

THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM IN GEORGIA

WHAT IS THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM?

The food stamp program provides monthly benefits to low-income households to help pay for the cost of food.

WHAT IS A HOUSEHOLD?

A household may be one person living alone, a family, or several, unrelated individuals living together who 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 and immigration status does not have to be provided to the caseworker. The decision as 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 your caseworker. These services are free and will be provided to people who need 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 which are experiencing temporary crisis as well as households whose income is at or below 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 Department of Human Resources at 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 Mondays through Fridays, except for holidays and office hours are usually from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Some offices are open until 5:00 p.m. or on certain holidays. Call your local county department to make sure of the office hours.

WHAT IS AN AUTHORIZED REPRESENTATIVE?

An authorized representative is a person who 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 MAKE APPLICATION?

To make application for benefits, the head of household or household member or authorized person representing the household completes an application for the household. An application form can be obtained from your local County Department of Family and Children Services or the website. You can go to the office to apply or call the office to request that an application form be mailed to your household 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 to complete it and mail or fax or take it to your local County Department.

WHEN IS AN APPLICATION CONSIDERED FILED?

When an application which provides the name of the head of household, date and signature of the head of household or another household member is received, either through the mail or in person or by fax, to the Department of Family and Children Services, the application is considered filed. You should try to complete the entire application. It is especially important that you give your telephone number or address so that DFCS can contact you. An application should be filed at your local Department of Family and Children Services, but any Department of Family and Children Services can accept your application.

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 person who is interviewed must know about the household situation. Interviews at local county departments are handled differently, some offices make appointments and others do not. For elderly/disabled individuals or individuals experiencing problems coming to the office, the interview may be done by a pre-arranged home visit, through the mail or by telephone. Contact your local department to find out about interviews.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE INTERVIEW?

The caseworker asks 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 costs. Proof of your household situation is necessary, so if you have the following information, take it with you:

- proof of your identity
- 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

- last month ' s telephone, electric, gas, water bill, etc.
- a statement written by a third party listing who lives in your household
- medical bills for persons age 60 and older and/or disabled
- information on educational expense for person enrolled in colleges, technical or vocational schools
- child care receipts for children whose parents are working, in school, or in training
- proof that you pay child support
- 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 obtain 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 Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services for choosing not to give a social security number.

An individual is not reported to the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services for choosing or for refusing to tell us his/her immigration status.

Information that is provided by the household can be sent to other federal agencies to check to see if it is correct. If there are discrepancies, failure to resolve the discrepancies may result in not receiving food stamp benefits.

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
- resources such as checking accounts, savings accounts, and savings bonds are limited to a combined value of no more than \$2,000.00. A household with at least one person who is disabled or age 60 or older has a resource limit of \$3,000.00
- you and/or other household members comply with work requirements
- the household ' s gross 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 the expenses is provided.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO GET BENEFITS?

Once all of the required proof is available to the caseworker, the application must be processed 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 within 5 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 persons 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 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 expire and that your household must reapply. If your response to this letter is timely, your benefits continue if your household is still eligible. If you do not respond to the appointment letter, your benefits stop. Certain participants cannot receive benefits for longer than 3 months within a 36-month period without meeting work requirements.

WHEN RECEIVING BENEFITS WHAT CHANGES MUST YOUR HOUSEHOLD REPORT?

Households with elderly/disabled persons and households with able-bodied adults without dependents are required to report the following changes. It is extremely important that you report changes, so that your household receives the right amount of food stamp benefits. If you receive extra benefits because of failure to report a change, you will have to pay the state back for the benefits (owe the state for the value of these benefits.)

- you must report things like moving to a new address, new income, starting or leaving a job, people moving in or out of your home, medical deductions, purchase of vehicles, monies from social security or other programs.
- you may report the information to your local county office by calling, writing a letter or sending in a change report form, which is provided by the department.
- you may report the change to the Change Center for your area. Please refer to the following section on Change Centers.

Simplified Reporting Households – If your household is a simplified reporting household, your caseworker will let you know. Households that have a simplified reporting requirement only have to report a change when their total gross income exceeds 130% of the federal poverty level based on the size of their households.

HOW ARE CHANGES REPORTED TO THE CHANGE CENTERS?

Recipients who live in Baldwin, Clayton, Cobb, Cherokee, DeKalb, Douglas, Fayette, Fulton,

Gwinnett, Henry and Richmond, Rockdale counties can report changes in their cases to the Metro Change Center at 404-463-0039 (for Atlanta Area residents only) all other counties dial 1-888- 295-1769. The fax numbers are 404-463-8517 or 404-463-0687.

Recipients who live in Atkinson, Bacon, Baker, Ben Hill, Berrien, Brantley, Brooks, Bryan, Bulloch, Butts, Calhoun, Camden, Carroll, Charlton, Chattahoochee, Chatham, Coffee, Clay, Clinch, Colquitt, Crisp, Cook, Coweta, Decatur, Dooly, Dougherty, Early, Echols, Effingham, Glynn, Grady, Harris, Heard, Irwin, Lamar, Lanier, Lee, Liberty, Long, Lowndes, Macon, Marion, McIntosh, Meriwether, Miller, Mitchell, Muscogee, Pierce, Pike, Quitman, Randolph, Schley, Seminole, Spalding, Stewart, Sumter, Talbot, Taylor, Terrell, Tift, Thomas, Troup, Turner, Upson, Ware, Webster and Worth counties can report changes in their cases to the South Georgia Change Center at 1-888- 295-1769 or (in the Albany area only) the number is 229-430-4487. The fax numbers are 229-430-4580 or 1-888-740-9355.

If your county is not listed above, report your change to your caseworker at your local DFCS office.

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 within 10 days of the change.
- 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?

People who break the rules may be disqualified from the program from 6 months to permanently; fined, imprisoned, or all three. Also, further food stamp benefits and tax refunds may be withheld to pay back benefits which your household should not have used.

WHEN ARE BENEFITS AVAILABLE TO THE HOUSEHOLD?

Benefits are credited to the EBT account from the 5th through the 14th 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 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 to issued be your household.

Remember to keep your EBT 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 65 or older or are disabled and cannot find someone to go into the food stamp office 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 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.

If you think you have been discriminated against in the Food Stamp Program, a complaint may be filed with the USDA, Director, Office for Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W. Washington, D.C. 20250-9410 or call (202) 720-5964(TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

THE DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND CHILDREN SERVICES IS AVAILABLE TO HELP WITH PROBLEMS AND ANSWER ANY ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE ABOUT FOOD STAMP BENEFITS.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL COUNTY OFFICE

OR

CALL INFORMATION

**TOLL FREE NUMBER 1-800-869-1150
IN ATLANTA AREA (404) 657-9358**