

COVID-19 SNAP Policy + Delivery Memo

CODE *for*
AMERICA

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Urgent Federal Response Needed to Streamline Online SNAP Enrollment and Maximize Capacity to Deliver Benefits

As COVID-19 reshapes our nation's health and economy, online and digital social service delivery of programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is facing an unprecedented surge. Code for America's [Blueprint for a Human-Centered Safety Net](#) provides a roadmap for digital social service delivery developed in partnership with state agencies and policy experts.

Immediate federal policy to streamline online SNAP enrollment and efficacy is needed to:

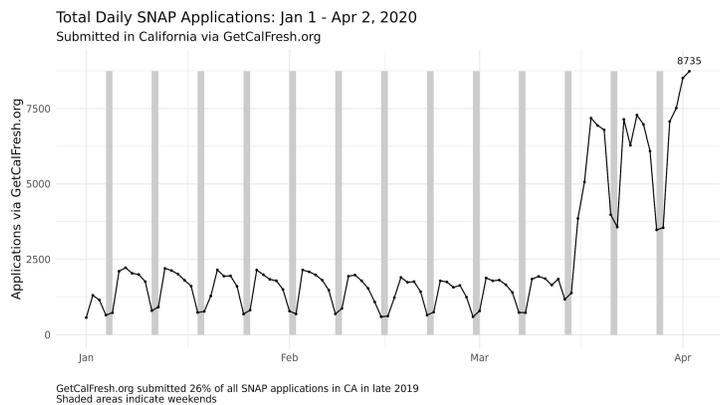
- Quickly enroll newly eligible people facing immediate health and financial crises
- Ensure that existing SNAP households retain benefits through the pandemic recession
- Enable SNAP to connect struggling people to targeted health and economic supports

Digital SNAP application assistance and outreach

Code for America operates [GetCalFresh.org](https://getcalfresh.org), an easy-to-use website that provides a single, user-centered online SNAP access point. Over the past year, GetCalFresh has served over 1 million California SNAP applicants. GetCalFresh also supports clients via livechat, personalized text and email messaging, and client experience surveys. Using this feedback and case-level outcomes data, GetCalFresh tests improvements, reduces barriers to enrollment, and shares key learnings.

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The COVID-19 crisis has led to the highest volume of SNAP applications in GetCalFresh history. SNAP applicants are in uncharted waters. They are sharing their anxiety and despair as their industries and employment prospects collapse, practically overnight. Community resources are hard to access. Many affected by the pandemic have never applied for benefits before. Digital access to the application is essential.



“After 30 years of hard work for the company and never had the need for this. I see myself and my family in desperate need of any help. This COVID-19 is the cause of my work termination.”

GetCalFresh has navigated previous spikes in online applications. Without streamlining, data shows that many who seek SNAP benefits online won't receive SNAP in a timely manner—or *at all*. When GetCalFresh experienced a surge of applications in 2019 due to a state policy change, 40,000 households were denied benefits because overloaded systems were unable to complete the SNAP online enrollment process.¹ Half of all applications during that spike were denied due to failure to interview or process verifications. Bureaucratic hurdles block eligible people from basic needs.

¹ Based on application volume and denial rates for interview and verifications from May 13–August 12, 2019.

Urgent Federal Action is Needed

Congress can enable SNAP to be a powerful tool to mitigate societal harm from COVID-19.

To serve the millions in need, **policy should not require states to seek individual waivers.**

These evidence-based policy recommendations are informed by both qualitative and quantitative GetCalFresh client data.

Is there anything else you'd like us to know about your situation?

Feel free to give other details you think might be helpful for us to know. Otherwise, you can skip this question.



Client quotes submitted to GetCalFresh via an in-application free text box

Authorize online SNAP application processing with waived or postponed interviews through 2020 to effectively meet the surge of new applications

COVID-19 has created a spike of new online SNAP applicants, and required phone interviews are a major barrier to enrollment. States must quickly enroll millions of emergency applicants without income. Call centers are beyond capacity. Interviews are often weeks out while applicants grow desperate.

*"[Due] to the Coronavirus, I already did apply yesterday. I'm actually on the phone—I called back but **I've been on hold for 45 mins now.** Can I just email my check stubs?"*

*"I submitted all necessary docs and even received a confirmation number. **Never got a call or notice until I received a notice that I failed to answer the phone for a phone interview. When I called in, I was told the confirmation number was worthless.**"*

Encourage SNAP applicant self-attestation for unavailable documentation

Verification requirements are a common cause of procedural denials even in pre-pandemic conditions. Overwhelmed employers are not able to provide verifications for laid off employees during a crisis.

*"**It's hard for me to show I've lost my job when it was a layoff and the whole business is shut down. No one in the office can send a letter.** Is CalFresh aware of this due to COVID and the quick shut down in this unprecedented time? Thank you for your help. I'm sure you are very busy."*

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Suspend the SNAP Student Rule requiring student work documentation

The SNAP Student Rule implementation wastes valuable caseworker time, and slows down the enrollment process for all. Low-income college students have lost jobs and are struggling to maintain studies. It is not feasible to get verifications for student exemptions with many campuses closed.

*“I am currently a student and was laid off from work... **My student assistant work study job is on hold** because of the coronavirus until further notice and I need to earn something in order to purchase food until my work situation gets back on track.”*

*“**My worker is asking for an approval letter from the Student Aid Commission** in regards to my student loans. I’m not sure what she’s asking for. I submitted a picture of my financial aid award letter.... Can you clarify???”*

Provide funding and technical support for state process shifts to improve online SNAP enrollment, including SMS and digital client communication

State SNAP modernization efforts often take years of planning. States do not have that kind of time right now, and should not have to reinvent the wheel on their own. Federal funding and technical assistance should support high-impact/low-lift efforts like the SMS client communications that have been demonstrated to improve applicant outcomes.

*“I gave you my **email and texting number**... I am deaf man and I can’t hear voicemail. Thank you for understanding.”*

*“I missed my recertification date because I did not receive the forms. You had the wrong address on file despite the fact that I updated it when I applied for SNAP. I called your office... **However, with the Coronavirus issue, I want to know if I can recertify for SNAP online.**”*

Maximize SNAP's capacity to keep people afloat during crisis

Raise benefits for SNAP households in crisis and unprecedented hardship

Benefit levels for every household receiving SNAP should immediately be set at or above the Low-Cost Meal Plan. Even in strong economic times, maximum SNAP benefits are often supplemented by income from work and food pantry distributions, both of which are in short supply due to COVID-19 social distancing.

"Thank you so much may your family and coworkers be blessed. I do get \$100 a month on my EBT card but I run out of food. I depend on the food bank and my \$. I'm out of everything. I don't have toilet paper. I just signed an IHSS worker for me. Please help."

Immediately authorize the SNAP online purchasing pilot to all states

All SNAP recipients must be able to order groceries online for delivery. No one—especially seniors, people with disabilities, and other high-risk populations—should have to jeopardize their health or public health to buy food with SNAP benefits.

"I am quarantined [at] the apartment and cannot leave due to the COVID 19 as I am elder and have serious medical issues. I can do the interview on the phone, but my daughter has to shop for me as I cannot leave the home... Also there is not much food in the store according to my daughter. Please any help is greatly appreciated."

"UNABLE TO WORK BECAUSE OF CURRENT VIRUS... CAN NOT LEAVE HOUSE. 75 YEARS OLD WITH A COMPROMISED IMMUNE SYSTEM."

Suspend mid-period and recertification reporting requirements through 2020 and stagger recertification dates to allow effective processing when reinstated

Even in normal times, people fall off of SNAP at reporting periods because they did not know they were required to report changes. The vast majority of those who lose SNAP benefits at renewal do so because of missed deadlines, not because they became ineligible.² Administrators must focus on enrolling newly impoverished clients, not re-enrolling clients who inadvertently fell off benefits.

"I need a SAR 7 paper [semi-annual report] before 03/31... how will I turn it in on time if the coronavirus is going around??? I can't leave my home. If I mail it, it won't be processed in time with this virus going around."

² https://research.upjohn.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1306&context=up_workingpapers

Prioritize assistance to families with children through Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) and allow for continued delivery of food assistance through Summer EBT

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act allows states to provide K-12 students who qualify for free and reduced lunch with P-EBT food assistance while campuses are closed. Existing state data should be used to issue P-EBT cards directly to families as soon as April. When data is unavailable, a simple digital tool should connect struggling families to assistance without hassle or burden.

*“My job that I worked part time at is closed due to coronavirus. **My kids are home from school and I have no daycare for them. They are on the school lunch program and that is a financial issue to provide what they need at this time.**”*

Utilize EBT as a mechanism to deliver cash assistance and economic stimulus

The SNAP EBT card is a secure means of providing cash assistance as well as food benefits. SNAP recipients need to pay for rent, utilities, or medicine. Failure to stabilize income at this time will result in a worsening housing crisis. These basic living expenses will deplete any savings quickly.

*“I have not received a phone call from any worker... I called 2 different phone numbers, there was no answer and no voicemail to leave a message. **I NEED FOOD AND CASH ASSISTANCE IMMEDIATELY!!! I DO NOT HAVE ENOUGH MONEY FOR RENT AND BILLS BECAUSE ALL MY CLIENTS ARE NOW HOME AND DON'T NEED MY SERVICES...** This makes no sense to have services that people can't get because no one can do a phone interview.”*

About Code for America

Code for America believes government can work for the people, and by the people, in the digital age, starting with the people who need it most. We build digital services that enhance government capabilities, and we help others do the same across all levels of government. We organize thousands of volunteers across nearly 80 chapters nationwide who improve government in their local communities. Our goal: a 21st century government that effectively and equitably serves all Americans. Learn more at codeforamerica.org.

Questions?

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Additional GetCalFresh data, analysis, and applicant stories of hardship during the COVID 19 crisis are available upon request.