Millions of working parents qualify for food, medical, and child care assistance that can help them support their families. But it can be difficult for families to access and retain these benefits, partly because of inefficiencies in how work support benefits are delivered by state and local social services agencies. Six states participated in a multiyear, foundation-funded effort, the Work Support Strategies (WSS) initiative, to help low-income families get and keep the full package of work supports for which they are eligible. States sought to streamline and integrate service delivery and reduce administrative burdens. They did this to increase participation and retention in work support programs that support the well-being and stability of families.

This brief summarizes data provided by the states and collected by the WSS evaluation team to examine the outcomes of state efforts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their benefit delivery systems.¹ We build on earlier research documenting what the WSS states did to streamline and integrate program policies (Isaacs, Katz, and Kassabian 2016), upgrade technology systems (Loprest, Gearing, and Kassabian 2016), and modernize business practices (Hahn et al. 2016) to improve how they deliver work support benefits and help families get and keep the benefits for which they are eligible. We find that states made progress in several areas by the end of the initiative:

- Most states issued benefits in fewer days.
- States reduced some unnecessary churn, where families cycle off of and back onto benefits within a short period of time, although changes were hard to document. Two states were able to
provide good data measuring churn, and both saw reductions in at least one program. However, neither state was able to reduce churn in all work support programs.

- Lobbies were less crowded and clients had lower wait times for service in several states. It was not clear whether there were similar declines in the average time that workers spent on various tasks.

- Certain changes, such as reducing churn and using electronic data to automatically enroll Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) clients in Medicaid, were associated with savings for both agencies and clients. Overall, administrative costs per household appeared stable during the WSS period.

- Families eligible for both SNAP and Medicaid/Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) were more likely to participate in and receive benefits from both programs.

Our analysis of data outcomes for WSS relies primarily on examining time trends to identify any observed changes in measures over time and determine whether these changes align temporally with state activities. It is often difficult to attribute changes in outcomes to specific policy, technology, or business process reforms because the WSS states pursued many reforms at the same time and because other factors, such as implementation of the Affordable Care Act and postrecession economic recovery, may have also had an effect. Nonetheless, the timing of some state reform efforts and changes in outcome measures suggests a connection between the two.

**Speeding Up Delivery of Benefits**

Faster service matters to applicants because they often experience emergencies during the time of application that could be addressed through prompt receipt of benefits. Most WSS states succeeded in speeding up the approval process and getting benefits into the hands of needy clients faster. We measured timeliness in three ways, summarized below. Much of the data focuses on SNAP, which has more federal monitoring of timeliness than the other programs and thus more available data.

**Marked Improvements in Same-Day Service**

The most dramatic and consistent changes were in the percentage of applications processed on the same day they were received. Rates of same-day service for SNAP applicants tripled in Rhode Island and doubled in Colorado. Illinois also saw notable improvement in same-day service. Finally, Idaho, a state that already provided same-day service to 70 percent of its SNAP clients, reported marginal increases in its rate of same-day service. Idaho and Rhode Island also saw improvement in same-day service for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (both states), Medicaid (Idaho), and child care (Rhode Island).

South Carolina did not provide data on same-day service but did provide data showing an increase in the percentage of cases processed within 10 days of application. It is unlikely that same-day service
improved in North Carolina during the WSS period given that the state experienced a substantial backlog of applications while implementing a new eligibility system. However, the state reported improvements in overall processing time in 2015.

**Improvements in same-day service for SNAP often followed improvements in business processes (how local offices organize work).** Some of the clearest evidence comes from Colorado and Rhode Island. In Colorado, individual counties implemented business process changes differently. In Rhode Island, improvements in same-day service occurred directly after implementing business process changes. Data from Idaho and Illinois show a steadier trend, suggesting the positive impact of ongoing, continuous efforts to increase same-day service.

Clients identified faster benefit delivery as a top priority. Through survey responses and focus groups, families reported more frequent receipt of same-day service and the positive impressions they had of this improvement.

**Net Improvements in Average Application Processing Time**

Four states—Idaho, Illinois, Rhode Island, and South Carolina—saw net improvements in the average number of days needed to process SNAP applications. Data from two states also show improvements in average processing time for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program and child care applications.

Although processing times improved overall, states often saw temporary slowdowns in processing while rolling out new business processes or technology systems. Most of these issues were resolved by the end of the WSS period. For example, spikes in the average number of days needed to process SNAP benefits occurred in South Carolina (concurrent with the state’s rollout of business process changes) and in Illinois (concurrent with implementation of a new technology system). North Carolina also saw delays in SNAP processing after rolling out its new technology system.

In addition, Medicaid data from four states (Idaho, Illinois, North Carolina, and South Carolina) revealed periods of backlogs and delays in processing time generally following technology changes required by the Affordable Care Act. Delays in Medicaid processing times typically lasted longer than delays in SNAP processing times.

**Federal Timeliness Measures Show Variation across States**

Trends in the percentage of SNAP applications processed within federal requirements varied across the six states. Two states, Idaho and Rhode Island, had 90 percent or more of applications meet federal requirements (i.e., processing regular applications within 30 days and applications qualifying for expedited service within 7 days). Colorado made substantial improvements in the percentage of applications meeting federal timeliness in concert with its improvements in other metrics. In contrast, North Carolina’s performance in this measure dropped over five years of observation, a trend that fits with other information about challenges following the rollout of their new technology system. There were fluctuations in timeliness measures in Illinois and South Carolina. One reason states saw less
consistent improvement in this measure is that most states already process 80 to 90 percent of cases within the federal standards, so there is limited room for improvement.

No Consistent Relationship between Timeliness and Accuracy

Although some states thought that faster benefit processing and delivery would produce more errors, others believed that determining eligibility as close to the point of application as possible would reduce opportunities for mistakes. In fact, a review of data on SNAP error rates does not reveal any consistent relationship between payment accuracy and improvements in timeliness. One state, Colorado, did provide an example of error rates rising over the same time period that applications were processed faster. Looking at these data, state officials believe that error rates may have gone up because of their focus on improving timeliness. However, other states did not see the same increase. Idaho is an example of a state with low error rates and fast benefit delivery, suggesting the two do not necessarily move together. Other states provide examples of the two measures moving together, either deteriorating or improving in tandem.

What States Did to Speed up Benefit Delivery

The six WSS states used a combination of approaches in their efforts to speed up benefit delivery. One approach was to change the business design of local offices by shifting the way work is allocated, limiting the number of times a worker touches a case, and focusing on “one and done” case processing and same-day service. A second approach was to change office culture by putting greater emphasis on timeliness and customer service in local offices; many offices set goals to deliver benefits much faster than required under federal law. States also made changes to, policies, such as removing unnecessary verification requirements, to expedite processes. Lastly, states improved efficiency by expanding their use of technology (e.g., electronic verification of client information).

Reducing Churn at Time of Renewal

One insight from states’ early work in WSS data analysis and self-assessment was that enabling families to get and keep the full package of work support benefits for which they are eligible extends beyond the initial application; state agencies must also focus on retention, and specifically on reducing churn, or the loss of benefits while still eligible. Work support program rules generally require families to have their eligibility for benefits redetermined periodically. Families often temporarily lose benefits during renewal because of breakdowns in administrative procedures only to subsequently reapply and qualify for benefits shortly after. Churn is costly to families who lose benefits and to agencies that have to process additional applications.

Developing and tracking churn measures was challenging, and only two WSS states (Idaho and Rhode Island) were able to provide monthly data measuring the rate of churn among cases up for renewal. Both states were able to reduce churn rates and/or incidence in some work support programs, but neither was able to do so for all programs.
Dramatic Reductions in Churn in Some Programs, No Reductions in Others

Our primary analysis focuses on the renewal churn rate, defined as the percentage of clients sent renewal notices that reapply within 90 days. Given the subtle variations in how churn is measured and underlying differences in requirements for renewal, we cannot make comparisons across states or even across programs. We identify five key findings:

- **The number of Medicaid renewals that closed for procedural reasons dropped dramatically in Idaho** after implementation of the ACA and the use of electronic data to automatically renew eligibility. There were so few procedural closures in 2014–15 that the churn rate dropped to near zero (only 0.2 percent of all cases up for renewal).

- **There was a moderate downward trend in the procedural churn rate for SNAP in Idaho**, as well as a decline in the number of renewals relative to caseload. This led to a 25 percent reduction in the number of cases churned relative to the overall caseload.

- **Churn measures for Idaho’s child care assistance program fluctuated considerably from month to month but with an underlying upward trend.** Child care renewals are processed in an older case management system by a separate child care unit and did not see the same improvements in processing time or churn outcomes as SNAP and Medicaid.

- **SNAP churn rates remained high in Rhode Island, despite the efforts of a special statewide certification unit.** SNAP churn rates averaged 30 percent for much of 2012 and 2013. Rolling out a special statewide recertification unit in 2013 did not improve things; in fact, SNAP churn rates rose throughout 2013 and the first half of 2014. Near the end of the WSS grant period, the state disbanded the centralized unit, a decision influenced in part by monthly churn reports showing that the new unit was not reducing churn rates.

- **The proportion of child care assistance cases needing reevaluation dropped fairly dramatically in Rhode Island.** This decline was driven by a state policy change lengthening certification periods to 12 months, which will become the norm across the country as states implement the requirements of the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014. Longer certification periods created less risk points for churn and led to fewer cases churning relative to the total caseload, even though there was little change in the rate of churn at time of renewal.

Reducing churn can save money for both clients and agencies, as demonstrated by the SNAP churn savings in Idaho discussed further below.

How States Reduced Churn

To reduce churn, the WSS states took a number of actions to simplify the renewal process. They prepopulated redetermination forms, used technology to gather information that might already be available electronically, and revamped business operations to change how workers process renewals.
States such as Idaho and South Carolina used electronic data already on file to administratively and automatically renew benefits—for example, using SNAP information to renew Medicaid—so no client action is necessary for renewal, as strongly encouraged by the Affordable Care Act.

Another key step, which contributed to Rhode Island’s success with child care churn, was to lengthen certification periods for individual benefits, a policy approach incorporated into the Child Care Development Block Grant reauthorization enacted by Congress in 2014. Another policy change aligned redetermination dates so that families can now renew eligibility for multiple programs at the same time each year.

Reducing Client Wait and Worker Service Times

Social services agencies face a varied workload, especially in local offices. Clients show up each day with new applications for benefits, renewal forms, verification documents for previously submitted applications, information requests, and/or a need to be interviewed by a caseworker. In addition to managing the flow of clients through the lobby, the office must manage work that comes in through online systems, the mail, phone, or fax.

As states made changes to how work flowed through offices, lobby wait times grew shorter for some services in some offices. Such improvements in customer service were much appreciated by clients and staff. Changes in worker service times (the time needed to accomplish various tasks) were harder to identify because there were so many changes at once, including changes in how productivity is measured. Workers and supervisors could identify steps that were now faster, but they also identified steps that took longer, and it was hard to make a clear comparison. In general, data on these measures are more limited than for timeliness and churn measures.

Reduced Client Wait Times after Changes in Lobby Management

Business process changes were associated with shorter lobby wait times, according to administrative data from two locations, client surveys in two states, and qualitative data.

Lobby wait times decreased for all clients in Boise, Idaho, and for clients submitting new applications in Providence, Rhode Island, according to lobby management data. Average wait times in one Boise office fell from 26 to 15 minutes after the introduction of Q-Flow, a new lobby management system. A pre/post comparison is not available for Rhode Island, but wait times for new applicants declined during the first 14 months of implementing a new business process system in Providence. There were no comparable declines in other Rhode Island offices or for clients waiting for other services. Staff in both offices commented on less hectic and noisy lobbies, and clients also noted some changes in lobby management.

Wait times also fell in Illinois and in certain counties in Colorado. Clients in Illinois reported a reduction in average lobby wait times of 14 minutes and an overall reduction in office visits and phone
calls. Use of online applications increased, as did client satisfaction. There was also evidence of shorter wait times from clients surveyed across a large group of counties in Colorado.

State and local office staff in North and South Carolina spoke to the advantages of a more orderly lobby process. A triage desk up front addresses clients’ immediate needs and a coordinated “no wrong door” intake process ensures clients eligible for multiple programs do not have to wait in multiple lines. However, we do not have administrative or survey data documenting changes in wait times in these states.

**Limited Evidence on Changes in Worker Service Times**

The evidence on changes in worker service times was limited and mixed. Two sites did see some declines in average time workers spent on tasks. In Boise, Idaho, time per transaction dropped from 23 to 17 minutes, according to available data. Other sites did not provide comparable data.

In interviews, state and local staff were unsure whether worker processing times were slower or faster overall after WSS, given the vast number of changes that had occurred, including changes in the very way worker productivity is measured.

Local managers and workers cited how specific business process changes saved time. For example, increased same-day service and other improvements in the timeliness of benefit delivery reduced the number of calls offices receive from clients checking on the status of their case. Workers also noted that the new lobby intake systems, particularly the use of triage and front desk workers, reduced interruptions and allowed workers to process more cases without distraction. In addition, local supervisors spoke of the benefits of new workflow systems allowing them to monitor worker productivity.

State and local staff had mixed views about how new technology effect on worker service times. Although new workflow management systems and paperless processes were generally seen as positive changes, reviews for new integrated eligibility systems were more mixed. In particular, we heard several complaints about the slowness of the new systems. It was difficult to distinguish temporary delays caused by system implementation growing pains and worker adjustment from potential long-term problems. It was difficult to compare worker processing times between the old and new systems because the technology is so different (e.g., new systems are cloud-based and capable of interfacing with other systems). Some steps that were quick in the old system are time consuming in the new system, but other steps are now quicker, and expanded functionality of new systems offer potential for saving worker time.

**Savings for Agencies and Clients**

Administrative expenditures per case were fairly stable during the WSS implementation period, following a large decline in the years prior caused by dramatic caseload increases and flat or falling staffing levels during the Great Recession. In the wake of this increased workload, state respondents
highlighted their goal of using WSS changes to “work smarter” and process high numbers of cases without much change (up or down) in the number of staff.

Although additional cost savings were not a primary goal of WSS, states hoped that improvements to agency operations would result in savings, in time if not in dollars, by shifting from inefficient tasks to more productive ones. We provide estimates of potential savings associated with three changes:

- reducing churn,
- using electronic data to improve cross-program enrollment,
- reducing lobby wait times and the number of trips clients make to offices.

Time saved in these areas may have allowed states to improve overall benefit delivery without increasing administrative costs. Our estimates consider not only savings to the agency, but also the value to clients of shorter wait times and fewer trips to offices. Reducing the time and financial burden associated with applying for benefits is an important way to increase access to work supports.

Relative Stability in Administrative Costs per Case

Administrative costs per SNAP household increased in three states (Idaho, North Carolina, and South Carolina) and decreased in three states (Colorado, Rhode Island, and Illinois) between 2011 and 2015. This relative stability in costs is consistent with what state officials told us during interviews, that changes under WSS were made in response to past budget and staffing cuts and not as stimulus for further reductions in staffing levels. The WSS planning grants were awarded in 2010, at the height of one of the worst recessions in recent history and at a time when state agencies struggled to serve rising caseloads with stable or reduced numbers of staff. In their WSS applications and in our interviews, state officials emphasized the need to increase efficiency so that fewer staff could keep up with the workload.

Savings Associated with Reducing Churn

Idaho’s efforts to reduce SNAP churn saved the equivalent of 0.5 percent of total SNAP administrative spending. Estimated agency savings are based on the fact that initial applications are more expensive to process than recertification. Specifically, in a 2014 study of SNAP churn, Mills and colleagues (2014) estimated that it takes two to three times longer to process an initial application than to process a recertification. Using state-specific estimates of the unit cost of SNAP churn avoided, we estimate a $53,500 annual reduction in Idaho’s SNAP administrative costs. This estimate, equivalent to 0.5 percent of the state’s total spending on SNAP administration, is approximate and subject to caveats detailed in the report.
A rough estimate shows the annual gain to clients—and equivalent cost to government—of continuous, uninterrupted SNAP benefits is $1.3 million, or 0.5 percent of total annual benefit costs. The average client gains $195 in benefits for each instance of procedural churn avoided. In addition, the client saves time completing application paperwork, faces less anxiety about paying for groceries, and is less likely to experience hardships such as skipping meals or finding alternate ways to feed their family.

**Savings Associated with Using Electronic Data for Cross-Program Auto-Enrollment**

Automated processing of Medicaid eligibility using SNAP records has strong potential for administrative savings, a clear example being South Carolina’s implementation of Express Lane Eligibility (ELE). The state’s health agency used the ELE provision of the 2009 CHIP Reauthorization Act to enroll uninsured children in Medicaid based on their SNAP records. As part of a mandated multistate evaluation of ELE, researchers at Mathematica Policy Research, the Urban Institute, and Health Management Associates estimated administrative savings in South Carolina at $1.6 million annually (Hoag et al. 2013). These savings more than offset the estimated start-up cost of $538,000, which was spent primarily on IT programming. This same study also found that ongoing savings were larger than start-up costs in three other states that implemented automated processing through Express Lane Eligibility. More generally, estimates of ELE savings in Alabama, Louisiana, Massachusetts, and South Carolina, along with estimates of fast-track enrollment in Illinois and West Virginia, suggest that many states experienced time savings of 20 to 30 minutes per case by using automated processing.

Using electronic data for automated cross-program enrollment also saves clients time and money by removing the need to visit an office to apply for or renew benefits. But the bigger impact on clients is greater access to and retention of benefits, including faster approval of health insurance, reduced churn at time of renewal and fewer coverage gaps, and increased coverage of uninsured but eligible individuals.

Data from South Carolina show an increase in the percentage of SNAP children who also receive Medicaid benefits after implementation of ELE for children. The percentage of children jointly eligible for both SNAP and Medicaid/CHIP who receive both benefits (as discussed below) also increased. More generally, multivariate analysis from the multistate ELE study suggests an increase of about 6 percent in Medicaid enrollment is attributable to ELE.

**Savings Associated with Shorter Wait Times and Fewer Office Visits**

Our estimates suggest that costs associated with applying for SNAP in Illinois fell by 15 percent (from $32.21 to $27.52 per applicant) between September 2014 and March 2015. This includes transportation expenses and the value of time that would be spent visiting local offices and completing more in-person applications. It also factors in a 14-minute reduction in wait times for in-person applications. Our estimates use the minimum wage as one way to assess the dollar value of client time; this assumption and several other cost assumptions add uncertainty to the estimate, which is also affected by sampling error around the survey data. Even so, the estimate helps quantify the reduction in application burden for clients in Illinois.
Client savings are much more than shorter wait times and reduced transportation expenses. By reducing application burden, state agencies increase the likelihood that families will apply for the package of work supports for which they qualify. We do not attempt to quantify how many more eligible families may complete the benefit application process, but our findings show that program participation, particularly joint participation in SNAP and Medicaid, increased in WSS states.

Increasing Access to a Package of Work Supports

One of the broader WSS goals was to improve access to work supports for low-income working families and help families receive the full package of benefits for which they are eligible. An earlier WSS report (Loprest, Lynch, and Wheaton 2016) analyzed data provided by five WSS states to examine changes and potential progress in joint participation rates for SNAP and Medicaid/CHIP.

Loprest, Lynch, and Wheaton (2016) found that families who were eligible for both SNAP and Medicaid/CHIP were more likely to jointly participate in both programs in 2013 than in 2011. Joint participation rates for individuals under age 65 rose from 73 to 87 percent in Colorado, from 70 to 78 percent in Illinois, and from 73 to 81 percent in South Carolina. South Carolina’s increase was concentrated among children, which is consistent with the state’s use of ELE to enroll SNAP children in Medicaid. A fourth state, Idaho, had a smaller increase in its already high overall rate (from 93 to 96 percent), which included a substantial increase among nonelderly adults. One state, North Carolina, had fairly stable participation rates and actually showed a slight decrease among nonelderly individuals. Still, the progress made in the four other states shows that states can implement changes to improve access to the combined set of SNAP and Medicaid benefits.

Conclusion

The outcomes presented in this brief and detailed in the full report demonstrate that most WSS states achieved measurable improvements in their delivery of benefits. States improved their ability to deliver faster or even same-day benefits, reduced churn, revamped lobbies and reduced client wait times, found ways to save worker time, and increased multiple benefit receipt among eligible families.

Given the many concurrent changes during this period, we cannot attribute these outcomes solely to WSS. But they demonstrate that large-scale change is possible in these critical work support systems.

Implementing change in state agencies is hard work, and these results did not come quickly or easily. Some occurred early on; others were observed only after several years. As a state official in Illinois said of their technology rollout, “It got worse before it got better.” An official in Rhode Island likened the effort to overhaul business processes to “the turning of the Titanic.” After several efforts over an extended period of time, finally “the big ship turned.” Although many leaders involved with WSS felt a sense of accomplishment at the end of the grant period, there remain many ongoing challenges and unachieved outcomes still being pursued. They recognize that working to improve benefit delivery is a continuous process.
Going forward, states have many opportunities to streamline and substantially improve access to work support programs. The experiences of the WSS states offer specific ideas about how to diagnose and remove the barriers that prevent families from participating in work support programs and overburden state workers and administrative systems. The outcomes summarized here and detailed in the full report, along with the full set of WSS evaluation reports and additional resources provided by the WSS national partners (the Center for Law and Social Policy and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities), can provide inspiration and lessons learned to other states seeking to improve work support delivery to support the well-being and stability of families.²
Notes

1. This summary is drawn from the research report *Improving the Efficiency of Benefit Delivery: Outcomes from the Work Support Strategies Evaluation* (Isaacs, Katz, and Amin 2016). This report and other publications from the WSS evaluation can be found at www.urban.org/work-support-strategies.


References


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