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The American Review of Public Administration published online 22 August 2012
DOI: 10.1177/0275074012455454

American Review of Public Administration
XX(X) 1–18

DOI: 10.1177/0275074012455454
http://arp.sagepub.com

Clients' Perspectives on a Technology-Based Food Assistance Application System

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Abstract

The expansion of e-government is reshaping how disadvantaged groups access the social safety net, yet very little is known about clients' experiences with modernized systems. We examine client experiences applying to the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program in one state that has recently moved to an "online-only" system. Overall, more than half of the 26 applicants stated a preference for the traditional caseworker model, even though some of them identified benefits to the modernized, online system. Based on respondents' experiences, we identified four points where the system proved problematic for applicants: (a) Accessing the call centers; (b) completing an eligibility interview; (c) using the paperless system to submit documentation; and (d) obtaining personal assistance to complete the application materials. Findings are relevant for state administrators of social safety net programs, e-government researchers in the public management and public administration fields, and social stratification researchers interested in how institutional processes influence patterns of inequality.

Keywords

e-government, food stamps, SNAP, internet

Introduction

The "Internet revolution" of the past 10 years has brought rapid changes in the way that society is organized. Individuals now rely on the Internet as a vital source for information gathering, banking, purchasing, socializing, and entertainment. One natural extension of web-based technology is to the governmental services sector, and online service delivery has begun in various government contexts. The expansion of e-government has and will continue to be driven variously by claims of enhanced efficiency, increased access, and cost savings (Rowe, Hall, O'Brien, Pindus, & Koralek, 2010), and means that individuals will increasingly receive information about and apply for publicly funded services online. As nongovernmental services continue to move to online provision and access to the Internet becomes more available in

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homes, businesses, and other community-based locations, it is hard to envision a future in which government services will continue to be administered through paper applications and face-to-face interviews.

Against this backdrop of technological change is the harsh economic reality that American families are facing levels of hardship that are unprecedented in recent memory. In 2010, the official poverty count topped 15% for the first time in over 20 years, and food insecurity rates remained at a measured high of 14.5% (Nord, Coleman-Jensen, Andrews, & Carlson, 2011). As has been the case in other economic and policy contexts (Edin & Lein, 1995; Heflin, London, & Scott, 2011), the available social safety net is a critical source of support for many families as they try to make ends meet and mitigate material hardship in their own and their children's lives during these difficult economic times. In particular, in July 2011, 46.2 million people—or 14.8% of all Americans—participated in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2011). Although the SNAP caseload has reached historic levels, nonparticipation among eligible persons is considered to be a serious problem. Nationally, in (fiscal year) FY08, approximately 66% of eligible individuals participated in SNAP; for those with earnings, the participation rate was only 54% (Cunnyngham & Castner, 2010). In older studies of barriers to SNAP participation among eligible individuals, respondents cite "too many hassles" as a reason for nonparticipation (Daponte, Sanders, & Taylor, 1999). In the era of modernization and the expansion of e-government into the domain of public assistance administration, we know less than we should about how applicants navigate emerging Internet-based application and recertification processes and how such systems are perceived by them to affect access to needed services.

In this article, we present an analysis of the experiences of applicants to the SNAP program in Florida, which is known as "Food Assistance" within the state, in January and February 2009. Florida's Department of Children and Families (DCF) has been a heralded leader in the modernization of its service delivery system, eliminating the need for applicants to visit a state office, fill out a paper application, or meet in person with a caseworker (Cody, Renee, & Emily, 2008; Government Accountability Office, 2007). In 2004, Florida implemented a major modernization of its application process, replacing caseworkers with specialized staff who perform separate administrative tasks. In 2005, it adopted ACCESS (Automated Community Connection to Economic Self-Sufficiency), an Internet-based service delivery system to determine eligibility for public assistance programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), SNAP, and Medicaid. Eligibility for multiple programs is processed through a single online application. Applicants submit documentation through an electronic documents system, direct their questions to a central call center, and participate in interviews, when necessary, by telephone.

One of the unresolved issues regarding state modernization efforts of social safety net programs is whether they have changed the accessibility of services for the eligible population. Florida is one of a handful of states that are distinguished as having Food Assistance participation rates that are significantly below the national average. In 2008, 62% of the eligible population and 48% of the working poor population participated in Food Assistance, earning Florida a national ranking of 37 (Cunnyngham & Castner, 2010).

At this juncture, the ability of Internet-based public services to increase participation in social service programs is an uncertain, and largely untested, proposition. In part, this uncertainty results from what has been termed "the digital divide" (Lenhart et al., 2003). Even as the Internet and its uses continue to expand, there is persistent evidence of differences in the rates at which members of different groups use it, with low-income, less-educated, and older individuals, groups that are more likely to use publicly funded services, being less likely to use the Internet. According to estimates from the 2009 Current Population Survey, although 68.7% of

all American households had Internet access, among households in which the head had less than a high school education, this rate fell by more than half to 32.2%. In contrast, among households in which the head had a bachelor's degree or higher, 88.5% had Internet access. In terms of the age distribution, those above 55 years of age are the least likely to report Internet access (58.2%) relative to other age groups. Finally, in terms of race/Hispanic origin, both Hispanic households (52.8%) and Black households (54.5%) are less likely to report Internet access than are Non-Hispanic White households (73.3%) or Asian households (80.5%). In Florida, approximately 70% of the population reported having Internet access in 2009 (Current Population Survey 2009); however, educational, income, racial/ethnic, and age disparities similar to those evident in the national population were evident in Florida. Additional evidence suggests that these same demographic patterns exist in the usage of governmental web sites (Reddick, 2005; Thomas & Streib, 2003), but not necessarily in the preference for technology-based services over other options (Streib & Navarro, 2006).

In this article, we draw upon qualitative interviews and site visits to present our observations regarding the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the online application system in Florida. We begin by providing some contextual information regarding the size and characteristics of Florida's Food Assistance population and explaining how Florida changed the process for applying for Food Assistance. Next, we document our qualitative study design, providing detail regarding our sampling methodology, the content of the interviews, and our approach to analysis. We also describe the site visits we conducted. Then, after providing an overview of the range of responses we received from applicants, we identify four potential pitfalls that other states will want to be thoughtful about when designing or administering their own modernized delivery systems. Although our small sample size ($N = 26$) presents clear limitations, our study is the first of which we are aware that reports the experiences of applicants to a modernized delivery system. Because they are based on clients' actual experiences, our findings are relevant to state administrators of social safety net programs, e-government researchers in the public management and public administration fields, and social stratification researchers interested in how institutional processes influence patterns of inequality.

Florida Context

The DCF in Florida serviced the third largest Food Assistance (i.e., SNAP) caseload in the country. In May 2011, 3.0 million individuals were enrolled, which was 17% more than in May 2010. Florida's caseload accounted for 6.5% of the national caseload of 45.7 million participants (USDA, 2011). From the beginning of 2003 until mid-2007, growth in Florida's Food Assistance caseload followed the national trend closely; however, as shown in Figure 1, from May 2007 to the present, the rate of growth in Florida's caseload has exceeded that of the nation. It is unclear whether this rapid growth in the caseload reflects increased demand because of a particularly severe economic downturn in Florida relative to other states, increased access and participation of eligible persons because of modernization efforts, or some combination of these and other factors.

In the traditional service delivery model, applications are only accepted at state offices, often after a long wait in a crowded waiting room and a lengthy in person interview. Clients with traditional work schedules have to take off work in order to attend appointments and are required to submit verification of income, assets and expenses in person to a DCF worker. The eligibility analyst is then responsible for correctly entering data into a database, as well as completing voluminous and largely redundant paperwork. However, given the increased focus on employment across social service agencies, as well as the shrinking TANF caseload, Florida made a conscious move toward creating a delivery system that would significantly reduce administrative burden as

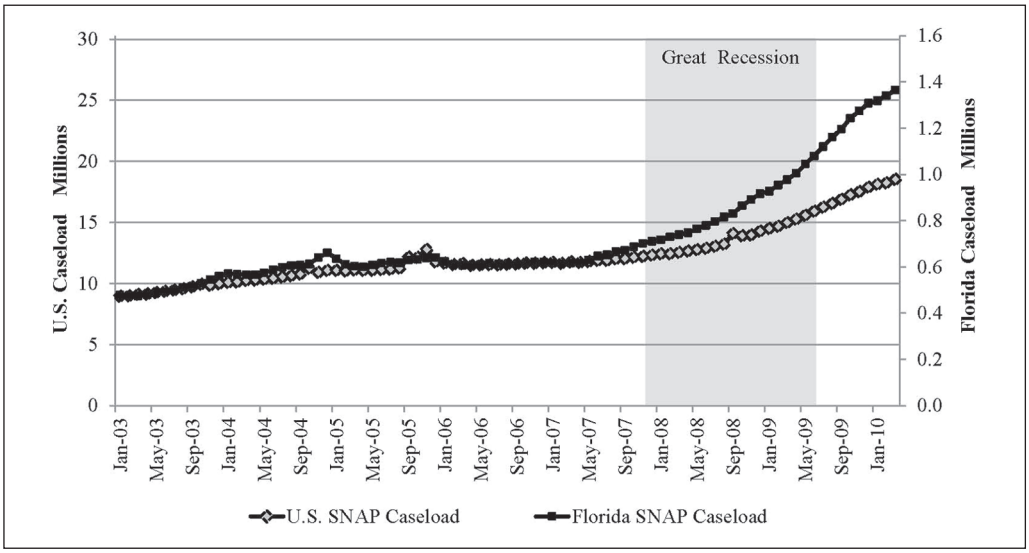

Figure 1. SNAP monthly caseloads: U.S. and Florida
Source: U.S.: U.S. Department of Agriculture (2011); Florida: Authors' tabulations.

Table 1. Summary of Application Procedure Changes

Application activity	Before modernization	After modernization
First contact	Paper application	Online application
Location	Department of children and families customer service center	Anywhere where there is a computer with Internet access
Eligibility interviews	Full 1 hour interview for all	One 15 minutes (or shorter) interview for most
	Eligibility interview by phone uncommon	Eligibility interviews by phone are the norm
Documentation	Most expenses, assets, and income require documentation	Most expenses, assets, and some income, do not require documentation
	Need to submit documentation in-person to department of children and families worker	Self-service submission of documentation either in-person or by fax

Source: Adapted from Cody et al. (2008: p. XXI)

a way to help individuals obtain self-sufficiency. The goals of the new self-service model were to simplify policy and procedures in order to reduce client and staff errors, and to reduce staff data entry, the need for face-to-face contact, and required travel time to DCF offices. The model designed by Florida's DCF is now nationally recognized as a model for modernization; Florida has won several awards, such as the Unites States Department of Agriculture Food & Nutrition Service Director's Cup and the Sterling Showcase Award to the SunCoast Region.

As summarized in Table 1, the reforms that were implemented in Florida had three major components: (a) Change from a traditional caseworker model to a system that uses enhanced technologies; (b) the ability to apply via the Internet; and (c) a reduction in staffing at state

offices (Lange, 2007). Below, we describe the major innovations to the application and eligibility determination process as of spring 2009, which is when we conducted the interviews with applicants for this project. Although Florida has continued to modify and improve the application process for applicants, the main contours of the system remain the same today.

Perhaps the greatest change to the administration of Food Assistance in Florida was the elimination of the traditional caseworker model. Instead of having a single point of contact throughout the application and eligibility determination process, individuals were asked to fill out applications on computers (even in DCF Customer Service Centers), call a 800 number to receive information about their application or case, and use electronic fax machines and scanners to transmit their verification information. As a part of the process of implementing this change in the service delivery model, policies and procedures were reviewed and analyzed for all of the state and federal social service programs under the DCF's jurisdiction, with a focus on identifying complex, burdensome, and error-prone processes and inconsistencies between the programs. Then, policies and procedures were changed to the extent possible in order to attain consistency, efficiency, and accurateness by modifying administrative rules and state statutes, with application for federal waivers as necessary. For example, in September 2005, Florida implemented a waiver that allowed for the recertification of Food Assistance benefits without a face-to-face interview. The new rules allowed eligibility to be determined with telephone interviews or information received through application packets and the Internet (Lange, 2007).[1] In addition, most expenses and assets do not require documentation. Eligibility workers are allowed to accept clients' statements regarding age, household composition, housing and utility costs, and some income sources. However, documentation *may* be required if the client is within US$100 of the asset limit or the eligibility worker deems the applicant a fraud risk. Furthermore, documentation may be submitted electronically. Other technological enhancements included the use of an automated response unit to provide answers to many inquiries made by those calling the customer call centers and the use of electronic document imaging for storage of verification documents.

In spring 2005, Florida implemented an Internet-based service delivery system for eligibility determination in public assistance programs (ACCESS—Automated Community Connection to Economic Self Sufficiency). Eligibility for multiple programs, including Food Assistance, is processed through a single online application. By September 2005, 66% of all applications in Florida were received online; this number increased to 77% in February 2006 and has remained at 90% since March 2007 (Lange, 2007; Winstead & Hudgens, 2007). Individuals can use the benefit "screener" to help determine their potential eligibility for benefits, apply for benefits, or check on the status of an application from anywhere the Internet is available (Lange, 2007). In addition, under the new system, very little data entry is required by the processor during the eligibility review. Thus, data entry errors and processing time are reduced.

Finally, as part of the changes implemented in Florida, the DCF absorbed a 43% reduction in staff even as caseloads increased over the FY02 to FY05 period. This reduction in personnel was accompanied by a 33% reduction in the number of DCF offices (Lange, 2007). In order to make Internet services more widely available for low-income populations, the DCF's Economic Self-Sufficiency Program established agreements with community partners who could voluntarily help applicants by providing access to the Internet, information about programs, or assistance with paper applications in limited circumstances. Eligibility determination was still undertaken by a DCF merit employee who reviewed the online data submitted by the applicant from the remote access point supplied by the community partner. As of December 2008, the agency had established agreements with over 3,300 community partners across the state. Community partners included hospitals, libraries, food banks, domestic violence centers, public health centers, aging resource centers, and faith-based organizations (Florida Department of Children and

Table 2. Completed Sample Size and Response Rate

	Black	White	Hispanic	Total
Urban	4/10 (40%)	4/7 (57%)	7/41 (17%)	15/58 (26%)
Rural	6/8 (75%)	2/14 (14%)	3/9 (33%)	11/31 (35%)
Total	10/18 (56%)	6/21 (29%)	10/50 (20%)	26/89 (29%)

Families 2007). Of the web-based applications received, only about 30% were filled out in computers located in state social service agencies; the remaining 70% were sent in from locations outside the traditional social service center, such as homes, work places, and community partner sites (Lange, 2007).

The rapid transformation of Florida's social service application and eligibility determination system from a traditional paper, caseworker, in person interview model to a technology-mediated model is at the leading edge of change in the governmental services sector. The changes in Florida have been recognized for their innovation, and other states are looking to Florida as a model for their own reforms. As these innovations begin to diffuse, it is important to consider how they are negotiated by the users of the system and how they are perceived to affect access to needed services. Lessons learned from Florida, both positive and negative, have the potential to affect what other states do. Thus, in this project, we conducted semistructured interviews with recent applicants to Food Assistance in Florida in order to understand their experiences with the online application and eligibility determination system.

Data and Method

Sample Design

In the spring and summer of 2009, we completed 26 in-depth interviews with individuals who applied to Food Assistance in Florida in January and February 2009. Our sample was selected randomly from a list of all applicants supplied by the Florida DCF following the procedures described below. Our sample excludes all individuals who were not able to successfully initiate an application and is therefore biased toward those with fewer barriers to using the system.

Applicants were sampled based on both race/ethnicity and county of residence. Our justifications for picking these dimensions of sample stratification were based on several considerations. First, Cody et al. (2008) found that there were urban–rural differences in application and denial rates. In addition, given the large number of office closures, we expected rural applicants to be differentially affected by modernization. Second, prior qualitative work on how applicants experience welfare systems indicates substantial racial (Black–White) differences in experiences (Schram, Soss, Fording, & Houser, 2009). Given the racial/ethnic heterogeneity of Florida's population, we wanted to make sure we had adequate racial diversity in the sample. Similarly, Hispanics are included because they make up a substantial portion of the population in Florida. Thus, our research design oversamples rural applicants and racial/ethnic minority applicants.

Table 2 presents the number of interviews we completed with six groups: Urban Blacks, Urban Whites, Urban Hispanics, Rural Blacks, Rural Whites, and Rural Hispanics. Because most of the interviews were conducted in person, we used cluster sampling to keep costs down. Urban interviews were randomly sampled from the Tampa area. Rural interviews were randomly sampled from Gadsen, Wakulla, and Jefferson counties (the Tallahassee area). The Hispanic interviews were randomly sampled from Miami-Dade county (urban) and Gadsen, Hendry, Wakulla,

and Jefferson counties (rural). Using the list of applicants provided by the DCF, we stratified by race/ethnicity and rural residence and randomly selected 89 individuals. For various reasons[2] we were not able to complete interviews with all of the selected individuals. The response rate for the overall sample and each subgroup is also presented in Table 2.[3]

Interviewing

Trained interviewers conducted in person English language interviews with non-Hispanic Black and White individuals. Spanish language interviews with Hispanic individuals were conducted by telephone. The average length for the face-to- face and telephone interviews was 52 minutes (range from 17 to 102 minutes).

The interview protocol began by investigating the respondent's general experiences using the new computer-based application system, including the presence of any barriers that needed to be overcome, such as accommodation to new technology, proximity to DCF offices, and the accessibility of a computer with Internet access. Then, we asked specifically about the application process and what strategies applicants used when applying for Food Assistance, such as whether they sought help from a community partner or from a family member. We discussed each stage of the application process specifically. Finally, we explored how individuals experienced the new modernized application system. We probed explicitly for both positive and negative views of the automated system and preferences for the new system versus the old one. Further, we attempted to differentiate reactions to the submission of the initial application from those of the eligibility interview, which is conducted by telephone the majority of the time. Finally, we investigated the confidence participants place in the new system.

Site Visits

In addition to individual interviews, as part of this project, we conducted a site visit to Florida DCF offices during the spring of 2009. Two researchers together visited three different state offices over two days. First, researchers visited a state office where applicants could come to use the computers to apply for benefits, access telephones to call the call center, or submit documentation required for their applications. We also observed state workers as they processed applications and spoke to them about their job process. Second, we visited one of the three state-wide call centers and were able to observe interactions between workers and clients on the telephone. Finally, we toured a site where electronic documents are connected to client files, eligibility interviews are conducted by telephone, and determinations are made. We were able to directly observe and interact with workers at all sites.

Both researchers kept detailed notes during the sites visits. At the end of each day, each researcher summarized the findings for the day and outlined emerging questions and issues for further consideration. Upon returning to the office, both researchers wrote detailed descriptions of their total site visit experience. The results from these site visits informed the development of the qualitative interview instruments and provided important contextual information for our analysis of the interviews below.

Analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded to examine themes related to the respondents' recent experiences applying for Food Assistance benefits. With preliminary codes and subcodes (i.e., categories and subcategories) defined by our core research questions, we organized and preliminarily collated the data from the interviews. We then read the data carefully in

order to identify emergent and recurrent themes. This approach, in which codes are derived both from the literature and a priori considerations, as well as from the data, is quite standard in the analysis of qualitative data (Berg, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2005); it allowed us to identify predominant patterns related to applicants' experiences of the new system. Although we are confident that our approach allowed us to identify the major themes in these data, we caution that our data were not collected in a manner that would allow us to confidently quantify the prevalence of specific experiences. In the analysis section below, we provide frequency counts of mentions of specific themes. However, because of our small sample size and sampling methods, these numbers should not be interpreted as being representative of the overall experience of the population applying for Food Assistance in Florida. Respondents' names were changed to protect their privacy; all names reported here are pseudonyms. This project was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Missouri.

Results

Overall Assessment of the Online Application System

Studies have found that citizens are generally happy with the implementation of e-government (Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2005). In the case examined here, 11 of the 26 people we interviewed acknowledged that the modernized system resulted in their application being processed more quickly and preferred being able to apply over the Internet. However, 15 of the 26 people with whom we spoke expressed a distinct preference for the traditional service delivery model.

Overall, among those who preferred the modernized system, their preference appeared to hinge on their level of comfort with computers and technology, although the ability of the new system to overcome barriers present in the more traditional application system, such as transportation problems, also played a role. Eleven of the 12 respondents who indicated that they had no difficulty navigating the online system also indicated an overall preference for the online system. Leon, an African American man in his late 20s who lives in a rural area explained his preference for the online application system as follows:

> *I like online because I mean it's quicker versus filling out papers, going to an actual DCF because some of us ain't got cars. I ain't got no car, so I got Internet access. I can just do it from home and then they can call me, or whatever, and let me know what's going on. And it's quicker that way versus having to get a ride, go to DCF, do all that. You just do it from the comfort of your home. I like that part.*

Generally, those who expressed comfort in navigating the computerized system were equally likely to reside in urban or rural areas and were as likely to be Black as White. However, the clear pattern that emerged is that the majority of Spanish-speaking applicants (9/10) expressed difficulty using a computer to initiate their application. Six of these respondents also expressed difficulty with the English language.[4] There was also some indication in our data that older persons might been experiencing problems with the online system. Carla, a Spanish-speaking single mother with two children from Miami-Dade County, had no problems with the technology herself and preferred the ease of the modern application process; however, on her visits to the DCF office, she noticed that others, particularly older people who might not be as computer savvy, had difficulty with the new system:

> *Well, for me—I can do it. There's not a problem. The application is easy. But, when I've been to the office to do it, because I've had to go three times, I've seen problems with older*

people. The people that are older, that—they get confused. They don't know how to use a computer. But with me, I haven't had any problems. . . I like the Internet. . . For me, it's perfect.

Among those who preferred the traditional paper and office application process, many acknowledged that the process was more difficult for them because of their difficulty navigating the computer, suggesting that the digital divide may pose a real constraint in some peoples' ability to access parts of the social safety net. Debbie told the interviewer

You know, I'll be honest with you. I know that they say that it is easier to do it online, but I really think I'd personally rather fill out the paperwork than to have to do all that. I really didn't care for it. . . I spent two hours filling out an online thing. . . To me it was a nightmare.

Shaquille similarly described her dislike of the new system using nightmarish imagery: *"I ain't ever had no problems when they did the regular paperwork. I hate this new procedure. . . This right here is hell."*

While general perceptions of preference for online versus the traditional delivery system are informative, we believe it is particularly instructive to look carefully at specific issues that were mentioned repeatedly regarding the setup of the application system itself. As Florida continues to use their modernized system and as other states move forward with the design of their own online benefit application systems, we offer a set of specific insights based on our respondents' experiences and the site visits we conducted. Specifically, we identify four problems that were identified by many of our respondents, including many who expressed general support or preference for the online system.

Specific Problems

Problem 1: Infrastructure and staffing of call centers. In early 2009, during the initial application process and after the eligibility determination was made, all customer service was handled through three centralized call centers. A client could call in to report changes in status, such as a household composition change or employment change, inquire about the status of an application, or ask general questions about a case. Given that clients no longer had an assigned caseworker to answer their questions, shepherd them through the application process, and answer their questions about benefits or the lack thereof, access to a customer call center representative was critical.

Seventeen of the 26 interviewees indicated that they had called the call center for assistance. Reports of difficulties were widespread, and there were no noticeable urban/rural differences observed. Similarly, Whites and Blacks were equally likely to report having difficulties reaching the call center. Of the nine who had not used the call center, seven were Spanish-speakers. As a consequence, the majority of our Spanish-speaking interviewees (7 out of 10) indicated that they had no experience using the call center. Although Spanish language assistance is a call center option, applicants may have been unaware of this and may therefore have believed that they would have difficulty communicating with call center staff. In addition, when asked about the call center, one Spanish-speaker, Maribel, responded that she did not know the call center existed, which suggests that basic knowledge of services may be lacking in some groups.

As Food Assistance caseloads have increased to historic levels, the call centers have not always been able to handle the volume of calls being placed. At times, an insufficient number of phone lines have been available to allow individuals to be placed on hold to wait for agents. When this occurs, clients receive a short message indicating that call volume is high and inviting them to try again later, and then they are disconnected. At other times, callers are placed on hold,

but ultimately never get to speak with an agent or get their questions answered. Regardless of the stage at which applicants are blocked from accessing DCF workers, such lack of connection represents a significant problem that could lead individuals to not receive the Food Assistance they are seeking in a timely manner or at all.

The three individuals who participated in Spanish-speaking interviews who had attempted to use the call center all indicated that they never successfully got through to a call center representative. When reapplying, Eduardo tried to call, but could not get through. He then went into a Florida DCF office, but was told that he had to call on the phone. He continued to try to call, but, eventually, his 60 days to complete the application ran out. Eduardo never got through to a DCF worker and told the interviewer: *"you keep calling and calling by phone, and nobody ever answers—nobody ever helps you. So you just waste your time."* Josefina, another Spanish-speaking interviewee, described how she could not even get through to be put on hold and how her calls were disconnected. She said the following:

> *Oh gosh, this is just like dying. You just call and call and call, and they never answer. Unfortunately, the lines are always very busy, and they don't really have time to help you and give you time. The phone itself will hang up on you.*

Four non-Spanish interviewees also indicated that they never got through to the call center. Shaquille went into a DCF office to report that her mother was inappropriately claiming her (Shaquille's) daughter as an eligible household member, which she considered to be fraud. Shaquille was told she had to call the call center. Despite spending two nearly full days calling and waiting on hold, she did not get through. Two other interviewees described frustration at not being able to speak with someone. Debbie said she would attempt to get through *"for hours and hours. And they would put me on hold, and I'd go through this and then I. . . wouldn't even get anybody."*

For clients who were able to secure a place in the queue, abandonment rates were high because of the long waits to reach a customer call center representative. Abandonment rates during our site visit at the Jacksonville office were 17% to 19%, but wait times were observed to fluctuate around nine minutes, which is much shorter than our respondents reported. Data on state-wide abandonment rates are not available. According to Cody et al. (2008), the average wait times in July 2006, the last month for which documentation is available, was approximately eight minutes, which is, again, much shorter than reported by the participants in this study.

Eleven interviewees were able to reach the call center. Interviewees indicated that, once they received a place in the queue, wait times varied from 5 minutes to 75 minutes. Aisha indicated that it took hours to get through because she had to keep calling back, but when she got to wait, it took 10 minutes to 15 minutes. For Pam, who called back five times before being placed in the queue, the wait time was 20 minutes. She feels that the most difficult part of the application process was just getting through to the call center and she was frustrated when, after finally getting through, she was referred to another number to get an answer to her question about the progress of her Food Assistance card. Black applicants with whom we spoke, both urban and rural, were more likely to report satisfaction with the quality of the response they received once they reached a state employee at the call center.

Some respondents reported specific strategies, such as calling first thing in the morning or during specific days of the week, which they believed helped them get through to the holding queue. For example, Shania said the following:

> *Like during Monday, Tuesdays, and Wednesday—like [they] getting a bunch of calls. But, then, Thursday and Friday, you get there quicker. But you got to call when they first open*

at 8:00. If not, you will be—because your phone will be busy, and you'll have to wait a long time. Sometimes you got to wait an hour.

Leon also said it was important to call right at 8:00 a.m. because when he called at 10:00 a.m., it took 1 hour and 15 minutes to get to speak to a representative. However, these techniques did not appear to work in all instances. Abby started calling at 7:00 a.m. and continued to get a busy signal. She expressed frustration that it was not possible to leave a message to have someone call back with the answer to a specific question. Only one person seemed somewhat understanding of the problem that high demand created for the call centers. When asked about whether it took her a long time to get through, Jennifer responded that it's just the system and there are a lot of people using it. However, she also stated that she avoids using the call center if at all possible.

Problem 2: Ability to complete telephone interview. As of spring 2009, Florida had virtually eliminated the face-to-face interview, with the exception of expedited cases or those that had been flagged for fraud. As described above, eligibility interviews were most commonly done over the telephone. Typically, an eligibility processor attempts to contact an applicant by telephone once and, if unsuccessful, sends a letter indicating that the client needs to call the processor within the weekly 2 hours block of time that the processor holds open to receive calls. If the processor does not complete the interview within 28 days, the person's Food Assistance application will be denied.

Applicants who were able to answer the telephone when the eligibility processor called the first time did not report problems. Ten respondents, the majority of whom were White, urban residents, indicated that they had no problem with the telephone interview. Maribel described how the interviewer only asked a few questions about employment and earnings. Pam also described a short interview, saying that it only lasted about 10 minutes, and that the interviewer was nice and helpful. Ramon was pleased that the eligibility processor who conducted the interview was very nice and conducted the interview in Spanish. Several individuals indicated a quick turnaround time with respect to being called for an interview. Pam said that the processor called within a week after she received an eligibility letter, and Leon noted that the day after he applied online he was called to be interviewed and asked for additional documentation.

Although many respondents appreciated the flexibility the new system offers and the elimination of the need to travel to a DCF office, some respondents who missed the initial call indicated that they had a difficult time reaching their eligibility processor to complete the interview. In order to focus on processing applications without interruption, many eligibility workers did not answer their telephones except during the weekly 2 hours block of time that they allotted for interviews. Telephone mailboxes quickly filled up with messages and became so full that applicants were unable to leave messages. In this case, many applicants tried to call the customer call center in order to try to get a message to the eligibility processor that they were trying to reach them.

Six of the 26 interviewees indicated that they had a problem completing their phone interviews (four Black applicants and two Spanish-speaking applicants). Two of these individuals had difficulty getting through to the eligibility processor to set up an interview. Abby indicated she called repeatedly for 2 months to try to get an interview, but the processor's mailbox was always full. Moreover, she said with frustration and incredulity: *"On their machine, they'll tell you not to keep calling and leaving a message because it backs up the machine."* Eduardo noted that he received a letter telling him that he needed to do a phone interview and giving him an appointment time. He had difficulty understanding this letter and went in to the state office to get clarification from someone there; however, he was told to call. When he called, he was told that the eligibility worker was not available and, in fact, was working from home. This made Eduardo angry because he was not able to call the eligibility worker at home. He said he called back repeatedly to set up an interview, but his calls were not returned.

Problem 3: Delays in electronic document systems. Florida implemented a document management system that allows eligibility processors to access information like birth certificates and pay stubs electronically. This electronic document system requires applicants to fax their documents to DCF, or to scan them at a DCF office. A worker at the DCF office attaches the documents to the applicant's file. However, because of the high volume of applicants for Food Assistance in Florida and an inadequate number of staff to process the documents, there is often a substantial delay between the time the documents are faxed to the DCF office and the time that they are attached to the applicant's file. In addition, many of the respondents we interviewed claimed that they had to fax their documents multiple times before they were correctly attached to their files. It is unclear to us whether respondents failed to send the information, dialed the wrong fax number accidently, or if the documents were received at the DCF office but not attached to the correct case file. It is clear, however, that applicants experienced substantial problems in this area. Often, respondents indicated that their application was denied because the necessary documentation was not attached to the file within the 28-day window period. Clients would then resubmit their application and their documentation, and were often approved on their second or third attempt, with benefits backdated to their initial application. Such backdating is an indication that the DCF deemed them eligible from their first application.

Only two respondents reported that they submitted documentation electronically without any problems. Both of these individuals reported that they owned their own fax machines. All of the other respondents indicated problems of various kinds. Five respondents reported that they had to submit the same documents multiple times before the DCF office received them or staff attached them to the correct file. Although he had successfully submitted documentation electronically from his place of work when applying previously, Leon reported that he had to keep refaxing documents for his most recent recertification: *"I applied three times and they kept saying that I didn't meet the requirements and I know I faxed all my stuff to them. So, I actually had to apply four times to recertify."* Similarly, Aisha discussed how she had to submit documentation of her income, as well as a letter from her aunt verifying that she paid rent and other bills. For the proof of income, which she sent from her work place fax, she reported the following:

> *Actually I had to do it four times because they didn't get it. . . They got the front part, but they didn't get the back. So, then I had to fax it again and it [the fax line] was busy. I had to fax it again and it was busy. It kept being busy.*

Other respondents mentioned similar problems with the fax line being busy, as well as problems because DCF staff failed to check the fax line for days and they had difficulty finding or affording access to a fax machine. Dayton described how he faxed in a birth certificate for his son, called two weeks later, and was told that the office had not received it. However, the eligibility worker also told him that they only check the fax machine once a week, and informed Dayton which day would be best for him to resend it. Polly reported difficulty obtaining access to a fax machine and with the cost. When asked by the interviewer if it was hard to find a fax machine, Polly responded: *"Yeah it was because the only one I found was at the library. I mean there's one at the print shop, but they charge you."* Even at the public library, Polly said it cost her around US$2 to fax a number of pages, which, because of her constrained budget, she considered to be a burden.

Eight interviewees reported dropping off or mailing in their documentation, rather than attempting to submit it electronically. Three of these interviewees were White, and five were Spanish speakers. Interestingly, only one of the 10 interviewees who conducted their interview in Spanish indicated that she turned in documentation electronically; the remaining four Spanish-speaking interviewees did not specify how they turned in documentation or indicated that they did not need to turn in documentation for this most recent application or renewal. Three of the

Spanish-speaking interviewees who either turned in documentation inside the DCF office or dropped it off in the mailbox outside of the office did not report any problems. However, two Spanish-speaking interviewees who submitted their documentation in hard copy noted that it was not received or processed, and therefore they had to reapply.

Among the White interviewees who turned in hard copy documentation, one submitted it in a drop box outside of the main office, another took it into the office where they copied and faxed it for her, and the third went to a community center, which made copies and mailed the documentation for her. None of these three reported a problem with the DCF office receiving the documentation.

Problem 4: Lack of assistance completing Internet application. Several reviews of government web sites for readability and accessibility indicate that most web sites are inaccessible for low-literacy, low-vision, and disabled populations (Becker, 2004; Rubaii-Barrett & Wise 2008; Streib & Navarro, 2006). Further research indicates that few governmental websites provide information in languages other than English (West, 2004). Other industries, such as retail and banking, have made the use of technology optional without eliminating the ability to conduct transactions in person (Dabholkar, Bobbitt & Lee, 2003; Durkin, McCartan-Quinn, O'Donnell, & Howcroft, 2003). However, in the course of designing and implementing their modernizing efforts, Florida opted for an application system that can be categorized as "online only" in the sense that applicants have to fill out their applications themselves using a computer at a state office or another location. Although a paper application and hard copy submission of documentation is technically available, this option is rarely used and there are no staff members available to walk an applicant through the application process.

Because of the history of population migration into the state, the Food Assistance caseload in Florida has a varied citizenship background. There were 87,000 naturalized citizens participating in Food Assistance in Florida in FY05, representing 13.7% of all naturalized citizens on the Food Assistance caseload in the United States. Similarly, there were 27,000 refugees and 99,000 other noncitizens participating in Food Assistance in FY05, representing 14.4% and 13.0%, respectively, of the national caseloads for these populations. In terms of race, 33.4% of household heads were classified as White, 27.7% as African American, and 28.4% as Hispanic (Wolkwitz, Kari, &Trippe, 2009). This is relevant because, as noted in our discussion of the digital divide at the outset of this article, non-English language speakers and the elderly may find the new system especially difficult to navigate. In a conversation with the interviewer, Rosa, an elderly Cuban immigrant with significant health problems, described her experience filling out the online form at a DCF office:

Rosa: Oh boy! It was very troublesome for me to apply over the computer because I do not know anything about computers. But, the gentleman that is there, or the woman. . . they guide you on how to do it. What anybody can do in one hour, I spend three, but I do it!
Interviewer: How do you call on them? What are the details? Do you raise your hand. . .?
Rosa: Yes, I raise my hand. . . because I do not know their names and those are people that speak English.
Interviewer: And do you understand what they tell you?
Rosa: I do not understand them. I show them where I am on the application. It is all by signs as though I was mute.
Interviewer: Do you not speak English?
Rosa: Nothing son. Nothing.

Persons with low literacy or cognitive functioning are another group that may find the technology-based system particularly difficult to navigate. Jeff is a 54-year-old disabled African

American man with a history of working in construction. Jeff left school after the 7th grade and is functionally illiterate; he is not able to complete the online application himself. He requested a paper application to bring it home so that his wife could help him fill it out. He told the interviewer: *"When I look at it, I said, well, I can't fill this out because I don't know what I'm reading or looking at. So I had to ask them can I bring it home and bring it back the next day."* When asked what suggestions he might make to improve the application process, Jeff suggested that the office should have someone with patience whose job it was to sit down and help with the application because not all applicants had a spouse or relative to help them.

Discussion and Conclusion

Given the critical role that SNAP has played during this last recession (Nord & Prell, 2011), it is useful to examine how recent modernization efforts are viewed and experienced by program participants. It is worth noting that there are no current reports in the extant literature that include evaluations of client experiences after application procedures have been modernized, although national studies of food assistance modernization efforts do include ratings of satisfaction from state and local program officials (Rowe et al., 2010). We address this gap in the literature by presenting results of semistructured, qualitative interviews with 26 applicants to Food Assistance in Florida in early 2009.

We find that some applicants greatly appreciate the ease of the online application system and the lifting of the requirement to apply for services at a state office. However, others have difficulty navigating the modernized delivery system. Overall, more than half of the recent applicants with whom we spoke stated a preference for the traditional caseworker model, even though some of them were among those who identified benefits to the modernized, online system. Based on respondents' experiences, we identified four specific points where the system has proved problematic for applicants: (a) Accessing the call centers; (b) completing an eligibility interview; (c) using the paperless system to submit documentation; and (d) obtaining personal assistance to complete the application materials. Although we did not detect any patterns of difference by urban and rural residence, it is clear that respondents who experienced difficulties were more likely to be non-native English speakers. Non-Whites in our sample were also more likely to have problems completing eligibility interviews and have difficulty submitting electronic documentation. Although these results are consistent with studies on the use of discretion in social service agencies to disadvantage non-White clients (Soss et al., 2010), this is the first study of which we know to document how the institutional arrangements of an online system's processes can differentially impact certain groups of Food Assistance users.

Technological change and remote, computer- and telephone-mediated communications were at the heart of the restructuring of the Food Assistance application and eligibility determination process in Florida. Academics studying the e-government literature note that the national trend toward web-based governmental services is motivated largely by efficiency concerns (McNeal, Tolbert, Mossberger, & Dotterweich, 2003). The stated rationale behind Food Assistance modernization is no different. A recent national survey of modernization efforts in the delivery of SNAP indicates that the primary motivation behind redesigning services was the increased caseloads brought on by the Great Recession (Rowe et al., 2010). However, as stated above, modernization in Florida was accompanied by a 43% reduction in staff and 33% reduction in state offices. This appears to be unusual, as most states report no reductions in administrative costs from modernization (Rowe et al., 2010). It is conceivable that the experiences of the applicants with whom we spoke might have been different if the technological innovations implemented in Florida had not been accompanied by such a substantial reduction in staffing. Indeed, it is very difficult to envision such a drastic change in the applicant–worker ratio without significant

changes in clients' experiences. Thus, it will be interesting to observe over time if social service modernization is generally thought to have resulted in efficiency savings in other states and in other areas of governmental services.

Policy scholars may note the different intent driving SNAP modernization relative to that, which was driving welfare reform. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which created the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program in place of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, put a modern face on cash welfare assistance with an explicit goal of reducing caseloads, particularly by promoting welfare exits among long-term participants. However, potential welfare participants were also discouraged from participating through the use of explicit diversion tactics, such as offering lump-sum cash payments in return for a period of ineligibility for TANF benefits, as well as through what has been termed "procedural diversion" or the hassle factor (Ridzi, 2009; Ridzi & London, 2006). Procedural diversion operates, to some extent, via fragmentation of intake processes across multiple sites and workers with discrete tasks, who are networked and communicate with clients and among themselves via information processing technologies. Applicants have more things to do in a limited amount of time and don't have access to a single caseworker who can answer their questions and help them through the processes. On the face of it, there should be no room for parallels between TANF diversion practices, which are explicit in their goals of reducing caseloads, and Food Assistance modernization, where decreasing participation has never been offered as an objective and increased coverage is often articulated as one of the benefits. In fact, the federal dollars included in the Recovery Act of 2008 to support the administrative costs of increased SNAP caseloads were included explicitly to ensure coverage of eligible populations and support the countercyclical nature of Food Assistance dollars. Yet, our interviews suggest that the technical changes occurring in the Food Assistance application process in Florida may have long-lasting effects on the accessibility and usage patterns of Food Assistance by some of the most disadvantaged groups. Clearly, given the importance of the social safety net during these tough economic times, additional research that documents clients' experiences with modernized systems is needed. Similarly, it will be important to observe how Food Assistance caseload characteristics and dynamics change as the institutional structures of access are modified.

Our study is not without its limitations. We offer a snapshot from a handful of Food Assistance applicants' experiences in Florida at a single point in time; the external validity and representativeness of our findings requires careful consideration. First, our sampling strategy was designed to enhance the representativeness of our small sample. We present our response rate in Table 2 and have strived to be transparent in order to allow readers to reach their own conclusions as to how successful we were. Although we may not have achieved representativeness, we are confident that our sample is diverse along theoretically important dimensions and was not purposively selected from those either most or least able to negotiate the new system. Unfortunately, our sampling strategy did not stratify based on age and we did not have enough elderly applicants in the sample to allow for subgroup analysis. There are clearly gaps in our understanding from this omission. Second, while our interviewees described difficulties in several Florida counties in the spring and summer of 2009, the process innovations of call centers, telephone eligibility interviews, paperless systems, and "online only" systems have been adopted in other states, in various combinations, and are under consideration in still more states. For example, according to Rowe et al. (2010), as of 2008, 21 states used call centers, either state-wide or in some areas of the state, while another eight states were exploring the possibility of implementing call centers. Similarly, 34 states offer the option of applying for SNAP benefits online (Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, 2011). Although the specific experiences documented in this study may not be fully replicated in other setting and contexts, the problems identified by our respondents are potentially instructive for policy makers, program implementers, and researchers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Financial support for this research was provided by the University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research, the Southern Rural Development Center at Mississippi State University and the University of Missouri Research Boad.

Notes

1. This waiver was rescinded by the Food & Nutrition Service in fall 2007.
2. Interviews were not completed because of explicit refusals to participate and implicit refusals, such as missed interviews, phone messages not returned, and telephone call terminations.
3. For the Black and White samples, new respondents were randomly selected and added to their pool of respondents to contact only after interviewers had exhausted their list of potential respondents through repeated contact attempts. For the Spanish-speaking sample, the contractor began working all the randomly selected names at once, against the directions of the project personnel, and then stopped interviewing as soon as the target of 10 completed interviews was reached. This is the reason that the response rate is so low for the Spanish-speaking interviews.
4. Like the paper application, the online application is available in English, Spanish or Creole, so these difficulties presumably reflect deficits in computer skills or general literacy.

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