

BOSTON COLLEGE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

The Senior Community Service Employment Program: Its Influence on Participant Well-Being—and Recommendations to Strengthen It

Report to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs

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Project Team

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Background

Within Massachusetts and nationally, the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) engages older adults in on-the-job training with the goal to secure unsubsidized employment. Participants are ages 55 years and older, have incomes at or below 125% of the federal poverty level, and experience multiple barriers to employment. SCSEP blends anti-poverty, workforce training, and civic engagement goals into one and, as a part of the Older Americans Act of 1965, is the only federal workforce training program designed to target older adults.^{1,2}

While the process may differ slightly by location and individual, interested participants apply to SCSEP to determine their eligibility, often join a waitlist, and are interviewed to assess their barriers to employment, such as disability, limited English proficiency, and homelessness or risk of homelessness^{3,4}. Once accepted into the program, they interview with potential host agencies and undergo both classroom and on-the-job training. They also develop an Individual Employment Plan. Due to the multi-step process of joining and participating in SCSEP, many participants are inherently motivated to find work and engage with the larger community.¹ Although the COVID-19 pandemic paused the work of participants, SCSEP programs in Massachusetts and throughout the country found ways to engage participants while providing paid sick leave and exploring virtual training opportunities.⁵

Study

This research project asked the following question: **How does the Senior Community Service Employment Program influence financial, physical, and mental well-being among its low-income and older adult participants?** To answer this question, we met with 15 SCSEP participants and case managers throughout Massachusetts over a combined nine hours in August and September 2020 in a form of participatory research called Community Based System Dynamics (CBSD). Our goals were two-fold: First, to map the role of SCSEP in participant well-being over time. And second, to develop program and policy recommendations to strengthen SCSEP while increasing participating well-being. We moved all meetings to either a virtual format over Zoom or over the telephone to promote the health and well-being of all involved due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This project is innovative in its use of the CBSD method in three key ways:

1. This is the first time that CBSD has been used to examine the role that SCSEP plays in the lives of participants.
2. This is one of the first studies to engage older adults in CBSD.
3. Due to the constraints and opportunities posed by the pandemic, this is one of the first studies to move CBSD methods to virtual and telephone environments.

This pilot project also set the stage for future engagement with SCSEP participants, case managers, administrators, host agencies, and more using a CBSD approach.

This report presents the systems map—a casual loop diagram—developed from these sessions. It also outlines the key recommendations uncovered from our sessions. Additional methodology details are described later in this report.

How to read this causal loop diagram. Changes in variables lead to changes in other variables over time, as indicated by arrows. Arrows that have a positive sign indicate that as one variable increases, so will the next variable. (And as one variable decreases, so will the next variable.) Arrows that have a negative sign indicate that as one variable increases, the next variable decreases. (Or vice versa.) Combined, these relationships create a system of feedback loops. Feedback loops labeled with an R and circled by an arrow are called reinforcing feedback loops. This means that, left alone, the variables in these loops continue to increase or decrease without stopping in what are often called virtuous or vicious cycles. Feedback loops labeled with a B and circled by an arrow are called balancing feedback loops. In balancing loops, an initial increase in one variable feeds back around the loop leading to a decrease in that same variable, producing a balancing or leveling off over time.

How this casual loop diagram was developed. Our research team developed this causal loop diagram in an iterative fashion during and between sessions with 15 Massachusetts-based SCSEP participants and case managers. We also met with the Massachusetts SCSEP state director to ask clarifying questions about some of the variables or relationships described. We then shared a draft version of this model in meetings with participants, case managers, and the Massachusetts SCSEP state director. Lastly, we incorporated this feedback into the final model.

Key Themes

The causal loop diagram has three themes:

- 1. Participant experiences.** This is the top cluster of variables. Here, participants and case managers described how SCSEP participation relates to increased levels of financial security, health, confidence, and social engagement, and decreased levels of isolation. An example feedback loop is "Awareness of Health Support." This shows how SCSEP participation increases awareness of non-SCSEP social supports (through their engagement with their case managers, supervisors, and human services agencies), which leads to increases in accessing additional benefits, which leads to increased health, which loops back to reinforce the increase in SCSEP participation.
- 2. Organizational environment.** This is the middle cluster of variables. Here, participants and case managers described how variables influence the quality of job training and performance at placement. An example feedback loop is "Performance Confidence." This reinforcing feedback loop shows how increased confidence leads to increased performance at one's placement, which in turn leads to more confidence. Separately, confidence itself is influenced by ageist stereotypes and beliefs as well as one's fit in the placement.
- 3. Program and policy environment.** This is the lower cluster of variables. Here, participants and case managers described how program and policy related variables relate to a set of output and outcome indicators, including the total number of people enrolled in SCSEP, total number employed after SCSEP, and employment goals. An example balancing feedback loop is "Slots Filling." This shows how increases in SCSEP enrollment lead to a decrease in the total slots available, which leads to a decrease in the number enrolled in SCSEP.

Combined, our conversations with SCSEP participants and case managers revealed how these three key areas of the program interrelated to influence changes in participant well-being over time. They also revealed how SCSEP influences a wider range of outcomes important to participants' well-being than are officially tracked.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our conversations with SCSEP participants and case managers, our research team developed the following sets of recommendations.

FUNDING AND SUPPORT

- 1. Increase funding for additional slots from the federal government and state, local, and private sources.** Respondents overwhelmingly stressed that there is far more demand for SCSEP slots than supply. In a time of fiscal constraints, funding may need to come from sources in addition to the federal government, enabling funding for additional slots to be more responsive to unmet demand.
- 2. Increase funding to build organizational capacity for program operators and host agencies to strengthen supports for SCSEP participants.** Respondents shared that due to tight SCSEP budgets, there is little financial support to increase the capacity of program operators and host agencies to better support participants. Supporting the organizations to build their capacity could lead to several positive outcomes, including better support for participants' needs and better participant outcomes. For example, some respondents noted the need to develop enhanced case management by hiring social workers to more holistically support the needs of SCSEP participants.
- 3. Increase participant stipends after certain goals are met.** Respondents shared that working part-time at minimum wage in SCSEP is hard to live on, especially in areas with higher costs of living throughout Massachusetts. Several proposed "pay for performance" ideas, such as increasing participant stipends after clear goals are met (e.g., passing technology trainings) to decrease financial stress while increasing skills.
- 4. Continue wraparound benefits after program exit.** Respondents shared that after some participants exit SCSEP for unsubsidized jobs, they lose important benefits, such as housing and SNAP benefits, health insurance, family support programs where they begin to build up a nest egg, and other benefits. This was described as a "benefits cliff." Communicating with existing and former participants regarding programs and benefits they may be eligible for after leaving SCSEP—such as the federal Family Self-Sufficiency program for low-income individuals receiving housing assistance from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development—was noted as one way to help. As was the idea of extending some of these benefits for a period of time after exiting SCSEP for unsubsidized employment, decreasing the incentive to remain in SCSEP.

TRAINING

- 5. Provide initial and ongoing training and education for host agencies as a requirement of continued participation in SCSEP.** Respondents shared that some host agencies do not understand that this is, first and foremost, a jobs training program. As a result, some host agencies focus less on the skills, knowledge areas, and confidence they can help participants to develop through the training experience.
- 6. Help program operators to provide additional technology training, both prior to and during placement in host agencies.** The level of technology training offered to participants varies depending on the program operator. Having some baseline technology training available to all participants would promote more skilled individuals for today's economy. In addition to basic

computer skills, the technology training should be responsive to the current and future work environments by training participants on strategies for remote work, including virtual meeting software and using the cloud.

- 7. Help program operators to provide more individualized support for training and education as needed.** SCSEP participants are a diverse group of people with different backgrounds, experiences, and needs, and a “one size fits all” approach will not always address their specific needs. For example, some respondents noted that language barriers are an issue for SCSEP participants whose primary language is not English. In this case, English language classes could be helpful.
- 8. Promote regular collaboration between SCSEP and American Job Centers (called MassHire Career Centers in Massachusetts) at the federal, state, and local levels.** Respondents noted that employees at career centers do not always have a full understanding of the goals of SCSEP and the needs of the older adults it serves. Further, local SCSEP staff, who sometimes work at the career centers to meet with potential SCSEP participants, do not know much about other available career programs. Regular collaboration and communication between SCSEP and American Job Centers will increase knowledge about the programs and supports for older workers seeking training and employment.

PROGRAMMATIC GOALS AND WHAT IS CONSIDERED “SUCCESS”

- 9. Reconsider benchmarks of success on current program goals.** Respondents noted that the older adults whom SCSEP is designed to support face very high barriers to employment—in an economy where older adults of all socioeconomic backgrounds have been documented to experience ageism, difficulty finding work, and high chances of losing their jobs.⁶ Despite this, some program administrators at the federal and other levels do not see SCSEP as a success when analyzing post-SCSEP job attainment and average wage data.¹ Yet our study’s respondents—considering the same data—often see SCSEP as a successful program. In fact, as the program is currently designed, the “most-in-need” goals are working directly against employment goals, as those most in need of SCSEP training are, by design, individuals who face the most barriers to finding work. Respondents noted that the significant barriers faced by SCSEP participants should be considered when analyzing programmatic outcomes.
- 10. Expand what success looks like for program administrators to include a broader look at financial, mental, physical, and social well-being.** The focus on post-SCSEP employment and mean hourly pay is important. Yet respondents noted many other benefits of SCSEP participation that currently are not assessed to indicate the success of—and funding for—the program. These include participants gaining access to secure housing, SNAP benefits, and health care; increased social engagement and “getting out of the house” and decreased isolation; increased confidence; and an increased sense of financial independence and reduced financial stress.
- 11. Focus on identifying participant strengths.** Some respondents noted how deflating it can feel for new participants to focus so much on their barriers to employment in some of their initial interviews. Utilizing a strengths-based perspective that is common in the field of social work will be more empowering to participants—building confidence—while increasing opportunities among staff to build off of participant strengths.

PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT

12. Increase opportunities for social engagement and relationship building among participants.

Respondents noted that while some program operators create opportunities for social engagement and relationship building, others do not. Considering the potential social benefits of this program—such as decreased isolation—efforts to increase the capacity of program operators to facilitate such relationship building may lead to better overall outcomes for participants. For example, during the pandemic, some noted how much they appreciated the regular virtual meetings that have been held by program administrators.

BRANDING AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION

13. From the federal to local levels, focus on developing a shared SCSEP brand or identity. Several respondents used other names besides SCSEP to describe the program. Many focused on the needs or requirements of the organization they receive their funding from—a “grantee”—instead of the federal program itself. Some participants saw themselves as staff of a local agency and not SCSEP participants. Further, many respondents noted that there is low awareness of SCSEP in their communities. While some of these examples have positive implications, they also reduce the SCSEP brand awareness and potential knowledge of the purposes and benefits of the program. Promoting a larger SCSEP brand or identity may help. Just as AmeriCorps members—who are placed throughout the country in community service roles—self-identify as members and alum, so, too, could SCSEP members. Further, just as the AmeriCorps logo is a clear symbol of the program from the federal to local levels, so, too, could a SCSEP logo.

METHODS

This research project asked the following question: **How does the Senior Community Service Employment Program influence financial, physical, and mental well-being among its low-income and older adult participants?** To answer this question, we met with 15 SCSEP participants and case managers throughout Massachusetts over a combined nine hours in August and September 2020 in a form of participatory research called Community Based System Dynamics (CBSD). Our goals were two-fold: First, to map the role of SCSEP in participant well-being over time. And second, to develop program and policy recommendations to strengthen SCSEP. All meetings were moved to a virtual format over Zoom as well as over the telephone to promote the health and well-being of all involved due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Study respondents were recruited through virtual presentations to Massachusetts SCSEP administrators, case managers, and participants, as well as through word of mouth. Some of the case managers in this study had dual roles as both case managers (i.e., taking on SCSEP staff roles) and participants.⁷ Study respondents received an honorarium in appreciation for their time.

Part of the larger field of System Dynamics, CBSD is an approach to understanding complex problems holistically by exploring how they are driven by factors interacting in systems. CBSD recognizes the importance of understanding individual perspectives on complex social problems by providing a method for involving groups of stakeholders in modeling systems. Further, it places an emphasis on building stakeholders’ capacity to understand and change systems by reframing the way they think about problems. Thus, CBSD uniquely encompasses aspects of the participatory, intervention, and policy

research paradigms. Systems approaches like CBSD have been used on topics such as public health, mental health, and human services reform, but rarely regarding older adults.⁸

We facilitated SCSEP participants and case managers in the mapping of factors at the individual, employer, community, and policy levels in relation to participant well-being, with the explicit goal to clarify what role SCSEP plays in influencing financial, physical, and mental well-being over time. To do so, we engaged stakeholders using structured small-group activities called “scripts” that were tailored to explore SCSEP’s interactions with financial, physical, and mental well-being over time. As experts in the systems in which they live and work, SCSEP participants and case managers dictated the important factors to include in the model, while we, as researchers, facilitated discussions and captured them using CBSD diagramming conventions.

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This pilot project, which developed the initial capabilities of participants and case managers to understand and change systems, also set the stage for future engagement with SCSEP participants, case managers, administrators, host agencies, and more using a CBSD approach.

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