SNAP: Special Services

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Disaster Outreach

Learn about Disaster SNAP and how it differs from the regular Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Review 10 easy steps to help your organization plan for outreach before a disaster strikes.

Disaster Outreach

What are disaster SNAP benefits and how does the program work?

After a natural or man-made disaster occurs and a Presidential declaration of disaster with a provision for individual assistance has been made, State agencies can request approval from the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to activate disaster SNAP benefits and provide temporary food assistance to households. FNS approves operation of disaster SNAP benefits once grocery stores are operational and telecommunications and electricity have been restored. Disaster SNAP benefits are delivered on Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards, similar to regular SNAP benefits, and require telephones and electricity for redemption. Generally, States request and FNS approves operation of disaster SNAP benefits a week or more after a disaster has occurred.

Disaster SNAP benefits help people buy food when they are experiencing economic hardships as a result of the disaster (loss of jobs, loss of food because of power outages, damages to home and personal possessions, etc.). Although every State agency maintains a general disaster SNAP plan for use in time of disaster, State agencies do tailor disaster benefit policies and procedures to fit the community's specific needs following each disaster, so every disaster SNAP program is unique.

How do disaster SNAP benefits differ from SNAP?

Disaster SNAP benefits are different from SNAP in some important ways:

- Families who are not normally eligible for SNAP may be eligible for disaster SNAP benefits. During the eligibility process, a household's short-term, disaster-related expenses are considered.
- Students, strikers, noncitizens and people subject to work requirements are not barred from disaster SNAP benefits as they are from SNAP. Rules surrounding verification, income and resources are relaxed.
- Recipients receive the maximum SNAP benefit for their household size.
- The period to apply for disaster SNAP benefits is short, generally one week.
- State agencies may operate mass application sites at fairgrounds, stadiums or other easily accessible locations that can serve large populations. For very small disasters, State agencies may provide disaster SNAP benefits out of social services offices. All applications for disaster SNAP benefits are distributed to prospective clients and collected at these sites.

How are ongoing SNAP participants aided in the disaster SNAP benefits program?

Aid to SNAP participants will depend upon the disaster. Your State agency may decide to issue replacement benefits for lost or damaged food. Additionally, a supplement or additional benefits may be provided to ensure participants receive the maximum level of benefits for their household size. Sometimes these benefits are paid automatically – in other cases, participants need to complete an affidavit attesting to disaster losses to qualify.

Why should my agency conduct outreach during disasters?

Since each disaster SNAP plan and operation is unique and many participants are first-time applicants, your agency must be prepared to clearly communicate what benefits are available, who is eligible, how to apply, and how to use SNAP benefits. Because disaster SNAP benefits generally operate for a one-week period, providing timely and detailed information is essential.

In addition, SNAP participants may need to know how to verify food loss for replacement benefits, how to obtain supplemental benefits, or whether or not benefits will be automatically replaced.

Because the days following a disaster are often chaotic, news about disaster SNAP benefits might be overshadowed by other disaster-related issues, or misinformation might be circulated. Ongoing outreach is essential to correcting misperceptions and providing factual information to disaster victims about the nutrition benefits to which they may be entitled.

Why should my agency partner with community and faith-based organizations during disasters?

Some disaster victims will turn to trusted organizations in the community for information and help. Affected people may already be interacting with these organizations for other needs, such as clothing, shelter, or medical care. These organizations are in a position to help your agency provide accurate information about disaster SNAP benefits to potentially eligible individuals.

Additionally, community and faith-based organizations might have personnel in parts of the affected areas where your staff are not present. They may also have other resources that are useful during disasters, such as media contacts, Web sites, toll-free numbers and translators.

How can my agency involve these community organizations in our disaster preparedness discussions?

Convene a "get-ready" meeting before a disaster occurs. Invite grocers, community organizations, and faith-based groups. At this meeting, consider conducting a needs assessment. A needs assessment will identify existing outreach services and resources in your community. It will also provide your agency with a better understanding of the number and nature of diverse groups in your community. In addition, it will help you identify geographic areas most prone to disasters, or communities, locations, and neighborhoods that may need unique assistance in the aftermath of a disaster, such as language assistance. Information identified in the needs assessment will not only help you effectively prepare to coordinate outreach efforts during a disaster, but will also reinforce cooperation for ongoing outreach.

Can my State agency include a disaster SNAP contingency plan in its State outreach plan?

Yes. A State outreach plan may include contingency plans for SNAP outreach during a disaster. Preparation is critical for an adequate disaster response. It enables a State to quickly implement activities that have been carefully planned.

When disaster SNAP benefits are operationalized, what outreach activities can be reimbursed by FNS?

To be eligible for reimbursement, partners must secure approval from the State agency in advance of implementing any disaster SNAP outreach activities. Allowable outreach activities during a disaster may include:

- Distributing information about disaster SNAP benefits to disaster victims;
- Funding a toll-free number;
- Distributing information to media outlets;
- Translating disaster SNAP outreach materials into other languages;
- Prescreening activities that do not involve accessing the State eligibility system or existing client case files;
- Distributing and helping prospective participants fill out disaster SNAP benefit application forms at disaster sites; and/or
- Greeting prospective participants at disaster SNAP benefit application entrances and directing them to appropriate areas.

How can I learn more about disaster SNAP benefits?

For complete information on conducting SNAP outreach during times of disaster, please see the Disaster SNAP Guidance on the FNS Web site: http://www.fns.usda.gov/disasters/disaster.htm

Web-Based Resources

Resource	*Website*
FNS Disaster Assistance Home Page	http://www.fns.usda.gov/disasters/disaster.htm
SNAP Disaster Handbook	http://www.fns.usda.gov/disasters/disaster.htm
Outreach State Plan Guidance	http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/default.htm
FNS press releases	http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/PressReleases/PressReleases.htm
FRAC Disaster Handbook	http://www.frac.org/pdf/dfsp05.pdf

Before A Disaster Strikes

Step 1 Develop A Plan

Convene or participate in a "get-ready" meeting with community and faith-based partners.

- Explain how disaster SNAP benefits can provide food assistance to those adversely affected by disasters, whether man-made or due to natural causes.
- Explain how disaster victims already enrolled in the regular SNAP program may be assisted with replacement benefits.
- Discuss strengths and needs of each partner in terms of disaster response.
- Discuss what community partner staff can and cannot do during a disaster.
- Plan and document how you will work together to prepare for potential future disasters. Be very specific about the best ways to get the word out, how that can be done in an emergency, and who will do it.
- Develop a contact list of participating members with multiple ways of reaching each party in the event of a disaster. Identify who will be responsible for periodically updating this information and on what schedule.
- Discuss what resources will be distributed

Step 2 Conduct a Needs Assessment

- If your community has not conducted a needs assessment, take steps to complete one. Consider if volunteers or staff will complete the needs assessment.
- If your community has previously conducted a needs assessment, reevaluate the findings and update corresponding next steps.
- Identify existing outreach services and resources in your community.
- Identify partners with special expertise, such as ethnic media contacts or translators.
- Identify vulnerable populations in your community, such as those in certain geographic areas or those with particular language needs, who may be most affected by potential disasters or who will need extra support accessing help following the disaster.

Step 3 Add To The State Plan

- Develop a State outreach plan and add a contingency plan for outreach activities to respond to a disaster.
- If you already have a State Outreach Plan, add a contingency section for SNAP outreach during disasters.

10 Steps To Plan For Disaster SNAP Outreach

1. Develop A Plan
2. Develop Needs Assessment
3. Add To The State Plan
4. Describe Outreach Activities
5. Plan For Media Activities
6. Maintain Good Relationships
7. Implement Activities
8. Develop New Partnerships
9. Connect Disaster Victims
10. Thank Staff And Partners

- Include a list of allowable activities and identify which agency will handle each activity. Advanced planning improves your disaster response. Knowing you have the tools and resources in place will reduce stress and improve your ability to respond to a disaster, when or if it occurs.
- Include drafts or template materials that your State might use as part of your media response.
- Maintain a hard copy of the contingency plan in a secure offsite location. If there is a disaster, you might not have access to a computer or your office.

Step 4 Describe Outreach Activities

- Describe your disaster outreach activities in your State Disaster SNAP Plan. If your State does not have an outreach plan, provide sufficient details on outreach activities and contacts. If your State agency has an outreach plan, make references to that plan.
- Develop templates of outreach materials, such as fliers, posters, and a Web page, so that they can be finalized quickly when needed. Consider the alternatives for printing and distributing in an emergency situation.
- Maintain a hard copy of the plan in a secure offsite location. If there is a disaster, you might not have access to a computer or your office.
- Identify a community liaison whose sole responsibility during a disaster is to coordinate and share information between the State agency and community partners.

Step 5 Plan For Media Activities

- Develop and articulate State policy on who initiates or handles media inquiries in your State Disaster SNAP Plan and State Outreach Plan.
- Identify State spokespeople in the plans. There may be more than one contact.
- Develop a list of media outlets (television, radio, online or print) for disaster SNAP outreach. These outlets can inform your audience of details about disaster SNAP benefits when it is implemented.
- Include phone numbers, fax numbers and addresses so that you have multiple ways to reach the media.

Step 6 Maintain Relationships

- Keep in touch with your community and faith-based partners. Check with them periodically to confirm their roles and responsibilities and to update your contact lists.
- If your State contracts outreach activities to organizations, contractual oversight will require more frequent contacts.
- Consider holding a practice drill, role-playing game or table-top exercise to practice what you will do in the event of a real disaster.

When A Disaster Strikes

Step 7 Implement Activities

- Make contact with outreach partners and implement your contingency plan.
- Provide accurate and consistent messages to your partners via the community liaison, especially as you make changes to the application process, application sites, or other aspects of the program that affect applicant eligibility and access.
- Remind State employees in disaster areas of media procedures. This is important because you may have employees from other States with different media policies.

Step 8 Develop New Partnerships

- Initiate partnerships with new organizations to meet unanticipated needs.
- Expand outreach activities, if needed. Don't feel limited. You may conduct necessary activities even though they are not referenced in your State Outreach Plan.

When A Disaster Is Over

Step 9 Connect Disaster Victims

- Disaster SNAP benefits recipients who wish to apply for the regular SNAP will need to follow the normal SNAP application process. Some households may have questions about SNAP requirements or may need assistance in filling out application forms or securing verification documents. Others may need other types of assistance such as clothing or household goods. Your partners can play an important role to help you provide the services your client might need during this stressful time.
- Let the media and other opinion leaders know how disaster SNAP benefits and regular SNAP responded to the needs of families and the broader community.

Step 10 Thank Staff And Partners

- Recognize employees and partners for a job well done.
- Make changes to your outreach and disaster plans based on what worked and what didn't work.
- Visit the FNS Web site and prepare promising practices for disaster outreach: http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/promising/Default.htm

10 Ideas For Disaster SNAP Outreach

1. **Inform the media.** Use the media to spread messages about the availability of disaster SNAP benefits. Be sure the identified spokesperson has the timely and correct information and an updated media list. Be sure to follow your State's procedures.
2. **Coordinate with other responders.** Identify the liaison to other first (disaster) responders in the community. Be sure that they have the correct information about disaster SNAP benefits and can share it with disaster victims they serve.
3. **Engage grocery store partners.** Provide information to grocers to post, distribute in grocery bags or announce in stores.
4. **Enlist faith- and community-based partners.** Enlist the help of your partners to distribute information (who can apply, when, where) about disaster SNAP benefits or to perform other duties as described in your State Disaster or State Outreach Plan(s).
5. **Use community volunteers.** Engage volunteers to perform activities such as answering the State/local toll-free number, distributing informational materials at grocery stores and monitoring SNAP lines to make sure potential applicants are in the correct line at disaster sites.
6. **Enlist community translators.** Work with community translators to translate news releases for ethnic media and informational materials, and to serve as interpreters during SNAP interviews.
7. **Provide a toll-free number.** Set up cellular phones to use as disaster SNAP benefit informational numbers if land lines are not working.
8. **Use the remote telephone feature.** Use the remote message feature of your telephone system, if available, to announce disaster SNAP benefit information. If this is not available, contact FNS to ask about using the national toll-free number remote messaging feature and/or contact your State SNAP EBT provider to ask if a message can be added to the customer service phone line.
9. **Post disaster SNAP information on your Web site.** Provide basic information, such as who may qualify, where and when to apply, and types of verification documents, if needed.
10. **Develop new outreach partnerships.** Develop new outreach partnerships to provide disaster SNAP benefit information to disaster victims, based on what is occurring in your community.

Sample Press Release

For Immediate Release

Contact:

[DATE]

[NAME OF APPROPRIATE CONTACT]
[AREA CODE AND PHONE NUMBER]
[CELL PHONE]

Disaster Victims Now Eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

[CITY, STATE] – Many victims of [DISASTER] are now eligible for disaster SNAP benefits.

[QUOTE ABOUT SIGNIFICANCE OF NUTRITION ASSISTANCE FOLLOWING A DISASTER,] said [STATE OFFICIAL.]

The United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service has approved disaster SNAP benefits to allow victims of [DISASTER] in [eligible geographic area] to receive nutrition assistance. Eligible households will receive an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card to use to purchase food at retail locations. Eligibility criteria for disaster SNAP benefits are different than for the regular Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Residents who have experienced *(describe unique disaster elements that may make residents eligible for the disaster SNAP benefits)* may be eligible. Other eligibility factors include [LIST ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA.]

Applications for disaster SNAP benefits will be accepted until [date]. Residents of [ELIGIBLE GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS] can apply for disaster SNAP benefits at the following locations and times:

Location: [ADDRESS]

Hours of Operation: [HOURS]

Those seeking to apply for disaster benefits from SNAP are encouraged to bring verification of identity and residency, if possible, with them when they apply. If the applicant's documents have been lost in the disaster, disaster SNAP staff can provide guidance on how applicants can prove their identity. [List other documents that should be available at application or other information about needed verifications.]

More information about disaster SNAP benefits is available on [WEB SITE ADDRESS AND TOLL-FREE NUMBER].

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Sample Press Release

For Immediate Release

Contact:

[DATE]

[NAME OF APPROPRIATE CONTACT]
[AREA CODE AND PHONE NUMBER]
[CELL PHONE]

Deadline To Apply for Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Benefits Is [ADD WHEN]

[CITY, STATE] – Victims of [DISASTER] are reminded that they have until [DEADLINE] to apply for disaster nutrition assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). SNAP's disaster benefits enable those who have experienced loss, such as [list criteria], as a result of the [DISASTER] to receive SNAP benefits on an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card to purchase food at retail stores.

[QUOTE ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF APPLYING BEFORE TIME RUNS OUT.] said, [STATE OFFICIAL]. [QUOTE ABOUT HOW MANY BENEFITS HAVE BEEN ISSUED TO DATE.]

Residents of [GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION] may be eligible for disaster nutrition assistance from the Food and Nutrition Service. Provisions of disaster SNAP benefits are different from the regular SNAP, so those affected by [DISASTER] in the designated locations are encouraged to apply to find out if they may be eligible for benefits under this program.

Applications will be accepted at the following locations until [DEADLINE.]

Location: [ADDRESS]
Hours of Operation: [HOURS]

Those seeking to apply for disaster SNAP benefits are encouraged to bring verification of identity and residency, if possible, with them when they apply. If the applicant's documents have been lost in the disaster, disaster SNAP staff can provide guidance on how applicants can prove their identity. [LIST OTHER DOCUMENTS THAT SHOULD BE AVAILABLE AT APPLICATION OR OTHER INFORMATION ABOUT NEEDED VERIFICATIONS.]

More information about the disaster SNAP benefits is available on [WEB SITE ADDRESS AND TOLL-FREE NUMBER.]

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