

USDA, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment & Training Pilots: Issue Briefs on Early Implementation Lessons (Summary)

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a work support for many low-income people. SNAP's Employment and Training (E&T) program provides participants with education, training, and support services to find employment, increase income, and reduce reliance on public assistance benefits.

In March 2015, USDA awarded pilot grants to 10 States – California, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington – to test innovative strategies for providing SNAP E&T. The three issue briefs present cross-pilot findings on implementation challenges and lessons, support services, and case management. The briefs are based on information collected during pilot site visits and service use data from participants enrolled in the pilots during January 2016 to December 2017. All pilot services ended by April 2019.

Key Findings

- Develop strong partnerships and be flexible when implementing new E&T programs or models.
- Understand the participants' goals and barriers to improve engagement in E&T activities.
- Provide ample and varied support services to help mitigate individuals' barriers.
- Dedicate enough staff resources and time to provide individualized intensive case management.

Findings from the Briefs

Implementing the SNAP E&T Pilots: Challenges Encountered and Lessons Learned

Develop and cultivate strong partnerships as SNAP agencies typically do not have the capacity or experience to provide E&T services. Allow time to build strategic partnerships and standardize policies and processes across partners as different administrative structures and cultures and missions can hinder coordination and slow implementation. Hold collective impact meetings with all stakeholders and maintain clear and consistent communication.

Invest significant time and be flexible when implementing new services or in new service areas. Allow ample planning time to coordinate efforts across organizations, even when partnering with established providers. Some pilots struggled to find employers who were both a good fit for individuals in the pilot and were willing to hire them. Build a portfolio of employers that will hire E&T

participants or reach out to employers for whom participants want to work.

Understand the participants' employment goals and barriers to better meet their needs. Participation in education and occupational skills training was lower than expected because individuals wanted employment immediately, were not interested in the offered services or lengthy training, or had many barriers to participation. Shift resources if necessary and create multiple pathways and ample and varied support services to meet people's needs.

Simplify the service model flow to increase take-up rates and completion rates for activities. Multiple "hand-off" points in the process or upfront requirements or waiting periods before starting education or training activities led to lower participation in certain activities. Design programs with fewer transition points or have case managers schedule appointments with other organizations. Coordinate recruitment with start of classes and reduce minimum class size to alleviate long wait times.

Plan time and resources for outreach. The pilots need to enroll many more individuals than they typically served which required extensive outreach and active recruitment. Have a recruitment plan from the start and place outreach staff at local SNAP offices. Create a list of individuals potentially eligible for the pilot that partners and providers can contact.

Provision of Support Services To Reduce Barriers in the SNAP E&T Pilots

The pilots could use grant funds to pay entirely for support services with no limits on how much of the budget could be allocated to support services. The pilots used this flexibility to increase the dollar amount and array of available support services.

Across the pilots, the share of individuals receiving a support service ranged from 40 percent to over 80 percent. All pilots offered transportation assistance and reimbursement for items needed by individuals who were participating in occupational skills training or starting employment. Six pilots offered child care assistance, seven offered some form of housing assistance, and five provided personal care items and medical assistance. The average total support services provided, among those who received a support service, ranged from about \$350 to nearly \$2,000 per person across the pilots.

Despite the wide use of support services, most pilots still faced challenges in helping individuals mitigate significant barriers. These barriers were most often related to transportation and housing, both of which were structural problems in many communities. Many providers pointed to a lack of stable housing as a primary reason for an individual's inconsistent attendance in or eventual exit from the program. Still the E&T providers agreed that support services were a vital part of their programs.

Diversity of Case Management Approaches in the SNAP E&T Pilots

The pilots were required to provide “intensive” case management approaches that focus on assessment, barrier reduction, and goal-setting. All the pilots assessed individuals' interests and aptitude and most collected information on work histories and barriers. Some pilots conducted more comprehensive assessments covering housing and transportation, mental health disorders, depression and anxiety, substance use, and criminal backgrounds.

The share of individuals who had at least one meeting with a case manager ranged from 64 to 100 percent across the pilots. In seven pilots, the share was more than 90 percent. The frequency of contact with case managers ranged from an average of 5 contacts per person to 34 (among the 8 pilots that provided data).

The SNAP E&T population often has significant barriers, and providers must devote appropriate levels of staff resources and time to intensive case management practices. Case managers did not always feel they had the time to provide the level of individualized case management needed, particularly when they had additional roles such as recruitment, intake and assessments, and course instruction.

Using team-based case management approaches can better serve individuals who access services at multiple organizations in the community, but it requires all organizations and staff buy into the process. Organizations also need to develop a clear process and goals for team-based case management meetings. A dedicated case manager for each individual can facilitate the process and improve the individual's engagement in the pilot.

For More Information:

Briefs prepared by Mathematica for the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, August 2021. Available at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis>. Reports with detailed interim findings from each of the 10 pilots and a summary report covering all 10 pilots are also available at the same website.