USDA

Drivers of Participation in Selected SNAP E&T Activities: Lessons from the SNAP E&T Pilots

Brief

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded pilot grants to 10 States—California, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington—to test innovative strategies for providing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T). Pilots offered more substantive activities and services than were available under existing SNAP E&T programs. Many continued to offer independent job search, but most focused on more structured job search support, such as job search assistance or training and job readiness training. Virtually all pilots included providers that offered occupational skills training and basic education or referred those interested in these activities to providers in the community that were not part of the pilot, and most pilots offered work-based learning placements. Many pilots also offered intensive case management and more generous and a broader array of participant reimbursements or support services compared to existing programs. This brief examines participation patterns in several of these core activities to understand when participants disengage and what strategies can be employed to prevent or address engagement challenges.

Each State developed their pilot program model based on the activities they planned to offer, the partners they contracted with to provide services, and the approach they felt best met the needs of SNAP participants. A few States based their models on their existing SNAP E&T programs, or programs that served other populations in the community, while others created new models. Although considerable planning went into designing these models, after implementing them, several of the pilots realized that their models made it challenging for individuals to engage in activities or led to participants exiting the program early before completing it. Reasons for this varied across the pilots. In some pilots, the model had multiple "hand-off" points or up-front requirements before individuals could enter job search training or assistance, education, and training activities. In other cases, the model did not account for the flow of individuals into the pilot versus the timing of activities, which sometimes led to lengthy waiting periods between enrollment and the start of education or training activities. As a result, individuals sometimes took up activities at different rates than expected, did not progress through the model as it was originally designed, or left it before completing activities. This brief uses administrative data on service receipt from several pilots to describe these points of disengagement—or "drop off"—in the program model and discusses how State agencies can avoid these design challenges in their own programs.

Program models with multiple hand-off points during orientation

Some of the pilot models were designed in a way that increased opportunities for exits or limited take-up of substantive activities. These challenges often were related to an extended intake process, including models that had orientations that required many steps and visits to multiple organizations or locations. For example, after SNAP agencies in Georgia, Illinois, Mississippi, and Virginia enrolled individuals into the pilot during orientations at their offices, those assigned to the pilot were scheduled for at least one subsequent orientation at a provider location. Significant drop-off occurred between these two types of orientations. This could be due to confusion over the process, transportation challenges, or the hassle of figuring out a new location and new processes. Whatever the reasons, the drop-off was reflected in participation rates. These pilots had the lowest rate of engagement among the 10 pilots—ranging from 58 to 83 percent of individuals starting their intake process after the initial orientation. In other pilots these rates were generally over 90 percent.

To address these issues, some pilots adjusted their procedures to reduce drop off. For example, provider staff at the community colleges in Mississippi contacted individuals after enrollment to introduce themselves and encourage individuals to attend their scheduled appointment. They also discussed any challenges the participant might have in attending the appointment. Overall, States agreed that minimizing the number of different organizations and locations with which an individual is asked to interact will increase the likelihood that they will participate in the program.

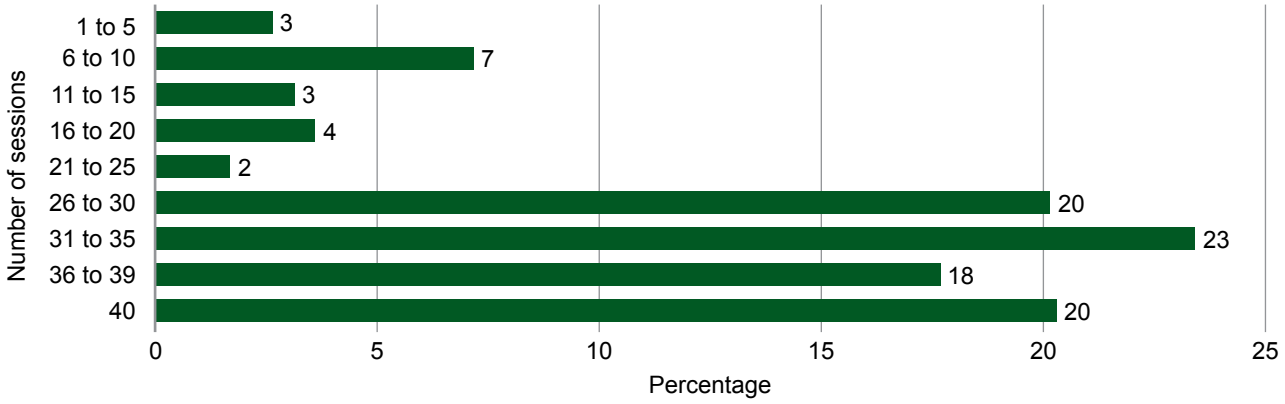
Program models with mandatory soft-skills and job readiness courses

Two pilots—Mississippi and Washington—required individuals to participate in multiweek, soft-skills and job readiness training courses. Participants had to complete the course before they could start education, occupational skills training, or work-based learning activities. Both pilots found that some individuals were not interested in the course because they needed to work and could not afford to attend a full-day class for several weeks. This sometimes caused them to leave the pilot before completing services or to find a job on their own and stop attending classes. This section explores participation rates in these courses and the level of engagement among those who started classes.

In Mississippi at the start of the EDGE course, individuals took the Test of Adult Basic Education as well as the WorkKeys assessments. The classes started with modules on career pathways. This included a career readiness workshop, a Myers-Briggs personality test, and learning work readiness skills, such as professional image, interviewing skills, and on-the-job behavior. Instructors also conducted mock interviews with participants. Later in the course, participants also received training in basic computer skills, financial awareness, communication and customer service skills, teamwork, and problem solving. Before completing the course, they also created an individual career plan.

Mississippi. Mississippi required some participants to take the Ethics, Discipline, Goals, Employment (EDGE) course that was a four-week skills-building class offered at community colleges. The course included 40 sessions (one in the morning and one in the afternoon on 20 days).

Percentage of participants completing EDGE sessions



Sixty percent of individuals in Mississippi participated in EDGE; about three-quarters of them completed it. Participants who completed the course did so in about 3 to 4 weeks, on average, participating in at least 35 of the 40 sessions. (The pilot allowed for some discretion in how many sessions were required to complete the course, so some had fewer than 40 sessions.)

About half of individuals who did not complete the course attended sessions for at most two weeks, with another 22 percent attending for a third week. Those who did not complete the course participated in about 15 sessions, on average (or for approximately 7 days). Notably, about a quarter of those individuals participated in fewer than 8 sessions.

Washington required individuals to participate in Strategies for Success (SfS), which was a six-week, 96-hour life skills and job readiness course. The course consisted of six modules that covered five areas: work concepts, health and well-being, communication, personal strength builders, and community engagement.

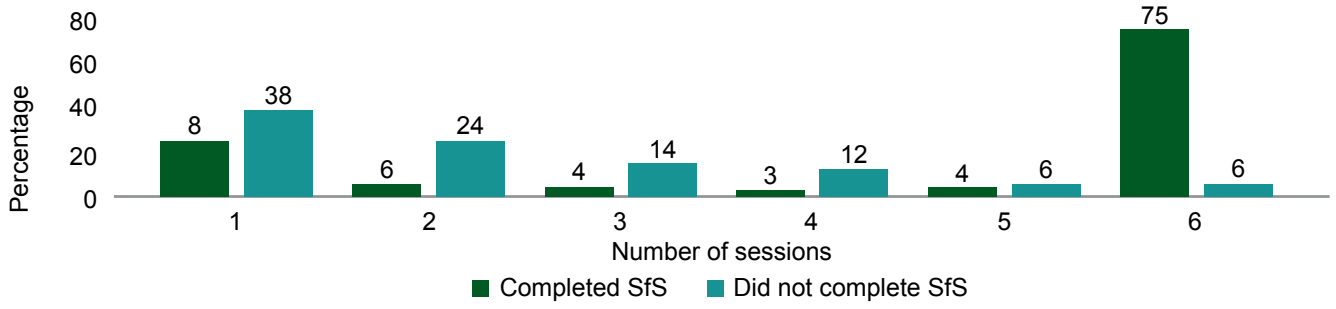
Individuals who completed EDGE were more likely than those who did not to be female (56 versus 47 percent), have at least a high school diploma (75 versus 63 percent), and to have worked in the past (83 versus 75 percent).

Washington. Washington required individuals to participate in Strategies for Success (SfS), which was a six-week, 96-hour life skills and job readiness course. The course consisted of six modules that covered five areas: work concepts, health and well-being, communication, personal strength builders, and community engagement. The course was conducted in person four days a week often at local American Job Centers or community colleges. The program offered individuals flexibility to start and stop SfS due to their barriers, which could extend the time it took an individual to complete the course beyond six weeks. Individuals who enrolled in the course could start with any module; the modules did not need to be completed sequentially.

Forty-six percent of individuals in Washington started SfS; about 60 percent of them completed it. Most participants who completed the course did so in seven weeks and participated in all six modules. (Starting in December 2017, there was some ability to expedite the course, so that may be why some individuals [25 percent] appear to have completed it but participated in fewer than 6 modules.)

Almost two-thirds of individuals who started but did not complete SfS completed at most two modules; 38 percent completed only 1 module.

Number of SfS modules completed among those who completed and did not compete the course



Individuals who completed SfS were less likely than those who did not to be between 18 and 49 years old (72 versus 83 percent) and were more likely to have at least a high school diploma (80 versus 75 percent).

Both Mississippi and Washington staff recognized early in the pilot the challenges with engaging participants in their courses and keeping them engaged. Both were flexible

and made changes to their processes to help improve engagement. For example, Mississippi offered EDGE in multiple locations to reduce the distance participants had to travel and allowed individuals to take a self-directed version of the class online. Some colleges also developed free transportation services to help individuals get to the EDGE class. Washington allowed participants to start with any module instead of taking them in order. It also allowed participants to take an expedited version of SfS which met in both mornings and afternoons instead of just once per day to decrease the number of weeks required to finish all six modules.

Despite these changes, the overall completion rates for the courses were much lower than expected. This was particularly true for Washington, where only about 27 percent of all participants completed SfS, which was a prerequisite for starting an education, occupational skills training, or work-based learning activity.

Participation patterns in occupational skills training

Several pilots that offered occupational skills training faced challenges with enrolling participants into training quickly after enrollment. Staff enrolled individuals continuously in to the pilot, but many training providers did not accept participants in classes on a rolling basis, creating wait lists for training. This was particularly problematic when training was offered primarily or exclusive by community colleges that offered classes on semester or quarterly schedules, or through other providers that had set schedules for when new classes began. Individuals referred to training just after classes began often had to wait until the start of the next scheduled class, which might be a few weeks to months later. Most pilots found that this lag caused some individuals to exit because they were not interested in other available activities or could not afford to go without a paycheck during the waiting period. In other cases, some individuals waiting for a class to begin would ultimately not participate because they chose to participate in other activities. This section explores participation rates and completion patterns among the five pilots—Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Virginia—in which occupational skills training was a prominent component of their model. This information highlights the challenges that individuals may face when accessing training.

Occupational skills trainings offered through the pilots were commonly related to construction, manufacturing, food preparation and service, nursing and medical professions, and commercial driving. Some pilots relied heavily on community colleges to provide training, while others primarily offered training through community-based organizations. These included large national organizations such as Goodwill, YWCAs, and food bank networks as well as small local organizations operated by nonprofits or churches. Most organizations offered short-term trainings that lasted two to three months; however, some training opportunities were shorter, such as those in Illinois and Kansas. In other pilots, trainings were longer—lasting from three to nine months.

Kentucky, Mississippi, and Virginia provided all or most of their training through community colleges, while Illinois and Kansas offered a mix of non-profit, for-profit, and community college options. (Kentucky did offer some in-demand training through providers other than community colleges, if participants had a significant wait time at the college.) Training offered through community colleges tended to last longer, as it often was part of a typical college schedule and could take one or more semesters to complete.

Findings from these pilots included the following:

Rates of participation in training ranged from 18 percent in Virginia to 46 percent in Illinois (Table 1). Illinois likely had a higher participation rate, because most of the pilot providers offered training and the programs were shorter-term than programs at community colleges, like in Virginia and Mississippi. Although Kansas also offered short-term training through a range of providers like in Illinois, its participation rate was lower; training was not offered broadly to all participants and was generally a secondary activity, so access was lower than in other pilots.

Table 1. Participation in Occupational Skills Training

		Among those who started training		
	Started training (%)	Completed training without exiting (%)	Ever completed training (%)	Median time to complete training (days)
Illinois	46	45	59	57
Kansas	23	75	78	72
Kentucky	27	32	38	120
Mississippi	24	44	54	102
Virginia	18	79	81	73

About one-third to three-quarters of individuals who started training completed it. The median amount of time it took individuals to complete training ranged from about two months in Illinois, to about four months in Kentucky. The completion rates were generally inversely related to the length of time it takes to complete the program; the shorter the program the higher the completion rate.

Among individuals who did not complete occupational skills training, those in Illinois and Mississippi stopped participating after one to one and a half months, while those in Virginia, Kansas, and Kentucky stopped participating after three to five months. This difference could be related to Illinois and Mississippi administering mandatory programs, where individuals who were not fully meeting work requirements would be sanctioned and exit the program. In addition, the rate of those who exited and returned to ultimately complete training were also highest in these two States. For example, in Illinois, 45 percent of individuals completed training without exiting, but an additional 14 percent completed training after exiting and reentering the program, for an overall completion rate of 59 percent. High rates of activity completion following exit and reentry may be related to the mandatory nature of the program.

In most pilots, individuals who completed training were more likely than those who started but did not complete it to already have a high school diploma or a post-secondary degree. For example, in Virginia, 70 percent of individuals who completed training had a high school diploma, compared to 54 percent of those who started but did not complete training. In Kentucky and Virginia, those who completed training were more likely than those who started but did not complete training to have been employed at the time of pilot enrollment.

These findings support the information pilot staff reported on training delays that existed for some programs. For example, pilot staff in Virginia observed that many individuals were frustrated about having to wait for the occupational skills training courses to

begin and having to participate in online trainings while they waited. It appears that the programs that offered short-term trainings with flexible start dates, unlike those offered through community colleges, could have contributed to individuals starting training at higher rates. Also, those programs, regardless of the provider, that offered shorter trainings had much higher completion rates.

Job search activities as a first or primary component

Although the pilots were focused on providing activities that were more intensive than job search related activities (independent job search, job readiness training, and job search assistance), some pilots prioritized these activities before more intensive ones, or they became a prominent component of the pilot due to demand. In some cases, the pilot did not anticipate so many individuals would participate in these activities, but they found that individuals came to the program in crisis and only wanted to find a job to pay their bills. Some pilots had to pivot to meet the needs of those in the program. For example, in Kansas and Illinois, staff anticipated more individuals would participate in occupational skills training, but the demand was high for job readiness skills training because participants were interested in moving into the workforce quickly.

Some pilots had to pivot to meet the needs of those in the program. For example, in Kansas and Illinois, staff anticipated more individuals would participate in occupational skills training, but the demand was high for job readiness skills training because participants were interested in moving into the workforce quickly.

Participation in job search activities can reduce the likelihood that participants start another activity, if they are able to find employment. However, the jobs that participants could obtain without building their skills often did not lead to self-sufficiency, and they may return to the program. Staff in some pilots discussed that they often would lose touch with participants once they started a job, but some would reach out within a few months because they lost their job or were still struggling to meet their needs.

Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Vermont, and Virginia provided job search activities to many, and in some cases most, of their participants, generally ranging from about 30 to 70 percent of individuals enrolled in the pilots (Table 2). Among those who started, the percentages of individuals who completed these activities before leaving the pilot varied greatly across pilots. For example, across pilots, between 38 to 96 percent of individuals completed job search assistance or training before leaving, but usually nearly 60 percent or more completed the training. A higher percentage tended to complete job readiness assistance; although only 6 percent of participants completed in Vermont 73 to 94 percent completed it in the other pilots. Completion rates were only marginally higher when measuring whether individuals ever completed any of these activities, including individuals who left and later re-enrolled in the pilot. This suggests that individuals are most likely to complete these activities when they first start them.

Job search activities in Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Vermont, and Virginia

Independent job search. A core activity offered in Georgia, Illinois, and Virginia, independent job search typically consisted of unstructured job search that was generally self-directed with minimal assistance from caseworkers and provider staff.

Job readiness assistance or training. Offered in Georgia, Kansas, Vermont, and Virginia, these activities consisted of short job readiness workshops focused on soft skills and life skills training. (Ex: life skills training in Virginia and in Georgia and Governor's Career Readiness Certificate in Vermont).

Job search assistance or training. Offered in each of the pilots, these activities consisted of job placement assistance, resume development, structured job search assistance, job search training, and skills building training focused on interview skills.

Considering all three types of job search activities together, individuals who completed these activities did so in anywhere from one to three days in Vermont, Georgia, and Virginia to slightly over three months in Kansas. (Kansas offered more intensive job readiness training courses that lasted five to eight weeks.) Among individuals who did not complete these activities, many individuals spent significantly less time participating compared with those who completed activities. For example, about half of individuals who started but did not complete these activities in Illinois spent 1 day participating in them, compared to 19 days among completers. Similarly, individuals in Kansas who started but did not complete these activities spent about 10 fewer days participating in them compared with those who completed them.

Table 2. Participation in job search activities

	Job search assistance or training		Job readiness assistance		Independent job search	
	Started	Completed	Started	Completed	Started	Completed
Georgia	50%	67%	35%	94%	50%	66%
Illinois	29%	58%	NA	NA	57%	67%
Kansas	1%	83%	71%	73%	63%	95%
Vermont	72%	38%	49%	6%	NA	NA
Virginia	32%	96%	53%	93%	NA	NA

NA indicates that the activity was not offered in a State.

Considerations for State SNAP E&T programs

In describing patterns of participation in and completion of mandatory life skills courses, occupational skills training, and job search activities offered through SNAP E&T programs, this brief provides new information regarding when individuals drop out of activities after starting them. The findings suggest several important considerations for SNAP E&T staff in improving participants' engagement in these types of activities.

Findings from the pilots showed that individuals were less likely to engage in the program or start activities when the program model had multiple handoff points to enroll in the program and participate in services.

Reduce handoffs during initial intake. Findings from the pilots showed that individuals were less likely to engage in the program or start activities when the program model had multiple handoff points to enroll in the program and participate in services. To increase participation, SNAP agencies should reduce the number of handoff points and referrals between enrollment in SNAP E&T and participation in activities. When handoffs or referrals are required, ensure that staff use "warm" referrals, where they introduce the participant to those at other organizations or help directly connect the participant with other service providers. This helps demystify the process for participants and it can assuage concerns they may have about meeting new people or navigating a new organization.

Assess whether programs address participants' long- and short-term needs. In the pilots, staff often found that what they were excited about in their program model was not always what interested participants. Many pilots were enthusiastic about the types of occupational skills training opportunities they offered, but individuals often wanted to quickly find a job and were not interested in investing in training. Although staff in Mississippi and Washington felt there was value in the EDGE and SfS courses and that all of their participants could benefit from them, many individuals were reluctant to participate. It delayed them from participating in other activities (such as education, occupational skills training, or work-based learning) or finding employment, which they found more valuable.

When designing the pilots, staff did not often gather and assess direct input or research on the immediate needs and longer-term training goals of participants. However, the program could have benefited from better understanding the population through direct communication with former and potential participants. This can be done through focus groups, listening sessions, or surveys. Also holding conversations or working groups with targeted community-based organizations that directly serve the SNAP E&T populations provides additional context for the types of barriers these populations face and what would benefit them the most.

Using this information, States should try to design programs that meet participants' immediate needs but keep them engaged so that they can continue improving their skills. This may include offering additional subsidized work-based learning opportunities that provide participants with income while they are in education or training. It may also include offering shorter, skill-building activities or providing expanded participant reimbursements to address a range of expenses that prevent people from staying engaged (such as transportation, child care, or access to technology).

Participants often faced competing priorities between participating in activities to improve their skills and addressing immediate needs through finding a job. Because training could take several weeks or months to complete, they viewed it as a long-term commitment and frequently would forgo skill attainment to move quickly into a job.

Offer a mix of short-term and long-term skill-building activities to address participants' competing priorities. Participants often faced competing priorities between participating in activities to improve their skills and addressing immediate needs through finding a job. Because training could take several weeks or months to complete, they viewed it as a long-term commitment and frequently would forgo skill attainment to move quickly into a job. Findings from the pilot show that participants may be more willing to complete activities if they are short-term. The patterns of participation for the soft-skills and job readiness training courses, such as EDGE and SfS, show that most individuals left these programs within the first two weeks of classes. Also, occupational skills training programs that offered shorter trainings (8 to 10 weeks) had much higher completion rates than longer trainings. Programs that are able to offer high-quality, skill-building activities that can be completed in a few weeks could better meet the needs of SNAP participants and increase the number who choose to improve their skills before finding a job.

In addition, given that participants may not commit to more than a couple weeks of workshops or training, providers should consider the order of lessons in their curriculum and prioritize the information that is more important in earlier sessions. States might also consider offering multiple short-term trainings, instead of one longer one, that participants can build upon even while employed, and offering flexible training schedules for those who need to work while in the program. The Kentucky pilot found success with combining employment and training—many of those in training at the community college also held a work study job. Participants who were interviewed often discussed how much they liked being able to work while in training and frequently had a job that related to their field of study.

Collect information to understand and explain program outcome measures. The findings presented in this analysis highlight the importance of having access to in-depth participation data that go beyond overall engagement numbers or participation by component. Identifying and collecting process measures, such as when individuals tend to drop out of the program, the length of time individuals spend in the program, and how participants feel about the training content, are necessary for identifying whether the program model could change to improve broad program

outcomes, such as employment, wages, and certification attainment. For example, in Washington, SfS instructors suggested that they observed drop off after the third module of SfS. These were their impressions from being in class each week, but they were not relying on the data to support this. The State SNAP agency used this feedback to make adjustments to the course, such as providing access to more participant reimbursements after completing the third week of SfS. The State also was considering how to shorten the course to about three to four weeks after the pilot ended. However, based on the data presented in this brief, in fact, most of those who did not complete SfS left earlier than observed by the instructors—after completing about two modules. Although the observed information is beneficial and should complement data, having data provides evidence for decision making about program improvement and allows administrators to be more responsive to participants. States should consider systematically collecting participant-level data regarding specific program components, and pairing this information with observational data and participant feedback to understand when and why individuals may leave the program before completing it.

Conclusion

In describing patterns of participation in soft-skills and job readiness courses, occupational skills training programs, and job search activities, this brief provides new information regarding how well individuals engage and complete various E&T program activities. Although some individuals successfully complete these activities, findings suggest that the way programs are designed and offered can affect participants' ability to engage and complete activities. This brief provides lessons on how States can identify and address potential drop-off points and roadblocks in their E&T programs through data and feedback from participants and providers.

For more information: *Detailed final findings are available in the full report "Expanding Opportunities & Reducing Barriers to Work: Final Summary Report" at https://www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis. Reports summarizing final findings from the 10 individual pilot reports also are available*

About the study

In the Agricultural Act of 2014, Congress authorized and funded 10 SNAP E&T pilots to test a range of innovative strategies to help SNAP participants find employment that increases their incomes and reduces their need for public assistance benefits. To encourage a diversity of approaches, each grantee identified focus populations, selected partners and service providers, and determined which services and activities best met their populations' needs. The legislation that authorized the pilots also included funding for a randomized controlled trial evaluation to assess the impacts of the pilots, which was awarded to Mathematica.

The findings presented in this brief are based on analyses of data on service provision collected from State SNAP agencies and on analyses of qualitative data collected through telephone calls and in-person interviews with pilot staff from State agencies, partners, and providers, and focus groups conducted with individuals participating in the pilot.

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