



## Selecting Providers to Meet Your Program's Needs

This resource for State agencies explores one part of how to build stronger SNAP E&T programs—selecting service providers that best meet the needs of E&T program participants.

The Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, requires that every State operate a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training (E&T) program, which is defined as case management and one or more SNAP E&T components.<sup>1</sup> However, there is much more to operating an effective E&T program. It is critical that you, as State E&T administrators, not only have services but have appropriate services available that meet the needs of all individuals who are referred to your program. To offer a variety of services to diverse populations, you need to identify the “right” providers that have the capacity and expertise to serve SNAP participants. Not all providers will be a good match for SNAP E&T or for your program’s needs. Identifying providers that are a good fit takes time and a clear understanding of your program’s mission and participants’ needs.

As you evaluate if a provider is right for your E&T program, you may start with the basic question, **“Does the provider offer quality employment and training services?”** We know a lot about what makes a good workforce development provider, in general. These providers tend to have strong employer connections; train for in-demand, high-growth jobs; use career pathways training models that lead to portable, industry-recognized certificates and credentials; offer wage subsidies as part of a work-based learning curriculum; and provide robust participant reimbursements and case management to help participants persist and succeed. The [2016](#) and [2020](#) U.S. Department of Agriculture SNAP E&T Best Practices Reports are helpful resources to better understand what workforce development services and programs are most effective.

Many providers likely meet those criteria and offer high-quality services, but they may not always be the right fit for SNAP E&T. So, the second question you should ask is, **“Is the provider a good fit for the SNAP E&T program?”** There are some unique considerations related to providing SNAP E&T services that providers need to be able to navigate, particularly if they are 50/50 providers (funding 50 percent of operating costs). These include having non-Federal funding sources available, operating a reimbursement model, and having administrative capacity (staff and systems) to track and report necessary financial and participant data. The SNAP to Skills brief [“Securing Third-Party Partners for SNAP E&T Programs”](#) and the [SNAP E&T Operations Handbook](#) provide additional information about considerations for partnering with SNAP E&T programs.

Currently, you may be partnering with providers that offer quality services and have the capacity to be a good SNAP E&T provider, but have you asked yourself, **“Is the provider a good fit for my State’s SNAP E&T program overall?”** It is important to assess what value each provider is bringing to your overall program and if they are filling a need. After exploring what your program participants need and designing a program to meet those needs, the group of providers you select should support the goals of your program (see the Growing and Strengthening SNAP E&T Programs series overview document). When you consider each provider, determine if each is adding value to your program. You should ask what is missing from my program and does this provider fill that gap; generally, you want providers to fill gaps in the types of services offered, where services are offered, or to which populations services are offered. Also, assess if the provider is

<sup>1</sup>Public Law 88–525; Enacted Aug. 31, 1964; 78 Stat. 703; As Amended Through P.L. 117–286, Enacted December 27, 2022

experienced in and equipped to serve the SNAP population, which often has different needs from the typical workforce clientele, including being part of historically underserved populations or communities.

This brief describes a variety of best practices for E&T administrators to consider when selecting providers that will best fit your needs currently and as your needs change with your evolving program. The information in the brief is based on conversations in September and October 2022 with Federal, State, and provider staff about what qualities they look for in providers and how to identify and attract them to the SNAP E&T program. The following sections summarize these conversations and include a set of questions you can use when selecting providers to better inform the process and ensure the providers are a good fit for your E&T program overall.

## Identifying the right providers

Across these conversations, several themes emerged about what qualities providers should have to make them a good fit for SNAP E&T. Although each State and program has unique needs, these characteristics were commonly considered to be important factors for identifying providers that are a good fit for any E&T program.

### Select providers that:

- **Have values and missions that align with the SNAP agency.** The key to identifying providers that are a good fit for your E&T program is understanding their missions and philosophies, and then deciding if they align with your own. This affects all aspects of the partnership, including the services providers offer, the way they serve participants, the importance they place on case management and the needs of the participants, and how they view their relationship with the SNAP agency.
- **Are client centered and provide holistic, individualized services.** Because SNAP participants often need more assistance than typical workforce clients, providers offering a human centered approach that meets participants where they are, create flexible programs, and reduce barriers to entry and engagement are ideal for SNAP participants.
- **Offer foundational and intensive wraparound services.<sup>2</sup> Participants enter E&T with a variety of limitations, some of which affect their ability to move directly into training, education, or employment immediately.** Providing foundational services, such as soft skills or life skills courses; intensive case management and counseling; and participant reimbursements or other supports, are necessary to prepare SNAP E&T participants for skill-building activities and employment.
- **Offer services that are shown to connect participants with meaningful employment.** Providers should have a history of providing quality, skill-building services that ultimately result in sustainable employment. This includes offering programs with pathways for participants who have high barriers and low skills to move them from low-wage, entry-level jobs to high-wage, in-demand jobs. Providers can use measurable outcomes and data to demonstrate their track record.
- **Have strong partnerships in the community.** A single provider is unlikely to offer all the services that participants need. Therefore, those that understand and are well connected to the community and have contacts at other organizations to which they can make referrals will be able to better serve participants. Also, providers should have partnerships with the workforce system and/or employers in the community, creating a direct pipeline to jobs for participants who are ready for employment.
- **Provide culturally specific services and staff who are representative of the community they serve.** Offering programs within the communities that they serve by staff who are representative of the community and have similar lived experiences allow staff to better understand and connect with participants.

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<sup>2</sup> State can provide participant reimbursement in its SNAP E&T program for expenses that are reasonably necessary and directly related to participation in the SNAP E&T program (7 CFR 273.7 (d) (4)).

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# Attracting the right providers

States offered a variety of lessons on best practices to attract the right providers. This includes some overarching ideas about how to work collaboratively with providers and create better working relationships.

**Treat providers as partners.** Providers bring expertise in offering SNAP E&T participants the services and supports they need to succeed in training and obtaining employment. When communicating with providers, it is important to recognize this expertise and respect their contributions. Asking for providers' feedback and giving them "a seat at the table" when considering changes to the program or developing State plans can build trust and strong relationships. It also is likely to ignite innovation and program improvement.

In addition, incorporating more opportunities for communication that is not focused only on compliance and reporting can build greater understanding and partnership. One State shared that it regularly visited to providers (outside of compliance visits) to learn about what providers were doing and to share tips or best practices from other providers.

**Lead with mission and shared vision.** Because the SNAP E&T program administration is complex, conversations with new providers often focus on the requirements, financing, and burden of the program. Providers acknowledged that this is important, but it may not be the best information to lead with when trying to onboard a provider. Instead, lead with the mission and goals of your program, and find a shared understanding of what you would like to do and accomplish for your SNAP E&T programs. Providers may be more willing to shoulder administrative burden if they see your enthusiasm about capacity building and increasing services to the community.

**Streamline administrative burden.** Most providers typically want to focus their time on serving participants. If the burden of administering the program for SNAP is too high, they will likely choose not to become an E&T provider. Streamlining the contracting process and reporting requirements as much as possible will attract more organizations, and more varied organizations. Administration tends to be easier for large and small providers—large providers have more capacity and systems in place to manage programs and small providers serve so few participants that the reporting can be manageable—but it is more difficult for the medium sized providers. You can create tools, systems, or processes to streamline the burden and make it more worthwhile for a variety of providers to partner with you.

**Create a consistent pipeline of participants.** You should also consider how to consistently refer participants to providers. A key consideration for providers in partnering in SNAP E&T is whether they will have people to serve. Providers can better tailor services to your population if they can plan for a consistent flow of SNAP E&T participants. It may also enable them to expand services or create specialized services if they can rely on a steady stream of participants.

**Provide ongoing technical assistance and guidance.** Regular meetings with providers can afford opportunities to discuss challenges and successes. Peer exchanges, such as those developed through a learning community, can create space to share experiences with the program.

## Selecting the right providers

Some States have found useful ways to proactively identify and assess providers before contracting with them. This ensures your network of providers is not duplicative and is filling a gap in services. Often States use a request for applications (RFA) approach to find providers, which may not attract the full range of providers necessary to serve all participants. If using an RFA, you still need to be selective about which providers you choose. Rather than partnering with any provider that responds to the RFA, you should evaluate the providers based on whether they will fill a need in your SNAP E&T program, provide high-quality services to your participants, and can meet the administrative requirements.

## Strategies for selecting providers

SNAP administrators often have some flexibility within their State contracting processes for how to identify and evaluate providers. In addition to RFAs, there are a variety of strategies that could help you find, select, and ultimately partner with providers, including:

- **Conduct targeted searches of providers.** Mapping exercises can help you find providers in targeted areas of your State, where there may be gaps in current services. Some States have worked with the State workforce agency to identify the providers that the agency uses. Other States have reached out to community partners to create a broad inventory of providers in the community and then narrow in to find providers that will meet their needs.
- **Hold information sessions and market SNAP E&T to providers.** You may be able to find E&T providers by holding information sessions and marketing the SNAP E&T program directly to providers. In some cases, States have developed formal marketing materials to share with providers to increase interest in partnering with the program.
- **Conduct informal screening meetings to talk about the process and the provider's capacity.** During the screener meetings, you can share what you want to achieve with the E&T program and discuss providers' capacity to serve participants. These meetings can serve a dual purpose, as you can assess the provider, and the provider can decide if SNAP E&T would be a good fit for them.
- **Ask potential providers to complete questionnaires with key information before any formal selection process begins.** The short questionnaires could provide quick and vital information to identify if the provider is the right fit for your program. It also can reduce burden on providers and your staff by limiting the number of providers who start a more formal selection process—such as completing an application—to only those who will be a good fit.
- **Rely on existing providers for referrals and testimonials about the benefits of the program.** Current providers often have large networks of providers with which they work. Using these networks can be a useful approach for quickly identifying new providers. The providers you work with can also be effective in supporting recruitment. One provider said that after it understood the benefits of partnering with the SNAP E&T program, it wanted to share information about those benefits with all of its partners in the community. Peer-to-peer experiences can be an effective recruiting tool.
- **Support smaller providers or those who are not as established.** Smaller providers may serve underserved communities well but have limited capacity for the administrative requirements. If these providers are important for meeting your program goals and serving participants, you should consider creating supports to reduce the burden for these types of providers.

### Investing in small, high-quality providers

Although providers need administrative capacity to successfully provide SNAP E&T services, that should not preclude partnering with a smaller provider that can offer high quality services to an under-served community. Several States discussed approaches they have used to reduce the burden of 50/50 funding requirements, financial tracking, and data reporting. These approaches include fostering a consortium of small providers that can pool resources to share the administrative burden; using intermediaries to offset more of the contractual and administrative burdens; using State administrative funding in the short-term while the provider builds capacity, then moving to a 50/50 partnership in a year or two; and offering upfront mentorship and assistance with capacity building.

## Selecting providers that infuse equity into programs

**States can improve equity in their E&T programs through the providers they select.** By partnering with a variety of providers, you can reach different populations and offer services to meet the needs of your participants. States and providers discussed a variety of ways in which they are focusing on expanding equity and equitable practices in their programs, including:

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- **Identify if service gaps exist in underserved communities.** It is important for you to understand if historically underserved communities have access to providers offering SNAP E&T services. You can use geo-targeting to identify providers with a presence in these communities and reach out to them to fill gaps.
  - **Find providers whose staff reflect the community.** To improve equity in your SNAP E&T program, you should seek providers with staff who are reflective of the communities the program is serving. Providers discussed hiring and promoting people who represent their participants. In doing so, they said that their staff better understand their participants' circumstances and barriers. A State emphasized that they seek providers with staff that are by, of, and for the communities they serve.
  - **Offer programs that are culturally specific, client centered, and flexible.** You should ask providers how they are being client centered and their understanding of the historical and cultural context of the community that they are serving. One State noted that it has added screening questions when assessing new providers that ask how the organization serves communities of color and how the services are client centered. The State has been intentionally partnering with providers working with underserved communities and has reached out to providers that focus on racial justice or gender equity work.
  - **Request feedback and include providers in program design.** Providers often understand and can provide feedback on how to better serve their communities, so seeking their feedback enables you to better design your program to meet your goals of being more equitable.
  - **Provide ongoing equity training to all providers.** Equity trainings need to be continual and tailored to the goals and populations served by your SNAP E&T program. One State included a civil rights training for all providers. A provider organization said that it had ongoing trainings on equity and encouraged all staff to join cultural centers and community groups to have closer ties to the communities they serve.



# Questions to guide provider selection

## Basic provider qualifications

- **Does the provider offer employment and/or training services that are designed to build participants' skills and lead to employment?**
  - Are the services offered skill-based and lead to certificates or credentials that are valued by employers?
  - Does the provider use current labor market information to align services with labor market needs and in-demand occupations?
  - Do most participants who are served attain credentials and/or get employed in quality jobs?
- **Does the provider use methods that are considered best practices for delivering employment and training services?**
  - Does the provider use a career pathway or sector partnership model?
  - Does the provider use integrated education and training models?
  - Does the provider have strong employer connections or other connections to the workforce system (like American Job Centers)?
- **Does or can the provider serve SNAP participants (characteristics of your population)?**
- **Does the provider have the capacity to serve the number of SNAP E&T participants required (have available slots and staff needed)?**
- **Can the provider contract with a State agency (or intermediary)?**
- **Is the provider in good standing on other Federal and State contracts?**
  - Does it have a good reputation and no major contractual, financial, or client complaints?

## SNAP E&T provider qualifications

- **Does the provider offer allowable components?**
- **Does the provider offer case management?**
- **Will the provider accept and commit to serving direct referrals from the SNAP agency?**
- **Does the provider have the necessary funding to serve SNAP E&T participants (particularly if it is not receiving funding from the State)?**
  - Does the provider have non-Federal 50 percent reimbursement funds available?
  - Can it provide a variety of participant reimbursements to all participants, as needed?
- **Does the provider have financial and data tracking systems, and the capacity to meet the reporting requirements?**
  - Does it have the ability to track and submit reimbursement documentation?
  - Does it have the ability to track participant-level data in the specified format?
- **Does the provider have a proven track record of serving people with high or multiple barriers?**

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## Program fit considerations

- **Does the provider fill a gap in your service package or service area?**
  - Are the services duplicative of other providers in the same area?
  - Do participants need or want these services?
  - Is the area the provider serves one that needs additional services?
- **Does the provider offer robust case management and wrap around services?**
- **Does the provider offer client centered, individualized services?**
- **Does the provider have strong partnerships in the community?**
  - Can it make referrals to other organizations that supplement its services (such as housing, mental health, and childcare)?
  - Does it have connections to employers and a pipeline of available jobs for participants?
- **Is the provider collecting and using data to track participant and program outcomes?**
  - Does the provider use data for decision-making and program improvement?
- **Does the organization's mission align with the mission of the SNAP E&T program?**
  - Does it have the same philosophy for serving participants as the SNAP E&T program?
- **Does the provider understand and commit to equitable access and practices in their program?**
  - Does the provider hire staff that reflect the community it serves?
- **Is the provider connected to and a part of the community it serves?**

**Prepared by Gretchen Rowe and Elizabeth Brown**

**February 2023**

Produced by Mathematica for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). This document does not provide official policy guidance. FNS has published other materials on these topics that are available on the FNS website.

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