



Considerations for Improving Participant Experiences in the USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) Programs: Lessons From the SNAP E&T Pilots (Summary)

Background

The Agricultural Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-79) authorized \$200 million for the development, implementation, and evaluation of up to 10 pilot projects to test innovative strategies to increase employment and reduce the need for SNAP among program participants. The 10 States that received grants were California, Delaware, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Illinois, Mississippi, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington. Grantees began implementing their pilots between January and April 2016, and all pilot services concluded by April 2019.

The four issue briefs present cross-pilot findings that cover participation patterns in selected Employment and Training (E&T) activities, effectiveness of work-based learning, employment patterns after occupational skills training, and how sanctions affect participants in mandatory SNAP E&T programs.

Key Findings

- Individuals were less likely to engage with the program or begin E&T activities if there were multiple participant handoff points and referrals between enrollment and accessing E&T services.
- Most work-based learning opportunities did not lead to permanent jobs.
- Over half of the participants who completed occupational skills training participated in multiple trainings in unrelated fields.
- In mandatory SNAP E&T programs, challenges with service delivery models can reduce participant engagement leading to noncompliance and sanctions.
- Sanctioned individuals had lower employment and earnings compared to those not sanctioned.

Methods

The briefs are based on analyses of data collected at pilot enrollment, SNAP administrative data, participant surveys and Unemployment Insurance (UI) wage records. Findings from qualitative data collected during interviews with pilot staff from State SNAP agencies, partners, and E&T providers are also included.

Selected Lessons From the Briefs

Drivers of Participation in Selected SNAP E&T Activities

States developed pilot program models based on the activities they planned to offer. After implementation, several pilots observed that their program model made it challenging for individuals to participate in activities. This brief describes when SNAP participants are likely to stop participating in E&T activities and discusses how SNAP agencies can design programs that avoid E&T participation roadblocks.

Reduce participant handoff points and referrals. Individuals were less likely to engage or participate in

activities when the program model had multiple handoff points to enroll in the program and access services. When handoffs or referrals are required, ensure that program staff use “warm” referrals, where they introduce the participant to staff at other organizations or help to directly connect the participant with other service providers.

Offer a mix of short-term and long-term skill building activities to meet participant needs. E&T participants often faced competing priorities between participating in skill-building activities and addressing immediate needs through finding a job. When training could take several weeks or months to complete, E&T participants frequently would forgo skill attainment for a job.

Effectiveness of Work-based Learning for SNAP E&T

Illinois, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Vermont offered work-based learning as a major component of their pilots. Those who participated in work-based learning activities experienced greater increases in employment and earnings compared to those who did not participate in them.

Implementation challenges and lessons learned are presented.

Participants' and employers' needs should drive the selection of work-based learning opportunities offered.

Pilot staff found that while many participants were flexible in the jobs they would take, which made matching them to employers easy, others had barriers or specific goals that made matching difficult. To increase the likelihood that work-based learning transitions to a career opportunity, working with participants to identify placements that meet their career goals and align with their skills is important.

State Agencies should prioritize working with employers where work-based learning can transition to unsubsidized employment.

In the pilots, work-based opportunities generally did not lead to permanent jobs. When selecting employers for work-based learning placements, ensure that employers are not only committed to training participants but also have opportunities for permanent positions.

Finding Work After Occupational Skills Training

All pilots offered occupational skills training but the type of training and providers varied. This brief describes participation in occupational skills training and employment patterns of participants during and after training and offers considerations for the provision of occupational skills training.

Less than half of all individuals who completed occupational skills training found employment in their intended occupations.

Forty-four percent of individuals found a job in a relevant field, and it took about 6 months to find that job. Possible explanations for these findings include: (1) the trainings offered were not well aligned with jobs (type or number) available locally; (2) the quality or the content of the training may not have produced the type of employees sought by employers; (3) available jobs may not have addressed participant needs, such as flexible schedules, accessible location, types of benefits available; and (4) participants faced challenges meeting employer pre-requisites, such as passing background checks or addressing barriers related to childcare and transportation. Therefore, collecting data on participant outcomes and obtaining information from potential employers on why individuals who have completed training are not competitive for open jobs would enable SNAP E&T programs to tailor their programming to ensure

participants' training and credentials match available jobs in the local area.

Participation in multiple trainings could be beneficial for participants or a sign of a training mismatch.

More than half of the participants who completed training participated in multiple trainings that were not stackable i.e., trainings were not in a related field. It is important that SNAP E&T staff monitor program data to see whether multiple trainings are part of a sequence or represent individuals not being well informed or properly matched to a training.

Sanctions in SNAP E&T Mandatory Programs

Three pilots, Georgia, Illinois, and Mississippi, operated mandatory SNAP E&T programs that require individuals to participate in E&T activities to retain their SNAP benefits. Those who did not comply were sanctioned, lost their benefits, and were ineligible to participate in SNAP for a State-determined length of time or until they became compliant, whichever came later.

Sanctions led to lower employment rates and earnings.

About one in five individuals in the three pilots were sanctioned in their first year in the pilot. Subsequently, sanctioned individuals had lower employment rates and annual earnings than those who were not sanctioned.

Challenges with service delivery models can lower engagement in SNAP E&T leading to noncompliance and higher rate of sanctions.

Across the three pilots, between 36 and 63 percent of individuals exited without engaging in any activity due to challenges with how the program was designed or barriers such as access to transportation. Many of the individuals who exited the three pilots without engaging in activities never reached an E&T service provider after enrolling at a SNAP agency office. Individuals who reported for their first appointment were less likely to drop-out. Steps to facilitate the initial contact between participants and providers should improve engagement and participation in activities.

Clear communication is key to serving SNAP E&T participants.

Clear and consistent communication as well as an understanding of the SNAP program rules is essential for ensuring that SNAP E&T participants are served as intended and sanctions are applied correctly.

For More Information:

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