USDA

Finding Work after Occupational Skills Training: Employment Patterns 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). In addition to a range of employment and training-related activities, such as job readiness training, job search assistance, basic education, and work-based learning, most pilots offered occupational skills training. Although about one quarter of individuals participated in an occupational skills training activity in most pilots, little is known about the employment experiences of individuals after completing training. This brief examines the employment and earnings patterns among individuals in the SNAP E&T pilots who completed occupational skills training and earned credentials. Based on these findings, it provides considerations for States and SNAP E&T providers for improving training completion and increasing employment after training.

SNAP E&T programs are designed to help SNAP recipients improve their employability, gain meaningful employment, and become economically self-sufficient. Occupational skills training activities, in particular, allow participants to gain skills that make them more employable. Most States and providers attempt to align short-term training with the needs of specific employers in the area, often leading to occupational certifications that are in demand in a community's local labor market.

This brief describes participation in occupational skills training and employment patterns for training participants both during and after they completed training.

Understanding occupational skills training activities offered in the SNAP E&T pilots

Occupational skills training was offered in each of the 10 pilots, although the type of training and providers varied across States. The geography, local labor market demands, and individuals' skill level also varied. Trainings were commonly related to construction, manufacturing, food preparation and service, nursing and medical professions, and commercial truck driving. Many different types of organizations offered occupational skills training. Some pilots relied heavily on community colleges to provide training, while others primarily offered training through community-based organizations (CBOs). 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 much shorter—lasting a few days or few weeks, such as those in Delaware and Kansas. In other pilots, trainings were longer—lasting from three to nine months. Training offered through community colleges (such as in Kentucky, Mississippi, or Virginia) tended to last longer, as it often was part of a typical college schedule and could take one or more semesters to complete. Community colleges also more frequently have the ability to offer multiple (or "stacked") credentials in a given field, which can take longer to obtain.

Alignment between the top 5 most common trainings completed and credentials received

The two most common types of training completed were healthcare support such as nursing, home health, and occupational therapy aides; and healthcare practitioners and technicians. Other common types of training included production occupations such as food processing, metal and plastic, and textile workers; transportation and moving material occupations such as motor vehicle, air, water, and rail transportation operators as well as material moving workers who move freight, stock, or other materials. The types of credentials or certifications most frequently earned were similar to the types of trainings completed.

Top 5 most commonly completed trainings.

1. Healthcare support
2. Healthcare practitioners
3. Transportation/Material moving
4. Production
5. Food preparation and serving

Top 5 most commonly received credentials.

1. Healthcare support
2. Healthcare practitioners
3. Transportation/Material moving
4. Production
5. Construction and extraction

Occupational skills training participation and employment patterns

Across all of the pilots, 22 percent of individuals started occupational skills training. This was lower than most program staff had anticipated, but nearly two thirds of those who started training completed it (14 percent of all individuals). It took participants a little over three months, on average, to complete their training. Findings from the pilots offer useful insights into how SNAP E&T participants access training and their subsequent employment patterns.

Delaware offered three types of training for in-demand industries: construction, culinary arts, and manufacturing. Construction training activities consisted of classroom training on basic construction instruction, followed by field training for two to three weeks which resulted in construction certifications. The pilot also offered one-day trainings in rigging, flagging, or forklift operations. The culinary track consisted of a 12-week combination of classroom and hands-on training in an on-site kitchen at a local food bank, followed by a two-week internship that resulted in a nationally recognized Servsafe certification. The manufacturing track consisted of a nine-day training consisting of classroom instruction, hands-on training, and on-line learning, resulting in manufacturing certifications and a 90-day subsidized job at a local manufacturer.

Credential attainment was much lower than the rate of training completion. About half of those who completed training also received a credential. Credential attainment for some programs required passing an exam after completing training. Other programs simply required completing the training, but exams (classroom and/or hands-on) were generally included throughout the course.

Completing multiple occupational skills training activities was not uncommon. Some individuals (13 percent of those who completed any occupational skills training) participated in multiple trainings while they were in the pilot, which was more common among participants who were employed at the start of training than those who were unemployed (17 versus 12 percent). Over 40 percent of individuals who completed multiple trainings completed them at the same time.

Although some workforce programs encourage participants to take multiple trainings to stack training credentials, they generally are in the same or similar field. For example, a program might provide training to participants in general construction techniques and once they earn that certification, they may build on it by receiving additional specialized training in the field, such as welding, woodworking, or plumbing to become more marketable. However, data from the pilots showed that almost half of those who completed multiple trainings (49 percent) did so for different occupations. Many of these individuals may have completed these trainings at different times, perhaps after realizing they were not satisfied with the initial occupation in which they were trained.

Illinois offered occupational skills training directly through community-based organizations (CBOs), or through referrals to community colleges or other local providers. A wide array of training programs were offered, including for Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and other medical certifications, culinary arts, carpentry, Commercial Driver's License (CDL), welding, machining, and administrative assistant skills. Some CBOs specialized in a particular training program, but most offered several different training options. Occupational skills training programs ranged in length from about 6 to 20 weeks, depending on the program and service provider. Additionally, some trainings were self-paced and thus the start time and duration varied by individual. However, other trainings were cohort based and/or had set start and end dates throughout the year.

Many individuals did not find employment immediately after completing training. Many individuals spent months—often between 6 and 12 months—searching for a job, regardless of whether the job was or was not in their intended occupation. However, employment patterns after occupational skills training varied by individuals' recent employment history. Among those who were unemployed at the start of training (69 percent of those who completed occupational skills training), individuals took 5.8 months, on average, after completing training before finding a job; 27 percent spent at least 9 months. Seventy-two percent found a job in the year after training ended. Among those who were employed when they started occupational skills training (31 percent of those who completed occupational skills training), individuals took 6.2 months, on average, after completing training to find a new job; 29 percent spent at least 9 months finding one. Sixty percent found a new job in the year after training ended.

Less than half of individuals who completed occupational skills training were able to find employment in their intended occupations. Forty-four percent of individuals found employment in their intended occupations and it took them about 6 months on average to find that job. Some individuals worked at a job in a different occupation during this time; about one-third worked at one or more intermediate jobs in an unrelated field before finding a job related to their training.

Some trainings were more likely than others to result in finding employment in related occupations. Most commonly, individuals who received training in protective services (such as security guards, law enforcement, and transportation security screeners) found related employment (66 percent), followed by training in food preparation (62 percent), transportation and material moving (58 percent), healthcare support (45 percent), and office and administrative support (42 percent). Some of these individuals held intermediate jobs before finding related employment, however. For example, those who found healthcare support jobs commonly worked in office

and administrative support roles before finding healthcare-related employment. Other trainings, such as those in financial, mathematical, and arts/entertainment fields were least likely to yield related employment.

Kansas offered occupational skills training, which was primarily short-term and limited to four to six weeks. Trainings varied by region but included certifications to work as an administrative assistant, CNA, or certified medical assistant, or in manufacturing, forklift operation, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, first aid, welding, masonry, or carpentry.

Despite the time it took to find employment, earnings increased for those who became employed after training. Overall, the average monthly earnings among all of those who became newly employed or found a new job after training ended increased in the year after training. For this group, average monthly earnings were $1,810 at the time training was completed and $2,157 one year after training. Although those who were employed when training began earned slightly more in the month that training ended than those who were not employed when training began ($1,872 compared to $1,753), this difference faded over time. Both groups earned virtually the same amount one year after training ended ($2,234 compared to $2,125 monthly). This could indicate that for those who become employed, training can equalize wages, and recent work experience may not be a major factor in earning potential. We should note, however, that it may have been easier for those with recent work experience to find employment more quickly and over time. Nearly all of those who were employed before training were employed in the three years after training, whereas only 84 percent of those who were not employed when training began became employed at some point after training. Some of these individuals may have faced barriers to employment that the training or other program services could not fully address.

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Considerations for State SNAP E&T programs

In describing employment patterns after completion of occupational skills training through SNAP E&T programs, this brief provides new information regarding how well individuals fare in the labor market after obtaining new skills. The findings suggest several important considerations for SNAP E&T staff in the provision of occupational skills training.

Several factors contribute to engagement in occupational skills training. Overall, pilot staff had anticipated much higher rates of participation in training. Staff often were excited about the level and types of training opportunities they were offering, but many individuals came to the program in crisis and only wanted to find a job to pay their bills. For example, in Kansas and Illinois, fewer individuals than expected participated in occupational skills training, but many more than anticipated participated in job readiness skills training because they were interested in moving into the workforce quickly.

Some pilots also required participation in one or more activities before participants could enroll in training, which created opportunities for participants to drop out of the program or exit the pilot before training was offered. For example, Georgia required that individuals participate in job search training activities before being referred to education or occupational skills training, which was offered by another provider at a different location. Similarly, Washington required all individuals to complete a mandatory six-week life skills course (Strategies for Success) before providers could connect individuals with occupational skills training. With multiple requirements preceding training, many individuals left the pilots before starting training.

Several pilots also faced challenges in coordinating the flow of individuals into the pilot with the start dates of occupational skills training classes. These classes often were provided through community colleges that offered classes on semester or quarterly schedules, or through other providers that had set schedules for when new classes began or needed to wait for a sufficient number of individuals before starting a new class. Thus, 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 the pilot before participating in training.

Virginia offered existing occupational skills training courses at its community colleges as well as new trainings developed during the pilot. Across the colleges training was commonly offered in the health professions such as pharmacy technician, CNA, and medical assistant; the building trades such as Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning technician and electrical groundsman; information technology such as data and systems programming; and transportation such as CDL and truck driving.

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 the pilot before participating in training.

In some pilots, individuals suggested that the available training options were not geared towards their needs or interests. For example, some individuals in Delaware and Virginia were not interested in the training options because they did not align with their career aspirations. The same was true in Georgia, which offered training for only a few in-demand occupations initially, although eventually the pilot expanded its offerings to better align with individuals' needs and interests.

Finally, pilots underestimated the amount of participant reimbursements needed to mitigate the barriers that individuals faced, which made it challenging for some individuals to complete their training programs. Although all of the pilots offered participant reimbursements, the level and availability of these supports varied. Some pilots, such as those in Illinois, Virginia, and Washington, had overall caps on the amount of participant reimbursements available to an individual; most of the other pilots capped the per-person amounts available for each type of support but not the overall amount across supports. Limited access to child care and transportation were frequently cited as a major barriers to participating in training and other activities. In addition to these barriers, individuals may not even be eligible for occupational skills training if they cannot meet training prerequisites, such as reading at an 8th grade level or passing a drug test.

Participant reimbursements in Virginia helped to support training

Participants and pilot staff in Virginia described individuals' difficulties securing transportation and childcare to attend training. Many had limited transportation options to and from training locations and many college staff cited difficulties faced by individuals who lived in more remote areas where public transportation was not available.

Virginia offered participant reimbursements based on need between $560 and $1,680 per individual to help cover costs related to transportation (gas cards and bus passes), car repairs, tolls, and other expenses.

Some individuals in the pilot indicated that the transportation assistance allowed them to cover their expenses and remain in occupational skills training. They suggested it was difficult to take time away from work for training, but the pilot's supports helped them to do so.

Although access to occupational skills training in Kentucky was valued, many staff and individuals noted that these communities offer few job prospects, even for individuals who obtained skills through training.

Occupational skills training completers became employed, but many had to drive to other counties (sometimes more than an hour away), and some indicated they would need to move out of eastern Kentucky to find a good job in their field.

Although a relatively high percentage of those who started training completed it, States could make efforts to increase the number of participants who start and subsequently complete training in several ways:

- Knowing the specific needs and interests of the population targeted for training before developing training offerings.
- Reducing upfront requirements and barriers that can delay entry into training for those who are ready to participate.
- Aligning enrollment with availability of training to ensure a consistent pipeline of available training opportunities
- Offering robust participant reimbursements.

Washington offered occupational skills training at local community colleges or other training providers in the area. The types of training individuals pursued varied widely and included training in phlebotomy, forklift operation, culinary arts, warehouse operations, CNA, and CDL. Training opportunities could last from three to nine months.

Most of participants who completed training did not find a job for at least six months and often it was not in the field in which they trained. Most pilots indicated that they offered training based on local labor market demands, often focusing on high-demand occupations. For example, Illinois built on two local workforce development and sector-focused training programs to target their occupational skills training and industry-recognized credentials. Kentucky also developed demand-driven trainings through the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS), which regularly assesses current and future State workforce needs has strong connections to networks of employers throughout the state. Similarly, Delaware developed its training offerings in three industry-based tracks in construction, culinary arts, and manufacturing, targeting training and employment in growth industries with high-wage potential.

Therefore, it is surprising that many individuals spent 6 to 12 months before finding a job, and among those who became employed after training, only 44 percent found a job in their intended occupation. These findings are unexpected and counter to the overall goal of providing short-term occupational skills training. There could be several factors underlying these findings, which are important for States to understand in their own programs so they can monitor them and make changes as needed, including:

- Types of trainings offered were not aligned as well with local demand as pilots had anticipated
- Supply of trained individual outweighed demand (available jobs) in some areas
- Quality or content of the training may not have been producing the type of employees that are marketable with employers
- The available jobs for which participants trained may have had less flexible schedules, been less conveniently located, or provided fewer benefits compared to the jobs participants already had. They may have been slow to select a new job until they found one that met their needs—salary being only one of those factors. Depending on the participants' priorities, they may forgo a higher wage in the short-run to find a job that was a better fit overall.
- Participants continued to face challenges searching for jobs; having successful interviews; meeting employers' prerequisites such as having a driver's license and passing background checks and drug tests; or addressing barriers to employment related to child care or transportation even after completing the training.

"Stacking" trainings or education program components has become increasingly common in workforce development programs, as individuals try to obtain more certificates or credentials without committing to participating in a more traditionally-designed (longer-term) program.However, it is important to ensure these activities actually reflect stackable training components related to the same industry, rather than inefficiencies in training programs or participants' challenges with identifying programs that are the best fit for their interests and skills.

Some pilots provided evidence of these possibilities. For example, although Kentucky's training programs targeted in-demand occupations, there were more individuals who completed training than jobs available in the local area. However, for many pilots, the evaluation did not offer specific information about which factors were most important determinants of finding a job soon after training completion.

In light of these findings, it is clear that having access to the data describing the length of time until training completers find a job or new job, and knowing whether the job is in their intended occupation, could greatly inform changes in State E&T programs' occupational skills training offerings. It could also inform the types of services agencies provide to support participants through these programs. States operating occupational skills training programs should carefully monitor these outcomes by collecting and analyzing data in real time that describe whether participants' trainings and credentials match those sought in local economy and whether there are sufficient numbers of jobs available.

Additionally, having State E&T program staff discuss with employers why applicants who have completed training are not obtaining open job positions may reveal a lack of soft skills at the interview, suggesting that participants may need more integrated soft skills or job readiness training. It may also uncover how employers view the training programs—if they teach the appropriate skills needed for the jobs and offer the right level and type of credential. E&T program staff can also learn from training completers about their post-training experience locating employment to reassess whether new or different training offerings are needed, such as coupling more technical training with job readiness workshops, or whether there exist other barriers to employment in these occupations related to transportation, child care, required supplies, criminal justice histories, and drug tests.

Participation in multiple trainings could be beneficial for participants or a sign of a training mismatch. "Stacking" trainings or education program components has become increasingly common in workforce development programs, as individuals try to obtain more certificates or credentials without committing to participating in a more traditionally-designed (longer-term) program. As such, it is not surprising to see a nontrivial percentage of training completers participating in multiple occupational skills training activities.

However, it is important to ensure these activities actually reflect stackable training components related to the same industry, rather than inefficiencies in training programs or participants' challenges with identifying programs that are the best fit for their interests and skills. In the pilots, some States allowed individuals to participate in multiple trainings within the same field to stack credentials, such as earning a certification in phlebotomy and earning one as a CNA. Sequential activities are more likely to be part of a "stackable" curriculum or track when they are in the same field. For example, the service components in the Virginia pilot were designed to be stackable and completed sequentially, conditional on individuals qualifying for additional services based on a reassessment. The community colleges chose occupational skills training options to be complementary in this regard, such as following a foundational welding course for individuals with low reading levels with a more advanced welding course once their reading level increased.

Across all of the pilots, we found that among the 60 percent of training completers who participated in multiple trainings, more than half (37 percent) of them participated in activities that are not traditionally stackable. These findings highlight the importance for SNAP E&T staff to use program data to monitor the extent of multiple training participation and identify whether these are part of a stacked training sequence. This would help to reduce the chances of individuals participating in multiple training because they are not well informed or matched to a training.

Conclusion

In describing employment patterns after completion of occupational skills training through SNAP E&T programs, this brief provides new information regarding how well individuals fare in the labor market after obtaining new sector-specific skills. These findings suggest that occupational skills training helps to connect SNAP E&T participants to meaningful employment and increased earnings. However, for many of these individuals it took at least a half of a year to find that job. These findings highlight the potential need for improvements in matching participants to appropriate training programs and supporting participants as they look for employment after training is complete. States can do this by further aligning training offerings with the experiences of participants and needs of local employers and ensuring participants also receive soft skills training and job placement support.

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 12- and 36-month survey data collected from individuals enrolled in the SNAP E&T pilots.

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