Coordinating SNAP and Nutrition Supports (CSNS) Impact Report:

Michigan September 2023

Background & Context

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), in collaboration with the Food Bank Council of Michigan (FBCM) and Michigan Department of Education (MDE), received a Coordinating SNAP and Nutrition Supports grant to address food insecurity in Michigan with cross-sector data insights. Building upon previous initiatives – such as establishing a cross-enrollment coordinator, forming a food and income supports work group, and conducting analyses on the state's "SNAP gap" – this project aimed to enhance coordination across programs in service of improving customer access to nutrition and other critical services. The collaborative grant team led by MDHHS leveraged the expertise and resources of FBCM and MDE to deepen the SNAP agency's understanding of food insecurity and develop strategies for improving food security across the state. This project represented a continued commitment to innovation and collaboration, aiming to promote the well-being of Michigan residents.

Project Description

The CSNS project in Michigan aimed to enhance their utilization of existing data to identify gaps in program reach. Key objectives included establishing a robust data infrastructure to determine:

- Characteristics and locations of underserved Michigan residents.
- The rate at which food bank and food pantry patrons are connected with long-term nutrition support programs.
- The success rate of providing emergency nutrition support to new SNAP applicants.
- Gaps and redundancies between SNAP, Food Banks, and Department of Education food programs.

These goals formed the basis for developing a shared set of metrics among collaborators addressing hunger in Michigan and guided the creation of a closed-loop referral system and a Food Insecurity Map, which were built to enable targeted interventions and improved coordination across the Michigan food ecosystem.

Logic Model

Objectives

Leverage existing data to improve the client experience and reduce food insecurity in Michigan

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes
• Existing publicly accessible data • Data analyst • MI Bridges application platform	• Promoted an internal MDHHS employee to take on data analysis • Developed food insecurity map with Poverty Solutions • Updated the referral technology in the MI Bridges application platform • Analyzed trends in SNAP and food bank co-utilization	• Published food insecurity map for use by state and community partners • Targeted outreach to underserved communities • Improved referral technology for the state and community partners • Report on food insecurity in Michigan	• Easier access to data related to food and economic security • Deeper understanding of gaps in services • Streamlined service and resource referral for clients • Improved coordination between MDHHS, MDE, and community partners

Impact

Improved understanding of gaps in services used to inform targeted outreach and program improvements to reduce hunger in Michigan

Project Approach

During the planning phase, the Michigan CSNS team divided the project into three major components, each aimed at addressing food insecurity in the state:

1   **Building a Food Insecurity Map**

Initially, the plan was to create a food insecurity dashboard that would align relevant data across the state regarding food needs and resources. However, the planning process revealed challenges in obtaining real-time data on key metrics such as poverty rates, housing burden, workforce participation, and racial demographics. To overcome this limitation and effectively map the data across Michigan counties, the decision was made to shift focus from a dashboard to constructing a map.

The Food Insecurity Map[i] incorporates the locations of MDHHS offices, MI Bridges community partners, food banks, and historical SNAP store locations. It also integrates geography-based data related to poverty, labor, food assistance use, and demographics. The University of Michigan Poverty Solutions Center utilized this map for data analysis, which is summarized in their report titled "Strengthening Food Security in Michigan."[ii] The report provides insights into food insecurity across Michigan, detailing the measurement of the "SNAP gap" across counties, the utilization of the Community Eligibility Provision for district-wide free school meals, and the assessment of existing emergency food infrastructure. These findings not only identify areas where community and public resources can be strengthened but also highlight unique opportunities for targeted strategies.

2   **Creating a Closed-Loop Referral System**

The goal of creating a closed-loop referral system was to lower the administrative burden for clients seeking food assistance by enabling public and private partners to refer community members to available services and resources and to track the outcomes for those referrals.

Originally, the closed-loop referral system was envisioned as a food bank-driven system utilizing QR codes or paper coupons to track referrals between community-based organizations and state agency services. However, during the planning process, it was determined that MDHHS could enhance existing referral technology within the MI Bridges[iii] application, providing a more sustainable long-term solution. Although this change required a higher cost and a longer timeline for implementation, it resulted in a tool with greater utility and the potential for application in other benefits areas. The referral tool was officially launched in October 2022 and is currently in use by community partners for referring clients to services and monitoring the outcomes of those referrals.

3 **Developing Data Analytics Capacity at the State Agency**

The project recognized the importance of having a data analyst on board to enhance the agency's capacity for timely data responses, maintaining the Food Insecurity Map, and conducting data analysis to inform service coordination and process improvements. Michigan identified a promising candidate from within the MDHHS Economic Security Administration—an early career staff member already involved in SNAP program administration. This individual was promoted to the data analyst role, and MDHHS invested in their training to enhance their skills and proficiency in working with the data warehouse and generating reports. To manage the data analysis during the training period, MDHHS partnered with the University of Michigan Poverty Solutions Center, which produced the initial reports based on information collected from the Food Insecurity Map. These reports served as a template for the data analyst to create subsequent reports and bridged the gap while MDHHS expanded its internal capacity to generate these reports.

Results

The Michigan CSNS project yielded significant outcomes, including the development of an interactive Food Insecurity Map. This map proved instrumental in identifying service gaps and informing strategic planning for future investments in addressing food insecurity. Additionally, the launch of the closed-loop referral system in October 2022 witnessed immediate adoption by partners, who began making referrals on behalf of clients even before formal training or alerts were provided. This enthusiastic uptake underscores the tool's necessity and suggests its intuitive usability for experienced users of the MI Bridges platform. Looking ahead, Michigan is committed to tracking the following metrics and feedback to assess the project's impact:

- Number of referrals made
- Number of successful referrals to community food resources
- Number of successful referrals to SNAP
- Client feedback & satisfaction
- MI Bridges navigator efficiency improvements
- Number of Food Insecurity Map visitors

Lessons Learned

☑ **Promoting internal staff paired with investment in professional development poses a promising solution to staffing government innovation projects**

The biggest challenge in this project was to bring on board a new data analyst for a 12–18-month contract due to a combination of the shifting talent pool available during the pandemic, the specific technical skills required, and the temporary nature of the position. This hurdle forced MDHHS to think creatively and explore solutions within their existing staff and partnerships. Ultimately, the team discovered that promoting from within the organization and investing in the professional development of existing staff members proved to be a more effective solution. This challenge also highlights the critical need for stable funding and support to sustain government innovation efforts.

☑ **The process for designing, building, and launching new technology requires significant and ongoing time investments.**

The lead time required for designing, building, and launching the closed-loop referral system was considerably longer than initially anticipated. While the Michigan team initially considered a high-tech solution during the grant proposal planning, they opted for a more modest analogue tool. However, during the execution planning, they realized that a high-tech solution was necessary to achieve their project goals. This shift in approach necessitated additional time and resources for tool design, development, and securing additional funding.

☑ **Engaging trusted community partners from project conception improves the impact and effectiveness of innovation.**

MDHHS forged valuable partnerships with organizations such as the Food Bank Council of Michigan (FBCM), who recognized the limitations of smaller nonprofit members and looked to state government partners to develop systemic solutions like the closed-loop referral system. The collaboration between MDHHS and FBCM was crucial in integrating the expertise of practitioners with direct client contact to ensure the success of the project.

Similarly, the University of Michigan Poverty Solutions Center played a pivotal role in building the Food Insecurity Map and providing insights into the wealth of data that can shed light on factors related to food insecurity. Their involvement helped MDHHS understand the benefits of mapping this data and making it easily accessible in one centralized location for various purposes. MDHHS acknowledges that involving the University of Michigan Poverty Solutions Center earlier in the grant proposal writing stage would have been beneficial in terms of project design and would have streamlined implementation.

Sustainability & Improvement

MDHHS's commitment to expanding cross-functional work aligned seamlessly with the CSNS program, which leveraged existing staff, technology platforms, and project management resources. This strategic approach ensures the sustainability and continuous improvement of the CSNS project components for the foreseeable future. Notably, the Cross Enrollment Coordinator position has become a permanent role, while regular maintenance and upgrades to the MI Bridges application remain integral to MDHHS operations. Additionally, the data analyst position is now a permanent position within the organization.

In the future, MDHHS aims to enhance the MI Bridges application by incorporating the capability to generate reports on successful referrals for immediate food resources and SNAP applications. These reports will enable MDHHS to identify areas and partners that are underutilizing the tool, allowing targeted outreach and support to enhance their skills and engagement. The manager of community partners, supported by various resources such as regular email notices, trainings, and conference calls, will spearhead these efforts.

Regarding the Food Insecurity Map, future upgrades will include the implementation of a traffic counter to track user visits and provide valuable insights into map usage. This information will empower Michigan to tailor and refine the map to better serve the community. The University of Michigan Poverty Solutions Center will continue to host and edit the map based on user requests and identified needs. For instance, the addition of farmers' market locations accepting Double-Up Food Bucks payments is currently underway, following a request from the program manager. As the Food

Project Team Reflections

"Building a relationship with APHSA staff was another benefit above and beyond the grant parameters. Staff members connected us with like-minded colleagues around the country and provided insights into our work gathered from their national experience. Having them as a resource for ideas and perspective was, of course, available prior to the CSNS project, but was strengthened via close, regular contact throughout the project."

"Engagement with peer government agencies across states and counties within the CSNS cohort forged new practices within the benefits delivery landscape with the ability to call upon colleagues working in the same manner to share ideas and resources and compare notes was crucial to success."

Insecurity Map expands with additional data points, it will offer deeper insights into service delivery equity, serving as a valuable resource for both community partners and MDHHS staff in their pursuit of a comprehensive continuum of care across the state.

Expanding the closed-loop referral function within MI Bridges is planned for other service areas, notably housing assistance and utility payments. The Economic Security Administration's data analyst will continue to provide support for these systems. The long-range planning of the MI Bridges management team now includes this expansion, which will be incorporated into the regular calendar of maintenance and updates. Nonprofit partners using the MI Bridges system to assist clients in accessing resources will receive training on utilizing the closed-loop referral system, ensuring its effective utilization and further integration into their workflows.

Key Takeaways

- Cross-sector partners are not only key to delivering food supports, but also invaluable suppliers of program design insight, as was the case in launching the closed loop referral system.
- It is difficult for public and private actors to address equity in food systems when the gaps are hidden, but excitement for tackling this issue has spiked since the launch of the food insecurity map.
- Bringing systemic improvements in food and nutrition delivery to scale requires government investment.

Project Library

- Michigan Case Study: Data-Driven Strategies to Help End Hunger in Michigan

For more information about this project, please reach out to **Morgan McKinney** at **mmckinney@aphsa.org** and **Jess Maneely** at **jmaneely@aphsa.org.**

[i] The Food Insecurity Map will be publicly available in August 2023.
[ii] Cooney, P; Nothaft, A; Jubaed, Samiul. "Strengthening Food Security in Michigan." University of Michigan Poverty Solutions Center. January 2023.
[iii] https://newmibridges.michigan.gov/s/isd-landing-page?language=en_US
[iii] The MI Bridges website simplifies benefit application, benefit renewal, and document submission. The portal also contains a list of local resources and offers text-message reminders. Read more: https://www.digitalbenefitshub.org/case-studies/mibridges-making-online-benefit-websites-work-more-effectively