



# **SNAP:** Supplement to the Keys to Payment Accuracy and Keys to Application Processing Timeliness

*Strategies for Balancing Accuracy and Timeliness*

February 2025



# Balancing SNAP Payment Accuracy *and* Application Processing Timeliness

## Introduction

On-time approval and delivery of accurate Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are priorities for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). This document supplements the "Keys to Payment Accuracy" and "Keys to Application Processing Timeliness" guides by highlighting strategies and considerations for State agencies to ensure they meet program requirements for both priorities. State agencies must prioritize both payment accuracy and application processing timeliness, and they can do so by focusing on continuous improvement of both and embedding these goals throughout the State agency. When State agencies provide accurate and timely SNAP benefits, they help to ensure food security and maintain program integrity, all while performing good customer service.

## Accuracy and Timeliness Requirements in the Law

The Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 requires State agencies to issue accurate and timely benefits to eligible households. State agencies must administer the program in accordance with the Act, regulations, and the State agency's plan of operation.

Sec. 11(e)(3) of the Act and regulations at 7 CFR 273.2(d) describe the State agency's responsibility for ensuring timely application processing. Sec. 16(c) and regulations at 7 CFR 275.2 explain the agency's monitoring responsibilities to ensure compliance with program administration requirements, including payment accuracy.

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Below are several ways State agencies can prioritize balancing accuracy and timeliness through (1) policy options and waivers, (2) training, (3) staffing and workload management, (4) organizational culture, and (5) data systems and technology.

## The Keys to Payment Accuracy and Application Processing Timeliness

Two guides, [SNAP: Keys to Payment Accuracy](#) and [SNAP: Keys to Application Processing Timeliness](#), share what FNS considers the most important strategies, or "Keys", for ensuring accurate and timely payments. Below are the Keys identified in each guide.

**Root cause analysis.** Find the causes of delays or payment errors as a critical first step.

**Monitoring and measuring timeliness (application processing timeliness only).**

Develop systems to monitor timeliness metrics to help achieve and maintain timeliness.

**Quality assurance reviews (payment accuracy only).** Use case reviews to prevent or correct errors and provide real-time training for workers.

**Policy options and waivers.** Choose policy options that will help achieve State agency goals for timeliness and payment accuracy.

**Training.** Target trainings for new and experienced staff to improve and maintain payment accuracy and on-time processing.

**Staffing and workload management.** Adapt staffing structures and workload management practices to increase operational efficiency and accuracy.

**Organizational culture.** Create a culture that supports payment accuracy and on-time case processing.

**Data systems and technology.** Enhance data systems to make it easier to complete accurate and on-time case processing.

**Corrective action plans (CAPs).** Develop and implement strong CAPs to improve outcomes and meet goals.

**SNAP:** Supplement to the Keys to Payment Accuracy and Keys to Application Processing Timeliness

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### Policy Options and Waivers

There are several policy options and waivers available to State agencies that can improve timeliness. Examples include decreasing the steps in case processing by reducing the number of required verifications, streamlining client interactions by offering telephonic interviews, and lessening staff workloads by implementing longer certification periods. Each of these options may also impact payment accuracy.



State agencies have a few ways to prevent options and waivers from hindering accuracy or timeliness:

- **Conduct effective interviews** that collect accurate information on household circumstances. Refer to the [SNAP Interview Toolkit](#) for suggestions on improving the interview process.
- **Inform clients about reporting requirements** to ensure they know what documents they need to submit and at what frequency. Make sure client-facing communications are clear, direct, and in plain language, in every language required for the project area.
- **Provide tip sheets to help eligibility workers.** For example, a reference sheet on the criteria for questionable information to assist workers in navigating when to request verification.
- **Monitor performance** and examine cases affected by options and waivers using root cause analysis or quality assurance (QA) reviews. More information on root cause analysis and QA reviews is available in the [SNAP: Keys to Payment Accuracy guide](#) and the [SNAP: Keys to Application Processing Timeliness guide](#).

The appendix, titled the "Framework for Assessing the Effects of State Agency Decisions," described in the next section, also gives State agencies a structured process for thinking through the impacts of adopting a policy option or waiver.

### Training

Trainings are opportunities to stress the importance of timely and accurate processing and reinforce ways staff can contribute to high payment accuracy and timeliness rates. State agencies can:

- **Incorporate a balanced focus on both accuracy and timeliness** in general trainings by highlighting the importance of each goal for good customer service and well-functioning SNAP operations.
- **Discuss accuracy in trainings mainly focused on timeliness.** For instance, in trainings on processing expedited cases to meet timeliness requirements, State agencies can include a discussion of how collecting complete and accurate information during the interview reduces follow-up work.
- **Discuss timeliness in trainings mainly focused on accuracy.** For example, in a training on income verification, State agencies can discuss how third party payroll databases can confirm household-reported income more quickly than requesting pay stubs from the client.

### Staffing and Workload Management

The way State agencies structure staffing and workflows can support or hinder timeliness and payment accuracy. In task-based case processing, also called case banking, workers complete discrete tasks and don't maintain a caseload. In traditional case management, workers have individual caseloads and handle

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most or all aspects of case processing. Before adjusting or implementing new staffing structures, State agencies can weigh the benefits and drawbacks for each approach on payment accuracy and application timeliness. Exhibit 2 outlines some of these benefits and drawbacks to the two main staffing structures used in SNAP case management, task based and traditional. However, there are many variations; State agencies can use a hybrid approach to case management that includes aspects of both staffing structures.

### Exhibit 1. Benefits and drawbacks for accuracy and timeliness, by staffing structure

Task based (case banking)	
Benefits	Drawbacks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Enables supervisors to distribute workloads so workers can focus on processing cases accurately and cases aren't waiting on the availability of certain workers to be processed</li> <li>+ Supports staff specialization and knowledge development so staff can process cases more quickly and accurately</li> <li>+ Supports an on-demand call center model so clients can complete their interviews and report current case information in a timely way while also reducing the risk of denial due to missed interview or lack of case information</li> <li>+ Enables supervisors to assign priority tasks to available staff, for instance, recertifications closest to the end of the certification period</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Could reduce workers' accuracy if they look at only one part of a case and don't see multiple requests for verifications or other information</li> <li>- Requires well-designed systems or processes for tracking sources of errors and delays</li> <li>- Requires well-designed systems or processes for tracking information, such as submitted verifications, so information isn't overlooked when multiple staff work on a case</li> <li>- Leads to more staff touching a case, with time in between each staff member's tasks</li> </ul>
Traditional case management	
Benefits	Drawbacks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Enables workers to develop an ongoing relationship with clients and a holistic view of each case; this can help workers focus requests for verifications and be aware of all information when processing case actions</li> <li>+ Makes it easier to identify the source of errors and delays because fewer workers touch each case; also makes it easier to target trainings and other supports</li> <li>+ Enables more parts of the process to be done at one time, reducing delays caused by multiple staff processing case actions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Requires robust worker training and supervision so any worker can, accurately and in a timely way, handle most or all actions for their cases</li> <li>- Makes it more difficult for supervisors to assign staff to certain tasks, such as those nearing deadlines, or to reassign work when staff are on leave</li> </ul>

### Organizational Priorities

State agency leaders can foster an environment that prioritizes both payment accuracy and timeliness. If staff often receive messages that one goal is important—such as regular communications about addressing top errors—they may infer that the other goal is less important. Below are a few ways leaders can help instill a culture that emphasizes responsibilities for both goals.



- **Communicate why accuracy and timeliness are important** and help staff see the larger impacts of their work. This can be done through all-staff emails, team meetings, trainings, and other instances where leadership communicates with front line staff.
- **Set performance goals and standards for both accuracy and timeliness** to put words into action.
- **Demonstrate a personal commitment** by integrating payment accuracy and timeliness goals into their own work.
- **Stay on top of how State agency processes and policies affect accuracy and timeliness** and be willing to reassess tools and procedures when needed.
- **Be open to new ideas from staff** who are working directly on applications and cases. Encourage staff to share their perspectives.
- **Explain how their work impacts the bigger picture**, for example, sending inappropriate requests for contacts can create churn, which impacts the overall workload.

### Data Systems and Technology

Data systems can help clients report complete and accurate information, workers correctly determine eligibility and benefits, and supervisors assess workloads. State agencies should keep several points in mind when considering changes or improvements to data systems and their impacts on accuracy and timeliness:

- **Prioritize both payment accuracy and timeliness when updating data systems.** System functions that support timeliness but do not consider accuracy may result in unintended errors in application or benefit determinations.
- **Consider how data systems align with business processes.** State agencies can use process maps to understand these interactions. More information on process mapping is available in the [SNAP: Keys to Application Processing Timeliness guide](#).
- **Ensure data systems correctly apply SNAP policy throughout the eligibility process.** Important touch points are when State agencies are (1) specifying requirements and (2) testing the system. The [SNAP System Integrity Review Tool](#) is an instrument for State agencies to evaluate whether a data system meets SNAP functional requirements.

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### Additional Considerations for Balancing Accuracy and Timeliness

**Employee engagement.** Consider including a wide variety of staff from different parts of the State agency when assessing how policies and processes will impact accuracy and timeliness. Staff with different perspectives, such as eligibility workers, supervisors, fraud prevention staff, claims staff, quality control staff, and the technical unit should be engaged in planning and decision making to ensure that new processes and initiatives meet accuracy and timeliness goals.

**Unintended effects.** When implementing policies or procedures designed to improve accuracy or timeliness, be sure to consider possible secondary effects. For example, is the change improving timeliness by reducing the burden on households but also possibly increasing the chance of overpayments, which have a negative effect on households?

**Long-term thinking.** Initiatives that could ultimately improve accuracy or timeliness may not have immediate effects. State agencies should allow time to work through issues and see impacts on payment error and timeliness rates. This also includes allowing time for staff to fully learn and implement new processes and for SNAP participants to understand how to interact with new systems. Similarly, some updates can address immediate issues but create challenges down the road. State agencies should also monitor impacts and consider long-term consequences.



# Framework for Assessing the Effects of State Agency Decisions

The "Framework for Assessing the Effects of State Agency Decisions" is a tool for State agencies to (1) consider the impacts of a policy or procedural change on payment accuracy and application processing timeliness and (2) assess how outcomes of the change balance these two goals. The framework includes five steps:

**Step 1: Predict or analyze the effects of a procedure or policy.** Use all relevant data to assess the full scope of likely or actual effects of the procedure or policy on accuracy and timeliness separately. These data sources may include:

- Quality control data
- FNS or State agency generated rates of application timeliness
- Findings from root cause analyses or case reviews
- Federal or State agency monitoring data
- Fair hearing data
- Staff insights
- Client insights
- Advocate insights
- Data or insights from other State agencies
- Findings from State agency studies. State agencies can also consider conducting new studies (see box below)

**Step 2: Assess the balance.** Assess the extent and magnitude of the procedure or policy's effects on accuracy and timeliness together. If the procedure or policy significantly advances one goal while impeding the other, the State agency can decide if the improvement outweighs the negative effect.

**Step 3: Adjust.** Make changes to the procedure or policy to mitigate any negative effects. Options include adding trainings, adjusting staffing, modifying procedures elsewhere, or developing new reports to monitor impacts.

**Step 4: Implement.** If the assessment suggests that the procedure or policy is an overall improvement, develop an implementation strategy. This includes how to communicate changes to relevant staff and establish systems to monitor the effects of the change.

**Step 5: Monitor.** Use available data to regularly assess the impact of the policy or procedure. Track the outcomes, consider the balance between accuracy and timelines, and identify needed adjustments.

## Conducting New Studies With Rapid-Cycle Evaluation

Rapid-cycle evaluation (RCE) is one way to test the effects of operational changes. In an RCE, the State agency makes a change for a short, defined period of time (one week to a few months), quickly assesses the effects, adjusts its approach, and repeats the process. The most rigorous RCEs use random assignment: those in the treatment group experience the change, and those in the control group experience "business as usual."

For example, a State agency may test a new practice of having staff review the interview procedures for 15 minutes at the start of every shift. After two weeks, they can assess this policy by (1) asking staff if they find the practice helpful, (2) conducting quality assurance reviews, or (3) looking at call data to see if interviews are shorter. The State agency may tweak the policy by lengthening the review time to 20 minutes or having staff review the material every other day; they may also decide not to implement this practice.

## Framework for Assessing the Effects of State Agency Decisions

**The process is a cycle.** Assessing a policy or procedure's impacts on accuracy and timeliness should be an ongoing process. In addition, State agencies should periodically reconsider procedures and policies they previously decided against implementing, as conditions may have changed since that decision.

A framework template with these steps, along with a completed example focusing on assessing a new technological tool, is included in the appendix.



# Frequently Asked Questions About Balancing Accuracy and Timeliness

**Q: Are there any policy options or waivers available to help improve accuracy and timeliness?**

**A:** The [Waiver Database](#), and the [State Options Report](#) list many policy options and waivers that could help State agencies improve timeliness and payment accuracy. State agencies can assess how policy options and waivers may impact accuracy and timeliness by using tools, such as the "Framework for Assessing the Effects of State Agency Decisions", described above. State agencies can also reach out to their FNS Regional Office to discuss which options and waivers might be the most effective.

**Q: How should we approach staff training on balancing timeliness and accuracy?**

**A:** First, it's important to train on accuracy and timeliness together, such as including a focus on accuracy in timeliness trainings and a focus on timeliness in accuracy trainings. Second, vary your training formats so that you can communicate information in ways that resonate with different people. Consider including on-the-job trainings, sending out memos and policy guides, creating desk aids or tip sheets, and holding virtual and face-to-face trainings. It can be particularly helpful to hold trainings that include staff from all local offices to make sure you are disseminating the same information everywhere. Third, experienced staff need regular refresher trainings to stay up to date on rules and procedures. Finally, ask staff what challenges they are experiencing and what they would like to learn, then develop trainings that address their responses. This approach can increase staff engagement with trainings, ensure the material is relevant, and show staff that their input is valued.

**Q: Which is better for balancing accuracy and timeliness: task-based case processing or traditional case management?**

**A:** Neither model is objectively "better"—both have their benefits and drawbacks for timeliness and accuracy. For example, task-based processing can move swiftly, because it enables any available worker to take an action on a case. However, with more people touching the case you introduce more opportunity for error. You can use the "Framework for Assessing the Effects of State Agency Decisions" to work through the advantages and disadvantages of each option. State agencies can also consider developing hybrid approaches that incorporate strengths from each model.

**Q: What are some strategies for balancing accuracy and timeliness when State agencies are experiencing high staff turnover?**

**A:** State agencies experiencing staff shortages might need to adjust staffing arrangements to make sure all roles are covered. Cross-training staff as a standard practice can help you re-balance workloads when needed. In addition, changes to your State agency's organizational culture could reduce staff turnover. Increasing training and professional development opportunities can improve job satisfaction among staff and expand their knowledge of policies and procedures that support accuracy and timeliness. For example, train-the-trainer style trainings can empower staff to take leadership roles with their peers and can be an efficient strategy.

## Frequently Asked Questions about Balancing Accuracy and Timeliness

for disseminating skills. Similarly, initiatives that prioritize listening to staff experiences can improve morale and provide State agency leaders with insight into issues causing payment errors or processing delays.

### **Q: How can we increase staff buy-in as we seek to improve accuracy and timeliness?**

**A:** Securing the support of staff across the State agency can be a challenge. It is important that eligibility workers see balancing accuracy and timeliness as a State agency priority shared by all. Ensure that these workers are included in collaborative workgroups, so that they can contribute to effective and sustainable approaches for addressing errors and delays. Workgroup participation can also promote relationship building among staff from across the State agency, as staff develop a mutual understanding of the challenges of each role. Further, when you include caseworkers in case reviews, they can feel like part of the broader team by identifying mistakes. Timeliness and accuracy in case processing also benefits families by ensuring they get the benefits to which they are entitled to, when they need them the most. Developing a culture of collaboration and participation helps all State agency staff feel connected to the goals of improving accuracy and timeliness and helping the community by providing good customer service.

County-administered States have the additional challenge of obtaining buy-in from different counties, especially when operations and local context can vary widely. To increase buy-in, involve representatives from each county in your collaborative workgroups; collect and share county-specific data on error rates and timeliness measures so you can connect county participation to program outcomes; and allow time to disseminate new trainings, processes, and messaging across the State.



### **Q: How can we communicate to staff that we can prioritize both accuracy and timeliness?**

**A:** Your State agency's organizational culture can emphasize the importance of both goals. Leaders can share successes with staff through announcements or newsletters that highlight changes and positive results for accuracy and timeliness. Further, leaders can communicate that problem solving is the responsibility of all parts of the State agency, and that it requires working together. This approach can move staff away from believing that potential issues—such as unclear policies, insufficient training, and outdated data systems—are unrelated. It can also help promote an interconnected approach to the whole SNAP ecosystem. Communication is more than just words, though. You should also take action to improve accuracy and timeliness and show that both goals are equally important. Ensure your policies and training approaches do not inadvertently prioritize one goal at the expense of the other.

### **Q: What new technologies can assist with balancing timeliness and accuracy?**

**A:** Available tools and technologies include the following:

- **Enhancements to call center systems.** For example, systems can route callers efficiently to appropriate agents for interviews or to report case changes. Some systems can move priority cases, such as SNAP applicants calling to interview 20 days or more after their application date, to the front of the queue.

## Frequently Asked Questions about Balancing Accuracy and Timeliness

- **Modernized case tracking systems.** These systems allow for real-time monitoring of application timeliness, such as a countdown clock for each case. They can also automatically flag cases requiring immediate attention to help staff prioritize work efficiently.
- **Data matching systems.** These systems pull information from external systems. They can improve accuracy while speeding up processing by reducing the need for clients to submit verification.

### **Q: How do we make progress on ongoing efforts to improve timeliness and accuracy when new urgent and time-sensitive matters seem to come up consistently?**

**A:** Achieving and maintaining accuracy and timeliness is a long-term effort. Circumstances are constantly changing in ways that cannot always be anticipated, so aim to make program improvements that are flexible enough to accommodate uncertainty. For instance, new data systems should allow users to add fields if they need to collect new types of data. Staff can also be cross-trained so they can respond nimbly to new staffing arrangements. When planning for operational improvements, engage with a collaborative workgroup to (1) identify immediate and long-term needs and considerations for implementation and (2) develop sustainable initiatives. For instance, when establishing a new call center, ensure that you have both an immediate and long-term staffing plan as well as backup approaches to communicating with applicants and clients in case of a system overload.



# Appendix: Framework for Assessing Effects of State Agency Decisions Template

The following framework template can help you operationalize the steps in the framework. It includes space to document goals for the procedure or policy decision; effects on payment accuracy and application timeliness, separately and together; possible adjustments, such as to address risks; and plans for implementation and monitoring.

## Framework for Assessing the Effects of a State Agency Decision on Payment Accuracy and Application Processing Timeliness Template

### Procedure or policy decision name

**Goals:** *(describe)*

**Data:** *(describe)*

#### 1. Predict or analyze the effects

**Positive effects on accuracy:** *Prediction or data analysis*

**Positive effects on timeliness:** *Prediction or data analysis*

**Risks to accuracy:** *Prediction or data analysis*

**Risks to timeliness:** *Prediction or data analysis*

#### 2. Assess the balance



*Review how the procedure or policy affects both accuracy and timeliness and assess whether this balance is acceptable. Are there more positive effects, or more risks? Does the procedure or policy favor one goal over another? What are the trade-offs? Is the procedure or policy feasible and sustainable considering the State agency's resources? Is there an alternative?*

#### 3. Adjust



*Decide whether to make any adjustments. How will the State agency manage any trade-offs? What adjustments or implementation strategies can mitigate risks or negative outcomes? If the procedure or policy is infeasible or unsustainable, what would make it possible?*

#### 4. Implement



*Based on this assessment, decide how to move forward: continue with the current procedure or policy, modify it, or decide not to proceed.*



*Describe how the State agency will successfully implement this plan, including what changes it will make, who will make the changes, and when and where they will occur.*

#### 5. Monitor



*Describe plans to monitor the effects of the procedure or policy. What existing data can you track? What new data can you collect (including observational or qualitative data)? How will you assess the balance of accuracy and timeliness? What benchmarks or thresholds will you use to determine if this change is a success or should be reversed?*

**Date to revisit:**

## Example Completed Framework Template

Below is an example of how the framework template can be used to assess the effects of a new technological tool.





### Example: Assessing a new technological tool

#### State agency mobile application (app) for submitting verifications

**Goals:** Simplify the verification submission process; speed up processing; provide better customer service.

**Data:** Average time from submission to processing of verifications; rates on application processing timeliness and payment errors; app usage data.

#### 1. Predict or analyze the effects

-  **Positive effects on accuracy:** One month after launching the app, QA reviews show errors are still occurring, but we believe we can see positive effects in the future once the app is more integrated into our procedures. By making it easier for clients to submit proper verification, payment accuracy can improve; we may rely less on self-declarations.
-  **Positive effects on timeliness:** One month after launching the app, average verification processing time decreased from seven days to three days. Application processing timeliness rates have increased by 5% so far. The app makes it easier for clients to submit many kinds of verifications, which can reduce the time it takes on the client's end. Digital document submission also cuts down significantly on the time it takes to process verifications, because they are automatically uploaded to a client's case and do not need to be scanned and indexed in two separate steps. In addition, app-based document upload eliminates delays involved in mailing or dropping off documents at a local office.
-  **Risks to accuracy:** If the mobile app is not functioning correctly or is not user-friendly, it will not increase accuracy; we must conduct regular quality assurance checks. We need to keep prioritizing accurate routing and data input of mailed or hand-delivered documents for clients who do not use the mobile app to ensure equitable access and to limit risks to accuracy.
-  **Risks to timeliness:** If the mobile app is not functioning correctly or is not user-friendly, timeliness may be at risk; we must conduct regular quality assurance checks. We need to keep prioritizing accurate and efficient routing and data input of mailed or hand-delivered documents for clients who do not use the mobile app to ensure equitable and timely access.

#### 2. Assess the balance



Allowing clients to submit electronic verifications on a mobile app makes it much easier and faster for them to share information, so it is likely to improve both accuracy and timeliness. So far, we have seen positive effects on timeliness, and we expect to see positive effects on payment accuracy in the future. There are no obvious trade-offs between the two goals.

#### 3. Adjust



We can keep training staff on how to route and input information from verifications submitted by mail or hand delivery so we serve all clients equitably. The mobile app build is expensive, but we received a Process and Technology Improvement Grant from FNS, which covered the start-up cost. We have also incorporated ongoing costs—including a part-time salary for a software developer to handle technological issues—in our annual budgets going forward.

**4. Implement**



We will continue implementing our mobile app as planned. We will keep notifying staff and clients through several communication streams about any updates related to the app, and have published refresher training modules workers can review about how to view and process verifications submitted through the app. (They received an initial training before the launch.)

**5. Monitor**



Each month after launch, at least for the first year, we will assess (1) the average time to process verifications, (2) processing time for verifications submitted through the app compared with mailed or dropped-off verifications, (3) the application processing timeliness rate, and (4) the State agency-calculated payment error rate. We will adjust our plans depending on what we find. For example, if processing time is fast for verifications submitted through the app, but slow for physical verifications, we will work toward a better balance. We will also assess app usage data and increase outreach if there is low usage.

**Date to revisit:** Monthly during the first year.

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