would then qualify the customer for SUA.
4. Are any changes planned for the Voter Registration (known as Motor Voter) Requirements?
 - a. None at this time.
5. How soon do you anticipate that the application for Food Stamp benefits will be on-line so that clients can apply for all programs at one time on-line?
 - a. Over 30 states have on-line applications and the number is expanding.

The teleconference ended on a positive note and it is anticipated that another one will be scheduled in the near future. Watch the newsletter or www.nationalnew.org for future dates and times.