

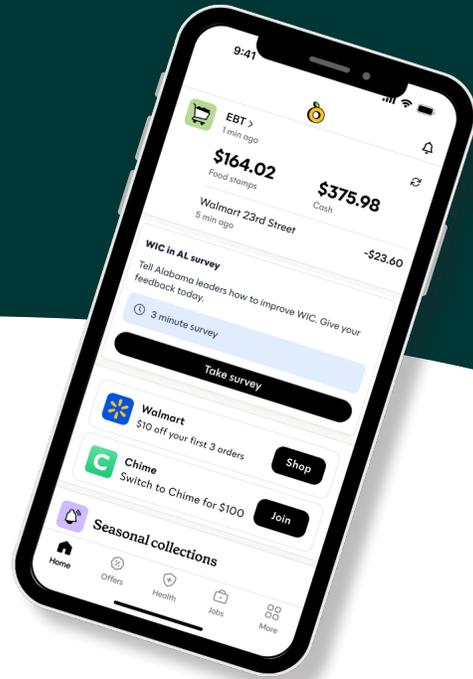


Southern Voices:

Reflections on Five Years of Community-Centered Data Projects

By Sarah Beth Gehl
October 2025





Key Learnings

Since 2020, SEAP has performed seven surveys and two initial pilot surveys on the Propel app to bring the voices of more than 10,000 low-income Southerners into policy conversations. The Propel app is a financial management tool that millions of households use to manage their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

This report reviews those survey efforts and provides key learnings and action items for building a community-driven and equitable approach to policy change and implementation, including:

Create a data partner ecosystem (tech platform, community partner, local government, researcher)

Surface new ideas and value the qualitative results gained through open-ended questions

Use data for external purposes (policy advocacy) and internal purposes (workplans)

Let communities identify what's not working...but also what's working

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The Backstory

Prior to SEAP's founding, several future SEAP staff worked together on a 2018 gubernatorial campaign in Georgia. They soon realized that while they were in Atlanta creating policy platforms to improve economic mobility, thousands of people were having valuable conversations with campaign canvassers at their front doors.

People shared what they loved about their communities, what their household struggles were, and what issues they hoped the next governor would tackle. Thanks to the community members' feedback, new questions emerged: how could the policy team be guided by these conversations and stories? Was there a technology solution that could gather place-based insights and feed them into policy plans rapidly and meaningfully? That experience shaped SEAP and made community voice a pillar of the organization. Seeking an innovative approach to bringing diverse voices into policy conversations became a cornerstone of SEAP's approach.

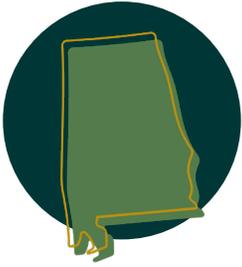
In 2019, SEAP staff sent a cold email to a tech company called Propel, which provides an app for SNAP households. They asked whether SEAP could piggyback on the Propel platform to gain policy insights from low-income households—the same households most likely to lack a seat at the policy table.

Propel took a chance on SEAP, and we have since connected with government benefits-eligible populations across the region around a number of policy issues.

This learnings report provides an overview of the surveys and lessons from those engagements. We believe that community engagement should be the new normal for policymakers, particularly now that state and local governments must grapple with a restricted funding environment in the wake of the One Big Beautiful Bill's passage. However, governments continue to struggle to engage with low-income communities. SEAP's experience offers an illustration of how community engagement and public benefits technology can combine to gather rapid and rich insights from communities most impacted by policy change.



Overview of Surveys



Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) in Alabama

Policy Question: How can WIC work better for mothers and families in both the application process and the service delivery?

Local Partner: Feeding Alabama

Timeframe: late 2024—early 2025

Respondents: 429

Takeaway:

The survey results highlighted just how much WIC means to Alabama’s mothers and families. More so than changes to the program, the survey demonstrated that WIC is a program worth defending and making even more effective for the families.

Key Insights:

- 97% of respondents said they would recommend WIC to others.
- 88% of respondents said it was somewhat easy or very easy to apply for WIC.
- 88% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of nutrition education services.
- 86% of respondents reported positive changes for their families, such as better access to food, healthier food choices, improved healthcare access, and enhanced breastfeeding support.
- Mothers share ways WIC can improve: increasing the quantity of eligible items and the range of options for special diets such as gluten free options, improving the in-store shopping experience by clearly marking eligible items, extending program eligibility beyond age 5.
- Information on WIC comes primarily from doctors and friends/family.

Outcome:

In partnership with the WIC government agency, Feeding Alabama launched a WIC Working Group with other nonprofit partners to share data, enhance coordination, and increase participation in the program.



Juvenile Justice Fines & Fees in Georgia

Policy Question: How are juvenile fines and fees affecting families in Georgia?

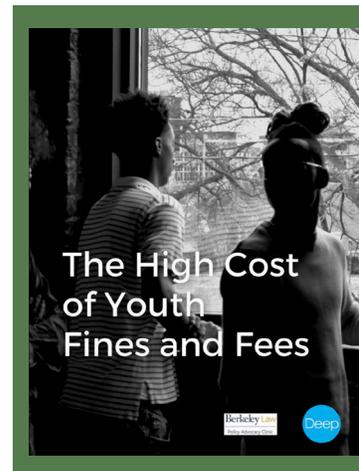
Local Partner: Deep Center

Timeframe: Fall 2022

Key Insights: Survey garnered information on the impact of fines and fees, but mainly served as a mechanism for connecting Deep Center with families for in-depth interviews to capture impacts beyond the survey.

Outcome: Deep Center used the results to educate lawmakers on fines and fees as well as data needs, accountability across systems, and policy solutions.

[Learn more here.](#)





Summer EBT in Mississippi

Policy Questions: How are current summer feeding programs working for families? What would additional SNAP benefits for children (Summer EBT) mean for families?

Local Partners: Summer EBT Coalition of 13 organizations

Timeframe: October 2024

Respondents: 1,572

Key Insights:

- 87% of respondents said it is difficult to provide enough food for their children over the summer.
- 23% of respondents were able to access a summer feeding site.
- 52% of those respondents who accessed summer feeding sites said that the sites helped but did not meet their household's food needs entirely.

Outcome: Advocates coordinated a day at the capitol and used the 1,500 responses to educate lawmakers on the gaps in food assistance for families during summer months.

We asked: What would having an extra \$120 per child for food over the summer do for your family?

"It would provide a significant amount of help for us because I had to come out of pocket every month to purchase food with cash due to us running out of food stamps."

"No more pushing bills back to buy food."

"I will be able to purchase essential items such as canned goods and fresh fruits, ensuring we no longer face food shortages."

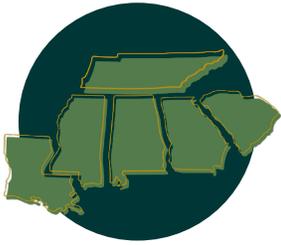
"Help provide more meals so they can stay fuller longer and able to eat better portions."

Takeaway:

Community-level data, including qualitative responses, is a powerful way to connect policymakers to the people most impacted by their work.



Aisha Nyandoro, CEO of Springboard to Opportunities, speaks at a press conference held on the coalition's advocacy day at the state capitol.



Federal Recovery Funds in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee

Policy Question: How would families like federal funds spent in their communities?

Local Partners: Varied by state, for example Mississippi NAACP.

Timeframe: 2021-2024

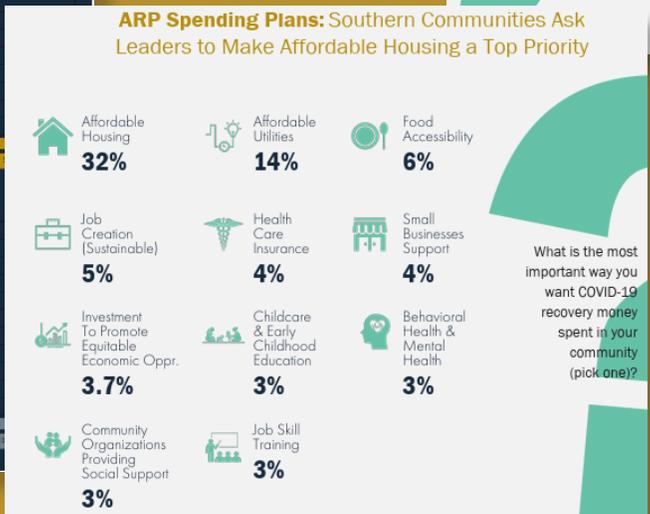
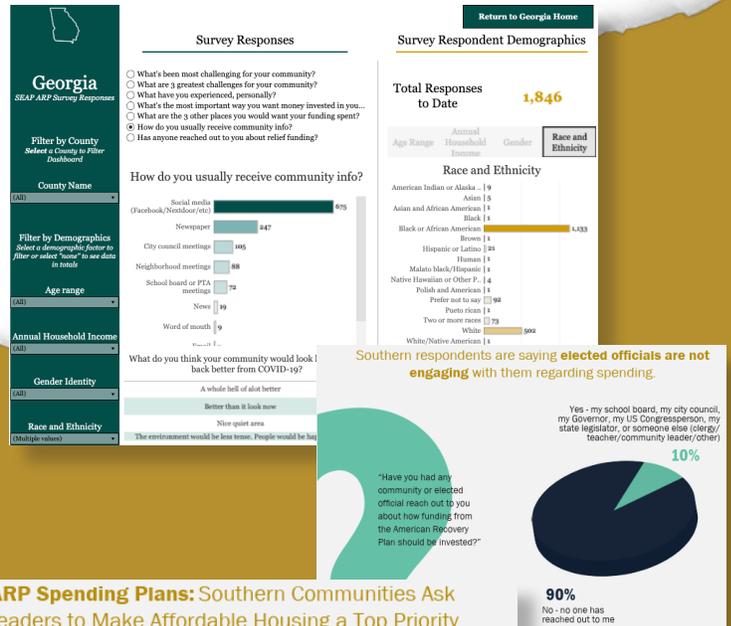
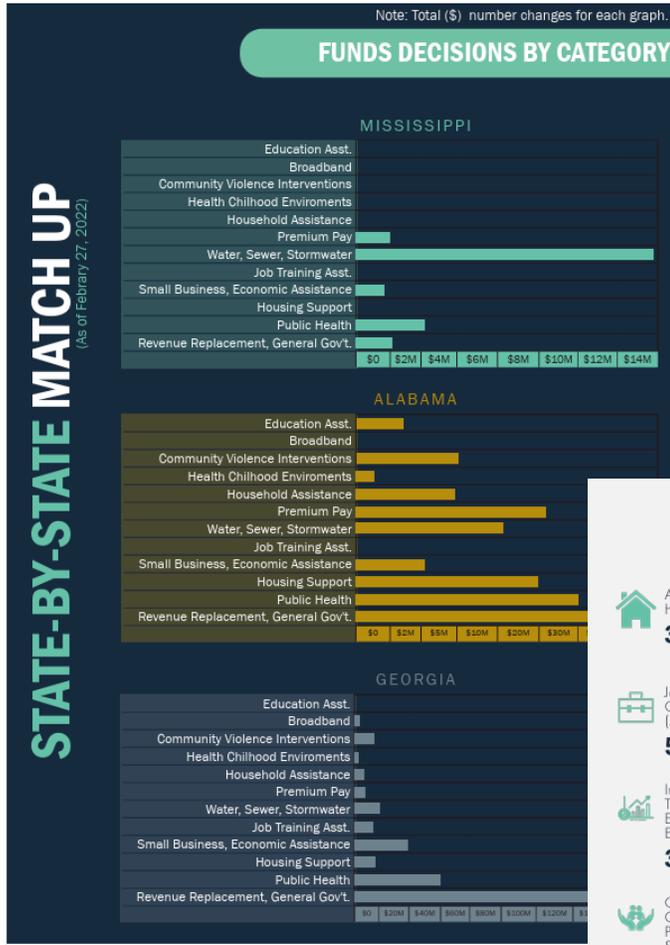
Respondents: over 3500

Key Insights:

- Housing as the number one priority for federal recovery funds across states.
- Food security moved up the list to second priority as pandemic food assistance expired.

Outcome: SEAP shared results with the US Treasury and pushed for additional resources on how recovery funds could be used for housing initiatives. SEAP prioritized examples of recovery funds being used for housing initiatives when educating local governments and community based organizations on eligible uses, while local partners also used the results to educate elected officials. SEAP elevated housing and food security within our workplan—creating a regional network of housing advocates and supporting food assistance campaigns in multiple states.

[Learn more here.](#)





COVID-19 Vaccines in Southwest Georgia

Policy Question: What barriers are preventing low-income, rural Georgians from accessing vaccines?

Local Partner: Fair Count

Timeframe: March 2021

Respondents: 225

Key Insights: The main narrative at the time was vaccine hesitancy. SEAP's survey showed a desire for vaccines, but challenges to access and information:

- 1 in 3 respondents didn't know if they were eligible yet.
- 1 in 4 respondents didn't know where vaccine sites were located.
- Respondents gave recommendations like mailers with vaccine information and mobile health clinics to bring vaccines to the community.

Outcome: SEAP designed a dashboard that identified vaccine sites and overlaid data from the American Community Survey on the key constraints identified through the Propel survey. Nonprofit partners designed their outreach plans and vaccine clinics using the data and contacted survey respondents who requested outreach.

Learn more [here](#) and [here](#).

Takeaway:

The most effective workplans and outreach strategies are built using data gathered from, not just about, the communities we seek to serve.

#CountMeIn

A FAIR COUNT AND SEAP INITIATIVE

To work FOR the community, we must hear FROM the community.

What are the challenges to getting a Covid-19 vaccine?

From March 8-11, SEAP and Fair Count surveyed Southwest Georgia residents through the FreshEBT app in partnership with the tech company Propel.

Early vaccine-distribution data received responses from more than 225 Southwest Georgia residents who are low-income and food-insecure.

59%

of those respondents are either already vaccinated or want the vaccine when eligible.

Rather than hesitancy, it appears that lack of access and outreach are two main forces responsible for slower vaccine distribution to vulnerable communities. Of the respondents looking for a vaccine:

THE DRIVING NUMBERS...

1 in 3 didn't know if they were eligible yet

1 in 4 didn't know where vaccine sites are located

1 in 10 reported transportation challenges to getting to a vaccine site

1 in 6 reported not knowing how to register for an appointment or having trouble due to inconvenient times of vaccination sites

Here's what participants recommended for improving vaccine access:

- Offer home visits. -Lori in Albany
- Put a site in a poverty area. -Deerica in Albany
- Make the list of people who are eligible to get the Covid-19 vaccine more visible and easier to find on their website. -Walter in Thomasville
- Send a letter with vaccination locations and when the age group is accepted. -Jenn in Dooley County
- Come thru the community with a bus and give every household a shot. -Pamela in Dawson

FAIR COUNT SOUTHERN ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT PROJECT

Visit CountMeInGA.org

Top and Bottom Zip Codes	Poverty Rate
31821 Stewart Cou..	88.0
31062 Baldwin Cou..	79.3
30812 Richmond County, Geo..	63.5
30423 Evans Count..	59.9
30303 Fulton Count..	57.1
31407 Chatham Co..	1.5
30346 DeKalb Cou..	1.2
30284 Spalding County, Geo..	1.0
30218 Meriwether ..	0.8
31807 Harris Count..	0.2

Southern Economic Advancement Project

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Medicaid Unwinding in Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and North Carolina

Issue: As pandemic protections ended, each state began a Medicaid unwinding process to disenroll members that no longer qualified for benefits. SEAP supported outreach efforts in Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and North Carolina by working to fill the gaps identified by local advocates. In addition to community-led outreach, SEAP ran ads on Propel’s app to connect households across the region to navigators and survey households on whether those navigators met their needs.

Local Partners: Community-based organizations across the four states

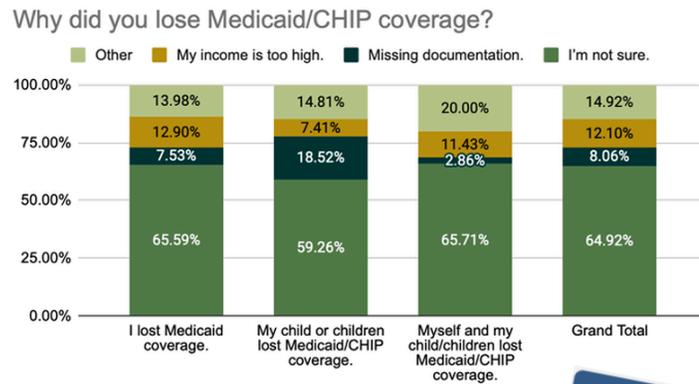
Timeframe: March–May 2024

Respondents: 497

Key Insights:

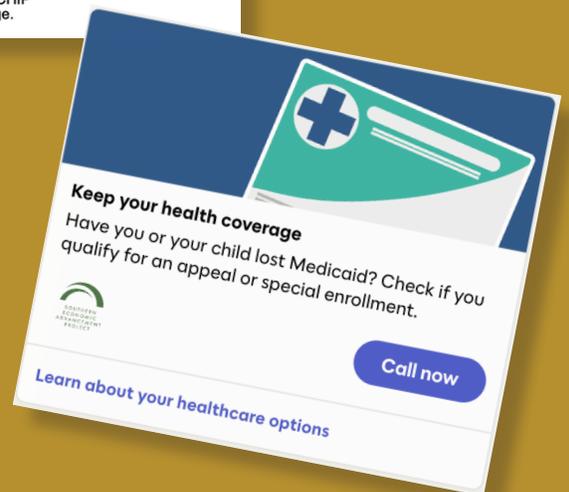
- 65% of those who had lost Medicaid coverage do not know why they lost coverage.
- Missing documentation was a more prevalent issue among children losing health coverage than adults.
- 37% of respondents were able to speak with a representative. For the nearly two-thirds of respondents who did not reach a representative, the leading reason was “the call never connected” followed by long call wait times and “other.”
- Respondents were slightly more likely to reach a representative and receive the help they needed on the federal line than a state call line in FL and NC.

Outcome: The survey provided real-time feedback on call lines and how to best connect families with the navigation assistance needed.



Takeaway:

Large community data gathering efforts, such as those in a public health policy context, are most useful in a data ecosystem where siloes are removed and organizations across multiple sectors can work from the same information and further refine and improve policy implementation.





Pandemic Benefits in the South

Policy Questions: What pandemic benefits are most useful? What benefits are the hardest to access? What should policymakers know during Covid?

Local Partners: 12 organizations across 5 states

Timeframe: August–September 2020

Respondents: 2,308

Key Insights:

- Food insecurity and job loss were top challenges in the pandemic.
- Government aid (particularly extra SNAP benefits) made a real difference for many...but much of it expired. Help with food, housing, and utilities were still needed.
- White respondents (64%) were more likely than Black respondents (54%) to say government aid helped, while Black respondents (59%) were more likely to report having received help from family and friends than white respondents (50%).
- Mississippi was an outlier in SNAP. Respondents in other states found SNAP the easiest benefit to access, while those in Mississippi did not.
- Open-ended survey results were an early warning on inflation for SEAP, as respondents discussed grocery prices.

Learn more here.

We asked: What do you want policymakers to know?

“We need help financially so we don’t have to worry about our light and water getting cut off and getting thrown out of our homes with nowhere to go.”

“Keep the extra food stamps coming. I am diabetic and it does help.”

“Families with children are at a complete loss because at least one parent must be home to care for the kids but that is a huge hit in income.”

“I lost two of my three jobs and I am struggling.”

“People are struggling out here. Food has gotten so expensive.”

SEAP performed additional surveys in early pilots of this approach in Alabama and Georgia.

Learnings

Work with existing, trusted platforms for larger reach and rapid responses. SEAP cannot gather 1,500 responses from low-income households in Mississippi within a few weeks timeframe on its own; however, with the Propel app, we accomplished that. The success of these surveys has relied on our use of an existing platform trusted by a typically hard-to-reach population.

Work with a local partner for implementation. Some of our early surveys did not involve a local partner or only incorporated the partner on the back-end of distributing the results. The impact of the surveys increased significantly when we worked with a grassroots partner from the beginning to design survey questions and to take the lead on implementing the findings.



Iterate surveys based on partner feedback. For the federal recovery funds surveys, SEAP piloted the survey in one state and refined the survey based on partner requests, particularly for demographic questions.

Include open-ended questions to surface challenges but also dreams. Qualitative data can be more challenging to analyze (although AI is easing some of that). However, the open-ended questions consistently provided policy insights that we did not know to ask in multiple choice questions. For example, inflation impacts showed up very early in our surveys on pandemic relief through the open-ended questions on challenges. In addition to open-ended questions on challenges, we found real value in including an open-ended asset-focused question, such as what would your community look like if it built back better? Open-ended questions allow often unheard voices to rise to the top.

Find external and internal uses for results. The primary purpose of these surveys was to bring low-income families' voices into policy conversations around food programs, federal funds, criminal justice, and others. However, they also serve as a North Star for internal work-planning – How can our work best align with the self-reported priorities of low-income communities in the South?

Use surveys for program improvements and defense. When we design these surveys, we typically think first and foremost about program improvement. We ask questions that surface challenges, barriers, and areas for change. However, across multiple surveys, respondents have praised public programs, underscoring the importance of preserving them.

Use multiple mediums to tell the story written by community data. We have created dashboards, reports, one-pagers, infographics, slide decks, webpages, and press releases. It is helpful to design products for multiple audiences from a single survey, but often the local partner's ability to sit down with a memo and explain the results to officials or agency heads is the most impactful use of the survey results.

Additional Resources

Tech Tools for Public Benefits

Propel (Benefits management tool for SNAP households)

Beam (Platforms for public benefits administration)

Benefit Kitchen (FindMyBenefits eligibility screener)

Democracy Labs (Testing platform for canvassers to sign people up for public benefits)

Lulo (Benefits management for WIC households)

mRelief (Benefits screener for SNAP)

Fortuna (Benefits screener for Medicaid)

Other models: 2-1-1 call centers, Ready.gov, DisasterAssistance.gov, FindHelp.org

Tech Tools for Community Engagement

Granicus (Engagement HQ)

Zensity

Polco

Go Vocal (Citizen Lab)

Social Pinpoint



What would happen if public benefits tech tools and community engagement tools worked together?

Additional Community Engagement Resources from SEAP

Local Government Community Engagement Guide

Guide to Nonprofit Civic Engagement in Post-Pandemic South

Community Voices in Federal Funds

Equity & Voice in Local Government Budgeting

Participatory Climate Action Planning in the South

Community Engagement Isn't Just a Democratic Ideal. It is a Fiscal Imperative.

Looking to the Future of Community Data: A Note on AI

Organizations, governments, and funders are discussing and testing how AI can improve public benefit administration, community engagement, and policy implementation. These are exciting frontiers that have the potential to solve many of the challenges we surface in our surveys.

However, we offer a word of caution from our vantage point at the intersection of technology and community: Investments and innovations in technology need to be coupled with investments and innovations in policy.

No matter how good the AI-powered technology for Medicaid applications becomes, if the policy puts in additional barriers like work requirements and documentation requirements, then people will unnecessarily lose their health insurance. If we don't address the biases inherent in the materials used to train AI models, we only accelerate our capacity to discriminate. If we don't grapple with the environmental impact of big data centers, we streamline programs and processes at the expense of environmental justice.

Whatever changes new technology brings to policy spaces we work in, SEAP will adapt by first asking communities in the South, "what do you need?" and then listening to the answers.