

## 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 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.

*(Note: unless the individual had already been receiving food stamps, OTDA will not be able to discern if new NYSNIP participants are getting less than they would ordinarily receive. Advocates should calculate the benefit amount under “regular” food stamps and advise their clients as to the advantages of each program.)*

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 two “yes/no” questions about the person's shelter and utility costs), people can get their benefits adjusted to the proper amount – as high as \$141.

New NYSNIP participants who weren't already receiving food stamps must access at least some of their benefits *within 90 days* or their NYSNIP case will be closed.

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**

Over the summer of 2003, New York City SSI live-alone recipients who were *already receiving* food stamps had their food stamp cases converted into NYSNIP. Conversion for all other districts occurred in December 2003; notices were sent to affected recipients informing them that their NYSNIP benefits would start in *January 2004*.

*(Note: No one was supposed to lose food stamp benefits through the conversion process; however, a few individuals fell between the cracks and were mistakenly put into NYSNIP even though their benefits decreased. If you encounter this situation, alert your local district as soon as possible and ask that the person be taken out of NYSNIP.)*

For *current* SSI live-alone recipients who are not already getting food stamps, in all districts outside of New York City, OTDA is planning to *open new* NYSNIP cases at the minimum benefit level on a “roll-out” basis over a 6-month period beginning in February. The roll-out month is based on the last digit of the person’s Social Security Number. Implementation in New York City is expected to occur later in the spring, again on a roll-out basis – but by borough, not Social Security Number. Opening notices and PIN numbers will be mailed to about 90,000 individuals.

*(Note: the notices contain a lot of information, which may be overwhelming to many SSI recipients. Community agencies and advocacy groups working with the elderly and disabled can help new NYSNIP participants understand what the program is all about, and encourage people to use their food stamp benefits.)*

OTDA anticipates that in *March or April*, 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.

### **Where can I find out more about NYSNIP?**

The Nutrition Consortium has been presenting information about NYSNIP over the past year and OTDA has already trained local districts about NYSNIP procedures. A GIS message should be forthcoming, as well as a Local Commissioner’s Memorandum and an Informational Letter. Both OTDA and the Consortium are working on outreach materials as well. *Social Security district offices have not yet been trained about NYSNIP and probably won’t be until March or April.* You can obtain a copy of the benefit schedule by contacting Cathy Roberts at (518) 436-8757, ext. 12, or at [hungerfs@aol.com](mailto:hungerfs@aol.com). The next page 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!!! We would be more than happy to provide an e-mail version of this article upon request – just call Cathy at the Nutrition Consortium at (518) 436-8757, ext. 12, or e-mail her at [hungerFS@aol.com](mailto:hungerFS@aol.com). Thank you!***

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

Prepared by the Nutrition Consortium of NYS – January 2004

### 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. Not all existing SSI live-alone recipients are being placed into NYSNIP at the same time. (OTDA is gradually enrolling everyone over a 6-month period. So – some folks will be put into NYSNIP before others.)
3. 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 within the initial 90-day period, and the NYSNIP case will 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.
4. If an SSI applicant is asked at their SSI interview whether they want to apply for food stamps, they should answer “Yes.”

This will trigger the two additional questions about their shelter/utility situation, so that they can receive the highest possible level of NYSNIP benefits (if they answer “no” they will still be put into NYSNIP, if eligible, but at the minimum benefit level.)
5. 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.
6. Existing SSI recipients automatically put into NYSNIP at the minimum benefit level should fill out and return the short form included with their opening notice, so that their benefits can be adjusted to the highest possible level.