USDA Food and Nutrition Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

SNAP: Keys to Application Processing Timeliness

A guide for State agencies

March 2024

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SNAP: Keys to Application Processing Timeliness

On-time approval and delivery of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are crucial to ensure food security, provide good customer service, and maintain trust. The timeliness of SNAP application and recertification processing is therefore an ongoing priority for USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).

This document provides guidance on the most important strategies or "Keys" to achieving and maintaining acceptable timeliness rates. It is a companion to the Keys to Payment Accuracy guide.

Timeliness standards

Program rules require State agencies to process SNAP applications and make an eligibility determination within 30 days. By the 30th day, eligible households must have an opportunity to participate, meaning they have an active Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card and personal identification number (PIN), and their benefits are posted to their EBT account and available to use. Households entitled to expedited processing must have an opportunity to participate within seven days.

Timely processing also prevents a benefit interruption when a household's certification period ends. State agencies must notify households their case is about to expire in the month before the last month of their certification period, and households must submit an application to continue receiving benefits. State agencies then need to review the household's circumstances and gather additional information— which may include conducting an interview—to redetermine eligibility in time to ensure benefits continue uninterrupted.

FNS measures application processing timeliness in three ways:

1. **FNS calculates application processing timeliness rates** (FNS APT rates) using the Quality Control (QC) active case sample. The FNS APT rate is the number of cases in the sample approved on time divided by the number of all approved applications in the sample. FNS calculates this quarterly.

2. **State agencies generate their own application timeliness rates** (State APT rate) using the whole universe of their approved cases in a defined time period. Like the FNS APT rate, the State APT rate is the number of SNAP applications approved on time divided by the total number of applications approved.

3. **The certification section of the FNS Program and Budget Summary Statement, Part B** (FNS-366B) includes a measure of the number of application decisions that were overdue by 1–30 days, 31– 60 days, 61–90 days, and 91 days or more. It differs from the FNS and State APT rates in that it includes recertifications and cases that were denied due to ineligibility.

For more details on these measures, see FNS's Clarification on the Three Ways That SNAP Application Processing Timeliness Is Measured, issued June 2017. Links to this and all resources mentioned in this guide are in the appendix.

The Keys to Application Processing Timeliness

A **Root Cause Analysis** uses data to reveal why cases are not processed on time. It is a critical first step in achieving and maintaining timeliness.

Monitoring and Measuring Timeliness helps State agencies make sure they meet timeliness requirements and deliver benefits to households promptly.

Policy Options and Waivers give State agencies flexibility in managing SNAP to meet the needs of their clients and make their operations more efficient and effective.

Training staff using a variety of methods is essential for improving and maintaining timeliness.

Staffing and Workload Management practices help determine whether staff have the time, skills, and knowledge they need to process benefits on time, and whether staffing structures efficiently support on-time case processing.

The **Organizational Culture** of a State agency influences the actions and performance of staff and can affect outcomes, including how quickly cases are processed.

Data Systems and Technology used by both State agencies and clients are essential to process cases on time.

Corrective Action Plans (CAPs) are a Federal requirement when State agencies have low application processing timeliness rates and are an essential tool for developing systematic approaches for investigating and addressing root causes of untimely case processing.

Appendix of all resources mentioned, including links.

Key takeaways

- There are two primary approaches to conducting root cause analysis for application processing timeliness: process mapping and quality assurance reviews.

- Understanding root causes can help State agencies develop approaches for improving processes.

Description

Root cause analysis looks at each step of the SNAP application (or recertification) process to reveal why a case was not processed on time. With this information, State agencies can make evidence-informed decisions about changing their processes, clarifying policy, and training staff.

There are two main strategies for a root cause analysis focused on timeliness: process mapping and quality assurance reviews.

Process mapping lets State agencies visualize the application or recertification process and understand the interactions between the steps. Process mapping can reveal "pain points," such as places where cases are touched by multiple workers or are waiting for verifications. Effective process maps include (1) how long each step took, (2) which steps depended on previous actions, and (3) what caused any delays.

Quality assurance reviews can reveal why a case was not processed on time. Experienced staff who did not process the case review it to identify the points that caused the delay. State agencies can also look for patterns across groups of cases.

Potential reasons for untimely processing

- Incomplete monitoring of how time was spent since the application was received
- Unclear notices that cause clients to miss recertification deadlines
- Improper screening of expedited cases
- Delays in scheduling interviews
- Extra verification steps
- Issues with technology
- Delays in EBT card delivery
- Inefficient workload management

For more, see the FNS study, Identifying Program Components and Practices That Influence SNAP Application Processing Timeliness Rates. (Link in the appendix.)

How to use this key

State agencies can use the following steps to complete a root cause analysis:

1. **Identify the focus.** This can be developing process maps of application or recertification workflows or conducting quality assurance reviews of individual cases processed late or groups of cases, such as those overdue by a certain amount of time, located in certain regions, or awaiting verifications.

2. **Select data for analysis.** This can include existing workflow documentation, call center process information, case notes, or client documentation.

3. **Conduct the analysis**. Below are examples of ways to conduct process mapping and quality assurance reviews:

   - **Process mapping.** To map the path of a SNAP application, staff can write each step on a separate sheet of paper and arrange them to capture the process, using string to show the paths between the steps. Once the process is laid out, State agencies can identify ways to streamline processes.

State agencies can include the following types of information for each step: staff that initiate it; how long it takes; data systems involved; dependencies—for example staff cannot continue processing a case until the step is complete; and effects on timeliness. Exhibit 1 is an example of what process mapping can look like for one step in the application process.

> **State agency example**
>
> One State agency convened a team from all levels of program operations every month. They (1) mapped each step from application submission to benefit issuance, (2) determined which steps were required by State or federal program rules, (3) identified steps that were not required or duplicative, and (4) removed extra steps one at a time and evaluated outcomes. This process helped them keep only the necessary steps.

- **Quality assurance reviews.** A review of a late case starts with the date the client submitted the application and looks at the ensuing steps.

  State agencies can review the following types of information that can affect timeliness: screening for expedited benefits, timing of notices and the interview; appropriateness of verification requests and outreach to collateral contacts; timing of verification request and receipt; timing of EBT card issuance; data systems used; and frequency of workers accessing the case.

4. **Find the reasons for delays.** State agencies can review the results from process mapping and quality assurance reviews to identify where and why delays occurred. Some delays have more than one root cause. For example, clients may have missed a SNAP interview because they received a late notice, or busy call center lines prevented them from getting through. Recertification delays may have different root causes than application delays.

   If root causes of delays are still unclear, one strategy is for staff to ask "Why?" until they determine the cause. For example, if an error resulted from a worker action, asking "Why?" can reveal whether the worker lacked the relevant policy knowledge, their supervisor provided incorrect guidance, or the worker failed to collect the correct information during a client interview.

How to use the results

Root cause analysis findings can inform efforts to improve timeliness by:

- **Informing improvements to worker processes**, such as where (and how often) workers open mail, how they manage paper forms and documents, where they sit in a room, and whether they print notices individually or in batches.

- **Identifying systems improvements to support timely processing**, such as streamlining data systems, creating new work tracking systems, or adding ways for clients to submit applications or verifications.

Exhibit 1. Process mapping example

Step: Request verification

Who initiates this step?

The interviewer, who discusses required documents at the end of the interview and generates a notice.

What does it depend on?

Getting correct information from the client in the application and interview.

How long does it take?

Mail takes two to five days to arrive; electronic notices are delivered the same day.

What systems does this step interact with?

Eligibility system; client portal; mobile app.

What cannot happen until this step is complete?

Case cannot be processed until client returns documents.

What happens next?

Wait for client to return documents.

How does this step affect timeliness?

Client has 10 days to return documents, which may take the case past 30 days from application.

If client doesn't return complete documentation, the agency must make another request, which delays the action.

What are the risks at this step?

Mail delays.

If not enough information is gathered in interview, the agency may have asked for the wrong documents.

The design and wording of the notices may be confusing or unclear.

Any need to defer or pend case can push processing time past 30 days.

Questions to answer with data

What share of clients receive electronic notices?

How often do clients submit documentation late?

Is this different for clients who get notices electronically?

What share of applications submit incomplete documentation?

Key takeaways

- State agencies can monitor timeliness rates in real-time, to analyze trends, and produce reports that communicate actionable information on timeliness.
- Monitoring systems can identify cases that were not processed on time so workers can prioritize immediate case action.

Description

State agencies need systems to monitor case processing metrics to achieve and maintain timeliness.

Monitoring systems can track how long it has been since the client submitted an application, how close to the end of a certification period a recertification was filed, or how many days have passed since verification was requested.

Measuring includes producing agencywide reports so staff throughout the agency can understand trends and make informed decisions.

Calculating timeliness

FNS's quarterly APT rates come from the QC review sample and lag about four months behind. State agencies should also calculate their State APT rate using their entire caseload data to have a more complete, up-to-date picture of timeliness. State agencies can calculate their State APT rate by following the State Agency Timeliness Data Protocol outlined in the Updated Guidance for Improving State Agency Application Processing Timeliness Rates: Standardizing the Escalation Process. (Link in the appendix.) Official timeliness calculations, such as calculations of the State APT rate, do not include cases that are past due and have not been processed or registered—often called "backlog." However, State agencies should develop systems to measure and monitor backlog.

How to use this key

Case tracking systems for monitoring timeliness include:

Back-end programming lets State agencies conduct quality assurance reviews of cases and find out if cases are processed on time before FNS makes quarterly calculations of timeliness available. At that later point, quality assurance reviews may not reflect current conditions.

Automatic flagging of cases requiring immediate attention. Workers can see these flags first so they know which cases to act on, or supervisors can use flags to identify and assign the most urgent cases to process. Some cases that may be flagged include:

- Cases that haven't been interviewed yet and are close to 20 days since application registration.

> ### State agency example
>
> One State agency added flags in the eligibility system for cases that were ready for processing. The agency did this after noticing that working on the oldest cases first slowed processing as cases were touched multiple times. Now, a subset of eligibility workers prioritize cases that are ready to go, and overall timeliness rates have improved.

- Cases nearing 28 days since application registration that need to be processed in time for the client to receive an EBT card within 30 days. (Note: the number of days should reflect the mail times in the State.)

- Cases with outstanding verifications requested 10 or more days earlier.

- Cases 30 days or more past their application registration date.

Data reporting

Local managers and supervisors need data to make good staffing and training decisions. These include *aggregate reports* that provide counts of outstanding and processed applications and cases. Example aggregate reports include the number of unregistered paper applications, the number of applications registered but not processed, the number of applications overdue by application processing timeframe, and number of recertifications expected in the next month. Supervisors also need *case-level reports* to prioritize worker assignments. These case-level reports can include:

- **Cases processed untimely**, by worker, supervisor, office, and county

- **Cases due in the next seven days**, by worker and supervisor

- **Cases with upcoming certification end dates**, by worker. These can include cases within the 10-day period for providing verifications.

- **Expected number of upcoming recertifications** by office, county, and specialized population.

Reports for agency leaders provide a broad picture of timeliness trends and help identify improvements to policies and procedures. Example reports can include:

- **Applications, weekly.** Number of overdue applications; number of applications due within seven days. State agencies can separate standard applications from expedited applications for reporting.

- **Applications, monthly.** Average days to processing for regular and expedited cases; average days to processing overall; number and percentage of cases processed in the past month on time (1 to 30 days), in 31 to 60 days, in 61 to 90 days, and in 91 days or more.

- **Recertifications, weekly.** Number of recertification applications received; number of late recertification applications received; number of late recertification applications that need to be processed in the next seven days; number of recertifications not processed on time.

> ### Assessing and clearing backlog
>
> State agencies should develop systems to measure and monitor backlog. Backlog monitoring should include the number of unprocessed initial and recertification applications by month and date, allowing the agency to see which ones are the most overdue. Monitoring lets State agencies understand both the size of the backlog (number of cases) and the scope (how overdue they are).
>
> Concerted efforts to clear the backlog can set a State agency on a path to efficient, on-time processing. One strategy for clearing backlog is to dedicate staff to the task making it possible for other staff to process new applications faster.

- **Recertifications, monthly.** Number of cases with certification periods ending this month; number of recertification applications received and the share of cases due for recertification that submitted recertification applications; average length of time to process recertifications; share of late recertifications; the average number of days past the end of the certification period it took to process the late recertifications.

State agencies can consider other ways of looking at data. For instance, weekly snapshots of the number of days since the five oldest unprocessed cases were registered can show how long processing delays are lasting.

Key takeaways

- Certain policy options and waivers can improve application timeliness by reducing administrative burden or streamlining processes.
- State agencies can use results from root cause analysis to identify and select policy options or waivers that may improve timeliness.

Description

State agencies administer SNAP based on requirements in the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (available in the appendix). Federal regulations, policy options, and waivers give State agencies the flexibility to structure their programs to better serve clients, streamline operations, or coordinate eligibility activities with other programs. **Policy options** generally do not require FNS approval, however many policy options do need to be indicated to FNS in the State Plan of Operations at the beginning of each fiscal year. **Waivers** allow State agencies to temporarily waive certain Federal requirements, and they do require FNS approval.

Exhibit 2 highlights policy options and waivers that can improve timeliness by reducing the steps in case processing, lessening staff workloads, and streamlining client responsibilities.

Exhibit 2. Policy options and waivers that can improve timeliness

Waiver/option	Description	Effects on timeliness
Verification options	State agencies may reduce the number of verifications they require—for example, by not verifying shelter costs.	Fewer verifications mean fewer workers touch a case, and may reduce the need to defer case processing.
Certification period options	State agencies may choose a length ranging from 4 to 24 months for household certification periods, depending on household circumstances.	Maximum certification periods lessen staff workload because cases go through fewer recertifications.
Reinstatement waiver	State agencies can reinstate households without requiring a new application. Households must provide required information or verification within 30 days of becoming ineligible and before the certification period expires.	Staff workloads are lessened when reinstatement does not require a new application and interview.
Telephonic interview option	State agencies may give households the option to be interviewed by phone.	Forgoing the in-person requirement may make it easier for some clients to complete their interview, eliminating the need to reschedule for a later date.

Waiver/option	Description	Effects on timeliness
On-demand interview waiver	Phone interviews can use a call center model; State agencies may provide a window of time for the applicant to call for an interview.	On-demand interviews decrease the staff time used to schedule interviews. State agencies may need to adjust staffing to accommodate more recertification calls near the end of the month.
Telephonic and electronic signatures option	State agencies may allow signatures on SNAP applications to be made over the phone or on online applications.	Less paperwork and fewer in-person appointments make application processing more efficient.
Electronic notices option	State agencies may let clients opt to receive notices via web portal with notifications sent by email or email and text message.	Clients receive notices instantly, without waiting for the mail. This option reduces the chances of clients missing information and due dates because of misplaced mail.

How to use this key

State agencies can take steps to identify, select, and monitor policy options and waivers and their effects on timeliness.

Gather information on available policy options and waivers that can benefit timeliness. Several FNS resources offer additional information on policy options and waivers:

- The SNAP workload management matrix contains information on available policy options, waivers, and demonstration projects. The State Options report lists available policy options and State agencies using them. The SNAP Rule Waivers section of the FNS website describes waivers in each State. Links to these resources are in the appendix.

- FNS Regional Offices can (1) discuss policy options and waivers that can support the State agencies' timeliness goals, (2) help State agencies connect to each other to discuss experiences with policy options and waivers.

Decide where processes need to change. State agencies can identify the outcomes they expect from a selected policy option or waiver and whether the outcomes align the process improvements the agency wants to make. For example, moving to an on-demand model for SNAP interviews changes staff scheduling and work locations, and requires new data systems for tracking call volume and new client notices

> ### State agency example
>
> One State agency stopped using the on-demand interview waiver because it did not have a dedicated call center. When the agency did use the on-demand waiver, it resulted in long wait times for clients, and eligibility workers spent significantly more time on phone calls. This decreased job satisfaction and diminished customer service, so the State agency returned to scheduled interviews. This highlights the importance of having the right infrastructure before changing a policy.

explaining clients' responsibilities. Process mapping can help State agencies understand which steps in the application or recertification process will be affected by a policy option or waiver and whether the new process may cause delays. More information about process mapping is in the Root Cause Analysis Key.

Make the changes and monitor performance. State agencies can update data systems and train staff on new procedures aimed at improving timeliness. Clients will also need information on how new procedures will affect recertification or reporting processes. State agencies can monitor the effect of policy options and waivers on timeliness by communicating with internal partners, analyzing data, and obtaining staff feedback.

Key takeaways

- Staff that understand SNAP policies and processes are more likely to perform case actions correctly the first time, which can improve timeliness.
- Ongoing training covering multiple topics and using varied formats keeps staff engaged and informed.

Description

Trainings emphasize the importance of timely processing; update staff on new policies and procedures; and provide consistent answers to staff questions. Some training topics State agencies have found helpful in improving timeliness rates include:

- **The basics.** An overview of eligibility policy, workflow processes, required documentation, information workers collect in interviews, interview techniques, and parts of the eligibility system.
- **How the State agency measures timeliness.** An overview of how the State agency measures timeliness and the parts of State data systems that workers should be looking at to know how their actions support timely processing. This training can include case scenarios and solutions to demonstrate how workers can address challenging situations.
- **Screening expedited cases.** Identifying cases that require expedited processing, which may involve using case studies or practice modules.
- **Efficient verification and verification options.** A more advanced training for experienced staff with suggestions on how to improve processing times and workload management.
- **Recertifications.** Measuring and processing recertifications, with topics such as when to treat returning cases as recertifications or new applications, or guidance on screening recertification applications when clients submit them instead of waiting for the interview. The SNAP Recertification Toolkit is useful here. (Link in the appendix.)
- **Conducting effective interviews.** How to conduct thorough and complete interviews that produce the information needed to make accurate and on-time eligibility and benefit determinations. This training should include all interview methods, such as in person or telephone. The SNAP Interview Toolkit includes information on how to conduct good interviews. (Link in the appendix.)
- **Identifying questionable information.** How to recognize questionable information that needs to be verified. Knowing when verification is *not* needed decreases the number of touches on a case and improves processing speed.
- **Effective quality assurance reviews.** A training for supervisors on how to conduct efficient, high-quality quality assurance reviews of cases that effectively identify the causes of untimeliness.
- **Backlog clearance.** When dedicating staff to clearing the backlog, a special training can be devoted to backlog workflow.

How to use this key

When States develop and conduct training, they should consider timeliness in the following ways:

- **Conduct both regular and ad hoc trainings.** Regular training will help staff maintain their understanding of policies and procedures that may impact timely application processing. State agencies can use ad hoc trainings to respond to identified reasons for untimeliness.

- **Vary training format.** Trainings can take different forms—interactive web-based training, short videos workers can access online, or longer recorded webinars.

- **Crosstrain workers.** Giving workers the skills to perform more than one job can increase efficiency by giving the State agency flexibility to adjust staffing and workload structures. For example, if application volume increases, additional staff can conduct interviews if they have the proper training. More information is available in the [Staffing and Workload Management Key](#).

- **Draw on FNS Regional Office and other supports.** FNS Regional Offices can review State training materials and provide training resources. Additional opportunities to learn about new information to incorporate into trainings are conferences, State-to-State visits, and FNS Regional Office technical assistance and meetings.

Key takeaways

- Different staffing models have different advantages and challenges for timeliness that State agencies can consider before adjusting processes.
- Retaining experienced staff and drawing on community partners can support timely processing.

Description

SNAP agencies have different ways of structuring their workflows, which can support or hinder staff in ensuring timeliness:

- **Task-based case processing (also called case banking).** Workers do not maintain a caseload but instead complete discrete tasks such as conducting interviews or reviewing verification documents. Workers draw tasks from queues based on their role and qualifications.
- **Traditional case management.** Workers maintain individual caseloads and handle most or all aspects of determining eligibility and benefits for their cases.
- **Hybrid task and case based.** Primarily a task-based model, but individual caseworkers are assigned to clients who are elderly or have a disability and may need extra support.
- **Specialized units.** Both task-based and case-based models can have specialized units that dedicate staff to specific parts of the process. Different functions are appropriate for specialized units under task-based and case-based models. For instance, in a case-based model, a specialized team may only process changes, and in a task-based model workers can specialize in tasks like document processing and verification or interviewing clients.

How to use this key

Exhibit 3 describes staffing models and how they can affect timeliness. State agencies can weigh potential impacts to timeliness before adjusting staffing models.

Exhibit 3. Benefits and challenges of different staffing models

Task based (case banking)	
Benefits	**Challenges**
- Staff work on the priority tasks first. - State agencies can assign workers to specific tasks, such as past-due recertifications. - Keeps workloads reasonable, reducing worker stress. - Supports an on-demand call center model for interviews, eliminating the need for staff to schedule interviews. - Workers can prioritize recertifications that are closest to the end of their certification period.	- Dividing work into discrete tasks can mean more people are touching a case. - Workers may look at only one part of the case instead of seeing it holistically. - Recertifications received within 30 days of the end of a household's certification period are still considered recertifications. Workers can be assigned to either applications or recertifications and must clear on this requirement to make sure the right team manages the case.

Traditional case management	
Benefits	**Challenges**
• Workers can develop a relationship with a client and have a holistic view of the case. When workers see the household circumstances as a whole, it may be easier for them to complete all processing for a particular client. • Agencies can calculate timeliness rates for each worker and focus training on those who need to improve.	• Limits the ability to prioritize cases or tasks that are nearing deadlines. • If workers are on leave or otherwise unavailable, there needs to be a plan for helping clients with questions.
Hybrid task and case based	
Benefits	**Challenges**
• Caseworkers may become more familiar with medical expense verifications for these populations, for example, which can speed processing.	• Cases for clients who need extra support may be delayed if the caseworker is unavailable or on leave. • There may need to be two versions of many printed and web-based materials.
Specialized units	
Benefits	**Challenges**
• Speeds up part(s) of the process depending on what the specialized unit focuses on.	• Workers in different units need different training. • Verification processing units need to send verifications to alert workers quickly. • Workers know a lot about their unit but may not have a good understanding of other processes, limiting the State agency's ability to move workers around quickly based on need.

Adjusting staffing models

State agencies can adapt staffing models to improve efficiencies or address challenges.

• **Assess operational needs.** State agencies can select staffing models that best align with the structure of their SNAP program, existing processes and data systems, and available resources.

• **Train workers.** It is important to ensure workers have the information and tools to perform their jobs quickly. A new staffing model may mean a change in worker roles and increase processing times as staff learn new skills. Cross-training workers to perform more than one job can increase efficiency in the long term by setting the staff up for flexibility.

• **Monitor, evaluate, and adjust.** State agencies should have a method for knowing whether changes have improved timeliness. They can choose an appropriate time period to look at timeliness rates, perhaps at three and six months post-change, and ask staff for feedback on how the changes affected their work, adjusting processes in response.

Retaining staff

Experienced and qualified workers process applications and recertifications faster. State agencies have found that reasonable workloads, pay raises, and bonuses can help them retain staff. Other ways to improve staff quality of life include flexible schedules; virtual or telework options; or office improvements like better lighting, ergonomic workstations, and soundproofed cubicle walls.

Engaging community partners

State agencies can collaborate with external partners such as food banks to help clients complete applications (including taking the telephonic signature) and gather verifications. These partnerships may speed processing by helping clients comply more quickly with program requirements.

Key takeaways

- Agency leaders have a valuable role in embedding a culture of timeliness into the organization's day-to-day functioning.
- Effective and clear client communication can improve their understanding of program requirements and thus reduce the likelihood of delays.

Description

When a State SNAP agency values timeliness, it infuses this commitment in day-to-day operations, and it shows at all levels of the organization. Agency leaders, local office administrators and supervisors, and eligibility workers all play roles in fostering a culture of timeliness.

How to use this key

Leaders can prioritize timely application processing in the culture of the State agency by:

Communicating why timeliness is important. SNAP payments mean food security for families, and on-time processing means they get the nutrition they need without delay.

Setting standards and performance goals. These highlight agency priorities and how application processing timeliness rates compare to expectations.

Assessing how policies encourage timeliness. Leaders can review how they (1) assess changes in processes or data systems that may support timeliness; (2) monitor corrective actions; and (3) support staff, including promotion criteria and training. Through their actions, leaders may unintentionally reward behaviors that conflict with timeliness.

Demonstrating commitment by visibly working to improve timeliness. Leaders can meet with staff on timeliness, stay knowledgeable on the causes of delays, and develop the agency's strategy to improve timeliness. Local managers and supervisors can monitor timeliness rates, systems, and processes that cause delays; talk with eligibility workers to identify workflow improvements; and support staff development by making time for training.

Being open to new ideas and support organizational or systems changes that would improve efficiency. Staff members who feel empowered to suggest changes can be a source of creative and effective ideas for how to improve timeliness rates. Junior staff have a different and valuable perspective.

Promoting staff engagement to boost employee buy-in to agency priorities. Leaders can recognize staff for efficient processing. They can also reward employee achievements, host events to celebrate staff contributions, and make time for peer-to-peer information sharing. Lastly, leaders can encourage collaboration by seeking staff feedback on the State agencies performance and assembling work groups

of staff to participate in root cause analysis of untimely actions. Groups can include staff from administration; policy; QC; fraud prevention; claims; data systems; and field operations, including local office administrators and eligibility workers.

Client communications

Clear, timely communication with clients is essential component of providing customer service, generating trust, and improving the agency's reputation. Delays that seem to be caused by clients (such as delays in completing interviews or submitting verifications) may be addressed with improved agency communications. Strategies for strong external communications include:

- **Revise client notices** to make them clear, concise, and easy to understand. FNS has developed a model notice toolkit, with example notices using plain language and easy-to-use formatting, to help State agencies improve their SNAP notices. (A link to the toolkit is in the appendix.)

> ### State agency example
> One State agency used practices based on behavioral science to redesign notices instructing clients to call the on-demand line for their recertification interview.

- **Deliver clear questions and instructions** during interviews and other client discussions. Workers should use language that clients understand.

- **Use messaging based on behavioral science** in written and electronic notices, such as mapping out the application process, highlighting how far a client has come, and encouraging them to take the next step. Notices can help clients work through what they will do next. For example, a letter instructing the client to call for an interview can include directions to look at their calendar and decide when they will call, and a space to write that plan down or a nudge to put the date and time into their calendar and set a reminder.

- **Add new communication avenues** such as text messaging or mobile application alerts. These can reach clients even when they miss letters sent by mail.

Key takeaways

- Technological tools impact strategies to identify priority cases and improve timely processing.
- FNS has resources available to help States plan and fund data systems changes.

Description

When State agencies integrate their technological systems—core data systems, worker tools, client-facing systems, and analysis systems—they can administer SNAP efficiently and effectively, and collect accurate and relevant information from clients.

Core data systems

- **Eligibility systems** collect client information, determine eligibility, and calculate SNAP benefits. Modernizing these systems can decrease the time workers spend interviewing clients and processing cases. Tools like flags and pop-ups can make it easier for workers to see where information is missing or when cases are close to being overdue.
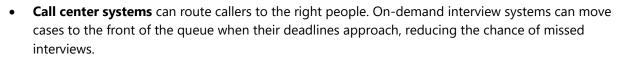
Worker tools

- **Work tracking systems** can be designed to prioritize cases close to the 7- or 30-day deadline and highlight cases that are ready for processing.
- **Document imaging and management systems** can let workers see which verification documents are on file and only ask for the missing documents when they interview clients. Centralized scanning and indexing departments can speed case processing.
- **Data matching systems** match case information against external State data sources—such as workforce and unemployment insurance data—and Federal data sources such as the Supplemental Security Income database. Developing systems that automatically match and populate certain information in the eligibility system can save time and help workers make accurate determinations.
- **Call center systems** can route callers to the right people. On-demand interview systems can move cases to the front of the queue when their deadlines approach, reducing the chance of missed interviews.
- **A bot, or robotic process automation,** is a computer program that does specific and repetitive tasks quickly, freeing workers for more complex tasks. (A link to the FNS guidance on Use of Advanced Automation in SNAP is in the appendix.)

Approved uses of bots:

– Performing pre-programmed functions otherwise performed by a State agency's automated system or private (non-merit) staff; examples include chatbots and Integrated Voice Response systems

– Retrieving information from one location and using it to populate another location in the eligibility system, as in a data match

Bot processes that require case-by-case FNS review:

– Robotic process automation involving machine learning and/or generative artificial intelligence

– Flagging cases for additional review beyond standard processing requirements

– Any advanced automation that replaces functions reserved for merit staff

– Any other technologies not already approved

Public-facing systems

- **Online applications** let clients submit applications any time from locations that work for them (such as their home, a library, or a community organization's office). Application systems use skip logic to present only relevant questions and remind clients that including more information at the application stage can speed processing. (A link to the FNS guide to Online Application Best Practices is in the appendix.)

- **Client portals** let clients check their application or benefit status, view notices, and upload documents. This reduces the number of calls to the SNAP agency and the waiting time for mailed notices. Some systems use mobile applications or mobile-optimized websites, letting clients access them from a smartphone or tablet. Smartphone cameras capture document images, making it easy to submit verification documents.

> ### State agency example
> One State agency's human-centered redesign of its online application combined multiple programs into a single application. This saved clients the time they would have spent applying for different benefits.

- **Text messaging, online chat, and email** can remind clients of appointments and verification due dates. Some systems provide data on message open rates, bounce-back rates, click-through rates, and other metrics, so staff can adjust messages and timing for better results. (Incorporating text messaging into a State agency's business processes may require a waiver.)

- **Callback assist for on-demand call centers** enables clients to hang up and stay on hold, making them more likely to complete their interviews.

Analysis systems

- **Data warehouses** store comprehensive data that staff can extract and analyze. Some connect to other systems for building automated reports and dashboards.

- **Data analytics** can reveal common sources of errors, trends in timeliness, and places where policies are misinterpreted. Staff can analyze large data sets to find patterns and relationships.

> **State agency example**
>
> Some State agencies have built timeliness dashboards so they can monitor workloads and timeliness in real time.

How to use this key

Preserve program integrity. Updated data systems that support timeliness cannot neglect payment accuracy. State agencies should ensure that data systems correctly apply policy during eligibility and benefit determinations when updating for efficiency and ease of use.

Conduct requirements review and testing. State agencies should ensure data systems accurately apply SNAP policy throughout the eligibility process. When specifying requirements of new systems, and while in the testing process, State agencies should include workers who use the tools and staff who analyze the administrative data. State agencies can consult FNS Handbook 901: The Advance Planning Document Process when planning for new technology. This handbook is designed to help State agencies understand FNS requirements to secure approval and funding for modernizing eligibility systems and EBT benefit delivery services. (A link to the handbook is in the appendix.)

Key takeaways

- Developing a thorough CAP requires collaboration, an understanding of what causes delays, and thoughtful considerations for correction actions that can improve timeliness.

- Corrective actions need to be monitored to understand their impact on timeliness.

Description

State agencies use corrective actions to address problems in policies, practices, procedures, or systems that cause delays in application processing.

FNS monitors the processing times of initial SNAP applications quarterly in the QC active case sample. FNS calculates the APT rate by dividing the number of applications approved on time by the total number of approved applications. FNS also calculates a 95 percent confidence interval around the calculated rate. For example, if the calculated APT rate is 90 percent, the 95 percent confidence interval may range from 87 percent to 93 percent. **If the upper bound of the confidence interval is below 90 percent in two consecutive quarterly reports, the State agency is required to create a CAP or update one they have already.**

An upper bound below 90 percent in one quarter triggers a pre-escalation process. The pre-escalation process is described in the FNS Updated Guidance for Improving State Timeliness Rates: Standardizing the Escalation Process. (A link to this resource is in the appendix.) Before moving into the CAP process, FNS will provide technical assistance to identify root causes, work with State agencies to set benchmarks for improvement, and validate timeliness data the State agency generates.

> ### Minimum CAP requirements
>
> FNS's formal request to the agency will outline minimum requirements the State must include in its corrective action plan. FNS will set the benchmarks and time frames after reviewing historical and current data on application processing timeliness and prior CAPs, if any. When setting benchmarks, FNS will consider realistic progress that a State agency can make within a specified time frame. Benchmarks may include:
>
> - Achieving an intermediary APT rate (such as 90 percent)
> - Improving an APT rate by a certain percentage
> - Clearing a backlog in new applications or expedited applications by a specified date.
> - The minimum benchmark for improvement must be at least 5 percentage points every six months.

How to use this key

Here are some tips that State agencies can consider when developing and implementing a successful CAP:

- **Be realistic** about the number and scope of corrective action initiatives that can be done at once. Prioritize the changes likely to have the greatest impact.

- **Assign reasonable completion dates** for each step in the initiative, because solutions take time to implement and to produce results.

- **Establish clear lines of responsibility** for implementing the CAP, so that assigned staff understand their responsibilities and that it is clear who is implementing each component.

- **Develop monitoring and evaluation plans** for evaluating the effectiveness of a corrective action for improving timeliness.

Creating an effective CAP

State agencies can take the following steps to develop an effective CAP:

1. **Create a collaborative team** to select and implement corrective actions. State agency staff with different perspectives, such as eligibility workers, supervisors, fraud prevention staff, claims staff, quality control staff, and the technical unit can be engaged in the process.

> ### Example SMART initiative
>
> A State agency can redesign the notice of required verification documentation to make it easier for clients to understand.
>
> **Specific**. The notice is one piece of the process that communicates information to clients.
>
> **Measurable.** Metrics showing multiple requests for documentation are available from the SNAP eligibility system. The State agency can set a goal of reducing the number of cases with multiple requests from the current level of 30 percent of applications to 20 percent.
>
> **Achievable.** The State agency contracted an outside vendor to give the notice a more modern design.
>
> **Realistic.** The State agency regularly updates its notices.
>
> **Time-bound.** The State agency intends to start using the new notice within four months. Every month for six months after that, staff will collect data showing the effects of the new notice.

2. **Conduct a root cause analysis** to reveal the primary factors contributing to untimeliness**.** More information is available in the Root Cause Analysis Key.

3. **Assess the problem.** Drawing on the information from the root cause analysis in Step two, describe the specific problem affecting application processing and the magnitude of the issue.

4. **Draft the CAP** using the information gained from Steps 2 and 3. This includes:

   - **Brainstorming ideas** for corrective actions with the collaborative team. The team should have candid discussions about the benefits and challenges of each idea.

   - **Develop SMART initiatives** that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound. That is, each should focus on addressing the problem; be possible within the State's resources; have measurable outcomes; and have a time frame for implementation, completion, or measurement. State agencies should describe how the corrective action responds to the results of the root cause analysis.

5. **Set benchmarks for improvement,** such as achieving a certain APT rate or percentage point increase in the APT rate, or clearing a backlog by a certain date. The team must decide what data sources and time frames the State agency will use for this evaluation. FNS will set minimum benchmarks after reviewing historical and current data on application

> ### Recertifications and corrective actions
>
> If a State agency's own data analysis shows that recertifications and initial applications are consistently late, strategies to improve recertification processes and timeliness can be part of corrective action planning.

processing timeliness and prior CAPs, if any. The minimum benchmark for improvement must be at least 5 percentage points every six months.

6. **Implement corrective actions** such as changing policy or initiating training. State agencies should communicate changes to all affected staff, update policy and procedure manuals, and add trainings as needed, depending on the activities and scope of the corrective actions.

7. **Monitor corrective actions** by thoroughly documenting outcomes of corrective actions and the impact on timeliness.

8. **Report progress to FNS.** State agencies must update FNS on CAPs focused on application processing timeliness at least twice a year. Each progress report must include:

- The status of each initiative—not yet started, in progress, or complete.

- Progress made on each activity, including an assessment of implementation fidelity.

- Any change in the timeliness rate and how it compares to the benchmarks.

- FNS may ask for the data and analysis reports used to produce evaluation measures.

- The Updated Guidance for Improving State Timeliness Rates: Standardizing the Escalation Process includes templates for providing FNS with application processing timeliness data. (A link is in the appendix.)

CAP Components

Exhibit 4 outlines the components of a CAP.

Exhibit 4. Components of a CAP

Deficiency/ identified root cause	Corrective action strategies	Completion date	Status	Lead(s)	Metric(s)/ evaluation measure(s)
Identify the deficiency or specific cause of the delay	Identify strategies the State agency will use for each root cause • How staff will implement the initiatives • The geographic areas staff will implement them in • The implementation date	Target date for completion	Identify the progress of each initiative (i.e., ongoing, completed)	Person responsible for implementing and monitoring each initiative	• How the State agency will evaluate each initiative for effectiveness • How the agency will know the initiative is successful • An analysis of the data used to make this determination may be requested by FNS.

Resource	Link
General resources	
FNS Timeliness Landing Page	https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/qc/timeliness
Ensuring Timely Benefits to Eligible Households	https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/ensuring-timely-benefits-to-eligible-households
Clarification on the Three Ways Initial SNAP Application Processing Timeliness Is Measured	https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/QC/measuring-application-process-timeliness
FNS-366B: Program Activity Statement	https://www.fns.usda.gov/form/fns-366B
Root Cause Analysis	
Identifying Program Components and Practices That Influence SNAP Application Processing Timeliness Rates	https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/identifying-program-components-and-practices-influence-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program
Monitoring and Measuring Timeliness	
Updated Guidance for Improving State Timeliness Rates: Standardizing the Escalation Process	https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/updated_apt_escalation_procedures.pdf
Policy Options and Waivers	
SNAP Workload Management Matrix	https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/admin/workload-management-matrix
State Options Report	https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/waivers/state-options-report
SNAP Rule Waivers	https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/waivers/rules
Training	
SNAP Recertification Toolkit	https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recertification-toolkit
SNAP Interview Toolkit	https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-agency-interview-toolkit
Organizational Culture	
SNAP Model Notice Toolkit	https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/model-notice-toolkit
Bilingual requirements	https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/subtitle-B/chapter-II/subchapter-C/part-272/section-272.4
Data Systems and Technology	
Use of Advanced Automation in SNAP	https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/advanced-automation
Online Application Best Practices	https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/admin/online-application-best-practices
FNS Handbook 901 – Advanced Planning Document (APD)	https://www.fns.usda.gov/sso/fns-handbook-901-v2-advance-planning-documents
Corrective Action Plans (CAPs)	
Updated Guidance for Improving State Timeliness Rates: Standardizing the Escalation Process	https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/updated_apt_escalation_procedures.pdf