



USDA Food and Nutrition Service
Leveraging Partnerships to Fund Eligibility/Benefits Workers
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Leveraging Partnerships to Fund Eligibility/Benefits Workers

Synopsis

The following paper outlines a strategy for States to fund new eligibility/benefits workers without using State funds by leveraging the resources of community organizations and for community organizations to obtain an outstationed (or mobile) eligibility worker who can provide eligibility determination service at their point of service.

Introduction

In difficult economic times, the demand for safety net and nutrition assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), and TANF cash assistance rises while the resources available to administer these programs often diminishes. A myriad of community organizations serve the individuals and families who are eligible for safety net programs and work hard to help them meet basic needs and move toward self-sufficiency. In order to maximize the use of government programs which provide nutrition assistance, cash assistance, and medical care, community organizations often spend considerable resources conducting program outreach and screening, making referrals, providing application assistance, and helping applicants navigate the application process.

While valuable, these efforts involve a “hand-off” from the community organization to the local department of social services or other government office conducting eligibility determinations for these programs. When possible, many organizations prefer to have an eligibility/benefits worker on-site to take applications, conduct interviews, and determine eligibility. Conducting these services at the point of contact increases the likelihood of a completed application and offers better customer service for those in need. Although state and local governments may want to increase the number of outstationed or mobile eligibility/benefits workers, the sharp increase in demand makes this prospect difficult.





Benefits

Increasing the number of eligibility/benefits workers by leveraging the resources of community organizations and placing more eligibility/benefits workers at points of service within communities creates benefits for low-income families, community organizations, the social service offices responsible for the administration of these programs, and the local and state economy.

Benefits to Low-Income Individuals and Families

- Increased access to safety net and nutrition programs by increasing the number of locations where applications can be made and eligibility determined and by locating eligibility/benefits workers in places where individuals and families already congregate and feel comfortable receiving services.
- Improved customer service by providing multiple services including eligibility determination at one location and in conceivably in one visit.
- Improved health outcomes by gaining access to nutrition food, nutrition education, and preventative health care services.

Benefits to Community Organizations

- Improved effectiveness by helping low-income individuals and families obtain safety net and nutrition assistance services more consistently and more quickly.
- Improved efficiency by replacing the time and resources used on referral and follow-up activities with local departments of social services with actual eligibility determination services.
- Increased value by using an organization's existing resources to draw down federal dollars spent on providing services in their community.

Benefits to Social Service Offices

- Providing improved customer service by increasing the number of eligibility/benefits workers and locating them at places convenient for applicants.
- Improving worker satisfaction by reducing the workload of existing staff involved in eligibility determination and case management processes.
- Increasing federal resources by leveraging non-State resources as match to draw down federal funds for program administration.
- Avoidance of federal penalties/sanctions by increasing the number of eligibility/benefits workers and thereby creating more time for workers to process their cases in an accurate, timely manner.

Benefits to the Local and State Economy

- Increasing federal dollars coming into the State without a concomitant increase in State dollars used as match.
- Stimulating the local economy by increasing benefits paid all or in part with federal dollars and the multiplier effect of the expenditure of those benefits. For example, SNAP benefits are 100% federal. USDA research estimates that every \$5 in new food stamp benefits generates \$9.20 in total community spending. See the Business Case for Increasing SNAP Participation: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/business-case.htm>.



How does it all work?

1. One or more community organizations would enter into an agreement with a local department of social services office responsible for the eligibility determination of SNAP, Medicaid, SCHIP, and TANF. Most States employ a combined application process with one worker performing eligibility determination for all of these programs (and sometimes more) at once. However, federal funds could be drawn down for any one of these programs except for TANF which is a block grant.
2. The community organization(s) would agree to pay the State share of an eligibility worker through a cash donation. The community organizations would have to certify that the cash donation is from non-federal source. Special emphasis should be placed on any grant or funding made available through State or local governments. Often the Federal sourcing becomes lost in the award process. In-kind donations are not allowable. Only cash is allowable as a reimbursable cost under the current FNS Regulations.
3. The department of social services would use the cash donation to draw down the federal reimbursement of administrative expenditures (roughly 50%) used to support an eligibility worker (roughly 50%), following its existing federal Cost Allocation Plan (CAP). Outstationed/mobile eligibility workers would be included in the State's existing RMS or other time study process used for cost-allocation purposes.
4. The department of social services would agree to provide an outstationed (or mobile) eligibility/benefits worker at the community organization's point of service on a schedule agreed upon between the local department of social services and the community organization(s) contributing funds to support the eligibility worker.
5. The worker would be a civil service employee, not an employee of the community organization(s). A sample agreement used by one City in a state-supervised, county administered State is attached as a reference.

Important Considerations

The following are important considerations:

- Community organizations give up control of a portion of their resources to a state/local government organization.
- Community organizations must be able to attract eligible families and individuals in numbers sufficient to warrant an onsite eligibility worker at least part of the time.
- State/local governments agree to outstation an eligibility worker which may be a new service model and which means less direct on-site supervision.
- State governments must provide the appropriate administrative oversight to ensure that only non-federal funds are used as match and that outstationed workers are only performing services approved in the State's Cost Allocation Plan (CAP).

Conclusion

These difficult economic times, characterized by high unemployment and increasing poverty, place a tremendous strain on State and local governments responsible for programs designed to provide assistance to those in need. Demand for services increases while state revenue decreases, and many States are struggling to avoid cutting administrative costs such as systems development and maintenance and staff resources. Funding sources available to community organizations including donations, grants, and government contracts are also shrinking. Now is the time to try this innovative approach which operates within the current boundaries of law and regulation and requires little more than trust and commitment across the private and public sectors.