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The Road to
ENGAGEMENT
A Toolkit for SNAP E&T Programs

SNAP TO Skills

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The Road to Engagement:
A Toolkit for SNAP E&T Programs

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Introduction

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), administered by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), is the primary source of nutrition assistance for many low-income adults and families. It also helps individuals make ends meet in times of unemployment and underemployment. This support is even more important during economic downturns. To help adults—and their families—gain sustainable employment to become economically self-sufficient, the SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) program provides a range of employment services to SNAP participants, such as assistance preparing resumes and accessing job leads; education, training, or work skills; and supports like transportation and childcare assistance so they can be successful participating in E&T services.

All State SNAP agencies are required to operate a SNAP E&T program, but States have considerable latitude in its design and implementation. This flexibility permits States to make choices within the following framework to customize their program:

- **Employment services** (for instance, supervised job search, workfare, work experience, apprenticeships, education, skills training, and subsidized employment);

- **Wraparound supports** (such as ongoing case management, transportation, and childcare);

- **The location of these services**;

- **Who to serve with these services** (e.g. any work registrant, any SNAP participant).

States have discretion in whether to operate a voluntary or a mandatory SNAP E&T program; they also decide whether to implement a direct referral model, where SNAP caseworkers refer work registrants and other volunteers to E&T services, and/or a reverse referral model, where service providers conduct outreach and refer individuals to the SNAP agency to determine if they are eligible for SNAP E&T. Depending on the State and types of E&T services offered, services can be provided directly by the SNAP agency, American Job Centers, community colleges, or community-based organizations (CBOs).

Although strides have been made nationwide in the development and implementation of SNAP E&T programs, including progress in getting operational systems in place and adding provider partners, participation among SNAP participants in E&T services remains relatively low. SNAP E&T programs could serve more SNAP participants with valuable services and supports to help them improve their economic situations by engaging them in the services offered.

The wide variation in States' E&T programs and the potential number of staff and partners who interact with SNAP participants to inform them about, refer them to, and serve them with E&T services can be daunting to SNAP participants, resulting in missed opportunities to access and successfully complete E&T components and to secure sustainable employment. This toolkit provides a framework and approach to identifying and addressing potential problems that thwart engagement in E&T services among SNAP participants.

SNAP to Skills Technical Assistance

In recent years, FNS has committed to helping States build and grow robust SNAP E&T programs under the SNAP to Skills Technical Assistance project. Building on this investment,

in 2019, FNS contracted with MDRC, in partnership with Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI), to assist seven States (Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island) in improving engagement and participation in SNAP E&T programs.

SNAP to Skills Technical Assistance Participating States
- Colorado
- Illinois
- Kentucky
- Louisiana
- Oregon
- Pennsylvania
- Rhode Island

The approach outlined in this toolkit, one that uses human-centered design and behavioral science to identify participant engagement problems and generate solutions, is derived from the process the MDRC and SJI team has used with the States participating in the SNAP to Skills project. Based on this experience and the team's knowledge of SNAP E&T programs in other States, the team has identified four key junctures, or problem areas, where lack of engagement is common within the SNAP E&T delivery system. These problem areas form the central structure of this toolkit.

This toolkit does not constitute official FNS guidance on SNAP or SNAP E&T.

The Roadmap: How to Use This Toolkit

The Toolkit Roadmap

Introduction | **The Roadmap: How to Use This Toolkit**

Understanding the Issues

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Getting Individuals Interested in SNAP E&T During Their First Point of Contact With the SNAP Agency

PROBLEM 2: Service Matching

Referring SNAP Participants

PROBLEM 4: Reverse Referrals

Establishing Eligibility for SNAP and SNAP E&T Through a Reverse Referral Process

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Map Key

This toolkit is designed to help SNAP E&T programs identify and confront potential engagement problems to improve the rate of participation in E&T services. The roadmap above offers two routes to use this toolkit:

- **Route 1:** Follow the winding road and read the toolkit **cover to cover** to get a sense of the problem-solving framework and how it can be applied to four specific engagement problems and to access worksheets that can be applied to these and other engagement problems.

- **Route 2:** Follow the multi-colored stripes to select one specific engagement problem in **Problem 1**, **Problem 2**, **Problem 3**, or **Problem 4**, and then flip to **Generating Solutions** to see how the problem you selected can be resolved.

How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to help SNAP E&T programs identify and confront potential engagement problems in order to improve the participation rate in E&T services. In many cases, SNAP E&T programs lose potential participants and potential participants miss out on valuable services due to engagement barriers like large numbers of steps, missing information, and confusing or unclear messaging.

This toolkit uses a human-centered design and behavioral science approach to identify four common engagement problems and generate participant-centered solutions. Regardless of whether States experience the same participant engagement problems as those described in this toolkit, or whether the problem of engagement appears at a different point in the service flow, the approach outlined in the toolkit can be used to address a range of problems States encounter in their SNAP E&T programs.

The Toolkit Uses the Following Roadmap:

- **Understanding the Issues:** This section provides a general approach to help identify an engagement problem which includes gathering more information to validate the problem, creating hypotheses to align motives and efforts, and developing a vision statement for the work ahead. In the next four sections, the toolkit outlines four common engagement problems.

- **Problem 1: First Contact:** This engagement problem occurs when an individual initially learns about SNAP E&T services; in many States, this is when an individual applies for SNAP benefits.

- **Problem 2: Service Matching:** This engagement problem can occur during the meeting where SNAP participants are screened for participation in E&T and matched to appropriate services. This generally takes place when an individual is assessed for services and then referred to a service provider.

- **Problem 3: Handoffs:** This engagement problem occurs among the numerous handoffs where SNAP participants are asked to meet or call different agencies (e.g., the State or service provider), interact with different staff members (e.g., eligibility specialist, E&T specialist, case manager, job developer, childcare provider and so on), or physically go to different locations for services.

- **Problem 4: Reverse Referrals:** This engagement problem occurs when individuals who seek out services with E&T providers are connected to the State agency for referrals to SNAP E&T programs.

- **Generating Solutions:** In the final section, a behavioral science approach is used to describe a hands-on solutions process for practitioners and generate and evaluate solutions for the four engagement problems.

- **Appendix:** This section includes worksheets that are referenced throughout the toolkit.

Note that this toolkit describes a particular set of participant screening and referral processes for SNAP E&T to help illustrate engagement challenges and solutions. This is not intended to suggest that these are preferred processes, as such processes are unique across all SNAP agencies and providers.

Understanding the Issues

Understanding the Issues

A Human-Centered Design and Behavioral Science Approach

A human-centered design and behavioral science approach can elevate the needs and experiences of the people for whom services are designed, which in this case are SNAP participants. Three principles underlying this approach are:

- **An empathy-driven curiosity to understand participant behaviors,** like the choices that participants make when interacting with programs that tally up to either showing up or dropping off.

- **A commitment from staff at all levels to focus on the experiences and needs of program participants,** which can include taking the perspective of participants when analyzing problems, learning from existing participant data, and interviewing participants and/or collecting feedback.

- **The practice of design thinking,** an action-oriented, hands-on approach to problem-solving through active brainstorming, prototyping, and piloting ideas.

Even successful programs may lose out on qualified participants when, for example, the eligibility criteria or next steps are not clearly communicated or designed. This approach can help E&T program operators identify these types of challenges in participant experiences and overcome common obstacles to participation.

Selecting a Team

The process of identifying and addressing participant engagement problems requires dedication, preparation, and intent. Before the work can begin, it is important to select a team that can carve out the time and resources to commit to the full process. Select a diverse team of staff members who bring a range of perspectives and who represent different roles in the E&T service flow. It's important to start with a commitment from staff at all levels to focus on the experiences and needs of program participants. Together, they can work to combine a full picture of the participant's experience and collaboratively design the improved experience they want the participant to have.

Examples of Team Members to Include:

- Eligibility workers
- Caseworkers or case managers
- Frontline staff supervisors
- Service provider partners

Participant Personas

This toolkit uses SNAP applicant personas to illustrate what engagement problems may look like from a participant's perspective. The hybrid human-centered design and behavioral science approach is focused on understanding participant behaviors and emphasizes perspective-taking when analyzing problems.

In addition to using participant personas, you may consider integrating feedback loops in the process for gathering input from SNAP applicants and SNAP E&T participants when designing and testing solutions. Feedback from real participants can help elevate the experiences of participants and test if the solutions are working as intended.

The Process

The following sections in this toolkit explore common participant engagement problems within SNAP E&T programs. Each problem section follows the A-D outline below:

A. State the Problem

The process of identifying and addressing engagement problems begins with a problem statement: a simple declaration of a prioritized engagement problem. A problem statement gives direction and specificity to where the team will focus their efforts and helps them prioritize within the constraints of a budget and other resources and demands. Defining a problem statement is an opportunity to unify the team around set priorities.

See the **State the Problem Worksheet** for more information.

B. Gather Information About the Problem

It is important to understand the root causes of the engagement problem in order to develop a right-sized solution that targets the underlying issue. There are many tactics to explore underlying causes, including interviews with participants, interviews with frontline staff, staff-participant observations, and analysis of existing program data, as outlined in the next sections.

See the **Gather Information About the Problem Worksheet** for more information.

C. Create Hypotheses

Get focused by consolidating the information gathered about the problem statement and generating a few hypotheses (or "If…, then…" statements) that may explain the lack of engagement. These hypotheses will allow the team to customize solutions.

See the **Create Hypotheses Worksheet** for more information.

D. Develop a Vision Statement.

Determining a vision statement for the program is like reversing the problem statement. The vision statement shifts the focus from the current engagement problem to the kind of improved experience the team wants participants to have.

See the **Develop a Vision Statement Worksheet** for more information.

Generate Solutions

In the final section, **Generating Solutions**, the example engagement problems are further explored through brainstorming and designing solutions that E&T program operators can develop. Beyond the scope of the highlighted examples, the problem-solving framework can be applied to other common engagement problems that arise in SNAP E&T programs.

See the **Generate Solutions Worksheet** for more information.

Toolkit Sections:
Problems 1-4

Toolkit Section:
Generate Solutions

A. State the Problem → B. Gather Information About the Problem → C. Create Hypotheses → D. Develop a Vision Statement → E. Generate Solutions
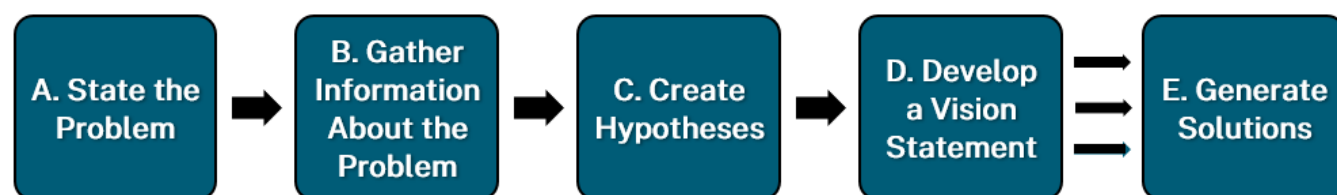
Problem 1:
First Contact

Problem 1: First Contact

Getting Individuals Interested in SNAP E&T During Their First Point of Contact With the SNAP Agency

A. State the Problem

In the SNAP to Skills Technical Assistance project, many of the participating State agencies identified that the first place where individuals hear about E&T services is during the eligibility screening interview. The interview follows the submission of the SNAP benefits application. This initial point of contact is an opening for States to inform the SNAP applicant of the benefits of participating in E&T services, even before the SNAP application is approved. At the same time, depending on States' proces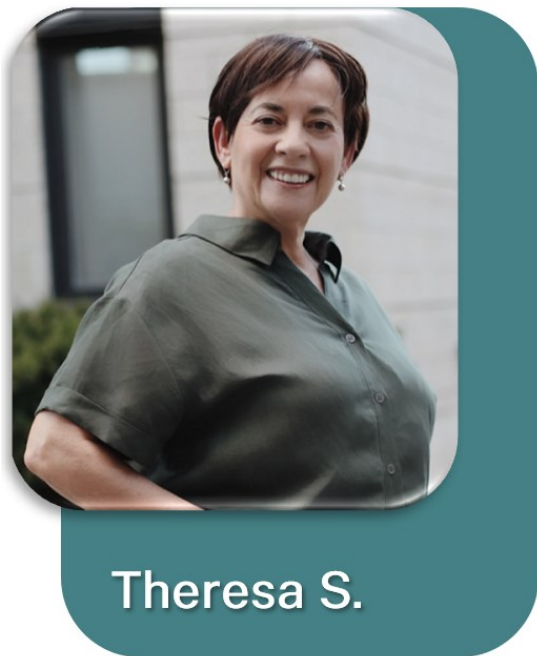ses, this first point of contact can also raise challenges about having the allotted time and resources to share information about E&T.

Theresa S.

Persona Perspective

Theresa is encouraged to apply for SNAP through a friend after being laid off from her job at a grocery store. To learn more, she goes to her State Department of Human Services (DHS) website and realizes she can submit a SNAP application online. Several days later, the State sends her an email with a date for an in-person meeting with an eligibility specialist. Theresa makes plans to borrow her daughter's car to drive to the DHS office since taking the bus would require a transfer.

On the day of the appointment, there is a lot to cover during the initial interview. Theresa doesn't understand all of the terms the eligibility specialist uses and there are many rules and regulations that are overwhelming and confusing. Theresa is more concerned about watching the clock because she is worried that she might be late to pick her daughter up from work. In the last few minutes of the meeting, Theresa learns about SNAP E&T, but it sounds like the program is mostly about supervised job search. Since Theresa is confident that she knows how to search for a job, she isn't interested. At the end of the meeting, Theresa asks the specialist how soon she might expect to receive the SNAP Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card. Following the meeting, Theresa chooses not to follow up about SNAP E&T.

A. State the Problem (continued)

How might this initial contact with the State agency be experienced by a SNAP applicant? Consider the applicant's thoughts and feelings during their initial appointment with a State staff member.

Falling short of making a connection between the SNAP applicant and E&T during the first point of contact is a missed opportunity for both the State and the applicant. This missed opportunity can result in:

- Fewer SNAP applicants served with E&T services downstream;

- A greater level of effort required by the State agency to interest SNAP applicants in E&T services after they have left the agency office; and

- The SNAP applicant not engaging with E&T, and thus potentially missing out on valuable resources that could help them prepare for and obtain quality employment.

The first step in turning an engagement problem into an opportunity is to learn more about why the problem manifests so the team can isolate a focal point around which to generate solutions.

Using Theresa's example, a problem statement at this early stage might be framed as:

> **Problem Statement 1:**
>
> Too few SNAP participants become interested in SNAP E&T services during the first meeting.

To break the problem down further, consider the point in the first meeting when E&T is described. The SNAP application process varies in length, but typically information is shared about the E&T program and whether it is mandatory or voluntary. If participation is mandatory, the State SNAP agency is required to provide additional information on how to comply with SNAP E&T requirements.

In this context, the benefits of participating in E&T services can get buried or lost. For example, some States in the S2S TA project identified that E&T may be covered in the last few minutes of a lengthy interview, making it hard to build excitement for the program. Further, considering that the individual has applied for SNAP benefits to put food on the table, it is easy to understand that anxiety about their next meal can crowd out concern about employment at that moment.

In short, many issues may be present during the first point of contact which makes it difficult to interest SNAP applicants in E&T services. The following are examples of issues that were identified by States in the S2S TA project:

- In a lengthy eligibility interview, it may not be possible for the eligibility worker to fully describe E&T in a compelling way under time pressure.

- The eligibility worker may not have details on the different E&T service options, limiting the quality of information they can provide to the applicant.

- The description of E&T may be limited because the applicant is not yet determined to be eligible for SNAP.

- The description of the benefits of E&T may get lost in the discussion of the rules and regulations surrounding SNAP benefits.

- It may be hard for the applicant to focus on employment when they are worried about how to put food on the table.

- The applicant may not have time to learn more about E&T given other obligations.

- The information provided may be overwhelming, making it hard for the applicant to know how E&T can benefit them.

B. Gather Information About the Problem

Before identifying solutions, it is important to take a deep dive to assess the engagement problem further so that the solutions developed can precisely target the root causes. The goal is to collect information that will provide new perspectives on why a SNAP applicant may fail to be connected to E&T or may not be interested in learning about E&T during their first point of contact.

Potential Data Sources:

- Interviews or focus groups with participants

- Interviews or focus groups with frontline staff

- Staff-client observations to learn how E&T is brought up

- Data available in the State's management information system on participation

Regardless of which data sources the team chooses to use, it is important to look at the problem from the experience of the SNAP applicant (described in the **Understanding the Issues** section). If the team is not able to interview SNAP applicants, another strategy is to take a "walk in the participant's shoes" by considering the following questions from an imagined SNAP applicant perspective.

Think from the Participant Perspective:

- How is SNAP E&T described to you? Are the benefits of participating in E&T services obvious to you?

- How are the outcomes of SNAP E&T described? If you achieve these outcomes, how will they help you?

- Is it clear what action you need to take to enroll in E&T services?

- What steps are you required to take if you are interested in E&T services and how much time and effort will it take you to enroll?

- If you have additional questions, is it clear who you need to contact and how to contact them?

- Are there any services available to you to help you prepare for or seek employment?

The data collected, combined with the consideration of these questions, will allow the team to formulate a few hypotheses about why it may be hard to interest SNAP applicants in E&T services during the first point of contact.

C. Create Hypotheses

Review the data collected and look for trends and common perspectives. Are there one or two educated guesses that emerge regarding what happens at the first meeting that may be driving SNAP applicants to not take the next steps to engage in E&T services? Although there may still be a number of reasons for the lack of engagement, the outcome of this step is to narrow to a few hypotheses that may be causes for lack of engagement during the first point of contact. These hypotheses will allow the team to tailor solutions to these causes in the final section, **Generating Solutions.**

Hypothesis Template

If our agency can improve [participant thoughts or feelings you want to change] at [engagement problem], then we will improve [the outcome we care about].

Example Hypothesis

If our agency can elicit more positive feelings about E&T services at participants' first contact with the SNAP agency, then we will improve the rate of engagement and get participants excited about the services offered.

D. Develop a Vision Statement

The preceding steps have resulted in 1) the development of a problem statement, 2) additional information that helps to illuminate the problem, especially from the perspective of the participant, and 3) a short list of hypotheses suggestive of the underlying causes of the problem. In this next step, the outcome is a vision statement that flips the problem into the type of experience the team wants to provide to all SNAP applicants during the first point of contact. This vision statement will be the touchpoint the team will use to assess whether or not the solutions generated will address the problem statement. As an example, in the S2S TA project, one State articulated its vision as follows:

> **Vision Statement 1:**
>
> We want every SNAP applicant to have a clear understanding of the SNAP E&T services available to them and our commitment to assist them so that applicants can make informed decisions about their participation in SNAP E&T.

E. Generate Solutions

For all the reasons stated above, fostering interest in SNAP E&T services during the first point of contact the SNAP applicant has with the State agency is challenging. Nevertheless, there are a variety of approaches States can take to refine how E&T services are described and the process States can use to encourage SNAP applicants to take the next steps required to engage in SNAP E&T service offerings. More information on the process of generating solutions is covered in the final section, **Generating Solutions**.

Common Engagement Potholes

As a rule of thumb, participant engagement can falter when:

- The individual is required to take too many steps to learn more about E&T.

- There are delays between steps in the process for determining eligibility for SNAP and starting E&T service engagement.

- It is not evident to the individual what outcomes to expect from participating in SNAP E&T program services.

- The next steps are not clearly stated so the individual does not know what to do next if they are interested.

Problem 2: Service Matching
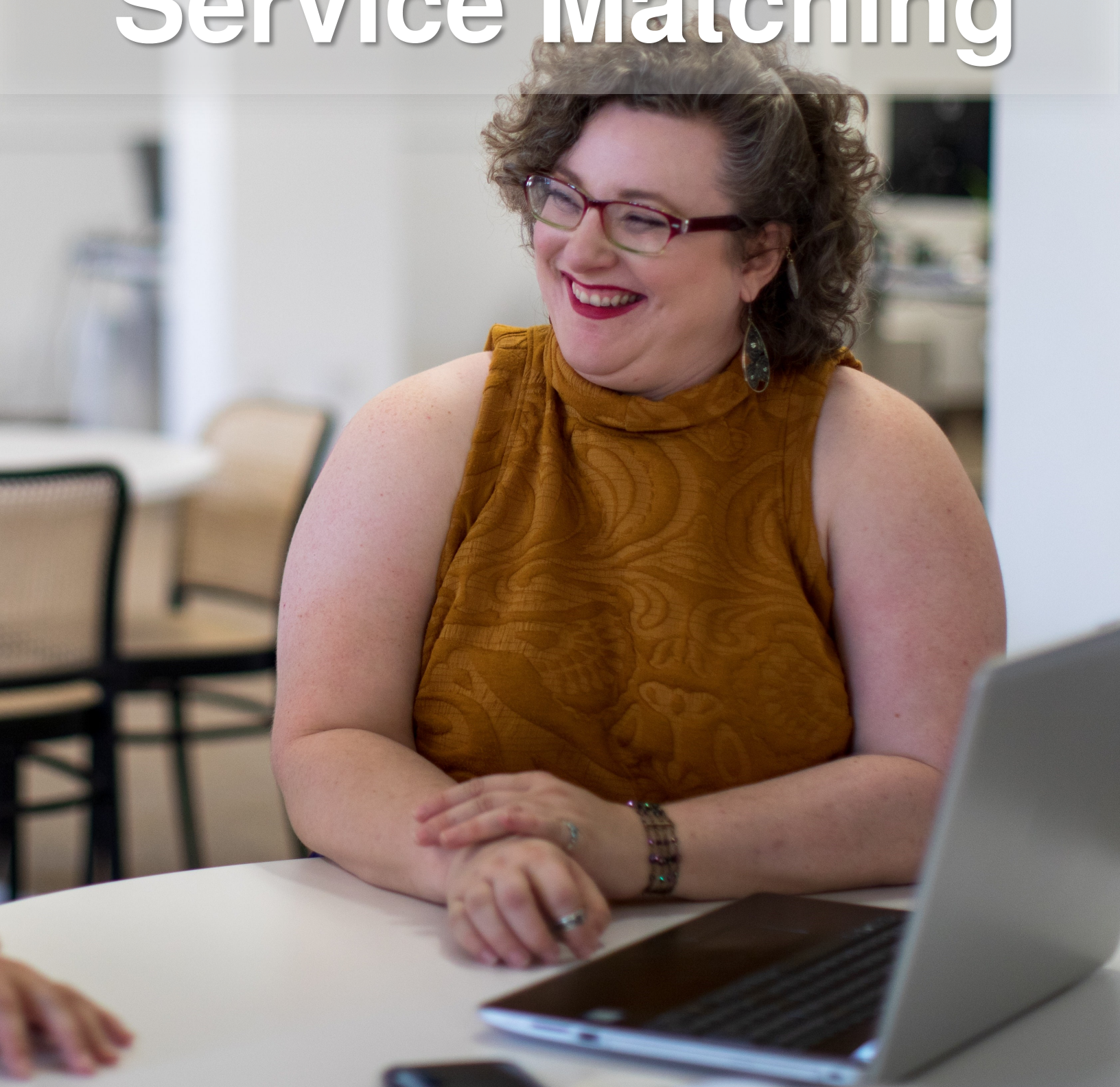
Problem 2: Service Matching

Referring SNAP Participants to the Appropriate E&T Services

A. State the Problem

This section focuses on the challenge of referring SNAP participants to the appropriate E&T services so they can be assisted in taking action toward their employment goals. A key precursor to determining which E&T service provider to refer a SNAP participant to is an employability assessment. States differ in who is responsible for conducting the assessment. In some States, the employability assessment may be conducted by the State agency, and in others, by the partner provider. These variations may depend on factors such as whether the participant's first point of contact is with the State agency (as in the case of a direct referral) or the provider (as in the case of a revers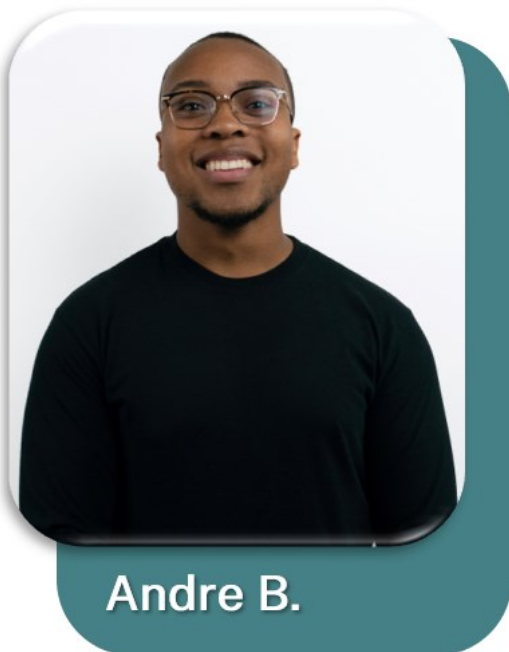e referral). Regardless of who conducts it, the employability assessment is essential for ensuring that a good match is made between the individual's goals and the services provided.

Andre B.

Persona Perspective

Andre is approved for SNAP and schedules an appointment with an E&T specialist for his employability assessment. Andre does not know what to expect, but he assumes he will learn more about the employment services he can use to help him become a municipal bus driver. At his appointment, the E&T specialist asks Andre questions about his current employment situation. He is also asked about his education and work history as well as about barriers that might get in the way of future employment. Andre mentions he has not been able to pay the outstanding parking tickets he got when he was working as a food delivery driver. At the end of the conversation, the E&T specialist refers Andre to a provider for supervised job search but does not ask Andre more about what he needs. Andre does not show up at the service provider because he feels that he is no closer to his goal of receiving the help he needs to obtain a Class B commercial drivers' license to drive a bus.

A. State the Problem (continued)

From a participant's perspective, consider why they may or may not be matched with the appropriate E&T services.

Some participants, like Andre, start their E&T journey with the State agency; others begin at the door of service providers. Regardless of the path taken, if participants are referred to inappropriate services, engagement can wane and present in several ways, including:

- Participants may not show up at the service providers to which they are referred.

- Participants may show up at the service provider after a referral is made, but then stop participating in services.

- Participants may not be able to access the supportive services they may need to participate in.

A poor match is also problematic for the provider, and can result in providers stating that:

- The SNAP participants referred are not a good match for their services.

- Fewer SNAP participants are being referred than anticipated, which may result in the provider deciding not to offer E&T services.

Using Andre's example, a problem statement related to a service mismatch might be framed as:

> **Problem Statement 2:**
>
> SNAP participants with an interest in E&T do not get referred to appropriate E&T services.

Since engagement in the E&T services offered to the individual is partly a function of how well suited the services are to the individual's interests and personal employment goals, it is important to understand why an inappropriate service referral may occur. Examples derived from the S2S TA team's experience working with participating States include:

- The employability assessment may not be conducted as a thoughtful two-way dialogue where the State agency staff member is able to learn more about the participant's interests, what support they need to realize their goals, what steps they are willing to take, and what barriers may stand in the way in taking those steps.

- The State agency staff may not have detailed knowledge of the E&T service offerings at the provider partners.

- There is not enough variation in services offered to adequately serve SNAP participants who need different types of services.

- SNAP participants may not have enough time to sit through a meeting to discuss their personal circumstances and employment goals.

- Participants sit through the assessment but do not have a strong understanding of how the E&T services they are being referred to will meet their employment needs and goals.

- Participants may be referred to service providers that are geographically inaccessible to them.

B. Gather Information About the Problem

Before identifying solutions, it is important to take a deeper dive into assessing the identified problem so that the solutions developed can address its root causes. There are several ways to gather more information about the underlying causes of the engagement problem.

Potential Data Sources:

- Interviews with participants to learn more about their experiences with the employability assessment.

- Interviews or focus groups with frontline staff to learn more about how the employability assessment is conducted.

- Staff-client observations to learn how the employability assessment is conducted.

- Short surveys with staff or participants if interviews /focus groups are not possible.

- Data available in the State's management information system on the number of participants referred to the employability assessment and the number who connect with a referral provider.

- Interviews with service providers to learn whether referred participants are appropriately matched to their services.

Regardless of which data sources the team chooses to use, it is important to look at the problem from the experience of the SNAP participant (described in the **Understanding the Issues** section). If the team is not able to interview SNAP participants, another strategy is to take a "walk in the participant's shoes" by considering the following questions from an imagined SNAP applicant perspective.

Think from the Participant Perspective:

- Were you told how long the assessment and referral appointment would take when the appointment was scheduled?

- Were you given a choice in the date/time for the appointment?

- Was the assessment appointment far in the future? If so, were you given a reminder message/text/card/call?

- Was it clear where the assessment appointment would take place and with whom you would meet? Did you have the person's contact information in case your situation changed and you could no longer make the appointment?

- Did you understand why the person was asking you so many questions and how your responses would be used?

- Did the person make eye contact and make you feel comfortable? Were you given the opportunity to meet with the staff member in a private space?

- Did the person conducting the assessment and making the referral ask you about your short and long-term goals and interests? Did you talk about the types of jobs you would be interested in and which service providers could be good matches for helping to prepare you for those jobs?

- Were you asked about your skills, work experience, and educational attainment?

- Did the person you met with describe different types of services available and how those services would help you meet your employment goals? Was it clear to you what outcomes you might expect if you participated in the services offered?

- Were you given the results of the assessment and provided the opportunity to comment and suggest amendments?

- Were you asked about your availability to participate in E&T services and whether you would be able to get to the provider's office? Did you have a conversation about any personal circumstances (e.g., the need for childcare, lack of transportation or money for gas, unstable housing, etc.) that would make it hard for you to attend? Were support services offered?

- Did you walk away feeling confident that the services to which you were referred would help you?

The data collected, combined with the consideration of these questions, will allow the team to formulate a few educated guesses for what may be getting in the way of a good E&T service referral for SNAP participants.

C. Create Hypotheses

Review the data collected and look for trends and common perspectives. Are there one or two educated guesses that emerge as to what happens during the employability assessment that may result in poor service matches for participants? Although there may still be several reasons for a lack of engagement related to service mismatch, the outcome of this step is to narrow to a few hypotheses on key causes. The process of generating hypotheses will allow the team to tailor solutions to these causes in the final section, **Generating Solutions**.

Hypothesis Template

If our agency can improve [participant thoughts or feelings you want to change] at [engagement problem], then we will improve [the outcome we care about].

Example Hypothesis

If our agency can improve the connection that participants make between their employment goals and what E&T services can offer at the employability assessment and referral point, then we will both help participants learn how E&T services can connect to their goals and improve the rate of engagement.

D. Develop a Vision Statement

The preceding steps have resulted in 1) the development of a problem statement, 2) additional information that helps to illuminate

the problem, especially from the perspective of the participant, and 3) a short list of hypotheses suggestive of the underlying causes of the problem. In this next step, the outcome is a vision statement that flips the problem into the type of experience the team wants to provide all SNAP participants during the employability assessment. This vision statement will be the touchpoint the team will use to assess whether the solutions generated will help realize its vision. A vision statement might be:

Vision Statement 2:

We want every SNAP participant who attends an employability assessment to feel supported and informed about how the E&T services might benefit them and help them realize their employment goals.

E. Generate Solutions

Zeroing in on the 1-2 hypotheses generated around the lack of engagement preceding, during, or following the employability assessment, the team is now ready to generate solutions. More information on the process of generating solutions is covered in the final section, **Generating Solutions**.

Common Engagement Potholes

As a rule of thumb, participant engagement at this point of contact can falter when:

- The referral information provided to the individual does not convey how the services that they are being offered will address their needs.

- The staff who conduct the assessment do not have sufficient information about the service providers to which they are referring SNAP participants.

Problem 3:
Handoffs

Problem 3: Handoffs

Navigating Successful Handoffs

A. State the Problem

Throughout the E&T enrollment and engagement processes, there is typically a multi-step network of handoffs where SNAP applicants and participants are transferred to or asked to connect with different staff members, agencies, or service providers. From the SNAP application to participation in E&T program services, participants may need to be proactive to successfully move forward with each step. Gaps in the multi-step handoffs between the participant, State agency, and service providers can cause the participant to fail to reach the next step or experience fatigue from managing logistics around multiple steps.

Maya G.
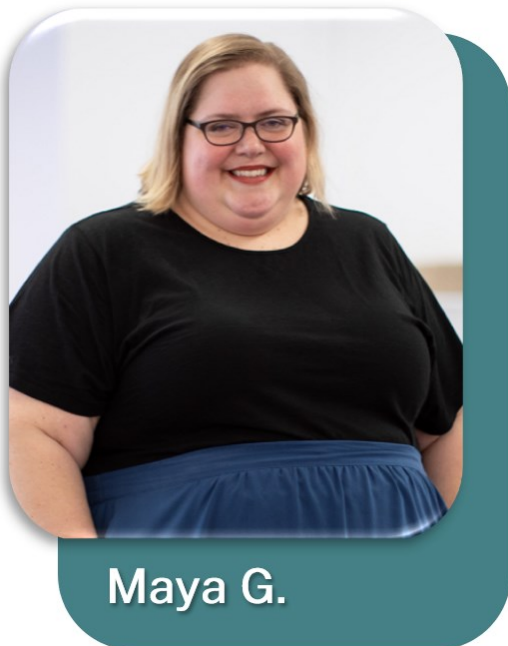
Persona Perspective

Maya decides to reapply for SNAP after she moves out of her ex-boyfriend's apartment and is staying temporarily with friends. Maya first calls the State agency office to ask about SNAP and then learns about E&T from an eligibility specialist. Maya is referred to an in-person appointment with a case manager to learn more about the program. After missing her appointment, she makes another call to reschedule. It takes Maya several connections with different staff members to enroll in SNAP E&T, which requires taking her 2-year-old daughter with her on the bus. After that, she connects with an E&T service provider and coordinates with job developers and childcare providers. Inevitably, Maya will need to successfully pass through many handoffs in order to enroll in SNAP E&T and keep up with program services.

A. State the Problem (continued)

From a participant's perspective, consider why the number, timing, and manner of handoffs might result in a failure to engage in E&T services. A difficult-to-navigate system of handoffs can present in multiple ways, including:

- Participants may not show up for appointments with the State agency that are required for SNAP and SNAP E&T participation.

- Participants may not show up at the service providers to which they are referred.

- Participants are not able to access the supportive services they may need.

- There may be a large delay between steps.

- The State agency or service provider may fail to connect participants with the next steps.

Using Maya's example, a problem statement related to handoffs might be framed as:

> **Problem Statement 3:**
>
> Participant drop-off between handoffs can explain the difference in the number of participants who express interest in SNAP E&T during their first contact and the number who engage in services with program providers.

Failure to take the steps necessary to begin or continue engagement in E&T services that results from challenges navigating handoffs will lead to a drop-off in service participation. A participant's drop-off related to navigating handoffs could be attributed to:

- A lack of clarity around the next steps with the State agency or service providers.

- A lack of urgency around the next steps with the State agency or service providers.

- An extended delay between steps in the process or before the start of services.

- Burnout or fatigue from navigating a long, multi-step process.

- A lack of reminders about upcoming appointments.

- An agency culture that perpetuates stigma and feelings of shame around receiving public benefits.

- A lack of updated contact information when the participant changes phone numbers or email addresses.

- A lack of transportation, childcare, or phone/Internet access.

- A change in life circumstances.

B. Gather Information About the Problem

Before identifying solutions, it is important to take a deeper dive into assessing the problem so that the solutions developed can address the root causes of the problem. There are several ways to gather more information about the underlying causes of the engagement problem.

Potential Data Sources:

- Interviews with participants to learn more about their experiences at different steps in the process.

- Interviews or focus groups with frontline staff to learn more about the sequence of steps in the process and common drop-off points.

- Data available in the State's management information system on participation at several steps in the process.

- Interviews with service providers to learn about drop-off during the service matching steps.

The goal is to collect information that will provide new perspectives about why there may be participant drop-off between handoffs.

Regardless of which data sources the team chooses to use, it is important to look at the problem from the experience of the SNAP participant (described in the **Understanding the Issues** section).

If the team is not able to interview SNAP participants, another strategy is to take a "walk in the participant's shoes" by considering the following questions from an imagined SNAP applicant perspective.

Think from the Participant Perspective:

- How were the E&T program services described to you? Was it obvious what the benefits of participating in the services are? Were you interested in the services?

- Did the State agency connect you directly to a staff person who could help you complete your application or learn more about SNAP E&T? Or did the provider follow up to see if you made the connection or needed assistance in your application?

- Were you given clear information and the next steps required?

- How much time passed between one step and the next? Were there any significant delays?

- Were you sent reminders about upcoming appointments?

- Did the State agency or service provider help address any childcare or transportation needs?

- Did the State agency or service provider ask for updated contact information throughout the process so they could best stay in contact with you?

- Were there any life circumstances that changed your availability or interest in participating in the services?

The data collected, combined with the consideration of these questions, will allow the team to formulate a few hypotheses about why it may be hard for SNAP participants to navigate the handoffs required to successfully participate in SNAP E&T services.

C. Create Hypotheses

Review the data collected and look for trends and common perspectives. Are there one or two educated guesses that emerge as to why SNAP participants are not able to successfully navigate handoffs required to engage in SNAP E&T services? Although there may still be several reasons, the outcome of this step is to narrow to a few hypotheses that may be causes for lack of engagement related to the difficulty of navigating handoffs. These hypotheses will allow the team to better tailor solutions in the final section, **Generating Solutions**

Hypothesis Template

If our agency can improve [participant thoughts or feelings you want to change] at [engagement problem], then we will improve [the outcome we care about].

Example Hypothesis

If our agency can improve participants' levels of motivation at various handoff points, then we will improve the drop-off rate between steps during the process flow.

D. Develop a Vision Statement

The preceding steps have resulted in 1) the development of a problem statement, 2) additional information that helps to illuminate the problem, especially from the perspective of the participant, and 3) a short list of hypotheses suggestive of the underlying causes of the problem.

In this next step, the vision statement flips the problem into the type of experience the team wants to provide all SNAP participants related to ensuring that they successfully navigate handoffs. This vision statement will be the touchpoint the team will use to assess whether or not the solutions generated will address the problem statement. An example of a vision statement might be:

> **Vision Statement 3:**
>
> All prospective SNAP E&T participants will be given clear and accurate instructions for navigating the SNAP E&T enrollment process and services.

E. Generating Solutions

Zeroing in on the 1-2 hypotheses generated around the lack of participant engagement related to the navigating handoffs, the team is ready to generate solutions. More information on the process of generating solutions is covered in the final section, **Generating Solutions.**

Common Engagement Potholes

As a rule of thumb, participant engagement at this point of contact can falter when:

- There is a significant delay after intake or between steps.

- The program does not make the next steps or expectations clear to participants. Participants may not know where they have been referred.

- The program does not send reminders to participants about upcoming appointments.

- The program does not make a clear link between an action, like agreeing to an initial SNAP E&T referral, and how that action will

benefit the participant. Emphasizing the benefits of E&T services is particularly important for voluntary programs.

- It is not clear to the participant where they are being referred, who their point of contact is at the referral provider, and/or how they are going to get to the provider.

- Every additional step requires time and effort, and participants may lose interest if the time or effort becomes too great.

Problem 4: Reverse Referrals

Problem 4: Reverse Referrals

Establishing Eligibility for SNAP and SNAP E&T Through a Reverse Referral Process

A. State the Problem

In a reverse referral process, a potential participant first interacts with E&T through a service provider. The individual's journey starts when they seek out the employment and training services offered by a specific E&T provider. Provider staff may complete an employability or similar assessment of the individual to determine if the organization's services are a good match for the individual's needs. If there is a good match to the provider's services (and those services are approved SNAP E&T services), the provider will communicate with the State agency to determine if the individual is a SNAP participant and if they can participate in E&T. Problems in the reverse referral process may cause potential participants to drop off prior to being referred by the State agency as an E&T participant and commencing E&T services.

The reverse referral process requires a back-and-forth exchange between the service provider, the State agency, and the participant, and presents gaps at which the potential participant could disengage, failing to enroll and participate in SNAP E&T services. Since the reverse referral process is centered on the service provider, it is assumed that it would be the service providers that would engage in the steps outlined in this section to come up with solutions to address the problem.

Janae S.

Persona Perspective

Janae connects with Goodwill, a local service provider, because she heard about their nurse aide certification program from a woman at her church. She's worked in customer service on and off for years and is having trouble making ends meet. When she meets with a worker at Goodwill, she learns about E&T services and expresses some interest in learning more. Because Janae is not a SNAP participant, she is referred to the State agency to be screened for eligibility. However, the SNAP certification process is postponed, resulting in a delay before she can access E&T services. As time goes by, Janae gets busy with other things and loses momentum. She never hears back about E&T services and does not follow up.

A. State the Problem (continued)

From a participant's perspective, consider why the steps involved in the reverse referral process might not result in the individual becoming eligible for SNAP and thus engaging in E&T services. Problems related to the reverse referral process may present in many ways, including:

- Participants may not be certified for SNAP and become eligible for E&T in a timely fashion.

- Participants may not show up for appointments with the State agency that are required to become eligible for SNAP.

- Participants may express a lack of understanding about why they are being referred to apply for SNAP when they went to the service provider for assistance.

Using Janae's example, a problem statement related to reverse referral might be framed as:

> **Problem Statement 4:**
>
> Too few individuals who seek out services at an E&T provider and appear to be eligible for SNAP are enrolled in SNAP and referred to E&T and thus miss out on obtaining enhanced services supported by E&T funding.

Failure to take the steps necessary to enroll in SNAP and become eligible for E&T may stem from frustration or confusion on the part of the potential participant. This can be the result of a reverse referral process that involves delays, duplicative or burdensome steps, an absence of or ineffectual communication, and possibly the lack of coaching and support. A service participant's engagement in taking the next steps to apply for SNAP could be attributed to:

- A lack of clear communication on the steps the participant needs to take to apply for

SNAP and referred to SNAP E&T.

- A delay in filling out paperwork after leaving the provider's office.

- The individual's determination after they meet with the provider is that they are not interested in the E&T services offered, so they do not follow up with applying for SNAP.

- A potential feeling on the part of the individual is that there is a stigma attached to asking for government benefits.

- Lengthy delays in the start of services while waiting for eligibility determination and referral to E&T.

At the same time, the service provider may also confront challenges in following through to verify SNAP enrollment and eligibility to participate in E&T. These challenges might be the result of:

- Lack of a direct channel to the State agency to verify eligibility while the participant is at the provider's office.

- Staff workload limiting the time available to walk through or help the individual to complete a SNAP application.

- Inability to reach the individual after they leave the provider's office to remind them of the steps they need to take to complete the application.

- Delays or issues with obtaining SNAP E&T eligibility verification.

B. Gather Information About the Problem

Take a deeper dive into assessing the problem so that the solutions developed can be tailored to the root causes of the problem. There are several ways to gather more information about the underlying causes of the engagement problem.

Potential Data Sources:

- Interviews with participants to learn more about their experiences at the provider and what they understand about SNAP and E&T.

- Interviews or focus groups with provider staff to learn how they describe SNAP and E&T to individuals during intake.

- Short surveys with provider staff or participants if interviews/focus groups are not possible.

- Staff-client observations to learn about how intake is conducted and how the services are described.

- Data available in the providers' management information system on the number of individuals who are asked during intake whether they meet the criteria for SNAP and who are referred to the State agency, compared with the number who are verified as SNAP participants, the number of SNAP participants who are referred for E&T, and the number who follow through and begin receiving services.

Regardless of which data sources the provider chooses to use, it is important to look at the problem from the experience of the individual (described in the **Understanding the Issues** section).

If the provider is not able to interview individuals, another strategy is to take a "walk in the participant's shoes" by considering the following questions from an imagined SNAP applicant perspective.

Think from the Participant Perspective:

- How were the program services described to you? Were the benefits to you obvious? Did you think the benefits would support you in achieving your employment goals?

- Was it clear how the provider was using the questions asked on the provider's intake or assessment form to help you?

- Did the provider follow up to see if you made the connection or needed assistance in your application for services with the provider?

- Did the service provider ask if you are currently receiving SNAP? Was it clear why they were asking you about SNAP, or how this benefit is relevant to the services the organization provides?

- If you are not participating in SNAP, did the organization provide you with information on the process for applying for SNAP? Did they guide you through the application process?

- Do you feel comfortable applying for government benefits?

- Did the organization explain to you what would happen if you were not eligible for SNAP?

Now consider the questions from the perspective of the service provider's frontline staff who interact with the service participants:

- Were you able to conduct a pre-screening to see if the participant should apply for SNAP?

- Do you feel sufficiently knowledgeable about the SNAP application process such that you are able to answer participant's questions and guide them through the steps they need to take to apply for SNAP?

- Are you knowledgeable about the services your organization can offer a participant if they are a SNAP participant and referred to E&T?

The data collected, combined with the consideration of these questions, will help the service provider generate hypotheses about the nature of the problem; these hypotheses will become the focal point for generating solutions.

C. Create Hypotheses

Review the data collected and look for trends and common perspectives. Are there one or two educated guesses that emerge as to what happens during the reverse referral process that results in individuals not becoming eligible for SNAP E&T?

Although there may still be several reasons, the outcome of this step is to narrow to a few hypotheses that may be causes for lack of engagement related to reverse referrals. These hypotheses will allow the team to tailor solutions to them in the final section, **Generating Solutions**.

> **Hypothesis Template**
>
> If our agency can improve [participant thoughts or feelings you want to change] at [engagement problem], then we will improve [the outcome we care about].
>
> **Example Hypothesis**
>
> If our agency can improve participants' levels of feelings of frustration with navigation the SNAP application steps before being referred to E&T, then we will improve access to E&T services.

D. Develop a Vision Statement

The preceding steps have resulted in 1) the development of a problem statement, 2) additional information that helps to illuminate the problem, especially from the perspective of the participant, and 3) a short list of hypotheses suggestive of the underlying causes of the problem. In this next step, the outcome is a vision statement that flips the problem into the type of experience the provider partner wants to provide all SNAP participants related to ensuring that their reverse referral process leads to eligibility for SNAP and SNAP E&T.

This vision statement will be the touchpoint the team will use to assess whether or not the solutions generated will address the problem statement. An example of a vision statement for the type of experience the provider wants to provide participants might be:

> **Vision Statement 4:**
>
> Every new participant seeking employment services who is seemed a good match for our services will be provided with assistance in applying for SNAP and access to clear information about how E&T services can benefit them.

E. Generate Solutions

Zeroing in on the 1-2 hypotheses generated around the lack of engagement related to the reverse referral process, the provider is now ready to generate solutions. More information on the process of generating solutions is covered in the final section, **Generating Solutions**.

Common Engagement Potholes

As a rule of thumb, participant engagement at this point of contact can falter when:

- The program does not make a clear link for the participant between an action, like agreeing to apply for SNAP, and how that action will benefit them.

- Every additional step requires time and effort, and participants may lose interest in the services they need if there are too many steps involved with accessing E&T services.

Generating
Solutions

Generating Solutions

How can States and their partners go about solving the SNAP E&T participant engagement challenges they have identified? This section of the toolkit describes a behavioral science approach that can help teams generate and evaluate solutions. The approach, set out in the form of several activities, can be applied to a range of engagement problems beyond the examples featured in this section. This section includes team-oriented steps with estimated activity times to help practitioners use and plan for these exercises.

The end of this section features example solutions for the four engagement problems.

Step 1: Center on the Vision Statement

Activity Time: 5 minutes

Teams likely have many ideas about how to improve participant engagement in E&T. Centering on the vision statement for the selected engagement problem encourages team members to target their solutions to the SNAP applicant or participant's experience.

Activity: One-Word Exercise

- Instruct each team member to close their eyes and picture a SNAP participant, either one they have met or one they have heard about.

- Ask each team member to then take the SNAP participant's perspective and imagine how they would feel in a world where the vision statement represents their experience. Then ask them to describe that feeling in one word. *Example words might be "supported" or "informed."*

- Ask each team member to share out their word. See where there is overlap.

Step 2: Generate a Long List of Potential Solutions

Activity Time: 30 minutes

*Teams should use the **Generate Solutions worksheet** to facilitate this session.*

The goal of this session is to come up with a range of solutions and to stretch the team's thinking. Each brainstorming round will be focused on a solution category (written communication, oral communication, process change, and environment change), as outlined below.

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Written Communication Change

This category revises the content, layout, or organization of existing participant-facing written materials and/or creates new materials (letters, brochures, webpages, text messages, emails, and so on). Communications should clearly present key information at appropriate times and in accessible formats and languages.

Oral Communication Change

This category involves providing participant-facing staff with new scripts, talking points, and approaches for interacting with participants. These can range from general guidance to very detailed scripts depending on the context, staff members, and goals.

Process Change

This category involves altering the steps a participant passes through during their participation in SNAP E&T. A step may be added or removed or a new pathway between two phases of participation may be created. Often, the goal of a process change is to reduce the lag time a participant might face or to shift a difficult step from being the responsibility of the participant to that of the system.

Environment Change

This category involves altering the physical (or increasingly, virtual) spaces where participants interact with the program. Some changes can involve substantial redesigns of office layouts and buildings. Others can be as simple as moving a few chairs to make an interaction feel different to a participant.
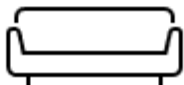
This activity involves four rounds of solution brainstorming sessions, each lasting 3-5 minutes.

Activity: Solution Brainstorm

- Instruct your team to prepare for 4 quick brainstorm rounds, each lasting 3-5 minutes. Each team member should be equipped with a pen and paper. To ensure that the team covers different approaches, use common categories of broad solution types: written communications, oral communications, process changes, and environment changes.

- Start with the category of written communication. Give team members 1 minute to quietly write how they might redesign or add written communication materials like letters, emails, or text messages to improve the participant's experience.

- Then, give team members 5 minutes to share solutions round-robin style, encouraging members to layer on new ideas.

- Repeat this process for the remaining 3 categories (oral communication, process change, and environment change). This activity will generate a long list of solutions, that is, more solutions than teams will be able to work on effectively. Don't worry! In the next step, teams will focus on prioritization.

- Probe team members to identify even more solutions or to help with writer's block. For example, if each team member received $1 million towards improving the participant experience, how would they do it? What if they received zero dollars? If the team had an additional staff member specifically to improve participant engagement in SNAP E&T, what activities would that staff member perform?

- The next steps will focus on prioritization. For now, the team's facilitator should preserve all the ideas and the team should review them periodically in case they are relevant later or resources become available to try additional innovations.

Tips for Facilitation:

- Establish group norms where all ideas are welcome. The more ideas the better.

- Allow for independent thinking, writing, and group discussions; different team members may have different preferred styles of thinking through new ideas.

- Think about team dynamics and, if possible, avoid putting team members in the same group as their direct supervisor. Team members are welcome to build or add on to solution ideas but should avoid criticizing any ideas.

- Encourage team members to share all ideas, even if they feel impossible. Often a wild idea resonates with someone else in the group and inspires a more plausible solution that retains the original idea's motivation and goal.

Step 3: Evaluate and Prioritize Solutions

Activity Time: A 10-minute survey plus 30-60 minutes of prep time

In this step, team members will work independently to prioritize the key solution components they want to move forward with. The best solutions rate highly across all three dimensions, indicating the solution improves the participant's experience, is likely to increase outcomes (e.g., participant engagement), and is possible to try quickly. If a solution is of high value but would require more time, consider selecting both a one-month and six-month solution. The following page includes a Decision Matrix that can be used by teams to help them rate their ideas.
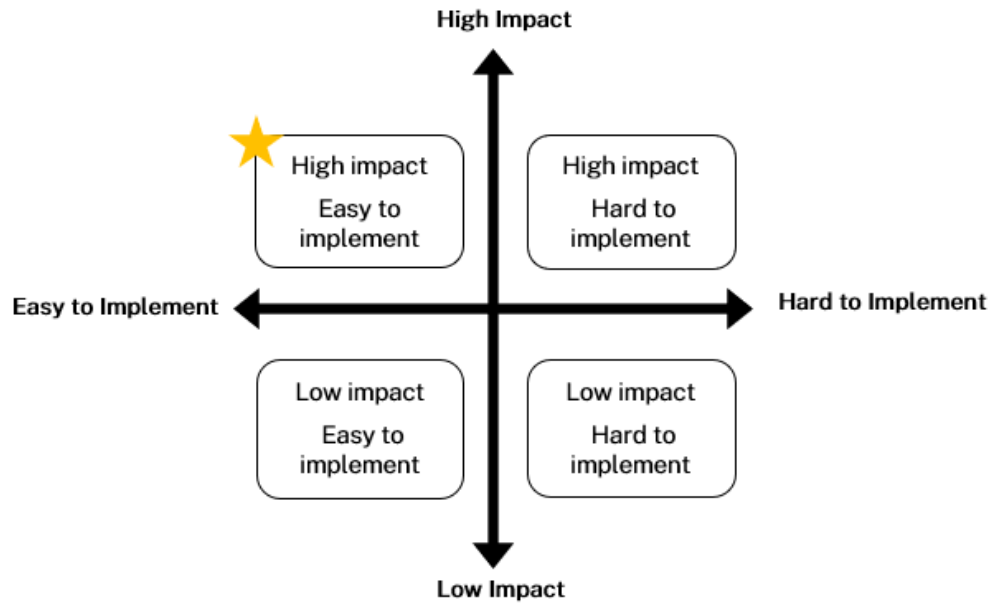
Activity: Prioritize Solutions

- Set up an anonymous survey, preferably using a web tool like Microsoft Forms or Google Forms, to encourage team members to rate potential solutions that were generated during the brainstorm. Encourage team members to freely express a range of perspectives in the survey.

- Design the survey to ask each team member to evaluate potential solutions across three dimensions, rating each solution as "low," "medium," or "high" regarding its:

  - **Connection to the Vision Statement:** How well does this solution align with the team's participant-centered goal? Ideally, this solution would benefit the participant's experience.

  - **Impact:** How much potential does this solution have to improve the outcome(s) the team cares about, as identified in its problem statement and vision statement? Considered another way, how many barriers does this solution solve or how significant are the barriers that this solution solves? Team members should think through what other barriers participants face that this solution does not address.

  - **Feasibility:** Could the team pilot these solutions next month? How many individuals or offices would need to approve moving forward with this?

- Review survey results to identify the highest-rated solutions. See the decision matrix to help think about evaluating based on impact and feasibility.

Quick Tip: Don't Wait for Solutions to Be Perfect

Trying at least one solution quickly, even in one office or with ten participants, can encourage a key habit of piloting new approaches. The faster a solution is tried, the easier it may be to decide whether it is helpful. This allows for learning by doing instead of spending time and money only to discover once a new strategy or system is rolled out that it does not reach participants as hoped.

Decision Matrix

High Impact

⭐ High impact Easy to implement	High impact Hard to implement

Easy to Implement ← → **Hard to Implement**

Low impact Easy to implement	Low impact Hard to implement

Low Impact

Step 4: Launch a Solution

Activity Time: Several team meetings

The steps below outline how teams can get a great solution idea from idea to reality.

A. Make a Prototype

A prototype is a simplified version of the solution that allows its functionality to be tested in order to gather feedback. Teams are encouraged to make prototypes—no matter how crude or rudimentary—right away. Turning an idea from words into something more tangible can help a team to see new aspects of how participants might experience the solution and identify challenges to be overcome for implementation.

Some ideas, like changes to written communication, are easy to imagine as a prototype. The team can quickly mock up a new letter, for example.

Less tangible ideas, like changes to oral communication, can be prototyped, too. The team could write up scripts or storyboards or even act out the new protocols for an eligibility worker communicating about SNAP E&T.

Fortunately, prototyping is not an art competition. The team should strive to make the prototype embody the idea and its goals. It can look nice, too, but clearly capturing the concept is most important.

Often creating the prototype triggers the team to think about what resources they might need beyond the team to continue to evolve the idea into something ready to interact with the public.

B. Gather Resources

Once the prototypes are complete, the team should review them and brainstorm a list of resources the team will need to take the idea from prototype to implementation. For instance, new mailings often need input from IT and operations staff members so the designs can be integrated into the mailing system.

A new text message reminder may require additional fields in the management information system or specific work with a third-party vendor. Many different ideas may require approval from leadership or consultation with regulatory staff members. It is better to identify these resources early and include them as needed in developing the prototype.

C. Refine Prototype

The first draft of a prototype is a great starting place. Teams should continue to elaborate on their early prototypes, adding more detail and applying new insights. Knowing that the prototype will continue to change and evolve helps the team to be open to feedback and continue to move the prototype closer to the vision statement.

D. Get Feedback

As soon as possible, teams should try to get feedback from staff members and participants. The team should plan to share early prototypes with the staff members who will be responsible for using the prototype with participants. If participants are accessible and willing, getting their feedback early and often can be invaluable. The team should welcome all feedback and consider critiques that challenge assumptions about how staff or participants might interact with the prototype.

E. Refine Prototype Again

Using feedback and working with other stakeholders and partners, the team should continue to improve the prototype. If the prototype is not evolving, the team is likely not getting enough feedback or is not being responsive to feedback they do get. At this step, the team finalizes the core functionality of the prototype.

F. Plan

Before the pilot launches, the team should make a detailed plan for piloting the prototype,

including how the effectiveness of the piloted prototype will be measured. The plan should focus on the nuts and bolts of implementation and concretely describe any necessary training and materials. A surprising number of pilots of well-designed prototypes neglect to account for the need to train the staff delivering them. The plan should also specify how long the pilot should run.

The plan should set out the evidence that will be used to determine if the pilot is a success and/or if the prototype needs further revision. The assessment could take many forms. To start, the team should think about the quantitative and qualitative data they used to better understand their problem. This same data can be leveraged again to better understand a solution. The data could be the statistical analysis of outcome data like SNAP E&T participation or referral rates (with or without a control or comparison group). The team should be sure to check that any data systems needed for assessment are operating as expected. Data could also be qualitative feedback from participants and staff collected through interviews and direct observation. Most importantly, the team needs a pre-planned strategy to know if the prototype is achieving the vision statement that inspired it.

G. Pilot

By reviewing program data and conducting observations, the team should closely monitor the implementation of the prototype and document how this solution is or is not going according to plan. If needed, the team should consider additional training or support to ensure improvement. The team should, according to their plan, look at evidence of the success and failure of the pilot. If the prototype performance meets expectations, the team should continue to roll out full implementation. If needed, the prototype can be further refined and the pilot can continue, or the team can choose to discontinue the pilot and explore other options.

Solution Examples

The following examples illustrate solutions that have come out of SNAP to Skills TA brainstorm sessions. The solutions also make note of the four solution categories from the brainstorming process (Written Communication, Oral Communication, Process Change, Environment Change). Note that while the four categories can be useful frameworks for brainstorming, a solution idea may evolve to encompass elements from multiple categories.

Problem 1: Getting Individuals Interested in SNAP E&T During Their First Point of Contact With the SNAP Agency

Example Solutions From SNAP to Skills TA:

- A State could develop a small paper card (the size of a business card or postcard) that outlines key steps for what it means to successfully participate in SNAP, including not only food-related activities and important compliance steps but also when and how to engage with E&T. The cards could be provided to applicants like Theresa at in-person intake interviews or mailed after remote or online applications are approved. **(Written)**

- A State could develop a participant-facing process map or timeline that integrates E&T steps with other SNAP milestones for applicants like Theresa. State SNAP agencies can highlight that E&T is an integral part of SNAP and can offer additional benefits to the participant. **(Written)**

- With increased call volume, many SNAP applicants experience substantial hold time on calls before they can speak to a caseworker. In many States, music is played or there is silence while the applicant is waiting. A program could utilize the hold time to provide applicants with recorded information about SNAP E&T including current opportunities, success stories from

Theresa S.

Problem 2: Referring SNAP Participants to the Appropriate E&T Services

Example Interventions From SNAP to Skills TA:

- Staff could develop and use a pre-assessment interaction tool designed to elicit the participant's employment goals and connect the assessment and subsequent activities to those objectives. **(Written)**

- In describing the assessment, staff could be provided talking points that destigmatize the assessment itself and reframe it in supportive terms that connect to the participant's goals. **(Oral)**

- After the employability assessment, some participants have difficulty understanding how assigned activities can connect with their employment or career goals. A tool to review assessment results and map them to long-term goals could help close this gap. It could also be a physical item a participant like Andre could keep, reminding him of his next steps. **(Written)**

Andre B.

Problem 3: Navigating Successful Handoffs

Example Interventions From SNAP to Skills TA:

- A State might develop a new interactive framework for staff to ensure that participants like Maya fully understand why a handoff is happening and what to expect. Effective explanations for why the handoff is happening can enhance trust in the process and reduce uncertainty and avoidance. Some staff members are likely already very effective at this and their strategies could be the basis for new best practices. **(Oral)**

- Similarly, clarifying what will happen next (and following through!) will alleviate participants' concerns about getting lost in the system. **(Oral)**

- Finally, staff members can provide clear recourse for the participant if the hand-off does not go as expected, expanding participant agency and perceived control. **(Oral)**

Maya G.

Problem 4: Establishing Eligibility for SNAP and SNAP E&T Through a Reverse Referral Process

Example Interventions From SNAP to Skills TA:

- SNAP applicants like Janae who enter SNAP E&T via reverse referral sometimes receive little support beyond being told to fill out an application form. A process change could involve forging a partnership between the State agency and the E&T provider to integrate the SNAP application into the provider's intake process. That process could collect enough information to automatically start an application for each applicant in the SNAP online application system. **(Process change)**

- In the reverse referral context, a potential program participant must initiate contact with the service provider. Once in contact with the service provider, participants like Janae may be able to access additional supports and services through SNAP E&T. To access the additional supports, Janae would need to apply for SNAP and, if eligible, be identified as eligible for SNAP E&T. More participants like Janae might be interested in applying for SNAP if the service provider described the value of the additional services and supports provided through E&T. **(Oral and process change)**

Janae S.

Appendix: Worksheets

A. State the Problem Worksheet

Many of us have encountered situations where "when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Jumping to solutions without a clear and detailed understanding of the problem and the participant's perspective leads us to inappropriate solutions, bad design, and, ultimately, poor outcomes.

1. Selecting <u>one engagement problem</u> can be challenging when there are many competing priorities. First, which of these phases do you want to focus on in your work? Select <u>one</u>.

☐ **Recruitment:** Too few eligible SNAP participants begin engaging with SNAP E&T.

☐ **Enrollment:** SNAP participants show up for E&T service intake, but too few enroll.

☐ **Participation:** SNAP participants enroll in E&T services, but too few continue their participation.

2. Think about participants in the phase you selected. In your State/county/region, what are one or two critical steps where you miss out on eligible applicants or where participants drop off in engagement?

3. What data do you have that can help show the story of participant drop-off?

4. Select one of the critical steps you wrote. Write a draft <u>problem statement </u>focused on participant engagement at that step.

A. State the Problem Worksheet (cont.)

5. Check your draft problem statement against the checklist below. Does it have all four features? If not, how might you adapt it to satisfy the requirements it was missing?

☐ Is it **IMPORTANT** – does it help you meet the program's goals?

☐ Is it **DOABLE** – is it within State or county control?

☐ Is it **NEUTRAL** – does it provide the facts without stating causes or proposing solutions?

☐ Is it **MEASURABLE**? – is it documented in existing program data? Or can data be collected?

6. **A refined problem statement meets all four criteria listed above. Write your refined problem statement here:**

B. Gather More Information About the Problem

Use this worksheet to make a plan for collecting participant feedback about your team's problem statement.

1. Take a walk in the participant's shoes: Consider the engagement problem from the participant's perspective. Why might participants drop off at this point?

2. To validate your assumptions, look to existing data or participant feedback. What data does your agency or department have? If you are not sure what resources are available, determine who in your agency or department may be able to answer your questions. Data and feedback do not always come neatly organized. Look for patterns in different data sources you can find and organize them into categories.

Types of existing data (check off possible sources):

☐ Attendance and participation records at different stages in the process

☐ Participant data or statuses in the MIS system (such as "applied" vs. "enrolled")

☐ Comment cards or suggestion box

☐ Social media pages or websites with public comments/reviews

☐ Notes from prior meetings with participants

☐ Reported complaints

B. Gather More Information (cont.)

3. Your team should seek to collect new feedback, too. To get feedback, you should aim to ask at least 3 participants or frontline staff 3 open-ended questions in an <u>interview or focus group</u> and record their answers. Brainstorm questions to ask participants or frontline staff by starting with the sample questions on the next page:

- **Do you want to use any of the following questions/sub-questions with participants?**

- **Do you want to <u>customize</u> any of these questions/sub-questions for participants?**

Consider the following tips to write your own questions:

- ☐ Use open-ended questions

- ☐ Encourage specific examples: *Who, What, Where, Why, When, How*

- ☐ Listen and stay curious, even if a participant says something that might not be your understanding of the process

- ☐ Ask "why" or "can you tell me more" to get richer information?

B. Gather More Information (cont.)

SAMPLE QUESTION: Have you ever heard of SNAP E&T?

→ **IF YES:**

Q. What have you heard about SNAP E&T? What do you think about it?

- **Q.** Tell me about how you went from [Step 1] to [Step 2] to [Step 3]? Can you tell me more? *[Tailor to touchpoints of interest]*

- **Q.** What has been the best experience you've had with SNAP E&T?

- **Q.** What is the worst experience you've had with SNAP E&T?

→ **IF NO:**

Q: Have you ever been a part of another jobs/training program?

- **If yes,** they have been a part of another jobs/training program:

- **Q.** What has been the best experience you've had [another jobs/training program]?

- **Q.** What has been the worst experience you've had [another jobs/training program]?

- **Q.** If you could get support in getting a new job, what kind of support would you want?

→ **If no,** they have not been a part of another jobs/training program:

Q. If you could get support in getting a new job, what kind of support would you want?

4. Select a strategy for collecting new feedback directly from participants. Select at least 1 activity that a minimum of 3-5 participants/staff members can participate in.

☐ A phone or in-person interview with a participant
☐ A phone or in-person interview with a frontline staff member
☐ A phone or in-person focus group with participants
☐ A phone or in-person focus group with frontline staff members
☐ Observation of an in-person or virtual meeting

B. Gather More Information (cont.)

5. Create a Plan: How will you move forward and make the most of participant feedback? It's important to select a strategy for collecting participant feedback that aligns with your pain point.

a. Who will conduct the interview/focus group/observation?

b. When will they conduct the interview/focus group/observation?

c. How will you select participants or frontline staff members to participate?

d. Which questions will you ask participants or frontline staff members?

e. How and where will you record and store responses?

f. What are you looking to learn from participant/frontline staff feedback?

Here are some ways to use feedback to assess your problem statement:

- Do the attendance and participation records align with the engagement problem?

- Does the data support the engagement problem you identified as being a point where participants are leaving the process?

- Do participants report negative feelings or experiences at the point of the engagement problem?

C. Create Hypotheses

1. Review and re-write the engagement problem (or problem statement) that is your focus:

2. Identify two participant thoughts or feelings that you're interested in exploring. Consider impact and feasibility.

- Impact: Might tackling these thoughts/feelings make a real difference for at least some participants?

- Feasibility: Does the agency have the possibility of improving the participant experience here?

Key Insight 1: At [priority pain point], some participants feel/think:

_____

Key Insight 2: At [priority pain point], some participants feel/think:

_____

3. Then, draft hypothesis statements. Use the following format:

If the agency improves [insert thoughts or feeling you want to change] at [engagement problem], it will improve [the outcome we care about].

D. Develop a Vision Statement

A vision statement that flips the problem statement into the type of experience the team wants to provide all SNAP applicants. The vision statement will be the touchpoint the team will use to assess whether or not the solutions generated will address the problem statement.

1. Restate your engagement problem/problem statement:

2. Restate your top hypotheses:

Sample format: If the agency improves [insert thoughts or feeling you want to change] at [engagement problem], it will improve [the outcome we care about].

3. **Develop a Vision Statement**

Our agency wants to improve **XX** *[insert thoughts or feeling you want to change] at* **XX** *[priority pain point] to improve* **XX** *[the outcome we care about].*

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

E. Generate Solutions

Get creative, be bold, don't judge yourself or others, maybe even have fun!

Written Communication *Such as letters, texts, emails, or signage*	Participant experience improves because:

Oral Communication *Such as staff script or talking points*	Participant experience improves because:

Process Change *Eliminate or add or combine touchpoints*	Participant experience improves because:

E. Generate Solutions

Get creative, be bold, don't judge yourself or others, maybe even have fun!

Environment Change *Such as phone call experience, website, waiting room*	Participant experience improves because:

One More Idea! *Build on what you've heard!*	Participant experience improves because:

Group Share Out: Solutions the team is most interested in exploring further:

_____

_____

_____

_____

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TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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