



**Employment First  
Participant Feedback  
Report: Profile of  
Employment First  
Participants from Four  
Urban Locations  
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**By**



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## Background

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Colorado's Employment First (EF) program is interested in understanding the characteristics and experiences of individuals who participate(d) in the program and if program services are meeting their needs. To this end, staff members from the Center for Research Strategies (CRS) attended 10 EF events at four EF sites: Arapahoe, Adams, Denver and El Paso Counties in August-October 2013. At each location, CRS staff attended three types of EF events: Orientation, Competency training and Support Groups.

Over a three month period, we used a point-in-time data collection process to collect paper surveys from a total of 348 participants and completed 103 face-to-face interviews with participants who had been in the EF program at some time in the past.

### Overview of Participants

Participants responding to the paper survey information provide a profile of those who participate in EF programming. While participants are similar in many ways across the four study locations, some differences among these sites were also found, as summarized below:

- ✓ More than half of all EF participants (or 52%) are female, although in Denver this is true for only 35% of participants.
- ✓ EF participants are mostly between 41 and 50 years of age, although higher proportions of participants in Denver and El Paso are more likely to be younger, while in Adams they tend to be older.
- ✓ Nearly half of all EF participants are people of color (44%) with high proportions of Latinos in Adams (37%) and Denver (33%) Counties.

Participants report challenges that impact their employability.

- ✓ Half of EF participants (51%) have only a high school degree or have not completed high school.
- ✓ Most EF participants (84%) speak only English at home, although in Adams this is true for only 77% of participants.
- ✓ One in six (or 17%) of EF participants are living in a homeless shelter or in their cars.
- ✓ Sixteen percent of EF participants report having a history of incarceration. In Denver County 23% of participants have been incarcerated at some point in their lives.

As detailed further in this report, CRS used a scoring system developed by the US Department of Agriculture to measure food insecurity. Across all sites, two thirds of participants reported their food insecurity to be either high (28%) or in the medium range (37%). Food insecurity involves being worried that food will run out, that food won't last and that a participant can't

afford to eat balanced meals.<sup>1</sup> Results from a companion report *Employment First Participant Feedback – Phone Survey Results* show that clients not in contact with the EF program are twice as likely to have high food insecurity as current EF program participants (58% versus 28%).

## Participant Participation Patterns

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Among participants reached through the paper surveys, 36% had been in the EF program before. This ranged from 25% of participants in Adams County to 50% of participants in Denver County. The main reasons why participants leave the EF program include: 1) finding employment (52%), 2) being sanctioned, (28%) 3) incarceration, (8%), and 4) illness/disability (8%). Participants can experience more than one of these situations, in particular because those who find employment or are incarcerated can be sanctioned because they either have not been able to report their reasons for leaving the EF program because they have been in jail, or they may decide having employment no longer qualifies them for benefits.

Among those interviewed, 46% of participants returning to the program report that they had been employed, but their average hourly wage across the four sites was \$11.43 with many positions being temporary. Participants who were interviewed detailed three main reasons for being sanctioned: 1) failure to comply with program requirements, 2) not understanding the program requirements or why they were sanctioned, and 3) communication problems.

## Participant Feedback

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A majority of EF participants at all sites (or 80%) rated the program information they received as either definitely (43%) or somewhat helpful (37%).

- ✓ Two out of three (or 61%) report that EF has improved their job seeking skills and helped to identify possible job options.
- ✓ Services most highly valued include gas vouchers, activities to stay eligible, referral for medical/ dental care and job fairs for employers who are hiring.

While overall ratings for the EF programs are high, participants faced difficulties in proving an exempt status (48%) and problems getting to the EF office sites (26%).

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<sup>1</sup> Food-insecure households are those that are unable at times during the year to acquire adequate food because they lack sufficient money and other resources. Food security means access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life." <http://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2013-june/food-insecurity-in-us-households-rarely-persists-over-many-years.aspx#.UmmdF3CsiSo><http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us.aspx#.UmmaHHCsiSp>

## Overview: How the Information Was Collected

The Colorado Department of Human Services contracted with the Center for Research Strategies (CRS) in late summer of 2013 to conduct an evaluation of the statewide EF which is a program that provides employment services to Colorado residents in need of food assistance.

Because of the relatively short amount of time available to collect data and the need to contact as many EF participants as possible, CRS focused our data collection efforts on the largest EF program sites in Adams, Arapahoe, Denver and El Paso Counties. In addition to having varying participant bases, these locations also differ in their governing structures and include Workforce Centers and a nonprofit organization, all of which are provided contractual oversight by each respective County Department of Human Services.

At these sites, CRS compiled paper surveys from a total of 348 EF participants that detailed their experience participating in the program. They provided their perspectives on their satisfaction with the program, challenges they have faced and suggestions for improvement.

In addition, a subset of 103 participants at these same sites who had participated in the program before (i.e., had dropped out and then re-enrolled) were interviewed and asked in-depth questions about their experience utilizing the variety of EF services, their reasons for dropping out of the program and suggestions as to how the program might be improved.

Survey and interview respondents included those who were participating in the three types of EF classes (Orientation, Competency Class and Follow-up Groups also referred to as Support Groups) to capture their experiences throughout the different phases of the EF process. Table 1 provides an overview of the information collected at each study site by date and by type of event.

This point-in-time data collection provides insight into the participants who currently participate in EF programs as well as their perspectives on program benefits and possible program improvements.

**Table 1: Surveys and Interviews by County**

Location		Paper Surveys Collected	Interviews with Repeat Participants
<b>Adams County</b>			
Sept 16	Orientation	33 surveys	6 interviews
Sept 18	Competency	27 surveys	7 interviews
Aug 27	Support Group	52 surveys	7 interviews
<b>Total</b>		<b>112 surveys</b>	<b>20 interviews</b>
<b>Arapahoe County</b>			
Oct 1	Orientation	19 surveys	3 interviews
Sept 18	Competency/Support Group	48 surveys	19 interviews
<b>Total</b>		<b>67 surveys</b>	<b>22 interviews</b>
<b>Denver County</b>			
Aug 8	Orientation	49 surveys	14 interviews
Sept 24	Competency	9 surveys	5 interviews
Sept 12	Support Group	22 surveys	17 interviews
<b>Total</b>		<b>80 surveys</b>	<b>36 interviews</b>
<b>Location</b>		<b>Paper Surveys Collected</b>	<b>Interviews with Repeat Participants</b>
<b>El Paso County</b>			
Sept 26	Orientation/Competency	18 surveys	6 interviews
Aug 21	Support Group	71 surveys	19 interviews
<b>Total</b>		<b>89 surveys</b>	<b>25 interviews</b>
<b>10 Events</b>		<b>348 surveys</b>	<b>103 interviews</b>

## PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Employment First (EF) is Colorado's mandated job seeking program for those on food assistance who do not meet any exemptions for participation. It is part of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program's Employment & Training (SNAP E&T) program. While EF participants are similar in many ways across the four study locations, some differences among these sites were also found, as summarized below and detailed in Table 2.

- ✓ Most EF participants across all four county sites are female (or 52%), with the exception of Denver county where 65% of the respondents are male.
- ✓ Larger percentages of participants across all the counties are between the ages of 25 and 55 years old; however, those in Denver and El Paso are more likely to be younger while in Adams they tend to be older.
- ✓ Denver is the only county that has more participants of ethnic minority groups (Latino, African American) than Whites. Nearly half of all EF participants are people of color (44%) with high proportions of Latinos in Adams and Denver Counties.

Challenges to employability are likely to occur for several reasons:

- ✓ Half of EF participants (49%) have only a high school degree or have not completed high school.
- ✓ A large majority of the participants across all the counties speak English at home as their primary language, although in Adams County, almost 25% of participants speak both Spanish and English at home.
- ✓ Although 16 percent of participants across all counties are ex-offenders, this is true for 23% of participants in Denver County.
- ✓ Many respondents across all the counties do not have stable housing. On average 17% of participants report living in homeless shelters or their cars. In Denver County, this is true for 33% of participants.

**Table 2: Demographic Profile of EF Participants for Four Study Sites**

<b>N=348</b>	<b>Adams N=112</b>	<b>Arapahoe N=67</b>	<b>Denver N=80</b>	<b>El Paso N=89</b>	<b>Across Sites N=348</b>
<b>Gender</b>					
Female	63%	51%	35%	55%	52%
<b>Age</b>					
Under 25	3%	10%	15%	15%	10%
25-40	33%	37%	34%	30%	33%
41-55	40%	37%	42%	43%	41%
56-60	21%	8%	11%	11%	13%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>					
White	48%	46%	26%	53%	44%
Latino	37%	16%	33%	18%	27%
Black	4%	22%	33%	16%	17%
<b>Language at home</b>					
English	77%	91%	84%	92%	85%
<b>Education</b>					
<HS diploma	18%	15%	22%	12%	17%
HS diploma	35%	27%	29%	35%	32%
Some college, tech or trade school	27%	30%	15%	27%	25%
Associates degree	8%	6%	23%	12%	12%
Four year college degree	6%	6%	8%	8%	7%
Graduate school	3%	5%	1%	2%	3%
<b>Living Status</b>					
Staying in homeless shelter	3%	15%	26%	6%	9%
Living in car or other vehicle	5%	10%	7%	11%	8%
Staying with a friend or relative	34%	43%	39%	39%	38%
None of the above	55%	42%	32%	48%	48%
<b>Status</b>					
Ex-offender	10%	16%	23%	18%	16%

## Food Insecurity

To determine the extent to which current EF participants are experiencing food insecurity to any degree, participants were asked a series of question developed by the US Department of Agriculture to measure food insecurity. Across all sites, two thirds of participants reported their



food insecurity to be either high (28%) or in the medium range (37%),<sup>2</sup> meaning that even though they received food assistance, their need was still not sufficiently met. Comparing respondents who had dropped in and out of EF over time to those who were in the program for the first time, the groups were found to be very similar. (See Table 3.)

**Table 3: Participants' Ratings of their Degree of Food Insecurity by EF Site**

County	Low Insecurity	Medium Insecurity	High Insecurity
Adams	26%	44%	22%
Arapahoe	27%	39%	23%
Denver	13%	26%	32%
El Paso	21%	33%	39%
<b>Total Across Sites</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>28%</b>
<b>Repeat EF participants</b>	23%	39%	28%
<b>First Time EF participants</b>	25%	37%	30%

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<sup>2</sup> The US Department of Agriculture uses three questions to screen for food insecurity: 1) *I worried whether my food would run out before I got money to buy more.* 2) *The food I bought doesn't last and I didn't have money to get more* and 3) *I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.* Participants are asked for each question if this is never true, sometimes true or often true. Total scores are then used to define low food insecurity, medium food insecurity and high food insecurity.

## PARTICIPANT PARTICIPATION PATTERNS

Among participants reached through the paper surveys, 36 percent had been in the EF program before. This ranged from 25% of participants in Adams County to 50% of participants in Denver County. On average, participants report their prior program participation to have lasted for seven months.

**Table 4: Participant Patterns of Prior Participation**

County N=348	Yes	No	Not Sure
Adams	25%	70%	4%
Arapahoe	36%	49%	8%
Denver	50%	45%	4%
El Paso	37%	58%	2%
<b>Total Across Sites</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>4%</b>

The main reasons why participants leave the EF program include: 1) finding employment (52%), 2) being sanctioned (28%), 3) incarceration (8%), and 4) illness/disability (8%). Participants can experience more than one of these situations, in particular because those who find employment or are incarcerated can be sanctioned because they either do not feel reporting a job they have located is necessary or they are not able to provide any update due to their being incarcerated.

Among those interviewed, 46% of participants returning to the program report that they had been employed, but their average hourly wage across the four sites was \$11.43 with many positions being temporary.

Participants who were interviewed detailed three main reasons for being sanctioned: 1) failure to comply with program requirements, 2) not understanding the program requirements or why they were sanctioned, and 3) communication problems.

When compared to participants participating in the EF program for the first time, those with prior EF experience share the following characteristics:

- ✓ Nearly twice as many prior participants (or 23%) are African-American compared with 13% of first-time participants.
- ✓ Four times as many prior participants (or 17%) report living in a homeless shelter as contrasted with only 4% of first-time participants.
- ✓ Twice as many prior participants (or 24%) have a history of incarceration compared to 11% of first-time participants.

## PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK: Do the EF Participants View Program Information as Helpful?

A majority of EF participants at all sites (or 80%) rated the program information they received as either definitely (43%) or somewhat helpful (37%). Respondents reported satisfaction with their current participation in EF and the extent to which they used and thought the myriad of services offered by the program helped them gain job-seeking skills and obtain employment. Across all sites, two thirds of participants report that they will definitely use the information they learned to get a job.

**Table 5: Participant Rating of the Helpfulness of the Information**

N=247	Definitely Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Neutral	Somewhat Unhelpful	Not At All Helpful
Adams	38%	49%	3%	.9%	5%
Arapahoe	42%	21%	10%	0%	3%
Denver	56%	33%	2%	0%	3%
El Paso	38%	39%	3%	0%	5%

**Table 6: Participant Rating of the Usefulness of Information Learned to Find a Job?**

N=124	Adams	Arapahoe	Denver	El Paso	Across Sites
I definitely will use it	59%	56%	74%	72%	64%
I may use it	41%	19%	13%	28%	23%
I definitely will not use it	0%	4%	05	3%	2%

## Satisfaction

Two-thirds of participants across all counties believed that they were warmly greeted and welcomed by EF staff. The overall percent who strongly agreed or agreed that they had been welcomed was 67%.

**Table 7: Participant Perceptions of Being Greeted and Welcomed to Employment First**

N=348	Adams	Arapahoe	Denver	El Paso	Across Sites
Strongly Agree	23%	42%	47%	43%	37%
Somewhat Agree	37%	25%	28%	27%	30%
Neutral	32%	21%	18%	26%	25%
Somewhat Disagree	3%	3%	6%	2%	4%
Strongly Disagree	4%	5%	0%	2%	2%

Orientation class respondents were asked to characterize the staff person who conducted the orientation and the vast majority (80%) reported that the staff person was friendly. Other

characteristics of the instructor reported by respondents included being patient, sincere and enthusiastic.

Competency and support group respondents were asked about their experience in the classes they attended. An average of 87% reported that there was sufficient time to cover the material in the day’s class, while 89% indicated they would remember the information shared that day and 86% stated that they felt comfortable asking questions and sharing in class. Similarly, most (or 81%) thought the size of the group that day was just right.

**Table 8: Participant Satisfaction with Components of Today’s Class**

<b>N=124</b>	<b>Adams</b>	<b>Arapahoe</b>	<b>Denver</b>	<b>El Paso</b>	<b>Across Sites</b>
<b>Was there enough time to cover everything in today’s class?</b>	93%	75%	94%	100%	87%
<b>Do you think you will remember the information that was shared today?</b>	89%	81%	97%	94%	89%
<b>Did you feel you could ask questions and share in today’s class?</b>	85%	81%	87%	100%	86%
<b>Was the size of your group today just right, too big, too small?</b> Reported just right	74%	71%	90%	100%	81%

## **Employment First Services**

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Orientation class respondents were asked which of a long list of services offered by EF they thought could help them get a job. The table below lists the services in order of greatest to least percentage of respondents across county sites who perceived the services as being helpful.

Services most highly valued across the study sites were: providing gas vouchers, offering activities to stay eligible for food assistance, providing referrals for medical and dental care, and offering job fairs. Participants differed somewhat across the sites in terms of how services were ranked.

- ✓ Participants in Denver County were more likely to value bus passes, bus tickets and referrals for housing.
- ✓ Participants in Adams County highly rated classes on basic computer skills, volunteer placements to enhance job skills and classes for applying for jobs online.

**Table 9: Perceived Helpfulness of EF Services by EF Participants**

Services N=151	Adams	Arapahoe	Denver	Across Sites
Provide gas vouchers	85%	53%	40%	67%
Offer activities to stay eligible for food assistance	72%	42%	67%	67%
Provide referrals for medical/dental care	73%	47%	62%	66%
Offer job fair with employers who are hiring	66%	42%	72%	65%
Provide classes on how to develop a resume	52%	53%	58%	55%
Provide classes on how to apply for jobs online	64%	21%	52%	50%
Provide referrals for assistance with housing	54%	21%	64%	53%
Provide classes on how to create a job search plan	55%	26%	56%	50%
Arrange volunteer placement to enhance job skills	60%	11%	47%	50%
Provide access to a computer to apply for jobs	53%	16%	57%	49%
Provide bus passes	33%	26%	84%	48%
Provide referrals for assistance with clothing	52%	16%	52%	47%
Provide classes on basic computer skills	61%	11%	46%	44%
Provide referrals for assistance with utilities	59%	26%	24%	44%
Provide interview clothing	42%	16%	53%	42%
Provide vouchers for showers, hair cuts	46%	21%	41%	41%
Provide classes on job interviewing	46%	22%	43%	40%
Provide bus tickets	28%	21%	72%	40%
Provide classes on how to create a master job application	43%	21%	45%	39%
Provide referrals for assistance with legal issues	39%	5%	32%	32%
Provide referrals for assistance with child care	37%	11%	27%	30%
Provide referrals for assistance with getting a GED	33%	16%	30%	30%

❖ This question was not asked at the El Paso site.

All respondents across the three types of classes were asked the extent to which they thought the EF program could or has helped them with the program’s overall objectives of developing job seeking skills and becoming employed. Two-thirds of all participants valued the assistance they received in improving their job seeking skills (62%) and identifying possible employment options (61%). Close to half of all participants report benefitting from creating a job search plan (49%). Close to half of the respondents believe that EF programs will help them become employed (42%) as well as to get education to become more employable (40%).

**Table 10: Overall Assessment of Impact of EF Programs on Job Seeking**

N=348	Strongly Agree & Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree and Disagree
Improve job seeking skills	62%	16%	10%
Identify possible employment options	61%	18%	8%
Create a job search plan	49%	20%	9%
Become Employed	42%	24%	17%
Get education so that can get a job	40%	30%	15%

## PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK: Participant Suggestions About the EF Program

While overall ratings for the EF programs are high, participants identified some areas where program services could be improved. Close to half of all participants (48%) report difficulty in proving exemption status from the EF program. A quarter of all participants (or 26%) find it difficult to get to the EF locations. Other challenges include difficulty contacting EF staff (17%) and problems with scheduled times for EF meetings or activities (18%).

**Table 11: Participant Suggestions Regarding EF Areas for Improvement**

N= 174	Adams	Arapahoe	Denver	El Paso	Across Sites
Difficulty getting to the EF office	25%	27%	19%	35%	26%
Difficulty contacting EF staff	14%	15%	26%	22%	17%
Difficulty proving exemption status	12%	12%	52%	44%	48%
Trouble filling out EF forms	9%	3%	7%	11%	6%
Problems with the scheduled times of EF meetings/activities	20%	19%	16%	6%	18%

### Transportation

Across the four study sites, participants vary in the types of transportation they use. While 80% of Adams County participants drive their own cars to the EF offices, this is true for only 18% of Denver County participants who are more likely to use bus transportation. Travel time to the EF locations also vary. While most participants can arrive at the EF offices in Adams and El Paso Counties within 30 minutes, the average travel time to the Arapahoe County office is 35 minutes while for Denver County it is 37 minutes. The longer travel time for Denver County is probably due to the fact that more participants are using bus transportation rather than driving.

**Table 12: Modes of Transportation to EF Offices**

N=348	Adams	Arapahoe	Denver	El Paso
Drove my own car	80%	39%	18%	62%
Bus	5%	28%	49%	17%
Got a ride	13%	19%	11%	14%
Walked	0%	8%	11%	5%
Rode a bike	0%	3%	2%	2%
Other: also bike or bus	.9% (1 person)	0%	1% (1 person)	0%

## Understanding EF Program Information

Participants who fail to understand the EF program requirements risk receiving sanctions which progressively reduce their food assistance as increasing numbers of sanctions are received. The EF program provides information and support to participants through a series of required meetings starting with an initial Orientation, followed by Competency training and Support Group sessions. To understand the extent to which participants understand the program requirements, we asked participants whether they had understood the information they had received.

Among the participants who attended the EF orientations at Adams, Arapahoe and Denver Counties, most (66%) understood all of the information they received, but a third (or 34%) indicated that they understood only some of it. The rate of understanding was higher among participants who attended the Competency and Support Group sessions with 76% reporting full understanding and 19% partial understanding. As shown in Tables 13 and 14 below, patterns of understanding varied by site.

**Table 13: Understanding of Program Benefits and Requirements after an Orientation**

N=101	Definitely Understand	Understand Some	Did Not Understand
Adams	52%	38%	7%
Arapahoe	44%	33%	0%
Denver	74%	22%	4%

**Table 14: Understanding of Program Benefits and Requirements after Competency and/or Support Group Sessions**

N=124	Understood All	Understood Some	Did Not Understand Any
Adams	67%	33%	0%
Arapahoe	58%	25%	0%
Denver	84%	10%	0%
El Paso	94%	6%	0%

Since roughly a quarter of all participants report having left the EF program in the past because of sanctions, participants were asked during interviews why the sanctions had occurred. In some cases, participants reported a personal failure to comply with program recommendations but in roughly half the reported incidents, participants indicated that they had been confused about program requirements or had experienced communication problems in getting in touch with their EF program contacts. Areas of improvement participants suggested include: providing job seeking assistance for ex-felons, providing more information on specific jobs available for hire and improving communication with staff. The subset of participants who were interviewed recount their stories and provide detailed suggestions for improvement which are contained in the four individual county reports accompanying this overall feedback report.

## CONCLUSION

The point-in-time surveys and interviews conducted with first time and repeat EF participants provide a representative profile of individuals who participate in the program as well as rich insight into participant satisfaction with the program and areas they suggest for improvement. Many of the individuals who participated in this study are female between 41 and 50 years of age and not highly educated. One in six participants are homeless and close to that number report a history of incarceration. Food security is a concern for many participants, particularly among those who are first-time participants in the program.

Among individuals who had participated in EF repeatedly over time, the primary reasons they provide for why they had stopped participating include finding employment, being sanctioned, incarceration or because of illness or disability. The availability of permanent jobs that provide a living wage do not readily exist for individuals with the skill set typical of the EF population. Yet, even those returning to the program report receiving support and encouragement to make seeking employment meaningful.

Individuals who receive multiple sanctions over time report inconsistent participation in EF. Some fail to comply with program requirements while others report not understanding program requirements or having difficulty communicating with EF staff to inform them of their inability to attend program classes or activities.

Despite these challenges, the majority of the participants surveyed rate the program highly. They view the information they received as helpful with two out of three reporting that EF has improved their job seeking skills and helped identify possible job options. While overall ratings are high, participants also report facing difficulties related to confirming an exempt status, getting to the E F offices, or contacting staff. They suggest some areas of improvement, including: providing job seeking assistance specifically tailored to ex-felons, providing more information on specific jobs and assistance to get hired, and improving communication with staff.

Overall, the EF program is perceived by participants as a needed and helpful service. They do experience some difficulties with the program and would like to see aspects of it improved, but the program has been successful in providing the services and support that it is intended to provide to those who need it.