

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ROLES AND EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SUMMARY)

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) granted waivers to six States between 2009 and 2010 that allowed community-based organizations (CBOs), such as food banks, to support Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) operations. The organizations conducted SNAP interviews, collected verifications (e.g., identification and proof of earned income), and submitted client applications to State SNAP agencies for eligibility determination. The projects were intended to improve the delivery of services, reduce strain on under-resourced State SNAP offices, and address the barriers that prevent some eligible households from applying for benefits.

This study was designed to document the operational details of the demonstrations and examine their impact. Specifically, the research objectives were to describe the:

- Services that the CBOs offer and the nature of their partnerships with State and local agencies,
- Response of State SNAP staff, CBO interviewers, and SNAP applicants who are interviewed by CBO staff to the involvement of CBOs in conducting applicant interviews, and
- Impacts of CBOs conducting SNAP interviews on program outcomes.

Methods

Data collection for this study included telephone interviews with SNAP directors and CBO directors, site visits to local SNAP offices and CBOs, administrative data from States, Quality

Control data from FNS, and a customer satisfaction survey.

Four of the six States that implemented the demonstration projects—Florida, Michigan, Nevada, and Texas—participated in this study. Oregon discontinued the demonstration in 2011. Minnesota did not participate in this study because of its project's small scope.

Overview of Demonstrations

The States in the study differed on the number of CBO partners, the types of services offered by the CBOs, and the mechanisms in place for submitting CBO applications to the State SNAP agencies.

- **Florida** had seven CBO partners. In addition to providing SNAP application assistance and conducting interviews, the CBO interviewers tracked the status of client applications for 90 days. They submitted SNAP applications to the State electronically. Florida also allowed CBO workers to recertify SNAP participants.
- **Michigan** worked with one CBO, Elder Law of Michigan (ELM), which identified and trained local community organizations to provide SNAP outreach to elderly citizens. ELM's local partners provided application assistance and conducted interviews. Paper applications were submitted to the State agency. Outreach workers were authorized to recertify SNAP participants.
- **Nevada** had two CBO partners. One provided SNAP outreach in remote areas outside of Reno, and the other offered a wide range of services to individuals in crisis in the Las Vegas area. The outreach workers provided assistance with

completing paper SNAP applications and submitted them to the local offices for processing. Nevada was the only State in which CBOs were not authorized to recertify SNAP participants.

- **Texas** had one CBO partner, the Texas Food Bank Network (TFBN). Five of TFBN's member food banks participated in the demonstration project. In addition to offering SNAP outreach, TFBN workers provided applicants with unloaded electronic benefit transfer cards and recertified current participants. The outreach workers submitted SNAP applications directly to the State agency using an online portal developed for the demonstration.

Findings

Feedback from States concerning the quality of incoming CBO applications was mixed. Some felt that the quality of applications received from the CBOs improved over time.

- SNAP workers in Florida and Texas indicated that the incoming CBO applications were generally complete and accurate, which facilitated eligibility determination.
- In Michigan and Nevada, some SNAP workers suggested that the interviewers did not consistently provide enough information to determine eligibility, requiring SNAP workers to follow up with applicants.

Both SNAP and CBO workers cited improved access, better customer service, and satisfaction among applicants as the most significant successes of the demonstration projects. CBO workers also believed the demonstration improved efficiency by enabling applicants to complete the SNAP application and interview in a single visit.

Both SNAP and CBO workers cited similar challenges including technology issues that led to processing delays, keeping CBO

workers up-to-date on policy and procedural changes, and ensuring adequate training for all CBO workers. CBO staff also noted limited awareness of the demonstration among State workers as a particular challenge.

CBO applicants reported a positive experience applying for SNAP benefits through a CBO.

- They were more likely than SNAP office applicants to report that they were very satisfied with the customer service they received.
- More than half reported that it was easier to apply through the CBO than their previous experience applying through a SNAP office.

Efficiency and payment accuracy results were mixed when comparing CBO applications to SNAP office applications.

- CBO applications had higher approval rates than did SNAP office applications in Florida, Michigan, and Nevada.
- Florida and Texas had shorter application processing times and better timeliness rates for CBO applications than regular applications.
- In Texas, error rates were higher for CBO applications, but in Nevada, they were lower. In Florida, the error rates for CBO applications were no different from the statewide error rate.

For More Information

Wilson, Claire, Brittany McGill, Carole Trippe, Rachel Gaddes, Brian Estes, Meg Tucker, and Chrystine Tadler. *An Assessment of the Roles and Effectiveness of Community-Based Organizations in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*. Prepared by Insight Policy Research for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, January 2015. Available online at www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.