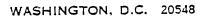
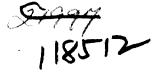


UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE





May 21, 1982

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

B-207529

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RELEASED

The Honorable Jesse Helms Chairman, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry United States Senate



Dear Mr. Chairman:

Subject: Food Stamp Program Application Processing Time (GAO/CED-82-87)

On April 8, 1982, you asked us to supplement our March 1982 report 1/ to you on expedited service in the Food Stamp Program by providing any information readily available on how long States take to process nonexpedited service (regular) cases. You also asked whether processing time for these cases would be shortened if expedited service were eliminated.

Processing time is the period between when a household makes application for food assistance and when a local food stamp agency issues or denies food stamp benefits to that household. The Food Stamp Act of 1977 requires that, for regular cases, benefits be issued not later than 30 calendar days after an application is submitted. Households can receive benefits within 3 working days (expedited service) if they have no net monthly income or are considered destitute as defined by the Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service.

The Service does not require State and local food stamp agencies to collect data on case processing time, and the Service has not collected such data on its own. Consequently, as agreed with your office, we telephoned Food Stamp Program officials im the 50 States and the District of Columbia to obtain whatever data or estimates they could provide us on case processing time.

1/"Expedited Service in the Food Stamp Program" (CED-82-59, Mar. 15, 1982).

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We also asked for information on the number of new cases receiving expedited service to supplement the data presented in our March 1982 report.

State officials provided us with estimates of the average number of days it took to process an application or the number of days in which most applications were processed. According to officials of 31 States and the District of Columbia, regular cases are generally processed within 15 calendar days. In 8 other States, officials indicated that these cases are processed within 22 days, and in 10 States, officials told us that their records only showed that most cases were processed within 30 days as required by food stamp legislation. An Indiana official said that he could not provide information on how long it took to process regular cases in his State.

As we reported earlier, the number of households applying for food stamps under expedited service varies greatly among the States. In 34 States (including the 15 States on which we reported in March 1982) and the District of Columbia, the percentage of all new cases receiving expedited service ranged from 4 percent to 75 percent. In about half of these States and in the District, at least 25 percent of all new cases were receiving expedited service.

Food stamp officials in 19 States said that eliminating expedited service would help reduce processing time for regular cases. Officials in 30 other States and the District of Columbia said that eliminating this service would not affect the processing time for regular cases. An Indiana official could not provide information on how or whether such elimination would change processing time for regular cases.

The State-by-State responses we obtained are shown in the following tables.

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States That Reported Processing Regular Cases Within 15 Days

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|----------------|--|---|---|
| <u>State</u> | Number of days to process regular <u>cases</u> | Percent of new cases receiving expedited <u>service</u> | Would elimination of expedited service reduce regular processing time? |
| Alaska | 15 | 40 | Yes |
| Arkansas | 15 | 20 | No |
| California | 13 | (a) | Yes |
| Colorado | 15 | (a) | No |
| Delaware | 14 | 75 | Yes |
| District of | | | |
| Columbia | 5 | 28 | No |
| Florida | 14 | 24 | Yes |
| Hawaii | 14 | 5 | Yes |
| Idaho | 9 | 44 | No |
| Iowa | 7 | 7 | NO |
| Kentucky | 14 | 43 | No |
| Louisiana | 13 | (a) | Yes |
| Maine | 15 | Under 10 | No |
| Massachusetts | 7 | 55 | No |
| Missouri | 15 | 15 | Yes |
| Montana | 1 | · (a) | No |
| Nebraska | 14 | (a) | No |
| Nevada | 14 | 18 | Yes |
| New Mexico | 12 | (a) | NO |
| North Dakota | 10 | Under 10 | NO |
| Oklahoma | 15 | 14 | No |
| Oregon | 7 | (a) | Yes |
| Rhode Island | 14 | 30 | No |
| South Carolina | 7 | 6 | No |
| South Dakota | 5 | Under 10 | No |
| Tennessee | 12 | 67 | NO |
| Texas | 15 | 60 | Yes |
| Utah | 15 | 40 | Yes |
| Washington | 4 | 25 | No |
| West Virginia | 5 | (a) | NO |
| Wisconsin | 7 | 70 | No |
| Wyoming | 14 | 33 | No |
| | | | |

<u>a</u>/Information not available.

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| States 7 | | | Regular Cases | | | |
|----------------|--|--|---|--|--|--|
| Within 22 Days | | | | | | |
| State | Number of days to process regular | Percent of new cases receiving expedited service | Would elimination of expedited service reduce regular processing time? | | | |
| State | cases | service | processing time? | | | |
| Alabama | 17 | (a) | Yes | | | |
| Connecticut | 22 | 12 | Yes | | | |
| Georgia | 21 | 26 | Yes | | | |
| Illinois | 21 | 36 | Yes | | | |
| Kansas - | 17 | | No | | | |
| Rural counties | 6 | 35 | | | | |
| Urban counties | 5 | 65 | | | | |
| Minnesota | 21 | 24 | No | | | |
| New Hampshire | 21 | 10 | No | | | |
| Vermont | 20 | 4 | No | | | |

a/Information not available.

| States That Reported Processing Regular Cases Within 30 Days | | | | | | |
|---|------------------|----|----------------------|------------------------------------|-----|--|
| Number of Percent of days to new cases Would elimination of process receiving expedited service | | | | | | |
| State | regular cases | | expedited service | reduce regular processing time? | | |
| Arizona | Within | 30 | days | 25 | Yes | |
| Maryland | 0 | 13 | н | 36 | No | |
| Michigan | F8 | ** | 11 | 11 | No | |
| Mississippi | 10 | 14 | н | (a) | Yes | |
| New Jersey | ** | 11 | 14 | 14 | No | |
| New York | •• | 14 | 14 | (a) | Yes | |
| North Carolina | 58 | 11 | 16 | (a) | No | |
| Ohio | 88 | 11 | | (a) | NO | |
| Pennsylvania | ** | н | 14 | (a) | Yes | |
| Virginia | st | н | 11 | (a) | No | |

a/Information not available.

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NOTE: Indiana could not provide any information in response to our call; therefore, it is not listed.

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We have discussed the information in this report with your office and, as requested, we did not obtain agency comments. As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 7 days after its issue date. At that time, we will send copies to the Secretary of Agriculture and the Director, Office of Management and Budget. We will also make copies available to others on request.

Sincerely yours,

Henry Eachwege

Henry Eschwege Director