

Background

Low participation rates among low-income people eligible for food stamp benefits have prompted a number of outreach and public education efforts. In 2002, the Food and Nutrition Service awarded \$5 million in grants to community-based organizations in 15 States to investigate how to increase participation among people eligible for food stamp benefits. The evaluation of these grants describes the features and outcomes of these 18 projects.

Organization	Amount
Project Bread	\$344,500
Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz	\$287,680
Illinois Hunger Coalition	\$300,000
Food Bank of Delaware	\$359,592
Connecticut Association of Human Services	\$195,000
ACORN Institute	\$262,000
Community Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Indiana	\$285,766
Maternity Care Coalition	\$325,352
North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services	\$217,218
Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger	\$310,822
Muskegon Campaign to End Hunger	\$209,934
Vermont Campaign to End Hunger	\$294,297
Salem Keizer School District	\$121,638
Human Services Coalition of Dade County	\$350,000
Food Bank of Central New York	\$217,827
Community Action Program of Madison County	\$171,300
City of Atlantic City	\$179,911
Community Action Project of Tulsa County	\$336,093

The 2002 outreach projects addressed several 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 offered:

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

The evaluation findings provide important lessons about outreach strategies and food stamp participation. However, none of the projects used an experimental approach that can conclusively identify outreach activity impacts. Concurrent changes in some program 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 stamp offices, using technology to reach low-income people, and the effectiveness of different types of outreach strategies.

Findings

In total, these projects provided some form of application assistance—from simple referral to actual help in filling out and filing applications—to at least 14,000 people. Project staffs estimate there were more than 11,500 applications filed and more than 7,000 new certifications. These estimates likely represent lower bounds of the outreach efforts because of data losses. Further, these results do not account for longer-term effects from the outreach projects that continued beyond this evaluation's time frame.

More generally, the evaluation concludes that:

- **Partnerships with community groups serving low-income families contribute to successful outreach.** Partners that were trusted organizations within the community provided access to potential clients, opened doors to other groups in the community serving similar populations, and helped implement outreach strategies.
- **Cooperation from local food stamp offices is critical to successful outreach.** Successful grantees used staff from local food stamp offices in several ways – to help plan and monitor projects, provide outcome data, participate in training, and conduct outreach activities at remote sites.
- **Technology that facilitates eligibility prescreening, while challenging, can pay off.** New Internet tools require trained personnel to develop, maintain, and adjust software. 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 application process, especially for broader target populations.
- **Successful outreach often requires more than basic education and information dissemination.** 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. 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 making frequent follow-up calls to facilitate the process.

- **Groups with the lowest food stamp participation rates, including immigrants, the elderly, and the working poor, proved the most difficult to reach.** 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 similar backgrounds were important for reaching these groups. Connecting with low-income working families was challenging because they often did not frequent places where outreach was occurring.

Method

This report synthesizes findings from quantitative and qualitative data collected by the outreach projects and from local evaluation reports submitted by the 18 grantees. 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.

For More Information

Zedlewski, Sheila, David Wittenburg, Carolyn O'Brien, Robin Koralek, Sandra Nelson, and Gretchen Rowe. *Evaluation of Food Stamp Research Grants to Improve Access Through the Use of New Technology and Partnerships*. Report prepared for the Food and Nutrition Service, USDA. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, October 2005.

The full report can be found on-line at www.fns.usda.gov/oane

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