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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-573](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

One in 12 Americans participates in the federal Food Stamp Program, administered by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). States have begun offering individuals alternatives to visiting the local assistance office to apply for and maintain benefits, such as mail-in procedures, call centers, and on-line services. GAO was asked to examine: (1) what alternative methods states are using to increase program access; (2) what is known about the results of these methods, particularly on program access for target groups, decision accuracy, and administrative costs; and (3) what actions states have taken to maintain program integrity while implementing alternative methods. GAO surveyed state food stamp administrators, reviewed five states in depth, analyzed FNS data and reports, and interviewed program officials and stakeholders.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Agriculture direct FNS to (1) work with the Economic Research Service (ERS) to enhance their research agendas to include projects that would determine the effects of alternative methods; (2) conduct analyses of data received from states implementing waivers or demonstration projects waiving the face-to-face interview; and (3) disseminate and regularly update information on promising practices states are using to implement alternative methods. FNS and ERS generally agreed with GAO's findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-573](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-573).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Sigurd Nilsen at (202) 512-7215 or [nilsens@gao.gov](mailto:nilsens@gao.gov).

# FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

## Use of Alternative Methods to Apply for and Maintain Benefits Could Be Enhanced by Additional Evaluation and Information on Promising Practices

### What GAO Found

All states use mail and about half of states use or have begun developing on-line services and call centers to provide access to the food stamp program. Almost all states allow households to submit applications, report changes, and submit recertifications through the mail, and 26 states have implemented or are developing systems for households to perform these tasks on-line. Almost half of the states are using or developing call centers and states also are allowing households to participate in telephone interviews instead of an in-office interview. States have taken a variety of actions to help households use on-line services and call centers, such as sending informational mailings, holding community meetings, and using community partners.

Insufficient information is available to determine the results of using alternative methods. Few evaluations have been conducted identifying the effect of alternative methods on program access, decision accuracy, or administrative costs. Evaluating the effectiveness of alternative methods is challenging in part because limited data are available, states are using a combination of methods, and studies can be costly to conduct. Federal and state officials reported that while they believe alternative methods can help households in several ways, such as increasing flexibility and efficiency in the application process, certain types of households may have difficulty using or accessing alternative methods. In addition, technology and staffing challenges may hinder the use of alternative methods.

To maintain program integrity while implementing alternative methods, the states GAO reviewed used a variety of strategies, such as using software to verify the information households submit, communicating with other states to detect fraud, or using finger imaging. Although there has been some concern that without frequent in-person interaction with caseworkers, households may not submit required documents on time and thus be denied benefits on procedural grounds ("procedural denials"), GAO's limited analysis of FNS data found no considerable fluctuations in the rate of procedural denials in the five states between fiscal years 2000 and 2005. The states GAO reviewed have instituted several approaches to prevent procedural denials.

### Call Center Caseworker Answering Calls



Source: GAO.