

City of Seattle
Racial Equity Toolkit (RET) Summary Sheet
Cover Sheet and Questions

Department/Office: Office of Sustainability & Environment

Name of policy, program, etc. analyzed: Fresh Bucks transition to e-benefits

Names and titles of key staff that led this RET process: Tiffany Anderson, Robyn Kumar,
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Dates of RET process: 1/2021—10/2021

Fresh Bucks e-benefits RET Summary Sheet Questions

1. Describe the project, program, policy or budgetary decision that you assessed using the Racial Equity Toolkit.

This RET assessed the racial equity impacts of transitioning the Fresh Bucks benefit from a paper voucher to an electronic benefit. Fresh Bucks is a healthy food program that helps Seattle residents afford healthy food. Through Fresh Bucks Vouchers, Seattle residents with incomes at or below 80% AMI can apply to receive \$40/month in benefits redeemable for fresh fruits and vegetables at nearly 40 participating supermarkets, small grocers, and farmers markets. Historically, this benefit has come in the form of paper vouchers delivered by mail to enrolled households. This RET was conducted in advance of a planned, October 2021 transition to an electronic benefit, where participants' benefits are loaded on a plastic card or app.

2. List the racial equity outcome(s) that you set in Step 1 of the RET process.

Eliminate racial disparities in access to healthy foods for low-income Hispanic, Black/African American, American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN), Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander (NHPI) communities and immigrants and refugees, particularly those with language barriers.

3. Which stakeholders (groups and/or key individuals) did you engage in this RET? In what ways did you engage them?

Key Fresh Bucks staff met periodically to plan community engagement sessions, discuss findings, and draft an e-benefits user testing process. The community engagement comprised key stakeholder groups that are responsible for implementing e-benefits via a series of virtual meetings and one-on-one conversations to gather their ideas and feedback on the user testing process, customer testing criteria, findings, and implementation planning. Select partners also participated in the user test by hosting the testing, recruiting customers, and providing insights, feedback, and in some cases interpretation during the user tests.

1. Community-based organization (CBO) partners that help their customers (primarily RSJ priority populations) enroll in Fresh Bucks, recruited customers to test the e-benefit in retail settings, and helped facilitate the user test sessions;
2. Neighborhood Grocers who provide culturally relevant food and who implemented e-benefits at their stores;
3. Safeway leadership, who led e-benefits implementation at all Safeway stores and helped coordinate user testing; and
4. Farmers market administrators, who led the transition to e-benefits at the market processing booths and helped customers use e-benefits.

4. Please describe up to five key benefits and/or burdens for people of color of this policy, program, project, or other decision, which the RET process helped you to identify or confirm.

Benefits: In several important ways, the transition to e-benefits reduces the stigma our customers experience when using their Fresh Bucks. Simplifying different aspects of the shopping and processing steps improves the interaction between customers and cashiers and reduces the occurrence of miscommunication, especially when customers and cashiers do not speak the same language.

- Flexibility of purchase amount: Customers no longer need to make purchases in \$10 increments, which allows them to shop with ease and eliminates difficult conversations with cashiers about payment amounts.
- Easy for cashiers to process: Swiping the payment card once reduces the number of steps for cashiers to process the benefit, making it easier to use for customers and cashiers.
- System determines item eligibility: Customers and cashiers no longer need to monitor item eligibility independently, eliminating stress and difficult conversations negotiating item eligibility on both sides of the transaction.

Burdens: The user test revealed several steps in the process where customers faced confusion. The burdens were amplified when the customer and the cashier did not speak the same language.

- Card activation was difficult for many customers to complete independently. They had additional questions or needed help from the CBO staff to complete the steps. If customers didn't have an email address, they had to take extra steps to activate their cards which were time-consuming and confusing.
- Customers and cashiers experienced some challenges adjusting to using the payment card. The Safeway point-of-sale system requires a specific order of operations to successfully process the transaction and sometimes triggers an override message. Additionally, many customers tried to scan their card in the card processing machine instead of having the cashier scan the card.
- Customers were confused about program and process changes, including the switch to receiving a card one time that is reloaded automatically versus monthly voucher mailings and changing item eligibility from fresh, frozen, canned and dried fruits and vegetables to only fresh produce.

5. Please describe up to five key actions – things that you will do differently or begin to do now – of this policy, program, project, or other decision, which will increase opportunity and/or minimize harm for people of color.

1. Fresh Bucks staff created a call-in card activation option so customers with language and/or technological literacy or access barriers have an option to receive support. Staff can activate the card on behalf of the customer over the phone, and interpretation services are available.
2. Fresh Bucks staff revised the website to simplify the process for customers who do not have an email address for card activation. These changes eliminate steps in the process and confusion for customers.
3. Fresh Bucks staff revised the testing protocol for retailers based on findings from the user test. The testing scenarios were expanded to include the transaction processing issues identified as part of the user test and deployed at every Fresh Bucks retail site.
4. Fresh Bucks staff revised customer communications and created an in-language, highly visual video to teach customers about the steps to activate and use their e-benefit. The revisions to communications emphasized changes that confused customers during the user test and provided answers to common questions that customers raised during the user test, including changes to item eligibility and the “one card, one time” process change.
5. Fresh Bucks staff revised retailer training and communications to emphasize the correct order of operations for transaction processing, identify common system error messages and mitigations, and share options for customers to activate their cards.

6. How will leadership ensure implementation of the actions described in question 4?

These changes have already been implemented and were in place for the October 1, 2021 launch of the e-benefits.

7. How have/will you report back to your stakeholders? (This includes the people who were directly engaged in this RET process, those who will be affected by decisions made, and other departments or divisions impacted by the RET findings and the actions described in question 4.)

Fresh Bucks staff reported back findings and mitigations regarding the user test in a variety of ways. As previously mentioned, Safeway store managers all received updated training materials through a presentation at regional store managers meetings, in-person store visits at all stores to share updates and emphasize program changes, and electronic and in-person handoff of 1-page cashier guidance for cashier stands. Small retailers all received individual, in-person training aligned with the user test findings and successfully completed test transactions. Farmers market staff also received training and successfully completed test transactions in alignment with the user testing findings. Community-based organizations received updated guidance and talking points to help guide their support of customers during the transition to e-benefits.

8. What additional racial equity issues did this RET reveal? Consider how these unresolved issues present opportunities for structural transformation (i.e. working across departments, and with other institutions and sectors to achieve racial equity).

While the Fresh Bucks team was able to reduce some of the burdens of the card activation process, we believe that ultimately it would be best for customers if the organization enrolling them in the program could hand them the card in person and help them activate it on the spot. The Fresh Bucks team will investigate how to implement these changes for future enrollment in 2022.

This RET identified that item eligibility changes were a greater burden than expected for many of our most vulnerable customers. Although updating item eligibility at large retailers like Safeway presents a significant body of complicated technical work, we will begin exploring the feasibility of making this change in 2022.

Finally, the shift to e-benefits presents the opportunity to access a rich data set that can teach us how our racial equity priority populations are using and impacted by our program. We can look at customer behavior including card activation, benefit redemption, and program retention rates by race. This level of analysis will help us more deeply understand the existing gaps among our user populations, the starting point for further investigation of additional barriers. We plan to conduct this level of analysis, engage stakeholders to understand the barriers we identify, and implement solutions to ensure all customers can access our program.