USDA Food and Nutrition Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Research Summary April 2023

Modernizing Channels of Communication With USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Participants

Background

Over the last decade, State agencies (SAs) that administer the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) have enhanced their use of mobile communication strategies (MCS) to enable SNAP applicants and participants to remotely access program information, receive alerts and notifications, and perform some case management tasks. For this study, MCS are defined as (1) text messaging, (2) mobile apps, and/or (3) mobile-optimized websites that facilitate communication between participants and SNAP agencies. The availability and functionality of these MCS vary substantially across States. The onset of the Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic and temporary closing of local SNAP offices accelerated the development and implementation of these mobile technologies.

The primary purpose of this study was to better understand the current landscape of MCS technology and also highlight best practices and lessons learned from various MCS programs implemented by SNAP SAs. The four study objectives were to (1) provide a general overview of how MCS technologies are used by States, applicants, and participants; (2) conduct case studies of selected State MCS projects; (3) gather information on client perspectives on MCS; and (4) identify best practices and lessons learned for future development.

Key Findings

- Between 2018 and 2022, SAs made significant gains in developing and implementing MCS.
- The most common functionalities across MCS types were receiving information tailored to personal needs, certification notifications, and account changes.
- MCS implementation benefits both program participants and case workers.
- Best practices for MCS in the areas of development, marketing, implementation, and effectiveness were identified in the study.

Data Sources

The study used a qualitative design and landscape analysis to produce two national scans of MCS across all 53 States and territories. Additionally, indepth case studies were conducted focusing on five sites. Best practices were identified by synthesizing and triangulating data collected throughout the study.

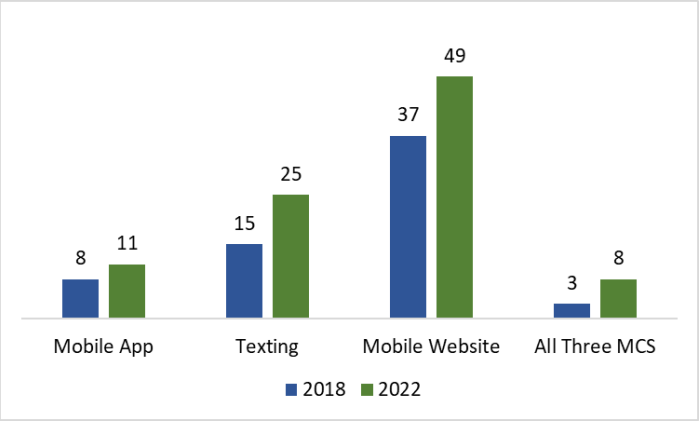
- The first national scan of MCS availability and functionality was conducted in November and December 2018. This scan used a combination of administrative and public data to assemble a detailed snapshot of MCS availability in each State and territory.
- A second national scan of MCS availability and functionality was conducted in May and June 2022. This was conducted to identify what progress had been made in MCS implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Five indepth case studies were conducted in Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New York City, and Texas. Each case study consisted of two virtual focus groups of SNAP participants who had previously used their SA's MCS as well as key informant interviews with SA staff.

Findings

Between 2018 and 2022, SAs made significant gains in developing and implementing MCS. The closure of local SA offices during pandemic created a need for SNAP agencies to provide remote services for program participants. Addressing this need accelerated the development and implementation of MCS technology as shown in Figure 1.

- The number of SAs that have implemented all three MCS increased from three to eight during this timeframe. In addition to the progress shown in Figure 1, five additional SAs are developing text messaging and six are developing mobile apps.

Figure 1: Total States Implementing MCS Technology: 2018-2022



The most common functionalities across MCS types were receiving information tailored to personal needs, certification notifications, and account changes. States with mobile apps allowed SNAP participants to conduct a broad range of activities, such as checking application status, submitting documentation, and receiving information tailored to personal needs. States with text messaging capability used it to send clients tailored information, account change information, and certification notifications. States with mobile-optimized websites allowed SNAP participants to sign or submit an application, start and save an application, and check application status.

MCS implementation benefits both program participants and case workers. Interviews with SAs workers and focus groups with SNAP participants in five case study locations found a largely positive view of MCS technologies as well as some criticisms.

- Benefits include a streamlined application process, reduced barriers if client lacks access to a computer, faster updates on enrollment status, and lower rates of churn because participants can receive notices of required recertification actions and submit documents through MCS rather than in person.
- Criticisms of MCS include a lack of specific functionality such as live chat with case workers and limited language options, concerns about information security when sharing sensitive information, the difficulty of using MCS technology with limited access to broadband internet, and an overall discomfort with technology.

Best practices for MCS in the areas of development, marketing, implementation, and effectiveness were identified in the study. The focus groups and SA staff interviews provided useful insights for future development and implementation of MCS technology.

- Successful development of new MCS technology requires careful evaluation of administrative barriers, the ongoing support of SA leadership for support and funding, and the recruitment of third-party experts with specific technical knowledge.
- Outreach and stakeholder engagement requires sustained engagement with community organizations, social media networks and program participants, as well as ongoing access to technical support for participants, and MCS integration with other social safety net programs.
- Successful technical implementation of MCS requires engaging with a variety of technical experts, greater integration of routing between program websites and apps, and comprehensive testing and documentation of new functionality.
- Maximizing the effectiveness of messaging with clients requires more timely issuance of push notifications, personalized text message reminders, appropriate text engagement beyond the notifications required by regulation, shifting to a default opt-out for receiving text reminders, and improving routing between texts and SA websites.

For More Information:

Steigelman, C., Bozzolo, C., & Page, N. (2023). Modernizing Channels of Communication with SNAP Participants. Prepared by Insight Policy Research, Inc. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Available online at www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis). USDA COR: Andrew Burns.

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