



*REPORT TO
THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE
ON AGING
UNITED STATES SENATE*

Effectiveness Of Project FIND--
Helping The Elderly Obtain
Food Assistance And Other Services

B-164031(3)

*BY THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL
OF THE UNITED STATES*

~~710641~~

094251

APRIL 5, 1974



COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

B-164031(3)

The Honorable Frank Church
Chairman, Special Committee on Aging
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In accordance with your request dated March 26, 1973, this is our report on our review of the effectiveness of Project FIND in helping elderly persons obtain food assistance and other services.

We met with representatives of the groups and agencies that played major roles in Project FIND and discussed our findings with them. Their comments were considered in preparing this report.

We do not plan to distribute this report further unless you agree or publicly announce its contents.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James B. Stacks".

Comptroller General
of the United States

100-100000
92
20
1800
927
62

C o n t e n t s

	<u>Page</u>
DIGEST	1
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	5
Need for food assistance	5
Organization and development of Project FIND	6
Scope of review	8
2 EFFECTIVENESS IN OBTAINING FOOD ASSISTANCE	9
Limited impact on elderly needing food assistance	9
Impact at locations in the review	12
3 EFFECTIVENESS IN OBTAINING OTHER SERVICES	14
Limited identification of other needs	14
Referrals to service agencies and groups for help	15
4 PROJECT FIND PROBLEMS	17
Insufficient time for volunteers to provide adequate assistance	17
Project timing	18
Other problems affecting the project	19
5 CONCLUSIONS	25
6 COMMENTS OF PARTICIPATING AGENCIES AND ORGANIZATIONS	27
Department of Agriculture	28
Office of Economic Opportunity	29
Red Cross	29
Social Security Administration	30
APPENDIX	
I Group and agency participation in Project FIND	33
II Summary of the amounts and sources of Federal funds spent for Project FIND	36

APPENDIX

Page

III	Letter dated March 26, 1973, from the Chairman, Senate Special Committee on Aging, to the Comptroller General	37
-----	---	----

ABBREVIATIONS

GAO	General Accounting Office
HEW	Department of Health, Education, and Welfare
OEO	Office of Economic Opportunity
SSA	Social Security Administration

COMPTROLLER GENERAL'S
REPORT TO THE SPECIAL
COMMITTEE ON AGING
UNITED STATES SENATE

EFFECTIVENESS OF PROJECT FIND--
HELPING THE ELDERLY OBTAIN
FOOD ASSISTANCE AND OTHER SERVICES
B-164031(3)

D I G E S T

WHY THE REVIEW WAS MADE

The Chairman, Senate Special Committee on Aging, requested GAO to report on Project FIND, a campaign to contact and enroll eligible elderly citizens in food stamp and commodity distribution programs.

GAO did not request formal comments on this report from any agencies or groups involved but did discuss its findings with officials of organizations which carried out the project.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Project FIND began in August 1972 with a mailing of brochures to selected elderly persons. The brochures described benefits and eligibility criteria for food assistance programs.

If they thought they were eligible for assistance, the elderly were to contact local food assistance offices or return an enclosed card if they needed more information.

The American National Red Cross provided volunteers to contact and assist persons who returned cards.

Direct Federal cost of the project was about \$2 million. Originally, the Red Cross signed a \$4.4 million contract with the Office of Economic Opportunity to assist in carrying out the project. The contract

later was reduced by \$1.5 million when the number of cards returned was substantially less than anticipated.

Of the remaining \$2.9 million, only \$1.4 million was obligated during the project. The Red Cross is using the remainder to fund another outreach campaign, the Supplemental Security Income Alert. (See p. 7.)

Effectiveness in obtaining food assistance for the elderly-- the principal objective

The target population for the project was about 3 million persons, 60 years of age or older, living on incomes below the national poverty line and eligible for, but not receiving, Federal food assistance. In total, about 1.4 million cards were returned by persons indicating they needed more information.

The Department of Agriculture estimated that 190,000 elderly (about 6.3 percent of the target population) were enrolled in Federal food assistance programs as a result of the project. However, this estimate might be overstated since it includes elderly persons enrolled in food assistance programs as a result of efforts other than Project FIND. (See pp. 10 to 12.)

For the locations included in GAO's review--Cuyahoga County, Ohio; Los Angeles County, California;

Pinellas County, Florida; King and Snohomish Counties in Washington; and the District of Columbia--the number of elderly, estimated to have been enrolled in the food stamp and commodity distribution programs as a result of the project, represented a small portion of the estimated elderly poor in these areas. (See pp. 12 and 13.)

Effectiveness in obtaining other services for the elderly-- a secondary objective

GAO found that volunteers had identified only a small number of elderly who needed other services, such as transportation, medical services, employment, homemaker services, home-delivered meals, welfare services, and clothing.

Project volunteers contacted over 67,000 persons in response to cards the elderly returned, but they reported only about 830 persons needed services other than food assistance.

When volunteers identified elderly persons who needed other services, they referred the cases to local agencies which could provide assistance but generally did not follow up on referrals to insure that services were provided.

Federal agencies administering programs for the elderly were not advised of gaps in existing programs where needed services were not available.

Problems encountered during Project FIND

Originally, the project was to be completed within the 3 months from

August 15 to November 15, 1972. Although the completion date was extended to April 30, 1973, Red Cross volunteers contacted the majority of elderly persons between August and December 1972.

Because of the limited time, they reached most persons by mail or telephone rather than through home visits. As a result, many elderly persons who could have benefited from home visits might not have received needed help. (See pp. 14, 15, 17, and 18.)

The project was scheduled at a time when many community volunteers were involved in local fund raising and election campaigns.

Moreover, in the period selected for the project, an increase in social security benefits became effective making many elderly ineligible for Federal food assistance. (See pp. 18 and 19.)

Other factors affecting the success of the project included incorrect eligibility information in brochures mailed to the elderly residing in some States, limited training provided to volunteers, and a lack of effective coordination between volunteers and food assistance office staff. (See pp. 20 to 23.)

Also, many elderly persons may not have received help because they lived in inner-city areas which volunteers were reluctant to visit or in areas in which transportation was not available. (See pp. 23 and 24.)

Problems of the type encountered during Project FIND could be reduced in future projects designed to contact large groups of citizens.

This could be achieved through better advance planning, including consideration of other activities and factors which could affect the impact of the projects, and reasonable time for completion. GAO believes also that procedures for monitoring and evaluating such projects should be developed in the planning stage.

AGENCY ACTIONS AND UNRESOLVED ISSUES

As agreed with the Chairman's office, GAO did not request formal comments from the groups that participated in Project FIND but did discuss its findings with those that played major roles. (See pp. 27 to 31.)

Generally, these groups said that the project was a unique and successful effort considering the magnitude of the task and the tight time frame. They said that cooperation was good considering the number of groups involved.

Several groups pointed out that the number of persons reported as enrolled--190,000 made the project a success in that the target population and the expected rate of return of cards by the elderly were unknown at the outset of the project. They believed that the number enrolled as a result of the project might have been larger than 190,000. (See p. 28.)

Some groups felt that the only objective of Project FIND was to provide food assistance; others stated that a secondary purpose was to identify other critical needs of the elderly. However, reporting these needs to Federal agencies on a community-by-community basis was not to be a part of the project.

Since Project FIND was a unique cooperative effort, some groups believed that using evaluation and feedback would have helped in planning future efforts.

BLANK PAGE

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On March 23, 1972, the President announced to the Congress, in his Message on Aging, plans for Project FIND, a major outreach campaign to enroll the elderly in Federal food assistance programs.¹

As described in the President's message, the campaign was to be conducted through a "senior citizen awareness network" made up of federally operated or funded field offices and outreach workers, assisted by volunteers from State and local governments and the private sector. During a 3-month period, these workers were to locate elderly persons who should be participating in food assistance programs but were not.

NEED FOR FOOD ASSISTANCE

One of the major needs of the elderly identified during an outreach effort by the National Council on Aging in the late 1960s was food assistance. The council found that the diets of many elderly persons lacked protein, milk, or fruits and vegetables. Also, about 14 percent of the elderly had difficulty getting meals or securing food. A major factor contributing to inadequate nutrition of the elderly was insufficient income. However, of the persons interviewed during the campaign, 41 percent said they were not aware of Federal food assistance programs. Of those who were aware, about 25 percent had applied for assistance and less than 10 percent of those interviewed had ever received assistance.

¹Federal food assistance programs referred to in this report are the food stamp and the commodity distribution programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Participants in the food stamp program purchase food stamps at a cost less than their value (on the average less than half the value) and use the stamps to purchase food in participating stores. Participants in the commodity distribution program directly receive foodstuffs at no cost from commodity distribution centers.

Inadequate nutrition of the elderly was also a major concern of the 1971 White House Conference on Aging. A recommendation of that Conference was that the Federal Government assume the responsibility for making adequate nutrition available to all elderly persons of the United States and its possessions. To help accomplish that goal, the delegates to the Conference recommended that food stamp applications be included with social security checks or be distributed to the elderly by some other efficient and dignified method.

ORGANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF PROJECT FIND

The White House Domestic Council's Committee on Aging, the Special Consultant to the President on Aging, and the Post-Conference Board of the White House Conference on Aging planned, organized, and provided policy direction for the project.¹

FIND informed elderly persons of available Federal food assistance and encouraged them to apply at their local food assistance office, in most cases the county welfare office.

- On August 3, 1972, Federal food assistance information brochures were included with checks mailed to about 27 million social security annuitants.
- On August 10, 1972, similar brochures were mailed to about 1.25 million Medicare recipients.
- On September 29, 1972, a special card message was sent with the monthly checks mailed to about 1.1 million civil service annuitants.
- On November 1, 1972, information on Federal food assistance programs was sent to about 980,000 railroad retirement annuitants with their monthly checks.

¹A description of the participation by the major groups and agencies involved in Project FIND is included in app. I.

A public affairs campaign, using radio and television announcements, newspaper articles, and posters, was to reach persons not contacted through the mass mailing and to increase the awareness of those receiving information by mail.

A postage-paid card to be returned to the Social Security Administration (SSA), Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), was included with the brochures mailed to social security annuitants and Medicare recipients for the convenience of persons needing further assistance. In addition, a card sent to civil service annuitants was to be returned to the Civil Service Commission by persons unable to contact their local food assistance office. The American National Red Cross, under a \$2.9 million contract funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), organized and directed a volunteer followup effort to provide needed assistance to elderly persons who returned cards. (Originally, the contract was for \$4.4 million but was reduced by \$1.5 million when the number of cards returned was substantially less than anticipated.)

Only \$1.4 million of the Red Cross contract was obligated during Project FIND. The Red Cross is using the balance for another outreach effort, the Supplemental Security Income Alert. This alert is a nationwide volunteer effort to reach aged, blind, and disabled persons who may be eligible under the federally administered income maintenance program (Public Law 92-603) which began January 1, 1974.

All cards returned by the elderly requesting further assistance, including those returned to the Civil Service Commission, were forwarded to SSA, sorted by zip code, and sent to local Red Cross chapters. On August 28, 1972, Red Cross volunteers began contacting persons who had requested assistance. Originally, the followup phase for the project was to be carried out in the 3 months from August 15 to November 15, 1972, but the termination date for the project was extended first to February 28, 1973, and subsequently to April 30, 1973. The majority of contacts by volunteers, however, were made between August and December 1972. About 976,000 contacts were completed by December 1, 1972, for about 1.4 million cards returned. The remaining cards were processed from December 1, 1972, to April 30, 1973. From May 1, to December 31, 1973, an additional 18,200 cards were received and processed. In January 1974 about 2,200 more cards were received but will not be processed.

ACTION funded a contract with Capital Systems Group, Inc., a Washington, D.C., firm for planning, monitoring, and coordinating the project. According to its final report dated March 21, 1973, more than 36,000 volunteers were involved in the campaign, and 540,000 volunteer man-hours were provided at no cost to the project.

The direct Federal cost of the project was about \$2,024,486.¹ This cost excluded salaries of Federal employees with the exception of salary costs of SSA employees, which were fully reimbursed by the Department of Agriculture.

SCOPE OF REVIEW

We reviewed project FIND as part of a review of selected federally funded programs serving the elderly. Our objectives were to (1) determine the extent to which the project enabled elderly persons to obtain Federal food assistance, (2) determine whether other needs of the elderly were identified and services provided, and (3) identify problems encountered during the project.

We reviewed the operations of the White House Domestic Council's Committee on Aging, SSA, Red Cross, and Department of Agriculture as they related to the project. We also reviewed local Red Cross and Federal food assistance operations related to the project in Cuyahoga County, Ohio; Los Angeles County, California; Pinellas County, Florida; King and Snohomish Counties in Washington; and the District of Columbia.² The review of field operations covered primarily the period August 15 to November 15, 1972, the time frame initially established for completion of these operations.

¹See app. II for a breakdown of this cost.

²The District of Columbia, for purposes of food assistance programs and for purposes for this report, is considered to be a county.

CHAPTER 2

EFFECTIVENESS IN OBTAINING FOOD ASSISTANCE

The target population for the project, as stated in the contract between OEO and the Red Cross, was about 3 million persons, 60 years of age or older, living on incomes below the national poverty line but not receiving Federal food assistance. The Department of Agriculture estimated that 190,000 elderly persons (about 6.3 percent of the target population) were enrolled in Federal food assistance programs as a result of Project FIND.

However, this estimate might be overstated since it included elderly persons enrolled in food assistance programs as a result of efforts other than the project. Other information obtained from Agriculture and the six counties in our review also indicated that the impact of the project in enabling the elderly to obtain food assistance was limited.

LIMITED IMPACT ON ELDERLY NEEDING FOOD ASSISTANCE

According to the 1970 census, about 5 million persons, 65 years of age or older, have incomes at or below the poverty line. Before Project FIND, Agriculture estimated that about 2.5 million older persons (60 years of age or older) were receiving benefits under Federal food assistance programs. Since income eligibility standards for food assistance approximate the poverty line, it was agreed in the contract between OEO and the Red Cross that the target population for the project would be about 3 million persons 60 years of age or older.

SSA estimated that about 1.4 million persons returned cards requesting additional assistance. In addition, an undetermined number of persons contacted local welfare offices, SSA field offices, and local Red Cross chapters during Project FIND. However, according to Agriculture's estimates, only a small portion of these persons applied for and received Federal food assistance.

Agriculture estimated that, during the project period, about 190,000 elderly persons were enrolled in food assistance programs (certified as eligible for assistance) as a

result of Project FIND and that about 70 percent of the elderly who applied for assistance were certified as eligible. Based on this estimate about 270,000 elderly persons would have applied for assistance. Red Cross volunteers reported that some elderly persons did not apply for assistance because they had income or assets in excess of allowable amounts, were already receiving Federal food assistance, or did not want food assistance because they believed it was a form of welfare.

Agriculture's estimate of the number of elderly persons certified for food assistance as a result of FIND might have been overstated since no attempt was made to exclude elderly persons certified as a result of causes other than FIND. The estimate was based on information provided by State welfare directors; in requesting the information Agriculture asked that all elderly persons certified as eligible for food assistance be reported regardless of why they applied. Therefore, this estimate could include elderly persons who were certified as a result of (1) some counties beginning food stamp programs during Project FIND, (2) public assistance applicants being referred to food assistance programs by welfare offices, or (3) local food assistance offices increasing their outreach efforts.

Counties transferring to the food stamp program

During August through December 1972, the period on which Agriculture based its estimate, 56 counties transferred from the commodity distribution to the food stamp program and an undetermined number of elderly persons certified for food stamps in these counties may have been attributed to Project FIND. Although some elderly persons in these counties had previously participated in the commodity distribution program, they had to be certified as eligible for food stamps because of different eligibility criteria under the two programs. Also, since the maximum allowable income under the food stamp program is generally higher than the commodity distribution program, counties which transfer to the food stamp program would normally have an influx of applicants in excess of those who would transfer from the commodity distribution program.

All the counties in our review were operating food stamp programs before Project FIND. One county had recently transferred to the food stamp program, and food stamp officials in that county advised us that they had actively recruited recipients since inception of the program in March 1972. These officials, however, had not estimated the number of elderly persons certified as eligible because of such recruiting.

Referrals from public assistance offices

According to information from Agriculture, over 60 percent of all participants in the food stamp program and 50 percent of all participants in the commodity distribution program during the project period were receiving public assistance. Local welfare offices normally approve about 90,000 to 100,000 applications for Old Age Assistance during a 3-month period, according to records maintained by the National Center for Social Statistics of HEW.

An HEW official advised us that, generally, persons qualifying for public assistance would also qualify for food assistance since the eligibility standards for food assistance are less stringent. We found that, for the counties in our review, persons qualifying for public assistance were generally referred for Federal food assistance. It is likely, therefore, that a portion of the elderly determined eligible for food assistance during the project period were those approved for Old Age Assistance and referred to food assistance programs.

Increased outreach by welfare offices

A 1971 amendment to the Food Stamp Act required State agencies administering food assistance programs to increase their outreach efforts by July 1, 1972. The implementing guidelines issued by Agriculture required that State agencies develop a plan which would include the means to be used in reaching ethnic groups, senior citizens, migrant workers, and other minority groups. As of July 1972, 46 States had obtained approval of plans for informing potential recipients of the benefits of food assistance programs.

Agriculture officials would not speculate as to the number of elderly persons that would have been reached

through these increased efforts rather than as a result of Project FIND. One official, however, pointed out that FIND merely enabled the States to reach needy elderly sooner.

In one county included in our review, the local food assistance office had begun a campaign, before Project FIND, to certify social security annuitants. From January 1972 through July 1972, 1,825 social security annuitants had been certified as eligible for food assistance by this office. From August through November 1972, an additional 2,131 social security annuitants were certified as eligible, but food assistance officials estimated that only 915, or about 43 percent, were attributable to Project FIND.

IMPACT AT LOCATIONS IN THE REVIEW

The food assistance offices and Red Cross chapters in our review had not established procedures for accurately determining the number of elderly persons enrolled in Federal food assistance programs through Project FIND efforts. Most of the food assistance offices, however, maintained limited records on elderly persons enrolled through the project for their own reference, and information was available on total food assistance applications and certifications.

The information maintained by the food assistance offices and Red Cross chapters which we visited indicated that the impact of the project might have been limited at these locations. In those counties we reviewed, the number of elderly persons estimated by local food assistance officials to have been enrolled in food assistance programs through the project comprised only a very small percent of the estimated elderly poor population, as shown in the following table.

<u>County or State location</u>	<u>Elderly population below poverty level (note a)</u>	<u>Estimated Project FIND certification (note b)</u>	<u>Percent of elderly poor certified</u>
District of Columbia	14,034	1,046	7.45
Los Angeles	111,378	(c)	-
Pinellas	28,053	674	2.40
Cuyahoga	34,638	915	2.64
King	18,197	349	1.91
Snohomish	4,267	93	2.17

^aBased on 1970 census information and an average poverty income cutoff of \$1,749 for individuals 65 years of age and over.

^bCertifications are for the period August to November 1972, except for the District of Columbia which includes certifications through March 31, 1973, since, due to a backlog, the majority of Project FIND applications in the District were processed after November 1972.

^cLos Angeles County did not maintain any records on Project FIND certifications.

In two of the counties we visited, food stamp officials and a Red Cross official said they doubted that Project FIND enabled many to obtain Federal food assistance. Food stamp officials said relatively few elderly persons applied for assistance and a significant portion of those who applied were not eligible but were confused by the notices they received with their social security checks. One food stamp official estimated that an additional 30 persons had come to the main office each month but that this increase was negligible. Another official said many of those needing help still were not able to receive it through Project FIND because of the short time frame which volunteers were given to contact them.

CHAPTER 3

EFFECTIVENESS IN OBTAINING OTHER SERVICES

A secondary objective of Project FIND was to identify other critical needs of those elderly persons contacted and to assist them in obtaining services to help satisfy those needs. Red Cross volunteers were to record instances of needs for services other than food assistance on "special assistance memos" and turn the memos over to their supervisors. When local Red Cross chapters were unable to provide the additional needed services directly for the locations we reviewed, they relayed the information to other agencies or groups capable of assisting the elderly.

Information was not available on the total number of elderly persons identified as requiring other services or the numbers and types of services provided. However, special assistance memos were not used extensively by any of the Red Cross chapters we reviewed and the number of elderly persons identified as having critical needs other than for food assistance was relatively low in comparison with the number contacted. A Red Cross Project FIND field manager in one location and a volunteer in another location pointed out that the project was not as effective as it could have been because volunteers did not make home visits to many who needed help.

LIMITED IDENTIFICATION OF OTHER NEEDS

At the locations we visited limited use had been made of special assistance memos. Project volunteers contacted over 67,000 persons in response to cards returned requesting help, but prepared only about 830 special assistance memos.

A Red Cross Project FIND field manager in one of the locations we visited advised us that the project was not as effective as it could have been because volunteers did not make home visits to many who needed other assistance. She cited two sets of circumstances in which mail and telephone contacts were not adequate.

--Some elderly persons she had visited could not have responded to contacts by mail because they were blind, could not read or write, or were too ill.

--She talked to one woman by telephone and had no indication that the woman's health was not good, but a home visit later disclosed that the woman was in a wheelchair and in very bad health.

At another location a project volunteer noted that elderly persons she had visited had definite problems other than for food assistance and pointed out that many would not receive assistance because volunteers did not visit them.

REFERRALS TO SERVICE AGENCIES AND GROUPS FOR HELP

The two major needs identified by volunteers in special assistance memos were transportation and medical services. Other identified needs included homemaker services, home-delivered meals, welfare services, and clothing.

Except for cases where the Red Cross was able to provide the needed help or where, upon further checking, it was determined that special assistance was not needed, the memos were referred to various local service agencies and groups. Even though the Red Cross was not required to follow up on these memos, local chapters in three of the counties we visited were taking action to determine whether needed services were being provided. In the remaining three counties, the Red Cross was not trying to follow up on special assistance memos referred to other agencies and groups. We did not attempt to determine whether services were being provided. However, at our request, a local Red Cross project manager in one county followed up on the eight special assistance memos referred to local agencies and found that three of the cases were under active review by the agency to which they were referred. One case was receiving services, and the agencies to which the four remaining cases were referred had no record of such referral.

The elderly needed some services, not readily available in the counties we visited. In most counties, for example, adequate transportation was not available for the elderly; in one county a Red Cross representative advised us that a serious problem was trying to obtain medical services. Information on the special needs and problems of the elderly identified during the project, however, was not reported to Federal agencies, such as the Administration on Aging; SSA;

or the Medical Services Administration of the Social and Rehabilitation Service, HEW, which are responsible for programs serving the elderly. This information could have been useful in planning programs serving the elderly as well as in identifying and eliminating gaps in service and outreach efforts.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT FIND PROBLEMS

Certain circumstances working together, seemed to diminish the impact of Project FIND. For example, the 3-month time frame established for the project, even though extended, did not allow for volunteers to make home visits to many elderly persons. Because most persons were contacted by mail or telephone rather than home visits many might not have received needed help. In addition, during the period selected for the project, an increase in social security benefits became effective making many elderly persons ineligible for food assistance. Other problems which might have affected the project's impact included citation of incorrect income standards in brochures sent to some, limited training provided to project volunteers, and a lack of effective coordination between volunteers and food assistance offices.

INSUFFICIENT TIME FOR VOLUNTEERS TO PROVIDE ADEQUATE ASSISTANCE

Project FIND was to cover only 3 months from August 15 to November 15, 1972. At the end of November, however, SSA was still receiving cards from elderly persons requesting help and volunteers were still making contacts in 20 metropolitan areas. Therefore, the completion date was extended first to February 28, 1973, and subsequently to April 30, 1973.

Under the contract between OEO and the Red Cross, an estimated 50 percent of those persons returning cards would require home visits and the remainder could be assisted by telephone. However, according to a Project FIND status report volunteers made about 967,000 contacts through November 1972, of which about 182,600, or 19 percent, were home visits. Home visits constituted an even smaller percent of total contacts in the locations we reviewed. Nearly 79,000 contacts were made for about 67,000 persons who returned cards requesting additional help, but only about 5 percent were home visits.

In its final evaluation report, the Red Cross noted that:

"As the number of cards received increased and the time began to run out, more and more contacts were made by phone and/or mail. If it was known that the elderly person was already receiving food assistance, little or no effort was made to contact them."

PROJECT TIMING

The time period selected for Project FIND extended over the same period as local fund raising and election campaigns. As a result, many active community members may not have been available to participate in the project.

Another factor not anticipated in planning Project FIND, however, may have had a more significant impact on the project. During the period covered by Project FIND, social security benefits were increased affecting the eligibility of many social security recipients. The effect of this increase on the impact of Project FIND is discussed below.

Increase in social security benefits

On July 20, 1972, after the planning had begun for Project FIND but before the project had been implemented, the Congress approved a 20-percent increase in social security benefits effective September 1, 1972. The 20-percent increase was first included in checks mailed on October 3, 1972, 2 months after Project FIND began. The project was continued as scheduled, even through the field operations had not yet begun, because it was believed that a significant number of elderly persons could still be assisted, and cancellation of the project would have proved demoralizing to individuals and groups already involved and costly since funds had been spent for printing brochures.

As a result of the increase, welfare offices had to redetermine eligibility and recalculate benefits for all public assistance and food stamp recipients receiving social security benefits. Project FIND, therefore, created an additional workload for some welfare offices at a time when they already had a substantial backlog of work. In its final

report on the project, the Red Cross noted that many State and local offices handling food assistance programs were already overloaded and an additional burden was created by inquiries and applications resulting from Project FIND.

Since Federal food assistance eligibility is based, in part, on income, many who qualified for assistance before the increase became ineligible as a result of the increase. Implementation of Project FIND before the increase in social security payments caused confusion about eligibility among many elderly persons, as well as among some volunteers. The majority of contacts by volunteers were made after the increase had been included in social security checks; however, most of the cards returned to SSA by the elderly were received before the increase.

Of the 1.4 million cards returned to SSA, about 1.3 million were returned before October 1972; but only about 80,000 cards were processed before that time. As a result, many persons eligible for food assistance at the time they returned cards requesting further help in obtaining assistance were no longer eligible when volunteers contacted them.

Food assistance officials advised us that many elderly who came to their offices were disappointed when they found out that their income levels were too high to qualify for assistance. For one location included in our review, a Red Cross progress report noted that:

"Some calls are being received by workers from people who are now not eligible due to social security increase. We feel it would have been better to delay the project until after the increase. People are feeling 'let down' after receiving stamps for September and now are being cut off."

OTHER PROBLEMS AFFECTING THE PROJECT

Other problems which may have impaired the success of the project include the citation of incorrect information in FIND brochures, limited training provided to volunteers, and a lack of effective coordination between the efforts of volunteers and State and local food assistance personnel. In addition, many elderly persons may not have received

needed help because they lived in inner-city areas where volunteers were reluctant to visit or in areas in which transportation was inadequate.

Inaccurate information contained in FIND brochures

FIND food assistance brochures mailed to elderly persons residing in some States contained incorrect information on the maximum income levels for eligibility under the States' food stamp programs. According to the brochures, a person living alone could be eligible if his monthly income was \$178 or less, and a couple could be eligible if their monthly income was under \$233. However, 11 States have income eligibility levels which range from \$180 to \$210 a month for individuals and \$235 to \$272 a month for couples.

The income levels in the brochures were based on national income eligibility standards established by Agriculture. When these standards were established, States having income eligibility levels higher than the national level were permitted to retain their existing income eligibility levels. When the brochures were mailed, nine States had income eligibility levels higher than the national level. For two other States the eligibility level set by Agriculture was higher because of the cost of living in these States.

In five of the States for which the income eligibility levels in the Project FIND brochures were incorrect, a relatively low number of persons were certified as eligible for food assistance during the Project FIND period in comparison with the number of elderly residing in those States. One of the States, for example, according to the 1970 census, had the second largest elderly population in the Nation but ranked 13th in the number of elderly certified for food assistance during the project period. Another State, which had the 8th largest elderly population, ranked 33d in certifications of elderly for food assistance.

Training of volunteers

Field operations for Project FIND, including training of volunteers, were to be completed within 3 months. The final report issued by the Red Cross concluded that the

general consensus of local chapters was that training was adequate but noted that the late arrival of training materials, at many locations, affected the recruitment and retention of volunteers and caused some chapters to postpone training sessions.

The evaluation reports prepared by local Red Cross chapters contacted during our review, however, contained comments on training that ranged from "excellent" to "totally inadequate." The general criticism expressed by those chapters that believed the training was inadequate was that training material arrived late. One chapter reported that training materials arrived 3 weeks late, and another reported receiving training material 2 weeks before the cutoff date of the project. As a result of the late arrival of training materials and the short duration of the project, Red Cross officials at one location advised us that most of their training consisted of providing information on food assistance programs to volunteers over the telephone or through the mail.

Better training of volunteers might have increased the number of elderly receiving food assistance through Project FIND efforts. For example, a project manager in one county advised us that volunteers often failed to provide the elderly they contacted essential information, such as the location of the nearest food assistance office.

In another county, a project manager told us that volunteers were not familiar with basic food assistance program eligibility criteria. She pointed out that a volunteer chairman in one county was not aware that for eligibility purposes there was a difference between gross and net income even though the distinction was explained in volunteer training material. She also noted that other volunteer workers in the county did not realize that maximum income limitations for food assistance vary according to the number of persons in the household and that many elderly in the county were misled by these volunteers before she became aware of this problem and corrected the situation.

Lack of effective coordination

Another problem area identified by local Red Cross chapters during Project FIND was the lack of effective

coordination between the efforts of volunteers and State and local food assistance personnel. The Red Cross report noted that in some communities volunteers were used in food assistance offices to eliminate backlogs in applications but that often local food assistance offices rejected their help. At five of the locations we visited, food assistance offices did not allow Red Cross volunteers to help process applications even though all offices had a backlog of applications.

The primary reasons food assistance officials gave for not permitting volunteers to assist in processing applications were that (1) volunteers lacked adequate training, (2) they were not authorized to make eligibility certifications, and (3) the information on food assistance applications was confidential. At the sixth location the volunteers who assisted in the followup and the eligibility verification process had previous volunteer experience with the food stamp program.

A Project FIND field manager advised us that one county food assistance office destroyed 924 applications prepared by Red Cross volunteers and prepared new applications because the applications did not contain complete eligibility information. This action not only created additional work but required that the applicants be interviewed again.

At another location the county food assistance office agreed to mail food assistance applications to the elderly. The Red Cross provided a list of those needing applications, but, according to a project evaluation report, no one on the list had been sent an application as of December 1972.

In a third county a Red Cross volunteer chairman advised us that volunteers had been referring all elderly persons that they contacted to the same food assistance office although public assistance recipients were to be referred to a different office for food assistance.

Most of the food assistance offices we visited did not appear to give priority to processing applications from the elderly during Project FIND. At one office, waiting time was reported as 2 to 6 hours and at another, from 5 to 7 hours. One volunteer said he took an elderly man from the hospital to the food stamp office at 10 a.m. and had to wait until 3 p.m. before his application was processed.

One food assistance office, to relieve a backlog in applications, obtained authorization for food assistance personnel to interview elderly persons on Saturdays. For 3 months, 755 elderly persons were certified as eligible for food assistance through the efforts of personnel working overtime. However, according to an official in the food assistance office, about 700 to 800 applications from elderly persons were rejected because the applicants, due to inclement weather or other reasons, had not kept appointments and officials had made little effort to reschedule the appointments because of time limitations.

The limited extent of cooperation on the part of some local food assistance officials may be attributed to inadequate information and direction provided to local welfare offices. In early July 1972 the Special Consultant to the President on Aging sent letters to the Governors and welfare directors in each State explaining Project FIND and requesting their cooperation and participation. They were urged to advise their local welfare directors of the project. However, in two of the locations we visited, welfare officials apparently did not learn of the project until after it had begun. An official in another welfare office said he first became aware of the project through a newspaper article.

Assistance to inner-city residents

According to the Red Cross report, many volunteers were reluctant to make home visits in inner-city neighborhoods. In addition, since recruiting volunteers from minority groups in these areas was difficult, the areas had fewer volunteer workers to handle the heavy workloads.

In one county we noted that, because of a lack of volunteers, 76 percent of the contacts in the inner city were by mail; however, in the suburbs only 33 percent of the contacts were by mail. In another county, 172 volunteers assisted in the followup effort, but some refused to go into inner-city neighborhoods and a Red Cross official responsible for coordinating volunteer activities in the surrounding 20-county area personally made many of the contacts in the inner city.

Transportation

Although volunteers in the counties we visited had contacted over 67,000 elderly persons who had returned Project FIND cards requesting additional assistance, Red Cross officials indicated that volunteers had transported only about 39 persons to food assistance offices.

In one county volunteers contacted about 38,000 elderly persons; Red Cross officials reported that volunteers assisted only about 25 with transportation. In another county Red Cross officials said volunteers did not transport any elderly persons to the food assistance office. In three counties officials estimated that volunteers transported only about 14 persons to food assistance offices. In the remaining county volunteers did not keep records on transportation provided, but the coordinator for volunteer activities advised us that volunteers provided transportation assistance to only a few persons.

Local Red Cross officials gave the following major reasons for the limited number of elderly transported to food assistance offices.

- Volunteers were reluctant to use privately owned vehicles for fear that they would not be covered by insurance.
- The limited number of volunteers willing to transport the elderly and wait for long periods at food assistance offices.
- The availability of public transportation.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The number of elderly persons enrolled in Federal food assistance programs as a result of Project FIND was considerably less than the estimated number needing such assistance.

While a number of factors may have impaired the success of the project, the primary problem appears to have been the short time frame in which the project was to be organized and operated. Also the timing of the project might have caused conflicts with other activities and thus limited the extent of assistance it could have provided to the elderly.

Such factors as the dissemination of inaccurate information, limited training of volunteers, and ineffective coordination of efforts and the fact that some persons were not contacted because they lived in inner-city areas and still others were not provided needed transportation also affected the impact of the project. Agencies responsible for organizing future campaigns of this type should be aware, and make outreach workers aware, of the importance of identifying needs and knowing what resources are available for meeting these needs.

More effective procedures for obtaining feedback for Federal agencies and groups administering programs serving the elderly should be established.

For future projects of this nature, regardless of the target population at which they are directed, Federal agencies which organize and direct these outreach efforts should insure that

- projects are adequately planned, including consideration of other activities and factors which could limit the impact of the projects, and coordinated to prevent the type of problems encountered during Project FIND;

- a realistic amount of time is established for successful completion of the projects; and

--procedures are developed during the planning stage for effectively monitoring and evaluating the projects.

CHAPTER 6

COMMENTS OF PARTICIPATING

AGENCIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

As agreed with the Chairman's office, we did not request formal comments from the agencies and organizations that participated in Project FIND. However, we did give certain agencies and organizations that played major roles in the project, or that provided funding, an opportunity to review our findings. We subsequently met with representatives of the following groups to discuss the findings and to solicit their views: ACTION, Agriculture, OEO, Red Cross, SSA, Capital Systems Groups, Inc., and the Special Consultant to the President on Aging.

We also gave the White House Domestic Council's Committee on Aging an opportunity to express its views but did not receive any response.

Generally, the groups that responded emphasized that Project FIND heightened the awareness of the needs of the elderly and that communities and organizations began to provide new services to the elderly. They added that the project would have an unmeasurable residual impact and FIND represented a unique model for outreach efforts in that it involved several large Federal agencies and a large volunteer organization which had virtually no previous experience in working with Federal agencies. Considering the number of groups involved, decisions were made and implemented within a very short period and the project was successful from the standpoint of overall coordination.

Representatives of several groups stated that the exact target population was unknown but it was believed to be less than 3 million and that the expected rate of response was also unknown. Some groups stated that the only objective of Project FIND was to provide food assistance; others stated that, although providing food assistance was the major objective, the project was also intended to identify other critical needs of the elderly. However, reporting these needs to Federal agencies on a community-by-community basis was not to be part of the project.

Some representatives said the number of persons reported as assisted--190,000--was significant and was in itself an indication that the project was successful. Several groups stated that, in their opinion, the 190,000 could be understated because

- at the cutoff date of the project an undetermined number of persons were in the process of being enrolled in food assistance programs as a result of Project FIND, but they were not included in the statistics on the project;
- persons could continue to be enrolled in food assistance programs after the completion of the project as a result of the public relations campaign or by hearing of the project in some other way; and
- nonelderly persons receiving social security payments because of a disability or survivorship status might have been assisted by the project but would not have been included in the number reported as assisted.

Some groups believed that, since Project FIND was a unique cooperative effort of the Federal Government and volunteers from the State and local governments and the private sector, using evaluation and feedback would have helped in planning future efforts.

Additional specific comments of several of the groups regarding the project are summarized as follows.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agriculture officials stated that the report was factually accurate but that for a mass mailing campaign the number of responses, compared to the target group, was highly successful.

These officials said the number of persons no longer eligible for food stamps because of an increase in social security benefits represented only a relatively small percentage of the elderly target group who were eligible before the increase in benefits.

Because of the extent of advance planning that should be done to carry out a project of this magnitude, the officials said it would be difficult at any time of the year to avoid other activities being carried out at the local level by volunteer organizations.

OFFICE OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

The OEO project manager stated that, from the project's outset, OEO believed its involvement should have been greater. This feeling was especially strong at the local community action agency level because local agencies believed they had a better understanding of the needs of the citizens of the communities, especially the inner-city areas. Coordination between the Red Cross and local community action agencies varied but generally improved as the project progressed.

The Red Cross might have been more effective, according to OEO, if it had been authorized to subcontract for assistance in administering its Project FIND activities in some locations and this was an alternative that the Red Cross should be given in the Supplemental Security Income Alert.

The project manager stated also that the original amount included in the contract between OEO and the Red Cross for local travel--for taxis to be used in providing transportation for volunteers to visit the elderly--was much too high. In negotiations between the two groups this amount was reduced significantly which was probably why telephone contacts outnumbered home visits.

He agreed that the time frame was extremely tight and that inaccurate information in the brochures was a problem. Also, the language of the brochures was too formal for the target population and the print too small for some elderly persons to read.

RED CROSS

Red Cross officials said our conclusions were accurate.

The Red Cross undertook the project at the request of the Federal Government on an agreed "best efforts" reimbursable contract and it was recognized that the abilities of local chapters to do the fieldwork varied.

Additional responsibilities were given to the chapters as the project progressed, one of which was the special assistance memo. Questions were raised whether the memo violated the confidentiality or privacy of the elderly or whether discussions with the elderly about their other needs would raise expectations that communities could not fulfill. Thus it was agreed that use of the memo would be optional.

Many Red Cross volunteers used telephone contacts rather than home visits. Because of the timing of FIND and the involvement of many key volunteers in other activities, the telephone was "overused." There was reluctance on the part of many volunteers who had agreed to make home visits to work inner-city areas. When this became apparent, more groups that were inner city oriented were involved--the Urban League, community action agencies, and neighborhood service centers.

The Red Cross agreed that training was a problem. Training materials were late in arriving at some chapters because of losses or delays in transit. Project FIND managers were instructed to proceed with a training plan while materials were being mailed, thus the degree of effective training varied with persons who did the training, not necessarily with the available materials.

Transportation for the elderly was a major problem in FIND and remains a major concern for organizations attempting to help meet the needs of the elderly. Of the 3,000 chapters only a small percent have automobiles; therefore, volunteers had to transport the elderly in their own vehicles. The Red Cross agreed with the major reasons that volunteers transported such a limited number of the elderly.

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

When Project FIND was being planned, SSA was somewhat reluctant to do what it was asked to do. This reluctance centered around SSA's responsibility for insuring the confidentiality of recipient information; protecting social security trust funds; and including "stuffers" with social security checks mailed to recipients.

SSA is unable to use its resources on projects not related to the social security insurance programs without reimbursement from the general funds of the Treasury or from other nontrust funds. SSA agreed to participate in Project FIND only after assurance that recipient information would be kept confidential and that it would be fully reimbursed for its costs.

BLANK PAGE

GROUP AND AGENCY PARTICIPATION

IN PROJECT FIND

Following is a brief description of the services provided by the major groups and agencies involved in Project FIND.

I. ORGANIZATION OF PROJECT FIND

The White House Conference on Aging, held in Washington, D.C., from November 28 to December 2, 1971, provided the forum in which the idea for Project FIND was conceived.

The White House Domestic Council Committee on Aging, working with the Special Consultant to the President on Aging and Post-Conference Board of the White House Conference on Aging, planned and organized the Project FIND campaign.

The Project FIND Board, organized in mid-June 1972 as an ad hoc committee consisting of representatives of the major participating organizations, provided a mechanism for decisionmaking and communication.

Capital Systems Group, Inc., a Washington, D.C., based firm, under a contract funded by the Department of Agriculture, developed the overall plan and timetable for Project FIND.

The Office of Management and Budget provided fiscal and administrative policy guidance.

The Bureau of Census, Department of Commerce, working with SSA conducted a test to determine the expected response from a mailing of food assistance brochures.

II. MAILING AND PUBLICITY

The Social Security Administration organized and assisted in the mass mailing of food assistance information to social security annuitants and Medicare recipients.

The Civil Service Commission organized and assisted in the mass mailing of a special card message to civil service annuitants.

The Department of Agriculture provided the funding for printing the brochures mailed by SSA and underwrote the cost of handling and mailing the message and reply.

APPENDIX I

The Office of Economic Opportunity provided the funding for the Civil Service Commission mailing.

The Department of Treasury printed and stuffed the brochures for the SSA mass mailing and sent the special card message to civil service retirees.

The Railroad Retirement Board mailed food assistance brochures with railroad retirement pension checks.

The Veterans Administration distributed information on Project FIND to its regional offices.

ACTION funded the planning and preparations for the public affairs program and supervised the media and other agency participation.

Jack Porter and Associates planned the public affairs program, prepared advertising, and designed posters under a contract funded by ACTION.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development assisted in the national distribution of the Project FIND posters.

III. OUTREACH

The Social Security Administration collected the reply cards returned to the Civil Service Commission and SSA, sorted them by zip code, and distributed them to the appropriate Red Cross chapters.

The Red Cross provided the volunteer force that contacted those persons who sent in the reply cards.

The Department of Agriculture funded the cost of Red Cross volunteer materials.

The Office of Economic Opportunity contracted with the Red Cross for the volunteer field operations.

IV. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The Red Cross prepared a final evaluation of its volunteer activities.

Capital Systems Group, Inc., under a contract funded by ACTION, monitored project reporting and prepared a final summary of the project.

ACTION compiled a digest of news articles on the project.

The Department of Agriculture collected certification data from the welfare offices for the final evaluation.

The Social and Rehabilitation Service monitored local welfare office activities through its regional offices.

Local welfare offices reported certification data to the Department of Agriculture and procedural problems to the Social and Rehabilitation Service.

APPENDIX II

SUMMARY OF AMOUNTS AND SOURCES OF
FEDERAL FUNDS SPENT FOR PROJECT FIND

<u>Agency</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Amount</u>
Office of Economic Opportunity	Red Cross con- tract	^a \$1,433,428
	Civil service mailing	5,000
Department of Agriculture	SSA mailing	^b 135,697
	SSA processing of reply cards	^b 272,239
	Printing and shipping of volunteer materials	126,427
	Capital Systems Group contract	2,475
ACTION	Capital Systems Group contract	^c 32,020
	Printing and other costs for public affairs materials	^d <u>17,200</u>
		<u>\$2,024,486</u>

^aTotal amount spent by Red Cross on Project FIND, December 31, 1973. Red Cross had received \$2.9 million under the contract and the balance of this amount is being used for the Supplemental Security Income Alert.

^bSSA incurred these costs and the Department of Agriculture reimbursed SSA fully.

^cJack Porter and Associates received \$5,000 under this contract for the public affairs campaign.

^dAmounts included in this total were from agency personnel and not verified by GAO.

FRANK CHURCH, IDAHO, CHAIR

HARRISON A. WILLIAMS, JR., N.J.
ALAN BIBLE, NEV.
JENNINGS RANDOLPH, W. VA.
EDMUND S. MUSKIE, MAINE
FRANK E. MOSS, UTAH
EDWARD M. KENNEDY, MASS.
WALTER F. MONDALE, MINN.
VANCE HARTKE, IND.
CLAIBORNE PELL, R.I.
THOMAS F. EAGLETON, MO.
JOHN V. TUNNEY, CALIF.
LAWTON CHILES, FLA.

HIRAM L. FONG, HAWAII
CLIFFORD P. HANSEN, WYO.
EDWARD J. GURNEY, FLA.
WILLIAM B. SAXBE, OHIO
EDWARD W. BROOKE, MASS.
CHARLES H. PERCY, ILL.
ROBERT T. STAFFORD, VT.
J. GLENN BEALL, JR., MD.
PETE V. DOMENICI, N. MEX.

WILLIAM E. ORIOL, STAFF DIRECTOR
JOHN GUY MILLER, MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR

United States Senate

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

(PURSUANT TO S. RES. 51, 91D CONGRESS)

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510

March 26, 1973

Honorable Elmer B. Staats
Comptroller General
of the United States
General Accounting Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

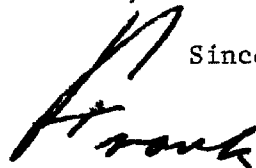
Dear Elmer:

It has been brought to my attention that the General Accounting Office has recently completed a review of certain Administration on Aging community projects. I am especially interested in the review of FIND (Friendless, Isolated, Needy, Disabled) which was conducted in St. Petersburg, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Cleveland. I would appreciate receiving a copy of the report of this review of FIND when it is completed.

Thank you for your cooperation.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,



Frank Church
Chairman