



Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance

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General Information System (GIS) Message

Section 1

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To:	Subscribers
Suggested Distribution:	Commissioners, TA Directors, SNAP Directors, WMS Coordinators, Medicaid Directors, Child Support Coordinators
From:	Jeffrey Gaskell, Deputy Commissioner, EISP Eileen Stack, Deputy Commissioner, CSS
Subject:	COVID-19
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Section 2

The purpose of this GIS is to provide guidance to social services districts (districts) on meeting the needs of individuals and families who are applying for or receiving benefits and/or assistance through Temporary Assistance (TA), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and child support services.

In response to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the declaration of a State disaster emergency (Executive Order 202, March 7, 2020), the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) is advising districts of immediate measures that can be taken to simplify and streamline program administration for clients and staff, and is temporarily issuing essential statewide waivers to certain eligibility requirements for the programs that the agency oversees. The expiration of provisions contained in this message may be extended by future guidance. Certain items are authorized by Executive Order 202.1 issued on March 13, 2020, which currently expires April 11, 2020.

Temporary Assistance

Eligibility and Recertification Interviews

Effective immediately, OTDA is allowing and encouraging districts to conduct all TA eligibility and recertification interviews by phone, as opposed to in person or “face-to-face” (18 NYCRR §§ 351.20(b)(3); 350.3(c)). For eligibility interviews, this waiver will continue until April 11, 2020 and for

recertification interviews until May 15, 2020. Districts must return to in person face-to-face interview practices effective April 12, 2020 for eligibility interviews and May 16, 2020 for recertification interviews **unless notified otherwise** or operating under a previously approved waiver. If an applicant or recipient requests an in-person interview, they must be allowed to have one.

Districts who utilize telephone interviews at eligibility are reminded of the importance of screening for emergencies when the application is submitted and meeting any immediate need the same day. In these situations, face-to-face interaction with applicants may be unavoidable but should be kept to a minimum.

Districts may contact individuals already scheduled for face-to-face recertification interviews to advise them that their recertification interview may be conducted via telephone. For recertifications that have not yet been scheduled during this waiver period, districts should notify such clients of their telephone recertification appointment date and time on a locally produced manual notice.

Districts must mail clients who have a phone recertification interview an [LDSS-2642 Documentation Requirements](#) form to request any needed documentation by close of the business the day following the telephone interview or as soon as possible thereafter.

Screenings

If a district conducts the eligibility or recertification interview by telephone, the district must conduct drug/alcohol screenings and domestic violence screenings when such screenings are required. In accordance with Executive Order 202.1 issued by Governor Cuomo on March 13, 2020, sections 132 and 349-a of the Social Services Law have been temporarily suspended until April 11, 2020 to the extent necessary to allow such screenings to be conducted by telephone. These screenings may be conducted via telephone at both application and at recertification.

Common Benefit Identification Card (CBIC)

Consistent with Executive Order 202.1, section 131(9) of the social services law has been suspended which allows districts to issue CBIC cards for TA applicants or recipients without photographs affixed until April 11, 2020.

Other procedures

Districts with local procedures such as a call-in process or a process that requires frequent contact with individuals experiencing homelessness and residing in emergency housing may conduct these contacts via phone, reduce frequency, or suspend them through May 15, 2020. In all instances, districts are expected to ensure residents of emergency housing continue to receive necessary services and that staff are available to address resident needs.

Districts are also allowed to conduct phone interviews with recipients that have emergencies until May 15, 2020. Recipients will still need to provide documentation of the emergency need so that the districts can make an accurate assessment and determine the assistance necessary to ameliorate the need.

In order to maximize staff resources and triage critical work, districts will be allowed flexibility on taking negative action on periodic reporting requirements for TA until May 15, 2020.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

OTDA expects federal legislative action in the near future to expand flexibility for SNAP case processing to reduce staff and applicant/recipient requirements. OTDA will provide additional guidance when existing federal rules are modified for this purpose.

Districts again are reminded that all SNAP application and recertification interviews may be done by phone. An in-person interview is only required if the applicant or recertifying recipient requests an in-person interview.

Per [05 ADM-15](#), the threshold for requiring establishment of an overpayment claim on an active SNAP case is \$125. Any overpayment equal to or greater than that amount owed by members of a household with an active SNAP case is supposed to have a claim established. However, OTDA's federally-approved State plan requires claim establishment, on both active or inactive cases, only on claim amounts of \$500 or more. For the duration of the COVID-19 public health crisis, at their discretion, districts can elect to raise the claims collection threshold to \$500 on active SNAP cases.

Additionally, districts are reminded that clients may use SNAP benefits for online grocery purchases. Current participating retailers include Amazon, Walmart and ShopRite. Amazon is available statewide; Walmart and ShopRite participate in specific zip codes. Walmart, depending on specific locations, offers delivery, pick-up or both. Clients can enter zip code on the Walmart or ShopRite websites to find availability.

Employment Activities

Districts may and are encouraged to suspend or defer any non-essential face-to-face contacts/appointments including work activities for TA and SNAP applicants and recipients until May 15, 2020. Districts should document the good cause justification and should cite this directive. Any TA or SNAP recipient that is unable to comply with a work activity through May 15, 2020 must be granted good cause if the nonparticipation is due to an inability to participate or concerns with participation due to COVID-19. Districts should inform all staff of this policy.

Districts should ensure that staff are reminded of the requirement to grant good cause when failure to meet program requirements is due to factors beyond the participant's control. The COVID-19 pandemic may result in the inability of individuals to attend agency employment appointments, including work activity assignments, due to factors such as lack of transportation, lack of child-care, or worksite closures, or legitimate concerns about using public transportation or other factor regarding work participation. Districts should consider the extent to which such factors may affect an individual's ability to comply with program requirements and document good cause based on a notation of pandemic factors in the district.

Employment Assessments and Employment Plans

Districts are reminded that employment assessments and employment plans for applicants and recipients may be completed via telephone contact, in order to comply with the 90-day requirement to complete the employment assessment for adults in households with dependent children. Districts should mail individuals copies of completed/updated plans that were discussed during telephone calls.

Distance Learning

Districts should encourage individuals who are currently engaged in educational activities to continue to participate via distance learning options, if this is a viable and available option. Until May 15, 2020, districts may report all hours of educational activities that are conducted remotely as participated in that activity regardless of the 10 hours limitation set forth on page 19, of [08-ADM-07](#) Implementation of Final TANF Rule.

Orientation

OTDA encourages districts to avoid conducting employment orientations face-to-face or in group settings. Districts may conduct employment orientations over the phone, online, or provide applicants or recipients with written materials by mail.

Job Search/Job Readiness Training

OTDA encourages districts to avoid conducting job search/Job Readiness Training activities in large group settings during this public health crisis and encourages delaying mandatory employment assignments until May 15, 2020. The NYS Department of Labor has online resources available to help districts and clients utilize JobZone. The link below gives an overview of JobZone, including a video overview and a list of available features, such as job search and work search record. Districts may wish to include these links in any orientation materials or other communications with clients.

<https://labor.ny.gov/careerservices/jobzone/index.shtm>

JobZone FAQs may be found at: <https://labor.ny.gov/careerservices/JobZone/pdf/JobZoneFAQs.pdf>

Able Bodied Adults without Dependents (ABAWD)

OTDA is aware of pending federal legislation that may remove the work requirement/time limit for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) until after the federal emergency declaration is suspended. Pending federal action, districts should cite this directive to document good cause for any ABAWD unable to meet the work requirement during the month of March, 2020. OTDA will issue additional guidance as new information becomes available.

Child Support Services

Child Support Applications

As outlined in [19-ADM-08](#), Application for Child Support Services ([LDSS-5143](#)), in addition to requesting a child support application in person, a parent may request a child support application through the following ways:

- Calling the Child Support Helpline (888-208-4485). Upon request, the customer service representatives at the Child Support Helpline will send the LDSS-5143 to the individual by mail. They will also advise callers that the LDSS-5143 is available at: www.childsupport.ny.gov.
- Accessing from the website. The LDSS-5143 is available at childsupport.ny.gov, where it can be printed, completed, and submitted by mail to the Child Support Enforcement Unit (CSEU). It is also available as a fillable PDF that can be electronically completed, signed, and emailed to the CSEU at the district email address located on childsupport.ny.gov, or the district website.

Child Support Referrals

If at application or recertification, a child support referral is needed, the district must provide the applicant/recipient with an [LDSS 5145](#), *Referral for Child Support Services*. The recipient must be advised to provide as much information as possible on the LDSS-5145 and mail the completed and signed LDSS-5145 and any supporting documentation to the CSEU. The applicant/recipient must also be advised that the CSEU will follow up directly with the applicant/recipient as necessary, so providing reliable contact information (e.g. phone and email) is critical. Additionally, the [LDSS-2859](#), *Information Transmittal* must be sent to the CSEU informing them a referral was given.

Determining Child Support Cooperation

CSEUs have flexibility in determining whether an appearance by the individual A/R is necessary to take the next appropriate step in a case, and in how the individual “must appear” at the CSEU. For example, CSEUs may determine that factors beyond the A/R’s control impede the ability for the individual to appear in-person including, but not limited to, quarantine conditions (self-imposed or mandatory) or lack of childcare. Communication via telephone, email, or regular mail may constitute an appearance at the CSEU permitting a determination as to whether the individual has cooperated with the child support requirement without the necessity of a face-to-face interview. State regulation does not provide a

specific timeframe for determining a TA applicant's or recipient's cooperation with the child support program (18 NYCRR § 347.5). Therefore, district staff have discretion to delay the determination of cooperation if they have credible reason to believe that the applicant's or recipient's lack of cooperation is due to COVID-19. District staff also may determine cooperation via phone interview with the applicant or recipient.

Alternatives to Walk-in Customer Service

Several enhancements are underway at the State level to provide Child Support Program customers with alternatives to inquiries resulting in a direction to visit a district for walk-in service. The New York State Child Support Helpline (CSH) will obtain email addresses in addition to phone numbers from custodial and noncustodial parents for whom a referral to the CSEU is necessary. The collection of this additional information is anticipated to provide another mechanism for communication including the sharing of necessary documentation. Additionally, revisions are underway to the landing page for childsupport.ny.gov to prominently display links to forms that customers may need to seek relief for an emergent situation. Individuals will be advised that these forms can be submitted via mail or email, as an alternative to visiting the district.

At the district level, staff may establish a local phone number for purposes of providing customer service remotely for referrals on matters that cannot be addressed by the CSH, and to reduce face-to-face contact while also providing flexibility for alternative staffing arrangements.

Systems Implications

WMS and myWorkspace is currently available from 7:00 am until 9:00 pm for data entry on Monday through Thursday and 7:00 am until 7:00 pm Friday through Sunday.

NYC WMS is currently available for data entry from 8:00 am until 9:00 pm Monday through Friday and 8:00 am until 5:00 pm on Saturday and Sunday.

OTDA is exploring the availability of extending the hours that districts can data enter information into WMS, myWorkspace and NYC WMS if districts wish to have workers stagger their work schedules. Districts will be notified if there are any changes to the abovementioned times.

General Reminders and Recommendations

As a reminder, all districts are expected stay open during regular business hours Monday through Friday, and they must continue to meet emergency needs.

Additionally, districts are reminded that they must have after hours procedures in place to handle emergencies.

Please see [20 TA/DC013](#) for additional information.