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Going Digital: The Pros and Cons of Promoting Online Food Assistance Applications

Research by Colleen M. Heflin and Peter R. Mueser, University of Missouri; and Andrew S. London, Syracuse University

The expansion of e-government is reshaping how disadvantaged groups access the social safety net. In 2011, 46.2 million people (or 14.8 percent of Americans) received Food Stamps, now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).[1] Persistent evidence suggests that low-income, less-educated, and older individuals, groups who are more likely to use publicly-funded services, are less likely to use the internet, yet very little is known about clients' experiences with emerging, modernized, internet-based public assistance administration systems.

What do disadvantaged clients think about internet-based application and recertification processes for social programs that provide critical financial support during these difficult economic times? Colleen Heflin, Andrew London and Peter Mueser address this question in their RIDGE Center for Targeted Studies-supported research, "Clients' Perspectives on a Technology-Based Food Assistance Application System." In this study, they interviewed 26 individuals in 2009 who were applying for SNAP benefits in Florida, which moved to an online-only application system in 2005.

Application Model

Florida serviced the third largest Food Assistance (i.e., SNAP) caseload in the country in 2011, with 3 million individuals enrolled, 17 percent more than in 2010. From May 2007 to the present, the rate of growth in Florida's caseload has exceeded that of the nation, as shown in Figure 1. It is unclear whether this rapid growth in the caseload reflects increased demand due to a particularly severe economic downturn in Florida relative to other states, increased access and participation of eligible persons due to modernization efforts, or some combination of these and other factors. Although caseloads are high, Florida has Food Assistance participation rates significantly below the national average. In 2008, 62 percent of the eligible population and 48 percent of the working poor eligible population received SNAP, earning Florida a national ranking of 37th.[2]

1   U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2011 "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Monthly Data, December 1, 2011". <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/34SNAPmonthly.htm> Accessed December 21, 2011.

2   Cunnyngham, Karen E. and Laura A. Castner. 2010. "Reaching Those in Need: State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates in 2008." Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services.

In spring 2005, Florida implemented an online application for multiple public assistance programs, such as SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Medicaid. As summarized in Table 1, applicants submit documentation through an electronic documents system, direct their questions to a central call center, and participate in interviews, when necessary, by telephone.

The Florida model, nationally heralded as a leader in modernization, eliminates the need for applicants to visit a state office, fill out a paper application or meet in-person with a caseworker. The goals of the new self-service system include simplifying policy and procedures to reduce client and staff errors and decreasing the need for face-to-face contact and required travel time to the Department of Children and Families (DCF). However, modernization in Florida was accompanied by a 43 percent reduction in staff and a 33 percent reduction in the number of state offices.
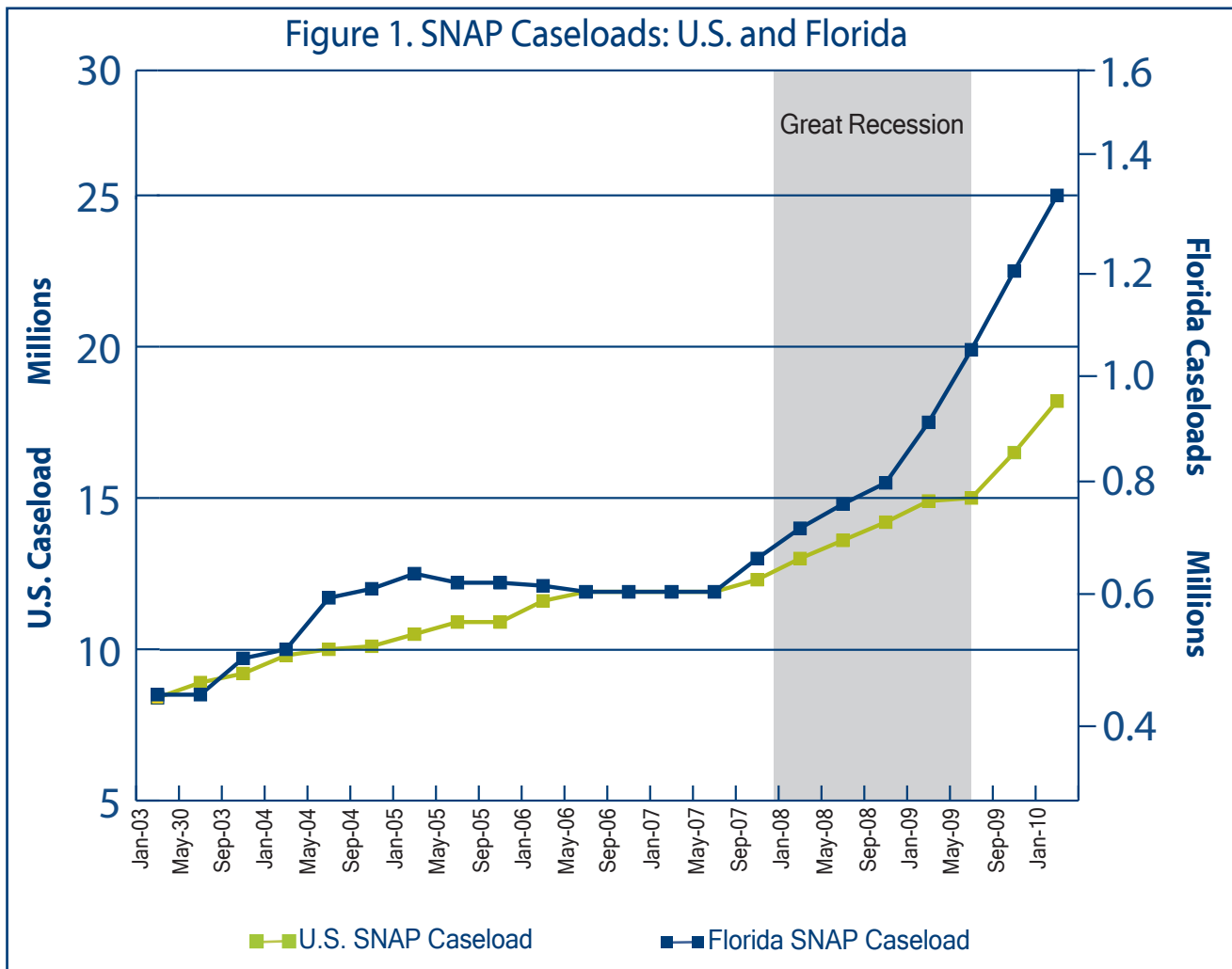
Since March 2007, 90 percent of Food Assistance applications in Florida were received online. Thirty percent of online applications were filled out at state social service agencies, and 70 percent were sent in from homes, workplaces and community partner sites. To make internet services more widely available for low-income populations, the state's Economic Self-Sufficiency Program established agreements with more than 3,300 community partners,

including hospitals, libraries, food banks, domestic violence centers, public health centers, aging resource centers, and faith-based organizations, who could voluntarily help applicants by providing access to the internet, information about programs, or assistance with paper applications in limited circumstances.

The individuals interviewed for this study successfully initiated a Food Assistance application in early 2009. Eleven lived in rural areas, and 15 lived in urban areas. Ten Black and six White respondents participated in in-person interviews, and 10 Hispanic individuals took part in Spanish-language telephone interviews. What were their experiences?

Applicant Feedback

Eleven of the 26 people interviewed preferred being able to apply online and believed the modernized system resulted in their applications being processed more quickly. Fifteen interviewees had a distinct preference for the traditional caseworker model. 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. Nine out of the 10 Spanish-speaking applicants, however, expressed trouble using the computer to initiate their application, and six of these respondents also said they had difficulty with the English language.

Figure 1. SNAP Caseloads: U.S. and Florida

Among those who preferred the traditional paper and office application process, many acknowledged their difficulty navigating the computer, suggesting that the digital divide may pose a real constraint in some people's abilities to access parts of the social safety net. One applicant said, "I spent two hours filling out an online thing...To me it was a nightmare."

Overall, the respondents, even some of those who preferred the online system, identified four specific problems with this modernized e-government system.

Table 1. Summary of Application Procedure Changes

Application Activity	Before Modernization	After Modernization
First Contact	Paper application	Online application
Location	DCF Customer Service Center	Anywhere with a computer with Internet access
Eligibility Interviews	• Full one-hour interview for all • Eligibility interview by phone uncommon	• One 15 minute (or shorter) interview for most • Eligibility interviews by phone are the norm
Documentation	• Most expenses, assets, & income require documentation • Need to submit documentation in person to DCF worker	• Most expenses, assets, & some income do not require documentation • Self-service submission of documentation either in person or by fax

Source: Adapted from Cody, Scott; Renee Nogales; Emily Sama Martin. 2008. *Modernization of the Food Stamp Program in Florida.* Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for the Food and Nutrition Service.

Problem #1: Infrastructure and staffing of call centers

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. Widespread reports of difficulties using the three centralized call centers that handled all customer service included being disconnected by the phone system and long wait times to speak with a representative. Lack of connection represents a significant problem that could lead eligible individuals to not receive the Food Assistance they are seeking in a timely manner or at all. Seven of the 17 respondents who tried to call for assistance said they never got through to talk to an agent.

Problem #2: Ability to complete telephone interview

As of spring 2009, Florida relied almost exclusively on telephone eligibility interviews. While many respondents appreciated not having to travel to a DCF office, some respondents who missed the initial call for the eligibility interview indicated they subsequently had a difficult time reaching their eligibility processor to complete the interview. Applicants who were able to answer the telephone on the first call from DCF did not report problems. Ten respondents, the majority of whom were White, urban residents, indicated that they had no problem with the telephone interview. However, four Black and two Spanish-speaking applicants reported problems completing the interviews because the agent's voicemail boxes were always full when they called within the weekly block of time the processor held open to receive return calls from the applicants.

Problem #3: Delays in electronic document systems

Individuals interviewed also reported problems with the electronic systems that required them to fax or scan required documents. Only two respondents, both of whom own their own fax machines, said they submitted documentation electronically without any problems.

Five respondents reported they had to submit the same documents multiple times before the DCF office received them or staff attached them to the correct file. Due to 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 they are attached to the applicant's file.

Problem #4: Lack of assistance completing internet application

Respondents also cited a lack of assistance completing the internet application. An elderly Cuban immigrant with significant health problems described her experience filling out the online form at a DCF office: "It was very troublesome for me to apply over the computer because I do not know anything about computers." As a non-English speaker, the new system is especially difficult to navigate, even with an agent's help, as she explained: "I do not understand them. I show them where I am on the application. It is all by signs as though I was mute." In addition, those with low literacy or cognitive functioning may find the technology-based system particularly hard to understand.

Although the study did not detect any patterns of difficulty by urban and rural residence, it is clear that applicants who experienced problems are more likely to be non-native English speakers. Non-whites were also more likely to have trouble completing eligibility interviews and submitting electronic documentation.

Policy Implications

Given the critical role that SNAP has played during this last recession, it is useful to examine how recent modernization efforts are viewed and experienced by program participants. 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 of 2008, 21 states used call centers, either statewide or in some areas of the state, while another eight states were exploring the possibility of implementing call centers.[3] Similarly, 34 states now offer the option of applying for SNAP benefits online.[4] Although the specific experiences documented in this study may not be fully replicated in other settings and contexts, the problems identified by the respondents in this study are potentially instructive for policy makers, program implementers, and researchers.

Overall, more than half of the recent applicants interviewed stated a preference for the traditional caseworker model, although some were among those who identified benefits to the modernized, online system. 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 impact what other states do. 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.

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It is also conceivable the experiences of applicants interviewed might have been different if the technological innovations implemented in Florida had not been accompanied by such substantial reductions in sites and staff. Indeed, it is very difficult to envision such a drastic change in the applicant-worker ratio without experiencing significant changes in clients' experiences. This is something for other states to consider as they pursue their own modernization plans.

The expansion of e-government will continue to be driven by claims of enhanced efficiency, increased access, and cost savings, and individuals will increasingly receive information about and apply for publicly-funded services online. Yet, these interviews suggest the technical changes occurring in Florida's Food Assistance application process may have long-lasting effects on SNAP accessibility and usage patterns by some of the most disadvantaged groups.

Because of the importance of the social safety net during these tough economic times, additional research is needed to document clients' experiences with modernized systems. It will be important to observe how Food Assistance caseload characteristics and dynamics change as various institutional structures of access are modified.

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3   Rowe, Gretchen, Sam Hall, Carolyn O'Brien, Nancy Pindus, and Robin Koralek. 2010. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis, *Enhancing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Certification: SNAP Modernization Efforts: Interim Report - Volume 1*, Alexandria, VA: April 2010.

4   Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. 2011. "SNAP On-line: A Review of State Government SNAP Websites."< http://www.cbpp.org/files/8-23-05fa.pdf> Accessed December 26, 2011.