

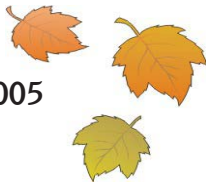


# Excellent Service for All

Innovation in the Food Stamp Program

Access, Outreach, Payment Accuracy, Certification, Nutrition Education & Quality Control

U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Food and Nutrition Service  
Mid-Atlantic Region  
Food Stamp Program



Issue 9, November 2005



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## Many Thanks...

We take this opportunity to thank our state and local agency colleagues in the Mid-Atlantic Region for providing excellent service to Hurricane Katrina evacuees who needed the nutrition benefits of the Food Stamp Program.

We most appreciated your willingness to serve, tireless desire to resolve problems and incredible patience awaiting answers to rapidly-evolving policy. We applaud you, as well, for selflessly giving of your time on weekends and during evenings and working at evacuee sites.

While you were providing vital assistance to the evacuees, you were determining eligibility and benefits for resident applicants and maintaining the cases of the ongoing customers.

Thank you very much for doing an outstanding job!

Yvette S. Jackson, Administrator

Joseph Weingart, Regional Director, Food Stamp Program  
Mid-Atlantic Region

Special benefits applied for in September or October 2005:

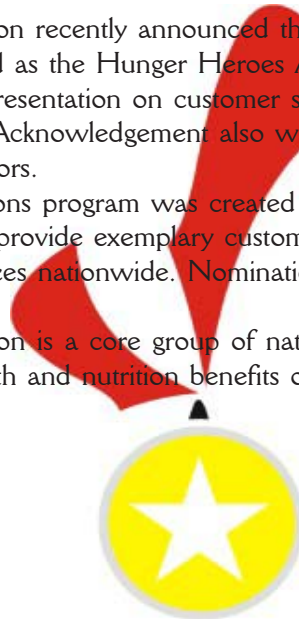
	Households	Individuals	Benefits
DE	116	241	\$ 30,164
DC	470	685	\$ 79,481
MD	1,434	2,960	\$ 365,728
NJ	549	1,082	\$ 214,525
PA	806	1,541	\$ 194,039
VA	1,645	3,606	\$ 546,104
VI	5	11	\$ 1,913
WV	239	360	\$ 41,856
MARO	5,264	10,486	\$1,473,810

# FOOD STAMP HUNGER CHAMPIONS

The Food Stamp Outreach Coalition recently announced the first winners of the Food Stamp Hunger Champions program (formerly identified as the Hunger Heroes Award Program). The two offices that were selected as Mentors each provided a presentation on customer service and their approach to outreach at the APHSA conference this past October. Acknowledgement also was given at the conference to the four offices that were selected as Honorable Mentors.

The Food Stamp Hunger Champions program was created by the Food Stamp Outreach Coalition to recognize local food stamp offices that provide exemplary customer service. The winners were selected from nominations of more than 50 local offices nationwide. Nominations were accepted from any individual, agency or organization.

The Food Stamp Outreach Coalition is a core group of national anti-hunger advocacy groups, other groups interested in promoting the health and nutrition benefits of the Food Stamp Program and staff of the Food and Nutrition Service.



## Mentors

### *Department of Human Services, Polk County, Iowa*

The Department takes extraordinary measures to educate and assist eligible food stamp customers. The Income Maintenance personnel use traditional and creative outreach methods to serve their customers. Its media campaign included advertisements and an outreach blitz that took the office to the streets. The latest technology was used to expedite the processing of applications. Their creativity goes far beyond average outreach and customer service.

### *Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency, Santa Cruz, California*

The agency demonstrates an innovative approach to customer service and administration of the Food Stamp Program. This office has a strong partnership with community organizations to strengthen anti-hunger resources in the Santa Cruz area and provide one-on-one assistance to potential customers. One partner stated, "The administrative staff, supervisors, eligibility workers and intake staff perform above and beyond the call of duty in training community workers, answering questions on regulations..." This agency is seen in the community as an exemplary agency.

## Honorable Mentors

### *Philadelphia County Assistance Office, West District, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

The West District partners with the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger to change service delivery, shift perceptions in the community and reverse shrinking food stamp rolls. The office

members also made many enhancements to provide better service, such as adding a magazine and children's book corner in the lobby, internally distributing a neighborhood resource guide, scheduling information open houses for social service providers and community leaders and installing a secure, document drop-box to accommodate working customers.

### *Richmond City Department of Social Services, Richmond, Virginia*

The Department offers a friendly, customer-oriented approach to providing needy people with food stamps and other benefits. The staff members participate in annual training on customer service, provide services at several satellite offices throughout Richmond City, accommodate elderly customers through home or telephone interviews, wait on customers within 15 minutes of their arrival and offer program information at numerous community and health fairs.

### *Charlottesville Department of Social Services, Charlottesville, Virginia*

This local office assists the community in any way it can. Customers are served within 10 minutes of their arrival at the office, customers' needs are assessed, and they are encouraged to apply for all programs. When denied for food stamp benefits, customers are contacted and offered other forms of assistance. Limited English Proficiency and interpreter services are offered, information is provided to food (con't on page 6)

# DIVERSITY IN OUTREACH

*It's not uncommon to hear exchanges in Cantonese, Russian and Spanish at the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in Maryland. Speaking a second language is among the many contributions provided by the staff there. And some of the ways they tell the public about assistance benefits are equally diverse.*



## POVERTY LESSONS LEARNED

The curriculum for the teenagers at Shaare Torah in Gaithersburg, Maryland, this past year included the topic of poverty. Through hands-on activities, they studied the origins of poverty and responses to it, and learned about the function of non-profit organizations and governmental agencies, including the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), in providing assistance to needy people.

The point of the project was to look at a relevant situation in the modern world and respond from a Jewish perspective, says Deborah Ayala Srabstein, who is the education director of this spiritual home for approximately 200 families.

The students' journey to gain a deeper understanding of the Jewish "mitzvah", or mandate, to combat poverty, began with a discussion on poverty by repre-

sentatives of various organizations.

Peter Flandrau of DHHS, Crisis Prevention and Intervention, and Tina McKendree, executive director of a nearby family shelter, Stepping Stones, talked about what it is like for children and adults who live in shelters.

Lora Couchman and Viviana A. Ortiz of DHHS provided information about the food stamp, cash and medical assistance programs – how to apply, verification requirements, who typically applies for benefits in the county and the amount they can receive. They passed along an application, benefits chart and program pamphlets to the teens and their parents.

"Meeting the DHHS staff was very helpful," says Deborah. "The students realized that there are caseworkers who care and want to help people through the

process. They also received an explanation of fraud and verifications, so they left the meeting knowing that there are protections in place to make sure that the Food Stamp Program operates as it is intended."

And they also left with something on their minds: What can a family pay for with the money (food stamp allotment)?

They found out during a subsequent shopping trip at a nearby grocery store. They also found themselves asking a lot more questions. After filling grocery carts with the things they were used to, such as juice boxes, the students soon realized that these items would place them far beyond the \$300 budget they had for food and toiletries (for a fictitious family of four), says Deborah.

For the remainder of the trip, the young shoppers consulted (con't on page 4)



with Deborah and also with their parents about unit pricing, purchasing in bulk and the nutritional value and shelf-life of different foods. “It was an eye-opener when they realized, for example, that they could put

the juice boxes back on the shelf and purchase a much larger quantity at a lower cost,” Deborah says.

The students put faces to the nameless family of four when they donated the purchased goods to Stepping Stones, a family shelter they had previously visited.

“When we came back to the shelter, the residents were all hanging out in the living room. Moms were with their babies. Walking in with all that stuff made us feel a little awkward.”

They talked later about their feelings. “The students came to realize that for the most part, they are able to eat whatever they want - rarely do their parents say ‘no’ to them because of the price of something. They don’t typically have difficult choices to make about how to use money. And they began the year with a lot of misconceptions about who is poor in this country - it was quite eye-opening to see that the majority of the poor are working families.”

The experience also caught the parents somewhat off-guard. “Some (parents) experienced feelings of guilt. They expressed how lucky they were. One parent talked about how it felt to walk with her daughter through the huge food closet at the shelter,

and they realized how many economic resources they had as compared to many others,” says Deborah.

In continuing their examination of poverty, the students’ experience this year has been an entirely different one. The ongoing homework assignment has been to clip news articles about poverty. It will be sadly simple to find coverage on people struggling to find housing or meet their basic needs because of Hurricane Katrina, says Deborah.

Shaare Torah has been providing the lessons on poverty through a curriculum developed by the Jewish Fund for Justice, and with the help of a grant from the Jewish Youth Philanthropy Institute, which was used for the shopping trip.

**To swap information, contact: Deborah Ayala Srabstein, Shaare Torah, (301) 987-0699, [deborahayala@gmail.com](mailto:deborahayala@gmail.com); and Sue Gordon, Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, (240) 777-4087, [sue.gordon@montgomerycountymd.gov](mailto:sue.gordon@montgomerycountymd.gov).**

## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS PROMOTED

Cindy Chan, case manager, is proficient both in Cantonese and program policies. It’s a mix that works well for applicants and customers of the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in Maryland.

It’s also a good thing for partner organizations when they request a speaker to present information in Cantonese on the food stamp, medical, cash, housing and refugee assistance programs.

Cindy says she enjoys meeting with folks and is happy to explain the programs to the meeting attendees, who may number as high as 250 during a session. Over time, she’s become familiar with the types of issues and questions they have, and as a result, has developed a visual presentation that she uses to explain what DHHS has to offer and the basic eligibility requirements for each program, shown simultaneously in Cantonese and English.

Back at the office, besides translating routinely for the customers, Cindy shares with her co-workers the knowledge that she has gained from participating in outreach presentations to the Chinese community. She encourages the case managers to be especially patient with customers who have limited English-speaking ability. She tells them to listen to the customers. It may just be that taking extra time is enough to improve communication and give the customers what they need.

The Montgomery County area has a large number of immigrants, many of whom arrived recently from China, says Cindy. A large percentage of them are elderly persons, and although they usually have some family members here, it’s still a difficult adjustment, she says.

**To swap information, contact: Cindy Chan, Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, (240) 777-4063, [cindy.chan@montgomerycountymd.gov](mailto:cindy.chan@montgomerycountymd.gov).**





### SIMPLIFYING THE MEDICAL DEDUCTION

The New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has been operating a simplified medical deduction project since December 2003. The project, which replaces actual costs of medical expenses for elderly household members or disabled household members, was granted through December 1, 2008, by the Food and Nutrition Service in a waiver of the federal regulations at 7 CFR 273.9(d)(3).

The state applies a standard medical deduction of \$83 a month to cases in which the monthly medical expenses exceed \$35. If a household can verify that its monthly medical expense equals \$35, a deduction of \$83 is given. If the household can verify that its monthly medical expense is more than \$83, the actual amount of the expenses is used for the deduction.

To obtain approval for the project, the state was required by the Food and Nutrition Service to demonstrate that it would be cost neutral. This was accomplished by lowering the Standard Utility

Allowance by \$6. DHHS also was required to complete a pre-implementation survey to capture data from 18 months prior to the project. It is required to do the same at the end of the second year of the project; DHHS is in the process of tabulating the results of the recent customer survey. For the first and third years, time and accuracy was/will be measured through a random sample of cases.

“We were looking to simplify the verification process for our senior citizen and disabled participants,” says Laurie Green, food stamp program manager for DHHS, Division of Family Assistance. “Besides the benefit for those populations, we thought the Family Service Specialists would gain from the change, maintaining maximum efficiency in processing and lowering the risk of errors.”

Whether the project has made a difference in the error rate, it's too early to tell. “We are still doing an analysis of the impact of the deduction and its effect on the error rate.”

One thing is for sure - feedback from eligibility staff has been very positive because the simplified medical deduction is just that, a simpler calculation and fewer documents through which to pore, Laurie says.

The early results of the recent customer survey have been interesting. Laurie explains, DHHS has been getting about a 31 percent response rate, and the responses are primarily positive. Most of the negative feedback comes from not really understanding the process, although most survey responders said they were comfortable with it.

DHHS has asked a staff person to contact the folks who identified themselves on the survey. Besides getting additional feedback, DHHS sees this as an opportunity for outreach to elderly participants. “We may get some better understanding of how to reach non-participating target population members.”

**To swap information, contact: Laurie Green, New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, (603) 271-4256, lagreen@dhhs.state.nh.us.**

## 2004 Performance Bonuses Program Access Index

The U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded eight states a total of \$12 million recently for providing the best or most-improved access to the Food Stamp Program during 2004:

### Best Program Access Index

Missouri	105%	\$2,938,589
Louisiana	97%	\$2,864,775
District of Columbia	96%	\$ 450,753
Hawaii	92%	\$ 507,892

### Most-Improved Program Access Index

Oklahoma	121%	\$1,728,520
West Virginia	101%	\$1,150,513
Arkansas	87%	\$1,465,877
New Mexico	75%	\$ 893,081

The Program Access Index (previously known as the Participant Access Rate) is based in part on data from the Census Bureau's March Supplement to the Current Population Survey. It measures the ratio of participants in the Food Stamp Program to the number of persons in poverty.

## Timely-Processed Applications

The U.S. Department of Agriculture also recently awarded six states a total of \$6 million for having the highest percent of food stamp applications processed timely in 2004:

Massachusetts	99%	\$1,039,891
Kentucky	99%	\$1,552,195
South Dakota	98%	\$ 142,065
West Virginia	98%	\$ 740,788
Oklahoma	97%	\$1,112,959
Virginia	97%	\$1,412,102

The bonuses for Program Access Index and Timely-Processed Applications, as well as the other performance bonuses that are awarded to states each year - best and most-improved payment error rate and best and most-improved negative error rate - were authorized by the 2002 Farm Bill. A total of \$48 million in performance bonuses is awarded annually to states in these four areas of the Food Stamp Program.

### ...Hunger Champions

banks, schools and health departments, and outreach is conducted at community events.

### *Department of Health and Human Services, Portland, Maine*

The Department provides a one-stop-shop for all eligibility programs and uses a one-page application. The 230 daily walk-in customers are seen on a first come, first served basis.

For a list of the nominees: [www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/pdfs/hunger\\_champions.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/pdfs/hunger_champions.pdf).

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## Participation Grants

The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced in August that six grants, totaling \$5 million, were awarded to state agencies and partner organizations. The grants, authorized by the 2002 Farm Bill, were provided to fund projects aimed at simplifying food stamp application and eligibility systems. Within the states in the Mid-Atlantic Region, the Maryland Department of Human Resources was among the six awardees.

- \$938,057 – Maryland Department of Human Resources and United Way of Central Maryland  
To develop a web-based, multi-program tool, Service Access and Information Link (SAIL), which will enable customers to pre-screen for eligibility, apply on-line for nine benefit programs, including the Prescription Drug Benefit Program, recertify and report changes.
- \$566,143 – Michigan Department of Human Services and Elder Law of Michigan
- \$832,343 – State of Arizona and Office of the Governor
- \$945,000 – City of New York and New York City Coalition Against Hunger
- \$911,900 – Minnesota Department of Human Services, Semcac Community Action Agency and Olmstead County Community Action Agency
- \$806,557 – Tennessee Department of Human Services

The projects of the grantees were selected from more than 30 proposals.

# FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

## Products★Services

### TV and In-Store Public Service Announcement

The Food and Nutrition Service recently made available a 30-second Public Service Announcement (PSA) that promotes the nutrition benefits of the Food Stamp Program. The message is about the basics – family, health, shelter and enough to eat. It shows a mother and her young daughter grocery shopping and using their electronic benefit card to purchase nutritious food, and then moves to the family eating together.

The PSA is appropriate for broadcast use (television and cable) and for in-store play by businesses such as supermarkets and department stores that have video public address systems.

Originally developed by the Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz, California, the PSA was tailored for use nationwide (it provides the national toll-free number of the Food Stamp Program: 1-800-221-5689) and is available in English and Spanish. There also is a version that enables the user to overlay a local telephone number or other contact information. If desired, the national number also can be included with the local number. The master tape is high-quality Betacam SP format.

**To see and hear a small and compressed streaming version of the PSA:** [www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/psas.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/psas.htm).

**To get a copy of the PSA:** [fspoutreach@fns.usda.gov](mailto:fspoutreach@fns.usda.gov). Indicate whether you are requesting it for TV/cable broadcast or in-store play. These versions are very similar but are licensed differently; therefore, it is very important to request the correct version for your use.

### Outreach Grants

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently announced that it is again offering food stamp outreach grants. At least \$1 million is available for the grants under this competition (contingent upon the availability of fiscal year 2006 funding), and the maximum grant award is \$75,000.

The purpose of the grants is to implement and study effective strategies to inform and educate potentially eligible, low-income people about the nutrition benefits of the Food Stamp Program, the eligibility requirements and how to apply. The national participation rate among those eligible for the Food Stamp Program is only 56 percent. These grants represent FNS' continued commitment to conduct food stamp outreach and work towards growth in program participation.

The outreach grants are available to private, non-profit organizations, including faith- and community-based organizations, and public entities (with the exception of state and local food stamp agencies). Recipients and sub-grantees of U.S. Department of Agriculture outreach grants in fiscal years 2001, 2002, 2004 and 2005 are not eligible for the outreach grants (outreach grants were not awarded in 2003).

Interested applicants may submit an optional Letter of Intent by January 6, 2006. All completed applications must be received at or before 5 p.m. Eastern Time, on April 3, 2006.

**To obtain the Request for Application, including detailed information about due dates, the application process and format and who to contact:** [www.fns.usda.gov/fns/grants.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns/grants.htm) or [www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov).

**Please share this information with your colleagues, members or constituents, in newsletters, through listservs, at events and meetings and/or on your website.**

(con't on page 8)

# FOOD STAMP PROGRAM Products★Services

## Free Publications

The Food and Nutrition Service is offering a variety of new food stamp outreach publications -

### *10 Myths and Facts Collection*

Fact sheets to address common myths related to the Food Stamp Program and workers, the homeless, the disabled, the elderly and immigrants

Workers: [www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/workingpoor.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/workingpoor.htm)

Homeless: [www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/homeless.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/homeless.htm)

Disabled: [www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/disabilities.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/disabilities.htm)

Elderly: [www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/seniors.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/seniors.htm)

Immigrants: [www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/immigrants.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/immigrants.htm)

### *10 Outreach Ideas Collection*

Fact sheets on ways retailers, municipal agencies and faith-based organizations can conduct food stamp outreach activities: [www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/coalition/default.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/coalition/default.htm).

The Food and Nutrition Service also provides other free food stamp publications that cover information on food stamp eligibility specific to the general public, immigrants, the elderly and the disabled; public charge; and verification required for eligibility. The publications are available in 36\* languages: [www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/translations.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/translations.htm).

\*Albanian, Amharic, Arabic, Burmese, simplified Chinese, traditional Chinese, Croatian, English, Farsi, French, Greek, Haitian-Creole, Hebrew, Hindi, Hmong, Igbo, Italian, Japanese, Khmer, Korean, Kurdish, Laotian, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Somali, Spanish, Tagalog, Thai, Turkish, Urdu, Vietnamese and Yoruba.

## Radio Advertisements

As part of its campaign to increase participation in the Food Stamp Program, the U.S. Department of Agriculture will run radio advertisements again in 2006.

Within the Mid-Atlantic Region, advertisements will air in Philadelphia (also covering parts of New Jersey), Pittsburgh, Baltimore and Washington, DC (also covering parts of Maryland and Virginia), and the tentative schedule is March, April, July and August 2006.

We will provide the list of radio stations that will run the advertising, along with the general times of the day when they will air, as soon as this is determined.

**Plan now to coordinate your outreach efforts with this radio advertising campaign.**

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