

# Recommendations

US Digital Service |

DRAFT

## Executive Summary

The following recommendations are the result of a collaboration between the [REDACTED] and the United States Digital Service (USDS).

**Together, we set the north star goal [REDACTED] to keep APT rates steady while rolling out interviews over 6 months, in addition to improving the experience of eligibility technicians.**

Through an intensive discovery sprint that included shadowing eligibility technicians (ETs), fee agents, call center workers, and on-the-ground workshops with key [REDACTED] staff, we arrived at implementation consensus on the following recommendations.

Below is a summary of the near-term recommendations and their potential impact, based on data provided by [REDACTED] and estimates provided by eligibility workers.

#	Recommendation	Potential Impact
1	Extend system timeouts within Federal regulations	<b>2-4 hours</b> time saved per ET timeout per week; increased ET morale
2	Texting	Average time to process reduction of <b>several days</b> per case due to increased client clarity
3	Notices	Average time to process reduction of <b>several days</b> per case due to increased client clarity; <b>5-10 minutes</b> ET time saved per additional notice sent; increased ET morale
4	ET Central	Up to <b>3-4 hours</b> time saved per ET per week no longer having to search for critical information; increased ET morale
5	Supervisor Coaching	Increased trust in supervisors; and increased morale across ETs and their supervisors
6	Centralized Registration	<b>10-20 hours</b> registration time saved per ET per week
7	Department All-Hands	Increased communications and knowledge across the department

## Near-term Recommendations

### 1. Timeouts

**Current State:** Many systems used by ETs have their own timeout limits set such that if they do not receive direct input from an ET, their session will be locked automatically, even if the ET is still at their computer actively working. These session timeouts can result in unsaved work being lost, and require ETs to reauthenticate, often causing disruptions in workflow. According to the latest federal security requirements, a session lock is not required unless the worker leaves their workstation, meaning that these locks are no longer necessary in their current form.

**Proposal:** In the near term, the USDS team recommends increasing session timeouts to the maximum time allowed by federal regulations, and implementing these extended timeout policies in all systems used by ETs.

**Implementation considerations:** User testing could be helpful in determining the right length for the timeout. It's important that all systems have their timeout extended so that workers aren't required to reauthenticate in some systems more often, and timing out can be more predictable. In the long term, [REDACTED] can consider implementing timeouts at the operating system level - typically via the use of a screensaver or something similar, as per the guidance from NIST and CMS.

**Impact:** ETs are timing out of the systems they're actively working in on a daily basis. Sometimes this interruption is minor, requiring only a quick reauthentication. Even in these scenarios, these timeouts can be an unnecessary distraction. However, in more extreme cases, timeouts can cause unsaved work to be lost, sometimes resulting in an hour or more of work.

**Next steps:** This work will be championed by [REDACTED] with support from [REDACTED].

	Task	Owner	Completion Date	Others Involved
1	Determine the current timeout configurations for each system	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
2	Extend timeout duration of [REDACTED] systems determined above	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
3	Iterate on timeout duration based on ET needs	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]

## 2. Texting

**Current state:** All communications and notices to SNAP applicants and clients are performed solely via mail. In rural areas, this can be a prohibitively lengthy method; mail can often be delayed for two weeks or more, causing a variety of negative impacts. One of the most impacted areas is interviews, in which clients can receive the notice informing them of their scheduled interview date after the date itself has passed. This results in missed interviews (est. **20-40%** of scheduled interviews are missed), delays in processing as interviews are rescheduled, and administratively closed cases.

**Proposal:** USDS recommends that [REDACTED] start sending texting reminders for SNAP interviews. These would include reminders the same day the interview is scheduled. Reminders will request that clients contact the [REDACTED] and include the [REDACTED] phone number and scheduled time slot.

Texts will be sent by leveraging an existing texting service [REDACTED] via the [REDACTED] team. The distribution list will utilize an existing [REDACTED] CSV report.

The content for the text messages should align with the following core tenets to ensure text messages meet all of [REDACTED] goals:

- **Trustworthy:** messages should appear to be from [REDACTED] and not from potential scams.
- **Plain Language:** message content should be as readable as possible by the majority of clients.
- **Compliant:** content should contain relevant information without exposing PII, PHI, or other sensitive information, in addition to complying with any other relevant regulations.
- **Program Agnostic:** the messaging infrastructure should be able to be reused for other benefit programs, and should not be SNAP-specific.

Content for the text messages should be drafted in plain language, then reviewed by policy SMEs. Feedback from ETs and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) should also be incorporated. A potential starting point could be best practices from similar texting programs (e.g., [Code for America LA's Message campaign](#))

Following the initial rollout, the campaign should be expanded to additional use cases, including:

- Notifying clients at the moment their interview is scheduled.
- Notifying clients a day (or week) prior to their interview that it is soon.
- Notifying clients when a verification is required from them.
- Notifying clients when mail has been returned from the address on file for them..

**Implementation considerations:** The report listing the clients who could potentially receive texts is already being generated from [REDACTED] on a daily basis. This report is generated manually, and may need to be augmented to include telephone numbers of clients and their interview times.

The [REDACTED] team already has access to a text messaging service [REDACTED]. The capacity of the [REDACTED] team to handle daily text message uploads should be investigated prior to beginning the campaign, especially as the number of interviews increases.

Once per day, the report will be generated from [REDACTED] and emailed to the [REDACTED] team. This team will upload the report into [REDACTED] and send the texts.

**Impact:** Sending text message reminders for scheduled interviews will provide an alternative communication channel when mail cannot be relied upon for timely delivery of crucial information. Clients will be informed of their interview time on the day their interview is occurring, and as a result will be more likely to call during their scheduled time. This will result in a higher rate of interviews completed both on their scheduled day and overall. This, in turn, will result in more timely processing of cases and fewer administratively closed cases. To attribute the impact, texts can be sent to a portion of the clients with upcoming interviews with the remaining receiving no texts (control group)

**Next steps:** This work will be championed by [REDACTED] with support from [REDACTED]

	Task	Owner	Completion Date	Others Involved
1	Pull data from [REDACTED] to determine average and maximum daily text loads	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
2	Pull daily report from [REDACTED] for interviews scheduled and determine any augmentation needed	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
3	Contact [REDACTED] office to gauge capacity for expected text volume, assess any risks	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	
5	Share best practices and case studies with [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	
6	Draft initial text content	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	
7	Meet with policy to review program idea and content	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	
8	Review text content with ETs	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	
9	Review text content with CBOs	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	

10	Communicate to clients (social media, web presence) that texting will begin	✖	✖	
9	Schedule campaign start and align operational plans	✖	✖	
10	After starting the campaign, evaluate missed interview metrics for impact.	✖		✖

### 3. Notices

**Current state:** Currently, ETs lack the space they need to write critical client communications in mailed SNAP notices. Current ✖ SNAP notice templates have limited free-form text character counts which commonly results in ETs:

- (a) sending multiple notices out to clients in order to have the free-form text space they need to communicate critical information, sometimes 3 or more depending on the complexity of the case or
- (b) leverage the generic, 3-page blank notice template

However, sending out multiple notices results in additional burden for ETs, and client confusion, likely contributing to significant processing delays and/or procedural denials related to missing interviews and verification documents. Leveraging the blank notice template results in compliance and audit concerns, as not all ETs leverage policy-approved language when filling out the blank template.

Additionally, notices are currently printed in-house from the mainframe and driven over to Alaska Laser for folding, stuffing, and mailing. This is expensive and time-consuming, requiring a service fee of \$117k+/year to maintain – not including costs of paper and ink – plus "express" charges to fly in maintenance technicians from out of state when printers break, and 2 full-time employees to staff the printing room. Additionally, multiple printers have been broken for 2+ years.

**Proposal:** In the near-term, USDS recommends the following:

- Adding a single blank page to all ✖ notices
- Communicating this change to all ETs
- Using data to evaluate the "before and after" impact of adding a blank page (see "Implementation considerations" for details)

In the medium-term, USDS recommends the following:

- Moving forward with a single, local vendor for all notice printing, folding, stuffing, and mailing needs given they can meet the following requirements:
  - Lower overall costs than current printing process

- Ability to print, fold, stuff, and mail variable-length notices

**Implementation considerations:** USDS recommends a data-driven approach to evaluating the "before and after" impact of improving notices. Impact metrics could include, but are not limited to the following:

- Increased client comprehension
  - Decreased call center volume related to notice questions
  - Decrease in procedural denial rates related to missing verifications
- Increased efficiency
  - Decrease in duplicate notices sent
  - Decrease in blank notice templates sent
  - Decrease in overall time to process, due to reduction in client delays and ET time savings
- Increased worker satisfaction
  - Reduction in complaints related to notices
  - Positive feedback and comments related to the change

**Impact:** Average time to process reduction of **several days** per case due to increased client clarity; **5-10 minutes** ET time saved per additional notice sent; increased ET morale

**Next steps:** This work will be championed by [REDACTED] with support from [REDACTED]

	Task	Owner	Completion Date	Others Involved
1	Submit a work request to add a page to all [REDACTED] Notices	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	
2	Pick up work request and route for approvals	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
3	Obtain a level of effort estimate from [REDACTED] vendor to add a page to all [REDACTED] notices	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	
5	Collect baseline data (see "Implementation considerations" above)	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	
6	Make the update across systems	[REDACTED]		
7	Roll out communications to ETs updating them of the change, including thanking ETs for their	[REDACTED]		

	time and expertise in flagging the issue			
8	Collect "after" data to show the impact of this work			

#### 4. ET Central

**Current state:** Currently, critical information ETs need to successfully process SNAP cases are scattered across multiple platforms and systems, including [REDACTED] multiple policy manuals, [REDACTED] and other locations. As a result, ETs waste hours each week trying to find the materials they need.

As a workaround, after locating critical resources, many ETs download files to their Desktop folders to locate them again more easily the next time they need them. However, this results in additional time and effort burden ensuring the materials stored on their Desktop are the most up to date by cross referencing them with the same materials across multiple platforms and systems to look for updates. However, some ETs struggle to find time in their week to cross-reference materials, resulting in policy confusion and not always having the most up-to-date information when processing cases.

**Proposal:** USDS recommends designing and piloting an easy-to-find and use "one stop shop" for critical ET resources.

This centralized resource should be guided by a set of design principles to ensure the resource meets its intended goals:

- **User-friendly:** especially for new ETs who need critical resources the most
- **Easy to find and search:** all ETs who come to the resource can easily and quickly find the critical information they need
- **Easy to maintain:** quick and easy for those who maintain critical resources to update them in real-time
- **Always up-to-date:** in order for ETs to want to continually refer to the single resource and return to it, content must always be up-to-date

**Implementation considerations:** USDS recommends a phased approach for this resource, starting with two sprints running in parallel:

Sprint A: Design (4 weeks) – Lead: [REDACTED]

- Phase 1: Design
  - Survey ETs on the top content they need to access easily
  - Iterate on existing ET Central design and organization based on feedback
  - Iterate on proposed file naming structure based on feedback
- Phase 2: Test

- Usability test existing design with 5-8 ETs to ensure information is easy to find and use
- Phase 3: Iterate
  - Iterate on designs based on top usability testing findings

Sprint B: Technical Discovery (2-4 weeks) – Lead: [REDACTED]

- Phase 1: Gather requirements
  - Gather requirements from ETs and stakeholders on the core functional requirements of the resource
- Phase 2: Comparative analysis
  - Conduct a review of existing/available and potential tools (e.g. [REDACTED])
  - Provide a recommendation on which tool to move forward with based on availability, timelines, and fulfillment of core functional requirements

After completing both sprints, [REDACTED] will need to decide on a platform/system to move forward with, migrate files and resources over to that platform if necessary, test that the site is fully functional, and then launch and share out the resource.

**Impact:** Up to **3-4 hours** time saved per ET per week no longer having to search for critical information; increased ET morale; increased accuracy of processing and timeliness of information sharing with ETs

**Next steps:** This work will be championed by [REDACTED] with support from [REDACTED]

#### Sprint A: Design

	Task	Owner	Completion Date	Others Involved
1	Create ET survey on content they need most often	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
2	Reorganize existing SharePoint content based on survey output	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	
3	Finalize and publish common naming convention based on SharePoint output	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
4	Rename existing [REDACTED] files based on common naming convention	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	



5	Convene a group of 5-8 ETs to test the new structure and organization			

#### Sprint B: Technical Discovery

	Task	Owner	Completion Date	Others Involved
1	Gather requirements from ETs and stakeholders			
2	Review additional products that satisfy the necessary requirements			
3	Review options with technology and policy teams for feasibility and compliance			
4	Provide recommendation for new resource including timeline and migration plans			

#### 5. Centralized Registration

**Current State:** The initial processing step for integrated benefit applications and single-program SNAP applications begin with manually copying data over into a tool used for triaging that application's expedited status, then data is entered into a task is created, and in the case of applications with multiple programs, that data may be manually written again into each of systems responsible for each respective program.

**Proposal:** Build a new tool that requires ETs to enter registration information only once and includes triaging expedited status automatically. For applications submitted electronically, do not require ETs to re-enter data already available electronically. In the future, all programs can draw from this one source of information, so that ETs only need to enter data once no matter how many programs are included in the case. This tool will leverage the existing electronic data generated by client portal applications as well as the new technology to integrate into

The goals of this new tool are to:

- Reduce **dependency** on
- Free up clerical workers to **upskill** and contribute to higher priority work across the department
- Increase overall **ease of use** by implementing a simple-to-interact with user interface

- Create a **foundation** to allow for future added functionality and automation between systems

**Implementation considerations:** USDS recommends the frontend for this tool be built in the modular design approach that existing tools such as the change of address experiment, to allow for extensibility beyond a proof of concept. Given the amount of technical systems this tool may eventually interact with, we should design the tool in a way that sets us up for success in the future.

Additionally, we recommend testing with users once a prototype is formalized, to ensure the tool meets their needs, is simple to use, and does not add burden to their existing processes. Usability testing sessions (or other qualitative research methods) can be used to quickly gather feedback from 3 – 5 users, which should produce enough data to iterate on the prototype and make improvements.

Once this tool is ready for use, changes to ET processes will need to be communicated out, and some training to use the new tool will be required to switch ETs off of the existing process. This communication and training step may need to be repeated in the future as this tool is extended to include other systems.

**Requirements:**

- Web front-end interface that allows ET [REDACTED] to input data into form fields
- Connected to other identification tools that would allow for individual matches based on social security number, date of birth, name, etc.
- Ability to determine if an application meets the criteria to be labeled "expedited"

**Impact:** Centralizing registration will allow for the following:

- Reducing or eliminating duplicative, manual data entry during registration.
- Automating registration of electronic SNAP applications requiring little to no human input for registration.
- Removing the need for triaging SNAP expedited status through the existing [REDACTED] tool.
- Bootstrapping usage of the USWDS framework in accordance with the desire to adopt a modern design language.

**Next steps:** This work will be championed by [REDACTED] with support from [REDACTED]

Task	Owner	Completion Date	Others Involved
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1	Obtain client portal application data from [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
2	Design wireframes for new registration tool frontend	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
3	User testing with [REDACTED] staff to provide feedback on wireframes	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
4	Design an API to sit in front of [REDACTED] in consultation with [REDACTED] and existing documentation	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
5	Create a database to back [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
6	Validate that interacting with data in [REDACTED] database is properly synchronizing with [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]

## 6. Supervisor Training & Coaching

**Current state:** Eligibility technicians during the onsite and during research noted that ETs currently experience varied management styles, with many being unsupported when asking key questions, belittled when dealing with a complicated case that may require more processing time, and/or micromanaged such that they are being called every 60 minutes to update their supervisor on why a particular case is taking so long. This deeply influences staff morale, and may increase time to process if they are being badgered or have to explain why a case is taking a while. Alternatively, many also noted that they have had really amazing managers who encourage them to try new things, take on larger tasks, and apply for higher positions. This diversity in supervisor experience creates an imbalance amongst ETs experience.

**Proposal:** An opportunity championed by the eligibility technicians was to reintroduce training for ET supervisors that prioritizes leadership skills. [REDACTED] ETs, in collaboration with USDS and [REDACTED] staff, recommends:

- **Creating a new supervisor toolbox.**
  - To support new ET 3s and 4s, create a repository of learning materials for these new positions to refer to. This repository should include things like job roles and responsibilities, expectations for the job, ways in which to complete operational tasks (e.g. completing timesheets), and places to go for help. This repository should be centrally located, and be shared with ETs as soon as they are promoted.
- **Instituting "learning circles" for ETs and [REDACTED]**
  - To support managers and leaders across the organization, [REDACTED] should consider instituting learning sessions where staff can learn best practices from

other leaders across the organization on ET-informed topics. This should be a mix of presentations from staff skilled in certain areas and may be considered "mentors" to other staff. The meeting should consider uplifting various ET voices and provide a safe space to discuss challenges, open questions, and challenging circumstances.

By accomplishing these two parts, new ET [REDACTED] workers will be able to know expectations and what their new role includes, while having a community of support available to them.

#### Implementation considerations:

- Culture change is extremely difficult and long term. To ensure the success of this endeavor, [REDACTED] leadership should champion this work and not be discouraged by attitudes resistant to change and/or a lack of quick, quantifiable results. It is important to listen to all voices along the way, including detractors, but also to understand that some resistance is inevitable, expected, and even healthy during a transformation like this. It will also be key for leadership to demonstrate the values and input expected by their staff; this means attending meetings and not rescheduling them, encouraging praise and successes, etc.
- The supervisor toolbox should be maintained, managed, and shared consistently. Someone should own this lane of work in the long term, and continue to collect input and feedback from ETs on what should be included.
- [REDACTED] should survey eligibility workers to understand what they would like to see and experience in the learning circles. From this survey, [REDACTED] can plan agendas in advance and ensure ET voices are included in the design of the approach.

**Impact:** Both of these ideas go towards accomplishing our South Star goal of improving ET morale. To measure this, we suggest monitoring:

- Worker retention rates
- Worker satisfaction rates

**Next steps:** The supervisor toolbox will be championed by [REDACTED]. The Leader Learning Circles will be spearheaded by [REDACTED]. Both will be supported by [REDACTED] and [REDACTED].

	Task	Owner	[REDACTED]
	<i>For Supervisor Toolbox</i>		
1	Collect materials that already exist and may be used	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
2	Create a draft of the first content for [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]

	responsibilities and 2) where to go for help			
3	Identify if [REDACTED] is a good place for a repository	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	
4	Test content drafts with new ET	USDS	[REDACTED]	
	[REDACTED]			

	Task	Owner	Completion Date	Others Involved
	<i>For Learning Circles</i>			
1	Survey ETs about their ideas and wants for a "Learning Circle" experience	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
2	Review survey and determine if idea should be implemented	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
3	If yes, design meeting approach and agendas, plus leads, for next 3 months	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]

## 7. Department All Hands

**Current state:** A challenge identified during the onsite was that communication across the division was extremely difficult. Many noted that different teams heard and learned different information at various times, causing mismatches in implementation and policy alignment. Eligibility workers noted that this impacted their ability to do their jobs, and teams such as [REDACTED] and Policy were unaware of certain leadership decisions or strategy.

**Proposal:** From the onsite, the team recommends instituting a [REDACTED] department all hands that brings together all staff to communicate key information, particularly to ETs. It should be championed by [REDACTED] leadership but co-designed with ETs to make sure their needs are being met.

This meeting will allow ET staff to hear about key policy, process, and strategy decisions that impact their work. It will also include a celebration of staff that have performed exceptionally well during the month.

### Implementation considerations:

Any meeting should include:

- An agenda created in collaboration with ETs
- Communication of Leadership strategies and goals

- Updates from technology and policy teams that impact ETs
- Celebrations and successes of ETs

Because of staffing requirements, timing should be considered to encourage all staff to join. A suggestion was made to remove a huddle one day a month and replace it with this staff meeting, which may be a good avenue to explore.

**Impact:** Both of these ideas go towards accomplishing our South Star goal of improving ET morale. To measure this, we suggest monitoring:

- Worker satisfaction rates

**Next steps:** The all hands will be championed by [REDACTED] with support from [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

	Task	Owner	Completion Date	Others Involved
1	Decide if team wants to go implement this	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
2	Plan agendas for next 3 months	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
3	Create calendar invite for all staff and send it	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	
4	Implement first all hands	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	