

# Moving to a Self-Directed Service Approach

## *Factors Influencing Variation in Self-service Application Rates across NYC SNAP Centers*

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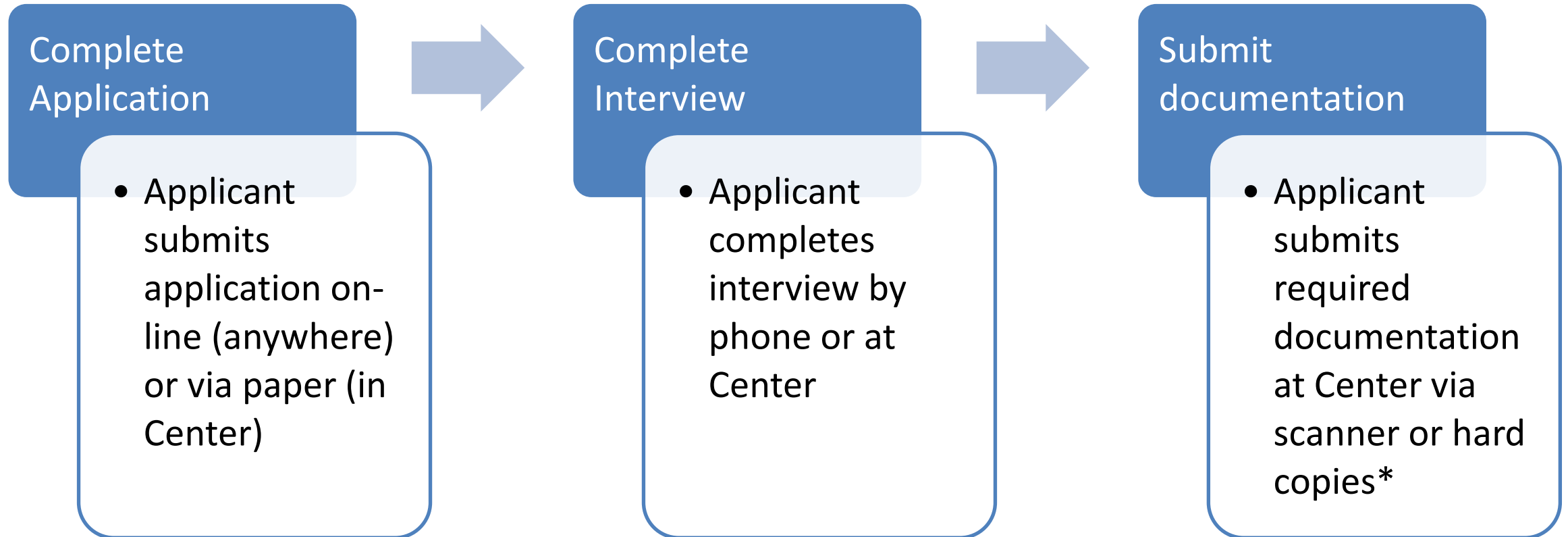
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# Background

- HRA administers SNAP for more than 900,000 households, processing over 37,000 applications each month.
  - On-line electronic SNAP applications (“E-Apps”) available since 2010; currently ~75% of all applications filed electronically.
- As part of its business process innovation efforts, HRA began opening self-service computer banks (“PC Banks”) at SNAP Centers in 2013.
  - Goal: improve efficiency of SNAP operations by reducing wait time for applicants while also reducing staff workload.
  - Staffed by facilitators who assist with questions about the application and troubleshoot computer issues.
  - About 40% of all E-Apps are submitted via PC Bank at an HRA Center.
- Applicant characteristics (e.g., age, English proficiency) affect PC Bank uptake, but do not explain variation by Center, suggesting that factors related to Center implementation play an important role in determining take-up.

# SNAP Application Process

*Overall goal: Move toward a self-directed approach*



# Research Questions

- *Center layout and workflow:* How does the traffic flow of the Center promote or inhibit use of the PC Bank? How have Centers integrated the PC Bank into their overall operations?
- *PC Bank staffing and support:* What strategies do Center administrators use to staff and support the PC Bank?
- *PC Bank workflow and applicant engagement:* What is the applicant's experience in the PC Bank? What strategies are more or less effective in engaging and supporting applicants?

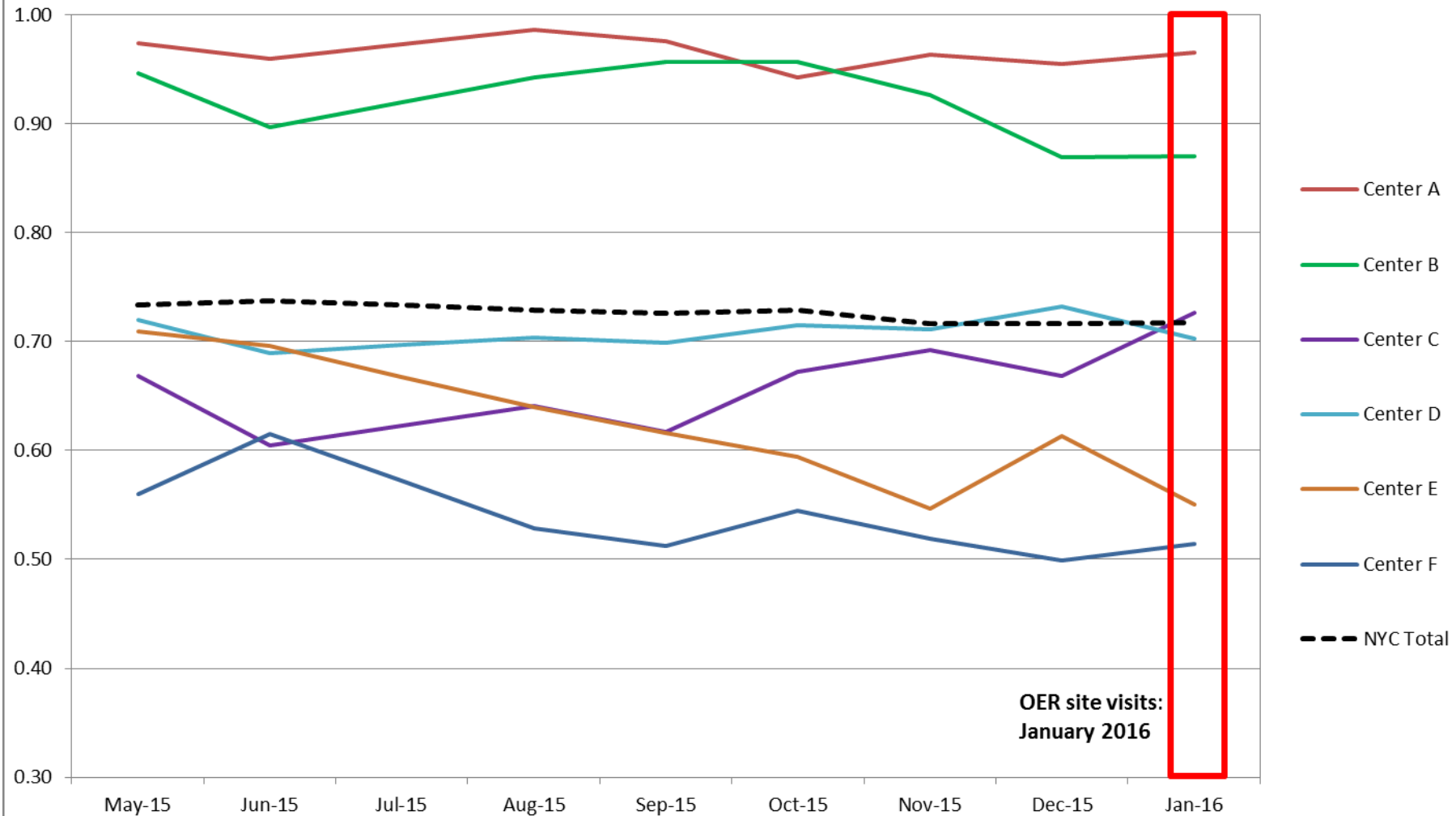
# Methods

- **Sample:** purposive selection of 6 Centers from across NYC based on PC Bank use.
- **Data collection:** teams of 2 researchers conducted 4-hour site visits using structured instruments
  - Tour of Center
  - Key informant interviews with Center administrators and staff
  - Observation of PC Bank operations
  - Surveys of applicants (n=15) waiting to complete in-person intakes

Center	PC Bank Use
A	High
B	High
C	Medium
D	Medium
E	Low
F	Low

PC Bank Use assessed as % of in-Center SNAP applications submitted using PC Bank (November 2015). Low = ~ 50%, medium = ~ 70%, high = ~ 90%.

### PC Bank Proportion of Total In-Center Applications, 2015-2016



OER site visits:  
January 2016

Source: NYC Department of Social Services Administrative Data

# Findings

# Center Layout and Workflow

- In general, the PC Bank was easy to locate. Most centers routed all applicants to the PC Bank via a “ticket” issued at front reception.

## Exceptions

- Center F (low use) reception directed applicants to either the PC Bank or to a separate paper application area.
  - Center D (medium use) reception provided applicants with both a PC Bank ticket and a paper application.
- Centralization of work areas (PC Bank computers, scanners, staff workstations) varied; in some Centers facilitators had to leave the PC Bank area to attend to other tasks.



# PC Bank Staffing Strategies

- Facilitators were responsible for a wide range of duties.
  - Troubleshooting computer issues
  - Answering questions about the on-line application
  - Conducting in-person intakes for applicants who declined use of computer
  - Assistance with self-service scanners for document submission
- Centers had 2 to 4 Eligibility Specialists\* assigned to work as facilitators, but the number present in the PC Bank varied with Center traffic and staff availability.
  - The lowest-use Centers (E and F) sometimes had only 1 facilitator present for extended periods of time.
  - Two Centers (A-High and C-Medium) used clerks to assist with greeting and scanning documents.
- Centers used different strategies to designate staff as PC Bank facilitators.
  - Center B (High): leadership purposely assigned staff to full-time facilitator role based on perceived “fit.”
  - Center D (Medium): all Eligibility Specialists assigned in turn to one-week rotation in PC Bank.

# Supervisory Support

- We found no marked differences across Centers in Directors' communications with staff about expectations for overall PC Bank use rate.
- We did observe differences across Centers in PC Bank supervisor and facilitator buy-in.

High PC Bank Use	Low PC Bank Use
Immediate supervisor of PC Bank facilitators a consistent, visible presence in the PC Bank area	Immediate supervisor of PC Bank facilitators generally more removed from area
Facilitators generally positive about the PC Bank and their role, comfortable multitasking, and worked as a team to cover responsibilities	Facilitators more likely to dislike working in PC Bank, feel overwhelmed by duties, and/or feel like the process was not working

# Engaging Applicants within the PC Bank

- Effective facilitator strategies for supporting use of the PC Bank included:
  - Actively circulating throughout the PC Bank to monitor applicant progress
  - Quick responsiveness to applicants needing help
  - Blending light-touch assistance with more 1:1 help → i.e., tailored to applicant need
- Higher-use Centers were more able to assist Spanish-speaking and elderly applicants.
  - Presented PC Bank as default option to applicants
  - Facilitator language skills, patience, and availability were key
- Perceptions of applicant experience varied; more positive outlook at higher use Centers.
  - Staff at high-use Centers felt that applicants were generally comfortable with the PC Bank, while staff at low-use Centers believed that people came to their Centers specifically to avoid the PC Bank.

*NOTE:* Some facilitators at lower-use Centers demonstrated high-engagement strategies.

- PC Bank use influenced by both general workflow processes as well as individual staff behaviors.

# Engaging Applicants within the PC Bank (cont.)

High PC Bank Use	Low PC Bank Use
<p>“Go ahead and have a seat at any available computer, and we’ll get you started.”</p>	<p>“Do you know how to use a computer?”</p>
<p>Gentle encouragement for applicants unsure about the computer</p>	<p>Rarely encouraged a hesitant applicant to use a computer; usually offered paper</p>
<p>Computer presented as default for all applicants</p>	<p>Older and non-English speaking applicants given paper application</p>
<p>Facilitators strongly inclined to encourage applicants to finish the PC Bank application, even if applicant needs a lot of help</p>	<p>Facilitators more willing to give an applicant a paper application if there was any indication of computer difficulty during PC Bank use</p>
<p>“The key is listening to clients and providing encouragement. It’s important that clients feel someone is there.”</p>	<p>“There is no trick to engaging clients. You either know how to use a computer, or you don’t.”</p>

# Applicant Experiences in the PC Bank

- Applicants were generally able to navigate the on-line application, and once someone began a PC Bank application, they usually finished it.
  - Initial account creation (user name and password) was the most difficult step in the process.
- Ten of 15 applicants surveyed did not *choose* paper—rather, they had not been given the PC Bank option.
  - Two of these respondents would have been interested in using the PC Bank.
- Staff identified two types of barriers to PC Bank use:
  - *Prior application experience*: Some choose a paper application because of a prior poor experience with the *overall* technology-based application process (not with E-App itself)—i.e., difficulty completing the telephone interview or submitting documents after E-App submission.
  - *Applicant characteristics*: Elderly, disabled, and limited English proficient applicants are more hesitant to use a computer-based process.

# Conclusions

- Centers that present the computer as the default option had much higher rates of use.
- Inter-Center differences generally reflect the initial decision (paper vs. PC) rather than differences in drop-out rates among applicants who initiate an on-line application.
- Maintaining appropriate staffing levels in the PC Bank is challenging due to role conflict and other Center needs.
- Centers with higher PC Bank use had facilitators who embraced active, direct computer assistance as their key role and deployed strategies for assisting multiple applicants.
- Supervisory support makes a critical difference in facilitators' attitudes and engagement.
- Centers with high rates of PC Bank use applied strategies that successfully encouraged PC Bank use even among elderly and limited English speaking applicants.

# Lessons Learned: Supporting Self-Service Technologies in Public Benefit Settings

Redesigning workflows is a long and multi-faceted process. With emphasis now shifting from infrastructure development to business process transformation, study findings are informing executive staff decision-making; key takeaways include:

- Important to develop a common understanding of expectations around use of technology – “What does *good* look like?” —and explicitly address the tension between responding to individual needs and preferences while encouraging a self-directed approach.
- Some applicants will need in-person paper-based approach, but workflow processes can promote broad access to technology regardless of age, language, and other applicant characteristics.
- Higher levels of staff buy-in achieved by:
  - Ensuring proper staffing levels
  - Maximizing fit between staff attitudes/characteristics and their role
  - Supervisory engagement and support

These lessons will inform new initiatives to improve the performance of the low and medium use Centers.