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**EVALUATION OF FOOD STAMP RESEARCH GRANTS
TO IMPROVE ACCESS THROUGH
NEW TECHNOLOGY AND PARTNERSHIPS**

EXECUTIVE REPORT



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Background

In 2002, the Food and Nutrition Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) awarded grants to 19 local outreach projects to investigate how to increase participation in the Food Stamp Program, or FSP. The projects, which were implemented in different locations across 15 states, included a technological component and/or partnerships with other organizations to expand the scope of outreach. This report summarizes the findings of these projects.

These grants represent one of several recent initiatives the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has undertaken to increase FSP participation. The Agency launched a national public education campaign in 1999 to increase awareness of the program. FNS also funded two previous sets of grants for community organizations to experiment with FSP outreach (USDA 2004; LTG Associates 1999). In 2004, FNS completed an Internet-based prescreening tool that individuals or local groups can use to estimate eligibility.

Low participation rates among people eligible for food stamp benefits have prompted these outreach efforts. Many low-income individuals fail to receive a monthly benefit that could substantially increase their total family resources. (The maximum monthly food stamp benefit, \$393 for a family of three in 2005, increases household resources by about 30 percent of the poverty threshold.) Official estimates indicate that about 56 percent of eligible individuals participated in the program in 2003 (Cunningham 2005). According to recent research, a lack of knowledge, expectations of small benefits, stigma associated with using government assistance, a desire for independence, and complicated application procedures all reduce participation (Ponza et al. 1999; McConnell and Ponza 1999; Bartlett, Burstein, and Hamilton 2004).

The 2002 outreach projects addressed factors that limit participation. All grantees attempted to educate their target populations about food stamp benefits through various media outlets, flyers, and presentations. Grantees also experimented with various mechanisms to induce more food stamp applications by providing

- prescreening assistance to show clients whether they were eligible for benefits and, if so, how large a benefit; and
- application assistance that ranged from giving clients the food stamp application form to more intensive hands-on services to helping clients complete the application process.

This report synthesizes quantitative and qualitative data collected from the outreach projects. Data quantifying the grantees' activities and client outcomes were collected through a web-based reporting system. Data describing the grantees' progress and processes were collected through three rounds of phone interviews and six site visits to projects that represented a range of partnerships and strategies. A synthesis of project evaluation reports supplements the quantitative and qualitative findings.

The findings provide important lessons about outreach strategies and FSP participation. None of the projects used an experimental approach that can conclusively

identify outreach activity impacts. Also, concurrent changes in some FSP policies and a softening economy make it especially difficult to assess whether the interventions were the primary factor affecting food stamp participation at the project sites. But the projects offer insight into establishing effective partnerships with other community groups and local food offices, using technology to reach low-income people, and the effectiveness of different types of outreach strategies.

General Findings

In total, the USDA spent about \$5.0 million on the 19 outreach projects – although one of these discontinued outreach services due to staffing problems. Grantees provided some form of application assistance—from a simple referral to actual help in filling out and filing the form at the local food stamp office—to at least 14,000 people. Outreach project staff estimate there were more than 11,500 applications filed and more than 7,000 FSP certifications. These estimates likely represent lower bounds of the outreach efforts because of data losses. Further, such results do not account for longer-term effects from the outreach projects that continued beyond this evaluation’s time frame.

The grantees’ projects lead to five major findings:

1. *Partnerships with community groups serving low-income families contribute to successful outreach.*

Partnerships with other established community groups, including service delivery agencies, schools, faith-based organizations, and employers, were critical to the success of these projects. Partners that were trusted organizations within the community provided access to potential clients, opened doors to other groups in the community serving low-income populations, and helped implement outreach strategies.

2. *Cooperation and buy-in from the local food stamp offices are critical to successful outreach.*

Successful grantees used staff from local food stamp offices to help plan and monitor their projects. Food stamp office staff not only provided outcome data, but also often participated in training and information sessions. Some local offices designated a point person to work with the grantee to facilitate the outreach project. Other local offices sent their staff to outreach venues. In the few sites where grantees were unable to establish productive relationships with the local food stamp offices, the project’s ability to track outcomes was stymied.

3. *Technology that facilitates FSP eligibility prescreening and applications, while challenging, can pay off.*

New Internet tools require trained personnel to develop the software, maintain it, and adjust it to changing requirements. Partners and outreach project staff must be trained to use the software. Some clients, especially the elderly, may find the new technology harder to use. However, multiple projects showed that web-based

systems that included in-person and software-driven application assistance could facilitate the process, especially for broader target populations. Web-based prescreening and application assistance can also simplify the application process for rural populations that live long distances from a food stamp office. Four projects eventually were able to submit web-based application forms electronically to local food stamp offices. Grantees expect these tools will be used to facilitate applications beyond the project time frames.

4. *Successful outreach requires more than basic education and information dissemination.*

All grantees reported that general mass marketing activities alone had little effect on getting a person to apply for benefits. Most potential applicants required more intensive activities that helped them understand their benefit eligibility and the requirements for benefit approval. Nine grantees suggested that effective outreach (leading to an application submission) often requires going beyond prescreening. Many also reported that requirements for more intensive assistance depended on the target population. While prescreening and benefits counseling were sufficient to induce some people to apply at the food stamp office, others found the application too difficult to complete on their own. Some grantees provided more intensive help by submitting clients' application forms, accompanying them to the food stamp office, and/or making frequent follow-up calls to monitor and to facilitate the process.

5. *The groups with the lowest food stamp participation rates—immigrants, the elderly, and the working poor—proved the most difficult to reach.*

Grantees found that seniors and immigrants tend to distrust the application process. Many value their privacy and independence more than a food stamp benefit. Good translators and outreach workers with backgrounds similar to the target group were important for reaching these groups. Grantees also found that connecting with low-income working families was challenging because these families often did not frequent places where outreach was occurring (e.g., food banks, local health clinics, even local school events).

Overview of Outreach Projects

The 18 grantees represented a wide range of organizations (*Exhibit E.1*). Most grantees were nonprofit organizations, but three were governmental organizations. Eight grantees were food banks or established anti-hunger organizations. Some organizations had worked on FSP outreach previously while others had conducted outreach for other services, often Medicaid or the State Children's Health Insurance Program. A few sites had no previous experience with outreach. Some projects focused on rural areas, while

Exhibit E.1: Organizational Characteristics of the 18 Grantee Projects

Organization: location	Target populations ^a	Major partners
ACORN: Jersey City, NJ	Broad	Grocery stores, schools
City of Atlantic City: Atlantic City, NJ	Hispanics and elderly	Hispanic center, housing authority
Food Bank of Central New York: Cayuga, Cortland, and Oswego counties, NY	Broad	Department of Aging, service providers, food banks, university
Connecticut Association for Human Services: Bridgeport, CT	Broad	Child advocates, workforce training centers, businesses, supermarkets, day care centers, senior centers
Food Bank of Delaware: DE	Broad	“One-stop” employment centers, food member agencies, WIC offices
Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger (GPCAH): Philadelphia, PA	Broad	Interfaith hunger groups, one-stop employment centers, grocery stores, universities
Illinois Hunger Coalition: Chicago, IL	Families with children	Chicago public schools and related agencies
Community Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Indiana: nine counties in northeast IN	Broad	Grocery stores, aging councils, hunger relief programs
Community Action Program (CAP): Madison County, NY	Working poor and elderly	Office for Aging, Department of Health, WIC offices, libraries, food banks
Maternity Care Coalition (MCC): Philadelphia, PA	Young families	Interfaith groups, hospitals, Head Start centers
Human Service Coalition of Dade County: Miami-Dade, FL	Low-wage workers	Employers, workforce development centers
Muskegon Community Health Project: Muskegon, Newaygo, and Oceana counties, MI	Broad	WIC, workforce development centers, Head Start agencies, service providers.
NC Division of Aging: south central NC	Elderly, minorities, rural residents	Council on Aging, senior centers, Goodwill, churches
Project Bread: Athol, Orleans, Boston, and Worcester, MA	Broad	Public schools, health centers, social service agencies
Salem-Keizer School District: Salem, OR	Families with children	Elementary schools, WIC centers
Second Harvest Food Bank (SHFB): Santa Cruz, CA	Immigrants.	Latino service agencies (food, employment, and health)
Community Action Project (CAP): Tulsa, OK	Working poor	One-stop employment centers, Head Start centers, homeless shelters
Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger: VT	Broad	Service providers, Head Start centers, employment offices, senior centers, libraries, university

^a Grantees targeting “Broad” populations generally included low-income immigrants, the elderly, low-income families with children and the working poor.

others focused on larger metropolitan areas or broader state populations. Target populations also varied across grantees. Half the projects targeted broad populations (usually including families with children, the elderly, immigrants, and working poor and/or disabled adults) and the other half focused more intensely on one or two of these subpopulations.

Project Organization

Grantees used different strategies for partnering with other community groups, staffing, training, selecting venues for outreach services, and working with their local food stamp offices.

Partnerships. Some grantees partnered with several organizations, while others limited their partnerships to reach select populations (*Exhibit E.1*). Atlantic City targeted Hispanics and seniors and partnered with the Spanish Community Center and the Atlantic City Housing Authority. Two projects, Illinois and Salem-Keizer, focused on low-income parents and partnered with local elementary schools. Miami-Dade focused on low-wage workers and partnered with local businesses. In contrast, Delaware and Vermont partnered with more than 90 organizations to reach a broad target population of potential applicants. Two grantees (GPCAH and North Carolina) had specific partnerships with faith-based organizations, and others (such as MCC) made periodic presentations to similar groups.

Staffing. On average, sites employed five to six workers, usually a combination of full- and part-time workers. Ten sites also used volunteers to help with outreach. Some grantees used volunteers to conduct the full range of outreach services, while others limited volunteers' participation to information dissemination.

Training. Grantees used different strategies for training outreach workers and volunteers. Some relied on local food stamp office personnel to provide all the training, but in most cases local office personnel trained the primary outreach workers, who in turn trained other project staff. Because of volunteer turnover, projects that used many volunteers generally faced a continual training process. This led one grantee (GPCAH) to focus on smaller teams of more dedicated volunteers (students in work-study programs) who had strong incentives to remain attached to the project.

Venues. Outreach venues varied considerably across the sites. These venues often coincided with locations used by local partners and/or target populations. Grantees conducted outreach at food distribution sites, local community service offices, community events, schools, grocery stores, Head Start centers, WIC centers, senior centers, one-stop employment centers, health centers, public housing complexes, and tax preparation sites. Some grantees incorporated numerous venues into their projects, while others focused on one type of venue.

Relationships with the food stamp office. The degree of interaction and partnership with the local food stamp offices varied across the sites. Partnerships ranged from agreements to track basic outcomes (e.g., applications submitted and approvals) to more in-depth activities, including training, establishment of key contacts or liaisons to process the project's applications, and, sometimes, participation in outreach services. Half the grantees had worked with the food stamp office in the past and the others established new relationships. Local FSP office staff provided and/or participated in training project staff in 15 of the projects.

Outreach Services

Projects also differed in their emphasis on different kinds of outreach activities (*Exhibit E.2*). While all projects disseminated information, conducted some prescreenings, and assisted with applications, they varied in the types and intensity of services offered.

Information dissemination. Every grantee implemented some type of FSP information-sharing strategy and publicity campaign that included distribution of printed outreach material, such as brochures, flyers, posters, magnets and postcards. Most grantees produced their own materials containing explanations of monthly income levels

Exhibit E.2: Outreach Activities of the 18 Grantee Projects

	Information Dissemination				Prescreening and Application Assistance Tools				Application Assistance					
	Targeted dissemination of information (e.g., presentations, flyers)	Multimedia (e.g., television, radio, newspaper)	Web site	Hotlines	Paper forms	Computer/Software	Password-protected web-based tool	Public access web-based tool	Information/help with verification documents	In-person help completing application forms	Delivering and/or submitting applications to FSP office	Transportation	Eliminated initial food stamp office visit	Follow-up
ACORN	✓				P				✓					✓
Atlantic City	✓					A			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Central NY	✓	✓	✓	✓	B	P		B	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Connecticut	✓				B				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Delaware	✓	✓	✓		P	P			✓					✓
GPCAH	✓		✓	✓	B			B	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Illinois	✓			✓			B		✓	✓	✓			✓
Indiana	✓	✓	✓		B	B			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Madison	✓	✓	✓		B			B	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
MCC	✓				B			B	✓	✓	✓			✓
Miami	✓			✓	B		B		✓	✓	✓			✓
Muskegon	✓	✓	✓		B			B	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
North Carolina	✓				P				✓				✓	✓
Project Bread	✓	✓	✓	✓			A	B	✓	✓	✓			✓
Salem-Keizer	✓				B				✓	✓	✓			
SHFB	✓	✓		✓	B	P			✓	✓	✓			✓
Tulsa	✓						B		✓	✓	✓			
Vermont	✓	✓	✓					B	✓					

P = grantee used a tool for prescreening only; A=grantee used a tool for application assistance only; B=grantee used a tool for both prescreening and application assistance.

and maximum benefit amounts, as well as contact information. Others distributed the USDA flyers and posters, while adding their agency's logo and contact information. Eight projects also presented basic information about the FSP through their websites. Six

grantees advertised and maintained hotlines that provided information about the FSP and the application process.

Prescreening. All grantees offered formal or informal prescreening to determine the potential eligibility of their clients. The prescreening questions ranged from basic information about income to in-depth questions about the client's income, assets, and household information. Seventeen grantees used a formal prescreening tool that included one or more calculators (varying from paper and pencil to Excel spreadsheets and sophisticated web-based software programs) to estimate clients' eligibility for the FSP. Nine grantees offered a combination of screening mechanisms that adapted to the skills and expertise of service providers, the technology available at the service sites, and the desires of their clients. For example, some partner sites did not have Internet access, and some clients distrusted the computerized prescreenings. In these cases grantees used paper prescreening forms.

Application assistance. All sites provided some form of application assistance that ranged from the minimal service of providing information about the application process to the maximum service of going with a client to the local food stamp office to complete the application process. Fourteen sites provided at least some in-person help with completing the food stamp application form, and all these sites delivered some applications to the local food stamp offices. Staff often delivered or faxed application forms for clients, and four sites eventually were able to send the form electronically to the food stamp office. Seven grantees worked with the FSP to simplify the application process by eliminating initial food stamp office visits. Two sites provided assistance with transportation to the food stamp office. Fifteen grantees reported following up with at least some clients by phone to find out whether clients were proceeding with the application process and how it was going.

Findings from the Outcome Data

Half of the grantees successfully recorded the number of applications, approvals, and denials for their projects (*Exhibit E.3*). Another six captured some, but not all of these data and three grantees were unable to set up a process to track either most or all of their clients' applications at their local food stamp office.

The large range of outcomes across grantees underscores the differences in project scope, the experience of the grantee, and the nature of the project activities and target populations. Grant amounts and months of outreach shown in *Exhibit E.3* provide some context for variation in project scope.

Applications submitted. The number of applications (forms submitted to local food stamp offices) ranged from 133 to 3,300 across the 15 projects reporting outcomes. No single characteristic distinguishes the projects with large or small numbers of applications. For example, three of the four grantees with over 1,000 applications (GPCAH, Indiana, and SHFB) conducted outreach for 21 months or longer, but Vermont was active for only 13 months. Also, three of these four grantees (GPCAH, SHFB, and Vermont) had prior experience with their local food stamp offices (in various capacities),

but Indiana’s partnership with the local food stamp office was new. On the other hand, these grantees have several common characteristics: they all worked with several partner agencies and/or had extensive networks of volunteers, none reported difficulty tracking outcomes for their clients, and all had relatively high grant amounts.

Exhibit E.3: Quantitative Outcome Data

Location	Grant amount	Total months of outreach	Number of applications	Number of approvals	% approved	% denied	% pending/unknown
ACORN ^d	\$262,000	22	341	230	67%	11%	22%
Atlantic City	\$179,911	12	174	129	74%	26%	0
Central NY ^a	\$217,827	16	403	315	78%	22%	0
Connecticut ^b	\$195,000	17	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Delaware	\$349,592	22	935	780	83%	17%	0
GPCAH	\$310,822	21	3,300	2,470	75%	20%	5%
Illinois ^a	\$300,000	17	765	504	66%	33%	1%
Indiana	\$285,766	23	1,307	603	46%	49%	5%
Madison	\$171,300	12	264	90	34%	10%	56%
MCC	\$325,352	20	133	70	53%	22%	25%
Miami-Dade ^a	\$350,000	13	595	116	19%	10%	71%
Muskegon ^b	\$209,934	24	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
North Carolina ^a	\$217,218	19	354	280	79%	21%	0
Project Bread	\$344,500	10	460	85	18%	29%	53%
Salem-Keizer ^b	\$121,638	21	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
SHFB	\$287,680	21	1,398	457	33%	34%	33%
Tulsa ^a	\$336,093	12	136	108	79%	17%	4%
Vermont	\$294,297	13	1,008	814	81%	19%	0

NA= site had difficulty tracking outcomes.

^a An unknown number of applications and/or approvals are not included in figures for this grantee.

^b Grantee data are not shown because of significant problems tracking applications and outcomes.

Application outcomes. The share of applications approved (certified for benefits) ranged from 18 to 83 percent. In nine projects, two-thirds or more of the applications submitted were approved within the projects’ time horizons. This group includes a diverse set of projects. Several (Delaware, GPCAH, Tulsa, and Vermont) trained relatively large networks of volunteers, but two others (Atlantic City and Illinois) did not use volunteers in their projects. The projects differed in their emphasis on technology. ACORN (67 percent approved), for example, used only paper prescreening and application forms, but Vermont (81 percent approved) relied on a public-access web tool for prescreening and application assistance.

Some projects provided information about reasons for application denials. At four sites, the income and asset limits were the primary reasons for denial. High denial rates can reflect client characteristics or the prescreening activity. Two of these sites (Atlantic City and North Carolina) targeted the elderly, and these grantees reported that elderly clients were more likely to be denied food stamps because of assets. In other sites,

applicants' failure to complete the interview process or provide all the required verification information caused the high denial rates. For several sites, outcomes for over half the applications were pending or unknown at the end of the outreach period.

Costs. A common theme across all grantees was that conducting outreach proved costly because it was very labor intensive. While cost information on specific activities is not available, the cost per benefit certification can be calculated. Based on these calculations, the cost per certification varied significantly, from approximately \$126 in GPCAH to over \$1,000 in multiple locations.

It is important not to draw definitive conclusions about the “success” of projects based on these outcomes, for three reasons. First, several sites had missing data on applications filed, resulting in undercounts. Second, some grantees targeted harder-to-reach populations with historically lower FSP participation rates, such as the elderly and immigrants. Third, many projects will reap rewards from their outreach activities beyond the timeline of these projects. Grantees and their partners will continue to use prescreening and application assistance tools and their greater knowledge of the FSP should help assist their clients in the future.

Lessons about Outreach Project Implementation

Grantees' strategies for implementing their projects and delivering services provide further context for the findings and offer insights into future outreach activities. The summary below provides lessons related to staffing, use of volunteers, partnerships, new technology, training, and venues.

Staffing. Several grantees noted that the skills, expertise, and background of key staff were critical to a project's success. The project director in one site attributed much of their success to the lead outreach worker's strong leadership skills and marketing abilities. Another site benefited from the experience of a project coordinator who had worked on a prior FSP outreach project and had also been employed by the local FSP office. Some grantees that worked with populations with limited English language skills pointed to the need for culturally appropriate outreach workers who understood the concerns of their community and “spoke their language.”

Volunteers. Grantees found that committed volunteers could provide outreach services effectively when they established rapport and trust through in-person contact (particularly with members of similar demographic or ethnic groups). Volunteers varied in their comfort level with outreach assignments. Some preferred providing general information about the FSP and referring applicants to hotlines or outreach staff because they were reluctant to ask individuals for personal information or were afraid of making benefit computation errors. In one site, student volunteers participating through university work-study programs proved particularly committed and effective. While most grantees were generally positive about using volunteers, one grantee (Muskegon) argued that paid staff provided the most effective outreach workers because they were trained to fully understand FSP rules.

Partnerships. Grantees reported that partnerships with well-established, trusted community organizations substantially enhanced their outreach activities. These partnerships provided direct links to target populations and venues for presentations and/or prescreening and application assistance. Grantees also faced challenges with partners, such as difficulties keeping them trained and committed, especially when they reported to different managers. Some grantees found that their partners' staff was overcommitted and could not devote sufficient time to FSP outreach activities.

Training. Training for grantee and partner staff and volunteers required a significant time and labor commitment, particularly for grantees with extensive partnering or volunteer arrangements. Some grantees modified and adjusted training sessions based on early program experiences. Others needed to repeat training sessions to address frequent staff turnover. Some sites found it important to include FSP staff in the training because they could answer questions about program rules and regulations. FSP staff participation also validated the food stamp office's commitment to the outreach efforts.

New technology. Ten grantees implemented new technology or adapted existing technologies to assist with prescreening for eligibility and, in some cases, with application assistance. Overall, grantees found these activities proved challenging and labor intensive, in many cases more than anticipated. Grantees often experienced implementation delays from technical challenges, contractor scheduling, and, in many cases, necessary modifications to original designs. New technology often required the availability of computers and Internet access not always available at partner sites. Technology also placed extra demands on partner and volunteer training. Factors that seemed to contribute to successful web development included clear up-front specifications; minimally designed sites that are easily navigated; and project staff who know the FSP and could communicate with the web developer. One site (Vermont) attributed part of its success to a minimal web site design that was easy for clients to use. Another site (Madison) noted the importance of having staff with knowledge of the FSP who could also speak the language of the web site developer.

Venues. Grantees reported two primary lessons about venues. First, clients need privacy when learning about the FSP. Clients did not want to learn about the FSP in locations, such as grocery stores in small towns, where a neighbor or friend would see them. Second, venues with changing audiences were more effective for reaching larger numbers of potential eligibles. One site that used school events to identify eligible parents found the same parents tended to go to all the events during the school year. In contrast, projects conducting outreach at health centers and career centers reported they frequently saw new faces.

Lessons about Collaborating with the Food Stamp Office

Grantees learned the importance of ongoing communication with the local FSP agencies and the value of having FSP staff participate in project training. Two grantees found having specific liaisons to their projects helped ensure communication. Other sites found

communications were enhanced when food stamp office staff were integrated into outreach activities. FSP offices also benefited from the outreach projects because clients came to their eligibility interviews better prepared.

In a few cases, grantees failed to set up a partnership or the local food stamp office staff faced work overloads or budget cuts that made it difficult to serve the outreach grantee's needs. These problems made it difficult to assess the number of application approvals achieved by the outreach project. Failures related to difficulties establishing smooth systems to track outcomes for clients referred by the grantee.

Lessons about Outreach Approaches

According to the grantees, some outreach activities work better than others. While these results represent the impressions of project coordinators, local evaluators, partners, and volunteers rather than hard evidence that connects specific food stamp application approval rates to particular outreach inputs, a large number of grantees can identify strategies that seem more fruitful than others.

Information dissemination. Some grantees found that information flyers were more effective when they included eligibility information, including potential benefit amounts and required verification documents. Some emphasized the importance of using local contact information over toll-free numbers in media campaigns because clients preferred talking with a person knowledgeable about their local community. Several sites traced clients' interest to public service announcements on TV and radio, but did not find that billboards encouraged the same interest. Several grantees found that personal interactions with clients were more effective than impersonal information distribution.

Prescreening. Many grantees reported that prescreening encouraged applications for some clients. Prescreening showed reluctant clients whether they were eligible and their potential benefit amount.

Projects varied in whether they used paper, computer-assisted, or web-based prescreening forms. According to the grantees, some forms of prescreening worked better than others with particular client populations. For example, seniors in Madison and North Carolina preferred paper-based prescreening forms because they distrusted the new technologies. Grantees with technology-based prescreeners also used paper forms when PCs or the Internet was not accessible.

Some projects provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of prescreening for increasing food stamp applications. Five projects (ACORN, Delaware, GPCAH, Indiana, and Vermont) stopped their initial outreach process at prescreening and left it up to eligible clients to apply for benefits. (Most of these projects did, however, later follow up with clients who did not apply.) Two of these projects reported that about half of those prescreened as eligible submitted applications. (The other three sites did not report the share of those prescreened as eligible that applied.) Three additional sites (Connecticut, MCC, and North Carolina) specifically tested the effectiveness of prescreening and concluded that more intensive "case management" services were required for achieving

applications and approvals. The remaining 10 projects moved directly from prescreening to application assistance.

Application assistance. Nine grantees (ACORN, Connecticut, Delaware, GPCAH, Indiana, Madison, MCC, Project Bread, and SHFB) reported that successful completion of the FSP application process often required intensive assistance, including help submitting the applications to the food stamp office and multiple follow-up calls to encourage clients to complete their interviews and submit all required documents. MCC reported that 70 percent of submitted applications received extensive application assistance and support. Some clients required as many as three or four calls. Delaware reported that an initial round of follow-up calls induced only 30 percent of their prescreened clients to apply for the FSP. Some clients (especially seniors and individuals living in rural areas) needed transportation to the food stamp office (although transportation was not an integral part of most projects).

Despite the general assessment that clients often require intensive assistance to complete the food stamp benefit application process, some types of application assistance did facilitate the process. For example, four grantees (Madison, Project Bread, and the two Pennsylvania sites, GPCAH and MCC) successfully submitted clients' applications to the food stamp office electronically. Eligibility workers visited another site's (North Carolina) outreach location to complete the first application stage with clients. These forms of assistance saved clients one visit to the food stamp office.

Lessons about Special Populations

Grantees also learned more about barriers to food stamp participation among non-English speakers, the elderly, and the working poor. These lessons corroborate and strengthen previous research findings about food stamp participation.

Non-English speakers. Like previous outreach projects, these grantees documented that immigrants feared risking their status in the United States if they received food stamp benefits. They resisted giving personal information to outreach workers and food stamp offices. Others believed that their sponsors would be required to repay the food stamp benefits. Also, non-English speaking populations often misunderstood FSP rules and were not aware of their eligibility. Immigrant parents that were ineligible for benefits did not understand their children born in this country could receive food stamp benefits. Grantees also reported that some immigrants were discouraged because translation services were not always available at local food stamp offices. Several grantees reported that their information dissemination helped dispel myths about the food stamp program, and prescreenings showed families whether they were eligible for benefits. One site (Muskegon) conducted outreach activities in families' homes, thereby eliminating barriers related to a lack of child care and transportation.

Elderly. Senior citizens, in particular, expressed concerns about the stigma of receiving food stamp benefits. Sometimes their younger family members shared this feeling and refused to help their elderly parents apply for the benefits. California and

New York's applications required photo identification and fingerprinting, and New York noted that seniors feared the intrusiveness of these requirements. Grantees focusing on outreach to elderly persons fostered trust by partnering with community groups that routinely serve seniors and using older people as outreach workers. Some extended their information activities to seniors' families by developing specialized packets for adult children of eligible senior citizens.

Low-wage workers. Similar to earlier outreach studies, these grantees found it difficult to locate low-wage workers because they often were not connected to other community service programs. Projects focused on schools for outreach noted that the lowest-income parents, especially single parents, came to school events less often than more affluent, ineligible parents. One site (Miami) successfully conducted outreach at employers of low-wage workers (one employer helped with application assistance), but employer interest was difficult to sustain. Sites that packaged food stamp benefits with other public benefits, such as health insurance, reported some success. Several projects found that low-wage workers could also be identified at tax preparation sites. Also, getting working families with children to the local FSP office could be difficult because parents had many other obligations. One site arranged early morning interviews for eligible working individuals. Finally, the working poor often expressed feelings of stigma about getting food stamp benefits and many did not want to visit a welfare office.

Conclusions and Implications for Food Stamp Participation

These 18 food stamp outreach projects represent an important USDA initiative to improve participation in the Food Stamp Program. Projects occurred in local areas across the country and varied in their approaches and their target populations. Some projects aimed to reach broad low-income populations in their communities, while others targeted specific groups such as immigrants, seniors, and the working poor.

Grantees' projects demonstrate some important strategies for increasing FSP participation. Grass-roots efforts that educate service providers, community leaders, businesses, and low-income populations about the FSP help demystify what is perceived as a complex application process. Using outreach workers with similar cultural and demographic characteristics to approach potential clients increases the likelihood of engaging them in the process. New technologies that automate the application process also can facilitate participation, but they require time and technical resources. With the new technologies, clients can see whether they are eligible in a private, familiar setting. Eligible clients can be encouraged to move forward with an application.

Clients often fail to follow through with the process at the food stamp office, suggesting that increasing program participation requires more than education and initial help filling out the application. The labor-intensive application assistance that some grantees provided is not feasible nationwide. Reducing the verification documents required for eligibility and waiving more in-person interviews would help, although the effects of such changes on payment accuracy have not been assessed. Recent changes in food stamp regulations and legislation that allow states to simplify the application process should move the program toward a more user-friendly benefit system for those that need

and want food assistance. States should be encouraged to implement simplified systems, train “pro-participation” eligibility workers, and provide basic follow-up services for eligible applicants who drop out of the process.

Improving state and local food stamp office procedures likely will require additional staff and increase administrative costs. These investments should pay off, however, by enhancing the image of the program and improving food security among America’s poorest citizens.

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