



Training and Professional Development Needs Assessment for State Agency Child Nutrition Program Professionals Who Work Primarily with School Nutrition Programs

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to identify and prioritize training needs and preferences for training formats, delivery methods, length of training, and best time of year for training. The study also examined the use of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and ICN educational resources and the reasons they were or were not used.

METHOD

- The content was developed in Phase I using a comprehensive review of the literature and an expert work group comprised of State agency staff members to develop a draft survey.
- 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 using the Qualtrics online survey platform and analyzed using Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) software.

RESULTS

- State agency staff perceive a need for training in a variety of topics, at both basic and advanced levels. For the five key content areas explored (conducting reviews, financial management, program administration, procurement, and training curriculum and delivery), financial management and procurement were rated the highest needed, though there were needs in all areas. Other topics were explored, such as grant writing and management, farm-to-school, professional standards, and Team Nutrition, and there was some need for training related to those topics.
- A great variety among states may impact training, including differences in roles and responsibilities, job titles, training approaches, and state laws and regulations. These differences complicate providing training across all State agencies, but provide opportunities for exploring different approaches.
- Respondents prefer training in the summer months (June, July, and August) when school meals programs are not operating. While about 80% of respondents prefer one to two days training, shorter lengths of time are optimal for about 20% of respondents. Face-to-face training is by far the preferred format, while online formats are second choices. Manuals and other hard copy documents are least preferred.
- Most respondents reported using training resources from both the USDA (75%) and ICN (83%). One main reason given for not using these resources is that State agency staff were not aware of them. Others noted difficulty navigating the websites. Some respondents indicated they use training developed by their state, sometimes citing differences in state laws as necessitating development.

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

Conclusions to this study indicate that there are opportunities to provide training and to remove barriers to use of existing resources, and that many of these recommendations can be accomplished by using existing resources:

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 meet the instructor/students, and to outline goals and objectives for the course. Periodic webinars might be provided, and students 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 agencies and other staff.
3. Include both a participant and an instructor evaluation for any new training approaches to capture what was effective and also changes that would be needed for future training.
4. Divide training topics into small, focused areas that can be completed in short 1-2 hour sessions. For example, one training could focus on understanding and utilizing basic financial statements.
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 the USDA and ICN. A 1-page handout that 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 New Director Orientation.
11. Focus on a different educational resource each month, and email a description of the resource to State agency personnel. Include a link to the resource so that it is easy to find on the website.
12. Use text notification and email blasts to market training opportunities or new materials.

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