

TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR STATE AGENCY CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAM PROFESSIONALS WHO WORK PRIMARILY WITH SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE/OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to identify and prioritize the training needs of state agency staff and determine preferences for training formats, delivery methods, length of training, and best time of year to deliver training.

METHODS

A rigorous 3-phase data collection approach was used. A draft survey was developed in Phase I based on a comprehensive review of the literature related to training and development needs for school nutrition staff and input from an expert work group comprised of eight State agency staff members. The survey was validated in Phase II using State agency staff representing nine states and five USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) regions. In Phase III, data were collected (26 states responded) using Qualtrics and analyzed using SPSS (version 25).

RESULTS

Results indicate that State agency staff perceived the highest need for training in two key content areas: financial management and procurement.

APPLICATION TO CHILD NUTRITION PROFESSIONALS

Based on the results of this study, researchers recommend the following:

- Develop and test a multi-format approach to teaching a content area such as financial management specifically for State agency staff working with school nutrition programs. This format might begin with a Zoom meeting/instruction for introductions with instructor/participants and outline goals and objectives for the course. Periodic webinars might be provided and participants could have self-paced work. Periodically, Zoom meetings could be used to allow discussion among participants.
- Divide training topics into small, focused areas that can be completed in a short (1-2 hours) amount of time. For example, one training could focus on understanding and utilizing a basic financial statement as the financial management topic rated as the highest need for training.
- Include both participant and instructor evaluations for any new training approaches to capture what was effective and changes that would be needed for future training.

KEYWORDS: State Agency, Training Needs Assessment, Child Nutrition Programs, Administrative Reviews

INTRODUCTION

State agencies are responsible for administering multiple Federal child nutrition programs (CNP) including: National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), the Afterschool Snack Program, the Special Milk Program, the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), the Food Distribution Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) (Gunderson, 1971; Martin, 1997; Martin, 2008; USDA, 2019). These administrative responsibilities can include both mandatory and discretionary activities (USDA, 2016). Mandatory activities are articulated in the permanent agreement between the USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) and the State agency (FNS Form FNS-74), as well as those established by each State. Discretionary responsibilities may include those the State agency determines in the State Administrative Expense (SAE) plan or as determined by additional state requirements. Mandatory elements for State agencies administering CNPs include:

- complying with program statutes and regulations;
- monitoring compliance for all programs aligned with Federal regulations and state requirements;
- interpreting and communicating Federal regulations, policy memoranda, FNS instructions, and other written directives;
- collecting program data and processing Federal meals claims for reimbursement;
- collecting and reporting required data elements, such as the verification report, food safety inspections, school-level data including the number and percentage of free and reduced-price eligible students; and
- providing professional development, training, and technical assistance to school food authorities (SFA) and other program sponsors.

Discretionary responsibilities that may not be explicitly detailed in the permanent agreement, but are generally accepted, include:

- maintaining communication between the FNS and SFAs;
- providing leadership for program administration;
- utilizing Federal competitive grant opportunities to support program activities, such as Farm-to-School and the Team Nutrition training grants;
- collaborating with stakeholders within government and external groups such as non-profit and quasi-governmental organizations;
- conducting analyses of proposed state legislation; and
- engaging in promotions and events.

Due to the scope and complexity of state agency personnel's administrative role, a current training needs assessment was needed. The School Nutrition Association and the Institute of Child Nutrition have used training needs assessments to help determine the training needs of school nutrition professionals (Lewis, 2014; School Nutrition Association's Training Needs Assessment, 2016). The purpose of this study was to identify and prioritize training needs and to determine preferences for training formats, delivery modes, length of training, and best time of year for training.

METHODS

Three phases were used in this study. The study protocol and surveys were approved by the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Southern Mississippi prior to data collection. Each phase is described below.

Phase I: Development

Phase I consisted of a face-to-face facilitated expert work group of eight State agency CNP professionals (two directors and six State agency staff) representing different states from all seven USDA, FNS regions. The group discussed critical issues facing school nutrition programs and State agency staff preferences for training format and delivery mode. A three-round Delphi technique was used to identify and confirm questions for the needs assessment. Based on detailed notes from the expert work group, a survey was drafted. The draft survey was sent electronically to work group participants to review and provide comments. Based on feedback, the needs assessment was revised. Revisions dealt primarily with clarification of wording. No questions were added or removed.

Phase II: Validation

A convenience sample of twelve State agency professionals (two directors, two assistant directors, and eight State agency staff members) representing nine states and five FNS regions (the Mid-West and Mid-Atlantic were not represented) evaluated the draft needs assessment for completeness, accuracy, clarity, and suitability for the end user using a Guided Review Form. The primary recommendations from this sample were clarification of wording. No recommendations were made for adding or removing questions. The final online needs assessment survey was comprised of 48 questions asking respondents to rate (high, moderate, low, or none) training needs for six topic areas: (1) Conducting Reviews; (2) Financial Management; (3) Program Administration; (4) Procurement; (5) Training, Curriculum Development and Delivery; and (6) Other Needs. A ranking question for training format preference was included (1, most preferred, to 4, least preferred). The needs assessment survey also consisted of six open-ended questions dealing with usage of USDA and ICN resources. Qualtrics (<https://qualtrics.com>), an online survey platform, was used for formatting and delivering the needs assessment survey.

Phase III: Implementation

Researchers emailed an invitation with a link to the needs assessment to every State agency CNP director (N=56). The invitation asked recipients to complete the survey and to share the survey link with all members of their staff who work with school meals programs. Responses to the survey were compiled and frequencies and percentages were determined using SPSS (Version 25). Qualitative responses to open-ended questions were summarized and when multiple responses were the same, numbers were tallied. Examples of statements were provided to support responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Description of Participants

A total of 143 individuals responded to the needs assessment survey, representing all seven FNS regions. Table 1 provides descriptive characteristics for those who responded. All responses were included even if the entire survey was not complete in order to capture as much information as possible. Twenty-six of the 56 State agency directors completed the survey. Because staff members were asked to participate by the directors, the actual number solicited is unknown. State agency CNP staff comprised the highest percentage of respondents (58%) while 18% were State agency directors.

Table 1. *Descriptive Characteristics of Study Participants (N=143)*

	n	%
Job Title		
CNP Director	26	18.2
State Agency Management Staff member	24	16.8
State Agency CNP staff member	83	58.0
No Response	10	7.0
Years of Experience in Child Nutrition		
Less than 1 year	8	5.6
1-5 years	31	21.7
6-10 years	42	29.4
11-15 years	18	12.6
16-20 years	12	8.4
More than 20 years	23	16.1
No response	9	6.3
Years in Current Position		
Less than 1 year	19	13.3
1-5 years	61	42.7
6-10 years	32	22.4
11-15 years	12	8.4
16-20 years	4	2.8
More than 20 years	6	4.2
No response	9	6.3
Education		
High School Diploma/GED	6	4.2
Associate's Degree	8	5.6
Bachelor's Degree	48	33.6
Master's Degree	62	43.4
Doctoral Degree	8	5.6
No response	11	7.7
Professional Credentials/Certification		
Registered Dietitian/Nutritionist (RD/RDN)	50	44.6
Licensed Dietitian	24	21.4
School Nutrition Association (SNA) Certified	16	14.3
School Nutrition Specialist (SNS) Certified	30	26.8
Other	44	39.3

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Study Participants (N=143)

FNS Region Represented		
Mid-Atlantic (DC, DE, MD, NJ, PA, PR, VA, WV)	23	16.1
Midwest (IA, IL, IN, MI, MN, OH, WI)	14	9.8
Mountain Plains (CO, KS, MO, MT, NE, ND, SD, WY)	30	21.0
Northeast (CT, MA, ME, NH, NY, RI, VT)	12	8.4
Southeast (AL, FL, GA, KY, MS, NC, SC, TN)	20	14.0
Southwest (AR, AZ, LA, OK, NM, TX, UT)	22	15.4
Western (AK, AS, CA, CNMI, GUAM, HI, ID, NV, OR, WA)	13	9.1
No Response	9	6.3

Training Needs

Training needs related to five content areas were explored: Conducting Reviews; Financial Management; Program Administration; Procurement; and Training, Curriculum Development, and Delivery. Both quantitative and qualitative responses will be summarized to describe training needs in each area.

Financial management was consistently rated as the highest need for training by State agency CNP staff. The majority of respondents (n=93; 65%) indicated that it was a high training need area, and 97 (68%) indicated that they needed both basic and advanced training.

Written comments to an open-ended question related to training needs for Financial Management included: “Currently, basic is probably our actual level, but hopefully, we would need advanced in the future!”; “Most of our review team members are generalists – with no financial experience in their backgrounds”. Respondents were asked to rate their perceived need for training for several topics within the financial management content area. Table 2 summarizes the perceived training needs for each topic.

Procurement was the second highest rated content area for which State agency personnel perceived to need training. Within that content area, respondents were asked to rate the level of need for eight procurement topics. Ratings for procurement topics are summarized in Table 3.

Table 2. Perceived Need for Training on Financial Management Topics (N=138)

Topic	High n(%)	Moderate n(%)	Low n(%)	None n(%)
Understanding and utilizing basic financial statements (i.e., statement of revenue and expenditures, balance sheet	78(56.5)	49(35.5)	10(7.2)	1(0.7)
Budget development, justification, and implementation	74(53.6)	46(33.3)	17(12.3)	1(0.7)
Utilizing key performance indicators (i.e., meals per labor hour, inventory turnover rate) for decision making and program evaluation	73(52.9)	49(35.5)	14(10.1)	2(1.4)
Basic accounting principles	62(44.9)	57(39.1)	19(13.8)	0(0)
Federal and State guidelines for pricing meals and food items	61(44.2)	55(39.9)	20(14.5)	2(1.4)

Table 3. *Perceived Need for Training on Procurement Topics (N=143)*

Topic	High n(%)	Moderate n(%)	Low n(%)	None n(%)
Competitive procurement (n=130)	77(59.2)	42(32.3)	10(7.7)	1(0.8)
Principles of good procurement (n=129)	64(49.6)	46(35.7)	17(13.2)	2(1.6)
Non-competitive procurement (n=129)	64(49.6)	45(34.9)	18(14.0)	2(1.6)
Procuring local foods/farm-to-school (n=130)	60(46.2)	54(41.5)	13(10.0)	3(2.3)
Procurement ethics (n=130)	52(40.0)	43(33.1)	34(26.2)	1(0.7)
USDA Foods (n=130)	46(35.4)	47(36.2)	29(22.3)	8(6.2)
Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (n=130)	41(31.5)	54(41.5)	32(24.6)	3(2.3)
Food Buying Guide (n=131)	37(28.2)	47(35.9)	41(31.3)	6(4.6)

Just over half (59%) of the 130 respondents indicated a need for training related to competitive purchasing, which was the highest rated topic. Comments provided by respondents help explain the ratings. Two indicated that they do not conduct procurement reviews, one indicated that their state had been doing procurement reviews for a really long time, and another indicated that there was one person in the office who handled all procurement issues.

The need for training related to conducting reviews was ranked third among the five content areas with 51% of all respondents indicating that they had a high need for training. Sixty-one percent of respondents indicated that they had a high need for training for the topic of conducting procurement reviews.

Only 36% of the 143 respondents rated program administration as a high training need area. Within the program administration content area, the highest perceived need for training was administration of foodservice management companies (n=64; 45%), evaluations (n=54; 37.8%), and special requirements for non-traditional sponsors (n=51; 35.7%).

The content area with the lowest ratings for training need was training, curriculum development, and delivery. For that content area, only 36% of the 143 respondents rated this area as a high need, while another 38% rated it as a moderate need.

Preferences for Training

June (n=60) and August (n=52) were identified as the most ideal months for training by the highest number of participants, followed by July (n=44). November (n=16) and December (n=18) were identified as the least ideal months for training.

Preferences for four formats for training were explored. The clear preference was for face-to-face training as 87 respondents rated it as number one. Online options, both live and self-paced, received fewer number one rankings (n=22 and 19, respectively) but higher number two rankings (n=32 and 19, respectively) indicating that it was a first or second choice for training. Traditional hard copy documents to be studied at one's own pace was clearly the least preferred method.

The choices for optimal length of time for training ranged from short trainings (15-30 minutes) to multiple day (two day). In four of the content areas, one day training was preferred: (Financial Management [n=31; 22.8%], Procurement [n=34; 26.4%], Conducting Reviews [n=34; 24.3%] and Program Administration [n=31; 23.5%]). A 4-hour training was most preferred for Training, Curriculum Development and Delivery [n=36; 29.0%]. Very short trainings (15-30 minutes) were least preferred for five content areas (Financial Management [n=3; 2.2%], Procurement [n=5; 3.9%], Conducting Reviews [n=5; 3.6%], Program Administration [n=3; 2.3%], and Training, Curriculum Development and Delivery [n=4; 3.2%]).

One main reason given by respondents for not using USDA and Institute of Child Nutrition resources was that State agency staff were not aware of them. Others noted that the websites are sometimes difficult to use. The primary limitation to the study was the make-up of respondents, as only 26 of the 56 State agency directors completed the survey.

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

Conclusions

Results of this study indicate that this sample of State agency staff perceived a need for training in a variety of topics, at both basic and advanced levels. For the five content areas explored, financial management and procurement were rated highest in need for training. However, needs were identified in all five content areas. Because there is a great variety among State agencies including differences in roles and responsibilities, job titles, approaches to providing training, and state laws and regulations, these differences may complicate training across all states.

When exploring preferences for training, respondents preferred training in the summer months (June, July, and August) when many school meals programs are not operating, and thus reviews are limited. Respondents indicated a preference for one-day training for four of the content areas (Financial Management, Procurement, Conducting Reviews, and Program Administration), while a 4-hour training was most preferred for Training, Curriculum Development and Delivery. Face-to-face training was considered the preferred delivery method, while online formats were second choices. Manuals and other hard copy documents for self-study were the least preferred method. A major area opportunity for both the USDA and Institute of Child Nutrition is making State agency staff aware of their training resources.

Applications

Conclusions to this study indicate that there are opportunities for State agency CNP to provide training and to remove barriers to use of existing resources. Several recommendations for action are made based on the conclusions in this study, including:

1. Develop and test a multi-format approach to teaching a content area such as financial management specifically for State agency staff. This format might begin with a Zoom

- meeting/instruction to introduce instructor/participants and outline goals and objectives for the course. Periodic webinars might be provided, and participants could have self-paced work. Periodically, Zoom meetings could be used to allow discussion among participants.
2. Explore interactive instructional software to determine training options that might be effective for training State agency staff.
 3. Include both a participant and an instructor evaluation for any new training approaches to capture what was effective and changes that would be needed for future training.
 4. Divide training topics into small, focused areas that can be completed in a short (1-2 hours) amount of time. For example, one training could focus on understanding and utilizing basic financial statements, the financial management topic rated as highest need for training.
 5. Explore different methods of presentation, such as live webinars or recorded webinars, for which instructor contact information is provided for questions.
 6. Consider developing advanced-level training, especially related to financial management and procurement. The content for the training may be in existing materials, but more advanced concepts could be developed using case study approaches.
 7. Plan training programs for State agency personnel for summer months.
 8. Develop a 1-hour webinar focused on educational resources available from USDA and ICN. A 1-page handout, which provides key web links, could be developed to accompany the webinar.
 9. Recommend that State agency directors encourage all new employees to watch the educational resources webinar as part of their new employee orientation.
 10. Include the educational resources webinar as part of ICN's New Director Orientation.
 11. Focus on a different educational resource each month and email a description of the resource to State agency directors to share with personnel in their states. Include a link to the resource so that it is easy to find on the website.
 12. Use text notifications and email blasts to market training opportunities or new materials. These notifications could come from FNS and ICN, and could be shared with partner organizations such as the School Nutrition Association and state Extension educators.

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