

effective date of the change. Initial notification may be made by telephone but the State agency shall confirm the information in writing as soon as possible.

(e) *Advance planning documentation.* State agencies must comply with the procurement requirements of part 277 for the acquisition, design, development, or installation of automated data processing (ADP) equipment. With certain exceptions detailed in part 277, State agencies must receive prior approval for the design and acquisition of ADP systems through submission of advance planning documents (APD's).

§274.2 Providing benefits to participants.

(a) *General.* Each State agency is responsible for the timely and accurate issuance of benefits to certified eligible households in accordance with these regulations. Those households comprised of elderly or disabled members which have difficulty reaching issuance offices, and households which do not reside in a permanent dwelling or of a fixed mailing address shall be given assistance in obtaining their regular monthly benefits. State agencies shall assist these households by arranging for the mail issuance of coupons to them, by assisting them in finding authorized representatives who can act on their behalf, or by using other appropriate means. Requirements to assure timely and accurate issuance of benefits to eligible households in rural areas are described in paragraph (g) of this section.

(b) *Availability of benefits.* All newly-certified households, except those that are given expedited service, shall be given an opportunity to participate no later than 30 calendar days following the date the application was filed. An opportunity to participate consists of providing households with coupons or authorization documents and having issuance facilities open and available for the households to obtain their benefits. State agencies must mail authorization documents or coupons in time to assure that the documents can be transacted, or the coupons spent after they are received but before the 30-day standard expires. A household has not been provided an opportunity to par-

ticipate within the 30-day standard if the authorization document or benefits are mailed on the 29th or 30th day. Neither has an opportunity to participate been provided if the authorization document is mailed on the 28th day but no issuance facility is open on the 30th day. For households entitled to expedited service, the State agency shall make benefits available to the household not later than the fifth calendar day following the date of application. Whatever system a State agency uses to ensure meeting this delivery standard shall be designed to allow a reasonable opportunity for redemption of ATPs no later than the fifth calendar day following the date of application.

(c) *Combined allotments.* For those households which are to receive a combined allotment, the State agency shall provide the benefits for both months as an aggregate (combined) allotment, or as two separate allotments, with the same validity period, made available at the same time, in accordance with the timeframes specified in §273.2 of this chapter.

(d) *Ongoing households.* All households shall be placed on an issuance schedule so that they receive their benefits on or about the same date each month. The date upon which a household receives its initial allotment after certification need not be the date that the household must receive its subsequent allotments.

(1) State agencies that use direct-mail issuance shall stagger issuance over at least 10 days of the issuance month, and may stagger issuance over the entire issuance month. State agencies using a method other than direct-mail issuance may stagger issuance throughout the month, or for a shorter period. When staggering benefit delivery, however, State agencies shall not allow more than 40 days to elapse between the issuance of any two allotments provided to a household participating longer than two consecutive, complete months. Regardless of the issuance schedule used, the State agency shall adhere to the reporting requirements specified in §274.4.

(2) Upon the request of the tribal organization that exercises governmental jurisdiction over a reservation, the State agency shall stagger the issuance

of benefits for eligible households located on reservations for at least 15 days each month.

(3) When a participating household is transferred from one issuance system or procedure to another issuance system or procedure, the State agency shall not permit more than 40 days to elapse between the last issuance under the previous system or procedure, and the first issuance under the new system or procedure. The 40-day requirement does not apply to instances in which actions by recipients, such as failure to submit a monthly report, disrupt benefits. Transfers include, but are not limited to, households being moved into or out of a staggered issuance procedure, households on a fluctuating schedule within a staggered system, and households being moved from a direct-mail issuance system to an authorization document system. If the State agency determines that more than 40 days may elapse between issuances, the State agency shall divide the new issuance into two parts, with one part being issued within the 40-day period, and the second part, or supplemental issuance, being issued on the household's established issuance date in the new system or procedure. The supplemental issuance cannot provide the household more benefits than the household is entitled to receive.

(4) Notwithstanding the above provisions, in months in which benefits have been suspended under the provisions of § 271.7, State agencies may stagger issuance to certified households following the end of the suspension. In such situations, State agencies may, at their option, stagger issuance from the date issuance resumes through the end of the month or over a five-day period following the resumption of issuance, even if this results in benefits being issued after the end of the month in which the suspension occurred.

(e) *Issuance services.* State agencies are responsible for determining the location and hours of operation of issuance services. In doing so, State agencies shall ensure that the issuance schedules set forth in paragraphs (b) and (c) of this section are met. In addition, issuance authorization documents, such as ATP cards, should be valid only in the geographic area with-

in the State that is encompassed by the reconciliation system through which the issuance will be processed; however, the validity area may be extended within the State at the State agency's option. State agencies may also restrict the validity of these documents to smaller areas or particular issuance sites with minimal practicable inconvenience to affected households.

(f) *Issuance of coupons to households.* The State agency shall issue coupon books in accordance with a table for coupon-book issuance provided by FNS, except as provided in paragraphs (e)(1), (e)(2), and (e)(3) of this section. The State agency shall issue the coupon books in consecutive serial number order whenever possible, starting with the lowest serial number in each coupon book denomination. The household member whose name appears on the ID card shall sign the coupon books; if more than one name appears, any named member may sign the books.

(1) The State agency may deviate from the table if the specified coupon books are unavailable.

(2) Exceptions from the table are authorized for blind and visually-handicapped participants who request that all coupons be of one denomination. Recipients who have no fixed address (homeless), and residents of shelters for battered women and children, as defined in § 271.2, and which are not authorized by FNS to redeem through wholesalers, may request that all or part of their coupons be of the \$1 denomination. State agencies are authorized to grant this request when feasible.

(3) If a household is eligible for an allotment of \$1, \$3, or \$5, the State agency shall adjust those allotments to \$2, \$4, or \$6, respectively.

(g) *Issuance in rural areas.* State agencies shall use direct-mail issuance in any rural areas where the State agency determines that recipients face substantial difficulties in obtaining transportation in order to obtain their food stamp benefits by methods other than direct-mail issuance. Exceptions shall be made for households which have exceeded the two allowable reported losses within a six-month period and replacements set forth in § 274.6 (b) and

(g), and direct-mail issuance is not required in those localities where the direct mail loss rates exceed, or are likely to exceed, standards set by the Secretary at §276.2(b) of this chapter. The State agency shall:

(1) Submit an attachment to the State Plan of Operation (§272.2(d)(1)(xi) of this chapter) which describes the State's exemption from this requirement, because the State agency uses direct-mail issuance throughout the State, or

(2) Submit an attachment to the State Plan of Operation (§272.2(d)(1)(xi) of this chapter) which describes:

(i) The areas designated by the State agency as rural;

(ii) The rural areas where direct-mail issuance will not be used because:

(A) Recipients do not face substantial difficulties in obtaining transportation to obtain their benefits, and/or;

(B) Direct-mail issuance losses exceed the loss tolerance levels, or there is evidence which indicates that direct-mail issuance, if used, would produce losses which would exceed the loss tolerance levels established under §276.2(b)(4) of this chapter.

(iii) The State agency's criteria for designating an area as rural. Such criteria may include, but are not limited to: the use of the Bureau of the Census definition; the distances that recipients may need to travel to reach an issuance office; or, other criteria described by the State agency.

(iv) The State agency's minimum criteria for determining that recipients in an area designated as rural do not face substantial difficulties in obtaining transportation to obtain their benefits.

(v) The State agency's schedule for introducing direct-mail issuance into any rural areas requiring direct-mail issuance because of substantial transportation problems.

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§274.3 Issuance systems.

(a) *System classification.* State agencies may issue benefits to households through any of the following systems:

(1) An authorization document system that uses a document produced for each month's issuance. The inter-

mediary document, such as an ATP, may be distributed on a monthly basis to each household and surrendered by the household to the coupon issuer, or provided monthly to issuers with either single household authorizations or multiple household authorizations on each (such as a computer-generated listing). For reconciliation and identification purposes, the authorization document shall contain the following:

(i) Serial number;

(ii) Case name and address;

(iii) Case number;

(iv) Allotment amount;

(v) Benefit month or expiration date;

(vi) Name of issuing project area; and,

(vii) Space for signature of household member. An additional space for an authorized representative may be included.

(2) A direct access system that directly accesses a master issuance file at the time that benefits are issued to households. This system shall use manual card access or an automated access to the master issuance file. Systems of this type include the manual Household Issuance Record (HIR) card system and on-line issuance terminals.

(3) A mail issuance system that directly delivers coupons through the mail to households.

(4) An on-line Electronic Benefit Transfer system in which food stamp benefits are stored in a central computer database and electronically accessed by households at the point-of-sale via reusable plastic cards.

(b) *Other systems.* A State agency may develop an issuance system which cannot be readily categorized into one of the systems described in paragraph (a) of this section. FNS shall prescribe the reporting and reconciliation requirements which apply to that system.

(c) *Alternative benefit issuance system.*

(1) If the Secretary, in consultation with the Office of the Inspector General, determines that Program integrity would be improved by changing the issuance system of a State, the Secretary shall require the State agency to issue or deliver coupons using another method. The alternative method may be one of the methods described in paragraph (a) of this section, or the Secretary may require a State agency