

SOME SSI RECIPIENTS TO RECEIVE FOOD STAMPS AUTOMATICALLY

*by Cathy Roberts, Food Stamp Specialist, Nutrition Consortium of NYS
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The New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) has started a demonstration project called the New York State Nutrition Improvement Project (NYSNIP). NYSNIP's goal is to automatically enroll all of New York State's SSI (Supplemental Security Income) live-alone recipients into the Food Stamp Program.

For this population, no separate food stamp application, no interview and no separate verification will be needed; OTDA will rely on information provided by the Social Security Administration (SSA) through the State Data Exchange in order to generate a food stamp case. NYSNIP participants will use their existing Medicaid benefit card to access their food stamp benefits. Benefit amounts are standardized, and participants can receive food stamps through NYSNIP up to 48 months.

Who Can Participate?

NYSNIP is available only to SSI live-alone recipients – those classified as “living alone” by SSA (ie, live by themselves and pay their own food, shelter and clothing expenses). SSI couples and recipients in other living arrangement categories can't participate in NYSNIP, but they always can receive food stamps through the regular application process.

SSI live-alone **applicants** won't get food stamp benefits through NYSNIP; only if/when they become SSI **recipients** will their NYSNIP benefits start. Unlike Medicaid or SSI, there is no retroactive NYSNIP eligibility. NYSNIP benefits start the first or second month after the first ongoing SSI check is issued.

Benefit amounts and certification period

Food stamp benefits under NYSNIP are standardized; the food stamp budget is not individualized. The benefit standards take four factors into consideration: cost of shelter, eligibility for the heating/cooling standard utility allowance, presence of other income and geographic location.

One of the guiding principles behind NYSNIP is that *participants should get the same or more food stamp benefits than they would ordinarily receive through the regular food stamp application process*. Anyone who would receive a lower amount should be able to “opt out” of NYSNIP, and enter the regular food stamp application process, if they wish.

New food stamp recipients under NYSNIP (those now getting SSI but who had not already been receiving food stamps) will initially receive the minimum benefit level – either \$16 or \$20 per month. However, by filling out and returning a short form included with their NYSNIP opening notice (which asks some questions about the person's shelter and utility costs), people can get their benefits adjusted to the proper amount – as high as \$149.

OTDA will close the NYSNIP case of any new participants who hadn't already been receiving food stamps and who don't access at least some of their food stamp benefits within 90 days. (*Note: some people may have longer than 90 days to access their benefits; OTDA will send a reminder notice to affected individuals 30 days before the scheduled closing date*).

The certification period under NYSNIP is 4 years, with a short mail-in questionnaire required at the 2-year point. Participants who lose SSI live-alone status will be taken out of NYSNIP; however, they can still receive regular food stamp benefits, if eligible.

Implementation Schedule

The first wave of new NYSNIP recipients were SSI live-alone recipients who were already receiving food stamps. Between the summer of 2003 and January 2004, OTDA *converted* most of these food stamp cases into NYSNIP cases. (Anyone whose food stamps would have been lowered was not supposed to have been converted into NYSNIP.)

For SSI live-alone recipients who were not already getting food stamps, OTDA *opened new* NYSNIP cases at the minimum benefit level *on a "roll-out" basis from July through December 2004*. Opening notices and PIN numbers were mailed to about 92,500 individuals across New York State.

New NYSNIP participants who don't access their benefits within 60 days are being sent reminder notices encouraging them to use their food stamp benefits. These reminder notices inform NYSNIP recipients that they have an additional 30 days to access their food stamp account, or their NYSNIP case will be closed. The notices also contain a list of community agencies that NYSNIP recipients can call for assistance. The first batch of follow-up notices were mailed in *late January/early February 2005*. (Note: *the follow-up letters do not include all the informational materials contained in the original NYSNIP opening notice, but you can get these materials through the Nutrition Consortium – see below.*)

OTDA anticipates that at some point in the future, they can begin opening NYSNIP cases for *new* SSI recipients based on information gathered by SSA at the time of the SSI eligibility application interview. In addition to the normal questions, the SSI representative will ask two new questions about the person's shelter and utility costs, so that OTDA can provide the proper NYSNIP benefit level if the person is approved as an SSI live-alone recipient.

Until SSA begins asking these questions, new SSI live-alone recipients who aren't already receiving food stamps will have a NYSNIP case opened at the minimum benefit level; if they return the shelter questionnaire form included with their opening notice, benefits will be adjusted to the proper level. Any new NYSNIP participant who fails to access their food stamp account within 60 days will get the reminder notice mentioned above, and have an additional 30 days to access their benefits.

Where can I find out more about NYSNIP?

OTDA has released Local Commissioner's Memorandum 04-LCM-13, "the New York State Nutrition Improvement Project,," as well as GIS informational message 05 TA/DC 003, "NYSNIP non-redeemer reminders and attachments." You can get a copy of these materials at the Western New York Law Center's website at <http://www.wnylc.net>. The Nutrition Consortium has a reproduction of the original NYSNIP opening notice "packets" mailed by OTDA, which include a helpful set of Questions and Answers, the shelter & utility questionnaire and an EBT brochure. You can get a copy of these materials as well as the NYSNIP benefit schedule by contacting Cathy Roberts at (518) 436-8757, ext. 12, or e-mailing her at hungerfoodstamps@aol.com. *Social Security district offices have not yet been trained about NYSNIP and probably won't be for several more months*. Following this article is a quick reference guide that lists the major points about NYSNIP.

Please pass this information along to other organizations working with elderly and disabled individuals, and help get the word out about NYSNIP!!!

Desk guide about the New York State Nutrition Improvement Project (NYSNIP)

Prepared by the Nutrition Consortium of NYS – revised February 2005

What is the value of NYSNIP?

NYSNIP helps SSI recipients because:

1. the food stamp determination process is **automatic**:
 - no separate food stamp application or eligibility interview is required
 - no additional documentation needs to be collected
2. the benefit should be the **same or higher** than regular food stamps
3. There is a **4-year** certification period
(as opposed to 1 or 2 years for regular food stamps)

Other points to remember about NYSNIP:

1. Only SSI live-alone recipients can participate.
2. Enrollment in NYSNIP is *automatic* for SSI live-alone recipients which means that:
 - Even a person who is adamant that they don't want to get food stamps will have a food stamp case opened. This person can simply decline to access the food stamp account, and the NYSNIP case will eventually be closed – though we would strongly encourage the person to take advantage of the program.
 - Anyone placed into NYSNIP who would get more benefits by utilizing the regular application process can “opt out” of NYSNIP and apply for “regular” food stamps.
3. SSI disability applicants should be strongly encouraged to go through the regular food stamp application process, since the disability determination process often takes a long time and because – unlike NYSNIP benefits -- regular food stamps are paid retroactive to the application date.
4. SSI recipients automatically put into NYSNIP at the minimum benefit level should fill out and return the shelter questionnaire included with their opening notice, so that their benefits can be adjusted to the highest possible level.
5. Some SSI live-alone recipients may not be even be aware that a food stamp account has been opened on their behalf, if they didn't receive the original mailing, or they discarded, ignored or simply didn't understand their notice. Anyone who has contact with SSI live-alone recipients may want to see whether these individuals are aware of NYSNIP.
6. NYSNIP recipients can call the state EBT customer service line at 1-888-328-6399 to check their food stamp balance or order a new PIN number. Individuals who can't navigate the hotline to get a new PIN number can make the request through their local food stamp office. In New York City, such requests should be made to F-15, the SSI-Food Stamp Center, at (718) 722-4009.