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## NEW FOOD STAMP RULES WILL IMPROVE ACCESS TO BENEFITS

In June, Policy Page #133 (<http://www.cppp.org/products/policypages/131-150/131-150html/PP133.html>) informed readers of new laws passed by the 77<sup>th</sup> Legislature to improve access to Food Stamps. At its August meeting, the Texas Board of Human Services approved rules to implement one of these provisions, which provide for new telephone interview options for Food Stamp applicants and recipients. This Policy Page explains the new rules as well as steps the anti-hunger community can take to publicize the telephone interview options to low-income Texans in need of nutrition assistance.

**Who is eligible?** The new rules allow telephone interviews in place of face-to-face interviews (both for the initial interview and at recertification) for households that cannot make a personal appearance at a Texas Department of Human Services (DHS) office because they face one of the following hardships:

- work or training schedule;
- transportation difficulties;
- residency in a rural area;
- prolonged or severe weather;
- illness; or
- caring for another family member.

In addition, households that contain only seniors or persons with disabilities and have no earned income are eligible for a telephone interview. The rules maintain the option (as required by federal law) for a face-to-face interview if the household requests one. Applicants will still be required to submit all of the required documentation to DHS before they are certified for benefits.

**How will applicants be notified about the telephone option?** A one-page checklist of the hardship criteria along with an explanation of the telephone option will be attached to the application packet, which is mailed to clients when they call DHS for an appointment, or given to them if they come into a local DHS office. If a client meets one of the criteria, he/she can check the box next to the hardship that applies and mail it back with the application form to request a telephone interview. This attachment will be used until DHS can incorporate the checklist into the application itself.

Caseworkers will grant a telephone interview automatically if the household contains only seniors or persons with disabilities AND has no earned income.

**Will proof of hardship be required?** DHS will only require verification of a hardship if someone in the household is currently disqualified for committing fraud. Otherwise, caseworkers will accept a client's statement as verification. Caseworkers will be instructed to ask for clarification of a client's claim to hardship if it seems questionable, for example if "prolonged severe weather" is claimed, but there are no reports of foul weather in the area.

**When can a telephone interview be denied?** Caseworkers can only deny a telephone interview if someone in the household has been disqualified for committing fraud, and the household is unwilling or unable to provide proof of the hardship. In this case, a face-to-face interview will be required.

**Effective date:** The rules were effective starting October 1.

### OUTREACH IS CRITICAL!

As with any new policy that significantly changes enrollment procedures, outreach by health and human services providers and community-based organizations is badly needed to get the word out to clients about the new rules. Although all local DHS offices have received notification of this change, because of high turnover at DHS offices and staffing shortages—particularly in certain regions of the state—it may take some time for the new policy to take root and be consistently applied. Because it may be a while before all DHS caseworkers are fully familiar with the policy changes, the more providers and clients who are educated about the new rules, the fewer improper denials.

**Note to providers/client advocates:** If you feel that your client has been incorrectly denied Food Stamps (or any benefit), you should get the name of the caseworker and the office location and follow up with the caseworker's supervisor, or instruct your client to contact the supervisor. If this does not resolve the situation, please contact us and we will attempt to help sort out your client's case.

**CPPP has developed an outreach flyer (Spanish version will be available soon) to publicize the new telephone interview option, which is on our web site at [www.cppp.org/products/alertsflyers/foodflyers/fshardship.pdf](http://www.cppp.org/products/alertsflyers/foodflyers/fshardship.pdf).**

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