

Reaching Rural Populations: Tri-Valley Inc.

Senior SNAP Enrollment Initiative Best Practices Report

April 2020

Introduction

Established in 1976, Tri-Valley Inc. (TRV) is a private, non-profit agency providing information, referrals, and care management for in-home and community services in Central Massachusetts. The mission of TRV is to promote and maintain an optimal level of independence, dignity and well-being for elders and younger individuals with disabilities by providing information, advocacy and access to quality services, resources and caregiver support. TRV is an Aging Services Access Point (ASAP) contracting with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs for 40+ years with close collaborative relationships with the two other ASAPs in Central Mass. TRV is a member of the Aging and Disability Resource Consortium of Central Mass and has established relationships with hospitals, VNA's, senior centers, police/fire departments, and other local agencies. These relationships generate referrals for those in need and open communication to continuously assess and meet community needs.

TRV serves 25 towns in Central Massachusetts including: Bellingham, Blackstone, Brookfield, Charlton, Douglas, Dudley, East Brookfield, Franklin, Hopedale, Medway, Mendon, Milford, Millville, Northbridge, North Brookfield, Oxford, Southbridge, Spencer, Sturbridge, Sutton, Upton, Uxbridge, Warren, Webster, and West Brookfield. Most of these towns are rural areas. Through our vast network of food banks, partnering agencies and community partners, our staff focus on finding underserved individuals, particularly in rural areas. We leverage these relationships to spread information about our services and to educate communities about benefits. Using data from Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap report and state SNAP offices, we identify and target the most vulnerable counties with the lowest SNAP participation rates.

TRV's Outreach Strategy

Tri-Valley staff has been assisting consumers with public benefits applications for many years and enhancing our experience this past year by becoming a Benefits Enrollment Center through a grant from NCOA. The SNAP Enrollment Initiative Grant funded two experienced staff members to work as SNAP specialists on their weekly flex day off. Having the additional funding enabled Tri-Valley to reach more individuals in need of food security.

The SNAP Enrollment Initiative was implemented into our communities through internal referrals from staff, reaching out to local food banks to offer application days, having a staff member assist with applications at health fairs that Tri-Valley attends or sponsors, assisting consumers referred by community partners, as well as self-referrals.

We understand that our territory is rural, so transportation tends to be difficult for some individuals. Therefore, application assistance sites were set up for individuals to receive assistance, and home visits were provided to those who are unable to get to a site.

Tri-Valley already had an established procedure for referrals and a client database that could be used for this initiative. Reports are utilized from this database to track demographics of applicants and easily retrieve information that may be needed to complete any required statistical reports.

Having a foundation of knowledge and experience as well as a process in place for referrals, documentation, and reporting allowed Tri-Valley to be able to implement the project quickly.

Challenges

There are some misconceptions around SNAP benefits. Some individuals think that they will only get \$10 per month towards food purchases and feel it is not worth their efforts to get that small amount of money. Others believe it is a stigma to get the benefit or they are taking food away from someone who is needier.

Meeting the target number of applicants for the grant also has been a challenge. When Tri-Valley benefit specialists started assisting with the grant and focusing on SNAP applications as a sole benefit it was not successful. Many individuals in need of SNAP benefits have additional needs. The specialists found it difficult not to look at the global needs of individuals and were re-routing referrals to our BEC program instead of counting them under SNAP grant.

Staffing schedules has been an additional challenge. Tri-Valley has two staff, each providing five hours per week of application assistance under the SNAP grant. The difficulty is that both staff work on the grant on Mondays. This is challenging as there are many Monday holidays during the year ultimately leading to less days of availability for application assistance.

Best Practices

Educational efforts around SNAP benefits has helped to dispel some of the misconceptions. Explaining what the SNAP benefit program offers, including

the opportunity to access healthy fresh produce at the local farmers markets, has been key. Having the conversation around eligibility guidelines and funding availability also has been helpful—letting individuals know that the funds are set per individual (and not one pot that is fully divided amongst applicants) and their applying will not take away from anyone else. In addition, SNAP specialists explain to individuals about the various expenses that can be claimed to help increase their awarded amount. SNAP specialists provide a list of needed documentation and will support individuals with how to obtain the documentation should they not have it readily available to them in their homes. SNAP specialists spend time doing outreach at local food pantries during distribution days, giving presentations at the local YMCA, providing educational chats and application events at local senior centers, distributing information on Tri-Valley social media sites, and giving informational presentations at staff meetings for Tri-Valley staff and other community organizations. Creating awareness and opportunities for assistance with the application process has provided more successful connections for individuals with the benefits they need to help decrease their food insecurity and budget deficits.



Sample SNAP flyer developed by TRV

After many months of community education and application assistance resulting in numbers not growing at target rates, discussions were held with other BECs and NCOA for technical support. Tri-Valley wanted to brainstorm ideas and re-evaluate the current policies and procedures to better meet objectives, linking individuals with the appropriate and needed benefits and reaching target goals for the grant. After gathering ideas and then reviewing agency practices a new approach was chosen. Benefit Specialists began counting individuals with multiple application needs under SNAP and not redirecting them to the BEC. The additional applications submitted were for the purpose of consumer need and not used for statistical purposes besides SNAP. This change resulted in increased numbers being reported under the SNAP grant and moving closer to our target.

Reviewing the staffing pattern helped to figure out a new plan of action. We had one of the two staff spread their five hours out during the holiday weeks. This allowed for daily assistance with applications. The other individual was able to review their time management focus and make appointments ahead for the entire month to help streamline the flow of referrals. Both plans of

action resulted in greater numbers of individuals being educated around public benefits and connecting to the benefits that they need.

SNAP Client Stories

- Maria is an 82-year-old widow living on limited income. She worked in many factories throughout her life but had to retire at the young age of 47 due to ongoing back problems limiting her mobility. She relied on her husband financially for many years until he passed away four years ago. She has been managing on her own ever since. Since her husband's death, Maria has been dealing with new and worsening medical issues, some which are age related. She currently maintains a diabetic, low sugar and carbohydrate diet which is expensive under one income. Maria has limited informal supports and no children to assist her.

In order to assist Maria with the daily cost of living and food expenses, her Geriatric Support Service Coordinator thought that she would benefit from SNAP assistance. This could allow her to purchase the nutritious foods she needs in order to maintain her diet to benefit her health. A SNAP referral was made for Maria and the application was completed online. Maria is currently receiving SNAP assistance and is very appreciative of the support.

- The Benefit Enrollment Specialist was on site at a local food pantry assisting with SNAP applications. While assisting an older woman with an application for SNAP, the woman mentioned how grateful she was for the assistance of the Enrollment Specialist and the food pantry and how much it helped her get the food she needed. After speaking with the elder further, the Enrollment Specialist was made aware of the fact that she was caring for her granddaughter as her legal guardian. The elder spoke about her granddaughter and how much she meant to her but also how overwhelmed she had been. The woman also mentioned the frequency of bringing her granddaughter to a neurologist in Boston and how much the expenses for transportation to and from these appointments were costing her. The Enrollment Specialist was able to record the expenses for medical appointments in hopes to increase the elder's benefits for SNAP.

The Enrollment Specialist asked if she would be interested in speaking with Tri-Valley's Caregiver Specialist about the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren program for any form of respite. The woman was agreeable to this, so the Enrollment Specialist forwarded her information to the Caregiver Specialist, who was able to reach out to her. The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren program was able to

provide funding to the elder to enroll her granddaughter in dance classes a few days a week after school. Not only was this a great source of respite but it also meant a lot to the grandchild, who loves to dance.

- A 67-year-old divorced female consumer was a working single mother all her life. The applicant retired a few years ago but is finding it difficult to make ends meet with her retirement pay. The applicant moved into public housing and lives in a congregate apartment that she shares with 4 other women. She likes to share family-style meals with the other residents but only had a small food budget. The applicant applied for food stamps to stretch her budget and enable her to make healthier meals for herself. She also enjoys making larger meals during the holidays and shares these meals with the other residents. The applicant was grateful to be approved for SNAP and is excited to use the HIP incentive [Healthy Incentives Programs, which matches SNAP benefits dollar for dollar at farmers' markets] in the summer for fresh fruit, vegetables, and herbs.
- TRV also helped a 60-year-old divorced female who recently applied for SNAP benefits due to the rising cost of food. She had been living on her Social Security disability check for a few years but was finding it difficult to afford food and groceries. She moved into public housing recently and asked for help with a SNAP application. The applicant is very active within her church community and enjoys organizing fundraisers for her parish. She likes to make crafts and gives them away during the holidays as gifts. She was very appreciative for the SNAP benefit and stated that it will help with her monthly budget a lot.

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