

## Best Practices in USDA Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP) Operations and Planning (Summary)

### Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers 16 nutrition assistance programs with the mission to increase food security and reduce hunger—in partnership with cooperating organizations—by providing children and low-income people access to food, a healthy diet, and nutrition education in a manner that supports American agriculture and inspires public confidence.

Under the authority of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, the Secretary of Agriculture can authorize requesting State agencies to operate Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP) in areas with a Presidential disaster declaration authorizing Individual Assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) once commercial channels of food distribution are operational. This study seeks to: (1) assess the implementation and operation of D-SNAP for selected disasters in four study States; (2) document each State’s approach to protecting program integrity while operating D-SNAP for the selected disasters; (3) determine best practices for developing annual disaster plans to address a variety of disaster types; and (4) determine best practices for implementing and operating D-SNAP for a variety of disaster types.

### Key Findings

- State agencies expressed a desire to continue virtual D-SNAP operations after the Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic.
- State agencies should maintain relationships and open communication with other State agencies, partners, and contractors.
- During operations, daily management huddles, and a centralized “command room” promote efficient collaboration and decision making.
- Preregistration systems shorten interview duration and reduce errors.
- State agencies can use the closeout process to reflect on challenges and effective practices and identify areas for improvement in future D-SNAPs.

### Methods

This study drew on case studies of five D-SNAPs in four States that took place between spring 2018 and fall 2020. The disasters included a hurricane and tornados in North Carolina, a hurricane in Louisiana, a tornado in Tennessee, and wildfires in Oregon. See Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Disasters**

State	Disaster	Date of Disaster	Counties Affected	D-SNAP Application Period	D-SNAP Households Served	Total Benefits Issued	Type of D-SNAP
Louisiana	Hurricane Laura	August 27, 2020	21	September 10–23, 2020	41,936	\$37.3 million	Virtual
North Carolina	Hurricane Florence	September 14, 2018	34	September 18–November 9, 2018	205,449	\$84.5 million	In person
North Carolina	Tornado	April 15, 2018	2	May 17–22, 2018	2,581	\$1.0 million	In person
Oregon	Wildfires	Beginning September 7, 2020	8	October 23–28, 2020	168	< \$0.1 million	Virtual
Tennessee	Severe storms	March 3, 2020	3	March 16–24, 2020	2,354	\$0.8 million	Hybrid

Data collection for the study involved a review of documents for each D-SNAP, including annual D-SNAP plans, waiver requests and approvals, post-disaster reports, training materials, site schematics for in-person D-SNAP locations, signs, press releases, State agency-level policy guidance, operations handbooks, and outreach materials. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with SNAP State agency leadership, local office supervisory staff, eligibility workers and frontline staff, and a variety of community partners. Finally, administrative data was analyzed for the demographics and characteristics of D-SNAP households.

## Findings and Recommendations

**States agencies expressed a desire to continue virtual D-SNAP operations after the pandemic.** Virtual D-SNAPs improve access for individuals who are unable to visit an in person site, reduce burden on State agency staff who can work remotely, and save costs on physical infrastructure and staff travel.

### Planning

**SNAP State agencies should maintain relationships and open communication with other State agencies, partners, and contractors.** All State agencies stressed the importance of incorporating organizations, such as emergency response departments, local community organizations, and government contractors into the planning process.

**State agencies can benefit from consulting with States that have more extensive emergency response experience.** For example, Oregon had not implemented a D-SNAP in over 10 years before the 2020 wildfires. Contacting and learning from a State with more D-SNAP experience greatly helped with its own planning.

**State agencies should start drafting the D-SNAP waiver request before the disaster strikes.** Two States reported preparing the request in advance enabled submittal to FNS and FEMA as soon as an Individual Assistance was declared and normal channels of commerce were reestablished.

### Implementation

**Daily management huddles and a centralized “command room” promote efficient collaboration and decision making.** Having upper management work in the same space enables them to collaborate and make decisions efficiently.

**Group chats enable policy staff to support frontline staff in real time.** Two States used group chats (e.g., Skype chat

rooms in Louisiana) as an important tool for quickly responding to workers’ policy questions.

**Regular D-SNAP trainings can provide important avenues for keeping staff aware of the program and training in trauma-informed interviewing.** Several States with successful D-SNAP implementation mentioned annual trainings as beneficial. Oregon staff thought annual trainings were a good way to teach workers how to better serve a population that may have experienced trauma during the disaster.

**Use of known phone numbers or hotlines can facilitate effective public awareness campaigns.** Because residents of States are often familiar with certain governmental phone numbers, like 211, they are more likely to remember them as options during a D-SNAP.

### Operations

**Preregistration systems shorten interview duration and reduce errors.** Households provide information in advance of the disaster which shortens the post-disaster application process.

**Local offices can be effective locations for inperson D-SNAP operation.** Two States found that using these sites made operations easier since they were already Americans with Disabilities Act compliant, had resources, and were familiar to participants and staff.

**Prerecorded messages regarding rights and responsibilities can save time and ensure all clients receive the same information.** Louisiana used prerecorded messages on the D-SNAP phone lines, and North Carolina played prerecorded messages for clients while they waited in line at the D-SNAP site.

**State agencies can incorporate redundancy into the D-SNAP process to reduce fraud and mistakes.** For example, having several staff in different positions review the same application ensured suspected fraud was detected and effectively communicated to eligibility workers.

### Closeout

**State agencies can use the closeout process to reflect on challenges and effective practices and identify areas for improvement in future D-SNAP.** The closeout process provides an opportunity for State agency staff to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their program.

**Recorded interviews can be effective in case reviews.** Louisiana recorded all phone interviews as part of its regular process which made the case review process easier.