Coordinating SNAP and Nutrition Supports (CSNS) Impact Report:

New Jersey September 2023

Background & Context

New Jersey's Coordinating SNAP & Nutrition Supports (CSNS) project built on a steady pulse of progress toward modernizing benefits access in the state. Ongoing modernization initiatives across SNAP and WIC agencies demonstrated New Jersey's focus on and commitment to multi-program innovation.

In the WIC agency, New Jersey was carrying out modernization efforts at the onset of their CSNS project, including the launch of a Participant Portal that new applicants can use to check eligibility, enter information, and securely upload documents. This streamlined the certification process by making client information available to staff at the first point of contact. This also streamlined the WIC customer experience as the Participant Portal can also be used by WIC participants to view upcoming appointments and update information or documents.

In addition to the WIC modernization underway, New Jersey was granted two SNAP Fraud Framework Implementation Grants and two Process and Technology Improvement Grants (PTIG) that supported the development of the state's current eligibility system.

Together with these concurrent investments and innovations, New Jersey's CSNS project promised to benefit from a statewide culture of program modernization, strong project sponsorship from agency leadership, and a strong path toward sustainability. The technology enhancements funded through the CSNS project, further detailed below, served as bolsters to align modernization initiatives across the state's human services ecosystem.

Project Description

The primary objectives of the New Jersey CSNS project were to increase the number of children and families dually enrolled in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) they are eligible for, while simultaneously streamlining the eligibility and case management process.

In service of this objective, the New Jersey CSNS team at the Department of Human Services' Division of Family Development (DFD), the agency that administers SNAP in NJ, developed two critical technology products: 1) an electronic database – the NJ Nutritional Data Hub – co-developed with counterparts the Department of Health (NJDOH), the agency that administers WIC, that allowed agencies to identify and conduct outreach to families receiving SNAP who are eligible for, but not currently participating in, WIC, and vice versa; and 2) a webservice to facilitate efficient and automated adjunctive eligibility between programs.

Logic Model

Objectives

Increase access to WIC and SNAP by building a database of program participants to identify individuals enrolled in one service who are potentially eligible for the other to inform targeted outreach

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes
• Executed data sharing agreement between DOH and DFD • Technical vendor team • Technical project management	• Built web API to connect SNAP and WIC data systems • Initiated SNAP and WIC data matches • Designed and implemented tailored outreach to SNAP and WIC participants • Designed cross-program metrics dashboard	• Database housing participant data from SNAP and WIC • Framework for secure loading of data to database • Outreach letters to lists of individuals on SNAP but not WIC, and vice versa	• The web API has received 39,000 webservice calls since mid-July 2022 (as of April 2023). Roughly 29% of new WIC applicants have been confirmed adjunctively eligible using SNAP data since launch. • 14,168 WIC participants were newly enrolled in SNAP as of May 2023 after outreach letters were sent between October 2022-April 2023 • 5,022 SNAP participants were newly enrolled in WIC as of May 2023 after the first round of outreach letters were sent between October 2022-April 2023

Impact

- Sustainable approach for sharing data across SNAP and WIC that can be scaled to incorporate additional programs
- Targeted outreach methodology that can be continuously improved using data, analytics, and customer feedback

Project Approach

New Jersey's CSNS technical project was executed in three phases, followed by continuous targeted outreach enabled by the technical enhancements made to NJ systems.

Phase 1: WebAPI1 Development & Deployment

A WebAPI was developed and deployed to enable WIC to obtain data about active SNAP participants online and in real time.

- In this phase, enhancements were made to a newly deployed, web-enabled WIC eligibility system to help caseworkers take SNAP participation into consideration when determining the eligibility of WIC applicants.
- Another challenge in this phase of the project was executing the Data Sharing Agreement between SNAP and WIC agencies in the state, which was necessary to enable the exchange and matching of case data. Even with very supportive leadership across agencies, it took significant time to satisfy all parties with respect to legal authority to facilitate disclosure of information on program participants.
- This challenge was successfully overcome by creating meeting spaces including legal and project staff to discuss this project's goals in relation to the relevant privacy/disclosure rules. The data-sharing agreement was critical for the successful launch of the project. Without it, no inter-agency data could have been shared.

Phase 2: Establish a Data Matching Process

In Phase 2, a file transfer and matching process in the NJ SNAP case management system was established.

- The match identifies gaps in participation between the SNAP and WIC programs to inform targeted outreach letters tailored to SNAP or WIC.
- To be accurate, the system required regular updates to maintain synchronization across the databases. Due to staff capacity constraints, exchanging clean, concise data updates became a challenge. In response, the project team built new sorting logic into the data exchange system that automatically sorts duplicates from new case files, thereby streamlining the process.
- A key challenge faced in this phase of the project was to create a secure data transfer, as all data exchanges had to be brokered by the State of New Jersey's Office of Information Technology. To effectively navigate the complexities, the project team implemented cross-program coordination strategies to bring key stakeholders to the table; key network and security personnel from each of the agencies, vendors, and the Office of Information Technology established a standing meeting to work through the identified challenges and build a secure data exchange framework.

Phase 3: Build a Data Dashboard

The team built a data dashboard to view performance metrics.

- The dashboard shows breakdowns of the data by demographic factors such as race, ethnicity, and language, and is used to track progress and identify areas for improvement.

- In addition, these metrics are helping New Jersey identify populations under-enrolled in SNAP and WIC to inform future improvements.

Following the completion and testing of technical project components, the NJ CSNS team began deploying targeted outreach based on matched data.

- The NJ CSNS team used programmed outreach templates and bar-code technology on outreach notices, which allowed the project team to take advantage of their central printing facilities for sending outreach notices in a streamlined manner.
- The barcode technology also provided caseworkers with the ability to view and reprint sent notices, enabling consistent customer communications and quality customer service.

Results

In October 2022, New Jersey sent its first round of targeted outreach letters based on data matches that identified WIC participants who were not enrolled in SNAP, and vice versa.

- As of early May 2023, of the people who received an outreach letter, 14,168 WIC participants were newly enrolled in SNAP and 5,022 SNAP participants were enrolled in WIC.
- This means over 19,000 more children are dually enrolled in nutrition benefits they are eligible for and demonstrates the ongoing progress this new system is likely to have in New Jersey.

Data matches from the new exchange system identified that approximately 50% of active WIC participants in New Jersey were not actively receiving SNAP benefits.

- In the first round of targeted outreach, roughly 80,000 letters were mailed out, indicating a large enrollment gap.
- As of May 2023, a total of 244,000 outreach notices have been sent out. Of these, 88,000 were sent to SNAP-only recipients to encourage participation in WIC, and 156,000 were sent to WIC-only recipients to encourage SNAP participation.

The web API provides useful insights into program characteristics.

- Based on early API calls (which means the WIC eligibility system is using the web API to check if new WIC applicants have active SNAP cases), the team noticed that roughly 30% of new WIC applicants are active SNAP participants.
- This is one example of useful data that could guide program improvement strategies.

The new data warehouse now contains a valid record of all active and inactive WIC and SNAP participants.

- Data is refreshed monthly by batch processes to inform targeted outreach.

Lessons Learned

☑ **Involve key collaborators early to facilitate strong cross-program coordination.**

- This project required a data-sharing agreement between the New Jersey Department of Health and Department of Human Services' Division of Family Development. A key challenge the project team faced was ensuring the data exchange system that would be used to deploy the project upheld WIC and SNAP privacy and disclosure rules. To ensure compliance, the team engaged the Department of Health's legal experts in discussions to align the project with programmatic privacy and security policies. This experience demonstrated that interdisciplinary cross-program teams are critical for aligning systems that have historically operated in siloes.

☑ **Cross-agency and cross-sector project teams need to align on project management tactics.**

- Collaboration on project management was critical to this project's success. This meant aligning timelines with all partners, including outlining additional initiatives that may affect team members' availability. From there, the team set up regular project check-ins to ensure partners were on track to complete tasks in alignment with original standards and goals set during the planning process. These check-ins created space to respond efficiently to capacity-related or other challenges that arose throughout the project period.

- Throughout the course of the project, the team found that WIC and SNAP project team members worked very well together, as both departments had knowledgeable SME and technical staff dedicated to the project. Frequent, comprehensive communication was a key marker of successful collaboration and project management across teams.

Project Team Reflections

"Opening the lines of communication between departments that have traditionally worked in silos was the most difficult part of the beginning stages of this project. Ensuring we created analytics that answered the right questions, and asking the right questions in the first place, was of the utmost importance in this project. The very concept of this project initiated inter-departmental communications at a time when NJ is deepening its focus on its food-insecure population. This project, in many ways, will serve as a benchmark for future projects, and while the scope of this project itself is narrow, the technology and precedents created during the project will undoubtedly pave the way for many future projects."

☑️ **Identify and align technical strategies in early project planning.**

- Ensure data formats and processes are aligned. For example, New Jersey faced barriers to accurate data matching because the departments had different processes for handling special characters such as accented letters in names.
- If one entity's system captures the special characters while the other's doesn't, it can lead to mismatches in the data which brings forth serious equity implications. If there are dissimilarities in how certain data are captured, partners should agree who will take responsibility for converting their respective dataset to match the other.

Sustainability & Improvement

Technical Sustainability & Cross-Program Enhancement Opportunities
- To ensure sustainability of the technical project components, the Project Team completed several weeks of knowledge transfer to assigned members of the maintenance and operations team, which has now taken over operations, defect management, and change requests regarding the enabling technology (web API).
- The web API created for this project is the first outside-facing web service built into the NJ SNAP case management system. This technology can now be easily repurposed for other agencies.

Data-Enabled Program Improvement
- The data dashboard created for this project and early identification of core success metrics are paving the way for future customer-centered enhancements and contributing to a culture of continuous, data-driven improvement across agencies. Through this project, teams across SNAP and WIC agencies had an opportunity to explore baseline metrics such as co-enrollment of shared clients. These metrics are tracked on programmed dashboards that display project information. This data and the shared dashboard visualization of core metrics can help the team identify targeted initiatives to eliminate disparities, like conducting outreach targeted toward underrepresented populations.
- Through the dashboard, the project team intends to track and improve on core metrics in the months and years to come. The data analytics component of the project established monthly batch processes that ensure data are constantly refreshed.

Tailored Client Engagement

- New Jersey SNAP and WIC agencies can also leverage the dashboard to target outreach and refine how clients are engaged. For example, agencies can explore outreach frequency, messaging, and other factors to impact population or geographic trends and to tailor outreach tactics to the needs and preferences of customers.
- The NJ project team also began discussing the possibility of SMS integration, rather than utilizing physically mailed notices. This, however, fell outside of the scope of the current project and may be explored in the future.

Key Takeaways

- Cross-program and cross-agency data alignment and targeted outreach can significantly improve benefits access for eligible individuals and families.
- Interdisciplinary, cross-program teams are critical for aligning systems that have historically operated in siloes.
- Project management strategies drive progress forward and maintain momentum.
- Data dashboards and other tracking tools are necessary to visualize progress and identify areas for improvement.

Project Library

- New Jersey Case Study: Sharing Nutrition Program Data to Raise WIC Enrollment
- Leveraging Cross-Program Data to Modernize Outreach & Enrollment in SNAP and Connected Benefits
- Data Sharing Agreement
- Hunger and Its Solutions in New Jersey

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