



Coordinating SNAP and Nutrition Supports to Reduce Child Hunger



Mecklenburg County Spotlight: *Strengthening Community Relationships to End Child Hunger*

The Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services (DSS) is leading an initiative to coordinate nutrition supports across government and community partners to streamline access to resources that improve food security for families in Mecklenburg County. By the end of the grant period, households experiencing food insecurity will not only have a better understanding of the resources and services available to them, but also will find it easier to apply for public benefit programs. In service of this vision, DSS will:

Analyze Nutrition Program Data

DSS will review program data from multiple nutrition and other low-income supports to comprehensively assess need and identify service gaps. The project team will compliment this data analysis with key community stakeholder feedback to prioritize solutions to service delivery disparities.

Convene Cross-Sector Stakeholders

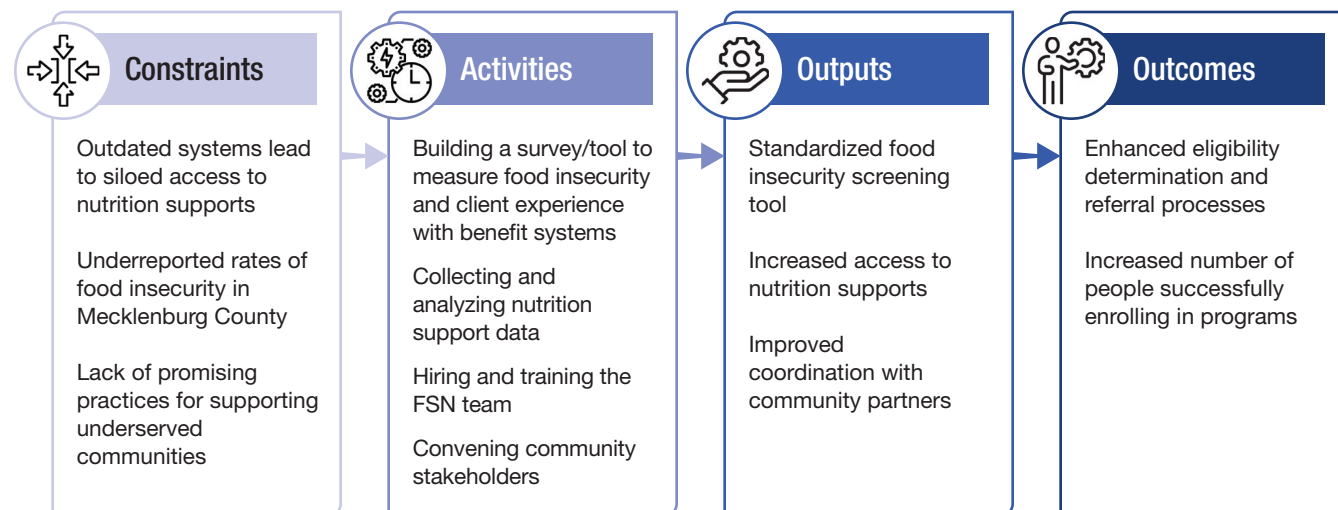
DSS will regularly convene an executive steering committee as well as a subject matter expert team comprised of community leaders representing public, private, faith-based, nonprofit, medical, and philanthropic organizations. Together, these groups will design new strategies to engage with families who are eligible for but not enrolled in nutrition supports.

Create a Food Security Navigation (FSN) Team

DSS will hire and train a group of Food Security Navigators to lead project implementation by informing business process changes and cultivating community partnerships so that eligible families can more easily obtain nutrition supports. Importantly, FSNs have some degree of lived experiences with hunger, poverty, and/or benefit programs, enabling them to meaningfully connect with the residents in need and understand their barriers to accessing services.

Logic Model

Purpose: To increase access to nutrition supports.



Background and Context: *Building on Mecklenburg County's Existing Local Partnerships*

DSS' Economic Services Division recently embarked on a transformative journey to realign eligibility determination and support processes to strategically improve processing capacity, efficiency, and timeliness of eligibility determinations. DSS has also invested in a Community Resource Center Model to offer integrated services at a geographically centric office, enabling residents to access a host of services in one location rather than various locations across the county. DSS is now planning to open a second Community Resource Center.

Mecklenburg County's project builds on past instances of collaboration between DSS and community-based organizations to enhance the well-being of children and families. These efforts include:

Supporting Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic

MeckHope, an initiative designed to improve access to preventive mental health and substance-related services, has made it easier for county residents to find information about local organizations that offer support.

Improving Mental Health and Substance-Related Services

MeckBetterTogether, a campaign aimed at protecting the health and safety of children and families throughout the pandemic, helped local service providers advertise their resources through an online toolkit.

Funding Free Pre-Kindergarten

DSS contributed to the implementation of MECK Pre-K, a program that advances early childhood education by funding free pre-kindergarten for families with low incomes.

Problem Identification: *Understanding the Needs of Families*

Despite the progress made through these and other efforts, siloed operations and data collection have made it difficult for DSS to address rising need in Mecklenburg County. Specific limitations to understanding community needs include:

Coordination Across Application Processes

Nutrition support programs are administered by separate agencies and require separate applications. This places undue burden on families trying to access supports and creates administrative hurdles for staff.

Data Collection

Rates of food insecurity in North Carolina and estimates of who is eligible for benefits but not receiving them are likely underestimates because of the number of individuals unknown to state systems. Creating connections across benefit systems and deploying a survey tool will generate more comprehensive data on who experiences food insecurity and what barriers these families face in accessing and/or retaining benefits so that DSS can provide tailored support where it is needed.

Support for Underserved Communities

Although pandemic-related supports have helped address food insecurity spikes during the COVID-19 pandemic, social stigma and misinformation about public benefit programs continue to pose challenges for both DSS and county residents.






“Addressing food insecurity is an incredibly complex issue that requires numerous stakeholders to collaborate around the common cause. With this project, Mecklenburg County is partnering with numerous stakeholders representing the many community voices to help steer the project team and ensure all perspectives are included in reducing childhood hunger. By using a human centered design, Mecklenburg County is ensuring that “lived experiences” are involved in every step of this project by utilizing “Food Security Navigators.” These Navigators are staff with lived experiences, embedded in the community and partner with FNS outreach events to better understand the various community needs and barriers to accessing and obtaining food and nutrition services.”

John Eller

Director of Social Services, Mecklenburg County Government

Project Implementation Plan

To address existing barriers, the FSN team will regularly engage with community stakeholders to pursue systemic changes that improve access to nutrition supports. This approach will progressively improve the quality of food programs in Mecklenburg County.

 Plan	 Develop	 Implement
<p>Analyze current nutrition support data</p> <p>Identify service and process gaps</p> <p>Convene community stakeholders</p> <p>Hire and onboard FSN team and new Management Analyst</p>	<p>Identify strategies for improvement</p> <p>Select practice interventions</p> <p>Collect stakeholder and client feedback</p>	<p>Launch service enhancements</p> <p>Map out new service delivery processes</p> <p>Begin developing food security screening tool</p> <p>Finalize evaluation plans with Johnson C. Smith University</p>

Long-Term Goals: Advancing Equity Through a “No Wrong Door” Service Delivery Model

Focusing on the “crescent” of Mecklenburg County—an area with a high concentration of residents with low incomes—will allow DSS to prioritize equity by tailoring its long-term vision for nutrition support improvements to the needs of families experiencing food insecurity at disproportionately high rates. This work will be supplemented by the FSN team that has lived experience with hunger and poverty, which will offer valuable insight into how nutrition supports function. Current DSS clients will have opportunities to provide feedback on how the agency can improve the design and implementation of food programs under their control. In addition to the FSN team, a Management Analyst will be hired to work with community partners on data collection and analysis. This new role will help the county identify strategies for improvement and implement interventions built on collected stakeholder and client feedback.



The agency will continue to strengthen relationships with community stakeholders and regularly analyze feedback from clients to create a “no wrong door” service delivery model. This approach will allow people to access support at various access points, such as community-based organizations, local offices, or Community Resource Centers, and become connected to benefits as efficiently as possible.

Experts at Johnson C. Smith University will conduct an independent evaluation of the project so that successful elements of the project can reach more families in Mecklenburg County. Increased levels of coordination between DSS, County agencies, and community partners will serve as key indicators of the project’s success.