



Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance

ANDREW M. CUOMO
Governor

MICHAEL P. HEIN
Commissioner

BARBARA C. GUINN
Executive Deputy Commissioner

General Information System (GIS) Message

Section 1

Transmittal:	20 TA/DC018 Statewide - Upstate and New York City
Date:	March 20, 2020
To:	Subscribers
Suggested Distribution:	Commissioners, TA Directors, SNAP Directors, WMS Coordinators, Medicaid Directors, Child Support Coordinators, HEAP Coordinators
From:	Barbara C. Guinn, Executive Deputy Commissioner
Subject:	District Office Hours and Availability to Meet Needs During COVID-19
Effective Date:	Immediately
Contact Information:	Temporary Assistance (TA) Questions – TA Bureau 518-474-9344 or otda.sm.cees.tabureau@otda.ny.gov Employment Questions – Employment Bureau 518-486-6106 or otda.sm.eisp.eas@otda.ny.gov Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Questions – SNAP Bureau 518-473-1469 or otda.sm.cees.snap@otda.ny.gov Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) Questions – HEAP Bureau 518-473-0332 or NYSHEAP@otda.ny.gov Child Support Services Questions - 518-473-0574 or otda.sm.dcse.bpo@otda.ny.gov

Section 2

As always, and especially during these challenging times, district offices and district Commissioners are at the heart of assisting those among us most in need. There is a great appreciation for the added difficulties occurring as a result of the evolving COVID-19 crisis.

The purpose of this General Information System (GIS) message is to remind social services districts (districts) of the necessity of remaining open to the public in order to meet emergency needs during core business hours, and to provide guidance on office hours and staff availability necessary to meet the needs of individuals and families who are applying for or receiving Temporary Assistance (TA), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), Child Support services, and other services. The Executive Orders related to the current State disaster for New York include restrictions for businesses regarding in-person work. The Executive Order specifically indicates that providers of basic necessities to economically disadvantaged populations and entities providing essential services or functions are not subject to the in-person restrictions. **Social services district offices provide essential services and are exempt from the in-person work restrictions.**

In response to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the declaration of a State disaster emergency (Executive Order 202, March 7, 2020), the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) advised districts of immediate measures that could be taken to simplify and streamline program administration for clients

and staff, and temporarily issued essential statewide waivers to certain eligibility requirements for the programs that the agency oversees. (See [GIS 20 TA/DC016 COVID-19 March 16 2020](#).) These measures are intended to significantly reduce the number of individuals that must go to the district office to receive or maintain benefits and services.

Districts must have staff available during core business hours to address and meet the needs of individuals and families who are applying for or receiving benefits and/or assistance through TA, SNAP, HEAP and Child Support services, regardless of county-wide mandates to close county government offices. Per [10-INF-22](#), districts are not allowed to limit the days of the week or times of the day that a person can apply for assistance. Furthermore, the date on which the person submits a signed completed application to the district is the “application date” and has associated processing timeframes and benefit implications, underscoring the need for applications to be disbursed and accepted at any time during business hours. For SNAP, the filing date or the date of application is when an application has been submitted containing at least the name, address (if there is one) and signature. SNAP benefits are determined after the application process is completed and are retroactive back to the date the application was filed. Use of external secure “dropboxes” to receive incoming documents is acceptable but clients must be given the ability to receive a receipt of document submittal. [05-INF-02](#) provides additional guidance on providing either a county-designed or State approved receipt ([LDSS-4847](#)).

Districts are reminded that individuals must not be prevented from applying for any form of assistance. An individual has the right to file an application with a district at **any time during business hours**. An individual’s right to apply and be interviewed for TA or SNAP must not be denied, limited or discouraged. If office hours are adjusted or if entrance to a district office is limited, appropriate accommodations must be developed to allow any individual who wishes to apply for a form of assistance to obtain an application and to submit their signed application. Please ensure your county websites are current and accurately reflect the offices hours that are available to the public. Districts must have sufficient staff available to answer phones during business hours.

Additionally, there have been no changes to the requirements outlined in [02 ADM-02](#), that districts are required to respond to an applicant’s declaration of an emergency situation at the time of application for TA and to provide appropriate notice to the applicant regarding the meeting of their immediate need(s). Social Services Law (SSL) 133 requires districts to grant TA pending the completion of an investigation to a person in an immediate need situation. Regulations 18 NYCRR 351.8(c)(3) and 351.8(c)(4) define what constitutes an emergency and 18 NYCRR 351.8(c)(4) reiterates the district’s obligation to meet immediate needs. 18 NYCRR 350.3(c) establishes the requirement for same day interviews. Districts are required to assess the emergency situation and if an immediate need is determined to exist, meet the immediate need the same day the applicant comes into the office. Districts must first determine if an emergency situation exists, and if the emergency constitutes an immediate need. The district must then determine how the emergency/immediate need will be resolved and provide appropriate notice via the [LDSS-4002](#).

In light of the unprecedented issues we face, effective March 16th, OTDA allowed and encouraged districts to conduct all TA and SNAP eligibility and recertification interviews by phone for ongoing and emergency assistance, as opposed to in person or “face-to-face” interviews (18 NYCRR §§ 351.20(b)(3); 350.3(c)). Districts who utilize telephone interviews at eligibility are reminded of the importance of screening for emergencies when the application is submitted and meeting any immediate need the same day. In these situations, face-to-face interaction with applicants may be unavoidable but should be kept to a minimum and precautions should be taken.

Effective March 13th, OTDA suspended the requirement for in-person interviews and applications for the Heating Equipment Repair and Replacement (HERR) component. Required interviews for any HEAP benefit component may be completed with applicants by telephone. Required applications and documentation may be submitted by mail or fax.

As a reminder, districts’ procedures for individuals seeking or receiving temporary housing assistance may include phone contacts, fewer contacts, or a suspension of contacts through May 15, 2020. In all instances, districts are expected to ensure that all applicants and recipients of temporary housing assistance receive necessary assistance and that staff be available to address immediate needs.

Please refer to the Department of Health’s website for timely information related to COVID-19: www.health.ny.gov/coronavirus. You can also find reliable information and updates about the virus from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/COVID19