

Approaches for Text Messaging in SNAP E&T Programs: Lessons from the SNAP E&T Rapid Cycle Evaluation

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides food assistance to eligible individuals with low incomes. Some SNAP participants may also receive employment and training services to help improve their economic self-sufficiency. States are required to operate a SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) program, but they have considerable flexibility in determining who to serve and what components (or services) to offer. Many States provide some type of education, training, and employment services, but the specific components, the number of SNAP participants served, and the supports such as reimbursements for child care and transportation provided vary across States.

Despite offering services directly targeted to SNAP participants, most State SNAP agencies face challenges with enrollment in their SNAP E&T programs and individuals' engagement in activities and receipt of services.^{1,2} Common reasons for these challenges include a lack of knowledge or understanding about SNAP E&T offerings and eligibility; the number of procedural steps needed before obtaining access to services; and being unable to connect SNAP participants to the providers who offer the services. One solution to address these challenges is using text messages to communicate with SNAP participants.

“I do think the texts are really nice, because it’s something that people can just reply to really quickly. And in fact, I think most of the responses we got, if not all, were because of texts, not emails or postcards. And so I think as far as getting people to respond, texts are the clear winner at this point. And so that’s interesting information for us that maybe we do need to be texting people more because that seems to be something that they will engage with.”

—*Staff member at the Colorado SNAP E&T program*

Most Americans (97 percent) own a cell phone, with the majority being a smart phone.³ Rates of ownership are fairly stable across various age ranges, races, ethnicities, and incomes. A common feature of cellphones is the ability to send a text message (also called texts or short message service [SMS]). A recent report estimates that the U.S. alone sent 2.1 trillion text messages in 2023.⁴ Given the prevalence of texting, human service programs have incorporated texts into their programs.^{5,6} As communication via texting becomes more common, this can also be used to engage with SNAP participants about E&T.

SNAP E&T programs could incorporate texting at any point in their processes—from recruitment to engagement in initial services to referral follow-up for job retention services. However, SNAP E&T programs should be intentional about beginning a texting strategy (Box 1). For example, although data suggests participants likely own a cell phone, some have limited connectivity—particularly those in rural areas.^{7,8} Many may also have a limited service (for example, after reaching a limit on the number of texts or minutes on calls) or an inconsistent phone number, which impedes communication with SNAP E&T providers.^{9,10} Additionally, privacy and security issues will vary from State to State. Finally, the content of the text matters and should be carefully crafted to be effective with SNAP E&T participants.

Box 1. Steps for incorporating text messages into SNAP E&T

1. Identify the problem texting will help to address
2. Examine feasibility
3. Develop text message content
4. Develop procedures for sending and responding to texts
5. Assess outcomes to determine success

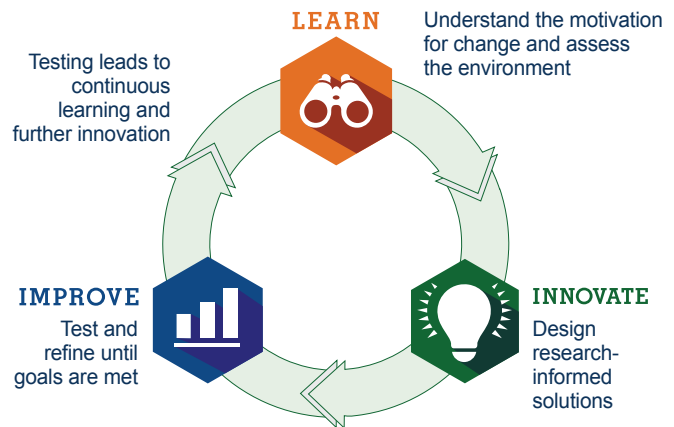
The purpose of this brief is to help SNAP E&T programs think through these and other considerations when developing text messaging programs. Below, we describe five steps for incorporating text messages into SNAP E&T programs. These steps come from lessons learned during the Rapid Cycle Evaluation (RCE) of Operational Improvements in SNAP E&T Programs (SNAP E&T RCE) project (Box 2).

Box 2. What is the SNAP E&T RCE project?

The rapid cycle evaluation (RCE) project tested seven, low-cost, small-scale interventions in SNAP E&T operations or service to improve SNAP E&T programs and identify how to strengthen the technical assistance FNS provides to States. From 2021 to 2024, Mathematica collaborated with the intervention sites to identify the major challenges their SNAP E&T programs faced—generally recruitment and outreach or participant engagement and receipt of services—and create and test changes to processes to address the challenges. These changes were tested with rigorous methods and assessed using SNAP administrative data and survey and qualitative data from staff and participants.¹¹

Every site used text messaging as a part of their interventions. The texts included behavioral nudges—messages designed to influence the choices individuals make. The following highlights how each site used texts:

- *Colorado, Massachusetts, Minnesota-Hennepin County, Minnesota, Rural Counties, and Rhode Island:* Sent a series of messages to encourage SNAP participants to enroll in the SNAP E&T program.
- *Connecticut:* Sent a text message encouraging SNAP E&T participants to follow-up on referrals given as part of service provision.
- *District of Columbia (DC):* Sent reminders for appointments and text messages with nudges to encourage prolonged engagement in the program.



Steps for incorporating text messages into SNAP E&T programs to help improve SNAP E&T enrollment and engagement.

Step #1: Identify the problem texting will help to address

SNAP E&T program administrators need to identify and understand how texting would help address a challenge. SNAP E&T RCE began by engaging program leaders, frontline staff, and partners in a series of activities designed to understand the breadth of challenges they faced. Across the sites in the project, common challenges most relevant to texting are noted in Box 3.

SNAP E&T program staff need to delve deeper into their challenges by identifying the drivers or core issues of the challenge. For example, if a program is experiencing an engagement challenge, staff should work to understand why participants are not engaging. Do they forget appointments, or do they have behavioral or motivational reasons for not engaging in services? Each of these drivers will require different text messaging content (discussed in Step #3). Additionally, the timing of the text could vary depending on the driver (for example,

Box 3. Common challenges text messages were addressing in SNAP E&T RCE

- Increasing enrollment into the SNAP E&T program
- Encouraging engagement with E&T providers or caseworkers
- Ensuring attendance at appointments with E&T providers

immediately following a SNAP eligibility interview or after a referral to an E&T provider). To identify drivers, staff can draw on their own experiences and perceptions and ask their participants and partners about theirs. In the SNAP E&T RCE, program leaders and staff participated in interactive brainstorming sessions to understand and prioritize the challenges and drivers.



Step #2: Examine feasibility

Below, we outline four areas for SNAP E&T programs to consider when determining if texting is feasible in their site:

1. **Understand participant access to cell phones and texts.** SNAP E&T program staff should first assess if texting is right for the program given where it operates and who they serve. For example, as described above, certain communities may not have reliable access to a cell phone service to receive texts. This is often called the digital divide—certain groups of people are unable to afford or access cell phone or technology like in-home broadband services.¹² If the SNAP E&T program is operating in an area that includes these communities, texting is likely not feasible. To better understand access issues, SNAP E&T program administrators can review data sources such as the Federal Communications Commission’s map¹³ showing cell phone coverage or the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey data on smart phone and tablet ownership and the incidence of cellular data plans.¹⁴
2. **Identify security and privacy requirements.** Text messaging regulations related to privacy and security vary between States and agencies operating SNAP E&T programs. SNAP E&T program administrators should consult with experts at their organization (such as information technology, legal, and policy staff) to ensure that the program can send texts that comply with regulations. Programs should also ensure they comply with Federal statutes such as the Telecommunications Consumer Protection Act (TCPA); for example, by ensuring their text messaging program meets the TCPA requirements for consent.¹⁵ Additionally, they should also consult with State SNAP agencies where appropriate to assess privacy and confidentiality policies. For SNAP E&T RCE, the Hennepin County site had privacy restrictions for text messages containing first names or mentioning that the respondent is receiving benefits. Colorado required compliance with Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (also known as HIPAA) regulations to protect client contact information.
3. **Assess the quality of contact information.** SNAP E&T programs should assess the quality of the participant contact information they receive from the initial SNAP application and eligibility process. Cell phone numbers can be outdated or incomplete, and landlines cannot receive text messages. To assess the quality, SNAP E&T administrators can ask eligibility staff about how often they text phone numbers that are no longer in service and how they work with participants with inconsistent phone numbers. Eligibility staff may also know or track in the eligibility system participants’ preferences for how they would like to be contacted.
4. **Evaluate potential options for texting.** Finally, the program should determine how staff will send texts. There are a variety of options for texting, from one by one texting using work-provided cell phones to mass texting using a platform designed for sending text messages to a large number of people. Staff should understand and consider the capabilities and limitations of each option. There are many texting platforms on the market and some States have developed their own. In SNAP E&T RCE, one site had their own texting platform, whereas other sites needed to purchase one. Though both systems allowed the user to text large groups of people, the State-owned platform had a character limit, which occasionally forced a single text to be sent as two messages. SNAP E&T program leaders should carefully consider these options (as well as the program’s budget and capacity) and select the one that is right for their program and staff. Table 1 describes several potential options.

“So one of the biggest things with robo-texting and robo-dialing quite honestly, is the regulations around consent and opting in and opting out. So that is part of the legal and privacy hiccups that we have had on all of these robo-campaigns that people have requested. So now that’s different than one-to-one texting.”

—Staff member at the Minnesota-Hennepin SNAP E&T program

Table 1. Potential texting platform options

Option	Description	Potential pros	Potential cons
Work-provided or personal phone	Some programs may provide staff with a cell phone as their main office number. Others may allow their staff to use their personal cell phones as part of the job.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff would be familiar with the pre-existing texting application. • If phones are already provided, there is likely no additional cost for texting. • Participants would recognize the phone number of their case manager (or could store the contact). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Texting is one-on-one, and there is no ability to send mass or automated texts to a large group. • Staff may feel pressure to respond after hours which may lead to burnout. • Use of personal phones could lead to unwanted contact from participants or others. • If work cell phones are not provided, program will need funding to purchase phones and associated plans. • Texting large numbers of participants may be overwhelming. • There may be rules about who and what to text. • There is less monitoring and oversight by supervisors on the responsiveness and appropriateness of texts. Also, if a worker is unexpectedly out of the office or on leave, others are not able to respond to participants.
Online texting platform	These programs provide a digital phone number and texting capability typically through a web browser.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs could be free or low-cost. • Staff can text using their work computer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff would need additional training and support to use the platform. • Texting large numbers of participants may be overwhelming. • There may be rules on who and what to text. • There is less monitoring and oversight by supervisors on the responsiveness and appropriateness of texts.
Mass texting platform	These are typically paid programs or software for mass texting and marketing campaigns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs can send mass texts with decision rules (for example, only texting work registrants). • Staff can text using their work computer or an app that can be downloaded to a work cell phone. • Summary data on text message receipt (for example, the number of texts that were not received) can be provided. • Caseloads can be shared and supervisors can monitor the program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding is needed to purchase the service. • A data upload containing contact information, pre-loaded texts, and decision rules is needed. • Staff would need additional training and support to use the platform.

Step #3: Develop text message content

Staff need to draft compelling texts that can alleviate the challenges they have identified and impact targeted participants' behavior. Customizing content is critical. For example, recruitment texts will differ from engagement texts and messages that remind participants about an appointment will differ from those attempting to motivate them to attend that appointment. As part of the SNAP E&T RCE project, we asked current participants at several sites to review the potential text message content and provide feedback before launching the strategy. Table 2 provides several examples from the project that may help staff draft texts.

“I thought [the content] was appropriate... Simple, easy. You might be dealing with individuals of fifth grade reading level if you're lucky sometimes. So, I think that they were short, they were appropriate. We did have people who responded stop or not interested, whatever. Okay, fine. But that also means they were able to read the message.”

—Staff member at Minnesota, Rural Counties SNAP E&T program

“I think it's short, it's sweet, it's to the point, it's not over stimulating with too much information, it seems legit...I think [texting] is a great, simple way to communicate.”

—Participant at the Massachusetts SNAP E&T program

Table 2. Types and examples of text messages

Text type	Description	Examples from SNAP E&T RCE
Simple reminder	Reminds participants of appointments, key events, or deadlines. Texts typically consist of dates and times.	Example from DC: Hi [NAME] this is [NAME] from [ORG.]. Your next case management appointment is at [XX:XX] on [DAY].
Mere exposure	Exposes participants to a concept, idea, or service. People often prefer familiarity, so providing background on SNAP E&T makes it more likely they will participate in it.	Example from MN-Rural: This is the Department of Human Services. Hi [NAME], because you're on SNAP, [PROVIDER] can help you reach your employment and training goals. Call XXX-XXX-XXXX today to learn about SNAP E&T. If you do not want to receive messages, please reply with STOP
Loss aversion	Encourages participants to avoid losses. People are more likely to act to prevent loss than to achieve gains, such as trying to prevent losing their SNAP benefits instead of strengthening their skills through SNAP E&T.	Example from MN-Hennepin: Hi, SNAP work rules come back into effect soon, but getting SNAP qualifies you for free job search or training help. Call us at XXX-XXX-XXXX. Your spot with us is waiting!
Endowment effect	Generates a sense of ownership. People tend to value items that they own higher than items they do not own. As a result, people may engage with SNAP E&T if they realize this comes with their SNAP benefits.	Example from RI: [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.
Present bias	Focuses on long-term benefits versus immediate rewards, such as notifying participants of continued SNAP E&T supports and highlighting how staff can help in long term planning. This helps to address the tendency to focus on activities that provide immediate satisfaction over those that have a pay-off sometime in the future.	Example from DC: [Name], now that you're settled in your job, it is time to start thinking about your future. We can still help you in your next level of growth, to work on skills to help you move up and earn more.



Step #4: Develop procedures for sending and responding to texts

Once the content is finalized, SNAP E&T program administrators need to prepare their staff to send and receive the texts. Administrators need to decide: 1) which participants will receive texts; 2) how many staff are needed to respond in a timely manner; 3) how staff will identify these participants; 4) the type of text the participant should receive; and 5) the process for sending texts. For example, if staff are using a mass texting platform, the staff guidance should specify how they should upload contact information, send the appropriate text, and respond as needed. Staff may also need support documents (such as Frequently Asked Questions, scripts, troubleshooting guidance) which can include screenshots of the texting platform interface. These materials should also highlight how staff properly document information from the text messages in the participant's case file, as appropriate. Written guidance can be turned into a training for staff to support them throughout the process. In SNAP E&T RCE, interactive, in-person trainings were provided for several sites. In one training, staff uploaded fake data into a texting platform or texted themselves and their colleagues to practice.

Staff will need to incorporate a thorough monitoring plan to ensure that the texting strategy is proceeding as intended (for example, ensuring the right people receive the right text). Box 4 shares some promising monitoring practices and processes that SNAP E&T programs might consider.

Box 4. Promising practices and processes for texting and monitoring

- Ensure enough staff are available to respond to participants who reply to texts. Start by texting a small group to estimate the response rate. This will help gauge how many staff are needed or how large of a group can be texted at one time.
- Plan to send texts when staff are available to respond if a participant texts back (for example, early in the workday and early- or mid-week). It is also important to determine how soon staff should respond to messages from participants.
- Check the messages sent to a small sample of participants to ensure the right ones received the right message.
- Review data to ensure the carrier network is not delaying texts (also known as throttling), which can happen when sending mass texts.
- Examine data to determine the rate at which messages were received, blocked, or sent to landline. It is also important to ask participants if they view the message as an authentic message (spam or scam).
- Send participants texts in their primary language.
- Check in with staff to ensure they are adhering to the process.



Step #5: Assess outcomes to determine success

SNAP E&T program staff should monitor how texting is influencing outcomes. For example, if the program began texting to increase enrollment into E&T, staff should observe an uptick in enrollment after sending texts. To help determine the success of a texting strategy, program staff should set a SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) goal. A SMART goal helps staff objectively assess outcomes. An example of a SMART goal related to text messages is: "Text messages will result in a 10 percent increase in monthly referrals to SNAP E&T within three months."

After setting a SMART goal, staff should develop a plan to assess progress towards the goal. Staff can simply check relevant data to ensure the texting is working as intended, or utilize more formal methods of continuous quality improvement or evaluation. They can also analyze demographic data or conduct small focus groups with staff and participants about what works well and what needs to improve.

After reviewing the data from the monitoring plan, SNAP E&T program staff should determine whether the texting achieved the SMART goal. If it did not, staff can revisit the steps in this brief to adjust the texting process and content and try again. Reviewing monitoring data may inform where adjustments are needed. For example, if a program observed a significant number of bounce-backs or undeliverable messages, there may have been bad contact information. Staff might consider ways to update cell phone information before texting again. Even with initial success, SNAP E&T programs should consider additional changes to optimize texts' effectiveness. In the SNAP E&T RCE, although the Rhode Island site successfully used texts overall to increase awareness of the program among SNAP participants, contacting some of them after they responded to the text was difficult; participants often did not answer when called or respond to messages that staff left, even though they indicated they were interested in learning more about the program. Based on this, staff suggested expanding the use of texting to get more information about participants general availability to receive a call about enrollment, instead of "cold calling" them.

“I feel like if we were to continue this [texting] program, it would only make sense to do some sort of text messaging back and forth with folks to organize that call... I just feel like if we're utilizing this text message system for outreach, then it can also be used for scheduling. Even something as simple as adding a, "Oh, what day of the week is best to call you," or, "Do you prefer morning, evening or afternoons," or something like that. Then someone can just reply back like, "Monday afternoon"..."

—Staff member at the Rhode Island SNAP E&T program

“...I first heard about it [SNAP E&T] also in a text message. To be honest, the very first time I received the text message I thought it was just spam, but after you [sent a text message] a second time, I think I actually read the whole message and it made me call in order to get more information, which actually led to me being signed up for a bunch more programs.”

—Participant at Minnesota, Rural Counties SNAP E&T program

Endnotes

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