

## INTRODUCTION FOR USE WITH ALL FOCUS GROUPS

Thank you for agreeing to come to this discussion group today. My name is Rhoda, and my co-worker is [NAME], and we work for Mathematica Policy Research, an independent research organization. We are located in Washington, DC and are not from the [local Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) office name] or from any local organization that you may have already spoken with about [local SNAP name].

We are doing a study for the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service to learn about getting food benefits through [local SNAP name], and how it works in [SITE] as part of a special outreach project to increase participation in [local SNAP name] by: [people age 60 and older]/[people who are working, looking for work or who expect to be working in the future]. As part of the study, we want to learn about your impressions of [local SNAP name]. In particular, we want to know how you first learned about the program, what you thought about the application process, and your opinions on ways to improve the program. Our discussion will take one-and-a-half hours.

### *Local SNAP Names*

MA – SNAP Food Stamps  
MI – The Bridge Card  
OH – Ohio Direction Card  
PA – ACCESS Card  
WA – Basic Food Program  
WI – FoodShare

Public reporting burden for this focus group is estimated to average 90 minutes per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, and participating in the discussion. An agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services, Office of Research and Analysis, 3101 Park Center Drive, Room 1014, Alexandria, VA 22302 ATTN: PRA (0584-0558).

We have a few basic rules that will help make the group run well that I wanted to mention.

- First, it's important for you to know that being a part of 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 you receive, and will not have an impact on whether or not you are approved for food stamps, or on your monthly food stamp amount.***
- I am going to lead the discussion by asking the group several questions. It's really important for everyone to speak up. Whenever

possible, let's try to share talking time so that people talk about the same amount—no one talks too much or too little. It will be helpful if you speak one at a time and as loudly as I am speaking. Please avoid any side conversation with your neighbors.

- Please respect each other's point of view. There are no right or wrong answers. We just want to learn from you and your experiences, so just say exactly what you think, whether it's positive or negative.
- 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.
- We also ask that you not repeat any of the discussion you've heard after you leave today in order to respect each other's privacy.
- I would like to tape record our discussion. This is so I can listen to it later when I write up my notes. We don't care *who* said what, but we do want to make sure we accurately record *what* you said. 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?
- Everything you say here is private to the extent permitted by law. No one besides our study team will listen to the tape. Your names will not be included in our report, and we will not share what someone says with anyone outside of this room.
- The session will last about 1½ 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 \$40 as a thank you for coming today and sharing your opinions and also to help offset the costs of transportation [FOR WORKING POOR GROUP ONLY: and any child care you had to arrange in order to participate with us today.]
- Are there any questions before we get started?

Let's start by going around the table and introducing ourselves by stating your first name, and how long you have lived in this area.

**Note to Facilitator:**

*[Bracketed italic text]* indicates material for elderly focus groups only.

[Bracketed underlined text] indicates material for working poor focus groups only.

(Follow-up questions are in parentheses).

**PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES LEARNING ABOUT SNAP**

You have all been invited to participate in this group because you recently applied for food benefits through [local SNAP name] and you belong to a group that FNS would like to serve better: *[people age 60 and older]*/[people who are working, looking for work or who expect to be working in the future]. To begin this discussion, I'd like to ask you about what made you interested in applying for [local SNAP name] recently.

1. Where did you see or hear about [local SNAP name] in the past few months that made you think about whether or should apply or whether you might be eligible?

Did you...

- Learn about [local SNAP name] while applying for other benefits?
  - Receive a letter about it? Get a phone call?
  - See or hear an ad on a billboard, TV, or the radio?
  - Learn about it while you were somewhere in the community that you usually go?
    - o Community center, Veterans of Foreign Wars hall, or other gathering place in the community
    - o *[Senior center]*
    - o *[VA/ Veteran's groups]*
    - o Food bank or other food provider
    - o Church or another place of worship
    - o Your doctor's office or your hospital
    - o [Your employer]
  - Hear about it from someone else? If so, who?
    - o Friend/family
    - o A presentation somewhere (given by whom?)
    - o Referral from another service provider (from whom?)
  - Participate in [local SNAP name] at some time in the past, before you recently reapplied? (About how long ago did you reapply?)
2. What appealed to you most about what you heard or saw about [local SNAP name]?
    - Availability of benefits
    - Ease of application
    - Ease of using benefits on the [EBT card name]
    - Offer of assistance from someone outside SNAP office
    - Other (what?)
  3. Did you call the [local SNAP name] office or a hotline to learn more about [local SNAP name] and how to apply? Describe your experience.
    - How did you know where to call?

- Did you speak with a person or just listen to the automated voice responses? If you spoke with a person, was this person professional? Friendly? Helpful?
  - [Could you speak with someone in your preferred language?]
  - What information did you get on the phone?
  - Did that information answer your questions?
  - Did that information influence your decision to apply for [local SNAP name]? (Why or why not?)
4. *[Before you actually applied]*, did you have a pre-screening phone call or meeting where someone asked you questions about yourself to figure out whether you *might* qualify for [local SNAP name] and how much you could potentially receive in benefits?
- How easy or difficult were these questions? (When that person asked about your income, assets and expenses, did you tell them exact figures or did you estimate?)
  - Did that pre-screening conversation answer all of your questions? (What did you still need to know?)
  - What did that person tell you about how likely it was that you would qualify? (What was your reaction – did you believe them or were you unsure?)
  - Did that information influence your decision to apply for [local SNAP name]? (Why or why not?)
5. *[Before you actually applied]*, did you or anyone else use a computer to try to figure out whether you *might* qualify for [local SNAP name]?
- Where was the computer that you used? (your home, a library, a community agency)
  - Did someone help you complete the questions? If so, who was that person? What did you find out on the computer about how likely it was that you would qualify?
  - Did you find out how much you might receive?
  - How easy or difficult was it to use the computer to get this information?
  - Did the results of the computer program influence your decisions to apply for [local SNAP name]?
  - If this experience didn't motivate you to apply, why not?
6. What do you think would make it easier for people like you to learn about [local SNAP name]?
- A personal letter? From whom?
  - A personal call? From whom?
  - More ads? Where? (TV , billboards, radios)
  - More flyers? Where?
  - Do you have a preference for someone calling you, sending you a letter, or talking with you face-to-face?
  - Of these ideas, which one would fail to get your attention and why? (For example, some people might not have a phone, might throw out fliers, or might not listen to the radio or watch TV.)

7. Have there been any times in the past when you thought you would be eligible for [local SNAP name] but did not apply? Why didn't you apply? What could have changed to encourage you to apply?

## **PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES APPLYING FOR SNAP**

8. Think about your most recent application for food benefits through [local SNAP name]. That is, even if you applied for [local SNAP name] in the past, I want to talk only about your most recent experience applying. What are some words you would use to describe your personal experience with the application process for the [local SNAP name]?

PROBE: It could be any word: easy, fun, angry, frustrating, unpleasant, or distressing.

How about "convenient"? Would you say that applying for [local SNAP name] is convenient or inconvenient? Why?

9. [Only in sites that are using online applications as part of the pilot:] Next, I want to ask about using computers to apply for benefits. Remember, applying for benefits is a more thorough process than a pre-screener that asks you just a few questions. How many of you used a computer to apply for [local SNAP name]—that is, either you or someone helping you typed information into a computer rather than filling out a paper application or giving information verbally to a worker in the [local SNAP name] office?
  - What about the rest of you? Would you be willing to use a computer to apply for [local SNAP name]? (IF NO: Why not?)
  - For those of you who used a computer to apply, where did you complete the computer application? (For example, SNAP office, local library, other community organization, tax preparer, or own computer at home.) Why did you go there, and how did you know to go there?
  - Were the procedures clear or confusing?
  - Do you think applying by computer is easier or harder than a paper application? Why?
  - How long did it take you to complete the application on the computer? Was this the right amount of time or too long?
  - Once you submitted the application by computer, what else did you have to do? (For example, did you have to copy and submit verification documents, sign and submit something, have a phone or in-person interview, or something else?)
  - What did you like about this process? What would you change?
  - Were you satisfied with your experience? Would you do the application this way again?
10. [Only in sites that are using phone applications as part of the pilot:] Let's talk about applying for benefits over the phone. How many of you applied for food benefits through [local SNAP name] over the phone (that is, you provided information for the application when you received a phone call or dialed toll-free phone number)?

- What about the rest of you? Would you be willing to apply for [local SNAP name] over the phone? (IF NO: Why not?)
  - For those of you who used the telephone to apply, how did you know who to call to be able to apply over the phone?
  - Were the procedures clear or confusing?
  - Do you think applying by phone is easier or harder than a paper application? Why?
  - How long did it take you to complete the application by phone? Was this the right amount of time or too long?
  - Once you submitted the application by phone, did you have to copy and submit verification documents, sign and submit something, have a phone or in-person interview, or something else?
  - Was the person who answered the phone professional? Friendly? Helpful?
  - What did you like about this process? What would you change?
  - Were you satisfied with your experience? Would you do the application this way again?
11. How did the rest of you apply for [local SNAP name]?
- Did you fill out a paper application? Where? (For example, SNAP office, community organization, tax preparer .)
  - If not at a SNAP office, why there? How did you know you could go there? Were you familiar with this place? How comfortable were you going there?
  - Was it what you expected? Why not?
  - How long did it take? The right amount of time? Too long?
  - After you submitted the paper application, did you have to copy and submit verification documents, sign and submit something, have a phone or in-person interview, or something else?
  - Were the staff you encountered at this office professional? Helpful?
  - Were you satisfied with your experience? If you had to do it again, would you start your application at that organization? What would you change about what they do?
  - Are there other organizations that should provide [local SNAP name] applications? Which organizations and why?
12. Now, here is a question for everyone, no matter how you applied. When you worked on your application, did you need or ask anyone for help with completing it?
- Were you able to get assistance?
  - Who provided assistance? A [SNAP office] worker? Community organization staff? A family member or friend? Someone who helped you file your taxes?
  - [If not family or friends] What kinds of things did they help you with?
  - [If not family or friends] Please describe your impression of the assistance.
    - Were staff helpful?
    - Would you agree, disagree, or have no opinion about whether staff at the organization were professional, fair, and knowledgeable?
  - Is there some kind of help that you wish you had gotten with the application but did not receive? Please describe.

13. After you completed the application questions, how many of you needed to submit documentation other than your application? This could include documentation of housing, income, or expenses.
  - Describe the process of submitting this documentation. What did you have to submit? Did you need to make a special trip to the [SNAP] office? If not, how did you submit your documentation?
  - Did you find this process easy or difficult? Why?
  - Did you have to make copies of the documentation? If so, was it easy or difficult to get copies made? Where did you go to get the copies made?
  
14. Now think about what happened after you turned in your application and your documentation. How many of you had an interview with a worker?
  - What was the purpose of this interview? (What did you talk about?)
  - Where did you go for the interview? Did you go to the [SNAP] office, meet with someone at another location [*or at home*], or get interviewed over the phone?
    - [If in person:] Did you have to make a special trip to the office for that interview, or were you already there?
  - How long did it take? Does that feel like the right amount of time, fast, or too long for an interview?
  - How would you rate the program staff that you encountered during this interview? HOLD UP A RATING SCALE (1-5, "EXCELLENT," ETC.) Why?
  - What would need to change to make their rating a 1?
  
15. Overall, if you had to rate the application process for [local SNAP name], which number would you pick? Why? What would need to change to make the program a 1?
  
16. Is there anything else that you would change about the [local SNAP name] application process to make it easier to apply for benefits?

## WRAP-UP

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

*[What other changes in the [local SNAP name] would help people age 60 and older apply for food benefits?]*

[What other changes in the [local SNAP name] would help people who are working, searching for work, or expect to work in the future to apply for food benefits?]

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 [local SNAP name] Program in [SITE].