Texas Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Outreach Final Report for Fiscal Year 2016

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Introduction

In fiscal year 2016, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) met Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Outreach goals through the implementation of four projects outlined in the 2016 state plan. By leveraging HHSC Community Partner Program (CPP) and Regional Community Relations (RCR) staff and administering contracts with two external organizations, Feeding Texas and Baylor University’s Texas Hunger Initiative (THI), HHSC met the primary goals of the state’s SNAP Outreach program to reduce access barriers and efficiently connect eligible individuals with benefits through the following projects:

1) Application Assistance - HHSC partnered with Feeding Texas and their 19 subcontractor food banks to provide education and application assistance utilizing HHSC's online benefits portal YourTexasBenefits.com to individuals potentially eligible for SNAP benefits.

2) Community Partner Interviewing - In addition to providing general application assistance, five food banks in the state provided SNAP interview services as part of a waiver from the United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service.

3) Box Messaging and Direct Outreach - Through the distribution of commodity boxes with printed information about SNAP and YourTexasBenefits.com, this project raised awareness on applying for SNAP benefits and the availability of application assistance services.

4) Community Partner Support - The CPP is a collaboration between HHSC and community partners (CP), a statewide network of over 1,300 government, faith- and community-based agencies, and other social service organizations. CPs are contracted organizations trained and certified by HHSC to provide assistance with SNAP applications and the navigation of YourTexasBenefits.com. Partnerships with these organizations are critical in creating access points for application services and ensuring needs are met at the community level. In fiscal year 2016, HHSC contracted with THI to provide regional field support services for CPs.

Fiscal Year 2016 Accomplishments

To maximize the success of SNAP Outreach projects and to ensure that eligible individuals are connected with SNAP benefits, HHSC underwent two major transitions. Specifically, HHSC redesigned the online benefits portal, YourTexasBenefits.com, and shifted the focus of CP regional support services to achieve program growth and accountability by engaging a new contractor and using existing HHSC staff to enhance program goals. Key accomplishments are listed below.

Online Benefits Portal Redesign

In September 2016, HHSC implemented a redesigned online benefits application portal, YourTexasBenefits.com. The new interface was designed to streamline the application process and provide clients with an improved point of access to the benefit system. To ensure the new online benefits portal met both client and CP needs, HHSC CPP staff supported the redesign throughout fiscal year 2016 by:
• Participating in workgroup sessions to assist in the design of both the benefit portal website and mobile application;

• Providing feedback from systems users on necessary improvements and enhancements; and

• Participating in system testing.

To prepare CPs for the launch of the redesigned benefit portal, HHSC CPP staff:

• Worked with the HHSC Training Development and Delivery staff to tailor training materials to meet the needs of CPs. An online training module was developed and made available to partner organizations providing application assistance through the CPP website.

• Conducted regional community forums in the four most populous regions of the state to provide education and technical assistance on the redesigned portal for organizations providing application assistance.

• Provided targeted presentations to entities providing SNAP application assistance, including all 19 food banks across the state as part of the Feeding with Impact Conference; members of the Texas Association of Community Health Centers; and the Consumer Benefit Consortium.

Community Partner Support Transition

At the end of fiscal year 2016, HHSC's contract with THI ended. In order to deliver more comprehensive support to organizations providing SNAP application assistance, HHSC entered into a new contract with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension for fiscal year 2017. The CPP will focus on improvements in CP training and resources, support visits, and strategic CP retention strategies to promote program growth. This change for the CPP will result in a strengthened program model that ensures CP support, development, and retention; contractor oversight and accountability; and scaling to accommodate new participants.

To augment the regional CP support model, the CPP engaged the HHSC RCR team in mid-August to respond to partner needs, as well as to expand the current network of organizations offering client support services. The work of the RCR team has been pivotal in helping application assistance sites navigate the new YourTexasBenefits.com online application portal. Additionally, RCR staff has escalated issues to the CPP team to help troubleshoot any issues with the new technology.

Community Partner Program Improvement

In addition to the transition activities previously detailed, the HHSC CPP team:

• Conducted a statewide survey to CPs to assess various aspects of the CPP.
• Instituted a quarterly newsletter for partner organizations, highlighting best practices in application assistance, news on policy and procedure changes that may impact partners and the clients they serve, available community resources, etc.

• Offered monthly webinars on certain eligibility programs, including SNAP, as requested by partners. Webinars also provided CPs with statistics on application assistance provided in various regions of the state.

• Conducted in-person visits to CP sites identified by HHSC as needing support and technical assistance.

• Maintained a general mailbox for partner inquiries or technical support requests.

• Created a statewide community partner group to gain feedback from 10 established CPs regarding the CPP and other HHSC programs. Members, chosen by an application process, represent the diverse geographic and organizational make-up (governmental, faith-based, non-profit, etc.) of the CP network. The first quarterly meeting occurred in September 2016.

• Held regional forums for CPs to network with and learn from each other, the CPP team, and local RCR staff. CPP staff provided training and information on application assistance and support activities. Partners were able to ask questions, share best practices and experiences, talk about the work they do and how they operate the CPP in their organization.

Application Assistance and Education

The 19 CP food banks serving as subcontractors under Feeding Texas conducted education and application assistance activities in all 254 Texas counties, which resulted in:

• Exposure of 2,047,914 potentially eligible individuals to SNAP program information, increasing program awareness and connecting potentially eligible individuals with resources to apply.

• Outreach to target populations through:
  o Collaborations with local colleges and universities to increase program awareness and application assistance as an optional part of classroom curriculum; and
  o Collaborations with disaster relief organizations to provide program information and application assistance in areas affected by disasters such as storms and flooding.

• Distribution of over 166,187 paper applications for SNAP statewide.

• Submission of over 119,000 applications for SNAP to HHSC.
  o 62 percent (approximately 73,000) of applications were submitted online, allowing clients to access their case information through the benefits portal.
  o Of these applications, over 21,000 individuals were interviewed by one of the 5 food banks participating in the Community Partner Interviewer (CPI) waiver program.
Community Partner Support and Recruitment

Through THI:

- Regional staff provided retention and support services to over 1,300 CP application assistance sites by:
  - Offering quarterly meetings with each community partner.
  - Providing training and technical support to streamline the client application process.

- Regional staff disseminated information and recruited potential CP organizations by organizing and participating in community outreach events across the state. As a result, over 100 new organizations applied to become CPs to provide application assistance.

Fiscal Year 2016 Challenges and Solutions Developed

Program growth and change is often accompanied by new challenges and opportunities for improvement. Below are challenges both state and contractor staff experienced providing SNAP Outreach activities.

- The transition of regional support staff required revising existing and developing new training materials, implementing new tracking systems, as well as communicating these changes to the current network of CPs.

- Changing technologies and new business processes that emphasize the use of the online application portal can be challenging for certain populations. CP food banks and Feeding Texas provided targeted outreach and support to increase understanding of these changes.

- The implementation of the new online benefits portal resulted in navigation and technical difficulties. CPP staff implemented targeted training and information dissemination mechanisms for CP organizations through webinars, strategic communications, on-site visits, regional forums, and ongoing support sessions to keep application assistance sites abreast with the technology changes and updates.

- Lack of accessibility to computers, mobile smart phones, and other devices and/or connectivity to the internet had an impact on the CPs’ ability to assist clients in the creation of an online account, upload supporting documentation, renew benefits online, or submit changes within accounts. Many of the reported internet service “deserts” are in rural areas. Troubleshooting with HHSC’s website Help Desk, working with computer labs, and using mobile devices such as hotspots have assisted in resolving some of these challenges.

- Challenges and difficulties with clients not remembering or not knowing their online account information created an access challenge. Development of a client online account form to give to the client, stressing the importance of keeping the form safe and bringing it with them whenever they need assistance (such as at the food bank or other CP organization) made it easier and faster for clients and staff to access accounts. CPP staff shared this best practice with CP organizations.
• HHSC partners with local community organizations through the CPP to educate eligible individuals and help combat perceived barriers associated with state and federal benefits programs.

Evaluation Methodology and Findings

To evaluate SNAP Outreach program efficacy and support, CPP and contractor staff implemented both quantitative and qualitative data collection and reporting methods:

Regional Community Partner Support Analysis

CPP collects data related to support and outreach to CP organizations through a newly designed SharePoint form. This data collection system allows CPP staff to analyze regional activities and trends in partner questions or needs, as well as categorize qualitative data obtained during site visits. Additionally, the CPP has evaluated and addressed partner need through the collection of qualitative information in a CP mailbox and questions asked during weekly support sessions. These efforts resulted in the escalation of technical issues to appropriate HHSC staff and have been critical in addressing issues users experience with the new YourTexasBenefits.com system.

THI utilized a customer relations management system, Salesforce, to track CP recruitment and support efforts. Additionally, focus groups were conducted with certain CPs to assess program implementation. These efforts resulted in a regional identification system that will be used in strategic recruitment efforts of statewide organizations for fiscal years 2017 and 2018.

Program Evaluation

In May 2016, the CPP disseminated a survey to the statewide network of CPs to assess partner needs, perception of the CPP, motivation for participation, program efficacy and efficiency, partner satisfaction, opportunities for improvement, and other factors. The survey return rate was 19.74 percent, with 447 of the 2,264 individuals invited to participate completing the survey. Key findings of the survey are as follows:

• The majority of respondents (79.9 percent) indicated they were motivated to participate in the CPP to "[serve] people/clients in need of public assistance and social services." An interest in training was clearly articulated by the majority of respondents, with nearly 85 percent indicating they were very or moderately interested in information on HHSC benefit programs including SNAP, 80 percent in information related to navigating the CPP and YourTexasBenefits.com websites, and approximately 70 percent wanted to improve their skills in providing application assistance. The CPP training strategy for fiscal years 2017 and 2018 will address these needs.

• The majority of respondents indicated they would like the opportunity to network and share best practices with other CPs in their communities. This led to the development and execution of regional forums. Over 125 participants attended the forums and 95 percent of
the attendees reported the forums were well planned and executed, the content was useful to their work, and increased their knowledge of the CPP and application assistance.

The CPP implemented a satisfaction survey on monthly webinars that is used to evaluate performance and guide future presentations of interest to CPs providing application assistance. As a result of quality improvement efforts, the CPP has seen a significant increase in monthly webinar participation. Since implementation of the survey, the number of participants who were satisfied or very satisfied with the webinar content has improved from 90 to 94 percent.

The CPP communications distribution list expanded from 2,000 to 7,000 individuals (350 percent), which has allowed the program to increase outreach to communities across the state. To accommodate for this growth, a mass-email system to communicate with stakeholders and track message impact through engagement rates (i.e., the percentage of recipients who were sent a message and opened or clicked on a link in that message) was implemented.

CPs assess application assistance activities through HHSC reporting mechanisms. In addition to providing access to an HHSC reporting account, the CPP prepares a statistical report each month that highlights application submission activity for each region of the state.

Program Monitoring

Feeding Texas continuously monitors activities across Texas based on monthly self-reported information submitted by individual food banks. These reports include data on the number of individuals reached, online applications submitted, paper application distributed, user accounts created, and supporting documents uploaded. CPI food banks collect additional data that is reported on a daily basis, which also includes information on SNAP interviews conducted and Electronic Benefit Transaction cards distributed. Additionally, "estimated local economic impact generated” and “estimated SNAP meals attributable to food bank outreach” have been assessed using the Feeding America SNAP Impact Calculator for 2015. Outcomes for fiscal year 2016 include:

- Over $525,000,000 estimated local economic impact generated; and
- Over 122,000,000 estimated SNAP meals attributable to food bank education and application assistance activities.

To ensure quality application assistance services are provided to potentially eligible individuals, the CPP trains and certifies partner organizations on SNAP and other available HHSC benefits. CPP staff utilize a website to track CP related data in a backend database. The CPP public facing website and YourTexasBenefits.com online benefits portal display a search function, pulling information from the database, which allows the general public to search for nearby certified and trained CP organizations based on specific criteria (zip, city, county) to assist clients with their application process. In fiscal year 2016, the CPP website had 31,130 hits to the search page functionality. Though statistics are not currently available related to the partner search functionality in the newly designed YourTexasBenefits.com website, there have been 182,701 user searches for partners through the mobile application since it was implemented in June 2015.