



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

DEC 16 2015

SUBJECT: Incorporating Job-Driven Elements into SNAP Employment and Training Programs

TO: All Commissioners

A growing body of evidence points to the importance of skills as a driver of economic security. With two-thirds of jobs created over the next decade expected to require at least some education or training beyond high school, expanding access to education and training for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants who have limited skills or earn low wages is critical to helping participants transition into economic self-sufficiency.

When employers can't find workers with the right skills, they struggle to grow their business, which can limit economic growth. One of the strongest efforts States can make to boost their economic growth is to ensure workers have access to education and skills training. Moreover, slow projected growth in the labor force means that most of tomorrow's workforce is already in the labor market today. Investments need to be made in adults, not just younger workers.

Helping SNAP participants gain the skills they need to secure the jobs of the future is one of USDA's top priorities. We are engaged in unprecedented collaboration with other Federal agencies to better understand what works in job training, encourage greater cross-system collaboration, and help States incorporate job-driven elements into existing SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) programs.

The SNAP E&T program has tremendous untapped potential. In fiscal year (FY) 2013, States served approximately 634,000 SNAP participants through SNAP E&T programs. This is a strong start, but SNAP E&T has the potential to improve the job prospects for thousands more low-income and low-skilled workers across the country, using more effective and robust programs.

SNAP E&T programs are flexible. They can help those who are work-ready find good paying jobs or help those who need additional skills find training or education programs that lead to jobs. States have a natural opportunity to expand the reach of their SNAP E&T program by forging partnerships with State and local agencies, community-based organizations, non-profits, and employers to fully utilize Federal funding.

FNS is committed to your success and will be rolling out resources and tools to help your agency incorporate job-driven elements into your E&T programs. Over the coming year, we will provide a continuum of resources, including new materials, a digital peer sharing platform for State SNAP agencies and their partners, webinars and intensive technical assistance, to help States identify promising training and education practices, clarify the

All Commissioners

Page 2

opportunities available to enhance the use of federal funding, and forge new partnerships with State agencies, community-based providers, educational institutions, and other organizations that serve SNAP recipients. These resources will be made available through FNS directly and through our newly-funded SNAP E&T Center of Excellence, led by the Seattle Jobs Initiative.

I encourage you to contact your FNS Regional Administrator about how FNS can support your State's efforts to grow a more skilled workforce through SNAP E&T.

Sincerely,



Kevin W. Concannon

Under Secretary

Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services

Enclosure

From SNAP to Skills: Incorporating Job-Driven Elements into SNAP E&T Programs

Today's labor market requires workers to have higher levels of skills and education than ever before. To achieve economic self-sufficiency and reduce their need for food assistance, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients must have opportunities to boost their skills and gain work experience through job-driven SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) programs.

Incorporating job-driven elements into your State's E&T program requires thoughtful planning with your State's workforce and education systems. Here are a few things you can do to ensure that your E&T program is helping workers gain the skills they need for open jobs in their communities right now:

- ✓ **Ensure training programs are responsive to the needs of local industries/employers and well-connected to job opportunities in the local labor market.** State agencies should engage with employers and local industries early and often when designing SNAP E&T programs and components. Inviting businesses to the table to help design curricula and provide work experience can help ensure that participants are learning the necessary skills they will need to compete for available jobs in their community. State agencies should also partner with local workforce boards, who can provide data on high-demand sectors.
- ✓ **Create opportunities for individuals to earn postsecondary credentials that employers value, including certificates and degrees, industry-recognized credentials, and licensures.** Economists predict that by 2020, almost two-thirds of jobs will require some education beyond high school. The opportunity to earn credentials that are portable, stackable, and widely recognized by employers will best position a SNAP E&T participant to compete for a good-paying job that reduces or eliminates their need for food assistance.
- ✓ **Encourage flexible and innovative instructional models that accelerate learning and transitions to employment (e.g. contextualized learning, dual enrollment, bridge programs, and career pathways).** A growing body of evidence shows that individuals with low foundational skills are more likely to succeed in programs that offer flexible scheduling, contextualized and accelerated instruction, and wraparound supportive services. These models have been proven to be more successful than traditional, sequential approaches, e.g. a stand-alone high school equivalency preparation course. For individuals with very low skills, States can fund the initial steps of an individual's career pathway where other education and workforce programs leave gaps, such as helping college-ready adults without a high school diploma access postsecondary education. State agencies can also use braided funding approach to deliver a continuum of services and supports using multiple sources of federal, state, and local funds.
- ✓ **Promote work-based education and training to help individuals earn while they learn.** State agencies can design components that allow clients to gain valuable work experience in their chosen career, improving their likelihood of landing a job in their field upon completion of an E&T program. Such work experience or work-based learning can include internships, pre-apprenticeships, Registered Apprenticeships, or other on-the-job training.

- ✓ **Provide robust and embedded support services to address barriers to success.** Unlike other workforce programs, States are required to provide SNAP participant reimbursements for expenses related to participation in an E&T component. States should take full advantage of this flexibility to include robust supportive services for SNAP clients, who often have multiple or very serious barriers to employment. A thorough client assessment prior to placement is an important first step toward gaining a full picture of the participant's needs. For participants with significant barriers to success, such as poor health or lack of affordable child care, States should offer participant reimbursements that enable clients to participate in longer-term training that offers a better chance at long-term self-sufficiency.
- ✓ **Create seamless connections to other education and training systems, partner organizations, and institutions, such as community colleges and community-based organizations.** SNAP recipients may interact with or benefit from a multitude of services provided by community organizations, such as food banks, private charities, or faith-based organizations, or other State agencies and programs, such as American Job Centers, TANF agencies, adult education providers, and community colleges. Developing partnerships with these other organizations can streamline the experience for SNAP clients and can help States use scarce resources more efficiently.
- ✓ **Measure and manage the success of programs.** The ability to demonstrate the success of an E&T program can help a State leverage additional community and State funding to expand their program with federal SNAP E&T “50/50” funding. In the coming months, FNS will release the first-ever reporting requirements for E&T through an interim final rule, which can serve as a baseline for State efforts to collect and use data. These reporting requirements will take into account the unique challenges facing SNAP E&T participants. These reporting measures, and any additional outcomes collected by the State, can be used for continuous improvement of services and programs. Currently, 37 states tracked the performance of their SNAP E&T components. E&T success stories published by FNS' forthcoming SNAP E&T Center of Excellence and outcomes from the 10 pilot sites funding through the 2014 Farm Bill pilots will also help create a national evidence base for successful E&T programs.

A growing number of States are reviewing their current E&T programs and finding ways to better align them with the needs of SNAP clients and the local employers. FNS strongly encourages State agencies to explore ways to incorporate these job-driven elements into E&T programs and has dedicated resources to provide hands-on technical assistance to states seeking to enhance or expand the reach of their program. For more information on the flexibility of the E&T program, see the *SNAP Employment and Training Toolkit: A Toolkit to Help States Create, Implement, and Manage Dynamic E&T Programs*.