

Coordinating SNAP and Nutrition Supports (CSNS) Impact Report:

Mecklenburg County, NC

September 2023

Background & Context

Mecklenburg County in North Carolina has a history of collaboration between the Department of Social Services (DSS) and community-based organizations to improve the well-being of families and children. Their Coordinating SNAP and Nutrition Supports (CSNS) project built on this collaboration to streamline access to nutrition resources for under-enrolled communities in the county. The project leveraged data analysis, community collaboration, and food navigators to provide outreach for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Free and Reduced School Lunch, and other emergency food services.



Mecklenburg's Economic Services Division, prior to receiving the CSNS grant, was working to improve eligibility determination and support processes to enhance processing capacity, efficiency, and timeliness for SNAP, which is county-administered under state supervision in North Carolina. Additionally, to better integrate and coordinate services across the large county, Mecklenburg County implemented a Community Resources Center Model that provides integrated services at a centralized location, making it easier for residents to access multiple services.

Project Description

Mecklenburg's CSNS project aimed to improve food security for families and children by simplifying access to wraparound supports, increasing enrollment in public benefits, and coordinating nutrition and economic resources among government agencies and community partners.

To accomplish these goals, DSS partnered with community organizations and individuals who have lived expertise with hunger and nutrition program navigation. These partners helped to identify, inform, and implement process changes that would eliminate obstacles for families accessing SNAP and other resources. The community members also provided feedback, identifying necessary system and process changes that simplify program access and eligibility determination.

Logic Model

<p>Objectives</p> <p>Increase access to nutrition supports to improve food security for families</p>			
<p>Inputs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mecklenburg County Management Analyst • Food Security Navigator team • Built-in project flexibility to account for unknown community needs and solutions for lowering barriers to access public benefits 	<p>Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveyed clients about their experiences of food insecurity and with the benefit system • Collected and analyzed nutrition support data • Regularly convened community stakeholders • Food Navigators conducted extensive outreach campaign 	<p>Outputs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standardized food insecurity screening tool • Community needs & solutions screener • Food education referral form • Consistent community collaborator coordination 	<p>Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16,151 new SNAP enrollments in Mecklenburg County between July 2022 and January 2023 • 529 referrals to community food resources as of January 2023 • Community-identified solutions prioritized in upcoming county system changes
<p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mecklenburg County residents experiencing food insecurity have a better understanding of the resources and services available • Residents find it easier to apply for public benefit programs and access relevant program resources 			

Project Approach

Historically, Mecklenburg families had to travel to multiple locations to access nutrition resources and were often unaware of the community resources available. To address this issue, Mecklenburg County DSS conducted research to better understand the needs and experiences of clients, improve coordination between community collaborators, and provide better support to families navigating public benefits.

Public benefits and community-based resources have operated in siloes, leaving the burden of identifying, locating, and accessing available resources on individuals and families experiencing food insecurity. Mecklenburg DSS aimed to bridge these gaps by bringing together collaborators across public, private, faith-based, non-profit, medical, and philanthropic organizations. An executive steering committee was established to ensure leadership buy-in and interdisciplinary subject-matter experts worked together to develop solutions. Collaborator engagement was initiated by sharing findings from data analysis and identifying potential solutions to address gaps and needs. Regular meetings ensured accountability and collaborative decision-making. The collaborators developed two tools: a survey to capture community member experiences and a referral form for food resources.

To implement these tools, the group created a Food Security Navigator (FSN) team. The FSN team employed navigators with lived expertise accessing public benefits to build trust with the community, share resources, expand partnerships, and create direct channels to hear proposed system changes from DSS clients. Mecklenburg County DSS partnered with Loaves & Fishes/Friendship Trays, the largest feeding organization serving Mecklenburg County residents, to house the FSN team and prioritized lived expertise and language diversity in the hiring process.

Once the FSN team was onboard, they launched an outreach campaign which included attending community events across the county and administering the food insecurity screener. They collected input on needs and solutions to improve access to public benefits and connected community members with food resources, including SNAP, WIC, and other public benefits. While this project served all areas of Mecklenburg County, the primary focus was on a geographic area of heightened need, known as “the Crescent area,” formed by a series of zip codes with high levels of people experiencing poverty and food insecurity.



Results

The community survey tool was the primary method for collecting feedback to improve public benefits access. With 5,382 surveys completed, the Mecklenburg community was eager to share feedback. Survey results highlighted several significant barriers to accessing public benefits, including a lack of awareness of available resources, confusion about how to apply for benefits, transportation issues, work schedule conflicts, and difficulty understanding the application questions.

To address these barriers, the project created an education referral form that provided consolidated information about multiple food resources in one place. This tool led to 529 resource referrals and was well-received by the community. Additionally, the Food Security Navigator team conducted an extensive outreach campaign, attending 370 community events where FSNs interacted with 24,413 community members representing 90% of attendees at all events, and distributing 86,867 outreach materials. This effort resulted in 16,151 new SNAP enrollments, with 9,946 of them being children.

The project's activities had a significant impact on benefit enrollment, with SNAP enrollments increasing to one of the highest monthly rates seen by the county after the Food Security Navigator team began their outreach activities. On average, the FSN team's active campaign led to 1,800 new enrollments per month.

Lessons Learned

- ✔ **Project management and including key collaborators from the outset is key to tracking project activities and impact, as well as avoiding redundant work.**

Mecklenburg's project involved coordinating multiple components and collaborators but lacked a project manager to oversee all activities. This missing role was noted as an opportunity for improvement. In addition, involving internal and external collaborators earlier in the project planning process could have ensured that key activities incorporated all partners' considerations. For example, when the team discovered that a state-wide referral tool was already in development, they scaled back their planned referral tool to avoid redundancy.

- ✔ **Executing a data sharing agreement successfully can take a significant amount of time but can lay the foundation for long-term collaboration.**

Another challenge the team faced was in creating and executing a data sharing agreement. While Mecklenburg DSS successfully established a data sharing agreement with the NC Department of Health and Human Services to receive WIC data, the data arrived too late to be analyzed as part of this project. However, the signed agreement is valid for three years, enabling data analysis moving forward.

 **The Food Security Navigator model is a promising framework for reaching and engaging the community.**

The Food Security Navigator model proved effective at reaching and engaging the community.

The navigator efforts resulted in boosted SNAP enrollment and facilitated robust community input, which attracted interest from other localities and states wanting to replicate a similar model.

However, the staffing requirements of the FSN model are high, making retention during the project and sustaining this level of staffing after project completion a continuous investment.

Sustainability & Improvement

- Mecklenburg plans to continue using the education referral tool and tracking monthly interactions as an ongoing performance measure. They also hope to incorporate the learnings from this project into the future state-wide referral tool and include better tracking of referral metrics, including referral sources and outcomes. Furthermore, Mecklenburg will incorporate community input from survey results into operational and policy changes to improve nutrition program access. The team plans to elevate proposed community solutions in state and national advocacy efforts to enhance program access across the country.
- Loaves & Fishes/Friendship Trays, Mecklenburg's key community partner in the Food Security Navigator model, will incorporate Food Navigators as part of their permanent staffing structure to sustain the efforts of this project.
- The data sharing agreement with the Department of Health and Human Services has been established for three years, which will allow them to carry forward project goals for collaboration with WIC and provide new insights and opportunities.

Key Takeaways

- Prioritizing lived expertise and community engagement through a Food Security Navigator model can enhance access to resources and drive changes in agency systems and processes.
- An effective community outreach campaign can significantly increase SNAP enrollment.
- Mecklenburg community members are eager to share their feedback which is leading to improved program access.
- Coordinating with community collaborators can improve access to food resources. By working with multiple organizations and agencies, Mecklenburg was able to create new initiatives that make it easier for the community to access food resources.

Project Library

- [Mecklenburg Case Study: Strengthening Community Relationships to End Child Hunger](#)
- [Mecklenburg All Access Point](#)

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