Benchmarking Service Delivery in Public Assistance Programs: Evaluating and Adapting Innovative Strategies for Implementation

By

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Executive Summary

The traditional process used by the Orange County Department of Social Services to deliver public assistance benefits falls short of optimal efficiency and effectiveness. Nationwide, states and local governments are using innovative practices to better deliver public assistance to families in need. This study uses the principles of best practice benchmarking to examine evidence-based service delivery processes in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Idaho, New Mexico, and Washington and offers recommendations for adaptation and implementation in Orange County, North Carolina.
Public Assistance Benefit Administration Falls Short of Optimal Efficiency and Effectiveness

Public assistance programs provide the core safety net for low-income American families. These programs were designed to supplement the incomes of the unemployed and working poor. Programs of public assistance include health insurance, vouchers for housing and child care, heating and cooling assistance, and cash assistance for low income families. One of the most common of these benefits is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This program, formerly known as food stamps, provides funds for low-income families to purchase food.

Unfortunately, the system designed to administer these benefits is flawed. A 2011 report published by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities noted that nationwide only half of working families eligible for SNAP in 2008 were actually receiving benefits.¹ Eligible families are frequently denied benefits to which they are entitled, often simply for failing to follow an administrative procedure. When approved, families wait weeks for their benefits to take effect.

Nationwide, the number of households enrolled in SNAP has increased dramatically. In Orange County, North Carolina, the number of households receiving SNAP benefits has increased 111% since April, 2007.² Like their counterparts elsewhere, the Orange County Department of Social Services (DSS) has struggled to keep pace with the increased number of households receiving public assistance benefits. Funds for additional personnel to process applications are not an option; the department has to find a better way to do business.

This paper uses the principles of best practice benchmarking³ to examine evidence-based service delivery processes in the administration of SNAP in Idaho, New Mexico, and Washington and offers recommendations for adaptation and implementation in Orange County, North Carolina.

Orange County’s Internal Process and Workflow Are Not Ideal

Data Analysis

This study focused on the percentage of procedural denials, average processing time, and accuracy rate in Orange County. These data elements are important indicators of whether eligible families receive benefits as quickly as possible. These data were then compared to the North Carolina average for further analysis. The following table defines each of these measures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedural Denials</strong></td>
<td>Denials for procedural noncompliance as a percentage of total denials. These include failing to return needed information within an allotted time frame.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Processing Time</strong></td>
<td>The number of days it takes for the paperwork to be completed once an application is received.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accuracy Rate</strong></td>
<td>Calculated based on random reviews of cases to determine whether the approval/denial was appropriate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data for Orange County and North Carolina are shown in the table below along with a target. The target serves as both a directional indicator and an aggressive goal that has been attained by others. Orange County is significantly off target on two of the three measures and has a higher percentage of procedural denials and a longer processing time than the state average. Orange County’s accuracy rate is excellent.
Table 2. Data Measures

| Measure                | Target | Orange County | North Carolina |
|------------------------|--------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| Procedural Denials     | <5%    | 71%           | 59%            |
| Average Processing Time| 2 Days | 14-17 Days    | 11-13 Days     |
| Accuracy Rate          | 100%   | 100%          | 94%            |

Workflow Analysis

It currently takes 12 steps to meet with a staff member who can complete an application for public assistance in Orange County. These steps are mapped in the flow chart found in Appendix 1. Similar processes exist for recertifying applications. Most of these steps are not value-added, leaving opportunities for improvement in workflow.

Idaho, New Mexico, and Washington Have Evidence-Based Best Practices in SNAP Delivery

Benchmarking calls for the identification of best-in-class organizations. To find these organizations, I conducted an extensive literature review that included a search of academic journals, professional associations, and research firms.

Many states and local governments are employing innovative practices in public assistance service delivery. However, most are in the initial stages of implementation, and it is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of their processes. For this study, best-in-class organizations were characterized by innovative practices and available data substantiating the benefits of the changes. Both pre- and post-implementation data were used to validate improved effectiveness through process changes.

A site visit is a traditional element in benchmarking. It is difficult to understand a process and its impact without the information that comes from observation. Since site visits were beyond the research budget of this study, I conducted interviews with site visit participants and reviewed site visit notes. I was also able to access a digital site visit that contained a recorded walk-through of a public assistance office in one of the best practice states.

Best Practice States

The table below depicts the data of the best practice states and contrasts it with Orange County and the State of North Carolina.

Table 3. Best Practice State Data Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Average Processing Time</th>
<th>Processed Same Day</th>
<th>Procedural Denials</th>
<th>Accuracy Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>2 Days</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>6 Days</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>2-9 Days</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>11-13 Days</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange County</td>
<td>14-17 Days</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This refers to new applications only

All three states were able to achieve superior performance while under budget constraints, increasing the likelihood that results are a product of business process changes and not increased staff resources. Idaho reorganized its public assistance division as a result of budget reductions and layoffs. Its staffing levels...
have decreased while the number of cases has continued to increase. Prior to making changes in business processes and policy, Idaho’s ratio of staff to cases was 1:185 (2008), and staff were struggling to keep pace with applications. In 2011, after implementing changes, this ratio was 1:627 and outcomes had improved significantly. Similarly, New Mexico was under a hiring freeze when it began making operational changes. One pilot office had a 20% vacancy rate and still realized excellent results.

Best Practice Processes

Each of the three benchmarking partners has developed an innovative process by which families can apply for, receive, and retain public assistance benefits. These are the core components of those processes.

- **Triage.** A greeter or navigator, located in the lobby, separates complex from routine cases and helps families get to the correct location the first time. Triage staff members possess extensive program area expertise and the ability to make decisions. They are often lead workers or supervisors. The navigators in Washington offices separate families into red and green tracks based on the difficulty of the case. They found that 84% of all families coming to the office have issues that can be quickly addressed (green track), and staffed that unit appropriately to free up time for more difficult cases.

- **Universal Worker.** All workers within public assistance have general knowledge across all programs. Workers do not specialize in a particular program area and are expected to be able to perform all functions. In some cases staff were divided into teams that shift functions each month. Evaluations are team-based.

- **Call Center.** Call centers provide a single point of contact that allows families to inquire about benefits, report changes in their household situation, lodge complaints, and request hearings.

- **Process/Task Management.** Staff are assigned specific tasks or processes to complete each day. In many cases, supervisors manage processes, not people. Work units and teams are structured around specific tasks or processes.

- **Dedicated Intake Unit.** Intake staff take applications. They attempt to collect all the information necessary to determine eligibility at the initial application. Staff are proficient in interview techniques and attempt to align families with all needed services at once.

- **Renewal/Maintenance Unit.** Customer maintenance and renewal units process and maintain cases once all available information has been received. Staff work in teams to leverage the expertise of others in more complex situations. Members of this unit make follow-up contact with families to make sure they retain benefits.

Orange County Lacks “Best Practice” Process Elements

Orange County employs most of the practices now discontinued in Idaho, New Mexico, and Washington. The chart below contrasts the current Orange County practices with those of the benchmarked states.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Process Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Orange County</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff specialize in a specific program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptionist handles front-end of process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calls come directly to staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work is managed in caseloads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake functions are combined with processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Best Practice Organizations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff are familiar with all programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triage staff handle front-end process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calls come to a call center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work is managed by process or tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake functions are a stand-alone process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As previously noted, Orange County has a twelve-step process to see a worker who can take an application for public assistance. In contrast, if a Washington applicant brings all necessary verifications, he can leave with an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card containing his first month’s allotment of food benefits in just eight steps (Appendix 2).

A limitation of this study is the difficulty in attributing results to a specific change in procedure. In all cases, states made multiple changes to their business processes. It is therefore difficult to know not only which changes had the greatest impact, but even whether all changes had positive consequences.

**Analysis Identifies Keys to Success**

Analysis of data and strategies in best practice organizations identifies the following enablers for implementation:

- **Use Data.** Data will indicate the efficiency and effectiveness of current service delivery practices and will allow agencies to determine whether changes result in more or less favorable outcomes.
- **Reduce Backlog.** To move toward single-day processing, the backlog of pending cases must be reduced. Most agency processes are designed to complete tasks and assignments based on the maximum allowable federal timeframes, thirty days for regular SNAP applications.
- **Educate Clients.** If client applications are to be processed more quickly, clients should be prepared to bring all necessary verification documents with them at application. This will help reduce repeat visits to the agency and speed up processing time.
- **Plan for Technological and Physical Infrastructure Needs.** Agencies need to design processes around current infrastructure or plan for infrastructure improvements to augment selected processes. Technical infrastructure may include lobby kiosks for check-in, case management software, or online applications. Physical infrastructure may be as simple as new signage or as complex as building redesign.
- **Identify Costs.** Agencies need to identify the costs associated with implementing proposed changes, which will differ depending on infrastructure needs. Washington and Idaho each spent money on case management systems. Some local offices in New Mexico redesigned facility space to manage work flow. Other costs may include IT equipment to set up a call center or overtime pay to reduce work backlog.
- **Prepare Staff for Changes and Change Culture.** Staff should be engaged in the process changes before, during, and after implementation. All three best practice states cited culture change as a major factor in successful implementation. It is difficult to change ingrained practices without major staff involvement.
- **Use a Framework to Plan and Implement Changes.** Project management plays a major role in instituting any major change. Washington created a Service Delivery Review project through its Department of Social and Health Services’ Community Services Division to evaluate and re-engineer business processes.

**Orange County Should Implement Changes in SNAP Delivery**

Based on the analysis of Orange County’s current service delivery system and the best practices of Idaho, New Mexico, and Washington, the county should phase in three strategies to improve processes:

1. **Triage**
2. **Manage Processes and Tasks, not Caseload**
3. **Separate Intake from Processing and Create a Dedicated Renewal Unit**
These changes should streamline workflow and allow Orange County to reduce processing time, decrease the percent of procedural denials and maintain the accuracy rate. A new workflow chart for the client check-in process illustrates the simplification provided by the triage worker, and can be found in Appendix 3.

The phased approach should allow Orange County to implement all three strategies during the next nine months. Appendix 4 is a proposed timeline. Washington rolled out similar changes using a phased approach statewide in twelve months.26

The table below shows the work that should be done before Orange County proceeds with implementation.

Table 5. Pre-implementation Work and Associated Costs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implementation Enabler</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost Estimates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Infrastructure</td>
<td>Additional signage for reception area</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Infrastructure</td>
<td>Check-in kiosks</td>
<td>$9,000 (x2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backlog Reduction</td>
<td>Overtime for staff (200 hours)</td>
<td>$5,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client Education</td>
<td>Flyers, other informational notices</td>
<td>$500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>$25,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following strategies were not recommended for implementation at this time:

- **Universal Worker.** This concept is appealing but would require resources above what are currently available. Existing staff do not have the necessary skills to handle all functions, and additional training would be required.
- **Call Center.** Most clients call to inquire about their SNAP case status. If benefits were processed quickly and accurately, many of these calls would be unnecessary. Orange County should refrain from adopting this strategy until the others are implemented and an evaluation can be completed to determine if a need exists.

Orange County should continue to monitor processes once implemented to gauge effectiveness and determine whether any additional changes are needed.

“Best Practices” Lead to Improved Efficiency and Effectiveness in SNAP Delivery

Although many of the projects are still in their infancy, credible evidence points to improved results and suggests that other governmental entities consider redesigning their own business processes in public assistance. The three benchmarked states have shown great improvement in process outcomes following similar blueprints. Orange County should adopt identified processes that Idaho, New Mexico, and Washington have implemented to replace its current process for the application, receipt, and retention of public assistance benefits.
Works Cited


5. Ibid

6. Professional associations consulted included the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA), the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), and the National Association of Counties (NACo). Information from these professional organizations, research firms including the Urban Institute, publications from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and searches of academic journals resulted in consideration of eleven total states for this study. Reports, websites, and other publications from each state were reviewed to determine whether sufficient data was accessible for this project.


References


Bradsher, Sherry, interview by Lindsey Shewmaker. Director, North Carolina Division of Social Services (September 2011).


Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1: Current Orange County SNAP Application Workflow

Figure 1. Current Workflow for New SNAP Applications in Orange County

1. Client arrives at front desk
2. Client takes a number
3. Client sits down in the waiting room
4. Receptionist call client back to desk
5. Client fills out screening sheet
6. Worker receives notification
7. Client sits back down in waiting room
8. Receptionist sends sheet to worker
9. Receptionist scans sheet
10. Worker goes to waiting room to get client
11. Client and worker go to worker’s office
12. Worker begins client application

Client

Worker

Receptionist

Screening Sheet
Appendix 2: Washington SNAP Application Workflow

Figure 2. Current Workflow for New SNAP Applications in Washington

1. **Client arrives at navigator**
2. **Client signs in with navigator assistance**
3. **Client sits down in the waiting room**
4. **Navigator sends client information to correct worker**
5. **Worker receives notification**
6. **Worker calls client to desk**
7. **Worker fills out electronic application with client and determines eligibility**
8. **Client sits back down in waiting room**
9. **Worker calls client to desk to receive EBT card**
Appendix 3: Proposed Orange County SNAP Application Workflow Changes

Figure 3. Current Workflow for New SNAP Applications in Orange County

Client arrives at front desk → Client takes a number → Client sits down in the waiting room → Receptionist call client back to desk → Client fills out screening sheet

Worker reviews screening → Receptionist sends sheet to worker → Receptionist scans sheet

Worker goes to waiting room to get client → Worker begins client application

Client arrives at triage → Client signs in with triage assistance → Client sits down in the waiting room → Triage sends information to correct worker → Worker receives notification

Worker begins client application → Client and worker go to worker’s office → Worker goes to waiting room to get client

Figure 4. Proposed Workflow for New SNAP Applications in Orange County
Appendix 4: Proposed Orange County Implementation Timeline

Figure 5. Proposed Timeline for Business Process Changes in Orange County

April 2012
Purchase kiosks and signage

Distribute client education materials

June 2012
Reconfigure reception with triage

August 2012
Reduce backlog

Transition to process management

October 2012
Separate intake from processing