

A PROCESS EVALUATION OF THE
**SUMMER ELECTRONIC BENEFIT
TRANSFER FOR CHILDREN PROGRAM:
2018 DEMONSTRATION**

Elgin and Georgetown, Texas

REPORT PREPARED FOR THE TEXAS
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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Executive Summary

The Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) exists as a model to curb food insecurity in families during summer months. Initially piloted in 2011 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), SEBTC provides monthly benefits to eligible families with the goals of reducing food insecurity and improving the nutritional status of children. In 2018, Texas participated in the pilot demonstration using the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program model that provided \$30 of benefits to children in households qualifying for free and reduced-priced meals.

The Texas Hunger Initiative (THI) partnered with a Baylor public health researcher (and THI Research Fellow), a public health undergraduate student, and the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) to perform a process evaluation of the pilot, including assessments of program content, participant trainings, implementation (fidelity), and reach and usability. Specific aims of the project were:

1. To determine the extent to which the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) program was implemented as planned in Elgin and Georgetown, Texas;
2. To determine the efficacy of involving WIC staff to provide training for SEBTC participants;
3. To identify possible barriers to SEBTC implementation in Elgin and Georgetown, Texas;
4. To determine SEBTC card usage among program participants.

The Baylor research team utilized three evaluation methods to assess the pilot: phone interviews, an electronic survey, and a focus group. Phone interviews with program administrative staff (including TDA and state and local WIC staff) were intended to assess staff perceptions of participant trainings and program implementation. The electronic survey illuminated participant experiences with the program, card usage, and perceptions of food insecurity. Lastly, the focus group provided qualitative information about program impact, participant trainings, program implementation, and program communication.

WIC staff demonstrated strong appreciation for the many ways they felt this program benefited families in their communities. Staff indicated that they felt prepared to help with the

program even though they did not feel that they received enough training to do so. They felt that if small improvements were made to communication, staff training, and participant trainings the program would be even more effective.

Overall, survey respondents had a positive experience with the program, and our research demonstrates the potential of the program to reduce food insecurity among participating households. Importantly, our research sheds light on the reasons why benefits may not be fully exhausted, which includes limited types and quantities of food that can be purchased under the WIC model. Nonetheless, most survey respondents who received their card later than expected (and had to spend down two month's benefits in one month to not lose the value) still spent all their benefits in the shortened period, underscoring the importance of these benefits for many families.

Background

The summer months are particularly burdensome for families who are food insecure. Parents report that budgets are tighter during the summer, and on average, they spend an additional \$300 per month on groceries (Share our Strength, 2012). In Texas, only 8 percent of children and teens who participate in the free and reduced-price lunch program during the school year participate in a federally funded summer meals program (FRAC, 2017). While there are several barriers to summer meals participation, the most frequently identified barrier among program sponsors and participants is the challenge of transportation—children may not have a way to travel to a summer meals site, the site may be located near busy highways or intersections and thus not safely walkable, or the site may be rurally located.

In 2011, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) piloted an alternative model—the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC)—to provide monthly benefits to eligible families during the summer months to reduce food insecurity and improve the nutritional status of children. The pilot model utilizes electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards to issue benefits and operates through either a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or a Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program system. To date, USDA has conducted five pilot demonstrations during the summers of 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2018 within select states. Texas participated in 2013, 2014, and 2018 pilot programs.

Federally funded evaluations have accompanied each pilot implementation, including an assessment of food-insecurity status, nutritional status, and benefit usage among program participants. Overall, the pilot programs demonstrated improvement in food insecurity and nutrient intake among children (i.e., more vegetables and fruits consumed). However, there is lower program participation and benefit usage in WIC-model states, when compared to SNAP-model states. Possible reasons for lower participation in WIC-model states is that WIC benefits do not roll over to the next month, and the WIC program restricts the types of allowable food purchases (Abt Associates Inc, 2016). However, there may be other food access barriers impacting benefit exhaustion, including a lack of full-service grocery stores, a dearth of nutritional, affordable foods in corner store establishments (Barker & Francois, 2012), and other unobserved factors which have not been accounted for in previous evaluations.

The Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) implemented its third (non-consecutive) demonstration of SEBTC in summer 2018 through the existing WIC EBT system, which allowed households to purchase specific packages of WIC-allowable foods at WIC-authorized stores using their summer nutrition card. Households that have children who attend school in Elgin ISD and Georgetown ISD were invited to participate in the program and were issued \$30 per month, June through August 2018. In total, 3,921 students in Elgin ISD and Georgetown ISD received benefits during the summer of 2018. While 2018 was the third year Texas implemented SEBTC, it was the first year TDA partnered with state and local WIC offices to develop and administer a training where participants picked up their card and received program information. Local WIC offices in Elgin and Georgetown conducted the participant trainings. Presentation slides containing information on food packages and use of the card were presented in both English and Spanish. Participants who attended the training received their card along with a shopping guide and welcome materials. In partnership with WIC staff, Elgin ISD provided three evening trainings for Elgin ISD participants, and Georgetown ISD provided six trainings for its participants. Participants who did not attend a training were mailed their card before the program began and also had an option to participate in an online training.

To understand potential benefits of SEBTC and the possible barriers of implementation during summer months, a faculty member & THI Research Fellow and student in Baylor's Department of Public Health partnered with the Texas Hunger Initiative (THI) and TDA to conduct a process evaluation of the SEBTC program. Process evaluation is necessary as a precursor to outcome evaluation as it can be used to determine potential factors that lead to success or failure of a program. The evaluation plan included assessments in four general areas specific to SEBTC: program content, training, implementation (fidelity), and reach and usability of the program. Specific aims of the project were:

1. To determine the extent to which the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) program was implemented as planned in Elgin and Georgetown, Texas;
2. To determine the efficacy of involving WIC staff to provide training for SEBTC program participants;

3. To identify possible barriers to SEBTC implementation in Elgin, Texas, and Georgetown, Texas; and
4. To determine SEBTC card usage among program participants.

Baylor researchers submitted the evaluation protocol to Baylor University's Institutional Review Board for review, and the study was deemed exempt.

Evaluation Methods

The purpose of this evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of SEBTC trainings and assess the experience and use of SEBTC among participating households. The Baylor research team utilized three evaluation methods to assess program training and participant experiences: phone interviews, an electronic survey, and a focus group.

Interviews

The phone interviews were designed to elicit responses from TDA and WIC staff about training effectiveness (including staff training and training provided for program participants), comfort level of staff who participated in the staff training, impressions of participant trainings, and program implementation. Participants were recruited by email to participate in a 30-minute interview. Staff self-selected to participate in an interview by signing up for a timeslot. Thirty-five staff were interviewed from Texas WIC, Williamson County (Georgetown) WIC, and Elgin WIC offices in July and August 2018.

Electronic Survey

The purpose of the survey was to help TDA staff understand how participants experienced the program and accompanying training components. The research team administered the survey via Qualtrics, a professional, online survey platform, at the end of the summer, after SEBTC benefits concluded. The original intent of the study was to assess the experiences of SEBTC participation in Georgetown ISD as well; however, Georgetown ISD leadership opted out of participating in the evaluation. Elgin ISD administrative staff sent the link to English and Spanish versions of the survey on August 31, 2018 via email to 1,915 participating households, 1,714 of which were successfully delivered. Two hundred and thirty-nine responded for a 13 percent response rate. The survey remained open for 16 days and participants received

four reminders via email. The survey consisted of 40 dichotomous, ranking, and open-ended questions and took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Survey questions related to SEBTC card utilization (also known as the summer nutrition card), satisfaction with training, perceptions of food environment, ease of card use, benefit exhaustion, program trainings, experiences of food insecurity, and household-level information.

Focus Group

At the end of the survey, participants were able to opt into participating in a follow-up focus group. Given the resources available, the research team chose to conduct only an English-speaking focus group, so the option to participate in a focus group was only presented in the English version of the survey. Three individuals participated in the focus group on October 11, 2018 which was held in a classroom in an all-purpose building owned by Elgin ISD. A focus group script was developed and used to guide the discussion about program impact, participant trainings, program implementation, and program communication and materials.

Table 1. Overview of Evaluation Methods

Method	Time	Purpose	Participants
<i>Phone interview</i>	July-August 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess staff’s perceptions of staff training and participant training. Assess staff’s experience of program implementation. 	35 staff from TDA, Texas WIC, and Williamson County & Elgin County WIC offices.
<i>Electronic survey</i>	August 2018, at conclusion of the summer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To assess how program participants experienced SEBTC & program trainings. To assess program participants’ perceptions of food insecurity and local food environment. 	239 respondents whose children attend school in Elgin ISD and who received SEBTC benefits during summer 2018. English and Spanish speakers.
<i>In-person focus group</i>	October 11, 2018, after the survey was administered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To assess how program participants experienced SEBTC & program trainings. To elicit feedback on how the program may be improved. 	3 parents whose children attend school in Elgin ISD; who participated in SEBTC; who completed the survey. English only.

Data Analysis

Both thematic and descriptive data analyses were used to address the specific aims of the project. Data from both phone interviews and the focus group were transcribed and analyzed using a constant comparison analysis approach for a single round of data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). The interview transcripts were coded and these codes clustered to develop sub-themes of similar topics and finally core themes related to training and program implementation. First, each digitally recorded telephone interview was transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were read for familiarity and to determine points of interest related to evaluation questions, which became the initial coding framework. Next, the transcriptions were uploaded into NVivo 12 software and subsequently coded by two independent, trained team members. A coding comparison analysis was conducted to determine the Kappa score and percent of agreement. Acceptable inter-rater agreement was achieved, Cohen's Kappa 0.94, 99 percent agreement. The third stage included cluster and collapsing codes into potential themes. The coded data were checked against the potential themes and the original research questions. The final stage included finalizing the themes related to training, program implementation, and program satisfaction.

Participants who completed the online survey were asked to participate in a follow-up focus group. Thirty-one participants indicated they were willing to participate in the focus group, seven responded to the invitation, and three attended. The focus group was designed to elicit responses concerning program implementation, training, and use of electronic benefit transfer cards. A focus group script was used as a guide for the 1-hour session. All focus group discussion was audio recorded with permission, transcribed, and coded. Coded responses were further categorized as program strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions.

The responses from the English and Spanish surveys were coded and combined into one master dataset for analysis. Descriptive and bivariate analyses were conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), a statistical analysis software. Frequencies, chi-squares, and t-tests were used to determine if any relationships existed between variables, and data tables were produced using Excel.

Results

The results of the SEBTC evaluation are presented in two sections: 1) WIC staff responses to interview prompts, and 2) participant responses to the electronic survey and focus group prompts. Responses are framed within each section around major themes that emerged from data analysis.

WIC Staff Responses

TDA, Texas WIC, Williamson County (Georgetown) WIC, and Elgin WIC staff were interviewed about their experiences helping with SEBTC. Thirty-five staff members participated in a 30-minute interview.

Training

Staff training. Staff indicated that they received no training or minimal training prior to assisting with SEBTC. For staff who received minimal training, most received training from conference calls, meetings, briefings, or the educational materials. Almost half of the staff (48%) indicated the training was helpful especially for interacting with participants and answering questions. Seventy percent of coded responses from Elgin WIC staff indicated that they felt moderately prepared to interact with participants, whereas 54 percent of Williamson County coded responses indicated that staff felt very prepared to interact with participants.

Participant Training. Staff commented that the main benefit of participants attending trainings was a better understanding of how the program worked. Elgin and Williamson County WIC staff also stated that another major benefit for participants who attended the participant trainings was the opportunity for participants to ask questions about the programs.

Program Implementation

Delay in Participant Card Delivery. Some participants experienced a delay in receiving their cards due to logistical issues with the card contractor. WIC staff reported that some participants received their cards as late as July, which meant some participants had twice the amount of benefits to spend down in one month since there is no roll over from month to month. Staff described the delay in delivering cards to parents as causing a tight timeline for program implementation and that the delay caused confusion among staff. Local agency staff also commented that the delay caused confusion for staff in the WIC clinics and for participants

who did not receive their cards. Williamson County WIC staff most commonly stated (26% of coded references) that the delay led to poor communication between agencies. Similarly, 26 percent of Elgin WIC staff indicated that the delay caused confusion among parents. Staff at all three agencies stated that they did not feel prepared to handle the additional tasks related to the delay and card delivery difficulties. However, 60 percent of Williamson County WIC staff indicated that they were able to adapt and successfully respond to the delays in EBT card delivery, despite initially feeling ill-prepared to cope with the program delays.

Staff Suggestions for Improvement

Suggestions for the program include enhancing communication, starting the program earlier than in the 2018 demonstration year, improving organization of participant cards for distribution, providing more and earlier staff trainings in addition to training materials, simplifying the participant card pin number, increasing the number of participant trainings, and ensuring clean participant data. Most Williamson County WIC staff (67% of coded responses) reported the need for staff training and training materials prior to program implementation.

Appreciation of the Program

If staff had additional comments at the end of the interview, the most common response (50 percent of coded responses) was appreciation of the program and how well it serves participants. Staff mentioned stories about how grateful participants were to receive the program as well as requests that the program be repeated in these communities. Several staff also indicated a willingness to help with the program in following years, because they were so grateful for how well it served participants' needs.

Participant Responses

Electronic Surveys

Elgin ISD administrative staff sent parents or guardians of households that received the summer nutrition card in 2018 links to the Spanish and English versions of the survey via email. A total 239 individuals responded, 236 of whom responded affirmatively to the screening question which asked if their household received a card for use during the summer 2018 (13 percent rate in Elgin ISD).

More than half (61 percent, n=145) of respondents took the English survey, and 41 percent (n=94) took the Spanish survey. English and Spanish responses were combined for analysis. Forty-eight percent of respondents identify exclusively as Hispanic or Latino/a, 23 percent White, 14 percent Black or African American, 1 percent Asian, 1 percent American Indian or Alaska Native, and 13 percent who identify as two or more races. The average number of individuals for whom food is bought per household is five, and nearly 50 percent of respondents indicated their monthly income is in the \$1,000 to less than \$1,500 range or lower. (Percentages in this section represent the share of individuals who responded to the specific question and does not incorporate missing values in the percentage; therefore, each question may vary in the number of total responses.)

Program Utilization

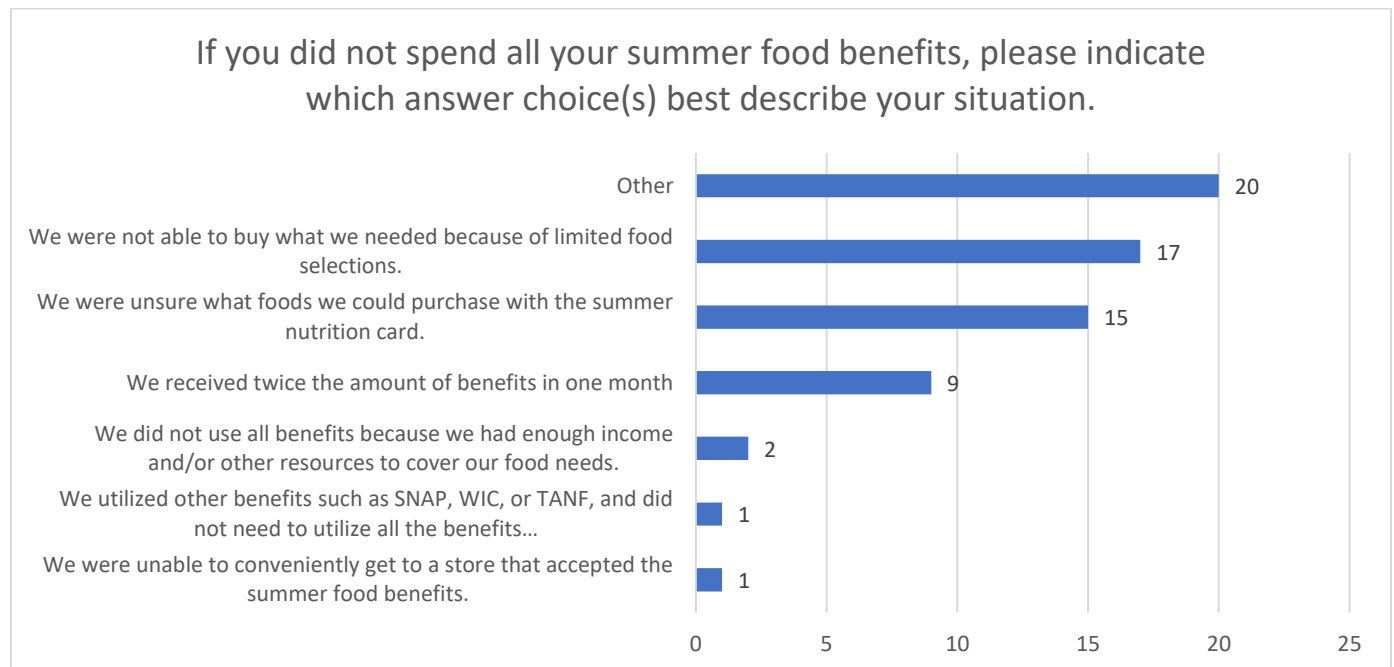
Approximately one-third (n=74) of respondents received their card later than expected and 17 percent of respondents (n=40) received double the benefits because they received their card late (i.e. they received both June and July benefits during the month of July because they did not have access to the card in June). We asked participants to rate a series of statements related to the quality of the summer nutrition card. Overall, respondents rated the card in high in terms of use, providing likable food, providing reasonable food sizing, and ability to use the card at a store that is convenient for them. Eighty percent of respondents (n=153) indicated the card was either “somewhat easy” or “extremely easy” to use. Sixty-nine percent of respondents (n=133) rated the card “good” or “very good” for providing likable food. Seventy-four percent of (n=142) respondents rate the card “good” or “very good” for reasonable food sizing. Eighty-six percent (n=164) rated “very good” or “good” for ability to spend their summer food benefits at a store that is convenient.

Seventy-four percent of respondents (n=153) indicated they spent all their benefits over the course of the summer. The mean amount of benefits spent is 85 percent. The most popular reason why respondents did not spend all the benefits available on the card was “we were not able to buy what we needed because of limited food selections” (n=17) followed by “we were unsure what foods we could purchase with the summer nutrition card” (n=15) and “we received twice the amount of benefits in one month” (n=9). (Since respondents could select all answer

choices that apply to this question, n represents the number of times that answer choice was selected.) While some households did not spend all their benefits because they received double benefits to spend in one month, 71 percent of respondents who received their card late *still* spent all their benefits over the summer (n=27).

For respondents who selected “other,” we allowed a text entry response. “Other” reasons included not being able to purchase preferred foods (preferring 2 percent milk or nondairy milk over 1 percent milk), limited food quantities available at the store, and technical issues (card not working or not receiving card until August), and not needing to spend all benefits. However, the data does not suggest there is a statistically significant relationship between benefit exhaustion and receiving benefits late or receiving double benefits. See table 2 for the breakdown in reasons why participants did not spend all their benefits.

Table 2. Reasons for Not Spending All Benefits During the Summer.



Program Training

To assess participants’ perceptions of the program training, we asked several questions about the helpfulness of the training, clarity of instructions, and knowledge of where to ask questions or get more information. Fifty-one percent of respondents (n=94) indicated they attended an in-person training. Only respondents who attended an in-person training (or who

had another individual in the family attend an in-person training, n=12) were asked the remainder of questions about the quality of the training. Eighty-two percent of respondents (n=84) indicated the training instructions were either “very helpful” or “extremely helpful” and 88 percent (n=87) indicated that they understood the training “very well” or “extremely well.” A strong majority of respondents provided positive ratings (strongly agree) to select statements including “I thought the time required to participate in the training was reasonable” (72%, n=64); “I thought the instructions for using summer nutrition card were clear” (79%, n=70); and “I knew where to get more information about the program if I had questions” (79%, n=72). See tables 3-6 below for a further breakdown of questions and responses related to the participant program training.

Table 3. Breakdown of Training Participation among Survey Respondents.

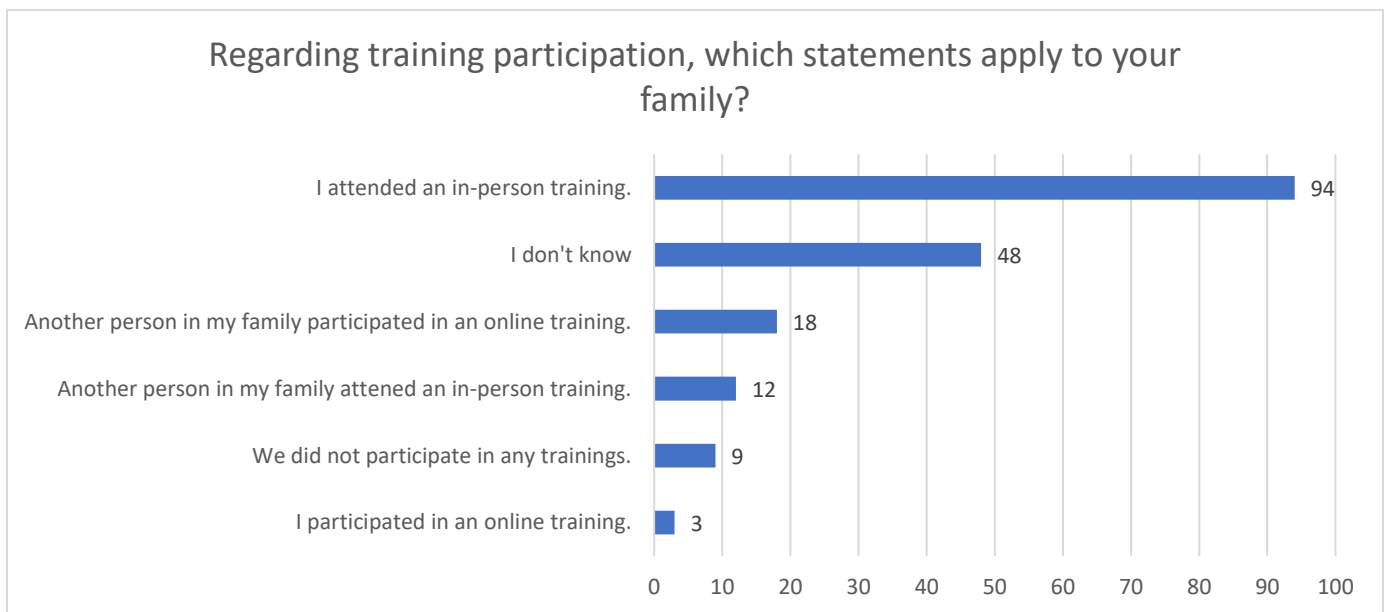


Table 4. Rating of Helpfulness of Training Instructions.

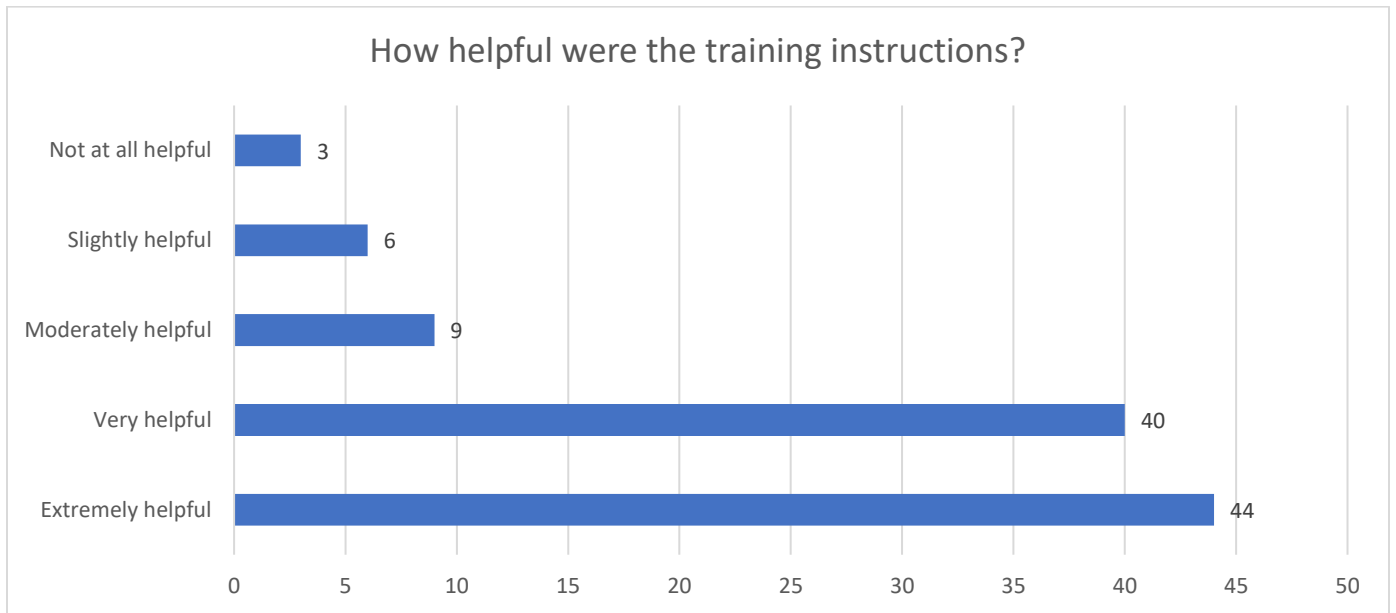


Table 5. Rating of Components of Training Experience.

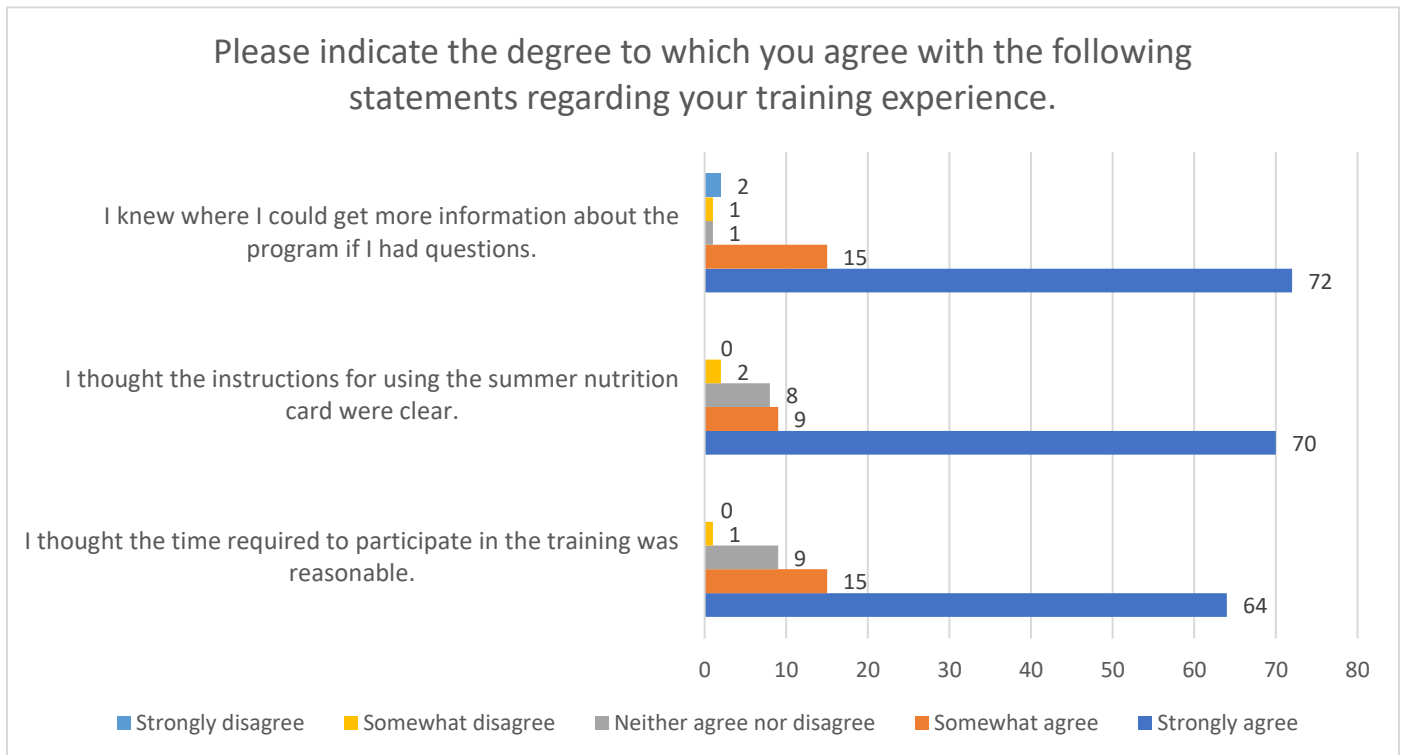
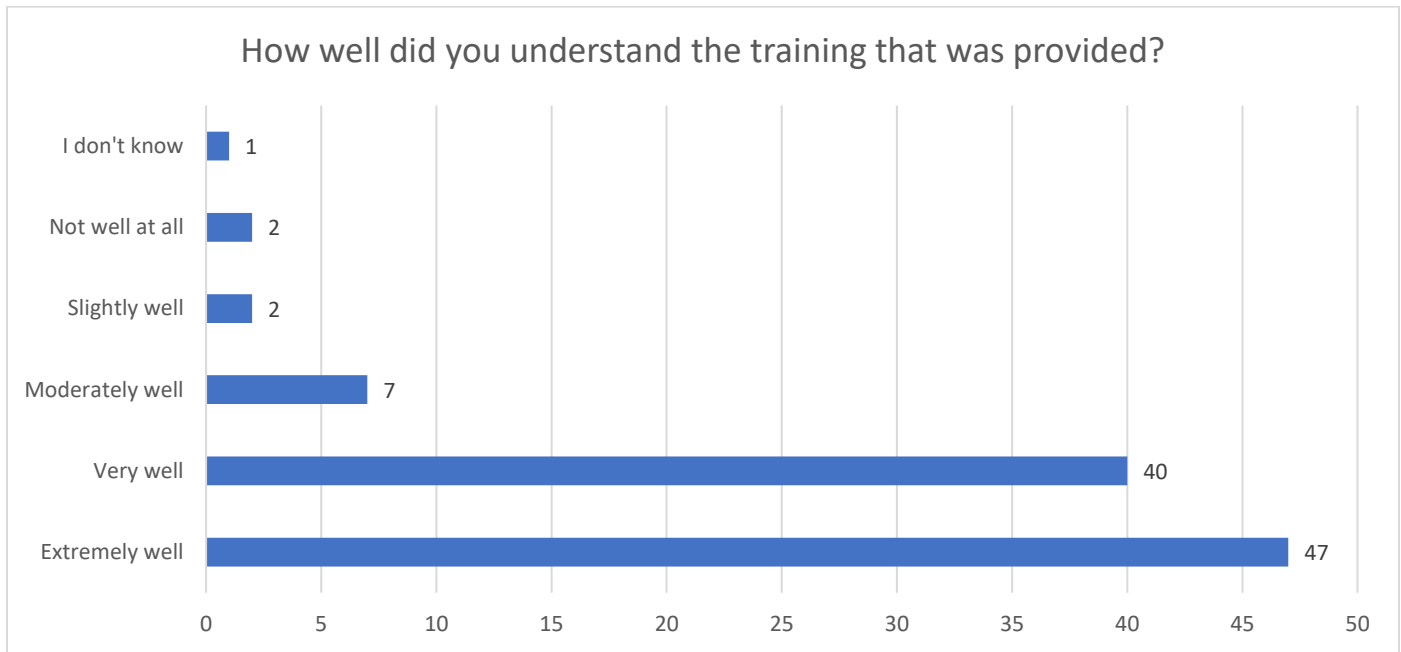


Table 6. Rating of How Well Survey Respondents Understood the Training.

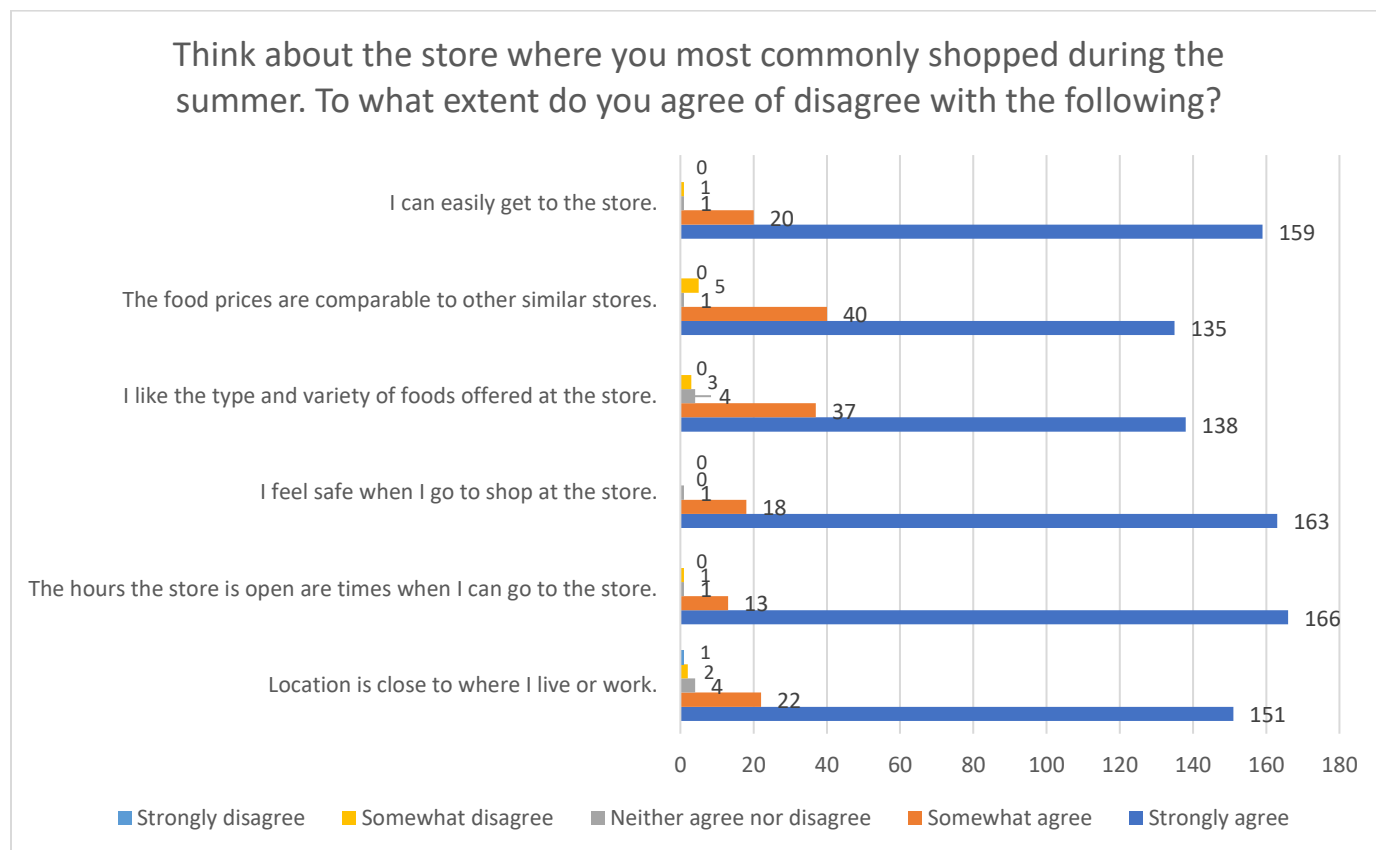


Physical Food Environment & Food Insecurity

Because the ability to buy food is not solely a household-resource problem, we also asked questions related to the physical food environment. Respondents were asked a series of questions related to the accessibility and quality of food in their neighborhood. Overall, the quality of store and neighborhood were rated relatively high, with 81 percent (n=146) agreeing it is either “somewhat easy” or “extremely easy” to access healthy, affordable food in their neighborhood. Eighty-seven percent (n=156) indicated they either “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” that the fresh fruits and vegetables in their neighborhood are of high quality. Even still, 93 percent (n=163) indicate they either somewhat or strongly agree that there are many opportunities to purchase fast foods in the neighborhood.

Overall, respondents rated store accessibility, convenience, safety, and quality high. In Elgin, Texas, there are two box stores which carry groceries and household necessities—one HEB and one Walmart, both of which are within walking distance of the other. Over 90 percent of respondents indicated they either “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” with the statements related to the convenience, safety, and quality of the store where they most commonly shopped. See Table 7 for a breakdown of how survey respondents rated each statement.

Table 7. Ratings of Quality of Store Where Survey Respondents Shopped.

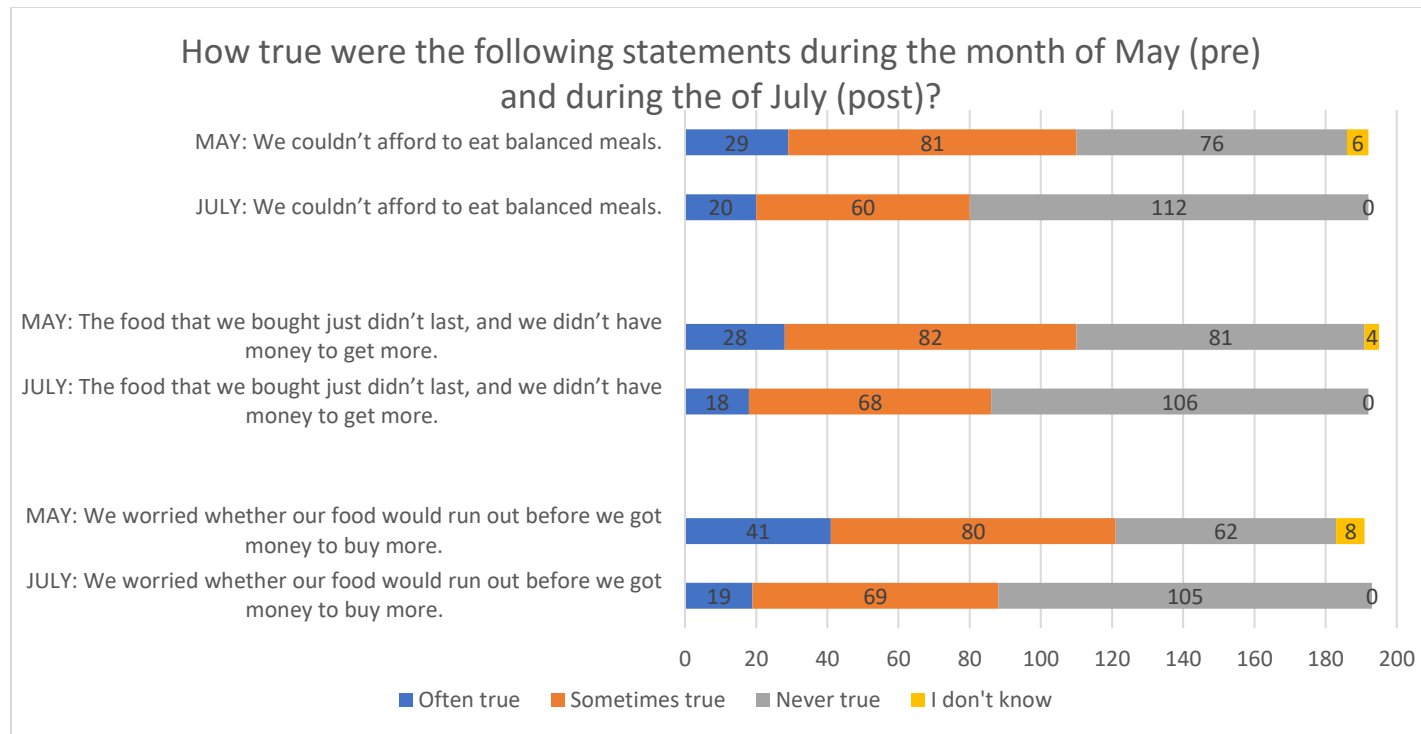


We also asked questions to assess the participants’ perception of food insecurity to determine if there may be any differences pre and post access to the summer nutrition card. Over half of respondents indicated “often true” or “sometimes true” to each statement related to food insecurity during the month of May, before they had access to the summer nutrition card. Fifty-seven percent (n=110) indicated “we couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals” was either “often true” or “sometimes true” during the month of May; 56 percent (n=110) indicated that “the food we bought just didn’t last and we didn’t have money to get more” was “often true” or “sometimes true” during the month of May; and 63 percent (n=121) indicated “we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more” was “often true” or “sometimes true” during the month of May.

While the majority of respondents indicated “often true” or “sometimes true” to each of these statements during the month of May, the majority of respondents indicated these statements were “never true” in the month of July, when they were able to use their summer

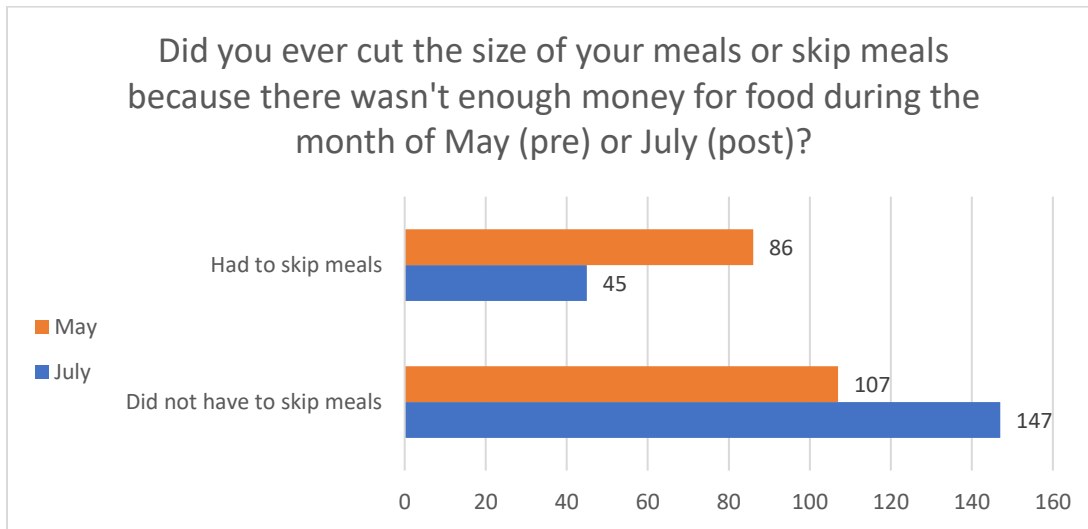
nutrition card to buy food (58%, n=112 indicated “never true” to “we couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals;” 55% n=106 indicated “never true” to “the food we bought just didn’t last...;” 54%, n=105 indicated “never true” to “we worried whether our food would run out...”). See table 8 for the distribution of responses to each statement, comparing May and July.

Table 8. Experience of Food Insecurity in May vs. July.



We also asked respondents whether they ever had to cut or skip meals because there was not enough money for food during the month of May (pre) or July (post). Forty-four percent of respondents indicated they had to skip or cut meals during the month of July (n=86). This number was reduced nearly in half for the month of July (n=45; 23%). See table 9 below.

Table 9. *Skipping Meals in May vs. July.*



Participant Focus Group

Participants who completed the English version of the survey were asked to participate in a follow-up focus group. Only English-speaking participants were asked to participate in the focus group because an interpreter was not available for Spanish-speaking individuals. Three participants of the 31 participants who opted-in attended the focus group. The participants were parents of children attending Elgin ISD schools who received SEBTC benefits. The focus group was recorded, transcribed, and coded. Major themes from the focus group were organized into strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for the program.

Strengths. Strengths of the program included increased quantity of food that participants could purchase and the ability to use benefits relatively easily. Participants stated that the extra food benefits enabled them to increase the quantity of food they bought for their household, with one participant specifically stating that the benefits helped the participant purchase more fruits, vegetables, and whole wheat products:

“I think [the quality of food selection] was better for me [compared to before using the card] as far as the produce option because there was just extra money there for buying fruit and vegetable options... we tried whole wheat tortillas which we had not had before.”

The participants also indicated that they were easily able to use up their benefits each month. One participant indicated because she could purchase food using her card, it meant she did not have to worry about her child crossing busy streets to get to a summer meals site:

“I thought [SEBTC] was an alternative for kids that stay home during the summer as far as the food options they have because previously I was sending my kids to the campuses for free lunch. And they were walking there and so it was it was a better alternative for me because I did not have to worry about their safety as far as getting them to the campus and then the quality of the meals provided at the campus weren’t always what my kids were hoping for.”

Weaknesses. Participants indicated that a major weakness of the program was that local grocery stores were not adequately stocked during the middle and end of each month, often running low on staple items like milk, eggs, and bread. This created difficulties for participants as they had to make multiple trips to the store to use their benefits on items that were out of stock. Participants cited confusion about the foods in the benefit packages, specifically with items not being labeled in the stores the same way they were labeled in their SEBTC guides. Participants also indicated a desire for more food options that are WIC-approved, including more variety of meats and additional bundle-value options based on family size.

One parent indicated they did not know who to contact if their card was lost or stolen, particularly because cards are not personalized with names or card numbers. Another parent said she received two cards—one for each child in her household—making it challenging to manage her benefit amounts because the cards were indistinguishable. Additionally, participants discovered that the card would lock for five minutes before midnight at the turn of the month. While not a serious complication, it may cause undue stress in the moment for parents who may think something is actually wrong with the card.

Suggestions. Participants suggested that a helpful addition to program trainings would be offering suggestions around food preparation and recipes, including cooking and assembling demonstrations. In addition, participants believed an app would be helpful for menu planning, managing benefit amount, and communicating with staff from TDA, WIC, or the school district. While an app may be a more expensive option, creating a wallet-size pamphlet of food options

would make a useful alternative so that parents can carry the guidelines with them in their wallet or purse:

“I think the materials were good and I always kept my shopping guide in the car because I couldn’t remember everything, so I would always have it with me. So maybe my recommendation of the shopping guide if it was like smaller and could fit into a wallet.”

The preferred communication method of focus group participants was email communication (instead of “robo calls”). The participants also shared that they appreciated automated texts reminding them to spend down their benefits before the end of the month. Participants relayed that some of their peers who showed up at the training were confused about what the training was for and others chose not to participate even after learning about the program. Targeted or additional messaging using a variety of communication methods may be helpful to assist families in understanding who the program was intended for and who may participate.

“So once I found out that it was like the WIC program I was kind of relieved. Like, okay good I already know what I’m doing here. So I think that maybe letting people know that it is similar to that program. And then maybe making the original message that sent out [to parents, to include] like offering some sort of cooking demonstration because I feel it peaks some kind of interest that might get more people in.”

The complete findings from the participant focus group can be found in Appendix A.

Discussion

Despite logistical complications with delivering the cards to participants, WIC staff, survey respondents and focus group participants indicated an overall positive experience with the training and SEBTC. Moving forward, staff recommend that the planning process begin earlier and parents prefer to be informed of the program in April or May via a flyer from the school and by email. WIC staff suggested that they be included in the planning process earlier than the middle of April, preferably in March or before. They believed this would give them enough time

to schedule additional staff trainings and coordinate participant trainings with the local school districts. They also suggested offering more targeted staff training before the participant training to prepare staff to answer participant questions, providing training during monthly staff meetings similar in content to participant training, and providing staff training materials (e.g., frequently asked questions, program description) via email. Further, the staff suggested enhancing communication across agencies by ensuring all relevant staff are kept up-to-date on program developments and proactively communicating with program leadership about current and future changes.

Regarding participant trainings, staff recommend organizing participant materials, such as the EBT card, shopping guide, and welcome materials, in alphabetical order to streamline the distribution process. Staff also noted significant confusion among participants about the EBT card pin number. They suggested simplifying the pin number to something more memorable or meaningful to the parents. Participants indicated a need for additional training regarding how to use their cards and how to prepare healthy meals. Offering parents wallet-size food guides, providing cooking demonstrations or other menu planning opportunities at the training, and continuing to send text reminders would help with food budget preparation. Additionally, providing information on card usage—such as when a card may lock and what to do about it, who to contact if a card is lost or stolen, and providing cards with unique IDs—could help streamline technical support. The most common reason benefits were not spent down, according to participants, was because of limited food selections. However, participants may have interpreted this in a couple of different ways: 1) to mean they were not able to purchase preferred foods because of the requirement to purchase WIC-eligible foods (which was the original intent of the question) or 2) the store runs out of food at peak periods (they carry the item, but do not keep it fully stocked throughout the month). Though participants rated store quality and neighborhood food availability relatively high, they were still concerned with the periodic lack of availability of staple food items during the month, indicating that even in generally well-resourced stores and neighborhoods food access can still be a concern for families. While food running out at the store may not impact the food security status of the household or the ability to spend down benefits for all households, it may still impact levels of

stress experienced by the household, requiring them to spend time, energy, and resources in another location.

The finding that limited food selections (which is a more distinct feature of WIC programs) is likely the number one reason households did not spend down all their benefits corroborates previous evaluations where lower benefit exhaustion occurs in WIC administered EBT programs compared to SNAP administered programs. We suggest looking at benefit transaction data to assess the extent to which benefits were fully exhausted among all participants; but to do so with caution because several families received benefits late or received double benefits, making comparisons with other demonstrations difficult. While examining the extent to which benefits were exhausted was beyond the scope of this evaluation, our research provides important context into *why* benefits may not be fully utilized.

Food insecurity is primarily a function of limited household resources, and the SEBTC has the potential to reduce food insecurity by providing more resources to households. The number of individuals who indicated they had to skip meals or cut meals altogether was reduced by 50 percent from May to July. Although the question of how often a family skipped or cut meals cannot capture the complexity or extent to which the household experienced food insecurity, it is an important feature of food insecurity. This supports the findings of previous SEBTC evaluations which demonstrate a reduction in food insecurity among participating households.

Limitations

One of the primary limitations of the evaluation was the inability to evaluate families in Georgetown ISD. This prevented the research team from comparing experiences between Elgin and Georgetown ISD. Additionally, participants were not randomly selected to participate in the study. Rather, participants self-selected to participate in both the survey and focus group. This may have created bias in responses to both the survey and in perspectives shared during the focus group. Staff also self-selected to participate in the interviews. While the majority of the staff opted to participate in the interviews, there were several staff who did not participate, limiting the results of the interviews. Due to an inability to protect confidentiality from TDA staff interviews, data gained from this interview was excluded from the qualitative results. Finally,

only three participating parents attended the focus group in Elgin, Texas. This small sample size limits the analysis and generalizability of data gathered in the focus groups. While valuable information was still gained from the focus group, a larger sample is needed for data generalization.

Conclusion

Pilot demonstrations require working out administrative and logistical challenges and developing and refining processes for smooth operation. The intent of this evaluation was to assess staff and participant perceptions of training, program implementation, benefit usage, and food access barriers. WIC staff demonstrated strong appreciation for the many ways they felt this program benefited families in their communities. While staff identified several administrative and logistical areas for improvement, most wanted to work with the program in the future. Most staff still felt prepared to help with the program, despite often not believing they received enough training to help with the program. Staff felt that if small improvements were made to communication, staff training, and participant trainings the program would be even more effective.

Overall, survey respondents had a positive experience with the program, and our research demonstrates the potential of the program to reduce food insecurity among participating households. Importantly, our research sheds light on the reasons why benefits may not be fully exhausted, which includes limited types and quantities of food that can be purchased under the WIC model. Nonetheless, most survey respondents who received double benefits because of late receipt still spent them all, underscoring the importance of these benefits for many families.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Focus Group Complete Findings

	P1	P2	P3	Response Summary:
1) How do you feel about participating in the program?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WIC program • Repeat/broader age range 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative to Summer Food Program • Didn't have to worry about safety because kids didn't have to go to schools/cross busy roads (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kids liked the program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents and kids liked the program • One parent thought it was an alternative to Summer Meals instead of supplemental
a) Do you think the program changed the way you eat or buy food?	<p>No, increased quantity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, could buy more produce/fruit/vegetables • Tried whole wheat tort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased quantity of food, tried whole wheat
b) What would make this program more helpful to your family this summer?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stores didn't have adequate food supply, especially at end of the month • Middle and end of the month • Had to wait for stores to replenish to use benefits- 2 day wait • Stores were HEB and Walmart—milks, eggs, cheese, bread • Also issues with using the card at 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ran out of all the staple items 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trouble with purchasing foods at grocers • Stores ran out of staples middle and end of month

	night— might not be able to use up benefits			
2) What types of communication materials were most helpful? In what way were they helpful?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They had things labeled WIC • Brochures were good, just not the same as the store • Cashier will print list for you 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some things were not marked • Fruits and vegetables were especially hard • Shopping guide was good, just should be smaller/more portable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard to determine food choices because shopping guide did not match the stores <p>Walmart didn't have a lot of things marked</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues interpreting labels not marked (all) • Materials were good/helpful
a) What is the best way for your family to receive information?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The reminders were great 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reminders were helpful
b) What additional type of information would you like to receive?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinks use of app should be a choice • Parents didn't understand that they qualified for the program, left the training without benefits, especially for people who don't 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would like app • Managers knew what the program was about, but staff at stores didn't necessarily • Couldn't use multiple cards on the same transaction • Two cards were confusing, trying to remember pin • Had to self-label the cards • Had to plan grocery trips so 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Didn't have multiple cards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Want choice of app • More clarification on program for store staff/new parents; Having multiple cards was confusing

	<p>receive other benefits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers at stores knew how to help with the program • Didn't have multiple cards 	could use both cards		
c) Did you call anyone for help or to ask questions about the Summer Nutrition Card?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No, would have referenced the packets 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No one called
3) Tell me about the training and information sessions. What did you like, not like, found confusing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Got reminders everyday leading up to last day of program • Didn't have to sort groceries a specific way • Shopped at both stores • Can't use the card on self-serve 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The information system was clear • Would be more helpful if had information in front of you to follow with the presentation • Would be confusing if new to WIC • Really good reminders • Preferred HEB • Couldn't use card as self-serve Had to sort groceries in a specific order to use card 	Would like to know that the last month wasn't the whole month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarification on what to buy and timeline of last month • Information was clear
4) Tell me about your experience using the card and buying food.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used everything on the cards • Want less sugary options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Didn't like hard beans, didn't know how to make them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wants other options besides wheat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used everything on cards • Want more options for allergies, less cereal options, too many beans

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Went through healthy eating, didn't change diet, just had more support A lot of beans HEB would have cooking demonstration with food package items Include recipes on app Changed cooking based on new ideas It was hard to use up all of the milk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Used everything except the last month More whole grain over more cereal Used whole grain tortillas for wraps Peanut butter/jelly sandwiches Eggs A lot of beans Cooking demonstrations would be helpful Brought food with family on vacation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Want more options, like for allergies Cooked a lot of beans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Want recipes/demonstrations at trainings
5) If you designed the Summer Nutrition Card program, what would you do the same and what would you do differently?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Food demonstrations at the trainings Communication was confusing because the phone calls were at bad time Email was helpful Have someone available after the information session is over and the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An app—doesn't have to be specialized Extend the last month until school starts Email was a good way to communicate Phone calls were hard to answer from school Recipes for kids to cook with Make shopping guide more accessible Adjust the food package because some categories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learned about the program through paper child brought home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use email for communication or send paper home with child Want food demonstrations/app Pin/ID number confusing Want card year round

	<p>program has started to answer questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Didn't know if you get your card back quickly after losing it • Want name on card • Wish the card worked year round, especially because of breaks 	<p>gave too much food</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ID number was hard to remember on card • Winter/spring break—card would be useful 		
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Appendix B: Survey Questions

Research question	Corresponding survey question(s)
How did participants rate the program overall?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How easy was it to use the summer nutrition card to buy food? 2. Please rate the summer nutrition card for (right quantity, likable foods, appropriate food sizes, convenient store)
How & to what extent was the program utilized by participants?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Did you receive a summer nutrition card to buy food in 2018? 2. In which month did your family obtain the summer nutrition card? 3. Did you receive your summer nutrition card later than expected? 4. Did your family receive twice as many benefits during one month because you received your summer nutrition card later than expected? 5. Did your family use the summer nutrition card to buy food at any point this summer? 6. Did your family spend the full amount provided on the summer nutrition card this summer? 7. Approximately what percentage of benefits provided on your summer nutrition card did you family spend this summer? 8. If your family did not spend the full amount on your summer nutrition card, please indicate which answer choice(s) best describe your situation. 9. Approximately how much of the food that was purchased with the summer nutrition card was consumed in your household this summer? 10. Were you able to use the summer nutrition card at the store where you most commonly shop? 11. Which type of transportation did you most commonly use to get to the store?
To what extent did participant experience FI before or after program participation?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. For the month of May, before you could use the summer nutrition card, please how true the following states were for your family (food run out, food does not last, couldn't afford balanced meals). 2. During the month of May, before you could use the summer nutrition card, did you ever

	<p>cut the size of your meals because there wasn't enough money for food?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. For the month of July, when you could use the summer nutrition card, please how true the following states were for your family (food run out, food does not last, couldn't afford balanced meals). 4. During the month of July, when you could use the summer nutrition card, did you ever cut the size of your meals because there wasn't enough money for food?
How did participants rate the training overall?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. An in-person training and an online training were offered to participants...which of the following statements apply? 2. Why did you not attend an in-person training? 3. How helpful were the training instructions? 4. How well did you understand the training? 5. Please rate the degree to which you disagree/agree with following (time reasonable, instructions clear, know where to get more info)?
How did participants experience the physical food environment?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Think about the store where you most commonly shopped during the summer to use your card. To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following? (location is close, hours are reasonable, safety, type of foods, prices, get there easily) 2. How easy is it to access enough healthy, affordable food in your neighborhood? 3. Please indicate the degree to which you agree/disagree on following items as it relates to your neighborhood (large selection of F&V, F&V high quality, fast food) 4. Did your child/children attend a Summer Meals site offered in your area this summer? 5. Where did your child/children receive free meals this summer? 6. Please indicate why your child/children did not attend a SM site this summer.
Who are the participants?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In addition to the summer nutrition card, which (if any) of these forms of assistance did your household receive this summer? 2. Including yourself, how many people live in your household? 3. Including yourself, how many people in your household share the food that is bought? 4. Please choose one more races that you consider yourself to be. 5. What would you estimate to be your household's total monthly income last month?

Appendix C: WIC and TDA Staff Interview Guide

Name of interviewee:

Date:

Start time:

End time:

Consent to record:

- Yes
- No, notetaker: _____

Introductory Questions

1. What is your job title and role at WIC?	
2. How long have you served in this role?	
3. What responsibilities did you have while implementing Summer EBT?	
4. When did you participate in staff training for Summer EBT?	

Program Training

1. Describe the staff training that you received, as it relates to Summer EBT.	
2a. The training improved my ability to answer questions related to summer EBT.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> 1, strongly disagree<input type="radio"/> 2, disagree<input type="radio"/> 3, neither agree nor disagree<input type="radio"/> 4, agree<input type="radio"/> 5, strongly agree
2b. The training improved my ability to better explain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> 1, strongly disagree<input type="radio"/> 2, disagree

to participants how to use summer EBT card.	<input type="radio"/> 3, neither agree nor disagree <input type="radio"/> 4, agree <input type="radio"/> 5, strongly agree
2c. The training improved my ability to help participants determine where to buy approved items.	<input type="radio"/> 1, strongly disagree <input type="radio"/> 2, disagree <input type="radio"/> 3, neither agree nor disagree <input type="radio"/> 4, agree <input type="radio"/> 5, strongly agree
2d. The training improved my ability to help participants determine what they can/cannot buy with Summer EBT.	<input type="radio"/> 1, strongly disagree <input type="radio"/> 2, disagree <input type="radio"/> 3, neither agree nor disagree <input type="radio"/> 4, agree <input type="radio"/> 5, strongly agree
3. I felt prepared to consult participants about the use of their EBT cards	<input type="radio"/> 1, strongly disagree <input type="radio"/> 2, disagree <input type="radio"/> 3, neither agree nor disagree <input type="radio"/> 4, agree <input type="radio"/> 5, strongly agree
4. I understood the information presented in the staff training sessions.	<input type="radio"/> 1, strongly disagree <input type="radio"/> 2, disagree <input type="radio"/> 3, neither agree nor disagree <input type="radio"/> 4, agree <input type="radio"/> 5, strongly agree

5. Approximately how many training sessions did you participate in?	
6. What was the length of training sessions?	
7. Describe your training experience.	
8. How helpful or not helpful was the training session? Why was it helpful/not helpful?	
9. What suggestions do you have that would improve the training program that you participated in?	

Participant Trainings/Consultations

1. On a scale of 1-10, how prepared did you feel to provide consultations to participants of the Summer EBT program?	
2. How well did the skills and information you learned in training translate to your consultations with participants?	
3. What benefit (if any) do you think participants who attended training sessions gained over their peers who did not attend training?	

Program Implementation

1. How did the delay in the start of the SEBTC program impact program implementation?	
2. How was interruption of Summer EBT services communicated to participants who did not receive EBT cards in June?	
3. How prepared was your agency to respond to the delays in EBT card delivery and interruption in service?	
4. Do you have suggestions for changes to how the SEBTC program is implemented in the future?	