



APPENDIX B-3

PARTNER AGENCY INTERVIEWS

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Partner Agency Administrators and Staff



Introduction/Purpose of the Study

My name is _____ and I'm a researcher from the Urban Institute, an organization based in Washington, D.C. that conducts policy-related research on a variety of social welfare and economic issues. I'm here today because the Urban Institute was awarded a contract by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service to conduct a major study of the range of efforts states are undertaking to enhance food stamp certification and to modernize the FSP. This study focuses on four types of modernization efforts: policy changes to modernize FSP application (case management and recertification procedures), reengineering of administrative functions, increased or enhanced use of technology, and partnering arrangements with businesses and nonprofit organizations. The goals of the study are to develop a comprehensive, national inventory of FSP modernization efforts, both large and small, undertaken in all the states; identify successful modernization efforts across the country that can potentially be replicated; and help avoid implementation pitfalls among states currently planning similar kinds of modernization initiatives.

This study is comprised of three major phases of data collection. Phase 1 entailed exploratory site visits to four states (Massachusetts, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin) which were conducted in Spring 2007; Phase 2 includes a national "inventory," or survey, of all states, including a sample of counties as well as partner organizations; and Phase 3 entails more intensive case studies in 14 states and up to two local sites within those states. The purpose of these Phase 3 case study site visits is to provide an in-depth, comprehensive picture of initiatives in selected states that have implemented or are implementing modernization efforts that affect the certification and/or recertification processes. In each site we visit, we plan to speak with state and local administrators and staff, and administrators and staff from community (community-based organizations (CBOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs)) or vendor partners. We also plan to conduct brief "exit" or "intercept" interviews with FSP applicants and/or participants as they are leaving the local offices to ask them about their experiences with the services they received. Focus groups with FSP participants and eligible nonparticipants will also be convened in conjunction with the site visits.

Confidentiality Statement:

Before I begin our discussion, I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I know that you are busy and I will try to be as focused as possible. I have many questions and am hoping to talk with a number of people in your state, so please do not feel as though I expect you to be able to answer every question.

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Our aim is to learn from your insights and experiences, not to audit or judge your work in any way. In addition, I want to let you know that although we take notes, information is never repeated with the name of the respondent in any reports or in any discussions with supervisors, colleagues, FNS, etc. When we write our reports and discuss our findings, information from all the people we spoke with is synthesized and compiled. No individual will be quoted by name. Do you have any questions before we begin?



A. General/Background

A.1. Respondent Background (*Review/confirm contact information (e.g., title, phone number, e-mail address) obtained prior to the visit. Use this discussion as an icebreaker.*)

- Please describe your current position (e.g., overall responsibilities, reports to whom)
- How long have you worked for this organization? In this position?
- What is your experience/background in this field? (e.g., education/relevant experience)

A.2 Organizational Background/Overview of the Organization

- Please give me a brief overview of your organization, its mission and the services it provides. (*Probe: Make sure you can categorize the type of organization this is – e.g., for profit vendor, non-profit organization (single or part of a larger network); local government agency, community action project, etc.*)
- What are the primary sources of funding for this organization?
- What population(s) does your organization generally serve?
- Is this your organization's first collaborative effort with the FSP agency? If no, please describe your prior collaborations.
- Do you work directly with the state FS agency, with one or more county FS offices, or both?
- How would you characterize your working relationship with the state/local FSP agency (as applicable)?

B. Food Stamp Modernization Activities

B.1. Planning and Early Implementation

Please describe how your organization first became involved in these activities with the state/county.

- Were you involved when the state was planning its modernization efforts? If yes, describe the role of your organization. If yes, who were the key players in this process? (*Probe: The Legislature? The Governor's office? The state agency? One or more local county offices? Advocacy groups? What were the roles of the key players? What was the nature of their involvement? What were their key concerns and issues?*)



- What mechanisms were used during this planning process (e.g., workgroups, steering committees)? (*Probe: Was the decision-making process top/down? Bottom/up?*)
- Over what period of time did the planning process occur? (*Probe: Number of years/months?*)
- What were the major start-up/early implementation challenges you faced with these efforts? Were these resolved? How? What, if any, start-up challenges continue to be a problem?

B.2. Modernization Activities

I have a general understanding of the types of activities related to food stamp modernization that your state has undertaken but I'd like to review and confirm them. My understanding is that your state is currently implementing (or planning to implement) the following activities: (**List activities and confirm.**)

Are there other activities I haven't mentioned? If yes, please describe.

For our purposes, we're grouping these activities into four categories, so let's discuss your activities within each of these groupings. (*Note: Review all available information about the state's modernization efforts so you are familiar with their activities and have the necessary background prior to this discussion to help guide this discussion; confirm the background information, filling in the gaps and adding new information as needed. For each type of activity, determine the goal/purpose of the change, implementation stage (planning, early implementation and fully implemented) and the geographic scope for each activity.*) [The background information for each state will be organized to mirror the format for the Organizing Framework for Data Collection and Analysis as shown in Exhibit 2 in the Phase 1 Data Collection and Analysis Plan.]

- policy changes to modernize FSP application, case management, and recertification procedures (e.g., policy options, waivers, legislative changes).
- reengineering of administrative functions,
- increased or enhanced use of technology,
- partnering arrangements with businesses and nonprofit organizations (*Note: We are interested in partnering arrangements with community partners (including community-based organizations (CBOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs) and with private vendors who are performing task related to the certification/recertification process - not with vendors who are contracted to do IT systems upgrades.*)
- Do the activities that you consider "modernization" activities fit in these categories? If no, what types of strategies or activities meet your definition of food stamp



modernization? (*Probe: Please describe those activities that don't fit in these categories.*)

- What is the overall goal or purpose of each of these efforts? (**Note: Use prepared checklist to determine goals for each activity.**) (*Partners may not be able to address these questions.*)

Probe:

- *Reducing administrative costs*
 - *Increasing access for applicants/beneficiaries or specific subgroups*
 - *Improving customer service Maintaining program integrity (e.g., achieving and maintaining low error rates)*
 - *Maintaining program integrity (e.g., achieving and maintaining low error rates)*
 - *Advances in technology*
 - *Integrating the FSP with other benefit programs*
- How do the goals of the FSP modernization efforts fit with the overall goals and objectives of your organization/agency? Are there conflicting goals?
 - Determine implementation stage for each activity. How would you characterize the overall implementation status of your state's modernization activities (e.g., planning, early implementation, fully-implemented? When were each of these activities/changes implemented? Are they still in operation? If no, why not? When did you organization first become involved in these efforts?
 - Was there a specific impetus for each of these activities? If yes, what was the impetus for each of these changes?
 - Determine geographic scope of each activity. Were each of these activities implemented county-wide? If no, in what areas were they implemented? Why were they implemented in selected localities? Who made these implementation decisions? (**Note: When different activities are implemented only in selected areas, subsequent questions must be tailored to capture those differences and address each separately.**)
 - Have you made any major changes to your activities since they were first implemented? If yes, please describe. Any strategies implemented and then dropped? Any additions?
 - Are there other modernization activities you think the state should pursue? If yes, describe.

B.3. Impact of Modernization Activities on Clients and Staff

Now, let's talk about the impact of these changes/modernization efforts on the application/certification process for clients.



- Overall, from the applicant's/participant's perspective, how is the application/certification process different now than it was before these changes? How have these changes/modernization efforts affected the application/certification process for clients? Have the basic steps in applying for program benefits and becoming recertified changed for applicants and participants? What aspects are different? How/in what manner are they different (e.g., staff attrition, RIFs, etc.)? ***(Note: Use the profile sheet to address changes for the client at all 13 points in the application/certification process, as described in the organizing framework. Address changes separately for each type of modernization activity implemented. Partners may be able to address only a limited part of the process.)***

Now let's address the impact of these changes on the roles and responsibilities of staff assigned to these tasks.

- Overall, from the perspective of staff, who is the application/certification process different now than it was before these changes? What aspects are different? How/in what manner are they different (e.g., staff attrition, RIFs, etc.)? ***(Note: Use the profile sheet to address changes for staff at all 13 points in the application/certification process, as described in the organizing framework. Address changes separately for each type of modernization activity implemented. Partners may be able to address only a limited part of the process.)***

B.4 FSP Services Provided by Partners

- In general, please describe the FSP services that your organization provides. *(Probe: outreach, prescreening, application assistance, assistance with on-line filing, development of new technology).*
- To whom are services provided? Where are these services provided? (e.g. at the FSP agency? At your organization's sites? At a third-party site?)
- Had your organization done similar work in the past? If yes, please describe.
- Do you have a formal partnership arrangement, e.g., contract(s), MOU(s), with the FSP agency? What are the key features of this agreement? Is your organization paid for providing these services?
- How was your organization recruited/selected for this assignment? What was your organization's level of interest? What concerns did you have about participating? What challenges came up in setting up these collaborations? How were they resolved? What aspects of the coordination were particularly successful? What aspects continue to be challenging?
- For contracts—Was a request for proposal issued? Was the contract awarded on a competitive basis? What is the contract period(e.g., number of years)? Is the contract performance-based? If so, what are the key benchmarks?



- Please describe the mechanisms in place for communicating with the FSP agency about issues related to these modernization activities. Do you have regular meetings to discuss operational and policy issues? How often do you meet?
- Are there other partners involved in these activities? Who are they? What are their roles? Do you meet with those organizations on a regular basis?

B.5. Staffing/Training

- Tell me about the staff at your organization. How many staff are employed by the organization? How many staff work on FS modernization activities? What are their responsibilities and duties? Do they have other assignments as well?
- Were any new positions created to handle these modernization activities? Were any new staff hired specifically for these activities? How were staff chosen/assigned for these activities? What are the responsibilities and duties of staff performing these activities?
- Have there been any turnover issues among staff performing these duties? Has this had any impact on the agency's ability to provide services as planned?
- Was any special training provided to staff prior to roll-out of these efforts? If yes, please describe. Who conducted the training? Who participated? How long was the training? What was covered? Has any additional training been provided subsequent to start-up? Are there any plans for future training sessions?
- Is there any additional training you'd like to receive or you would like your staff to receive?

C. Client Flow

Please describe the service delivery process for the FSP activities your agency provides. Please describe all of the steps that occur. *(Note: Pursue these questions only if not covered previously. Use organizational framework to categorize steps in the certification/recertification process.)*

- Did implementation of these efforts change the overall way work is organized for your staff (e.g., food stamp application processing, certification and recertification decisions and general case management)? Please describe.
- What types of outreach activities are there in your county? Who is responsible for conducting them? How do most applicants hear about the FS program? Are the sources of referrals tracked? Have the sources of referrals changed since the implementation of the modernization activities?



- Has the type or amount of paperwork/data entry you're required to complete changed with the modernization activities? If yes, please describe. How has this affected your workload?

D. New Technology

- What, if any, changes was your office required to make to your MIS to accommodate reporting requirements for these activities? What hardware and software changes did this involve? Were you required to procure additional software or hardware? What challenges were associated with this process? Are there outstanding issues related to this process? Where do you stand in terms of completion of these efforts?
- What kind of technology training was provided to your staff?
- What is your opinion of the new technology? Is it difficult or relatively easy to use? What is the reaction of clients to the new technology?

E. Data Reporting/Outcomes

Note: If applicable, ask the person (s) who is responsible for entering and tracking data on modernization activities to walk you through the process, show you the forms, etc.

- Please describe your data tracking efforts for these modernization activities. What goals/outcomes are you attempting to track (e.g., improved application processing times, higher participation rates, error rates, lower administrative costs, reduction in paperwork)? How are you tracking these outcomes? How do you measure whether these goals are being met? How are you tracking this information?
- Have there been any challenges or issues in terms of tracking/providing the data required? If yes, please describe. Did this require any new procedures?
- What outcomes have been observed to date? Are these outcomes different than what you expected to find? If yes, what explanations can you offer for these differences?
- Are you aware of any unintended negative effects of modernization? If yes, please describe? Any unanticipated positive effects? If yes, please describe
- ***(If providing additional access points to the FSP.)*** Are you tracking data on the usage of new access points by applicants and recipients? Are you tracking this data by population subgroups? Please describe. What has your data shown thus far?
- Which data are easiest to compile/provide? Which are most problematic?



- What have been the state/county/metro area trends in FS participation during the period of your modernization activities? What data show this?
 - [if there is a trend] Do you think this trend is related to the modernization activities?
- What have been the state/county/metro area trends in total benefits during the period of your modernization activities? What data show this?
 - [if there is a trend] Do you think this trend is related to the modernization activities?
- What have been the state/county/metro area trends in error rates during the period of your modernization activities? What data show this?
 - [if there is a trend] Do you think this trend is related to the modernization activities?
- What have been the state/county/metro area trends in administrative costs during the period of your modernization activities? What data show this?
 - [if there is a trend] Do you think this trend is related to the modernization activities?

F. Contextual Issues

- Are there any features/issues/concerns unique to the counties/sites implementing FS modernization activities that might have an impact on successful implementation (e.g., local labor market conditions, staffing issues in the local offices, new local office administrators)?
- What are the key barriers to FSP access in these communities (e.g., language barriers)? Have they changed over time?
- Have there been any notable changes in the make-up of the FSP population recently (e.g., influx of immigrant population)?

G. General Perceptions/Opinions

- Looking back, which aspects of your work with the FS agency on modernization seems to have been the most successful at this time? The most challenging? Are there any lessons or insights that might be important for others undertaking a similar effort to know? Any recommendations?



- What are the major implementation challenges or barriers you faced in carrying out your agreements/contracts with the FS agency? What strategies have you adopted to overcome these challenges? (**Note: Don't ask if you have already dealt with this in previous questions.**) What challenges still remain?
- [*If the state/county is implementing multiple interventions*] Among the activities that are being implemented, from your perspective, which do you think are the most successful? Why? The least successful? Why? If you were launching this effort again, what would you do differently?
- Do you feel that these efforts have been successful in terms of meeting their stated goals? Why or why not?
- In terms of lessons learned, what, if anything, should states and contractors/partners do differently to facilitate implementation and maximize positive outcomes?

H. Future Plans

- What are your plans for the next 2-3 years in terms of working with the FSP agency to provide these new modernization activities and changes the certification/recertification process? Will these activities continue? Why or why not? (*If applicable*) Will the efforts currently operating be expanded to other counties/locations? Please discuss.

THANK YOU