



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training Rapid Cycle Evaluation: Rhode Island

Final Report

November 2024

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Executive Summary

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides food assistance to individuals with low incomes. For some, it also provides employment and training (E&T) services to improve participants' economic self-sufficiency. This report describes the Food and Nutrition Services' use of rapid cycle evaluation to test new, low-cost, small-scale interventions in SNAP E&T operations in Rhode Island.

Rhode Island operates a statewide voluntary SNAP E&T program that serves all adult SNAP participants. The State's Division of Human Services (DHS) administers E&T and contracts with the Local Initiatives Support Corporation to oversee contracts with 14 SNAP E&T providers.

Intervention

Rhode Island sought to strengthen outreach messaging and improve the referral process within its SNAP E&T program. They developed an intervention that consisted of (1) sending SNAP participants a series of messages with behavioral nudges to encourage them to enroll in SNAP E&T and (2) developing and implementing an enhanced, provider-informed assessment with a human-centered focus to match SNAP participants with E&T providers. Mathematica conducted an evaluation that included a randomized controlled trial to estimate the intervention's impact on SNAP E&T enrollment and engagement, and an assessment of how the intervention was implemented, the challenges encountered and solutions to address them, and participants' experiences.

Outcomes

Nearly 20 percent of individuals who received text messages responded, and those receiving texts were twice as likely to enroll in SNAP E&T than those who did not receive them. Among individuals who enrolled in SNAP E&T, those that received an enhanced assessment in place of a standard assessment were more likely to contact a provider and start an E&T component.

Factors that facilitated or hindered implementation

DHS staff found the enhanced assessment easier to use than the standard assessment and made it clearer which providers were a good fit for participants. However, the overall capacity of DHS staff to keep pace with responses to the texts was challenging, particularly for Spanish-speaking individuals.

Lessons learned

Several lessons learned from the intervention will be helpful when considering scaling or replicating the efforts in Rhode Island. DHS found text messaging outreach to be effective and worth considering for future use. They also found the assessment to be a valuable tool for talking to participants and better connecting them to providers. Given the ease of use and the human-centered focus of the assessment, DHS plans to replace the standard assessment with the enhanced one.

There were several aspects of the intervention that could or should be improved. The SNAP E&T team must have enough staff capacity to respond to individuals who are interested in E&T. They also must be able to respond to non-English speakers and have the providers and services available for that population once they do reach them. Reducing the number of steps in the process for a SNAP participant to enroll in E&T and ensuring providers conduct outreach after a referral will reduce opportunities for disengagement.

I. Introduction

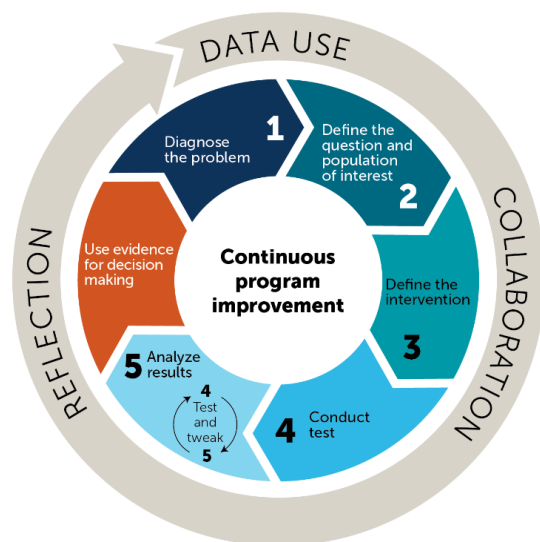
The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the cornerstone of the nation’s nutrition safety net and provides food benefits to eligible individuals with low incomes who are experiencing economic hardship. In addition to providing food assistance, SNAP provides work supports through Employment and Training (E&T) programs that help SNAP participants gain skills, training, or work experience to increase their ability to obtain regular employment. State agencies are required to operate an E&T program and have considerable flexibility to determine the services they offer and populations they serve. SNAP participants use these programs to meet work requirements, if applicable, and retain their benefits.

One of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service’s (FNS) strategic goals and priorities is to ensure the quality of the services and activities offered through SNAP E&T programs. Over the last 10 years, FNS has invested considerable resources and provided technical assistance to help States build capacity, create more robust services, and increase engagement in their programs. A typical State, however, has limited time and resources to make substantial changes to its business process, service delivery approach, or service options given their existing responsibilities of Federal compliance operations, running the program, monitoring providers, and growing the program.

Study objectives

1. Describe how RCEs can be used to improve SNAP E&T operations, service delivery, and program outcomes
2. Design and implement RCEs to obtain impact estimates of small-scale changes on SNAP E&T outcomes for each intervention
3. Conduct an implementation evaluation of the small-scale changes and RCEs in each intervention
4. Assess the scalability of the small-scale changes to SNAP E&T operations and service delivery to other local, State, or national policies and programs
5. Determine and document the costs associated with implementing and maintaining these small-scale changes

Exhibit I.1. Rapid cycle evaluation



FNS contracted with Mathematica to provide States the opportunity to test low-cost, small-scale interventions in SNAP E&T operations or service delivery using rapid cycle evaluation (RCE). RCE is a powerful method for improving programs’ efficiency and effectiveness. It follows a series of steps to identify challenges and define and test potential solutions (Exhibit I.1).

FNS selected Rhode Island, four other States, and the District of Columbia to operate interventions with the aim of improving SNAP E&T programs and identifying how to strengthen the technical assistance it provides to States. From 2021 to 2024, Mathematica collaborated with the intervention sites to identify the major challenges their SNAP E&T programs faced, which generally involved

recruitment and outreach or SNAP participant engagement and receipt of services, and to create and test solutions to them.

RCE addressed five main study objectives (see Study objectives box). This report describes the RCE process, intervention design and implementation, and findings from the small-scale changes Rhode Island made to its SNAP E&T program.¹

II. Rhode Island SNAP E&T Program

Rhode Island operates their SNAP E&T program statewide, although most E&T services are offered in or around Providence. The Rhode Island Division of Human Services (DHS) administers the program, which serves all adult SNAP participants 18 years and older who volunteer to participate in SNAP E&T. A team of three DHS staff (an E&T manager, senior case manager, and case manager) administer the program in coordination with an intermediary, Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC). Together they negotiate and oversee contracts with 14 community-based organizations that provide SNAP E&T services.

At the start of the study, DHS estimated that about 90 percent of its SNAP E&T participants were identified through reverse referral, with few referred directly by DHS. However, this changed over the study period with about 40 percent of participants identified through direct referral by early 2024. Through reverse referrals, the providers

identify individuals through their normal recruitment efforts. If the individual is a SNAP participant, the provider sends a referral form to DHS to confirm SNAP eligibility and make a referral to serve them through SNAP E&T. Through direct referrals during SNAP certification and recertification interviews, DHS eligibility workers ask SNAP participants who are work registrants if they are interested in SNAP E&T. If so, the eligibility worker enters basic information into an assessment form and emails it to the SNAP E&T case manager within DHS. The case manager (or another member of the E&T team) calls the SNAP participant and completes the assessment form and then refers the participant to a provider. The participant is told that someone from the provider will contact them, and the provider receives an email with the person's contact information. LISC also has a website where SNAP participants can learn more about SNAP E&T; individuals can request to be contacted to learn more about the program or they can identify and seek out a provider on their own. If they request more information, LISC passes the information to DHS and the same process that is used for the direct referrals is conducted.

In Fiscal Year 2023, the program provided services to over 2,100 people. It typically serves a mix of work registrants and able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs).² However, between 2020 and mid-



Rhode Island SNAP E&T program

- **Area served:** Statewide
- **Target population:** Adult SNAP participants (18 years and older)
- **Number served by E&T:** 2,102 (FY 2023)
- **Providers:** 14 community-based organizations
- **Referral type:** Direct and reverse referrals

¹ Reports for the other sites in the study are available at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis>.

² Work registrants are SNAP participants who have not met any Federal exemptions from SNAP work requirements and are therefore required to register for work and meet general work requirements. ABAWDs are work registrants who are ages 18 to 52, able to work, and do not have any dependents. (The Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023)

2023, the State did not implement the ABAWD time limit due to the public health emergency; most areas of the State continued to qualify for a waiver of the time limit in 2023-2024. Providers serve a variety of populations, including those with an immigrant status, recent incarceration, and unstable housing. The majority of E&T participants are typically women, with approximately twice as many women as men. Most providers offer specific trainings, such as for culinary arts, certified nursing assistance, construction, maintenance, robotics, and truck driving. A few providers offer work readiness assistance, adult basic education, English as a Second Language courses, and job placement services. Every SNAP participant in E&T also receives case management and is offered participant reimbursements and digital literacy training.

III. Overview of Intervention

A. Intervention development

In October 2021, Mathematica began working with the Rhode Island DHS and LISC team to identify the challenges they face in their program and to develop potential solutions to test. We used the Learn, Innovate, and Improve (LI²) framework to guide the Rhode Island team through this process (Exhibit III.1). It was a collaborative, co-creative partnership between Mathematica and the Rhode Island team.

The Learn phase took place between October and December 2021 and helped assess the State’s needs, the problems they wanted to solve, and the underlying causes. This involved a series of brainstorming sessions and interactive activities that relied on human-centered design principles. The activities included rose-bud-thorn (having individuals name aspects of the program that were positive, areas for growth,

and challenges), affinity clustering (sorting named aspects into categories), and persona mapping (putting the team in the place of the populations they serve by identifying their background, motivations, barriers, and goals). Through this process, the Rhode Island team determined that their main challenge was related to recruitment and enrollment of eligible SNAP participants in the E&T program.

The Innovate phase began in January 2022. Mathematica worked with the Rhode Island team to identify and develop potential solutions to the primary challenges identified in the Learn phase. The team

Exhibit III.1. Learn, Innovate, and Improve (LI²) model



temporarily increased the age limit from 49 to 52 in October 2023 and to 54 again on October 1, 2024; these changes end on October 1, 2030.) ABAWDs must meet both the general work requirement and an additional work requirement to receive SNAP benefits for more than three months in three years.

developed a detailed description of the changes needed to address recruitment challenges and generated a list of possible solutions. Proposed solutions were evaluated based on their estimated impact and the effort required to implement them. The Rhode Island team then selected options to use text messages and improve the provider referral assessment process as the solutions to test. Once these decisions were made, Mathematica and the Rhode Island team co-designed the intervention and evaluation. The evaluation included a randomized controlled trial (RCT) and an implementation study that assessed the intervention's design, operations, staff and participants' experiences, and replicability.

In the Improve phase, the proposed intervention was tested to identify any necessary changes. In July 2023, the Rhode Island team conducted a road test to assess if the intervention process was working as planned for staff, and to get feedback from individuals who received the intervention to learn what worked and what could be improved. No substantive changes were made to the intervention process from the road test. Rhode Island launched the intervention on September 6, 2023. It continued through February 2024.

B. Intervention overview

The Rhode Island team decided that recruitment challenges were their highest priority and identified several challenges that primarily centered around the need to strengthen outreach messaging and improve the referral process. In response to these challenges, the primary goals of the intervention were (1) to assess whether text messaging is a feasible, effective, and sustainable strategy to increase the number of participants who contact and enroll in the program; and (2) to determine if an enhanced assessment form for provider referrals increases the number of participants who meet with a provider and begin the intake process, as well as enroll in a component.

The intervention focused on two efforts:

1. Sending SNAP participants a series of automated messages with behaviorally informed nudges (small changes to a program, policy, system, or practice that are meant to influence the choices individuals make) to encourage them to enroll in the SNAP E&T program; and
2. Developing and using an enhanced, provider-informed assessment to match participants with providers.

The intervention tested these efforts for work registrants (Exhibit III.2). Those who were already in the SNAP E&T program or lived in a small number of areas in the State that had ABAWD time limits (there was no waiver in place) were excluded from the intervention.³ Work registrants were randomly assigned to one of three groups (see box).

For both treatment groups, Rhode Island used a texting platform to automatically send two rounds of text messages to about 4,500 SNAP participants. The first text messages used the endowment effect concept to raise awareness of program benefits and reducing barriers to enrolling (Appendix A). The message was

³ Initially, the intervention was going to also test outcomes for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) (using a loss aversion nudge for the second message indicating that the individual may lose benefits if they did not meet their work requirements) but most areas of the State qualified for a waiver of the time limit when the intervention was planned to begin, so the intervention focused only on work registrants.

sent to the treatment groups shortly after their SNAP case was certified or recertified. Rhode Island planned to send them about seven days after determination, but the timeframe varied based on when SNAP participants were certified or recertified for SNAP and in which week they were selected to receive a text message (those who were newly certified or recertified in a given week were selected first for texting, but to have a large enough group for texting each week, some participants who were certified prior to that week were selected to receive a text). Individuals who did not respond to the first text received a second text about 45 days after the first. The second text also used the endowment effect to focus on intervention participants' future goals and communicate the availability of training. The only difference in language between the two treatment groups was the instructions for responding to the text. One group was told to visit the SNAP E&T website with provider information to determine which provider to contact directly. The other group was told to reply directly to the text and a member of the DHS SNAP E&T staff would call the individual.

Rhode Island sent texts to a total of 4,473 SNAP participants: 1,120 in the group sent to the website and 3,353 in the group asked to reply to the text. To stagger the responses, they sent the first text across 12 rounds (usually each week) with about 400-500 people receiving a text per round. The second text was automatically sent about 45 days after the first text.

The second part of the intervention was focused on the steps in responding to those who replied to the text message. For some individuals in the treatment group, the DHS staff used the standard assessment form to collect information about their interest in SNAP E&T. This form asked several general questions about people's background and their interest in education and training. However, it was not aligned with the extensive criteria that the SNAP E&T providers use to guide who is eligible for or would be successful in the programs they offer. This puts a burden on DHS staff to know the criteria for the 40 programs that providers offer well enough to make appropriate referrals (such as culinary education, building trades training, basic education courses, English

Behavioral nudge concept

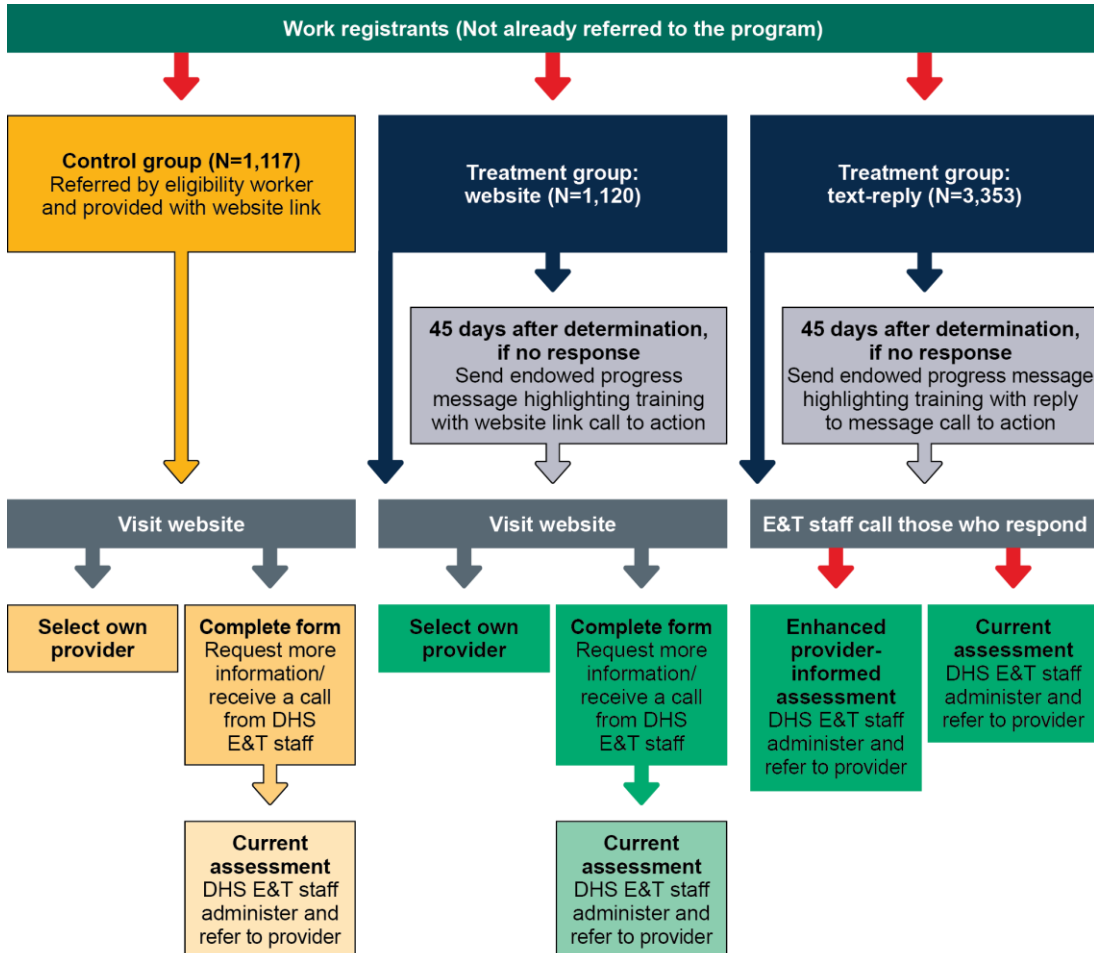
- **Endowment effect.** Encouraging SNAP participant to take advantage of E&T program opportunities they have access to because they are already part of SNAP

Intervention groups

1. **Control group: received standard outreach.** If referred by an eligibility worker, DHS SNAP E&T staff will call the person and complete the standard assessment form, then will refer the person to an appropriate provider based on the information provided. They may also use the SNAP E&T website to find providers on their own or complete a form to request more information. DHS SNAP E&T staff will call those individuals, complete the standard assessment form, and make a provider referral. (1,117 individuals)
2. **Treatment group: text message sending to website.** Received up to two text messages using behaviorally informed nudges with a link to the SNAP E&T website for more information. Those directed to the website can choose a provider and reach out to them directly or can complete a form to request more information; DHS SNAP E&T staff will call those individuals, complete the standard assessment form, and make a provider referral. (1,120 individuals)
3. **Treatment group: text message with return call.** Received up to two text messages using behaviorally informed nudges requesting participants reply directly to the text for more information. Those who replied to the text message were further randomized into two groups—one group received the standard assessment form, the other group received an enhanced assessment to better match them to providers. DHS SNAP E&T staff will call all of those who responded, complete the appropriate assessment form, and make a provider referral. (3,353 individuals)

as a Second Language classes, job search training, and work readiness assistance). To better align the assessment form with the provider criteria, Mathematica helped the Rhode Island team develop an enhanced assessment form for referrals that asked questions that would help DHS match individuals' responses directly to the criteria that mattered to providers (Appendix B). The questions were also written to be more human-centered—asking questions in a way that did not feel judgmental and focusing on individuals' interests and needed supports. A tool was also developed to accompany the enhanced assessment, which quickly allowed DHS staff to enter a summary value for each assessment question in a table that automatically excluded the programs that would not be a good fit for the individual based on their interests or background (Appendix B). A portion of the treatment group that responded by text were given the enhanced assessment when DHS called them. For both assessments, the DHS staff made a referral to a provider after the call. The SNAP participants received an email with information about the provider and who would contact them. The provider received a referral email and was asked to reach out to the individual for enrollment.

Exhibit III.2. Intervention flow diagram



Notes: Red arrows indicate points of random assignment. Rhode Island planned to send the first text message about seven days after determination, but the timeframe varied based on which week SNAP participants were selected to receive a text. For the assessments, some DHS staff could complete the entire process from calling participants to making referrals to sending follow-up emails. Other staff were not able to make referrals or send emails, so for some cases, DHS had to contact participants a second time to complete the referral process.

C. Evaluation design

Mathematica conducted an RCT to estimate the impact of the intervention components on outcomes related to enrollment in SNAP E&T and the effectiveness of DHS' assessment of individuals' background and interest in education and training. The experimental design answers the following research questions:

- Are targeted, behaviorally informed text messages more effective than current practices in increasing rates of contact with SNAP E&T staff and rates of enrollment in SNAP E&T?
- Does new behaviorally informed messaging using text messages lead to higher rates of initial contact with DHS staff and enrollment in E&T?
- Do requests to reply to outreach messages yield higher rates of contact with DHS staff and higher rates of enrollment in SNAP E&T than current practices of providing website links for individuals to contact E&T staff on their own?
- Does receiving a provider-informed assessment lead to greater percentages of individuals who finish the assessment and are referred to a provider, compared to those receiving a current assessment, among individuals who express interest in learning more about E&T services?
- Are there differential impacts for subgroups, such as those based on age and gender?

The evaluation also included an implementation study that assessed the intervention's design and administration, the challenges encountered and solutions to address them, and SNAP participants' experience with the intervention.

Mathematica collected and analyzed several types of data to support the evaluation:

1. **SNAP administrative data** describe the demographic and economic characteristics of individuals at the time of or just before random assignment.
2. **SNAP E&T outcome data** and intervention tracking data measure outcomes, including responses to text outreach, calls completed, assessments completed, referrals made, enrollment with a provider, and website analytics.
3. **SNAP E&T RCE participant survey data** describe SNAP participant experiences with the intervention and SNAP E&T services. Mathematica collected survey data for a stratified random sample of individuals in both the treatment and control groups.
4. **Implementation data** describe staff and SNAP participant experiences with the interventions, lessons learned, and factors that facilitated or hindered successful implementation. Mathematica collected implementation data through staff interviews, SNAP participant focus groups, and SNAP participant in-depth interviews.

Additional detail on the data collected and evaluation methodology is available in the Technical Supplement to the SNAP E&T RCE final reports.

D. Characteristics of individuals in the analysis

Exhibit III.3 shows the key characteristics of the 5,590 individuals (from the treatment and control groups) who were in the analysis. Most individuals were women (71 percent) and had children in the household (63 percent), with an average household size of 2.5 people. Their average age was 36, with 74 percent

between 25 and 49 years old (Technical Supplement Table A.1). Nineteen percent did not have a high school diploma or equivalent education.

The majority of individuals' primary language was English, with nearly 10 percent reporting Spanish as their primary language. Forty one percent of individuals lived in households that had earned income such as wages, and 30 percent lived in households that had unearned income such as unemployment benefits, cash assistance, or child or spousal support payments (Technical Supplement Table A.1).

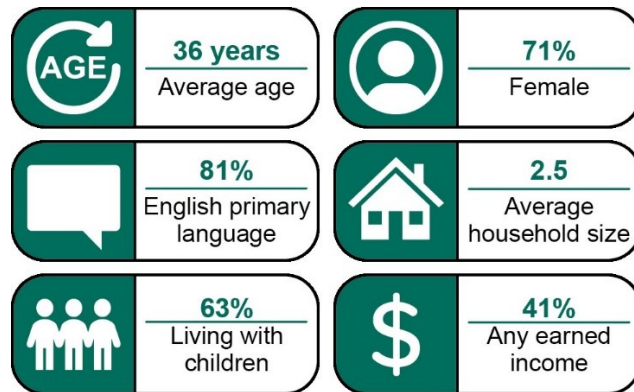
IV. Findings

A. Impact evaluation

Text messaging increased the percentage of individuals who enrolled in SNAP E&T. Individuals who received text messages were twice as likely to enroll in SNAP E&T than those who did not receive them (0.9 versus 0.4 percent; Exhibit IV.1).

Relative to individuals who did not receive a text message, those who received a text with a request to reply were more likely to enroll in SNAP E&T (0.9 versus 0.4 percent). The difference in enrollment rates between individuals who received a text message with a website link and control group members who did not receive a text was the same (0.9 versus 0.4 percent). Both impacts are promising despite only the first impact being statistically significant because of very low enrollment rates among individuals not receiving text messages.⁴

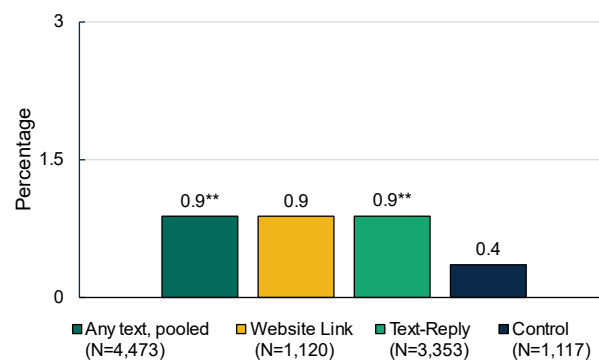
Exhibit III.3. Baseline characteristics of individuals in the analysis



Source: SNAP administrative data.

Note: See Technical Supplement for additional characteristics.

Exhibit IV.1. Percentage of individuals who enrolled in SNAP E&T



Source: SNAP administrative data.

** Difference relative to the control group that did not receive text messages significantly different from zero at the 0.05 level, two-tailed test.

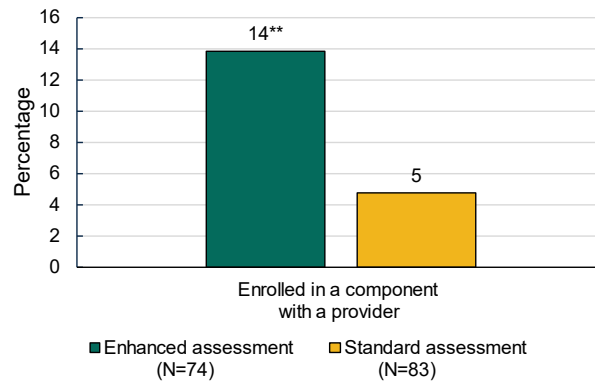
⁴ The intervention design assumed enrollment rates in the control group of around 30 percent without having access to State's data. Because actual enrollment rates were less than 1 percent, the intervention design was substantially underpowered or limited in its ability to detect statistically significant effects. This challenge was more pronounced in the comparison between the website link treatment group and the control group than between the text-reply treatment group and the control group because there were less people in the website link treatment group.

Impacts of text messaging were greater among men than women, among those who spoke primarily English versus another language, and among those with household income less than 50 percent of the Federal poverty level versus those with higher income (Technical Supplement Table C.1b).

Among individuals who were referred to a provider, those that received an enhanced assessment in place of a standard assessment were more likely to enroll in an E&T component (14 versus 5 percent; Exhibit IV.2). All individuals in the enhanced and standard assessment groups who started at a provider ultimately enrolled in an E&T component.

The same percentage of individuals receiving the enhanced and standard assessment were referred to a provider after their assessment (71 percent in both groups). However, a slightly higher percentage of those receiving the standard assessment were referred back to DHS after not showing up and beginning services with a provider compared to those receiving an enhanced assessment (4 versus 6 percent; Appendix Table C.2), but this difference was not statistically significant.

Exhibit IV.2. Percentage of individuals enrolled in an E&T component



Source: SNAP administrative data.

** Difference relative to the standard assessment group significantly different from zero at the 0.05 level, two-tailed test.

B. Implementation evaluation

The implementation evaluation of the intervention assessed the intervention’s design and administration, the challenges encountered and solutions to address them, and SNAP participants’ experiences.

1. Factors that facilitated or hindered successful implementation

DHS staff embraced the use of the enhanced assessment form and the tool. They immediately found that it was easier to use than the standard assessment and facilitated more informative conversations with SNAP participants. They thought the enhanced assessment made it clearer which providers were a good fit for participants, without having to remember or look up program criteria. One DHS staff member said, “the questions feel like you’re gathering information that will help the person in their referral...it gave us a better opportunity to guide somebody.” Another staff member noted that the enhanced assessment form helped them better understand the services that providers offered, and they felt they could more easily match SNAP participants with providers. Staff also felt that the information collected in the enhanced assessment would be valuable to providers for understanding the strengths and challenges of a SNAP participant before they showed up for their first appointment.

Although the enhanced assessment form and tool worked well, the overall capacity of DHS staff to keep pace with responses to text messages was challenging. The overall response rate was nearly 20 percent (about 600 people responded, with 30 to 50 responding each week), and staff generally were not able to respond within three days, which was DHS’s original plan. The turnaround was often closer to a week or

sometimes longer depending on staff availability. In the design phase, DHS anticipated they would have sufficient staff to respond to text messages and would be able to bring on additional staff if the response exceeded expectations. However, due to internal staffing constraints at DHS, they were not able to get all of the additional staff they needed. New releases of text messages were delayed four times to allow staff to catch up and respond to messages from earlier rounds of texting.

Compounding the staff capacity issues was that staff roles were defined and informed by what activities the union allowed staff to conduct. Not all staff were able to perform the full set of tasks that were part of the intervention. For example, the DHS team brought in an additional staff member who could call SNAP participants and conduct the assessment but could not make a referral or email them directly, per union rules. Another member of the SNAP E&T team had to follow-up with all individuals with a separate call to formally make the provider referral and then sent emails to the participant and the provider. The intervention did not initially include this additional step and it became another point in the process where people could disengage and not enroll in E&T with a provider. LISC staff also could not directly provide outreach to SNAP participants per their contract rules, so they could not support the process either.

As responses to the text messages began flowing in, DHS had not expected the level of response from Spanish-speaking individuals. No one on the DHS team spoke Spanish, so replies to Spanish-speaking individuals were significantly delayed. Staff had to call their translation line or have a translator from the eligibility staff with them to conduct outreach. This process was cumbersome and it could be difficult to find a translator. One staff member noted that during the holidays, the translators were understaffed, and it could take up to 45 minutes to get someone on the phone to begin calling back these SNAP participants. Translators also could not read the questions from the assessment and translate the Spanish-speaking participants' responses to expedite the conversation. They required DHS staff to ask the questions in English and then translated both parts of the conversation. Staff found this process frustrating and time intensive.

Finally, despite the consistent influx of responses to text messages each week, significantly fewer individuals were assessed and received referrals. DHS was able to get in touch with only about 40 percent (237) of those who responded to the text (593). All of the staff who conducted the outreach reported that, while phone numbers were sometimes incorrect or out of service by the time they called, the primary issue was that individuals mostly did not answer and staff left messages. SNAP participants shared that they did not pick up the call if they did not recognize the incoming number, even if they had responded to the text message and knew they would be contacted. Although DHS documented when they called, left a voicemail, and followed up with an email, focus groups and IDI members frequently said that they were never called or did not remember getting a voicemail. Among those DHS did contact, not all were a good fit for E&T and were not assessed. Some were not eligible for E&T (they may have started receiving TANF) or were already employed and not interested in services. About two-thirds of those contacted received an assessment (158 of 265), and most of these received a referral; this was fewer than anticipated when the intervention began. The number of steps in the outreach process and times people needed to be contacted before a referral was made contributed to the lower numbers.

2. SNAP participant experience

SNAP participants who shared their experiences in the intervention through in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus groups, and a survey offered a range of views and thoughts.

SNAP participants had mixed opinions about receiving SNAP E&T information through text messages. Half of those surveyed preferred text messaging for receiving information (compared to 28 percent preferring email and 8 percent preferring calls). Many IDI and focus groups members appreciated the convenience of getting information about SNAP E&T through text messages because they were often on their phone and also used it for job searching activities. Some members said that they preferred texts to phone calls or mailed notices because they could go back and read the messages at their leisure, and usually had their phones with them.

However, others felt the text messages were impersonal and preferred hearing about SNAP E&T from program staff directly. These members wanted to be able to ask questions and hear about offerings that were specific to their interests. One focus group member summarized this sentiment saying, “[The text messages are] too much of a blanket effort because you’re listing three professions right there. You don’t know what we wanna do. So, if you call us... say we have these courses for what you wanna do...you’re going to have much more success.”

“...when you go into the DHS office, there's a lot going on...Even if I did see something [about SNAP E&T], I don't think it's something that stuck out to me...So [seeing the text messages] was probably the first time that I saw it, paid attention to it, and actually took the steps to look into it.”

– IDI member

Most SNAP participants thought the text messages were clear and understood the next steps to enroll in SNAP E&T. Among the IDI members who responded to the text messages, many thought the enrollment process was easy. Some appreciated discussing their goals and employment barriers during their follow-up call with DHS and felt the introductory conversations they had were encouraging. Among those surveyed, 90 percent said they understood what the call was about and most thought the questions helped them better understand their needs and goals (71 percent), were a good use of their time (85 percent), and helped them understand the services and supports available (87 percent); the rates were slightly higher for those who received the enhanced assessment (Technical Supplement Table D.4).

The SNAP participants who responded to the text messages or reached out to a provider but did not enroll in SNAP E&T offered several reasons for this, including:

- **They faced challenges contacting SNAP E&T staff or providers.** Some participants described weeks of “playing phone tag” with SNAP E&T staff before they began discussing referrals to E&T providers. Once referred to a provider, some IDI members shared that it took several months for them to hear from the provider or to be placed in an initial activity; a few members said they never heard from the provider about starting the program. Among those surveyed who were referred to providers but did not receive services, 38 percent said they did not enroll because they were not able to contact providers.
- **They did not think the training opportunities matched their interests.** Among those surveyed, 20 percent said the services did not match their needs. Some IDI and focus group members agreed with

this sentiment, saying that they wanted other occupation training than what was available. A few mentioned feeling overqualified for the program offerings because they already had a GED or college degree. These participants shared they “didn’t want to take up space in a room,” when the program offerings did not feel relevant to them.

Most SNAP participants did not respond to the text messages (84 percent), with many thinking the text was not from DHS or was not real. One of the most frequently cited reasons for not responding to the text messages among those surveyed, was that they thought the text was spam (40 percent). Several focus group members who received the text without the website link thought it was a “scam” and not a real offer of services. They suggested that including the SNAP E&T website link or receiving a call from DHS would have legitimized the outreach.

Among the SNAP participants who received a text with the website link, about half of those surveyed reported that they visited the website. Many thought the steps to be connected with a provider were clear from the website (57 percent), but only about 34 percent of those surveyed contacted a provider listed on the website. Among those who did not visit the website, the most common reasons reported for not doing so were being too busy (29 percent) or having meant to visit the website but forgot (33 percent). Some focus group members mentioned liking getting multiple texts, because it reminded them to go back to the website when they may have otherwise forgotten.

//////
“They also need more variety. The CNA, some people want to do CNA but some people don't. Me, if you offer, for instance social work, I'll take it. But some people, they give you just CNA. I don't wanna do that.”

– Focus group member

//////
“Some people, I think, need a little extra push. So maybe that could be something with more on this job training. Two text messages, if someone shows any interest, someone give them a call. Someone give them some kind of push, an initiative they need.”

– Focus group member

V. Lessons Learned

The goals of the evaluation were to determine whether text messaging is a feasible strategy to increase the number of participants who contact and enroll in E&T and to assess if an enhanced assessment process increases the number of participants who consistently show up and start services at the providers. In this section, we highlight aspects of the intervention that worked well and could be built upon, discuss changes that the Rhode Island team could make for future text messaging outreach, and point to resources needed to replicate or scale up this type of intervention.

A. What worked and can be built upon?

Several aspects of the intervention demonstrated that text messaging outreach to SNAP participants and the enhanced assessment were effective and worth considering for future use. Nearly 20 percent of those asked to respond to a text did so, and half of those who were sent a text with the link to the SNAP E&T website visited it. This response far exceeded the outreach Rhode Island conducted using emails a few

years ago, and the whole Rhode Island team was excited to learn how well texting worked. The response to the text messages and increased website traffic showed staff how impactful texting can be for the program. The second text messages sent 45 days after the first also saw a large response—about 11 percent of participants responded to the first text message with an additional 9 percent responding to the second.

Although the intervention did not test the best timing to send text messages to participants, DHS staff thought they could build on these efforts to identify when participants would be most open to hearing



"A lot of people would say they had no idea [E&T] was part of their SNAP benefits. Because the first time when they first come to us...they have food insecurity and that's really all they're worried about. So, I think it's a good idea to do [outreach] three to six months after somebody is already receiving SNAP because they'll be more prone to look into this because they got the money coming in to pay for the food. Now it's like, "All right, I got this, how can I better myself."

– DHS staff member

about SNAP E&T services. Given most people apply for SNAP when they are in crisis, they suspected that a better time to start the outreach would be after a few months of receiving SNAP benefits, when individuals may be more stable and ready to enroll in SNAP E&T.

Also, IDI and focus group members pointed out that including the link to the SNAP E&T website in the outreach text helped to legitimize the texts. Although the intervention tested different approaches for outreach (text messages with a request to reply versus text messages with a website link), participants in the text with a request to reply group frequently suggested that including a website would have confirmed the message was not spam and given much more information on the variety of services and trainings rather than the small number included in the text messages.

DHS also found the enhanced assessment to be an effective approach for talking to participants and better connecting them to providers. Given the ease of use—such as having the radio buttons and check boxes for most questions to expedite data entry—and the human-centered focus of the assessment, the SNAP E&T Program Manager at DHS talked to leadership in January 2024 about replacing the standard assessment form with the enhanced form. They are in the process of making this change. The SNAP E&T Program Manager also shared the enhanced assessment with the TANF program staff at DHS and they are considering using it as well.

B. Changes needed for replicating the intervention and expanding its scale

The intervention overall demonstrated the usefulness of using automated text messaging to inform SNAP participants about E&T. However, there were several aspects of the intervention that could or should be improved for more effective scaling. First, DHS would need a larger team of staff members dedicated to contacting interested SNAP participants and conducting assessments and referrals. The intervention included only a portion of those who the SNAP E&T program targets, and the texting intervention was rolled out slowly, starting by piloting to about 100 people and then sending texts to about 400 per week. However, because Rhode Island had a small team the texting had to be halted multiple times to allow the team to catch up and respond to the texts. Having more capacity and appropriate staff (who are allowed

by the union to complete all tasks in the process) would be needed to scale this intervention to all work registrants. Also, including bilingual full-time staff would be important for conducting timely outreach with Spanish-speaking SNAP participants.

The intervention revealed that not only did the E&T team lack the ability to respond to non-English speakers, but they did not have the providers and services available for that population once they did reach them. Increased interest in the program from the text messaging outreach highlighted how few training opportunities beyond English as a Second Language courses were available for the nearly 10 percent of individuals in the intervention whose primary language was Spanish. Although this is a broader insight about their program, it demonstrates the importance of knowing the target population for outreach efforts, and not over-promising what the program can offer if services are not available.

Even with the right level of staffing, contacting SNAP participants was and will continue to be difficult due to incorrect phone numbers or participants not answering calls. Staff and SNAP participants suggested a few approaches to help DHS and SNAP participants connect: 1) ask in the text messages what time of day SNAP participants would prefer to be contacted; 2) use texting to set up a time and date for a follow-up call; and 3) include the DHS phone number in the text from which the individual should be expecting a call.

The intervention had several steps in the process for a SNAP participant to enroll in E&T, which created several opportunities for them to disengage and ultimately not enroll in SNAP E&T. Because of the staffing constraints at DHS, staff introduced another step of having two staff contact individuals separately before a referral was made. All staff acknowledged this was not ideal and they sometimes were not able to contact individuals a second time to make the referrals. Also, several IDI respondents and about one-third of those surveyed indicated they never heard from the provider after the referral was made or they talked to them initially but then communication stopped. For outreach to be effective, making the connection to the providers is key. Additional monitoring or a warm handoff between a provider and participant may be needed.

C. Resources needed to continue the changes made through the intervention

Additional resources and staff capacity would be necessary for Rhode Island to continue the text messaging effort. The enhanced assessment did not require new resources. DHS estimated that they would need one to two full-time staff members if they were to continue to conduct texting outreach. The full-time staff member also needs to be someone who has the authority to conduct all of the steps in the process, including checking eligibility and making a referral to a provider. The number of staff would depend on the scale of the outreach effort. Based on the intervention experience, DHS has suggested that they may want to reach out to a smaller number of SNAP participants each month or only during a certain period during the year when they have time to invest in outreach.

Rhode Island would also need to invest in the texting platform if they chose to continue using it. It would cost about \$20,000 to \$25,000 per year for ongoing use. The State would need to support any costs for maintenance or changes they elected to make.

Appendix A.

Text Message Content

Group asked to text back and will receive a call

Message #1

Hi [NAME]! This is the SNAP Employment & Training program at RI DHS. Did you know that as part of your SNAP benefits you are eligible for free education and training and/or job search support? Once you're enrolled in the program and participating, you may be able to get help paying for things like transportation, childcare, or other items. Reply Y and we will call you to get started. Reply STOP to stop receiving messages about employment and training.

Message #2

Hi [NAME]! This is the SNAP Employment & Training program at RI DHS. Just a reminder that as part of your SNAP benefits you are eligible for free training. You could be eligible for all kinds of training, including for a job as a nursing assistant, truck driver, or machinist. Reply Y and we will call you to help you get started on a new career today. Reply STOP to stop receiving messages about employment and training.

Group asked to go to the website

Message #1

Hi [NAME]! This is the SNAP Employment & Training program at RI DHS. Did you know that as part of your SNAP benefits you are eligible for free education and training and/or job search support? Once you're enrolled in the program and participating, you may be able to get help paying for things like transportation, childcare, or other items. Visit <https://risnapet.org/snap-participants/> to learn more about these exciting opportunities. Reply STOP to stop receiving messages about employment and training.

Message #2

Hi [NAME]! This is the SNAP Employment & Training program at RI DHS. Just a reminder that as part of your SNAP benefits you are eligible for free training. You could be eligible for all kinds of training, including for a job as a nursing assistant, truck driver, or machinist. Reply Y and we will call you to help you get started on a new career today. Visit <https://risnapet.org/snap-participants/> to learn more about training opportunities. Reply STOP to stop receiving messages about employment and training.

Appendix B.

Enhanced Assessment Form and Tool

Exhibit B.1. Enhanced assessment form

RHODE ISLAND DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

New SNAP E&T Assessment Form

Date _____

Background information

Case Name _____	Participant's Name _____
D.O.B. _____	Individual ID# _____ (RIBridges)
SSN (last 4 digits) _____	Address/City/Town _____
Gender _____	Preferred Pronouns _____
Cell Number _____	Email Address _____
Primary Spoken Language _____	Primary Written Language _____

Are you receiving RI Works? Yes No

Are you employed? Yes, 30 or more hours per week Yes, less than 30 hours per week No

I am agreeing to voluntarily participate in the SNAP E&T program: (if yes complete rest of form)

Yes No

.....
FOR RI DHS ONLY:

Case#: _____ Agency Representative _____

SNAP Office: _____ Preferred Program _____

Work Registrant Exempt Work Registrant ABAWD
.....

Career interests

1. Are you interested in starting a job right now? Yes No
What type of job are you looking for? _____
2. Would you like some training in a career field before finding a job? Yes No
3. Do any of the following careers sound exciting to you?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Culinary arts | <input type="checkbox"/> Customer service and management |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Construction or building trades | <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial driving or trucking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Certified nursing assisting or health care | <input type="checkbox"/> Pharmacy technician |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dental assisting | <input type="checkbox"/> Landscaping |
| <input type="checkbox"/> CNC machinist (coding, quality control) | |

If none, specify other: _____

Career readiness

4. Do you have a high school diploma or GED? Yes No
If "No," What was the highest grade completed? _____
5. Do you think you would have any trouble passing a criminal background check? Yes No
5a. Have you been incarcerated? Yes No
6. How many hours per week could you spend in training or a new job? _____
7. *For those interested in starting a job now:* I'm going to read a few statements to you about your readiness to work, and I would like you to think about if the statement is true and you are confident about doing it on your own, or if you could use some assistance to help you get ready. For each, you can tell me if you could use a lot of help, a little help, or no help at all.

			Need help:		No help needed	Notes
			A lot	A little		
Deciding on a career	Job search skills	I know where to find "good jobs" that interest me.	○	○	○	
	Knowledge of available work	I know which careers are in demand in my region.	○	○	○	
	Credentials	I have a license, diploma, or certificate needed for the job I want.	○	○	○	
Getting the job	Applying for jobs	I have a resume, cover letter, and experience applying to jobs.	○	○	○	
	Job interviewing	I am comfortable interviewing for a job.	○	○	○	
Starting the job	Confidence	I feel confident starting a new job.	○	○	○	
	Supplies	I have what I need to start work (proper attire, etc.).	○	○	○	

8. I'm going to read a few statements to you about your skills or items you may need for your career, and I would like you to think about if the statement is true or not. For each, you can tell me if you disagree with the statement or if you disagree.

			No	Yes	Notes
Prepare for a job or training	Drivers' license	A) I have a valid drivers' license and a clean driving record.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
	Drug test	B) I could consistently pass a drug test.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
	Physical health	C) I am physically able to stand for a long time and bend to lift heavy boxes.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
	Language skills	D) I speak, write, and read English fluently.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Technology	Access/ Use of Technology	E) I have reliable access to a computer and/or internet.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
		F) I know how to and frequently use a computer.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Supports	Housing	I have stable and safe housing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
	Childcare	I have reliable childcare and a backup plan.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
	Transportation	I have reliable transportation and a backup plan.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

Exhibit B.2. Enhanced assessment tool (example assessment information with values included in the 'Enter Value' field)

Assessment Response Summary			
Question #	Description	Value options	Enter Value
2	Training	Y/N	Y
3	Training field	As needed:	
--	Culinary arts	Y	Y
--	Construction	Y	N
--	CNA/health care	Y	N
--	Dental	Y	N
--	Pharmacy	Y	N
--	CNC Machinist	Y	N
--	Customer service	Y	Y
--	CDL/trucking	Y	Y
--	Landscaping	Y	N
4	GED	Y/N	Y
5	Background	Y/N	N
5a	Incarcerated	Y/N	Y
6	Participation hours	#	25
7	Work readiness	H/NH	H
8a	License	Y/N	Y
8b	Drug test	Y/N	Y
8c	Physical health	Y/N	Y
8d	Language skills	Y/N	Y

Instructions			
1. Enter responses from the Provider Assessment Form in column E using the value options			
2. Click the dropdown button on the 'Elimiated' cell (column H) and unclick the 'X' check box, then click 'OK'			
3. This will remove programs that a participant is ineligible for and leaves you with a list of eligible programs to consider			
Notes:			
-If the client changes their responses, note that you will need to re-set the filter and repeat the filtering process to remove programs marked with an X			
-The training fields of interest from Q3 will be highlighted in yellow and Column I ('Notes') also lists additional requirements to discuss with the client			

Personalized List of Providers			
Program	Provider	Eliminated <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes
Administrative Professional Training (evening and morning classes)	Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island		Customer service and management 20 hours/week
Careers in Manufacturing	JARC		CNC machinist 5th grade reading and math 25 hours/week
Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)	Newport Community School		Certified nursing assisting or health care Need to be fully immunized and pass pre-training interview 16 hours/week
Customer Service	Amos House		Customer service and management 20 hours/week
Microsoft Office Specialist	Providence Public Library		12 hours/week
OpenDoors Trucking	OpenDoors		Commercial driving or trucking 20 hours/week Only for formerly incarcerated
Direct Support Professional Training (morning classes)	Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island		Certified nursing assisting or health care 20 hours/week
Direct Support Professional Training (evening classes)	Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island		Certified nursing assisting or health care 10 hours/week

Appendix C.

Supplemental Tables

Table C.1. Impacts of behaviorally informed text messages on the percentage of individuals enrolled in SNAP E&T

	Treatment group	Control group	Difference
Treatment group: received any text ^a	0.88	0.36	0.52**
Treatment group: received text with website link	0.88	0.36	0.52
Treatment group: received text with request to reply	0.89	0.36	0.53**
Number of observations	4,473	1,117	

Source: SNAP administrative and SNAP E&T outcome data.

^a "Received any text" treatment group consists of individuals in the website link and text with request to reply treatment group.

***/**/* Difference between treatment and control group significantly different from zero at the 0.01/0.05/0.10 level, two-tailed test.

Table C.2. Impacts of provider-informed assessment on SNAP E&T engagement

Outcome	Enhanced assessment group	Current assessment group	Difference
Referred to a provider (%)	71.52	71.04	0.49
Enrolled in a component (%)	13.85	4.79	9.06**
Referred back to DHS (%)	4.35	6.00	-1.64
Number of observations	74	83	

Source: SNAP administrative and SNAP E&T outcome data.

Note: Individuals in both the enhanced and current assessment treatment groups received the text message with a request to reply if interested in SNAP E&T. Analysis is restricted to individuals randomly assigned to the enhanced or current assessment treatment group who responded to the text message expressing interest and received an assessment.

***/**/* Difference between enhanced and current assessment group significantly different from zero at the 0.01/0.05/0.10 level, two-tailed test.

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