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FOCUS GROUP GUIDE LONG-TERM & RECENT PARTICIPANTS

A. Introduction

Thank you very much for agreeing to come to this discussion group today. My name is [NAME], and I work for Mathematica Policy Research, an independent research organization that is not part of the government.

We are doing a study for the federal government to learn about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP, which was formerly known as the Food Stamp Program [and is called NAME here in STATE], and how it works in your state.

You have applied or recertified for benefits and, as part of the study, we want to learn about what was easy and what was not so easy for you. Your experiences and your opinions matter to us.

Before we start, I want to mention some rules for our discussion group.

- First, we want you to know that taking part in this discussion is up to you, and you can choose to not answer a question if you wish. ***Participating in this discussion will not affect any of the services and benefits (e.g., SNAP, Medicaid) you receive.***
- I am going to ask some questions and I'd like everyone to speak up. Let's try to have equal "air time" so everyone will have a chance to speak. Please speak one at a time and as loudly as I am speaking. It's important to avoid any side conversation with your neighbors.
- Please respect each other's point of view. There are no right or wrong answers. So just say exactly what you think, whether it's something good or bad.
- We have many topics to cover during the discussion. At times, I may need to move the conversation along to be sure we cover everything. If I interrupt you, it's not personal. I just want to get to everything that's on the agenda.
- After you leave today, we ask that you respect each other's privacy by not repeating any of the discussion you've heard.
- I would like to tape record our discussion so I can listen to it later and accurately report *what* was said. Everything you say here is private. No one besides our study team will listen to the tape. Your

names will not be included in our report or on any document we submit to anyone outside of Mathematica.

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- If you want to say something that you don't want taped, please let me know, and I will be glad to pause the recorder. Does anybody have any objections to participating or to my taping our discussion?¹
- The session will last about 1-1/2 hours, and we will not take any formal breaks. But please feel free to get up at any time to stretch, use the restroom, or help yourselves to something to eat or drink.
- At the end of the session, you will receive \$25 as a thank you for coming today and sharing your opinions.
- Are there any questions before we get started?

To get started, please introduce yourself and tell us:

- Your first name
- How long you have lived in the area

¹ If a second request to turn off the recorder is made, the moderator will inform the participants that the recorder will no longer be used so that we can ensure the focus group proceeds as efficiently as possible. Mathematica will then rely solely on the detailed notes that will be taken during the focus group session. In addition, Mathematica will closely monitor each of the focus groups to identify this and other issues that may arise. We will keep FNS informed of any such issues and take the necessary steps to resolve them

OPINIONS ABOUT THE APPLICATION PROCESS

In-Person at Local Office

1. You have all been invited to participate in this group because you recently applied for SNAP benefits or have recertified. I'd like you to think about your most recent application or recertification. When was the most recent time that you applied/recertified for food stamps?
 - Was it within the last 3 months? Within the last 6 months? Or longer than 6 months ago?
 - Were you already receiving benefits when you were filling out the SNAP application? That is, were you recertifying your eligibility so that you could continue to get SNAP? Or were you applying while you were not receiving SNAP benefits?
2. How long did it take before you found out that you had been approved?
3. How many of you filled out an application or recertified in-person at a [STATE AGENCY] local office?
 - Why did you choose that location?
 - Can you describe what you had to do during the application or recertification process?
 - Were you able to complete the application process there? IF NO: What other steps did you need to take?
 - How long did it take you to complete the application? Does that feel like the right amount of time, fast, or too long for completing an application?
 - Did you have assistance in completing that application? Who provided assistance? What did they help you with? Were the staff generally helpful?
 - Was the application/recertification process what you expected? If not, what was different?
 - Would you say that the procedures for applying/recertifying were clear, or would you say they were confusing?
 - If you have apply/recertify again, would you go in-person again or try a different way such as applying/recertifying over the telephone or on-line?

In-Person at

Kiosk

3a. How many of you have filled out an application or recertified at a kiosk that could have been located at a [STATE AGENCY] local office, at a community organization, or some other place in your area.

- Why did you choose that location?
 - Could you describe that what you had to do during the application or recertification process?
 - Were you able to complete the application process there? IF NO: What other steps did you need to take?
 - How long did it take you to complete the application? Does that feel like the right amount of time, fast, or too long for completing an application?
 - Did you have assistance in completing that application? Who provided assistance? What did they help you with? Were the staff generally helpful?
 - Was the application/recertification process what you expected? If not, what was different?
 - Would you say that the procedures for applying/recertifying were clear, or would you say they were confusing?
 - If you have apply/recertify again, would you use a kiosk again or try a different way such as applying/recertifying over the telephone or on-line?

By Phone

4a. How many of you have filled out an application or recertified over the telephone?

- Could you describe that process? Did you call [STATE AGENCY] or do you think it was a call center?
- How did you know you could apply/recertify over the phone? How did you get that information?
- Why did you choose to apply/recertify by phone?
- What other steps did you need to take to complete the application/recertification process?
- How long did it take you to complete the application? The recertification? Does that seem like a reasonable amount of time, fast, or too long for completing an application?
- Was the application/recertification process what you expected? If not, what was different?

At Community

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Organization

Would you say that the procedures for applying/recertifying were clear, or would you say they were confusing?

If you have apply/recertify again, would you use the phone again or try a different way such as applying/recertifying in-person to the SNAP agency or completing the process on-line?

4b. How many of you have filled out an applied or recertified at a community organization?

- Could you describe that process?
- Why did you choose that location? How did you know you could apply/recertify there?
- Were you able to complete the application/recertification process there? If not, what other steps did you need to take?
- How long did it take you to complete the application? Does that seem like a reasonable amount of time, fast, or too long for completing an application?
- Did you have assistance in completing that application/recertification? Who provided assistance? Were the staff helpful?
- Was the application/recertification process what you expected? If not, what was different?
- Would you say that the procedures for applying/recertifying were clear, or would you say they were confusing?
- If you have to do it again, would you start/complete your application at that organization? What would you change about what they do?
- Are there other organizations that should provide SNAP applications? Why?

On-Line

4c. How many of you applied/recertified online using a computer either at your home or at some other place?

- Could you describe that process?
- How did you learn you could complete the application/recertification online?
- How long did it take you to complete the application/recertification? Does that feel like the right amount of time, fast, or too long for completing an application/recertification?

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- What other steps did you need to take to complete your application?
- Was the application/recertification process what you expected? If not, what was different?
- Would you say that the procedures for applying/recertifying were clear, or would you say they were confusing?
- If you have to apply/recertify again, will you do it through the computer again or try another way--such as by telephone or going in-person to the SNAP agency?

5. Still thinking about using computers to apply or recertify for benefits.

Let's start with those who did not use a computer...

- Would you be willing to use a computer to apply for SNAP benefits?
- Do you use computers for other activities? For example, do you use computers for work, for checking bank statements, or for e-mail?
- [FOR THOSE WHO SAID THEY WOULD NOT BE WILLING] What type of assistance would you need in order to be comfortable with using computers to apply for SNAP benefits?

Now, for those of you who used a computer to apply/recertify...

- Do you think applying/recertifying by computer is easier or harder than a paper application?
- Did you need help with the application? Were you able to get the help you needed? Who helped you?
- Do you think what you had to do to complete the application by computer is more or less than what people have to do to complete a paper application? More or less than doing it over the phone?

6a. Some of you of you had to go to an eligibility interview in person at a [STATE AGENCY] office.

- Describe that process.
- How long did it take? Does that seem like a reasonable amount of time, was it too short or r too long a time for an interview?
- Did you have to make a special trip to the office for that interview, or were you already there?
- Was the interview done on the same day that you completed the application?

6b. Some of you had your eligibility interview over the phone. If so, please tell us about that experience.

- How long did it take? Does that seem like a reasonable amount of time, was it too short or too long a time for an interview?
- Was this process what you expected? Why or why not?

7. How did you submit the other documentation needed as part as your application? This could include documentation of housing, income, or expenses.

On-Line (cont'dl)

- Describe the process of submitting this documentation.
- Did you have to make copies of the documentation at the office? If so, was it easy or difficult to get copies made?
- Did you have to scan the documents or upload them electronically? If so, describe that process. Was it easy or difficult? Why?
- Did you find the overall process of submitting the necessary documentation easy or difficult? Why?
- Did the process of submitting the documentation take more or less time than what you expected?

7a. [LONG TERM PARTICIPANTS ONLY]: For those of you have recertified for SNAP benefits in the past year...

- Did you understand that you would need to recertify for SNAP benefits? Who explained this to you? Did you receive a reminder letter or phone call from [STATE AGENCY] that you would need to recertify?
- For those who used a computer to recertify, was your information already prefilled when you logged in?
 - How would you compare your experience with the recertification process with your experience completing your first application for SNAP benefits? What aspects were easier? What aspects were more difficult? Why?

8. What are some words you would use to describe application/recertification process for the SNAP?

PROBE: It could be any word: easy, fun, angry, frustrating

9. People use different words to describe their experience with the application and recertification processes. Would you say that applying/recertifying for SNAP benefits is convenient or inconvenient? Why?

10. What was the easiest part of the application/recertification process? Why? What was the most difficult part? Why?

11. Where can people get general information about SNAP if they have questions?

- IF STATE HAS TOLL-FREE NUMBER: Are you aware of the program's toll free telephone number?

- Are you aware of STATE'S SNAP website [referred to as NAME]?
12. Have any of you had to call [STATE AGENCY] or a customer service center for information about applying or recertifying for the program?
- Describe your experience.
 - Did you speak with a "live" person or just listen to the automated voice responses?
 - IF AUTOMATED SYSTEM: Did the automated voice response system give you information specific to your case? Or did it only provide general information?
 - What information did you get from the call center?
 - Did that information answer your questions? Did that information influence your decision to apply for SNAP benefits?
13. How many of you used STATE'S SNAP WEBSITE NAME to track your application status or get more information about your case?
- What kind of information were you looking for? Were you able to find what you needed?
 - Did you get information about your specific case?
 - IF YES: How did you learn you could access your account online?
 - Did you have to create an account to log-in? Was this easy or difficult?
 - How would you rate the website overall for obtaining information?
14. Is there anything that you would change about the SNAP application/recertification process to make it easier?
15. Have there been any times in the past where you thought you would be eligible for SNAP benefits but did not apply? Why didn't you apply? What could have changed to encourage you to apply?
16. How would you compare your most recent experience applying for SNAP benefits with your experiences with other government agencies, such as the DMV? Is it easier or more difficult to get SNAP benefits than, say, to get your driver's license or to register a car?

OPINIONS ABOUT REPORTING CHANGES

1. Has anyone had a change in family status, income or medical expenses that might have affected your SNAP benefits? Has anyone contacted the [SNAP AGENCY] to report those changes?

PROBE: Note that this is different from recertification. For recertification, you need to reapply for SNAP benefits. Here, we are talking about times when you need to tell [SNAP AGENCY] that your income, expenses, or family status changed.

IF THEY HAVE NOT REPORTED CHANGES:

- For those of you have not reported changes, if you needed to report changes because you had a change in, say, your income, how would you go about doing that?
- What are the other types of circumstances in which you are required to report a change?

IF THEY HAVE REPORTED CHANGES:

- For those of you who have reported changes, describe the process of reporting changes.
 - PROBE: Did you use a computer to report changes?
 - IF YES, Where was the computer located?
 - How did you know you could use a computer to report changes?
 - Was using a computer to report changes easy or difficult?
- Did you understand that you would need to report changes? Who explained this to you?
- Did you have questions about the process? If so, was someone available to answer your questions?
- Was reporting household changes convenient or inconvenient?
- Did the process of reporting changes take more or less time than you expected?

ADMINISTRATIVE RESTRUCTURING

1. Do any of you have an assigned case worker that you go to with any questions or updates about your case?
 - IF YES:

- When was this person assigned to you? Did they do your eligibility interview? Have you had different case workers assigned to you over time?
- Are they easy to reach when you have questions?
- How helpful has this person been so far?
- IF NO:
 - About how many different people have you dealt with so far throughout the process of applying, interviewing, reporting changes, etc.?
 - If you have questions, do you call a specific person at a local office, or a call center?

MODERNIZATION INITIATIVES

The state has in place a number of things to improve the way SNAP is administered. We are interested in learning whether you think these initiatives will lead to better services for people.

PASS OUT A DESCRIPTION OF INITIATIVES THAT HAVE GONE INTO EFFECT IN THAT STATE AND READ ALOUD WHILE PARTICIPANTS READ IT SILENTLY.²

1. Are any of you aware of anything that has been done in [STATE] to change the way people can get information about the program or apply for SNAP benefits
 - Which changes are you aware of?
 - Do you think people in general are aware of these things?
2. Do you think these changes make it easier or more difficult to apply for SNAP benefits? Why?
3. Are there any things listed here that you would not want to see implemented?

HOLD UP A RATING SCALE (1-5, "EXCELLENT," ETC.) AND TELL THE GROUP TO USE THIS SCALE WHEN ANSWERING SOME OF THE REMAINING QUESTIONS.

4. Now let's talk about program accessibility. By accessibility, I mean that people who need SNAP benefits know where to go to apply, and those locations are convenient.

² The handout will differ for each state depending on the modernization initiatives that have taken place in that state. An example of one is included at the end of this discussion guide.

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- If you had to rate the program before the applications were available at community organizations and/or before the use of computer applications, which number would you pick? Why?
- And how would you rate the program after these changes were made? Why?
- What would need to change to make the program a 1?

6. Let's talk about program staff.
 - How would you rate the [INSERT EACH CATEGORY BELOW] that you dealt with when applying or recertifying for SNAP benefits? Why?
 - Agency staff you met with in-person?
 - Staff at Community Organizations?
 - Agency staff you spoke to over the phone?
 - AFTER EACH RATING: What would need to change to make their rating a 1?
7. Next, let's talk about the reporting and recertification process.
 - If you had to rate the reporting and recertification process before the recent changes were made, which number would you pick? Why?
 - And how would you rate the reporting and recertification process with these recent changes? Why?
 - What would need to change to make the program a 1?
8. Finally, let's talk about the quality of SNAP overall.
 - [LTP] If you had to rate the old SNAP overall—that is, before these recent changes—which number would you pick? Why?
 - [LTP, RP] If you had to rate the changed SNAP overall, which number would you pick? Why?
 - [LTP, RP] What would need to change to make the program a "1"?
9. What other changes do you think are needed to improve the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and make it more accessible to people who need assistance?

WRAP-UP

Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experiences with SNAP, or are there other thoughts you had during our discussion that you would like to mention before we finish?

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts and ideas. This discussion has been very useful in helping us learn more about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in (STATE).

**[FOCUS GROUP HANDOUT - SAMPLE]
CHANGES TO THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION AND ASSISTANCE
PROGRAM**

- **Electronic Applications** - Individuals can apply on-line.
- **Community Partners** - Schools, libraries, hospitals and other organizations provide applications and application assistance.
- **Self-Service Centers** - At [STATE] offices, computers, fax machines, copiers, and a secure drop-off box are available to apply for benefits or report income changes.
- **Shorter Eligibility Interviews** - Some individuals qualify for expedited interviews
- **Toll-Free Information Line** - Provides information about the program and allows participants to report income changes