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United States
Department of
Agriculture

Food and
Nutrition
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3101 Park
Center Drive
Alexandria, VA
22302

Food Stamp Program Client Enrollment Assistance Demonstration Projects:

Final Evaluation Report



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Demonstration Projects:
Final Evaluation Report**

A Product of LTG Associates, Inc.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is the largest of the nation's food assistance programs administered by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The FSP provides benefits to eligible low-income households to help them obtain sufficient and nutritious foods.

In the mid-1970's the rate of participation in the FSP had been found to be less than 50 percent of the households that were potentially eligible for the program. By 1989, the estimated participation rate had climbed to 59 percent of potentially eligible households. Survey research found that general reasons for non-participation included lack of information, difficulties with the enrollment process, stigma and fear associated with the program, and the desire of many persons, even when in need, not to receive public benefits. The survey data also showed that certain hard-to-reach groups were served by the FSP at even lower rates than the low-income population as a whole.

In 1990, the U. S. Congress authorized funding for a series of demonstration projects to develop and implement innovative client-assistance strategies to help eligible members of underserved, hard-to-reach populations groups gain access to the FSP. Target groups included "rural, elderly, and homeless populations, low-income working families with children, and non-English speaking minorities."

In 1993 and 1994, FNS awarded small grants totaling \$2.8 million to 26 local, mainly non-profit social-service organizations to carry out these demonstrations. The authorizing act also directed the Secretary of USDA to assess the outcomes of the demonstration projects and report to the Congress. In order to enlarge on earlier studies of program barriers and access, which employed quantitative and survey methods of data collection, the present evaluation was conducted using qualitative observational and data collection. An Interim Evaluation Report, detailing the methods utilized, and a Survey of the Literature on problems of access to the Food Stamp Program were submitted in 1997. This report completes the evaluation process.

Three basic questions guided the evaluation:

1. What barriers do eligible clients encounter in gaining access to the FSP?
2. What methods of outreach and client assistance are most effective in help ineligible persons overcome these barriers? and,
3. Can public-private collaboration between project sponsors and local food stamp offices facilitate eligible persons' completion of the enrollment process?

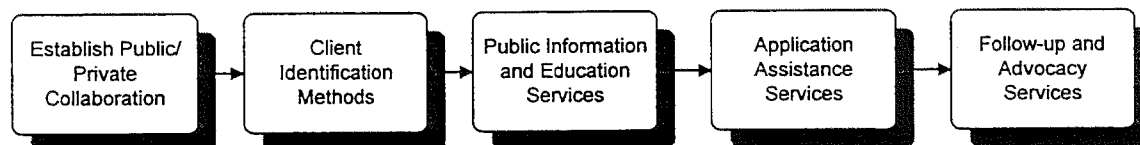
Barriers to Participation. Barriers observed were varied and numerous and interacted in complex ways. What constituted a barrier depended critically on applicants' capacities and circumstances. Some people in all the underserved population groups were able to complete the enrollment process with little or no assistance. People who were able to access the benefit on their own generally

possessed adequate life skills, were in reasonably good physical and mental health, and maintained the kinds of records required to document eligibility. They were for the most part literate, able to communicate appropriately, and able to understand instructions. Other people needed limited assistance, such as proper information about FSP requirements, help with transportation or copying documents, or more accessible office hours or locations. Still other persons, however, required intensive, ongoing support to obtain and continue their use of the food stamp benefit, due to many, interlinking causes. Common among these causes were basic problems with literacy, language, and cultural interpretation. As common were limitations arising from personal physical or mental frailty or disability, from geographic or social isolation, and from fear of dealing with an impersonal Government bureaucracy. Some persons had such overwhelming medical, psychological, or psycho-social problems that they could apply for benefits only if another person acted on their behalf. These latter groups of eligible non-participants, despite serious need for food assistance, were much harder to reach and serve than policy and advocacy groups had acknowledged in the past, even with the assistance of eligibility workers or staff advocates.

Demonstration Project Activities. A wide variety of methods were developed by the demonstration projects described in this report. The figure below shows the range of activities pursued.

FIGURE 5

Client Identification and Assistance Process



Not surprisingly, public/private agency collaboration proved useful in overcoming many of the barriers experienced by clients in seeking to enroll in the FSP. It was apparent that most local food stamp offices did not have the staff time or resources to provide the extent of assistance needed by many clients. Successful collaborations allowed client needs to be more fully met, with FSP and grantee staffs both able to play to their respective strengths.

Many methods were tried for identifying unserved potentially eligible clients, some effective, some not. Since many clients need multiple services, some of the most successful methods involved working through related service agencies, developing client lists, contacting clients at those agency sites, and providing FSP training to their staffs. These activities helped overcome the lack of systematic information sharing among agencies, one of the widespread barriers to efficient FSP documentation of client status.

Contacting potentially eligible clients in settings where some degree of comfort, safety, and privacy were available and where clients' circumstances allowed time to talk proved effective. Sites where potentially eligible persons already were seeking food or other aid were particularly successful. Outreach workers who were experienced with the target population, sensitive in personal interactions, and well trained in FSP procedures made a significant difference.

The success of media efforts to inform potentially eligible persons about the FSP were difficult to assess. Language-specific messages on TV or Radio stations targeting specific ethnic populations showed some success. Localized media (small community newspapers, shoppers' guides, flyers) appeared to be most effective. The use of 1-800 phone numbers for individuals to request detailed information on FSP appeared effective.

Direct assistance in the application process was most effective when good liaison was maintained between grantee and FSP staffs. Clearly identified contact persons within the food stamp office proved highly valuable. Client pre-screening by grantee staff was quite effective when carefully done. Ongoing training for grantee staff in FSP procedure was needed and useful.

Flexibility of FSP office procedure was effective in diminishing barriers for hard-to-reach groups: arranging for eligibility workers to accept applications and interview clients at alternative sites; providing assistance at times convenient for the population being served; and arranging to accept applications from grantee staff on behalf of clients. FSP offices augmented their own effectiveness when they accepted grantee agencies' active assistance to clients throughout the enrollment process: acting as culture brokers to ease misunderstanding; helping clients with the initial applications, with appointments, documentation, follow-up inquiries and information; and acting as client advocates when applications would go astray or seem to be denied unfairly.

Overall, the projects demonstrated that motivated and well prepared non-profit agency staff can provide highly individualized, supportive services enabling many eligible persons in hard-to-reach population groups to successfully complete the FSP enrollment process. These services helped clients overcome linguistic, cultural, and cognitive challenges. In many cases, grantee agency staff provided appropriate interventions with or between clients and FSP staff, bridging gaps that would otherwise be likely to deter eligible persons' enrollments. Grantee agencies that established strong public/private cooperation were able to act as adjuncts to the food stamp office, smoothing the path for clients, including those with mental illness or lacking essential life skills, whose comprehensive needs placed them beyond the capabilities of both public and private agency staffs.

I. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the final evaluation of 26 research demonstration projects authorized under Public Law 101-624, entitled the "Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act" of 1990. Section 1759 of the Act authorized funding of grants to public and private nonprofit organizations during fiscal years 1993 through 1996 "to increase participation by eligible low-income households in the Food Stamp Program." Strategies were to be developed that would ensure that eligible but un-enrolled members of underserved populations were made aware of the Food Stamp Program [FSP] and that the program was made accessible to them. The populations to be targeted, as instructed in the Act, included members of "rural, elderly, and homeless populations, low-income working families with children, and non-English speaking minorities."

The Act further directed that a sufficient number of projects be evaluated to be able to "determine the effectiveness of the projects and the techniques employed by the projects." This report serves to inform Congress of the results of the funded demonstration projects' client assistance efforts as directed. The report is organized into five major sections. Background information on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's [USDA] Food Stamp Program and the 26 funded demonstration projects is presented in Section II. The processes used by evaluators in their analyses are found in Section III.

Evaluators were requested to answer three questions in the course of the evaluation. The first of these was: "What barriers do eligible clients encounter in gaining access to the Food Stamp Program?"; Section IV, "The Findings", examines the barriers that were identified during project implementation. Section IV is divided into two major subsections, the first focusing on information collected about the identified client groups, and the second focusing on the local food stamp offices and food stamp employees. Responses to the second and third questions that evaluators were to answer, "What methods of outreach and client assistance are most effective in helping eligible persons overcome these barriers?", and "Can public-private collaboration between project sponsors and local food stamp offices facilitate eligible persons' completion of the enrollment process?" are presented as Section V, "The Evaluation". Section VI, provides a summary of the findings and the evaluation, and the resulting conclusions.

II. BACKGROUND

The background information presented in this section focuses on the history of the Food Stamp Program and on development of the demonstration projects. Some of the events surrounding and leading up to the award of 26 client-assistance demonstration grants, as well as events that took place while project activities were underway, also are presented to provide context for understanding the project outcomes and their evaluations. These outcomes and the evaluations are presented in Section IV, The Findings, and Section V, The Evaluation, which together are the culmination of the work of this evaluation project.

A. The Food Stamp Program

Millions of people living in the United States rely on Federal food assistance provided by one or more of the programs administered by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service [FNS]. The Food Stamp Program [FSP] is the largest and most widely used of these food assistance programs. Monthly food stamp benefits are designed to help low-income households¹ sustain a sufficiently nutritious diet. Food stamps primarily supplement the food budget of households in transition and experiencing a temporary need for assistance, although they do help provide long-term food security for some low-income households.

The FSP was initiated as a pilot program in 1961 and became permanent in 1964. Initially participants were required to purchase their food stamps, which were available at a fraction of their actual value. Stamps could then be used at their full value to purchase food. In 1977 the structure of the FSP was changed to eliminate the fixed-benefit allotment for households according to size and the requirement that recipients pay for a portion of the benefit's cost. Benefits are currently adjusted for each household, depending on its available income. Although FSP funding, program rules, and requirements are Federally generated, the programs are administered at the State and local levels. In general, the program is governed by the same Federal rules and requirements throughout the country.

Eligibility Criteria

In order for individuals to participate in the FSP, they must meet eligibility criteria set at the Federal level related to income, assets, and employment. Eligibility for the benefit is non-categorical so it may include many kinds of low-income populations such as full or part-time wage earners, people who are unemployed, recipients of Temporary Aid to Needy Families [TANF] or Supplemental Security

¹ A household is defined as "either one person or a group of people who buy and prepare their food together."

Income [SSI], older people or people with disabilities, and people who are homeless.

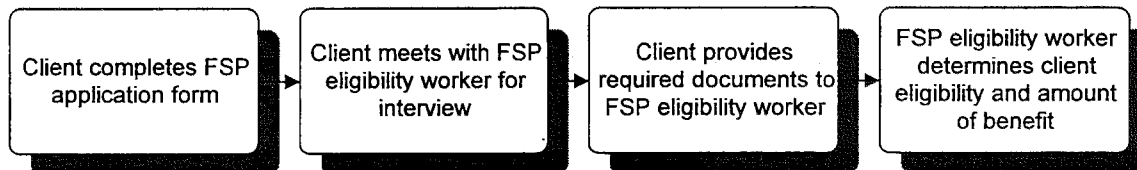
To receive food stamps, a household's assets may not exceed \$2,000, or \$3,000 for households with one person 60 years of age or older. An eligible household's net income, after certain allowable deductions, must be less than or equal to 100 percent of the Federal poverty income guidelines. The quantity of food stamps a household receives is based on the USDA Thrifty Food Plan, a low-cost, nutritious model diet. The Plan is reevaluated each year to reflect current food prices.

The FSP Application Process

Most FSP applicants must follow a similar application process, which is illustrated in Figure 1 and detailed below.

FIGURE 1

Components of the FSP Application Process



Potential FSP clients obtain an application form in person or by mail from their local FSP office. Once the application is completed and returned to the local food stamp office, an interview with a food stamp eligibility worker² takes place. In some food stamp offices, clients can schedule an appointment for the interview, but in others they are seen on a first come, first served basis. At the time of the evaluation project, when appointments were made but not kept, eligibility workers were required to contact the household to try to schedule a second interview.

During the interview, the eligibility worker explains FSP regulations, helps clients complete any part of the application form that is not fully and/or accurately completed, asks for verification of eligibility, provides a copy of client rights and responsibilities, and answers any questions that clients may have. Clients are required to bring to the interview proof of identity, residence, and income for all household members. Clients may also be requested to provide additional records such as current utility bills, medical bills, and disability verification.

² The term "eligibility worker" is used in this report to refer to all FSP staff who are responsible for determining client eligibility.

Eligibility workers must review these documents before client eligibility is determined. At times clients must gather additional information and participate in a second interview before their eligibility can be determined.

Once eligibility has been determined and a household has begun to receive food stamps, any changes in circumstances, such as unexpected wages, must be immediately reported by a client to her or his assigned eligibility worker at the food stamp office. If there are no changes in circumstances, clients are required to prove that they are still eligible for the FSP within time frames set by individual State agencies. Clients are informed by letter when recertification is required, and in most cases they must resubmit documentation and participate in another interview at the food stamp office.

Special provisions have been made for people who need food assistance immediately and are unable to wait the typical 30 day period after submission of their application to receive benefits. For these people services are expedited, and they can receive their food stamps within seven days. Clients receiving expedited benefits must still complete the eligibility screening process in full during their first month of enrollment in order to continue receiving benefits.³ Special provisions have also been made for those unable to attend an interview at the local food stamp office. These people, primarily those who are older or who have disabilities, can be interviewed at an alternative location or by telephone, or they can arrange for another person to act as their authorized representative at meetings with the eligibility worker.

Research on FSP Participation and Access

Periodic studies of the FSP have been conducted in an attempt to understand the populations served by the program, and in particular those eligible for benefits that have not been reached [Allin and Beebout 1989, Trippe and Doyle 1992, Trippe 1996]. A variety of studies have revealed that rates of participation⁴ in the FSP continually increased, from less than half of eligible households enrolled in the program in the 1970's [Coe 1983], to 59 percent in January 1989, to 74 percent in January of 1992 [Trippe 1996]. In general, it appeared that non-participants were older, had fewer children, less need, and more financial resources than those who were using food stamps [US GAO 1990, Trippe and Sykes 1994].

³ For more information on expedited service, especially in relation to one of the demonstration target populations, homeless persons, see Susan Bartlett, "Evaluation of Expedited Service in the Food Stamp Program" in Nutrition and Food Security in the Food Stamp Program. Daryl Hall and Mike Stavrianos, eds. United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Service; Alexandria, VA: January 1996.

⁴ The number of participants enrolled in the FSP divided by an estimated number of those in the total population thought to be eligible at that time.

Congressional expansion of eligibility criteria for the food stamp benefit to include more categories of at-risk people appears to have increased overall participation in the FSP over the years. These changes in eligibility criteria were made at the same time as other programmatic changes were instituted by USDA, Food and Nutrition Service [FNS],⁵ in an effort to improve people's knowledge about the FSP and facilitate their access to the program. Together, these changes made FSP benefits more accessible for many groups [Trippe and Doyle 1992], thus increasing not only the total number of people who were receiving the food stamp benefit, i.e., the gross participation figures, but also increasing the number of those people who were potentially eligible, who actually enrolled in the FSP, i.e., the participation rate. A number of informational outreach projects, jointly undertaken by the FSP and the States⁶ and specifically funded to address the participation rate, may have contributed to the increase in the percentage of those eligible who were actually accessing the FSP. However, it became apparent that even with legislative changes and program initiatives designed to increase access and participation, certain populations in need of food assistance were still not being reached.

Researchers have broadly identified some problems that keep eligible clients from obtaining food stamps. These findings, which were based on client reports, indicated that issues impeding FSP participation include insufficient information regarding the FSP, administrative problems with applications, reluctance to deal with local food stamp offices, uncertainty about eligibility, and low benefit amounts [Coe 1983]. Later, similar studies found that many eligible non-participants did not want the benefits, did not have correct information about the FSP, and/or had experienced or anticipated problems with the program [Allin and Beebout 1989, US GAO 1990]. What was missing from the research was a better understanding of the client's decision-making process, the context in which decisions were made, and information on ways of effectively addressing those problems that could be overcome.

B. The Demonstration Projects

In 1990, as a result of concerns about the patterns of participation in the FSP, the United States Congress authorized funding [Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act of 1990, P.L. 101-624, Section 1759 (1)(A)] for public and private non-profit agencies to conduct demonstration projects to develop and implement innovative client-assistance strategies. In 1993 and 1994 FNS awarded competitive grants to 26 Food Stamp Program Client-Assistance Demonstration

⁵ Renamed Food and Consumer Service [FCS] during the period 1993 - 1998.

⁶ Individual States used funding to make 1-800 numbers available for information and referral. They printed flyers and brochures about the FSP and its eligibility criteria, and developed electronic media campaigns to increase awareness of the FSP.

Projects across the United States and, as required in the original legislation, specified that the demonstrations be evaluated to determine their effectiveness. Successfully demonstrated client-assistance strategies could then serve as models for improving access to the FSP for previously unserved populations in need of food assistance. An analysis of unsuccessful strategies also would be useful to explain more fully why some eligible people were unable to take advantage of the food stamp benefit or were discouraged from doing so.

The 26 funded demonstration projects were implemented in two cycles from 1993 to 1996. Agencies could apply for funding for a period of 12 or 18 months. The first of the two funding cycles began in 1993, when funds were provided under the Congressional authorization, and included 16 projects in 12 States and the District of Columbia. In the second cycle another 10 agencies were funded in six additional States.

All of the target groups named in the authorizing legislation were served by one or more of the demonstration projects. Most projects directed their activities to more than one population group. The low income populations served included:

- ◆ Working people and families;
- ◆ Older people;
- ◆ People with disabilities;
- ◆ Homeless people;
- ◆ Members of non-English-speaking populations; and,
- ◆ Members of other minority populations including African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

The organizations funded to implement the demonstration projects were primarily nonprofit agencies, although one local food stamp office was funded to conduct a demonstration project working with private nonprofit organizations as subcontractors. The size of the awards and the organizational structure of the grantee agencies varied widely from site to site, which gave the programs diversity and allowed many different approaches to be explored. Community Action Agencies, advocacy groups, general service organizations, and organizations serving single populations, such as migrant or homeless people, were represented among the grantees. The funded agencies, their rural/urban status, and the populations targeted by each included the following:

Table 1.
Food Stamp Program Client Enrollment Assistance Demonstration Project Sites⁷

Site	Location	Specified Population Group[s]
1. Arizona Community Action Association, Inc., Phoenix, AZ	Rural	Native Americans
2. Southern California Interfaith Hunger Coalition, Los Angeles, CA	Urban	Homeless People Non-English-Speaking Minorities [Middle Eastern American and Russian American] Older People Low-Income Working Families
3. Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, Denver, CO	Urban/Rural	Homeless People Migrant People
4. D.C. Hunger Action, Washington, D.C.	Urban	Homeless People Non-English-Speaking Minorities [Asian American and Hispanic American]
5. Immigrant Center, Honolulu, HI	Urban	Non-English-Speaking Minorities [American Samoan, Chinese American, Filipino American, Korean American, and Vietnamese American]
6. Project Bread - The Walk for Hunger, Inc., Boston, MA	Urban	Low-Income Working Families Non-English Speaking Minorities [Asian American and Hispanic American] Older People
7. Mississippi Action for Community Education, Inc., Greenville, MS	Rural	Low-Income Working Families [African American] Older People [African American]
8. East Bloomfield Central School District, East Bloomfield, NY	Rural	Low-Income Working Families Migrant People
9. Community Food Resource Center, Inc., New York, NY	Urban	Low-Income Working Families Older People People with Disabilities
10. InterReligious Council of Central NY, Syracuse, NY	Rural	Low-Income Working Families Older People
11. Douglas-Cherokee Economic Authority, Morristown, TN	Rural	Low-Income Working Families Older People
12. West Tennessee Legal Services, Inc., Jackson, TN	Rural	Low-Income Working Families [African American] Older People [African American]
13. The Daily Planet, Richmond, VA	Urban	Homeless People
14. Central Vermont Community Action Council, Inc., Barre, VT	Rural	Low-Income Working Families Older People
15. Fremont Public Association, Seattle, WA	Urban/Rural	Homeless People Low-Income Working Families
16. Western Dairyland Economic Opportunity Council, Independence, WI	Rural	Low-Income Working Families Older People Homeless People
17. Food Bank of North Central Arkansas,	Rural	Low-Income Working Families

⁷ Numbers 1-16 were funded in the first funding cycle and numbers 17-26 in the second. Two programs, D.C. Hunger Action and Community Food Resource Center, Inc., received funding in both cycles.

Site	Location	Specified Population Group[s]
Norfolk, AR		Older People
18. San Francisco Department of Social Services, San Francisco, CA	Urban	Low-Income Working Families Non-English-Speaking Minorities [Asian American and Hispanic American]
19. Center for Employment Training, San Jose, CA	Urban/Rural	Non-English-Speaking Minority [Hispanic American]
20. D.C. Hunger Action Washington, D.C.	Urban	Older People People with AIDS
21. Cambodian Association of Illinois, Chicago, IL	Urban	Non-English-Speaking Minorities [Refugees from Cambodia, China, Ethiopia, Laos, and Vietnam.
22. Penquis Community Action Program, Bangor, ME	Rural	Low-Income Working Families Older People People with Disabilities
23. Community Food Resource Center, Inc. New York, NY	Urban	Low-Income Working Families [And Those Recently Unemployed] Older People People with Disabilities
24. Outside In, Portland, OR	Urban	Homeless Youth
25. Green Thumb Food for Health, Rapid City, SD	Rural	Older People
26. Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia, Norfolk, VA	Rural	Older People

III. THE EVALUATION PROCESS

A. Mandate and Criteria

The authorizing legislation for the demonstration projects included a mandate for the Secretary of Agriculture to have conducted, and to report, an evaluation of the projects' success in reaching their goals. As noted, the three central questions to be addressed in the evaluation were:

- ◆ What barriers do eligible clients encounter in gaining access to the FSP?
- ◆ What methods of outreach and client assistance are most effective in helping eligible persons overcome these barriers? and,
- ◆ Can public-private collaboration between project sponsors and local food stamp offices facilitate eligible persons' completion of the enrollment process?

The evaluation also responded to the need at FNS to increase the scope of the methods used to study non-participation. This additional focus had been called for in a review of the literature on non-participation by Allin and Beebout [1989, 58]:

Many studies have sought to identify the causes of non-participation in the FSP, and their results provide reasonably consistent evidence on the factors associated with a high or low probability of participation, as well as the groups in the FSP-eligible population likely to have relatively high or low entry or exit rates. We know very little, however, about households' actual behavior in deciding whether to participate in the program... Thus the task of future research is to identify the motivations behind the behavior of eligible non-participants so that specific policy recommendations can be made.

An important subsidiary question for evaluators to examine was why some people eligible for and in need of food assistance, having been offered assistance specifically designed to overcome known barriers, still might choose not to participate in the program.

Problems of access and reasons why many potentially eligible clients are hesitant or find it difficult to enroll in the FSP or other public benefit programs are not easily studied through survey research. Researchers had compiled clients' self-reported reasons for not enrolling in the FSP. These reasons suggested general areas of concern, but as Allin and Beebout [1989, xi] stated "...we may know who does not

participate, but we cannot be certain about the underlying reason why.” They suggested that understanding these decision processes “requires a less structured and more probing method of data collection than a survey of households.” The evaluators and the project staff of the 26 demonstrations have undertaken such a method in their data collection. Critical to this effort was the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods; relying on any single method often provides a limited and narrow view of the phenomena under study. Researchers employing qualitative and quantitative methods together may be able to capture more adequately complex information, including people’s decision-making processes.⁸

In their design for evaluating the 26 demonstration projects, evaluators included methods for capturing both quantitative and qualitative data about the conduct of the projects as well as about the behaviors, concerns, and beliefs affecting the decision-making process of participants and potentially eligible non-participants in the FSP. The evaluation team played dual roles with the demonstration projects. The evaluators directly collected qualitative data about each site using a variety of methods that will be discussed below. Evaluators also provided the sites with technical assistance in developing and managing their own quantitative data collection systems; these data were then reported to the evaluators for analysis. As far as possible, a single evaluation team member was the primary contact for a specific site. Therefore, the evaluator and demonstration project manager were able to develop rapport over time. By establishing rapport, both parties had an easier time designing and understanding any changes to project activities that might be necessary, and the evaluator was able to gain an enhanced knowledge of the project’s history and process.

B. Technical Assistance

The first task undertaken by the evaluators was providing demonstration project staff with technical assistance to support their collection of quantitative project data. The quantitative data collected by demonstration project staff included the number of people who:

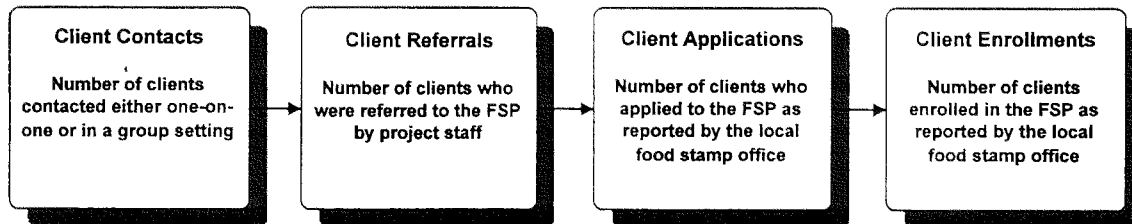
⁸...It is important to keep the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research visible and clear. In the first, categories take shape in the course of research, whereas in the second, they are fixed from the beginning. In the first, the analyst uses his or her methods to capture complexity and to search out patterns of interrelationship between many categories. The first is designed to elicit testimony that the respondent has difficulty articulating with ease and clarity. The second seeks to ask different, more precisely answerable, questions. In the first, the investigator is an instrument of investigation. In the second, the investigator is the deliberately dispassionate operator of a piece of finely calibrated methodological machinery. Finally, the qualitative tradition offers explanations that take us “back stage” in the culture in question, to let us glimpse assumptions and categories that are otherwise hidden from view. It is not intended to capture issues of distribution and generalization. It tells us what people think and do, not how many of them think and do it. [McCracken 1988:49]

- ◆ Were contacted;
- ◆ Were referred by project staff to the FSP;
- ◆ Applied for food stamps; and,
- ◆ Subsequently were enrolled as FSP participants.

Figure 2 illustrates the basic quantitative data collected by demonstration project staff for analysis by the evaluators. Project staff reported this information to the evaluators primarily during their monthly telephone discussions but also during in-person discussions when evaluators were on-site.

FIGURE 2

**Basic Quantitative Data Collected by
Demonstration Project Staff**



In order to prepare project staff for their data collection responsibilities, evaluators assisted with:

- ◆ Developing strategies for tracking client-specific information;
- ◆ Identifying and planning for reporting the data needed for monthly telephone interviews with evaluation staff; and,
- ◆ Establishing a method with the local or State food stamp office to track and verify the number of clients who actually applied for food stamps, completed the application process, enrolled in the program, or were disqualified from participation in the FSP.

Along with this last task, project staff were encouraged to establish their lines of communication with the local food stamp office. Through the early implementation of any joint planning and activities, staff could help to ensure that training and communication between the agencies would begin on time and continue to occur routinely. To assist the first round of funded projects to accomplish this collaboration, evaluators conducted preliminary site visits to 15 of the 16 sites. During these site visits, evaluators assisted project staff to develop site-specific reporting methods. Evaluators continued to provide technical assistance during their monthly telephone discussions with project managers. In the second round of funding, where the public/private partnership requirement was made more explicit, representatives of the project agencies, cooperating food stamp offices,

the evaluation team, and FNS staff met for a day and a half at a USDA-sponsored seminar on evaluation. This seminar served both to promote constructive public/private partnerships and to facilitate data collection in the second funding cycle.

As a result of the ongoing technical assistance provided by evaluators, demonstration project staff were able to collect both observational and numerical data in ways that were useful both for understanding process and for determining the outcomes of their projects. Evaluators considered information about challenges encountered by the projects in the conduct of activities to be as important as information on successful strategies. Challenges assisted evaluators to judge the potential of such projects' methods for future replication. Therefore, as the demonstration projects proceeded, evaluators noted and conducted cross-site comparisons of both positive and negative responses to and information about their activities.

C. Data Collection Methods

As noted, key to this evaluation was an examination of qualitative as well as quantitative data. Evaluation team members collected qualitative information during review of project reports and other written materials; monthly telephone interviews; and in-person, on-site observations and discussions with project staff, eligibility workers, and clients.

Discussions were topic driven; the open-ended questions contained in the interviewing guides developed for the project served to focus, but not limit, discussion. Especially where cultural sensitivities were at issue, conducting focused but open-ended research was essential to producing data that captured barriers and facilitators to client application and enrollment in the FSP. This methodology allowed the evaluators to obtain the most relevant and comprehensive information possible within a specified time frame and within the context of the research questions. The following section details the approaches taken to the two primary methods of data collection: telephone interviews and on-site visits.

Telephone Interviews

Evaluators conducted monthly telephone interviews with project managers during which they collected project staff's statistical information. In addition, through these interviews, evaluators obtained project staff's observations and reports on factors that appeared to influence FSP participation or non-participation among their clients as well as information on the activities being instituted to overcome barriers to accessing the FSP. These discussions included exploration of contextual issues facing the projects and of events or situations in the communities

that might influence the intended project outcomes. Such events could include factors as diverse as layoffs and plant closings, natural disasters, and crop successes or failures. Evaluators encouraged project managers to have staff elaborate on questions where responses were too general to be useful. When terms appeared frequently in reports by staff and in quotations from clients, for example, the term 'hassle,' project staff were encouraged to return to clients for definitions or explanations of the terms in their own words.

Through ongoing assessment of project activities during these telephone interviews, evaluators and demonstration project staff were able to continuously reflect on the assistance being offered by the projects, the needs and challenges experienced by the clients to whom it was offered, and the kinds of activities that were both effective and efficient. Managers explored with evaluators as well as with their FNS Project Officer what changes they might make in project activities that would not compromise the validity of their data or alter the essential nature of the demonstration, while at the same time increasing the potential benefit of their activities to those needing food stamp assistance. Project managers sometimes improved their strategies of providing client assistance during the course of the demonstration by, for example, moving the location of their activities, improving communication with the local food stamp office, or strengthening staff capabilities through additional training.

Site Visits

All but one of the 26 demonstration project sites, Hawaii, were funded for site visits. In eight of the projects, evaluators conducted a second site visit. Evaluators remained on-site for five days during each visit. In preparation for the visits, evaluators reviewed project materials including project plans, progress reports, and evaluation plans. While on site, evaluators reviewed additional resources, such as informational materials developed by the projects.

A major focus of the evaluators while on-site was to gather in-depth information regarding the projects. They interviewed project managers, staff, and clients in all of the sites visited. Where feasible, they also conducted interviews with FSP eligibility workers and with FSP-eligible non-participants. Evaluators obtained their information not only by conducting interviews and group discussions but also through extended observation.

Evaluators' observations of project activities and, where possible, of local FSP office operations, provided valuable sources of data about the projects, the clients, and the FSP. The evaluation staff attempted to conduct their observations at times and places designed to successfully capture information about clients' experiences with the demonstration project and FSP operations, exposing the impact of variables and approaches that might otherwise go unreported. For

example, staff of two different projects provided information about the FSP in homeless shelters. In one project the workers sat behind a table and waited for clients to approach them. In the other, the workers moved through the shelter actively interacting with residents. While individual project staff might not have deemed these individual nuances of approach relevant to report, these differences produced demonstrably different client responses.

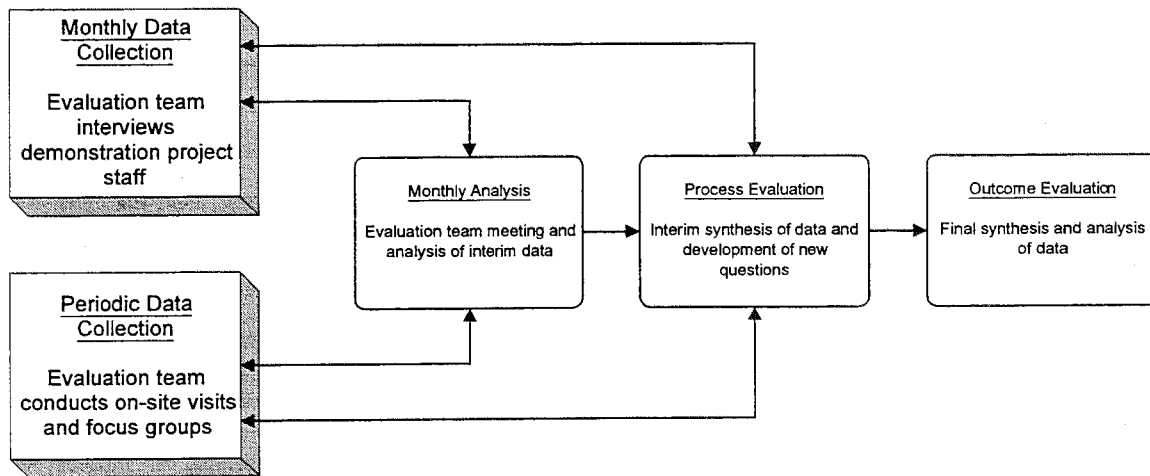
At each location, evaluators also collected contextual data. These data included information about each community’s social and economic conditions, other food resources available, transportation, demographic patterns, the location of both grantee agencies and food stamp offices, and places to cash vouchers and to use food stamps in relation to the location[s] of the target population. All of these variables can have, and in many instances did have, an impact on the demonstration projects and the clients they served.

D. Data Analysis and Synthesis

Figure 3 illustrates the steps used by evaluators to gather, process, and analyze information about the projects, their clients, and local and State FSPs.

FIGURE 3

Evaluation Process



The information gathered in telephone interviews and during on-site discussions and observations was carefully documented by the evaluation team. As new data were collected, evaluators added them to existing data in ways that allowed the team to manage and systematically review them. The ongoing process used

to analyze the data was based on principles of grounded theory research [Crabtree and Miller 1992, Denzin and Lincoln 1994, Silverman 1993]. This approach consisted of monthly meetings during which evaluation team members discussed the current issues arising from their telephone interviews and site visits. Also during these meetings, evaluators redefined or added new areas of inquiry they would pursue in their subsequent contacts with project staff. Using this method, evaluators continued to refine the questions asked of project staff, eligibility workers, and clients over the course of the evaluation. Through the refining process, evaluators were able to derive responses to the complex questions being asked.

Once evaluators had synthesized and evaluated their findings, they used a lexical computer program [ISYS] to review the majority of printed project documentation, including both project materials and evaluator site visit reports. The review allowed evaluators to determine associations between concepts, and to point out any specific interrelationships that they may have missed in previous analyses. Evaluators then finalized and condensed the findings and the evaluation for presentation in this final report. The results of this process are found in Section IV, The Findings, and in Section V, The Evaluation.