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Why We Should Rethink the SNAP Interview Requirement: A Former Caseworker's Perspective

By Parker Gilkesson Davis

As a former social services caseworker turned SNAP policy expert, I've spent years navigating the intricacies of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) interview requirement. Even as a caseworker, I questioned the necessity of interviews, especially for clients who were already familiar with the program, didn't have questions about SNAP or their case, and had submitted all the necessary information.

For many clients, the interview process often felt redundant, as it asked the exact questions already covered in the application. Over time, I realized that the primary purpose of these interviews was to detect possible instances of fraud by trying to catch discrepancies between the application and the answers during the interview. While maintaining program integrity is important, it's essential to note that SNAP fraud is remarkably rare. In fiscal year 2019, only 0.1 percent (https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/snap-program-integrity-how-racialized-fraud-provisions-criminalize-hunger/) of SNAP issuances were overpayments based on Intentional Program Violations —which worked out to just a dime for every $100 of SNAP benefits. Moreover, only 0.9 percent (https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/snap-program-integrity-how-racialized-fraud-provisions-criminalize-hunger/) were overpayments of any sort, including household and agency errors.

Meanwhile, the SNAP program reaches, on average, 22 percent (https://www.mathematica.org/publications/estimates-of-state-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-participation-rates-in-2020) of those eligible. That means families are going without the food they need; and administrative burdens like the interview requirement are one of the reasons people find it hard to access SNAP. For example, these interviews are often scheduled without input from the client, which may require them to miss work to attend. Sometimes clients receive notification of their interview

date after the actual date has passed.

The focus on fraud increases the stigma attached to accessing food benefits through SNAP by implying that SNAP participants are thieves who must be watched. In reality, SNAP participants are children, parents, and grandparents. Many have disabilities or are trying to keep their loved ones fed while they are between jobs. They are working in the low-wage jobs that keep our society functioning, as nurses, home health aides, housekeepers, and possibly the friendly cashier at your local coffee shop.

Despite the low incidence of fraud, caseworkers are required to dedicate significant time and resources to fraud prevention. This focus often overshadows other critical aspects of our work, such as providing trauma-informed care or referring families to additional assistance to address the myriad challenges of living in poverty.

Removing the interview requirement would not only streamline the application process but also help minimize agency errors. With an interview option, workers can focus their efforts on those clients who need extra support. The time spent on unnecessary interviews can instead be spent on providing essential services to clients, addressing their immediate needs, and connecting them with appropriate resources. This shift in focus from fraud prevention to client-centered care is crucial in creating a more compassionate and effective social services system.

Caseworkers are often better trained to look for fraud than to provide holistic support and assistance. But in my experience, caseworkers don't want to spend time on unnecessary interviews that are ineffective at finding what infinitesimal fraud exists. They want to use those critical personal interactions with clients to help their clients find the resources and support they need to thrive. As we work toward an improved SNAP program, we must include an optional interview for those who would benefit from it and ensure that these caseworker jobs are secure, well-paid, and high quality. Caseworkers are essential to the success of SNAP.

As we advocate for change, it's vital to recognize the deep investments made in program integrity and the stereotypes that often surround public benefits recipients. Removing unnecessary barriers like the interview requirement is a step toward reorienting our

priorities and ensuring that SNAP truly serves those in need with dignity and respect. Efforts to remove the interview requirement specifically for recertification is a nice first step, but our ultimate goal is to strengthen the program so it better serves those who need it by making the SNAP interview optional. This approach aims to uplift SNAP workers and recipients alike, fostering a more compassionate and responsive system that meets the diverse needs of our communities.



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