

## The States' Uses of CSBG Recovery Act Benefits Enrollment & Coordination Funds

### Introduction

In February 2009, President Barack Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act). This Act provided \$9.7 million to State CSBG Offices to implement benefits enrollment and coordination (BE & C) activities in their States. In providing these funds, Congress wanted to ensure that individuals and families affected by the economic recession were receiving critical health care, nutrition assistance, tax credits and other benefits for which they qualify.

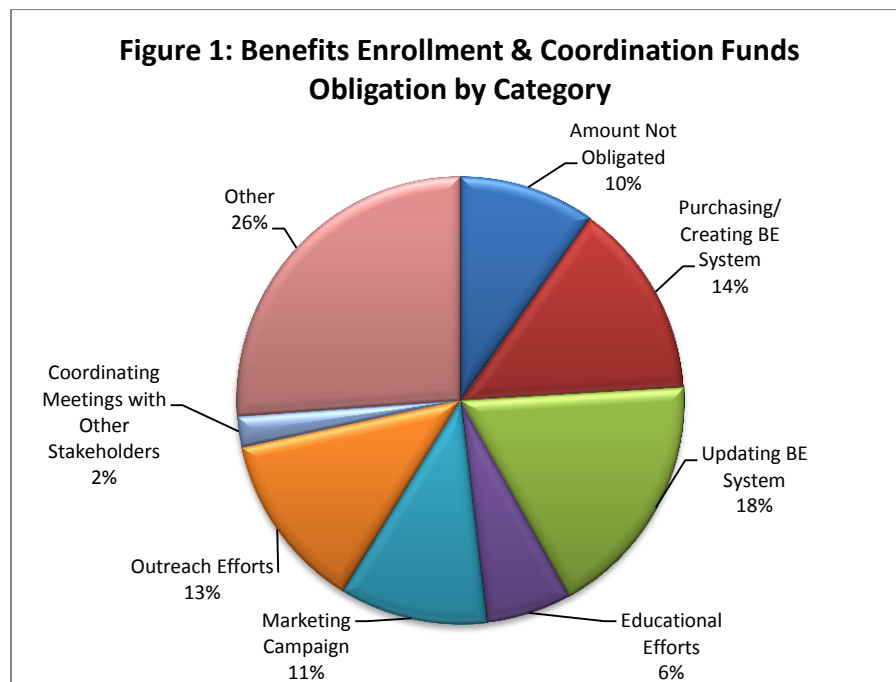
The amounts provided to State CSBG Offices for these activities varied widely from state to state, lowest being Alaska with only \$36,926 and highest being California, which received \$891,500. Twenty of the 52 states received less than \$100,000 to facilitate BE & C, and only 8 received more than \$200,000. The amount of funding each State received depended on its total CSBG Recovery Act allocation, of which 1% was allocated for BE & C.

### States' Uses of Benefits Enrollment Funds

States' uses of the BE & C Funds generally fell into four categories:

- Benefits Enrollment Online System (32%)
- Outreach and Marketing (30%)
- Coordination with Other Stakeholders (2%)
- Other (26%)

Figure 1, below, provides an even more detailed breakdown of these expenditures.



## **Benefits Enrollment Online System**

Eleven States reported spending \$1.5 million for purchasing/creating a benefits enrollment system and 15 States reported spending \$1.8 million for updating an existing benefits enrollment system. Most of these States invested in creating or enhancing online systems that allow customers to check for benefits eligibility from home using a website, to apply for these benefits, and to find which Community Action Agency (CAA) is serving their community. Some systems even allowed for a client to set up an appointment at the CAA. Recognizing that not all potential clients may have ready access to technology, many States invested in setting up public points of access in libraries and other often-visited community locations. This included supplying computers and internet access, and training staff in helping potential clients check or apply for benefits.

In addition to making benefits and information directly more accessible for the customers, many States invested in integrating their current data collection systems with additional programs throughout the state and even external public benefits and programs not connected with the CAAs. Such initiatives helped CAAs track clients across multiple programs, leading to more efficient services.

## **Outreach and Marketing**

Twenty-nine States engaged in outreach, marketing and/or educational activities in order to ensure qualifying individuals are aware of services and benefits that are available to them. States invested in a wide array of projects and materials to promote existing government and community action programs. Some strategies included marketing their State's 2-1-1 system – a telephone number which individuals may call to find out about available services in their state. For example, Alaska distributed rack cards – 4 by 9-inch advertisement cards that individuals can take and keep – coordinated with 2-1-1 information, to over 1,000 organizations in 245 communities.

States also promoted their online benefits enrollment systems and encouraged individuals to use them. Connecticut hosted a kick-off meeting at a statewide conference and included demonstrations and overviews of their new benefits enrollment system to CAA staff and community partners. Michigan invested in an innovative approach of “system navigators” – developing a network of leaders and volunteers across the State who assist low-income individuals with obtaining access to Federal, State and local benefit programs.

Other outreach and marketing efforts were conducted through radio and television public service announcements; advertisements on billboards, public transportation, and in newspapers; creating and updating websites, brochures, posters, and other informational pieces; hosting speakers, webinars, and presentations; disseminating videos, and reaching out to partner organizations. Some States targeted information to Hispanic populations by providing information in Spanish. These endeavors informed the public about numerous social benefits programs to encourage enrollment to get the services and assistance provided to those that need it most.

## **Coordination with Other Stakeholders**

Coordination of benefits enrollment activities with other stakeholders and partners was naturally a part of any activity the States decided to undertake, due to the collaborative nature of CSBG. Seven States report specifically dedicating BE & C funds to this purpose. States report conducting webinars in partnership with other stakeholders, reaching out to partners and other service providers to determine more effective enrollment processes, and conducting regularly scheduled partner meetings.

For example, Missouri mobilized local communities to form collaboration groups which would work together to reduce the impact of poverty in the state. Fifty-three community members from across the state attended a two-day training session which focused on the theory of community and leadership, the deep change necessary to lead change, and specific skills and plans to implement in the local Community Empowerment Collaborations (CEC). These leaders from across a variety of sectors were trained to lead change and work with each other and Community Action to lead positive change to empower low-income people to become self-sufficient.

## **Other**

Other BE & C activities included tax preparation services to ensure low-income individuals obtained all federal and state credits they qualified for, including the Earned Income Tax Credit, which has been proven effective in lifting working individuals out of poverty. Some States also targeted unserved populations with needed services, such as dental services for veterans in Illinois, or enrollment in childcare services in West Virginia.

## **Amount Not Obligated**

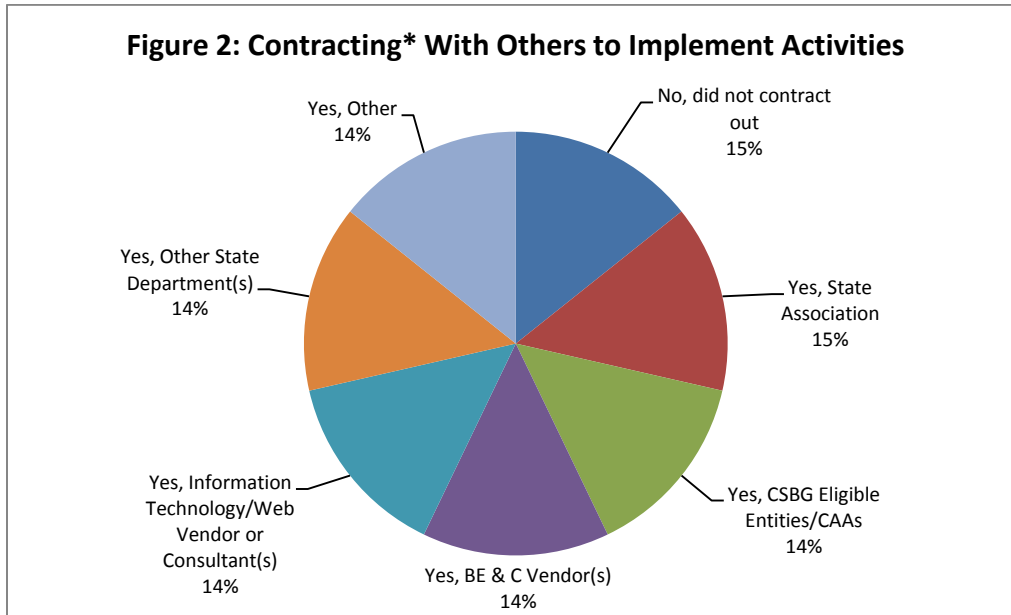
Thirty-six States obligated 100% of their benefits enrollment allocation. Sixteen states were not able to obligate the full amount. For many States this represented very small portions of their total allocation, ranging from \$2 to \$5,000 in unobligated funds. Only five States failed to obligate over 20% of their allocation; the remaining 11 States left less than 15% of the funding on the table.

State CSBG Offices received no administrative funding under the Recovery Act. Thus the unprecedented strain of administering CSBG Recovery Act Funds, along with regularly appropriated CSBG, caused many States to struggle to balance these responsibilities along with the directive to expend funds strictly on BE & C activities. Although constrained in administrative funds, State offices were committed to the goals of the CSBG Recovery Act, and successfully expended over 90% of BE & C funds.

## **Methodology of Expending Benefits Enrollment & Coordination Funds**

Twelve State Offices directly planned and carried out BE & C activities. The remaining States contracted out at least a part of the activities to be performed by another State department, CAAs, State CAA Association, an information technology vendor, or another vendor.

The below chart breaks down States' methods of expending their BE & C allocations.



*\*Contracting may have been for the full amount of the State's allocation, or for a partial amount.*

Fourteen State CAA Associations were involved in BE & C contracts, 12 States involved their CAAs, 10 states involved an information technology vendor, and six States involved a different State department.

### **Targeting Special Populations through Benefits Enrollment and Coordination**

Eight States targeted specific underserved populations in their BE & C activities. For example, Illinois chose to target veterans, because of lack of federal and state funding for services for this population. Montana and Indiana targeted homeless individuals, especially homeless veterans. Mississippi targeted elderly and disabled individuals in need of services. In addition to targeting the low-income population in general, North Dakota put efforts into reaching out to individuals newly in need of services who were not yet familiar with benefits that were available to them. Other populations targeted include refugees and non-English speaking communities.

### **Evaluation of Results of these Activities**

Most States compiled quarterly reports to summarize their activities and track the number of clients served. Additionally, indicators like the increase in applications, increase in clients served, or 2-1-1 calls received, and rate of increase in website traffic were measured and tracked. In cases where States contracted with CAAs to provide benefits enrollment and coordination activities, States reported monitoring those CAAs' activities, conducting site visits, and requiring activity and outcome reports to ensure accountability.