



REFLECTIONS AND LEARNINGS ON THE COORDINATING SNAP AND NUTRITION SUPPORTS PROJECT

Spring 2026



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INTRODUCTION / CONTEXT

Millions of families across the country rely on public benefits programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to meet their children's basic needs. Yet too often, benefits systems are outdated or difficult to navigate, leaving eligible families without critical support.

To address this challenge, Share Our Strength and the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) launched the Coordinating SNAP and Nutrition Supports (CSNS) project in 2021. In partnership with APHSA, state human services agencies, community-based organizations, and those with lived experience accessing public benefits, CSNS aims to make benefits more accessible, efficient, and equitable for families.

At its heart, CSNS is systems change work. As Rachel Jetel (2022) explains in *What Is Systems Change? 6 Questions, Answered*,

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Systems change can be defined as shifting component parts of a system—and the pattern of interactions between these parts—to ultimately form a new system that behaves in a qualitatively different way. Applying systems change as an approach to complex challenges can help decision-makers pinpoint critical actions on which to focus, identify more effective solutions, and better understand the cascading impacts of various interventions.

Systems change does not have to be done on a grand scale in order to be “done right.” In fact, systems change works well when done in small, intentional steps—especially when those steps are co-created between like-minded partners. CSNS embodies this approach by transforming how public agencies and community organizations coordinate to deliver nutrition supports. CSNS fosters data-sharing, centers lived expertise in program design, and builds equitable, customer-centered processes that make accessing benefits simpler and more dignified. By breaking down silos, integrating technology, and embedding community voice in decision-making, CSNS is not just improving service delivery—it is fundamentally reshaping how nutrition support systems function to reduce hunger.

This year, we undertook a structured learning and reflection process to better understand the successes and opportunities identified through the first two CSNS cohorts and its related Community Impact Council (CIC), a group of six individuals with lived expertise navigating the human services benefit system who advised us on the program. This effort focused on what we've learned, which populations the project has been reaching, how the project might be improved and expanded, and what it will take to co-create with community members user-centered benefits systems that truly serve families.



ABOUT CSNS AND THE COMMUNITY IMPACT COUNCIL

Coordinating SNAP & Nutrition Supports (CSNS) is a cohort program developed by the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) and No Kid Hungry, a national campaign run by Share Our Strength. Its goal is to align the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) with other federal, state, and local nutrition supports to combat hunger for children and families.

CSNS COHORT 1 SITES

(Spring 2021 through Fall 2022) worked to reduce cross-departmental silos, facilitate partnerships with community organizations, improve the experience of families accessing nutrition supports, and leverage data and technology to address systemic barriers and promote equitable access to nutrition benefits. The projects varied in approach and were customized to the vision and challenges of each agency. Project activities ranged from developing automated data exchanges between the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program to support targeted outreach to families, to using data analytics to better understand gaps in food access, to engaging people with lived expertise to help inform human-centered design of food security programs. This also includes how families experience program outreach, engagement, and the enrollment process.

New Mexico - Improving Online Infrastructure to Expand WIC's Reach

Established new online interfaces that facilitated exchanges of participant data between SNAP and WIC with aims to maximize participation in WIC.

Michigan - Data-Driven Strategies to Help End Hunger in Michigan

Deployed a three-pronged strategy of data analysis, a benefits referral tracking system aimed at improving client experience, and the creation of a food insecurity map to inform state priorities for hunger reduction.

Mecklenburg County, North Carolina- Strengthening Community Relationships to End Child Hunger

Coordinated various nutrition supports, including data analysis, convenings, and creating a Food Security navigation team across government and community partners to streamline access to resources that improve food security for local families.

Hawai'i - Building a Data-Driven Foundation to Help End Hunger in Hawai'i

Built foundational capacity to share and analyze administrative data across SNAP and WIC.



New Jersey - Sharing Nutrition Program Data to Raise WIC Enrollment

Developed an electronic database with the Department of Health that allowed agencies to identify and conduct outreach to families receiving SNAP who are eligible for but not currently receiving WIC, and vice versa.

Kansas - Forming Connections Between SNAP and WIC to Tackle Food Insecurity

Built a sustainable data matching and tracking process to improve cross-enrollment for families eligible for both SNAP and WIC, and launched a Community Resource Navigator program in Geary County, where the most need was identified.

CSNS COHORT 2 SITES

(Spring 2023 - Spring 2025, with some projects extending through Spring 2026) drew on lessons learned, experience, and relationships built in the first cohort to leverage real-time data, couple language justice with cultural humility, and innovate the delivery of services to meet participants where they are, with the goal of increasing access to SNAP and connected nutrition supports. The selected sites also participated in cohort learning, sharing best practices and opportunities for policy and practice changes that help reduce hunger. The selection process and grant administration for cohort 2 was guided by APHSA's Community Impact Council, a group of six individuals with lived expertise navigating the human services benefit system.

Caroline County, Maryland - Creating a Community Resource Navigator Network

Built a comprehensive and collaborative Community Resource Navigation Network for the county and redesigned the county's online resource directory.

North Carolina - Meeting Families Where They Are: Cross-Enrollment between SNAP, WIC, and Medicaid

Leveraged school partnerships, built benefits application referral pathways through the health

system, and improved community-supported digital application processes in order to increase cross-enrollment between SNAP, WIC, and Medicaid.

Illinois - Strengthening Connections to Nutrition Benefits for Children Through Improved Technology and Data Sharing

Modernized Illinois' student data infrastructure in order to enable Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer program (Summer EBT) eligibility determinations, improved data matching to support direct certification for the National School Lunch Program, and targeted outreach to students and families who are income-eligible for SNAP

San Francisco, California - Meeting Communities Where They Are—Transforming CalFresh and Nutrition Outreach

Established a series of pilot and prototype mobile benefits events that provided enrollment assistance to communities, with aims to ease the geographic barriers and bureaucratic processes that hinder access to CalFresh and other vital benefits. The pilots informed the creation of a mobile benefits office launching in late April 2026.

Extensive details on CSNS cohorts 1, 2, and the CIC are available via case studies and impact reports on the CSNS website at: <https://aphsa.org/coordinating-snap-and-nutrition-supports-csns/>



A MOMENT TO LEARN

As we complete cohort 2 and look ahead to cohort 3, we wanted to take an intentional pause to evaluate the work of the program to date. We designed reflection and learning questions, which shaped our approach to our reflection and framed the conversations we held with agencies, community partners, and families. These included:

Key Learnings

- What are the key learnings from Cohort 1 and 2?
- How can we translate those learnings into resources, guidance, and best practices in order to increase access and drive improvements to SNAP and other public benefits, for both the general population and specific populations?

Systems Change Opportunities and Levers

- What are the systems changes we would like to see implemented across the human services ecosystem?
- What levers might we pull to influence agencies and stakeholders to make the recommended changes?

Program Reach

- Which communities and populations are we reaching through this project?
- How can we gather data and metrics about populations reached in order to continue our progress or expand the program's reach?
- Are there opportunities to intentionally reach new populations through CSNS that have not yet been reached? If so, what are they?
- How might sites build out a broader reach?

Centering Lived Expertise

- How can we improve upon our approaches to sharing power and project ownership with people with lived expertise (PWLE) who access SNAP and other supports?
- What have we learned from our past CIC work, and what are the opportunities to do better?

With these questions in mind, we built learning conversations into ongoing CSNS and CIC meetings, cohort calls, and peer learning spaces, and conducted a feedback survey at the conclusion of cohort 2. Partnering closely with APHSA and site partners, we collected data about the impacts of the sites' work, and asked the participating agencies and community members to reflect on their sites' wins and struggles, needs and opportunities, necessary pivots throughout the course of the work, and progress to date. Now, we are drawing on the data, site reports, CIC discussions, and survey to develop a set of themes that arose through the work so far, and to inform recommendations for the program's future.

KEY LEARNINGS FROM COHORTS 1 AND 2

Technology and Data Sharing

Both families and agencies benefit when agencies modernize technology, streamline processes, and share data across programs.

- Modernized technology and streamlined processes free up time for agency staff. This allows them to focus more time on providing quality case management and outreach to families and individuals accessing services rather than having to sift through duplicative paperwork and perform extensive manual data entry.
- Technology can play an important role in improving benefits access, but it cannot replace the value of human interaction. Tools such as data systems and screeners can reduce administrative burden and free up time for staff to have more meaningful engagements with clients. When paired with human-centered support, technology can strengthen benefits access while building and preserving the trusted relationships that help families navigate these systems.
- Through CSNS projects in Kansas, New Mexico, Hawai'i, North Carolina, and New Jersey, states have shared and matched participant data across SNAP, WIC, and Medicaid to identify families enrolled in one program who are likely eligible for another to conduct targeted outreach. Similarly Illinois's CSNS project is strengthening the state's data sharing infrastructure between the Illinois Department of Human Services and the Illinois State Board of Education to automatically enroll eligible children in Summer EBT. By leveraging existing state databases, this approach not only increases participation in individual programs but also promotes co-enrollment across multiple benefits, strengthening the overall impact and support available to families.
- One limitation of this strategy is that it does not identify families who are eligible for public benefits but are not currently enrolled in any programs.



Collaboration Across Agencies

Partnerships between different human services agencies reduce barriers and increase efficiency.

- Collaboration across agencies allows for a holistic, whole-family approach to public benefits. Agencies are better positioned to provide individuals and families with tailored support that addresses all of their needs, such as food, healthcare, housing, employment, and transportation.

Role of Community-Based Organizations

Community-based organizations (CBOs) often have the clearest insights into participant experiences and needs and should play a lead role in the project.

- CBOs are trusted partners and messengers who can deliver crucial messages to families who may be unaware or weary of government programs; some are even able to assist with the application process.
- In Cohort 1, both Kansas and Mecklenburg Counties, CSNS partners embedded Community Resource Navigators (CRNs) within local CBOs to help families connect to SNAP, WIC, and other supports. Because CRNs often have lived experience navigating these systems, they were able to meet families where they are—whether in schools, libraries, or community centers—and guide them through applications and enrollment. This model was later expanded in Cohort 2, where Caroline County hired CRNs with lived expertise, including bilingual staff, to provide in-language assistance and ensure no family was left without support.
- CBOs may be able to provide more support for those who have complex cases and questions.
- CBOs can help recruit and facilitate partnerships directly with people with lived expertise to shape government service delivery. (Greater Chicago Food Depository, Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center, Meals4Families, Green Rural Development Organization, as examples).
- CBOs play a key role in outreach and helping families navigate the public benefits system. To do this work at scale, they need clear, user-friendly pathways provided by the state to submit applications, recertifications, and paperwork digitally on behalf of clients. They also need insight into the cases they support to help streamline the navigation support they provide and relieve agencies of extra work.
- CBOs are crucial in bridging gaps, facilitating connection, and rebuilding trust between government agencies and the community.
- In San Francisco, the agency partnered with Civic Makers, a strategic consulting organization that co-designs community-led solutions so that systems become more equitable, effective, and human-centered. Together, they deepened the agency's capacity for community-driven program design, by engaging in community interviews and ideation sessions regarding the interior and exterior design, locations the vehicle will frequent, mobile office hours, safety features, and other features of the mobile office. Given that the mobile office will be utilized by the community, it was imperative that the mobile office be designed by the community. Through Civic Makers, the community also provided input on marketing materials and communications related to the mobile office as well as the mobile office website, to ensure that community needs and perspectives in the design and layout are addressed.

TRANSLATING LEARNINGS INTO PRACTICE

Feedback from Cohort participants, gathered through structured learning conversations, cohort calls, and an end-of-grant survey, reinforces that the program model is working well while also highlighting opportunities to deepen reach, strengthen internal infrastructure, and sustain momentum. These reflections help sharpen our understanding of what it takes to translate systems-change learning into daily practice. As we look to make these learnings actionable, we will place priority focus on the following core areas:



Improving Technology and User-Friendly Systems

Across both cohorts, participants reaffirmed that modern, navigable, and human-centered technology is foundational to improving the benefits experience. Survey respondents described CSNS as “refreshingly different” from traditional government initiatives, noting that clearer processes, streamlined tools, and collaborative problem-solving allowed staff to spend less time navigating administrative hurdles and more time engaging directly with families.

Sites emphasized that when data systems work well, especially those enabling real-time connections between SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, and other supports, agencies become more efficient and frontline workers feel more confident in their ability to meet families’ needs. These reflections validate the need to:

- Build more user-friendly technology platforms (e.g., North Carolina’s ePASS portal).
- Balance self-service tools with human support.
- Employ Community Resource Navigators within agencies to bridge the gap between families and bureaucracies.
- Improve data-sharing systems to close participation gaps.
- Focus on technology improvements in the context of changes to SNAP administration at the state level (higher focus on error rates, work requirements, etc.)

Participants made clear that user-friendly systems not only increase access, but help restore dignity and reduce the stress families face when navigating benefits.

Expanding Program Reach

Survey results indicate that CSNS participation significantly strengthened organizational capacity, engagement of people with lived expertise, cross-sector partnerships, and agencies' confidence in sustaining the work. Agencies also noted meaningful reach into immigrant communities, rural regions, and language-diverse populations.

Participants also identified clear opportunities to deepen the program's reach in future cohorts, including:

- Increasing engagement with individuals experiencing behavioral health challenges, substance abuse, or houselessness
- Strengthening partnerships with legal aid, tenant and housing rights organizations, immigrant and worker-advocacy groups, and other trusted intermediary organizations
- More intentionally addressing digital access barriers that limit families' ability to use online benefits access tools
- Maintaining light but consistent communication during project extensions to sustain momentum

The survey highlighted that equity-driven outreach requires both community trust and structural support, both of which CSNS is uniquely positioned to help build at state agencies.

Emphasizing Equity and Power-Sharing with People with Lived Expertise (PWLE)

One of the strongest findings was the value of partnering deeply and intentionally with people with lived expertise. Participants repeatedly emphasized that the leadership of individuals who have experience with nutrition benefits systems was a defining strength of the program and a true differentiator from other government-funded initiatives.

To continue building on this success, the next phase of CSNS should maintain that:

- Families and community partners need clarity and transparency about decision-making processes and policies.
- Valuing lived expertise requires compensating participants for their time and insights.
- Agencies must close the feedback loop with those who are partnering with them on systems change solutions. Agencies should communicate how community input is used, what decisions were made, and what changes resulted.
- Sites should be empowered to budget explicitly for management and coordination time, a need raised repeatedly in survey responses, so equitable collaboration is structurally supported from the outset.
- People with lived expertise should be engaged early in program design, not just during implementation or feedback stages. Involving community members from the start helps ensure initiatives are grounded in real experiences, strengthens trust, and leads to solutions that are more responsive to families' needs.

These practices help build and sustain trust, elevate community voice, and ground the program's design in real family experiences.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SECTOR

Lessons learned through the CSNS initiative point to clear opportunities for practitioners, policymakers, funders, and our teams at Share Our Strength and APHSA to strengthen how benefits access work is designed and delivered.

For practitioners, CSNS underscores the power of peer learning. When agencies and community partners share strategies and challenges in real time, they accelerate innovation and build collective problem-solving capacity. Embedding these kinds of learning spaces across projects can help surface promising approaches more quickly and allow states to adapt successful models to their own contexts.

Practitioners can also make meaningful progress by embedding Community Resource Navigators directly within agencies rather than solely relying on external partners. When navigators are part of agency teams, they gain deeper insight into the full enrollment process—helping families move from application to approval—and they serve as vital bridges between systems and the communities they serve. Finally, transparent and participatory decision-making processes are essential. Families and partners should understand how decisions are made, where they can influence outcomes, and how their feedback translates into change.

For policymakers and funders, CSNS has highlighted a pressing need to invest in modern, user-friendly technology and improved process and systems change efforts. This is especially critical as states face new accountability measures tied to SNAP error rates—policies that, without better systems, could reduce enrollments and funding for food supports, harming the very families these programs are meant to serve. Investments in technology and interoperability are investments in accuracy, efficiency, and equity.

Funders and policymakers can also play a powerful role in supporting partnerships that center community voices. The CSNS Community Impact Council offers a model: by including people with lived expertise in design and decision-making, the work becomes more grounded, relevant, and effective. Finally, evaluation



efforts across the field should more intentionally measure equity and representation, ensuring that progress is defined not only by efficiency metrics but also by who benefits.

Finally, we have learned that undertaking efforts such as this require ample time—often, more than might be planned. Throughout this initiative, several projects extended project timelines due to information sharing, approvals processes, and other essential steps taking longer than anticipated. It takes a good amount of time for relationships to be built, but they are key to the short and long term success of these projects, and evidenced by the work done by the Mecklenburg, NC (cohort 1), North Carolina (cohort 2), Caroline County (cohort 2) sites.

For Share Our Strength, these lessons reaffirm our commitment to working in partnership with people with lived expertise and to expanding our outreach to underrepresented groups—including young parents and people with disabilities—whose perspectives are critical to shaping inclusive solutions. We also recognize the importance of translating what we learn into public-facing resources that others can use: practical tools, case studies, and stories that help the broader field apply lessons from CSNS to their own systems-change efforts.

Together, these implications chart a path toward benefits systems that are not only more efficient, but also more equitable, participatory, and centered on the families they are designed to serve.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The CSNS learning reflection demonstrates that building effective benefits systems requires more than technical fixes — it requires intentional partnerships, transparency, and a commitment to equity.

As we close out Cohort 2 and look ahead to future iterations, we remain hopeful that this project can serve as an exemplar for state agencies and community members navigating the national moment we are in. The next Cohort will likely play a key role in helping states and families navigate the impacts of H.R. 1, especially as states need help reducing SNAP error rates and navigating the new cost-sharing requirements created by federal policy changes. CSNS is designed to help state agencies strengthen the way they administer federal nutrition

programs like SNAP, WIC, and Summer EBT—by reducing barriers, improving access and accuracy, and ensuring more eligible families receive the support they need. As households continue to face shifting eligibility rules, rising food prices, and economic uncertainty, initiatives like CSNS will become even more essential. Share Our Strength and APHSA will continue to share public resources (including case studies, blogs, and toolkits), disseminate findings through webinars and partner platforms, and advocate for benefits systems that are more accessible and equitable for all families. For more information about the CSNS program and details on the work of each cohort visit the following links.



RESOURCES

[CSNS Landing Page on the APHSA site](#)

[APHSA Policy and Practice: Shifting the Paradigm Together
Feature by CIC Member Zahava “Zee” Zaidoff](#) (pg. 10)

[APHSA Policy and Practice: Data, Tech, and Equity Connect
by APHSA and Share Our Strength](#) (pg. 14)

[APHSA Policy and Practice: Combating Hunger for Children and Families:
Community Voices Spur Rural Maryland County’s Resource Navigation Network by
Shari Blades, Director, Caroline County Department of Social Services](#) (pg. 10)

[Coordinating SNAP and Nutrition Supports Blog Series](#)

REFERENCES

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World Resources Institute (WRI), November 4, 2022.

<https://www.wri.org/insights/systems-change-how-to-top-6-questions-answered>

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