



# COORDINATING SNAP & NUTRITION SUPPORTS **IMPACT REPORT**

— CAROLINE COUNTY, MARYLAND —



## Background & Context

Through the CSNS project, the Caroline County Department of Social Services (CCDSS), the Caroline County Board of Education, and the [Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center \(ChesMRC\)](#) strengthened their collaboration to advance a shared goal of helping children and families access nutrition supports and economic services with dignity, in culturally responsive ways, and with fewer barriers to entry. Prior to receiving the CSNS grant, the agencies partnered on COVID-19 emergency response efforts and connecting families to Pandemic EBT. They also collaborated through the Caroline Collective Impact Initiative to coordinate a comprehensive approach to family stability, with the Family Resources Action Team serving as a key partner throughout their CSNS project.

Caroline County is a rural community where many residents face barriers to accessing public benefits and services, including limited transportation options and fewer centralized service locations. Families experiencing generational poverty and immigrant households in the county may also encounter challenges related to language access, system complexity, and awareness of available resources. In smaller communities, stigma and lack of familiarity with public programs can further limit participation. These factors can make it difficult for residents to identify and access available supports.

Driven by a commitment to equitable access to resources, the Caroline County team used the CSNS project to reimagine how residents connect to health and human services programs. By centering community voice, leveraging trusted local partners, and bringing services directly into community settings, the project sought to make resource navigation more accessible, responsive, and effective for residents.

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When agency and organization staff and community members use the term Community Resource Navigator they know that these are trusted individuals ready to help them access the benefits and resources they are eligible for and to look for creative solutions to overcoming barriers that impact their household stability.”





# Project Description

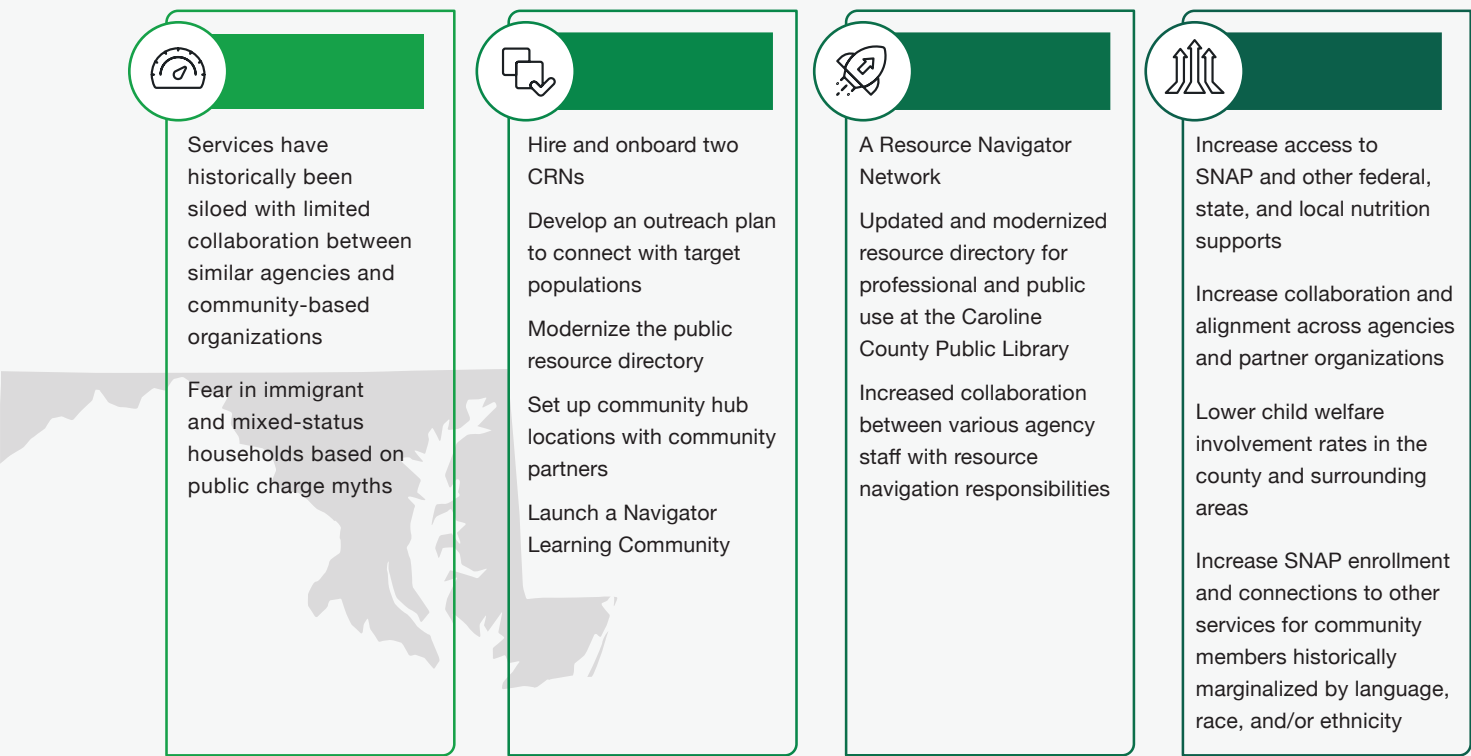
The Caroline County CSNS project focused on increasing access to SNAP and other supports through the creation of a Community Resource Navigator Network, modernization of the county’s resource directory, and investments in community leadership and cross-sector collaboration.

Rather than expecting residents to navigate complex systems on their own, the project brought services into trusted community settings and equipped community members, organizations, and frontline staff with the tools and knowledge needed to support benefit access. The project combined direct service delivery, community engagement, community leadership development, and systems improvements to create a more coordinated and responsive network of support.

## Key Objectives

-  Expand access to SNAP and other supports by embedding Community Resource Navigators in trusted community locations and increasing the visibility of available resources.
-  Strengthen community capacity and leadership through interpreter training, steward leadership development, and investments in community-based organizations.
-  Improve coordination across agencies and sectors by strengthening partnerships and creating more seamless pathways for residents to access services.
-  Center community voice in service design and delivery to ensure resources, outreach strategies, and navigation support reflect the needs and experiences of residents.

## Logic Model





## Approach

The Caroline County CSNS project was guided by the Caroline Collective Impact Initiative, particularly the Family Resources Action Team, a cross-sector group of agency, community, and organizational partners that served as a steering committee throughout implementation. The team provided strategic direction, helped identify and address barriers, and supported ongoing coordination across partners. As part of this work, partners established regular communication channels, developed data-sharing agreements, and identified key metrics to track, including SNAP enrollment, referrals, and engagement with the community resource directory.

The team's approach was centered around two complementary strategies: strengthening systems and service delivery while building community capacity and engagement. Together, these efforts improved access to benefits and services while ensuring changes were grounded in the lived experience of residents.

## Systems & Service Delivery

Caroline County focused on improving how residents access and navigate services by strengthening coordination across agencies, modernizing navigation tools, and bringing assistance directly into community settings.



### EMBEDDING COMMUNITY RESOURCE NAVIGATORS

A critical component of the project was the creation of a Community Resource Navigator Network. Community Resource Navigators (CRNs) are people with lived experience utilizing nutrition supports and navigating food insecurity in the county hired to conduct SNAP outreach and enrollment support, drawing on their firsthand knowledge of barriers and opportunities. These Navigators were embedded in trusted locations where residents already spend time, such as schools, senior centers, libraries, and community-based organizations. By the end of the project, CRNs were co-located at eight community sites and worked alongside more than 20 community partners to provide hands-on assistance with SNAP applications and renewals, referrals to local services, and connections to employment, housing, and other supports.

Bringing navigation services directly into the community reduced barriers related to transportation, awareness of programs, and system complexity. During the project period, CRNs served 160 residents through community hub locations, participated in 27 community events, and engaged more than 1,300 community members through outreach, resource navigation, and benefit access activities. These efforts helped expand access to SNAP and local nutrition services while strengthening relationships between residents and the organizations that support them.



**“Bringing my lived experience has allowed me to ignite sparks between myself and my customers through shared similar experiences, or troubleshooting the sometimes complex process of applying for benefits.”**



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### **PARTNERING WITH THE CHESAPEAKE MULTICULTURAL RESOURCE CENTER (CHESMRC)**

To improve access for immigrant communities and residents with limited English proficiency, the project partnered with the Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center (ChesMRC). This partnership expanded culturally responsive navigation services, strengthened language access, and helped build trust between service providers and immigrant families, especially for the region's Haitian Creole- and Spanish-speaking households. ChesMRC was also able to use CSNS funding to secure a permanent building in Federalsburg, Maryland, which will serve as a trusted space where community members can engage consistently with navigators and partners. Through this collaboration, more residents were able to access SNAP and other supports in ways that reflected their language and cultural needs.



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### **REIMAGINING THE CAROLINE COUNTY COMMUNITY RESOURCE DIRECTORY**

To address community feedback about a lack of awareness of available resources, the project team modernized the county's resource navigation tools through a redesign of the Caroline County Community Resource Directory ([carolinebettertogether.org](http://carolinebettertogether.org)). Working alongside community members, the team created a more user-friendly, mobile-accessible, and multilingual platform that made it easier for residents and service providers to identify and connect with relevant resources. These improvements strengthened the county's ability to provide timely, accurate information and support long-term sustainability of the Resource Navigator Network, evidenced by over 1,000 engagements in the first six months after the website's launch in September 2024.



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### **PUBLIC BENEFITS MOBILE VAN**

To further expand community-based access to benefits, the project invested in the development of a Mobile Benefits Van designed to bring enrollment assistance and resource navigation directly to residents. Building on the Community Resource Navigator Network, the mobile unit will allow staff to travel to neighborhoods and community events to help individuals apply for SNAP and other public benefits, answer questions about application status, and connect residents to additional economic supports.

The Mobile Benefits Van was intentionally designed to address multiple barriers to stability. In addition to enrollment assistance, the vehicle includes space to store shelf-stable food for households awaiting SNAP approval, helping meet immediate food needs during the application process. It is also equipped with a computer and wireless internet, providing residents with access to technology to search and apply for jobs or complete other online activities. These features help address barriers related to transportation, broadband access, and evolving work requirements while creating a flexible, community-based model for delivering services. Once deployed in Fall 2026, the van will further expand the county's ability to meet residents where they are and provide more timely, accessible support.



## Community Capacity & Engagement

Recognizing the existing capacity and connectedness of the community, the project team invested in strengthening community leadership, expanding local expertise, and creating opportunities for residents to shape the systems intended to serve them.



### COMMUNITY DINNERS & CONVERSATIONS

The team hosted twelve Community Dinners & Conversations to create welcoming opportunities for residents to connect, share experiences, and discuss community needs. More than 100 residents participated in these gatherings, which helped build trust and strengthen relationships between residents, community-based organizations, and agency staff. A Community Resource Navigator attended each event to provide benefit navigation support, answer questions, and connect residents to available resources.

The dinners served as an important feedback mechanism, directly informing project activities and community connections. Resident feedback led to enhancements in the Community Resource Directory, including the addition of downloadable listings of local food pantries and “blessing boxes” where individuals could access immediate food assistance. The events also connected residents interested in addressing community needs with volunteer opportunities, collective impact initiatives, and local community organizations. The strong positive response to the dinners continued beyond the grant period, with community members expressing interest in seeing them continue as an ongoing forum for connection, engagement, and collaboration.



### COMMUNITY STEWARD LEADERS PROGRAM

Recognizing that community members are often the first source of support for friends, family, and neighbors, the project team invested in a Community Steward Leadership Training program designed to strengthen local leadership and expand the county’s capacity to connect residents with resources. The Steward Leaders cohort consisted of individuals with lived experience who were committed to serving as community stewards and advocates. Reflecting the diversity of Caroline County, participants represented a broad range of backgrounds, came from at least three different countries, spoke five languages, and had lived in the community anywhere from one year to more than 75 years.

The training emphasized both individual leadership development and collective action, helping participants identify community assets, trusted relationships, and opportunities to address local challenges. Participants reported a greater understanding of cultural competency, the importance of considering people’s lived experiences when designing solutions, and the need to create low-barrier spaces that prioritize accessibility, reasonable accommodations, and active listening. The program also reinforced the importance of self-care, boundaries, and sustainability in community work. By investing in local leadership and relationship-building, the training expanded the network of trusted individuals able to connect residents to resources, support neighbors, and contribute to long-term community well-being.



## COMMUNITY INTERPRETER TRAINING

To strengthen language access and culturally responsive service delivery, the project partnered with Chesapeake College to offer a free 44-hour Community Interpreter Training program in response to community feedback identifying a need for additional interpreter capacity among bilingual staff and residents. The course provided hands-on training in interpretation techniques, cultural mediation, ethics, and specialized terminology, equipping participants with skills to support multilingual families and residents. The program reached capacity with 14 participants and generated strong interest in future training opportunities, while expanding the county's pool of qualified interpreters and creating new opportunities to support community outreach, events, and resource navigation efforts. By investing in interpreter training, the project expanded local language access capacity, strengthened culturally responsive service delivery, and created a foundation for ongoing community engagement and support for residents with limited English proficiency.

## WHY DOES INTERPRETATION MATTER?

Although the terms are used interchangeably, interpreters and translators perform different roles.

Translators convert written text from one language to another.

Interpreters convert spoken or signed communication in real time, helping people communicate during conversations, meetings, appointments, and service interactions.

Effective interpretation requires more than language fluency. Interpreters must understand cultural context, specialized terminology, and the intent behind a message to ensure communication is accurate, accessible, and respectful. In human services settings, qualified interpreters play a critical role in improving language access, building trust, and helping individuals fully understand and access available services.



## COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION MINI-GRANTS

To extend the reach of the Resource Navigator Network and support community-driven solutions, the project awarded mini-grants to seven local organizations<sup>1</sup>. Each organization received \$4,000 to implement activities aligned with the goals of the CSNS project, including improving food access, expanding nutrition education, increasing awareness of SNAP and other benefits, and strengthening community connections.

Over a four-month period, grantees delivered high-impact programming across Caroline County, collectively serving more than 1,100 residents through nutrition education, meal access initiatives, gardening programs, food pantry services, and

<sup>1</sup> The organizations who received mini-grants were Choptank SBHC Program, Jonestown CDC, Minary's Dream Alliance, DC Center, Men for Change, Martins House & Barn, and the Chesapeake Culinary Center.



public benefits navigation. Organizations helped connect households to SNAP, Sun Bucks, Summer Meals, Medicaid, TANF, housing and utility assistance programs, local food pantries, and emergency food resources. Beyond the direct services provided, the mini-grant program strengthened relationships among community organizations, expanded local capacity to support residents, and reinforced the project's broader goal of creating a more connected and responsive network of support. By investing directly in trusted community organizations, the project empowered local partners to develop solutions tailored to the needs of the communities they serve.

## Results

Throughout the project, the Caroline County team continuously evaluated activities to track progress, understand impact, and inform improvements. The project produced meaningful improvements in how residents access benefits and services, while also strengthening community capacity to support long-term well-being.



### INCREASED ACCESS TO SERVICES

The Community Resource Navigator Network significantly expanded access to SNAP and other supports by bringing services directly into trusted community settings. Community Resource Navigators were co-located at eight sites across the county and worked alongside more than 20 community partners to connect residents with resources. During the project period, navigators served 160 residents through community hub locations, participated in 27 community events, and engaged more than 1,300 community members through outreach, resource navigation, and benefit access activities. These efforts increased assistance with SNAP, cash assistance, and other public benefits, reduced barriers related to transportation and system navigation, and expanded access for residents who may not otherwise have connected with services.

Navigators also connected residents to employment, housing, and digital access resources, helping increase job and housing applications, expand access to workforce development opportunities, and reduce barriers related to technology access and digital literacy. In addition, the Navigator Network helped families access immediate support while waiting for longer-term benefits by distributing shelf-stable food, facilitating connections to emergency food resources, and helping stabilize households during critical transition periods.



The CSNS cohort encouraged our team to slow down and fundamentally rethink human services, asking, “How can we make this more human-centered?” The project moved the agency beyond just delivering services to actively building trust and breaking down barriers.”



### **STRONGER COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & TRUST**

The project strengthened relationships between residents, community organizations, and public agencies through intentional community engagement efforts. Twelve Community Dinners & Conversations brought together more than 100 residents to share experiences, discuss community needs, and help shape project activities. Community Resource Navigators attended each event to provide benefit navigation support and connect residents to available resources. By creating welcoming spaces for dialogue and pairing feedback opportunities with direct assistance, this work positioned CCDSS as a visible and approachable community partner, increasing trust, improving engagement with residents who may not otherwise seek services, and strengthening relationships across the community.



### **INCREASED COMMUNITY CAPACITY & LEADERSHIP**

The project invested in building local leadership and expanding community capacity to support residents beyond the grant period. Through Community Steward Leadership Training, Community Interpreter Training, and partnerships with community organizations, the project strengthened the network of trusted individuals and organizations equipped to connect residents with resources.

In addition, seven community-based organizations received mini-grants to implement activities aligned with the goals of the Resource Navigator Network. Over a four-month period, these organizations collectively served more than 1,100 residents through nutrition education, meal access initiatives, gardening programs, food pantry services, and benefits navigation. Grantees connected households to SNAP, Sun Bucks, Summer Meals, Medicaid, TANF, housing and utility assistance programs, and emergency food resources, while also expanding culturally responsive and trauma-informed services across the county.



### **MORE COORDINATED & RESPONSIVE SERVICE DELIVERY**

The project improved coordination across agencies, schools, community organizations, and service providers, creating a more connected network of support for residents. Investments in the Resource Navigator Network, community partnerships, and the modernization of the Caroline County Community Resource Directory strengthened referral pathways and improved access to information. Embedding navigators directly within community settings enabled faster benefit application assistance and referrals, improved alignment with community-identified priorities, and strengthened data collection efforts used to inform outreach strategies.

The project also helped CCDSS expand its service delivery model beyond traditional office-based approaches. By bringing services into schools, libraries, senior centers, and community organizations, the agency increased its flexibility to respond to community needs, adopted new approaches to service delivery, and strengthened its ability to meet residents where they are. Together, these efforts created a more responsive system that better reflects community needs and is equipped to support residents in navigating benefits and services.

## Lessons Learned

- ✓ **Human support and digital tools must work together.** While digital tools can expand access and remove administrative burdens, many residents still require personalized assistance to navigate complex systems and processes. Agencies should utilize technology to support, not replace, staff.
- ✓ **Food-centered engagement builds trust and participation.** Community dinners proved to be a powerful strategy for building relationships and encouraging meaningful conversations about community needs. Creating welcoming spaces centered around food helped reduce barriers to participation, foster connection, and create opportunities for residents to engage with service providers in a more informal and comfortable setting.
- ✓ **Lived experience strengthens systems.** Incorporating community members directly in program design and hiring people with lived experience helped ensure solutions reflect real needs. Community members brought valuable perspectives that informed outreach strategies, service delivery approaches, and efforts to reduce barriers to access.
- ✓ **Flexible funding unlocks innovation.** The CSNS grant enabled investments that would have been difficult under typical agency funding constraints. Flexible funding allowed the team to experiment with new approaches to service delivery and community engagement. Additionally, mini-grants allowed local community organizations to strengthen their capacity, test community-driven solutions, and extend the reach of the broader Resource Navigator Network.
- ✓ **Capacity building requires time and structure.** Training and leadership development were crucial in building and strengthening the Navigator Network, but they require sustained investment and intentional planning to produce lasting impact. Creating opportunities for ongoing learning, relationship-building, and leadership development helped ensure that knowledge and capacity remained within the community beyond the life of the grant.



Across all efforts, community voice was treated as an ongoing relationship rather than a one-time consultation. Feedback directly shaped outreach locations, language choices, training priorities, and system adaptations, reinforcing a collective impact approach grounded in dignity, trust, and shared ownership.”



## Sustainability & Improvement

The Caroline County team is committed to sustaining and expanding the partnerships, community leadership, and navigation supports developed through the CSNS initiative.

Key elements of sustainability include:



### **CONTINUED COLLABORATION BETWEEN AGENCIES AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS.**

CCDSS, the Caroline County Board of Education, community-based organizations, and collective impact partners will continue working together to strengthen resource navigation and improve access to supports for residents.



### **ONGOING USE AND EXPANSION OF COMMUNITY-BASED NAVIGATION SERVICES.**

The Resource Navigator Network and shared navigation practices established through the project provide a foundation for continued outreach, referrals, and benefit access support in trusted community settings.



### **SUSTAINED INVESTMENT IN LANGUAGE ACCESS AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SERVICES.**

The permanent presence of the Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center Federalsburg office and continued efforts to expand interpreter capacity will help ensure residents can access services in ways that reflect their needs.



### **CONTINUED INTEGRATION OF COMMUNITY VOICE AND LEADERSHIP.**

The relationships, feedback mechanisms, and engagement practices developed through the project will help ensure that community perspectives continue to inform local decision-making, program design, and implementation efforts.

Through these efforts, Caroline County is building a more connected, community-centered system that can continue to strengthen access to SNAP, nutrition supports, and other resources long after the grant period ends.

## Key Takeaways

- 1** Human-centered design and lived experience expertise are critical to making complex public systems more accessible and effective.
- 2** Community-based navigation helps reduce barriers and connect residents with the supports they need.
- 3** Cross-sector collaboration is essential to improving food security and economic stability.

## Project Library

[Caroline Better Together Resource Directory - CarolineBetterTogether.org](https://carolinebettertogether.org)

[Coordinating SNAP & Nutrition Supports \(CSNS\) Cohort 2 Case Study —  
Caroline County, Maryland: Creating a Community Resource Navigator Network](#)

[Human-Centered Service: How Coordinating SNAP and Nutrition Supports is  
Transforming Caroline County](#)

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