



## **Division of Family and Children Services**

# **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-SNAP (Food Stamps)**

# **IN GEORGIA**

# **THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM IN GEORGIA**

## **WHAT IS THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM?**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as the Food Stamp Program, is a federally funded program that provides monthly benefits to low-income households to help pay for the cost of food. The program also provides nutrition education to low-income households to promote healthy eating and healthy lifestyles, as well as provides employment and training opportunities for single childless adults and outreach activities to promote the advantages of the Food Stamp Program to low-income households and communities.

## **WHAT IS A HOUSEHOLD?**

A household may be one person living alone, a family, or several, unrelated individuals who live together and routinely purchase and prepare meals together. Certain family members or individuals who live together and do not routinely purchase and prepare meals together do not have to be included in the household. For those individuals, social security numbers, immigration status and citizenship do not have to be provided to the caseworker. The decision of whether or not an individual must be included in the household is based on federal regulations.

## **WHAT KIND OF APPLICANT SERVICES IS PROVIDED TO THE HOUSEHOLD?**

If you need a language interpreter, help completing forms, require accommodations for a disability or assistance in obtaining information in order to complete your application ask us or call 1-877-423-4746. If you have a hearing impairment, call GA Relay at 1-800-255-0135. These services are free and will be provided to anyone who needs them.

## **WHO CAN APPLY FOR FOOD STAMP BENEFITS?**

Anyone may apply for food stamp benefits. The program helps households that have limited income and resources. This includes households experiencing temporary crisis as well as households whose income is at or below the poverty level.

## **WHERE DO YOU APPLY?**

Each county has a Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) office. This department takes applications for food stamp benefits. Look under the county government section of your telephone book or go to the website of the Georgia Department of Human Services (DHS) at [www.dfcs.dhr.georgia.gov/locations](http://www.dfcs.dhr.georgia.gov/locations) to find the address and telephone number of your local department.

## **WHEN CAN YOU APPLY?**

All Department of Family and Children Services offices are open Monday through Friday, except weekends and holidays. Office hours are usually from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 pm. Call your local county department for the office hours in your area. Online applications are available 24 hours a day via the Georgia COMPASS website at: [www.compass.ga.gov](http://www.compass.ga.gov).

## **WHAT IS AN AUTHORIZED REPRESENTATIVE?**

An authorized representative is a person your household allows to apply for, to obtain and/or to use food stamp benefits on behalf of your household because you are unable to do so.

## **HOW DO YOU APPLY FOR BENEFITS?**

To apply for benefits, the head of household, a household member, or authorized person representing the household may complete an application for assistance. An application can be received from your local County Department of Family and Children Services or from the DHS website. You can go to the office to apply, call the office to request that an application be mailed to your home address, or have someone get a form for you. You may copy the blank application found on the website at: [www.dfcs.dhr.georgia.gov/foodstamps](http://www.dfcs.dhr.georgia.gov/foodstamps). Complete the form and mail or fax or take it to your local county office.

## **HOW DO I APPLY FOR BENEFITS ONLINE?**

You may also apply for food stamps online via the COMPASS website at [www.compass.ga.gov](http://www.compass.ga.gov). COMPASS allows individuals to apply for Food Stamps online. Applicants who create an account online may check the status of their application and may also check their eligibility for other DHS programs via the COMPASS Pre-screening Tool. Additionally, COMPASS allows food stamp recipients to report changes in household circumstances and to renew their benefits online.

## **WHEN IS AN APPLICATION CONSIDERED FILED?**

An application is considered filed when the application has the name of the head of household, address, date and signature of the head of household or another household member and is received by the local county department. The application may be filed in person, by mail or fax or online to the Department of Family and Children Services). An application *should be* filed at your local county Department of Family and Children Services, but any Department of Family and Children Services can accept your application. You should try to complete the entire application. It is **very** important that you give your telephone number and/or address so that DFCS is able to reach you by phone.

## **WHAT HAPPENS ONCE THE APPLICATION IS FILED?**

You or a member of your household (or someone authorized to make application for your household) must be interviewed by a staff person from DFCS.

The individual who is interviewed must know about your household situation. A phone interview is required. For elderly/disabled individuals or individuals experiencing problems coming to the office, the interview may be completed by telephone, a pre-arranged home visit, or an office visit. Contact your local department to find out about interviews.

## **WHAT HAPPENS IN THE INTERVIEW?**

The caseworker will ask you questions about your household's income, resources, rent or mortgage, and utility costs. Certain households may also be asked about medical expenses, childcare and child support expenses. Proof of your household situation is necessary, so if you have the following information, you may bring it with you:

- \* proof of your identity
- \* proof of your citizenship such as birth certificate, U.S. passport, hospital record, etc.
- \* immigration papers for persons applying for benefits, who are not U.S. citizens
- \* social security numbers for persons applying for benefits
- \* proof of income for each household member (check stubs, award letters for social security or veterans administration, unemployment benefits, contributions from family or friends, child support, etc.)
- \* last month's rent receipt or mortgage payment book
- \* medical bills for persons age 60 and older and/or disabled
- \* childcare receipts for children whose parents are working, in school, or in training
- \* additional information and proof may be required depending upon your situation.

If you do not have all the information when you first apply, you are given 10 days from the date of the interview to provide the required proof.

The interview is an official and confidential discussion of the household's circumstances. The interviewer must not simply gather and review information but must explore and resolve unclear or incomplete information.

If an individual in your household does not want to give us a social security number or information about immigration status or citizenship, the individual will not be eligible for food stamp benefits. Other household members may still be eligible for benefits.

An individual is not reported to the Department of Homeland Security, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, for choosing not to give a social security number.

## **ARE YOU ELIGIBLE?**

### **YOU MAY BE ELIGIBLE FOR FOOD STAMPS BENEFITS IF:**

- you are a citizen of the United States or have a certain legal alien status
- you provide all of the required documents as proof of the household 's situation
- you and/or other household members comply with work requirements
- the household 's monthly income does not exceed the income limits based on the number of people who live in the household
- the rent or mortgage payment, utility bills, and in some cases medical, child care and child support expenses are considered in the eligibility determination process if proof of these expenses are provided.

### **HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO GET BENEFITS?**

The application must be processed and benefits available within 30 days from the date the application is filed. If your household has little or no income and meets specific criteria, the application must be processed and benefits available within 7 days. A notice is sent to each household stating whether the household is eligible for food stamp benefits. If eligible, the notice states the amount of benefits the household will receive and how long the household will receive benefits before having to reapply.

### **HOW MUCH WILL YOU RECEIVE?**

The amount of benefits your household receives depends upon the number of individuals in your food stamp household, the amount of household income and the amount of the deductions used in the budgeting process. The date of application affects the amount of benefits received by the household in the first month. As long as your household remains eligible, benefits are provided each month. Benefits remaining in your EBT account can be obtained until they are used up even if your food stamp case closes.

### **WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOU THINK THE DECISION ON YOUR CASE IS UNFAIR?**

You have the right to a fair hearing if you believe that the decision made on your case is not fair. You can request a fair hearing by writing or calling your local county department. You should contact your local county department within 10 days of receiving your notice of eligibility, if you want to request a fair hearing.

### **HOW ARE FOOD STAMP BENEFITS ISSUED TO YOU?**

Benefits are issued using an electric benefit transfer (EBT) card and Personal Identification Number (PIN). If you are eligible for benefits, an EBT card and PIN are mailed to your household.

The household uses the EBT card in authorized stores to purchase food.

When the total amount of the food benefit purchase is determined at the check out counter, you swipe your EBT card through a point of sale device and enter your PIN number. The amount of the purchase is deducted from your total monthly allotment.

### **WHAT IS PURCHASED WITH FOOD STAMP BENEFITS?**

Benefits may only be used to buy food and plants or seeds that grow food, for your household to eat. Certain food supplements such as Ensure may be purchased with food stamp benefits. Ice, water and cold or room temperature foods, which are not designed to be consumed in the store, may be purchased with food stamp benefits.

### **WHAT IS NOT PURCHASED WITH FOOD STAMP BENEFITS?**

Food stamp benefits cannot be used to buy alcoholic beverages, cigarettes or tobacco, household supplies such as soap and paper products, medicines, vitamins, pet foods, or any non-food items.

### **WHERE CAN YOU SPEND FOOD STAMP BENEFITS?**

Food stores which are authorized by the Food and Nutrition Service of the United States Department of Agriculture may accept EBT transactions to purchase food. Most stores provide signs to indicate that food stamp benefits may be used to purchase food products.

### **HOW LONG DO YOU GET FOOD STAMP BENEFITS?**

If eligible, your household can receive food stamps for one month to one year before reapplying. In the last month of the certification period, your household should receive an appointment letter from DFCS. The letter tells you that your certification period is about to end and that your household must reapply. If your response to this letter is timely, your benefits will continue if your household is still eligible. If you do not respond to the appointment letter, your benefits will stop.

### **WHEN RECEIVING BENEFITS WHAT CHANGES MUST YOUR HOUSEHOLD REPORT?**

**Simplified Reporting Households** – All food stamp households in Georgia have simplified reporting requirements. This means that you only have to report a change when your total gross monthly income exceeds 130% of the federal poverty level for your household size.

Your caseworker will explain this requirement to you. You may report changes to the DFCS Call Center at 1-877-423-4746 or at [www.compass.ga.gov](http://www.compass.ga.gov).

### **WHAT ARE YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES?**

- You must answer all questions completely.
- You must sign your name to certify, under penalty of perjury, that all answers are true.
- You must provide proof that you are eligible.

- Report changes in household circumstances.
- Do not sell, trade, or give away your food stamp benefits.
- Use food stamp benefits to buy only eligible items.

## **WHAT ARE THE PENALTIES FOR BREAKING THE RULES?**

You may lose your benefits or be subject to criminal prosecution for knowingly providing false information.

- Do not give false information or hide information to get benefits that your household should not get.
- Do not use Food Stamps or EBT cards that are not yours and do not let someone else use yours.
- Do not use Food benefits to buy nonfood items such as alcohol or cigarettes or to pay on credit cards.
- Do not trade or sell Food Stamps or EBT cards for illegal items; such as firearms, ammunition or controlled substance (illegal drugs).

**Any household member who breaks any of the food stamp rules on purpose can be barred from the Food Stamp Program for one year to permanently, fined up to \$250,000, imprisoned up to 20 years or both. She/he may also be subject to prosecution under other applicable Federal and State laws. She/he may also be barred from the Food Stamp Program for an additional 18 months if court ordered.**

**Any household member who intentionally breaks the rules may not get Food Stamps for one year for the first offense, two years for the second offense, and permanently for the third offense.**

**If a court of law finds you or any household member guilty of using or receiving food stamp benefits in a transaction involving the sale of a controlled substance, you or that household member will not be eligible for benefits for two years for the first offense, and permanently for the second offense.**

**If a court of law finds you or any household member guilty of having used or received benefits in a transaction involving the sale of firearms, ammunition or explosives, you or that household member will be permanently ineligible to participate in the Food Stamp Program upon the first offense of this violation.**

**If a court of law finds you or any household member guilty of having trafficked benefits for an aggregate amount of \$500 or more, you or that household member will be permanently ineligible to participate in the Food Stamp Program upon the first offense of this violation.**

**If you or any household member is found to have given a fraudulent statement or representation with respect to identity (who they are) or place of residence (where they live) in order to receive multiple Food Stamp benefits, you or that household member will be**

**ineligible to participate in the Food Stamp Program for a period of 10 years.**

## **WHEN ARE BENEFITS AVAILABLE TO THE HOUSEHOLD?**

Benefits are credited to the EBT account from the 5<sup>th</sup> through the 23<sup>rd</sup> of each month. To access your benefits, you need your EBT card and PIN. If your EBT card is lost or stolen or you forget your PIN, call the EBT customer service help line at 1-888-421-3281. Your lost or stolen card will be cancelled. A new EBT card and/or PIN will be issued to your household. To obtain information on-line about your EBT account, log on to: [www.ebt.acs-inc.com](http://www.ebt.acs-inc.com). Using your card number and Personal Identification Number (PIN), you can:

- Check your current account balance
- Review your transaction history
- Change your PIN
- Contact Customer Service

You must have your card number ready to access your information. Remember to keep your EBT card and PIN in a safe place. If someone gets your EBT card and PIN, that individual is able to obtain your benefits. Benefits taken from your EBT account are **not** replaced by DFCS.

## **YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO:**

- receive an application on the day you ask for it.
- have your application accepted when you file it.
- have an adult apply for your household if you cannot get to the food stamp office.
- have a home visit or telephone interview if you are 60 or older or are disabled and cannot find someone to apply for you.
- have your EBT card and PIN within 30 days of the date you file your application, if eligible, or
- have your EBT card and PIN within 5 days of the date you file your application, if eligible for expedited services.
- receive fair treatment without regard to age, sex, race, color, handicap, religious creed, national origin, or political beliefs.
- have a fair hearing if you disagree with any action taken on your case.
- examine your case file and the rules of the program.
- be notified in advance if your benefits are reduced or stopped due to a change that is not reported in writing.

The Division of Family and Children Services requires that no applicant or recipient for services of the agency shall: on the grounds of race, color, sex, age, religion, national origin, political affiliation, or handicap be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or otherwise be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity conducted or supported by the Division. The requirement applies to individuals, childcare facilities, and other agencies/organizations in which the Division makes referrals or purchases services.

In accordance with Federal law and **the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) policy**, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability, age, sex and in some cases religion and political beliefs. The U.S. Department of Agriculture also prohibits discrimination against its customers, employees, and applicants for employment on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity, religion, reprisal and where applicable, political beliefs, marital status, familial or parental status, sexual orientation, or all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program or protected genetic information in employment or in any program or activity conducted or funded by the Department. (Not all prohibited bases will apply to all programs and/or activities.)

To file a Civil Rights program discrimination complaint with USDA, complete the *USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form* at:

[http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint\\_filing\\_cust.html](http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint_filing_cust.html), or at any USDA office, or call (866) 632-9992 to request the form. You may also write a letter containing all of the information requested on the form. Send your completed complaint form or letter to us by mail at U.S. Department of Agriculture, Director, Office of Adjudication, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9410, by fax (202) 690-7442 or email at [program.intake@usda.gov](mailto:program.intake@usda.gov).

Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing or have speech disabilities may contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339 or (800) 845-6136 (Spanish).

For any other information dealing with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) issues, persons should either contact the USDA SNAP Hotline Number at (800) 221-5689, which is also in Spanish, or click on the link for a listing of State Information/Hotline Numbers at [http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/contact\\_info/hotlines.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/contact_info/hotlines.htm).

To file a discrimination complaint regarding a program receiving Federal financial assistance through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), write: HHS Director, Office for Civil Rights, Room 515-F, 200 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C., 20201 or call (202) 619-0403 (voice) or (800) 537-7697 (TTY).

USDA and HHS are equal opportunity providers and employers.

You may also file a complaint of Discrimination by contacting the DFCS Civil Rights Program, 2 Peachtree Street, N.W., Suite 19-248, Atlanta, Georgia 30303 or call (404) 657-3735 or fax (404) 463-3978.

The Department of Family and Children Services is available to help with problems and answer any questions you may have about your Food Stamp benefits. Please call the number below.

**TOLL FREE NUMBER 1-877-423-4746**