

EPIC PILOT FINAL REPORT

Summary

Employment Opportunities, Personalized Services, Individualized Training and Career Planning (EPIC) Pilot, funded through U. S. Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), was a joint project between the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS) and Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO). DHS received \$21,857,568 for a term of April 1, 2015 through March 30, 2019. The project included a robust employment and training study that required a random assignment component.

A team was established that included DHS and DCEO management, program and policy staff, Southern Illinois University Consortium (SUIC) workNet staff, representation from Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), and on two occasions representation from the evaluation team and FNS. The team discussed the pilot requirements, policies related to the project, and how the pilot should be designed. After 6 months of planning and testing, EPIC started full implementation the second quarter of 2016.

Through a competitive Request for Application (RFA), 23 Community Based Organizations (CBO) were selected to be a part of the EPIC pilot and represented the following Local Workforce Innovations Areas (LWIA): 16 in DHS region 1 (LWIA#7), 1 in DHS region 2 (LWIA#3), 1 in DHS region 3 (LWIA#15), 3 in region 4 (LWIA#14 and 19) and 2 in region 5 (LWIA#24 and 25). Training programs were targeted in demand sectors including Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources, Architecture and Construction, Business Management and Administration, Finance, Government and Public Administration, Health Science, Hospitality and Tourism, Information Technology, Law, Public Safety, Corrections, and Security, Manufacturing, and Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics.

DHS aligned Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) customers with a CBO after the customer completed an orientation. The orientation provided information on the pilot design and directed the customer to information on training available in their area.

DHS recruited/invited over 28,200 SNAP recipients to attend the EPIC orientation. A total of 2,505 were assigned to the control group and 2,519 were assigned to the treatment group. An additional 1,448 SNAP customers were aligned with CBOs through the new cohort for a total of 3,967 SNAP customers assigned to CBOs. The CBOs assessed and staffed a total of 2,386 customers. Customers not assessed/staffed were no shows to the CBOs or some were not considered a good fit for the assigned training program and returned to DHS. There were 1,926 customers that were enrolled in academic or career only services and of those 984 completed their academic service. A total of 783 customers were placed in employment and 575 completed 90-day retention period to date.

The EPIC pilot identified a need to better assess and align SNAP customers with services. Based on TABE assessment scores many customers scored below the 8th grade level in reading (32%) and math (55%).

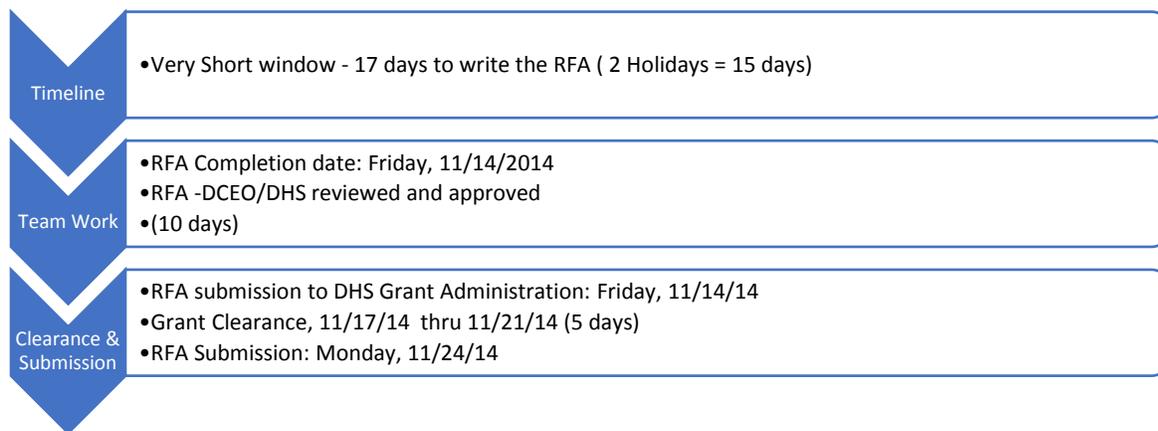


The workNet system developed to support EPIC pilot administration and data needs provided a communication tool for the DHS local staff and CBO career navigators to better serve and track customer engagement which is critical. Some federal policies make the alignment of employment and training services to SNAP recipients difficult, for example the inability to service a customer (who is actively participating) if they are no longer on SNAP benefits (i.e. due to a change in income or failure to complete redetermination). Fortunately, paid work experience was exempt from income determination for EPIC.

Pilot Project Background

In late October 2014, DHS and DCEO discussed the FNS “Fiscal Year 2015 Pilot Projects to Reduce Dependency and Increase Work Requirements and Work Effort Under the SNAP” RFA, released on August 25, 2014. The decision was made to move forward with a collaborative application and efforts to complete the process were expedited to meet the November 24, 2014 application submission date.

A team was developed that included DHS and DCEO management, program and fiscal staff, representation from ICCB, and the Illinois Workforce Investment Board. Meetings were held in November 2014 to establish the application. A strict timeline was developed that led to the final product being completed by November 20, 2014.



In developing the RFA there were several elements reviewed to determine targeted locations, industry sectors, eligible applicants and targeted participants.

The team reviewed geographic, economic and demographic profiles of LWIAs in Illinois. Seven LWIAs (3, 7, 14, 15, 19, 24, 25) were selected because they provided a representative cross-section of areas needed for a robust evaluation of the EPIC pilot. They have different mixtures of targeted sectors and economic growth, urban and rural mix, diverse populations, and availability of services needed for serving the targeted SNAP populations.

The team used the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES) labor market information, including the IDES statewide and LWIA industry and occupational projections, related information on wages, and education and training requirements to identify the 11 growth industry sectors and related occupations. Nine of the sectors are part of the Illinois

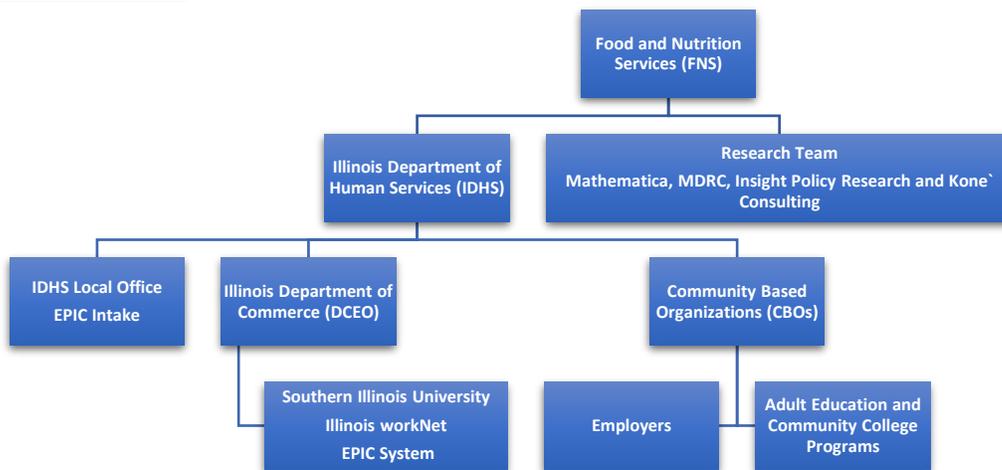
Pathways initiatives and the priority of the Illinois Workforce Development Board. These are Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math related sectors: agriculture, architecture and construction, energy, finance, health care, information technology, manufacturing, transportation and logistics, and research and development. Two sectors, hospitality and administrative support, were included based on the growth and current demand of their related occupations within some of the targeted locations.

Eligible employment and training applicants that would provide services to the targeted population was made up of a subset of Job Training and Economic Development Grant Program (JTED) providers and SNAP E&T providers. Also, additional CBOs were included that presented the capacity to partner with community colleges and other adult education providers had the capacity to leverage federal and state resources to implement the EPIC pilot model.

The JTED model was utilized in defining the targeted population. *Category 1 - Individuals Already Working* - comprised of 15% that may or may not be work registrants and are employed low wage/low skilled SNAP recipients who need basic and technical skill upgrading to achieve higher earnings and increased opportunities for job advancement. *Category 2 – Unemployed/Underemployed Individuals with Low Skills and/or Limited Work Experience* - comprised of at least 85% of SNAP participants that were work registrants needing basic and technical skill upgrading and work experience to enter a self-sustaining career pathway.

On March 20, 2015, DHS was notified that Illinois received the award.

Pilot Program Design



DHS and DCEO identified a project design team that met consistently throughout 2015 to establish the EPIC pilot. The team consisted of DHS SNAP E&T managers, and Local Office Administrators that represented the targeted regions. The DCEO staff consisted of the Office of Employment and Training manager of policy and legislation, JTED program manager, SIUC workNet staff, and representation from ICCB. Staff representing both departments IT and legal staff participated as requested. Two meetings were held that included representation from

FNS and members of the evaluation team. Parameters that guided the design included rules related to the study/random assignment and DHS SNAP E&T policy.

To insure integrity of the study, an intake process was created to provide an orientation at the DHS Family Community Resource Centers (FCRC) for SNAP recipients interested in participating in EPIC. To maintain a consistent message across the state, videos were produced to introduce the pilot and to explain the random assignment process. Orientation rooms were set up with computers, for recipients to access and input information. Illinois workNet was utilized as the platform for intake, orientation and access to information for recipients to make an informed choice. The intake process consisted of the following steps: (<http://www.ilepic.com>)

1. Attend a group orientation.
2. Participate in a Career Cluster Inventory Assessment.
3. Review job/training program information.
4. Complete an online application.
5. Meet with a case worker/manager to be randomly assigned.

The original intake process included a National Occupational Competency Testing Institute (NOCTI) 21st Century assessment that provided a baseline for the recipient’s math, reading and work readiness. This was eliminated due to the time it took (required a follow-up visit), the participation fall out from this longer process and the participants would receive a TABE assessment with the CBO.

During the intake and orientation process the recipients were introduced to the training programs only, and not the CBOs so they couldn’t reach out to the providers directly. This was to ensure that the control group did not receive any information that could affect what is considered “business as usual” in their services.

After the orientation, DHS case managers would randomly assign the SNAP recipients using Mathematica’s Employment & Training Pilots Information System (EPIS). SNAP recipients that were assigned to the treatment group were scheduled an appointment to meet with the CBO that provided the career pathway of the recipient’s choice.

The EPIC CBOs were selected through a competitive RFA. Twenty-three CBOs were selected to be a part of the EPIC pilot with the following distribution:

# of CBOs	Targeted Area (LWIA)
1	LWIA 3 (Boone, Stephenson, Winnebago Counties),
16	LWIA 7 (Cook County),
1	LWIA 14 (Knox, Warren, Henderson, McDonough, Hancock, Schuyler, Adams, Brown,
1	LWIA 15 (Stark, Peoria, Marshall, Woodford Counties),
2	LWIA 19 (Macon, DeWitt Counties),
1	LWIA 24 (St. Clair, Clinton, Washington, Monroe, Randolph Counties),
1	LWIA 25 (Perry, Jackson, Jefferson, Franklin, Williamson Counties

(One CBO choose to leave the program early on due to no referrals made to their organization.)

A critical element to the pilot design was the utilization of the Illinois workNet system. EPIC was built for communication and customer tracking functionality which included:

- Communication related to intake, orientation and referral.
- Data sharing with the evaluation teams EPIS system.
- Development of the Individual Service Training and Employment Plan (ISTEP).
- Documentation of services including participation, completion of programs, attainment of industry-recognized credentials, support services and placement and retention in employment.
- Real time communication between the CBO career navigator and the DHS case manager.
- Support of the monthly staffing process.
- Control group data support.
- Reports for evaluation study and project implementation and service delivery.

Below is a view of and link to the public page of the partner guide.

[Back to Workforce & Education Partner Resources.](#)

This guide is intended to be used by Workforce Partners participating in the EPIC pilot program. You can access the EPIC public site using the short URL www.ilepic.com. This can be used on any material you distribute to the public for easy access.

EPIC Partner Dashboard (Log in with your Illinois workNet partner account). EPIC Partner Dashboard, Customers, Resources, and Reports are available through your My Dashboard.

epic
employment opportunities • personal services
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The EPIC pilot was designed to meet the specific skill needs of the local employer and sector (demand driven). In addition, the pilot was structured to address the skill deficiencies of SNAP recipients including their challenges to participate and complete the training and their ability to be placed and/or retained in a position or enrolled in a higher education opportunity. A career plan was established to guide the participants through steps related to their career pathway. CBOs utilized established career pathway systems including bridge programs, adult education, and career and technical education that result in industry recognized credentials and/or certifications. This design also integrated work-based learning opportunities that were related to the career pathway the participant was pursuing.

EPIC had three model approaches depending on the skill level of the participant when entering the pilot.

- **Model I:** In cooperation with existing adult education/English as a second language (ESL) bridge program models as identified in the Statewide Bridge Definition, provide instruction to those with reading and math levels below the 8.0 Educational Functioning Level (EFL) preparing them for the next component of training, Model II or III.
- **Model II:** This integrated model blends adult education and CTE instruction and is delivered in an accelerated team-taught format. Individuals in this model may be employed but skill deficient or long-term unemployed, who need to earn their high school equivalency certification, upgrade their basic skills, earn a community college basic certificate and/or obtain an industry recognized credential. A concurrent work-based learning component is offered for participants.
- **Model III:** For SNAP recipients who are identified as employed that do not experience basic skills barriers but lacking industry related skills or credentials; or SNAP participants that have successfully completed Models I and II. CBOs offer enhanced short-term training opportunities to SNAP recipients in key growth industry areas through either in house training or training partners including established Integrated Career & Planning System support program. This would enable them to advance in their current employment or identify other employment opportunities.

The significant difference between the EPIC pilot (treatment group) and the current SNAP E&T model (control group) is the intensity of services. As defined above, EPIC integrates remediation/bridge programs, adult basic education, technical training, and work experience and offers a higher level of support services to help alleviate issues that could result in a negative outcome. Another significant factor is the coaching/mentoring provided by a dedicated group of career navigators. The table below identifies what services are provided for both groups.

SERVICE	EPIC SNAP E & T SERVICES GROUP	SNAP E & T CONTROL GROUP *
• Assessment and referral to SNAP contractors.	X	X
• Assistance for adult education.	X	X
• Job retention support for 30, 60 or 90 days.	X	X
• Referral to providers for counseling or mentoring services for drug addictions and mental support if needed.	X	X
• Supportive services for barrier alleviation to facilitate participation. (transportation, childcare, etc.	X	X
• Assignment to a Career Navigator who will coach you through every step in the program.	X	
• Barrier identification and remediation.	X	
• Career Pathway training in a high-growth employment area.	X	
• Career training that gives you skills and credentials recognized by local employers.	X	
• Connections to employers for job placement in the career pathway in which you trained, along with transitional employment.	X	
• The opportunity to receive paid work experience that does not impact your existing SNAP benefits.	X	
• Personalized career, training and employment plan based on assessment.	X	

*Services listed are only available to control group members in counties that have regular core SNAP E&T services available.

Pilot Project Implementation

An Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) was established between DHS and DCEO and an IGA was established between DCEO and SIUC to begin the implementation of the EPIC pilot. DHS hired a project manager and support staff and DCEO absorbed the management of EPIC with the current JTED program manager and SIUC utilized existing and new hires to support the workNet and project management functions.

On September 14, 2015, an RFA was publicly released requesting CBOs to submit applications that align with the intent of the pilot described in the RFA and applications were due by October 28, 2015. Applications were reviewed based on the criteria set forth in the RFA and of the 44 applications received, 23 were notified on January 20, 2016 that they were selected for funding based on agreeable negotiations. The original grant term was from 2/1/2016 to 1/31/2018, however the CBOs received the executed grant agreement in June because these grants were the first in a transition of the States grant process prescribed in the Grant Accountability and Transparency Act.

On Monday, March 28, 2016, DHS and DCEO received approval to start the random assignment of participants into the EPIC pilot. Random Assignment officially began on Wednesday, March 30, 2016 in Regions 1 and 5.

As mentioned above, orientation rooms with computer labs were set up for the SNAP recipients to participate in a group orientation, to research career pathways and complete the EPIC application. In DHS regions 2-5, the labs were established either at the DHS FCRCs or the LWIA in the region. In region 1 - Cook County, the intake and orientation process were originally centralized and set up at one FCRC located at 59th and Ashland street where the SNAP E&T program was administered. On August 5, 2016, DHS SNAP E&T services were formally decentralized to make it easier for SNAP recipients to receive services closer to their residence. DHS SNAP E&T employees from the central SNAP E&T office were permanently assigned to other 15 FCRCs. Eight FCRCs were set up as Pod offices where customers could complete orientation and random assignment and seven were set up as Feeder offices where customers could complete E&T intake and be scheduled to a Pod to complete orientation and random assignment.

The referral process was slow during the second and third quarter of 2016, partly due to the NOCTI 21st Century assessment (which was removed in June from the orientation) and the learning curve of implementing EPIC, but referrals did pick up the fourth quarter (see EPIC Random Assignment and Referral Numbers chart). Several CBOs received few or no referrals in 2016 which resulted in one CBO opting out of EPIC.

On September 25, 2017, DHS reached the required 5,000 randomly assigned customers so random assignment and referral ended. The only SNAP customers referred to CBOs were those that were in the treatment group and were eligible to reengage. Due to a significant amount of funds remaining in the EPIC pilot a conversation was held between FNS and DHS and a decision

was made to start a “New Cohort” that would not be subject to random assignment. The new cohort started May 14, 2018 (see EPIC Random Assignment and Referral Numbers chart).

EPIC Random Assignment and Referral Numbers

Quarter	Randomly Assigned	Treatment Group	New Cohort Referrals
April - June 2016	471	236	
July-September 2016	996	497	
October - December 2016	2148	1074	
January - March 2017	3293	1646	
April - June 2017	4295	2145	
July - September 2017	5039	2524	
October - December 2017			
January - March 2018			
April - June 2018			447
July - September 2018			1114
October - December 2018			1439
January - March 2019			

During the design phase of EPIC, it was decided that to maintain the legitimacy of the control group, all SNAP recipients that went through the orientation could not be exposed to the CBOs providing the services. Aligning the recipients selected to be in the treatment group required some level of aptitude, interest, and access to the training program offerings. The RFA applications included baseline requirements for a customer to be accepted into the training program. For example, if a customer had a sexual offense, several CBOs could not place them in their training program due to industry requirements. These cases were referred to as hard stops. There were also incidences, for example, when a customer was not able to pass a drug test at entry but was willing to work on recovery and could access the training based on future resolves. These were referred to as soft stops. Based on the recipient’s career/sector choice and data collected in the intake application, programs were recommended for the recipients. Realistically, it is difficult to make a perfect alignment between the recipient and a career pathway in a three-hour orientation, but this at least provided some thoughtful choices considering more data could not be provided during the intake process of the study.

The 23 CBOs providing EPIC training services had a wide range of composition. Some focused on a specific sector, for example Jane Addams focused on Manufacturing and Southland Healthcare focused on Health Sciences, while others had larger offerings. In regions outside of Chicago it was required for the CBOs to offer more than one sector of training. DHS regions 2 and 3 had only one provider, located in Rockford for region 2 and Peoria for region 3. Region 4 had two providers in Decatur, but they provided training in different sectors. Region 5 had two providers, one served Southern Illinois and the other served the East St. Louis area. The below chart shows the industry sectors and number of CBOs that provided training within that sector.

Training Programs Offered by CBOs

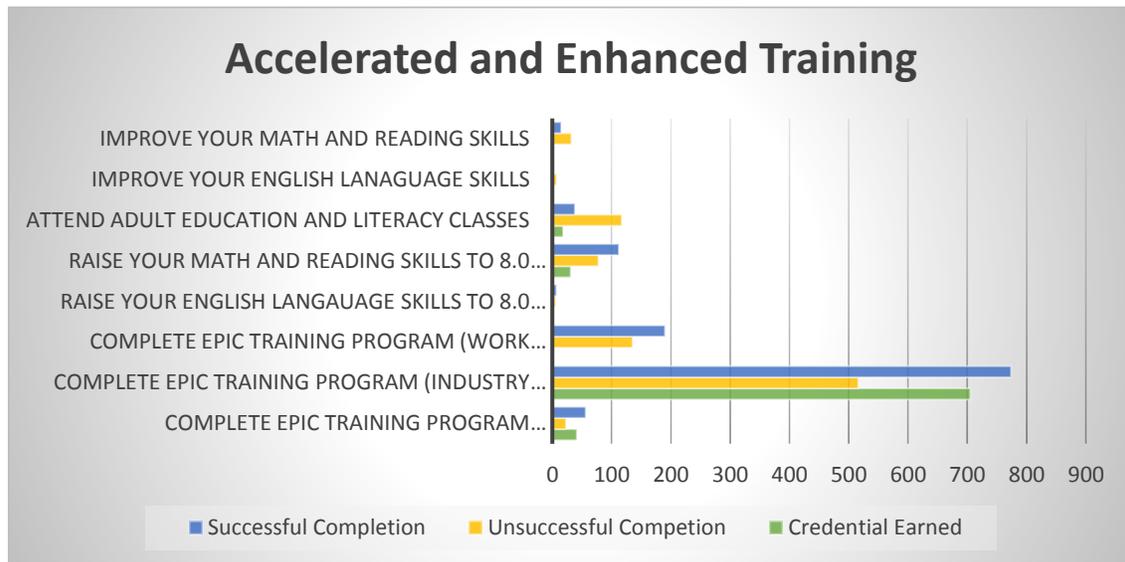
Industry Sector	# of CBOs Providing Training
Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources	1
Architecture and Construction	5
Business Management and Administration	8
Finance	1
Government and Public Administration	1
Health Science	14
Hospitality and Tourism	12
Information Technology	4
Law, Public Safety, Corrections, and Security	4
Manufacturing	9
Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics	15

DHS, immediately after the orientation and random assignment process, assisted the treatment group customers in selecting a “right fit” program and made an appointment for the customer with the CBO through a scheduling process in the workNet system. The customer left the DHS office with the DHS 1721 referral form, Customer intake form, and EPIC flyer in hand. The CBO was notified through the system that a customer was scheduled and the customer was added to their customer group. EPIC followed the SNAP E&T policy and procedures on engagement of customers. Within 48 hours of the initial appointment the CBO uploaded the 2151 form indicating the status of the customer.

Once a customer was assigned to the CBO and attended the initial appointment, the CBO would move the progression of the customer through their intake/service delivery process. This could look quite different from CBO to CBO as this is dictated by the training and industry requirements. As stated in the application submitted to FNS and mentioned under Pilot Project Design (above), the service delivery model was designed to move customers along a continuum of training based on their entry level that would advance their skills and provide meaningful credentials that could start the foundation to a sustainable career.

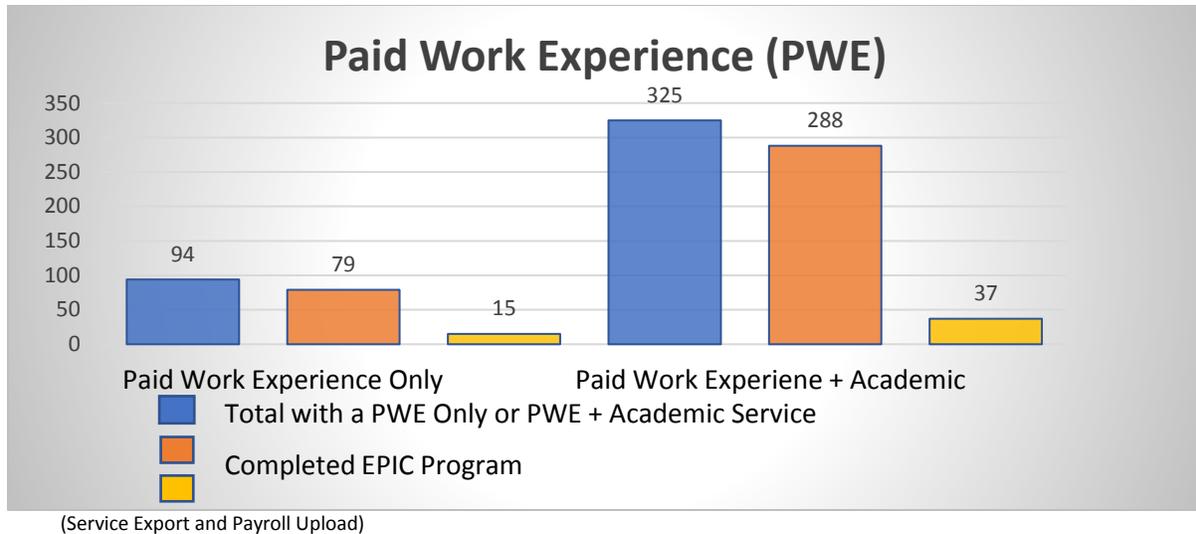
Customers were assessed via TABE to identify their academic readiness. Of the 165 tested for language, 54% fell below the 8th grade level. A total of 1,564 tested in math and reading scored 55% and 32% below the 8th grade level respectively. CBOs that offered bridge programs placed the customer that scored below an 8th grade level into their bridge program. CBOs that did not have a sector related bridge program offered assistance in remediation. Additionally, customers that needed Adult Basic Education were enrolled in GED courses. Conversations with the CBOs indicated that they were referred numerous customer that had significantly low math and reading scores. Based on the below chart, bridge programs were more successful in advancing the customers compared to general remediation assistance and GED attainment. Not all customers that were enrolled with a CBO received academic training. In some cases, customers were not interested in training and requested assistance in job search and attainment skills because they needed immediate income resources.

Many of the customers in academic services were enrolled in training offering Industry Recognized Credentials/Certificates. A total of 780 customers successfully completed, and 706 earned credentials/certificates. A much smaller number enrolled in College Credit courses, 57 successfully completed the EPIC pilot and 42 received credentials. A total of 67 customers that exited the EPIC pilot continued their education in other funding opportunities like the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) program. The chart below also illustrates the eight primary academic service categories and identifies the number that successfully and unsuccessfully completed that component of EPIC training, along with the credential/certification attainment.



(ISTEP Report)

Paid work experience (PWE) was one program element that was incorporated into EPIC and not offered in regular SNAP E&T. This element required a policy change so that the income would not be counted in the eligibility or benefits calculation. PWE was underutilized by the CBOs with only 62% of the total budget in that line item utilized and serving 419 customers for average earnings of \$1,728. Of the 419 customers with a PWE service, 367 or 87.6% completed the EPIC pilot. To complete the EPIC pilot the customer must have either Enlisted in Military, Continue Higher Education Outside of EPIC, Hired by Employer (30 hours/week or 120 hours a month), or Hired by Employer (Less than 30 hours/week or 120 hours a month). Many customers did not want to participate in EPIC if PWE was not provided by the CBO and opted out to find employment on their own.



One of the major outcomes of the EPIC pilot was to provide entry level industry recognized credentials and/or education through college credit courses with the opportunity to expand on these credentials in the career pathway of choice. Based on the prior chart (Training Programs Offered by CBOs) that identifies the industry sector and number of CBOs providing training in those sectors, it is not surprising that the credentials earned mirror the opportunities provided with Healthcare, Hospitality and Tourism, and Transportation, Distribution and Logistics leading in the number of credentials earned. (see graph/chart below).

Of the 743 customers earning credentials in college credit courses and/or industry recognized credentials, a total of 386 were hired; 31 continued higher education outside of EPIC; 144 were no long SNAP eligible; 120 in progress exited because the grant ended; 56 dropped out of the program; 6 moved or withdrew from the study.

EPIC Employment and Credentials by Industry	Employed #	Employed %	Credentials #	Credentials %
Hospitality and Tourism	142	18%	124	17%
Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics	137	17%	141	19%
Manufacturing	136	17%	57	8%
Health Science	122	16%	207	28%
Business Management and Administration	47	6%	39	5%
Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources	44	6%		
Law, Public Safety, Corrections, and Security	38	5%	51	7%
Architecture and Construction	33	4%	59	8%
Information Technology	24	3%	65	9%
Human Services	21	3%		
Marketing	17	2%		
Education and Training	8	1%		
Arts, Audio/Visual Technology, and Communications	7	1%		
Government and Public Administration	7	1%		
Grand Total	783	100%	743	100%

EPIC was designed to place SNAP customers in employment within their career pathway of choice that would provide sustainable income and progression within the pathway to no longer be reliant on public services. A total of 783 customers were placed in employment and 5750 completed the 90-day retention period to date. Industries in which customers were employed aligned with the availability of the training but also included a few additional sectors like human services (see chart above). Characteristics of the employed consist of the following. To date, 616 of the 2,519 referred treatment group customers (24%) gained employment and 167 of the 1,448 new cohort customers (11%) gained employment. Customers enrolled with a CBOs consisted of 1,646 in the treatment group of which 37% were employed and 739 in the new cohort of which 23% were employed. Fifty eight percent of the customers completing academic training were employed customers that completed paid work experience and placed in permanent employment at a rate of 54%.

Pilot Support and Technical Assistance

The EPIC team which consisted of DHS program manager Deidre Wesley and her staff, DCEO program manager Tammy Stone, and workNet staff Natasha Telger, Olivia Griesheim Miller, Dee Reinhardt, and system programmers provided extensive support for the pilot. To start the pilot off, the evaluation team held in person meetings with DHS frontline staff providing details and the parameters of the study and random assignment process. The SIUC workNet staff and DHS EPIC staff provided training to DHS frontline staff on the utilization of the EPIC system used to track and communicate customer progress between the DHS frontline staff and the CBO career navigators. An in-person meeting was held for the CBOs to go over the program design and expectations. The SIUC workNet staff also provided training to the CBOs on the utilization of the EPIC system.

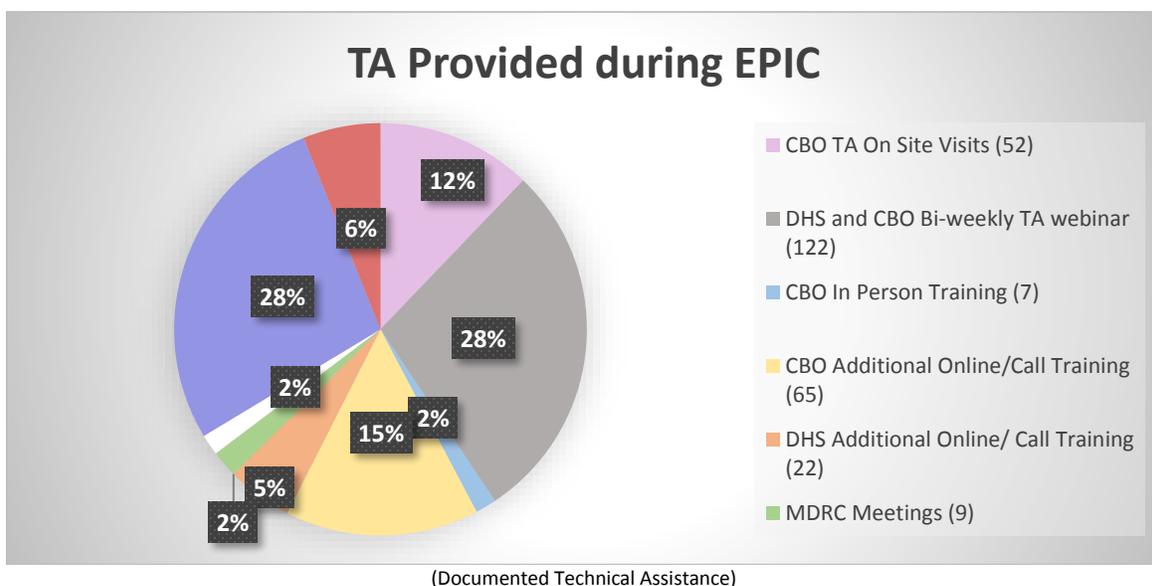
DHS held a weekly call every Monday with the DHS FCRCs to review random assignment, pilot implementation, DHS policy alignment, training, recruitment and tracking, the engagement and re-engagement progress and study close-out.

Weekly webinars were held every Wednesday for the CBO career navigators (switching later in the program to every other week). These included additional training on the system as it evolved during the pilot, review of progress, sharing of best practices, and content experts invited to discuss specific content like expungement, effective case noting, and other topics. Weekly webinars were held every Friday for DHS frontline staff (switching later in the program to every other week). These included training on the system and discussions on processes. CBOs also provided introductions to their agency and training programs offered in EPIC.

A state call was held every Tuesday between DHS, DCEO and the SIUC workNet staff to review overall progress of the pilot, discuss what was working and what was not, brainstorm on changes that needed to be made (for example “Staffing”) and to generally make sure the team was on the same page. DHS and DCEO worked with FNS, MDRC and the evaluation team to coordinate site visits and held monthly calls (that eventually went to quarterly) to discuss the project progression.

DCEO fiscal staff, who monitor the WIOA program, assisted with the fiscal monitoring of the EPIC CBOs. This review resulted in the suspension of one organization’s program due to findings. DCEO and SIUC workNet staff developed a comprehensive technical assistance (TA) tool and accompanied by the DHS EPIC staff visited each CBO to review their program progress and make sure the providers were following the pilot guidelines, and DHS procedures and policy. SIUC workNet staff did a follow-up visit to review progress made based on recommendations identified during the TA visit.

DHS, DCEO and SIUC workNet staff continually responded to calls from DHS frontline staff and CBO career navigators on program elements. The EPIC team became a very cohesive group, and each provided insight from their perspective based on the roles they played. The below chart indicated the volume of documented support provided.



Challenges and Solutions

A pilot of this magnitude did encounter challenges. Some of the challenges could be resolved and some could not. Some challenges have been beneficial as the lessons learned are being incorporated into other projects. Below is a list of challenges identified that are grouped based on significant challenges and solutions identified by the network in general and responses to a survey completed by the EPIC team, DHS frontline staff, CBO career navigators and the customers.

Challenges/Solutions for the whole network

- A quality assessment and aligning customers to the appropriate training program is key to success. A consideration for the EPIC pilot should have been to fund the development of a comprehensive assessment using the Illinois workNet platform to better align customers with services including those provided by the Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) or other social service providers.

- Engagement of randomly assigned customers was difficult. The first challenge was around 37% of the customers were initial no shows to the CBOs. A positive outcome of this was that the EPIC system allowed for transparency of the customers status and a quick response by DHS for conciliation. The second challenge was to keep the customer engaged after they were enrolled with the CBO.
- The ability to train DHS and CBO staff in providing customized training that incorporates the most critical elements of making assessments and motivating job seekers.
 - We missed the training opportunity (primarily due to timing and bureaucracy).
- Many SNAP recipients were no longer eligible for and receiving SNAP benefits which was required for participation. Many of the customers that lost their SNAP benefits were non-compliant. There were cases however when the customer was actively participating in their training program but lost benefits because of income increases or failure to redetermine. Federal SNAP E&T Policy related to eligibility does not align well with sustainable career pathway training which requires longer term participation without interruption.
- Turnover of staff and technical assistance needed for both DHS and CBO staff was challenging. DHS experienced a significant normal turnover of frontline staff due to promotions and position transfers requiring constant training. This also created inconsistencies in messages related to policy/process. The EPIC team, especially Deidre and her staff, worked extensively to mitigate issues related to personnel changes. CBO turnover was much less but still required attention.
- A performance-based model for CBOs tied to reimbursements was very difficult for a pilot project of this nature. Due to the intake process not being managed by CBOs it was very difficult for them to administer a model based on referrals only. The model was adjusted as we progressed because there was concern on providing services like paid work experience and more robust support services due to cost and earnings.
- The decision to apply for funds under the FNS opportunity was under an Illinois administration which changed shortly after receiving the award. The State departments management staff and team that originally submitted the proposal no longer existed. DHS experienced a significant turnover in SNAP E&T leadership and this impacted timely and key decisions during the term of EPIC.

EPIC Admin Team, DHS frontline staff, CBO career navigators and customers were surveyed and one of the questions asked was “What areas of the pilot do you feel need improvement?” Below is a synopsis of their responses.

Challenges experienced by DHS, DCEO, and workNet (EPIC Admin Team)

- Front end Implementation that required a random assignment process alignment of customers was difficult.
- Impact of SNAP E&T services changing from centralized to decentralized for recruitment and training staff was pivotal. There was a huge learning curve for newly participating FCRCs, but an uptake in recruitment afterward.
- Lack of a data sharing agreement to allow for integration of systems and forms. Manual verification of eligibility was a heavy load for the DHS EPIC staff.

- DHS transition to IES and the inability to integrate data between the CBO agencies (through EPIC), DHS and IDES for wage verification.
- No system in place to track data for the Control Group.
- Pilot design was not impacted by the Steering Group due to the delay in initiating the group.
- Initial “Staffing” process was problematic and inconsistent. After the removal of face-to-face requirement, it improved.
- More training tied to portable credentials, and the credential attainment tied to the step when entered in the EPIC system.
- Quicker implementation of non-randomized cohort to keep momentum and engage more customers.
- Update to EPIC could have included task-based update alerts, if no data integration – include a spot for DHS to put in sanction dates, other updates specific to policy.
- Better buy-in by DHS frontline staff.
- Better vetting of providers – use only providers with proven success rate of training completion and placement.
- The ability to gain user friendly reports and information from the ISTEP.

Challenges experienced by DHS Front Line Staff

- More information on training program options, as well as more options (in some areas).
- Ensure that computer systems can handle on-line systems (time-out issues).
- Enforcement of compliance.
- Better relationships between providers and FCRCs.
- Better training on how to access information on success story platform, information on training options, and tracking customers who completed training and received jobs.
- Limit involvement of voluntary participants. Many referrals were unsuccessful because customers would not follow-through with no repercussions.
- That EPIC could/should serve all clients that wanted to participate, as well as those with challenged backgrounds.

Challenges experienced by CBOs

- Quality of referrals. Many customers referred score very low on reading and math on the TABE. A recommendation was to give the TABE test as part of the DHS screening process. Some referrals should have been exempt and referred to DORS.
- Administrative demands of the EPIC pilot were excessive. An example is that “...the workNet tool was in constant re-design. We have spent many hours re-entering information into newly designed pages.”
- The pay for performance structure of the grant was very challenging.

Challenges experienced by the Customers

- Allow more time for the training, slower paced.
- More individualized services, access to tutors, better use of hands-on-training options especially in northern and suburban Cook County.
- More paid work experience/internships in some career pathways.

- Include Metra passes, other transportation options.
- Better contact with the instructor for some of the programs.
- Better job development at some providers.
- Better understanding of working with the homeless customers.

Major Accomplishments

Some of the accomplishment occurred because of the challenges experienced. The “Staffing” tools and process is an example of this. Many accomplishments occurred because of the dedicated support from the EPIC team, engagement of the DHS frontline staff, and relentless efforts of the career navigators. Below is a list of accomplishments identified and grouped based on significant accomplishments identified by the network in general and responses to a survey completed by the EPIC team, DHS frontline staff, CBO career navigators and the customers.

Accomplishments for the whole network

- Policy was developed or modified to better meet the needs of customers and the EPIC pilot. For example, policy was changed for EPIC so that paid work experience would be exempt from income determination for SNAP benefits that resulted in a higher rate of recipients completing training.
- EPIC provided a platform for DHS and DCEO to have a much more collaborative relationship. With this included a better understanding of how each organization operates incorporating policies and process associated with SNAP E&T. This understanding can drive the development of future projects.
- Relationships were built between CBO career navigators and DHS frontline staff that will extend past EPIC. Understanding each other’s roles and what can be accomplished helped with transparency.
- Through SIUC the EPIC team developed a system that was key in the administration of EPIC. The tools in the system helped administer the orientations, aligned customers based on customer factors and training program requirements. The EPIC system provided transparency of customer movement, training and partner resources, and reporting. Lessons learned based on EPIC have been incorporated in the current DCEO project and on system improvement.

DHS frontline staff, CBO career navigators and customers were surveyed and one of the questions asked was “Tell us your favorite experience from your time in the EPIC pilot?” Below is a synopsis of their responses.

Accomplishments experienced by DHS, DCEO, and workNet (Admin Team)

- Automation process of application, reporting, tracking customers progress.
- Better understanding of process and requirements between DHS and agencies.
- System generated documents.

- The ability and flexibility to develop tools based on the direction the pilot study was moving.
- Use of the dashboard to track customer progress between the CBO and DHS.
- Seamless collaboration and communication between DHS and CBOs on the status of customers and required next steps in the EPIC system.
- Formulated a successful CBO Reverse Referral process.

Accomplishments experienced by DHS Front Line Staff

- 28% of respondents were happy because of client success through training/employment.
- 5% appreciated the new training programs for customers.
- 52% felt communication regarding the EPIC pilot was communicated “fair” or better.
- One comment included: “EPIC dashboard and the EPIC profile. I enjoyed having a system in which you can look and see all the documents you needed as well as the providers comments and your workers history. As a manager that combined with the dashboard letting you know what was pending etc. This was a great tool to have.”
- Regarding engaging the customers – “I found the best process was just asking them what types of job they were interested in obtaining. I would show them the trainings available, guide them with the trainings that fit the type of job they were interested in and I felt they got excited by seeing the screen with the list of trainings, kind of like they felt there were endless possibilities.”

Accomplishments experienced by CBOs

- Numerous customer success stories including one about a customer having recently exited prison with no GED, testing at a 5th grade level. The participant has since 1) obtained his GED; 2) tested at a 12th-grade level; 3) entered a pre-apprenticeship program; and 4) entered a Department of Labor Registered Apprenticeship, employed full-time, no longer receiving SNAP benefits and has health and dental/vision insurance.
- ISTEP
- Dashboards
- Ease of case management with the IWN tools.
- Breadth of availability of support services and opportunities provided through EPIC.
- Webinars

Accomplishments experienced by the Customers

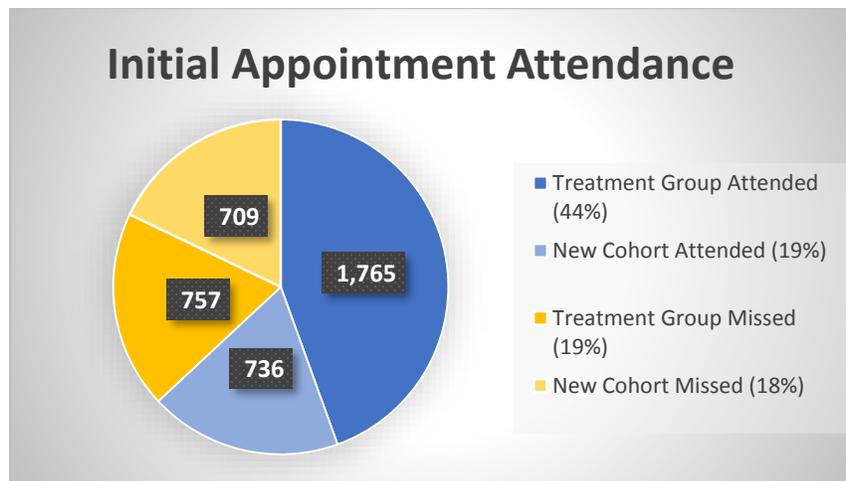
75% of respondents felt they were placed in the “right fit” program for their needs. Customers would recommend this program because:

- Hired immediately and now licensed.
- Change careers and a more promising future.
- Second chance at life, according to one respondent - Is an outstanding program that in my case was a second chance in life because I met wonderful and well-trained people that made this program so useful for me.
- Gained useful work skills to return to the workforce, according to one respondent.

- This is a program for real people with real understanding of their capabilities so that they understand the gravity of the opportunity.
- Introduction to basic stability in life and work.
- 55% of respondents said the expectations they had were met and 7 customers said the expectations were exceeded.
- From one respondent - The professionals were there to guide us every step of the way.

Costs of Implementing and Operating Pilot Project

By the close of the grant, March 31, 2019, approximately \$8,410,374.23 will be unspent and returned to FNS. The main reason there are considerable funds remaining after reaching the 5,000 randomly assigned customers (2,500 control group and 2,500 treatment group) is because of the participation fall out rate. This resulted in \$6,268,920.20 funds remaining in the CBO budget. The application with FNS planned on services provided to 2,500 customers however the participation fall-out rate for the initial appointment to the CBO was around 37% for the treatment group and new cohort combined (see graph below).



(Customers documented as missed appointment)

Also, DHS requested that two tasks in the SIUC scope of work (training and system sustainability) not be completed which resulted in an under expenditure of their grant agreement in the amount of \$1,057,503.68.

The CBOs expended \$9,765,304.80 on the EPIC pilot. Seven percent of the funds were expended on administration; 87% spent on training costs, 64% spent on participant wages, 79% spent on supportive services and 93% spent on career navigation. The average cost per participant enrolled was \$5,508, completed was \$10,258, and employed was \$12,472. Not all training costs for customers were charged to the EPIC grant. In some cases, other sources like WIOA or Pell grants funded the educational component of the training. The cost of implementation for the career navigator line was high due to the time required for learning EPIC policies and procedures, utilization of the EPIC system, and the time and effort required to

staff the 2,391 customers that were enrolled with the agency and had to be “Staffed” but not all of them were active participants in the training. Below is the current budget and unexpended balance.

<i>EPIC-Grant</i>	Currently Budgeted	Projected Unexpended
<i>DHS Contractual Personnel – Salaries</i>	\$1,793,590.00	\$899,762.25
<i>DHS Contractual Personnel – Fringe Benefits</i>	\$133,630.00	\$68,831.81
Total Contractual Personnel	\$1,927,220.00	\$968,594.06
<i>Travel – Local</i>	\$17,844.00	\$17,774.00
<i>Travel – Out of State</i>	\$4,156.00	\$4,156.00
Total Travel	\$22,000.00	\$22,000.00
Equipment	\$87,915.00	\$87,915.00
Supplies	\$5,580.00	\$5,441.29
<i>DHS Total</i>	\$2,042,715.00	\$1,083,950.35
<i>Total Agreement and Spent by DCEO for Contractual Services</i>	\$19,814,853	\$7,326,423.88
<i>DCEO- Project Management</i>	\$854,316	0
<i>SIUC</i>	\$2,926,312	\$1,057,503.68
<i>CBO</i>	\$16,034,225	\$6,268,920.20
USDA-Food and Nutrition Services Grant Award	\$21,857,568.00	\$8,410,374.23

Lessons Learned

Recommendations for Future Policy Considerations

- Allow eligibility determination for E&T at enrollment only without the requirement to constantly confirm.
 - This would require a change in federal policy.
- Approve paid work experience exempt from wage determination.
 - This would require a change in federal policy.
- Consider the benefits of becoming a SNAP E&T Volunteer state.
 - This would require a change in state policy.
- Review the states implementation quality control policies and steps and determine if processes can be streamlined (for example, “Staffing” procedures now that E&T is decentralized.)

Recommendations for Future Pilot Projects

- Secure a data sharing agreement (DSA) prior to implementation if ancillary systems are used to track the full scope of customer engagement.
 - Several thousands of manual data entry checks were required to maintain the illinoisworkNet system without a DSA.
 - Ensure there is a tracking system established for control group engagement.

- Updating SNAP E&T policy and/or processes and, when able, adapting to make the project more efficient for the customer and providers needs to be a priority.
- Hire front-line staff dedicated to the pilot.
- Complete the initial process flow with all stakeholders before roll-out and implementation of the pilot.
- Establish an in-depth assessment process and identify needed training topics with content experts. If this was accomplished, it could have influenced service delivery and outcomes.
 - Identify what is an appropriate referral for the customer whether it is rehabilitation services, adult basic education, or vocational/college credit training.
 - Give CBOs an opportunity to present their programs prior to engagement
 - Ensure that SNAP recipients are truly ready to engage successfully with the CBO by establishing a less aggressive timeline.
- Select career pathway CBOs
 - Have a larger selection of sector training program in all areas.
 - Provide for alignment to other training offerings through partnerships.
 - Tie training programs to credentials up front so there is consistency within the CBOs and across CBOs with authorized credentials.
 - Require that CBOs understand SNAP E&T customers and are ready to work with their barriers.
 - Have job fairs across all CBOs and FCRCs to maximize business engagement.
- Calculate expected participation rates that are more realistic with this population.
 - CBO budgets and performance were based upon an unrealistic higher participation rate.
- Complete CBO Technical Assistance reviews early in implementation.
- Monitor CBO customer engagement.
 - Not all credentials and employment obtained were in the customers industry of choice.
 - Not all customers felt that they were successfully serviced.
- Select and engage Steering Committee prior to implementation.