

Mar-Apr-May 2012

EBT Update

Hooray! It's spring! Time to shake off the winter doldrums, clean out the cobwebs, and start planting some seeds. We have already begun planting some seeds, little Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) seeds!

EBT is the next big undertaking in WIC. USDA has mandated that EBT be implemented nationwide by the year 2020 – Ohio, however, would like to implement EBT in the year 2015. In order to accomplish this feat, there is much planning to be done. We thought this would be a good time to share the details of some of our planning (or planting!) activities with you.

We piloted EBT in Montgomery County from 2000 to 2005 with approximately 11,000 WIC participants. Ohio was one of the first WIC programs in the nation to pilot EBT, as we knew then that EBT was the wave of the future. Although this pilot was favorably received by staff, participants and other stakeholders, we were unable to present an "adequate business case" for expansion; what this means is we could not convince USDA that we could afford to expand our EBT efforts. As a result, the pilot ended, we took some respite, and then went back to the EBT drawing board.

Unlike other states, we plan to take on much of the development, implementation, and operational support of EBT with our existing internal resources. We are fortunate to have a dedicated Information Technology (IT) team who is more than capable of developing and supporting EBT. The staff has vast knowledge of, longevity with, and commitment to the WIC program, which makes our IT team's use for this project the most cost-beneficial, efficient and logical solution.

We gathered UPC data from major food manufacturers and all EBT states, and our programmers have developed an Ohio-specific UPC database that will fully integrate with the National UPC database. We have established and are working with a Vendor Advisory Group, with whom we plan to pilot this database in 2012. During the pilot, this group will be able to integrate the database into their systems, as well as validate the information contained within the database. We will have this database fully implemented with all authorized retail vendors by October 2012, so that they may begin using it in the current paper environment.

We are in the final stages of completing an EBT cost benefit analysis, which we believe will clearly demonstrate that we can develop and operate EBT at a fraction of other states' costs.

The last step of our planning phase is to develop an Implementation Advanced Planning Document (IAPD). The IAPD will fully detail how we plan to pilot EBT and then roll it out to all of you. Much thought and consideration will be given to make this transition as easy as possible for participants, vendors and WIC staff. We will begin working on the IAPD soon, and will submit it for USDA approval by October 2012. Once approval is received, then there is no turning back, and we are EBT-Bound!

EBT is going to be quite a challenge, but Ohio WIC has never been known to shy away from a challenge! We, collectively, have the skills, determination, and ability to pull it off, and we will. And it will be so worth it. Here's to EBT in 2015!!!