SNAP APPLICATION EXPERIENCE PROJECT

OVERVIEW

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the nation’s largest hunger relief program, reaching 42 million people and providing a total of $58 billion dollars in benefits in 2017.

In Washtenaw County, 3.1 million dollars in SNAP benefits are provided to 25,000 participants each month. However, after a series of surveys and feedback from our community members, the Washtenaw County Food Policy Council found that many eligible people faced barriers preventing them from applying to or receiving SNAP benefits.

The Washtenaw County Food Policy Council’s Food Access & Nutrition Policy Action Team collaborated with Food Gatherers, the food bank and food rescue program serving Washtenaw County, and the Washtenaw County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to investigate the sources of these barriers and recommend solutions to increase the reach of SNAP.

METHOD

The collaborative modeled the SNAP Application Experience Study off the CalFresh Application Experience Study from the Marin Food Bank in San Francisco, CA. In this mixed-methods adaptation, researchers followed two SNAP applicants through the process from start to finish and engaged a larger group of stakeholders with surveys, interviews, and focus groups to uncover the barriers to accessing food assistance benefits in Washtenaw County.

⇒ 2 clients tracked through the SNAP application process in real time
⇒ 50 SNAP applicants surveyed and interviewed at local food pantries
⇒ 2 focus groups of:
  ⇒ 5 MDHHS SNAP Caseworkers
  ⇒ 3 Navigation Assistance Partners, community organizations who help with applications
RESULTS

SNAP Applicant Interviews
⇒ Unable to get answers to simple questions
⇒ No response from caseworkers after repeated contact
⇒ Demeaning interactions with staff
⇒ Must waste several workdays on applying, especially without access to a computer
⇒ Denied because of confusion: computer problems, caseworker errors, submitting wrong forms, letters lost in the mail, paperwork missing the tight 10 day deadline

WHAT WAS THE MOST DIFFICULT PART OF THE SNAP APPLICATION PROCESS?

DHHS Staff Focus Group
⇒ Confusing language on the application
⇒ Incomplete client applications
⇒ Technical difficulties with online application
⇒ High caseworker loads makes follow up challenging
⇒ Disrespectful attitude from overburdened case workers
⇒ No translation services for clients with limited or no English proficiency
⇒ No assistance available for clients with physical or mental limitations

Following Clients Through the Application Process
⇒ Lengthy application presents challenges to participants strapped for time, often delays submission
⇒ Good communication with DHHS case managers
⇒ Confusing requirements for documents needed
⇒ Difficulty proving expenses or contesting income sources

DHHS UPDATES

DHHS has already started to implement changes to make the SNAP application process easier, more client-centered, and more effective! Some of the changes include:

1. **Integrated Service Delivery Portal**: The layout and functionality of MI Bridges has been improved to integrate community resources and programs, coordinate with community partners, and provide better customer service to support the unique needs of each DHHS client.

2. **Universal Case Load Management**: The new system assigns case workers parts of the process rather than whole cases. This allows each staff person to complete tasks which match their skillset, reducing burden for case managers, reducing burnout, and improving customer service. In Washtenaw County, this will likely begin sometime in 2018.

3. **One Call Resolution**: The Client Connect is a streamlined feature within the Universal Case Load system that effectively manages incoming phone calls and customer contact. Individuals can call to get information directly through an automated system or select to be routed to a person at a local office who can help.

4. **Streamlined Applications**: Paper and online applications have been streamlined to reduce the length of time needed to complete an application.

Future Considerations
⇒ Continue to focus on customer service: secret shopper analysis, recorded phone calls for quality assurance, and DHHS client focus groups
⇒ Most requested resources to complement the application process: checklist of necessary documents, timeline of events, tip sheet, and a practice application.