Y. Interview Guide: Local Office Staff

Introduction

Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. My name is *[interviewer's name]*, and I work for Westat, a private research company based in Rockville, Maryland.

Purpose: The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service, or FNS, is interested in understanding more about tools used to identify cases likely to have a payment error. These tools may be known by different names, such as case-profiling tools, risk assessment tools, or error-prone profiling. After cases are flagged as high risk, they undergo a rigorous process to ensure accurate benefit decisions. FNS hired Westat to conduct a study to learn more about the development and implementation of these tools. The findings from the study will be used to inform the development of case-profiling tools FNS and State agencies use, identify best practices, and develop resources and technical assistance.

How you were selected: We first conducted an online survey of all SNAP State Directors. We then worked with FNS to select six State agencies among survey respondents for more indepth case studies on their use of case-profiling tools. After we discussed with the SNAP State Director what we hope to learn from your State agency, the State Director identified you as someone who would have valuable input and should be interviewed.

Risks and privacy: We use all data we collect only for the research purposes we describe. FNS knows which States were asked to participate in each case study but does not know the names or job titles of the individuals interviewed. We will report the results of these interviews for each State as a whole, but your name will not be linked to your responses. In our reports, we may include direct quotes, but they will be presented without the speaker's name or title. FNS will receive a redacted copy of the transcript of this interview that has been stripped of identifying information, except for the name of your State.

Study costs and compensation: There is no cost to you to participate apart from the time you spend with us for this interview, and there is no compensation. The interview takes 60 minutes.

Voluntary participation: Your participation is entirely voluntary. Refusal to participate will not have any impact on your position, your State agency, or nutrition programs. You may take a break, skip questions, say something off the record, or stop participating at any time.

Questions: If you have questions about your rights and welfare as a research participant, please call the Westat Human Subjects Protections office at 1.888.920.7631. Please leave a message with your first name; the name of the research study you are calling about, which is the SNAP Risk Assessment study; and a phone number, beginning with the area code. Someone will return your call as soon as possible.

We have planned for this discussion to last 60 minutes, until *[time]*. Is that still okay?

With your permission, I would like to record this discussion to help us fill any gaps in our written notes. The recordings, transcripts, and any notes we have will be stored on our secure server and will be destroyed after the project is complete. FNS will not receive any audio recordings.

Do you have any questions? *[Answer all questions]*

May I turn on the audiorecorder now? *[Turn on audiorecorder if gives consent]*

Now that the audiorecorder is on, do you agree to participate? *[Pause for response]*

And do you consent to be audiorecorded? *[Pause for response]*

Warmup and Background

1. To start, please tell me how long you have worked at this particular office and what your responsibilities are.

2. For the rest of this discussion, we will be talking mostly about the *[tool name]*. What *[is/was]* the nature of your involvement with *[tool name]*?

   [Probe: Designed it, built it, tested it? Is familiar with tool but was not involved in development?]

3. *[If not involved in designing/building it]* When did you first hear about the *[tool name]*?

   a. What were you told about what it was designed to do?

   b. What were your initial thoughts about it?

Using an RA Tool

4. Before I ask more specific questions, please describe how *[tool name]* works.

5. My understanding from the survey is that the *[tool name]* flags SNAP cases thought to be at risk of payment error at *[read survey response A19]*. Is that correct?

   a. *[If no]* When does *[tool name]* flag a SNAP case thought to be at risk of payment error?

6. Which staff use the *[tool name]*?

7. *[For e-tools]* How do staff know that *[tool name]* has flagged a SNAP case as being at risk of payment error?

   [Probe: Is there a note in the case file? Is an automatic notification sent to you? Is there color coding to indicate if a SNAP case is at risk?]

8. When *[tool name]* flags a SNAP case, what is supposed to happen next?

   [Probe: Undergoes a second review? Household asked to provide additional information?]

   [Note: For the following subquestions, multiple teams of local staff—eligibility staff, interviewers, QC staff, supervisors—may touch a case. Make sure you are clear on which types of staff the respondent is talking about.]

a. Are staff required to complete these followup steps, or are they considered suggested practices?

b. What percentage of the time would you estimate that the local staff are able to complete those steps exactly as they are spelled out?

  i. *[If not 100 percent of the time]* What makes it difficult for staff to complete those followup steps on cases that are flagged?

c. *[If next steps involve collecting additional information on the case flagged]* How often has collecting that additional information on a SNAP case revealed new information that changes a household's eligibility or benefits?

9. What is the timeframe for completing these steps after a case has been flagged?

a. Is that enough time to complete the followup steps needed? Why or why not?

10. How are these steps different from what would be done for a regular case that was not flagged?

[Probe: Are the cases flagged reviewed more times than those not flagged? Do staff collect additional or different data for the cases thought to be at risk of payment error than they do for cases not flagged?]

a. Are different staff involved with the cases flagged than with cases not flagged?

  i. *[If yes]* Which staff are only involved with cases that are flagged by the tool?

11. *[For e-tools]* Do staff enter any information manually when using the *[tool name]*?

[Note: For instance, staff may enter information gleaned from a head-of-household interview that the tool then uses to determine whether the case is high risk]

a. Does the *[tool name]* use information from any of your local office systems or databases? If so, please explain.

[Probe: Online applications, eligibility system, other?]

12. For the households flagged by *[tool name]*, what are they told about this process, if anything?

a. What are they told about why their case was flagged as being at risk for payment error?

b. For cases whose SNAP benefits changed because they were flagged by *[tool name]*, what are households told about the reasons for the change?

c. How could a household correct any inaccurate information that was used to flag their case?

13. Tell me about any training you or other staff received on *[tool name]*.

[Note: Supervisors/managers may have received training or technical assistance from the SNAP State agency; other local office staff would have probably received training from the supervisor]

a. Which staff received the training?

b. Who led the training?

c. What did the training cover?

d. Should the training have covered any other topics? If yes, what?

e. *[If supervisor received training or technical assistance from State]* To what extent did the training prepare you to explain the *[tool name]* to your staff?

f. *[If no training provided]* What kind of training would have been useful?

  i. Which staff should be trained?

14. What kind of impact, if any, has *[tool name]* had on your daily work?

[Probe to understand impact on workload, on workflow between staff, other]

15. What do you believe are the biggest challenges to using *[tool name]*?

[Probe: IT issues, staffing challenges, training, other?]

16. If you could, what would you change about how *[tool name]* works?

a. Why would that change be beneficial?

17. If you were to hear that another local SNAP office was considering using a similar tool, what advice would you give the office?

Data Tracking [Local Office Supervisors and Managers Only]

18. What data, if any, do you receive from your SNAP State agency on payment error rates?

a. What do you do with that information?

19. Tell me about any data your office tracks with regard to *[tool name]*.

[Probe: Number of cases flagged, number of cases followed up on, number of cases with payment error, other?]

a. How are those data tracked?

  [Probe: Shared database? Staff track these data on their own in various modes?]

b. What reports or other information do you receive?

c. Do the data indicate whether the cases flagged using *[tool name]* were actually found to have payment errors?

20. We know this can be hard to determine, but what impact, if any, has *[tool name]* had on payment error rates?

[Probe to understand if this is their perception only or if they have data to point to]

Local Context and Wrap-Up

This information has been very helpful. These last few questions will give me a little more understanding of your local office before we wrap up.

21. One thing I'm curious about is staff availability. In general, do you feel there are enough staff to process SNAP cases?

    [Yes, enough staff]

    a. And are there enough staff to follow up on the SNAP cases that *[tool name]* flags?

    [No, not enough staff]

    b. What types of staff do you feel are needed in your office to process SNAP cases?

        i. *[Supervisors/managers]* Which of those staff are most critical to keeping payment error rates low?

    c. What types of staff are needed to follow up on the SNAP cases that *[tool name]* flags?

        ii. Are there enough of those staff in your office?

    d. How long has the office needed additional staff?

        [Probe: Since before COVID-19 or more recently?]

    e. How has the staff shortage affected the use of *[tool name]*?

    f. *[For supervisors/managers]* How has the staff shortage affected payment error rates?

22. *[For supervisors/managers]* Do you feel you have enough funding to process SNAP cases? Why or why not?

    a. Do you feel you have enough funding to follow up on the cases that *[tool name]* flags? Why or why not?

    b. *[Supervisors/managers]* How might the funding level affect the office's payment error rate?

23. *[For supervisors/managers]* We know that COVID-19 drastically affected what were formerly standard practices when moving a SNAP case through the eligibility determination process. For instance, offices largely stopped conducting certification interviews. How else did COVID-19 change SNAP processes in ways that may have affected payment error rates?

    [Note: Be clear on whether the impact on error rates was positive or negative]

24. Are there any key challenges to successfully building or implementing tools like *[tool name]* that we haven't already discussed?

25. *[For supervisors/managers]* Is there anything else about the *[tool name]*, or payment error rates in general, that you would like to share?

We've reached the end of the interview. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us and share your experiences. The information you provided gave us valuable insights into how tools like *[tool name]* work.