

Title of Nomination: Washington State Combined Application Program
(WASHCAP)

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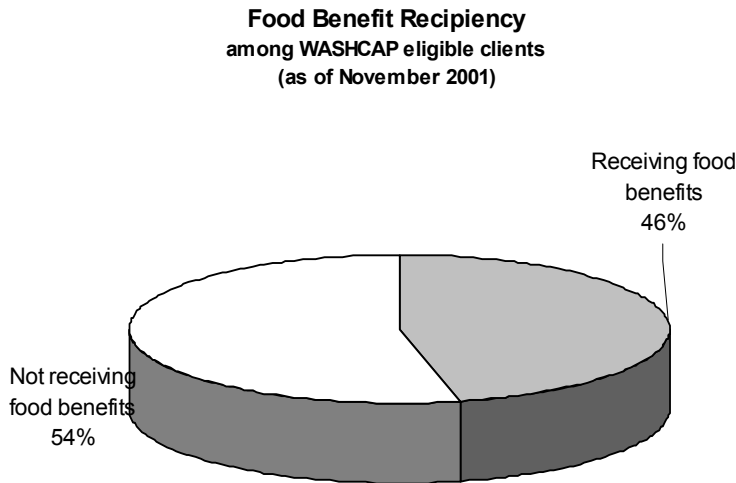
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The Washington State Combined Application Program (WASHCAP)

Executive Summary

The Washington State Combined Application Program (WASHCAP), a five-year federal demonstration project, is a combined effort between the United States Department of Agriculture Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNS), the Social Security Administration (SSA) and the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS). The goal of WASHCAP is to increase the number of aged, blind, and disabled adults in the state who participate in the Food Stamp Program. WASHCAP accomplishes this goal through an interactive Web site, telephony and an automated interface between SSA and DSHS legacy systems that automatically issues food assistance benefits when SSA approves Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for an individual.



In Washington State, 56 thousand SSI clients meet the eligibility criteria for WASHCAP. Each of these individuals receives approximately \$550 per month from their SSI benefits. Participating in the Food Stamp Program is especially important for these low-income individuals to ensure that their nutritional needs are being met. Even so, before WASHCAP began, only 46 percent of SSI recipients in the state were receiving food

assistance.

Program rules require food assistance recipients to travel to a community services office (CSO) for an in-person interview and submit paperwork up to four times per year. Recipients also must report all changes in their circumstances within 10 days of when the change occurs. National studies have shown the low take-up rate among the aged, blind, and disabled is in part because of the difficulty these individuals have meeting these program requirements.

Using technology, WASHCAP removes all of these program barriers and makes the application for SSI and the application for food assistance benefits seamless. The goal of the program is to increase the number of SSI recipients who receive food assistance by at least twenty five percent and become a national model for the delivery of food assistance benefits to this vulnerable low-income population.

Description of project, including length of time in operation

WASHCAP combines the SSI application processed by SSA with the food assistance application traditionally processed by DSHS. When an individual applies for SSI at the SSA office, the SSA claims representative asks the applicant if they would like to receive food assistance once their SSI is approved. If the applicant would like to receive food assistance, the claims representative asks two additional questions and puts a special code in their computer eligibility system called the Modernized Supplemental Security Income Claims System (MSSICS). That WASHCAP indicator is transmitted to DSHS each night through an electronic interface called the State Data Exchange (SDX) and is stored by the DSHS computer eligibility system called the Automated Client Eligibility System (ACES). Once DSHS receives information from SSA through the SDX that an individual's SSI application has been approved, ACES automatically issues food assistance benefits and an electronic benefits card is sent to the client in the mail.

In addition to the automated application process, WASHCAP recipients also benefit because they need only contact SSA to report changes in their circumstances, they are certified for benefits for twenty-four months, and they may receive a larger monthly benefit. DSHS manages most WASHCAP cases in a centralized call center. If WASHCAP recipients have questions about their food assistance benefits they can contact the call center through an 800 number and talk to one of the seven eligibility experts on staff.

Although ensuring that new SSI applicants also receive food assistance is an important component of WASHCAP, an equally important component is reaching out to the 30 thousand SSI recipients eligible for WASHCAP who currently get no food assistance. Each month, DSHS sends application packets to five thousand of these individuals inviting them to participate. Returned applications are processed by the central WASHCAP call center. The call center staff then use a Web-based interface to notify SSA of the SSI client's WASHCAP eligibility. SSA enters the information into MSSICS, the information is transmitted to ACES via the SDX, and benefits are issued to the client.

DSHS began working with SSA and FNS in January 2000 on the development of WASHCAP, which required changes to both the SDX and ACES. The first WASHCAP benefits were issued in December 2001 to SSI recipients who were already receiving food assistance. Outreach mailings began in March 2002.

Significance to the improvement of the operation of government

By automating the process and centralizing the maintenance of the WASHCAP caseload in a call center, DSHS is able to manage these cases with fewer workers than would be required to manage them in a field office. Seven call center eligibility experts currently manage 15,000 WASHCAP cases, or 2,500 cases per call center agent. This is far greater than the average caseload of an eligibility worker in the field. Also, the WASHCAP caseload will increase significantly through outreach without significantly increasing the staff in the call center.

SSA is federally mandated to take food assistance applications for certain SSI clients. By simplifying the food assistance application for SSI clients to just four questions, SSA is able to fulfill their requirement without significantly increasing the time their claims representatives spend determining eligibility.

FNS is responsible for half of the administrative costs for the Food Stamp Program. WASHCAP reduces their administrative costs. Also, FNS is concerned about the low up-take rate among this population and hopes this demonstration project will provide a nationwide model for service delivery to SSI clients.

Benefits realized by service recipients, taxpayers, agency or state

WASHCAP service recipients are able to access the Food Stamp Program- a basic nutritional safety net- much more easily than they did in the past. The reduction in paperwork and contact required to maintain benefits removes a barrier for these low-income aged, blind, and disabled individuals and encourages individuals to participate even if they have declined the benefits in the past. As many as 56,000 SSI clients will benefit from WASHCAP.

The administrative costs for DSHS, SSA, and FNS are lower than the regular service delivery method, allowing these agencies to serve more people without increasing costs. This ultimately benefits the taxpayer because these agencies can allocate more staff to other programs they administer.

Return on investment, short-term/long-term payback

One of the major components of the demonstration project evaluation is to determine the effect of WASHCAP on administrative costs. DSHS and SSA both invested staff time equivalent to two full time positions for two years to manage the project development at a total cost of approximately \$200,000. Both agencies also made changes to their computer systems, requiring dedication of systems development staff. The DSHS systems development cost was approximately \$200,000. DSHS invested some minimal resources in setting up the central call center, and is responsible for contracting with an independent firm to conduct the third-party evaluation. This is included in the WASHCAP administrative budget. The total start-up costs for the program are approximately \$400,000.

FNS pays 100 percent of the cost of the benefits issued and 50 percent of the administrative costs. The WASHCAP administrative budget is \$500,000 per year to operate the eight-person call center. If the WASHCAP caseload were managed in field offices, 81 staff would be required according to the DSHS field allocation formula. Employee salaries and benefits alone for these 81 staff would cost \$3.8 million per year compared to \$420,000 for the WASHCAP unit. This is a net savings to DSHS and FNS of \$3.4 million per year. Over the course of the five-year evaluation, this net savings will grow as the WASHCAP caseload increases.

An added payback is the difference in the cost of WASHCAP outreach compared to the traditional Food Stamp Outreach program DSHS administers through contracts with community-based organizations. DSHS pays contractors approximately \$3 million annually to contact an average of

40,000 potential food assistance recipients per year. The cost of the WASHCAP outreach mailing is \$26,400 annually to contact the 56,000 potential WASHCAP recipients. The WASHCAP mailing is generating about a 25 percent return rate, which is at least as effective as the traditional outreach program. This is a net savings for outreach of \$2.97 million per year.

The total net savings including the administrative costs and outreach costs of the WASHCAP program is approximately \$6.37 million per year. Over the span of the five-year demonstration project, after taking into consideration the cost of start-up, is a return on investment of \$31.5 million.