

## V. THE EVALUATION

In this section, the evaluation of the strategies implemented by the 26 demonstration projects is presented. This evaluation is organized in terms of the five primary components of the demonstration projects and the strategies they developed as activities to assist clients. The activities have been evaluated in terms of their success in overcoming the barriers and challenges encountered by people in need of food assistance. The evaluation also includes a discussion of the elements of the demonstration activities or combination of elements that were more predictive of success and failure, and suggests some reasons for these outcomes.

### A. Efforts of the Demonstration Projects to Overcome Barriers to Participation in the FSP

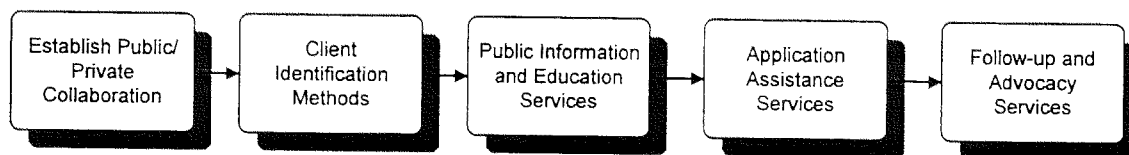
This section provides a description of the processes and activities designed and employed by the lead nonprofit demonstration project agencies. These activities include establishing cooperative efforts with the local and State FSP staff as well as addressing and overcoming barriers. The challenges addressed are those experienced by clients as well as eligibility workers in their separate roles and interactions during the application process.

#### 1. The Client Identification and Assistance Process

The demonstration projects were to identify barriers to enrollment for hard-to-reach populations that were eligible for but not enrolled in the FSP as well as to develop and implement strategies to assist these populations to enroll in the FSP. Implementation of these projects was intended by FNS to be a collaborative effort between the funded nonprofit agencies and their local public food stamp office. Although the specific approaches and methods used by projects to identify and assist clients were unique, the overall process was similar for most of the demonstration projects, as illustrated in Figure 5.

FIGURE 5

#### Client Identification and Assistance Process



### **a. Strategies to Establish Public/Private Agency Collaboration**

Three major elements were identified as essential to collaboration between local food stamp offices and the demonstration projects. First, local food stamp offices were to train project staff regarding FSP regulations and the application process so that staff could provide accurate pre-application assistance to clients. Second, a system of communication between project staff and food stamp eligibility workers was to be established so that project staff could ask questions about policies in support of the clients they were to assist. Third, local or state food stamp agencies were to be asked to verify the number of clients the projects had referred to the FSP. This last verification task was not only important as part of the evaluation process, but also enhanced staff's client assistance activities by providing project staff with a way to track progress or notice any difficulties in the enrollment process. Tracking in this way allowed staff to plan interventions as appropriate.

### **b. Client Identification Methods**

Project staff identified and made contact with people who might be eligible for the FSP in a number of ways, both in group settings and individually. These methods included door-to-door canvassing, especially in rural communities; developing relationships with staff of other community agencies serving similar target populations in hopes of obtaining referrals; reviewing the grantee agency's records to identify those who appeared to be eligible for the FSP; and, screening each new client who came to the agency for any type of assistance to determine their need for food stamps. Further, some project staff called or met with people receiving public benefits other than food stamps to determine their need for food assistance. In one urban program, for example, client-assistance workers were out-stationed at an unemployment and public utility office where they contacted people who were obtaining assistance in those areas.

Another common method of client identification utilized by the demonstration projects was visiting alternative sites or events frequented by their target population[s]. The sites and events visited varied widely, depending on the project, the target population, and whether the project was located in a rural or urban area. In urban areas, for example, staff visited low income senior housing complexes, community centers, homeless shelters, clinic waiting rooms, ethnic celebrations, and ethnic community meetings. In rural areas project staff more frequently targeted food pantries, senior and community meal sites, food commodity distribution sites, church meetings, and health fairs. Staff in both rural and urban areas also visited sites that were frequented by the general public, such as grocery, discount, and drug stores.

Staff used a variety of approaches to initiate discussion with people at these off-site locations. Some staff made presentations about the FSP. Others sat

behind tables with a sign reading “food stamp information” and waited for people to approach them for information. Still others were more active in their approaches, walking around the targeted site and initiating conversations about the FSP with individuals or small groups of people. Often, rather than rely on one approach to identifying potential clients, a combination of approaches was used.

Regardless of the approach taken, at the time of initial contact staff typically informed people of the food stamp benefit and of their possible eligibility for receiving it, answered prospective clients’ questions, and informed them about how to obtain more information about the FSP. Some projects had a 1-800 number available for clients to call with questions. Staff also typically distributed written materials such as flyers, brochures, and/or fact sheets.

People who expressed an interest in applying for food stamps were provided with additional information describing the services available to them through the demonstration project. While many clients began the application process immediately, others simply took an application form home. For those who took the application home, there is limited information about the outcome of the encounter. If a percentage of them did complete the application on their own, the projects may have assisted a higher number of clients to enroll in the FSP than they were able to report to the evaluation team.

### **c. Public Information and Education Services**

Project staff used a variety of methods to inform and educate clients about the FSP. These methods included developing media campaigns with public service announcements [PSAs] for television and radio; developing and disseminating flyers, fact sheets, posters, and brochures; and writing articles for newspapers, shopper guides, church bulletins, and newsletters. Language-specific materials were developed for non-English-speaking populations, and easy-to-read materials were often developed for those with limited literacy skills.

As noted, a number of projects also instituted a 1-800 number or were able to use their agency’s existing 1-800 number so that people could contact them for information. The projects with 1-800 numbers advertised them in various ways, including printing the number on written project materials and referring to or displaying the number during presentations and television and radio PSAs.

Information was provided to clients not only at initial contact, but throughout the entire client-assistance process. The purpose of providing information varied depending on the needs of the client. Initially, the overall purpose of providing information and education was to reach potentially eligible clients and prompt their interest in learning more about the FSP and the project. The content of

such messages varied, and included one or more of the following types of information:

- ◆ To inform people about the demonstration project and the services available;
- ◆ To describe the benefits of enrolling in the FSP;
- ◆ To inform people of their possible eligibility for the FSP;
- ◆ To dispel myths and fears that might keep certain population groups from enrolling; and,
- ◆ To inform people of the FSP and the application process.

#### **d. Application Assistance Services**

The demonstration projects developed and used client application assistance strategies that varied widely, but in general the activities developed by project staff were created in an effort to meet the different needs of project clients. The extent of assistance needed by clients ranged widely. For example, some clients needed only the simple provision of correct information on eligibility and enrollment procedures or more convenient times and places for application in order to continue and complete the process on their own. Other clients were initially intimidated by the FSP application process and forms, and staff needed to explain the process in order to dispel their fears and were then available to assist them. These clients might require only limited intervention and ancillary services to overcome a single or a few challenges. Some clients, particularly those with poor language or cognitive skills required constant and ongoing intervention and assistance at every step of the application and enrollment process. Many project clients were found to have complex needs and for the most part had to depend on added assistance from outside the FSP in order to gain access to the food stamp benefit. Some clients had difficulty understanding the FSP process and were unable to independently complete the application form, gather the required documentation, and follow FSP instructions. Without assistance, and often on-going assistance, these clients could not pursue and maintain food stamp benefits on their own.

Because client needs varied so widely, it was important for project staff to identify specific client needs, assess clients' abilities to fulfill the requirements of the application process, and provide the support clients needed throughout the application process. Many project staff, regardless of their clients' needs, provided clients with information regarding FSP eligibility criteria and the application process. To different degrees, the following services were offered by project staff to assist clients in overcoming barriers to participation in the FSP:

- ◆ Providing the FSP application, assistance with its completion, and a list of documents required to apply;

- ◆ Providing assistance in locating the necessary documentation;
- ◆ Copying clients' documents for them or providing a means for copying;
- ◆ Providing directions to the food stamp office for application form delivery or, when permitted, delivering the application themselves;
- ◆ Helping clients schedule appointments with the local food stamp office and/or providing access to a telephone so that clients could make needed calls to the office;
- ◆ Arranging for telephone interviews with FSP eligibility workers for people with limited mobility;
- ◆ Providing or making arrangements for supportive services such as child care and transportation so that clients could pursue the application process;
- ◆ Calling a food stamp office contact person to clarify clients' questions;
- ◆ Assuring availability of translators at the food stamp office;
- ◆ Accompanying clients to the FSP interview or, when permitted, acting as a representative for clients in the interview;
- ◆ Following-up with local food stamp agencies to determine how an application was proceeding;
- ◆ Following-up with clients to ensure that they had heard from an eligibility worker and ensuring that clients understood and were able to comply with any further instructions; and,
- ◆ Providing advocacy when an application was deemed out-of-compliance or when denial of enrollment appeared to have been made in error.

Throughout the entire process, staff often provided clients with the personal and technical support they needed to minimize some of their fears, and gave them the encouragement, information, and direction they needed to complete the application process. Again, it is important to note that only a few projects offered all of the above services to their clients. Projects offered services based on their project design, the needs of their clients, the skill level of staff, and the number of staff and other resources that were available to them.

As noted above, a complete description of each individual project and the specific activities implemented can be found in Appendix A. In the section that follows an assessment of the more and the less successful methods for forming collaborative relationships and directly assisting clients is presented.

## **B. Evaluation of the Efforts of the Demonstration Projects to Overcome Barriers to Participation**

### **1. Strategies Used to Develop Partnerships Between Grantees and Food Stamp Agencies**

The development of collaborative relationships between the funded nonprofit agencies and the public food stamp offices varied and at times were difficult to implement. New relationships were either initiated or existing ones were solidified due to the implementation of the demonstration projects. The public-private partnerships, particularly in the second set of projects, at times worked well, and lasting relationships were forged in some localities that will have an impact on FSP services for years to come. Other cooperative mechanisms failed to develop. Some of the activities and issues found to be significant across the sites to the success of collaboration efforts included the following:

- ◆ The development of written agreements specifying roles and responsibilities of each agency;
- ◆ The collaborative history between the nonprofit demonstration agency and the public food stamp agency;
- ◆ Time, ability and desire of food stamp office staff to fully support training and other collaborative activities; and,
- ◆ The skill level of the non-profit project staff in terms of their ability to assist clients with the FSP application process.

#### ***Written Agreements Specifying Roles and Responsibilities***

During the first funding cycle, emphasis was not placed by FNS on developing written agreements investing the local food stamp agencies in collaborating with the nonprofit agencies funded to implement the projects. As a result, a variety of collaboration patterns emerged, and in some instances the two agencies were not able to develop effective working relationships. In the second set of funded projects, clearer requirements for cooperation were outlined so that the State and local food stamp agencies could develop agreements and participate in the client-assistance projects in more meaningful ways. To solidify this process, the FNS held a two-day workshop in Alexandria, Virginia, that focused on partnership development and evaluation preparation. Attending were project managers, food stamp office representatives, and evaluation personnel.

When written agreements were developed in the second funding cycle, they generally included commitment from the FSP to support three main activities necessary to the implementation of the demonstration projects, including: [1] provision of training for project staff on the FSP application process; [2] identification of a contact person at the food stamp office who project staff could

call to ask questions; and, [3] verification of client enrollments as a result of project efforts. In most instances, written agreements did not specify the roles and responsibilities of staff from each agency nor did they identify contact persons for project staff at the food stamp office. Further, few agencies developed a system for evaluating the progress of their partnership. In some projects, staff from both agencies worked together to clarify these issues and as a result were able to establish positive working relationships. In other projects, however, these issues were never clarified.

### ***Collaborative History Between the Nonprofit and the Public Food Stamp Agency***

Nonprofit agencies that had developed a working relationship with their local or State food stamp office prior to implementation of the demonstration projects found it easier to work collaboratively on this effort than those agencies without a previous working relationship. Two agencies in particular had a great deal of experience as advocates for their clients and had developed exemplary arrangements with their local food stamp agencies. In these instances, both the nonprofit organizations and the food stamp agencies sought to solve client problems before other actions were taken, negotiating between clients' needs and agency constraints. Given this history, the nonprofit agencies developed effective working relationships with their local food stamp agencies throughout the course of the demonstration projects, and project staff could call upon eligibility workers to answer questions and give advice.

### ***Current Working Conditions at the Food Stamp Office***

Current working conditions at the food stamp office had an impact on eligibility workers' ability to provide support to project staff as intended and as project staff would have liked. The reality of many local food stamp offices did not allow eligibility workers enough time to work closely or consistently with demonstration project staff; in general, staff of the local food stamp offices were overworked already. Additionally, as noted, local and State food stamp offices were undergoing changes that placed them under additional stress. For example, the transition to new computer record systems instituted by some food stamp offices was difficult, and as a result FSP staff were unable to access the needed information for verification of client enrollment.

Other issues affecting the development of collaborative relationships were related to the projects themselves. For example, some eligibility workers viewed the demonstration projects as a criticism of how they were performing their jobs. Many stated that they wanted to be able to provide more in-depth assistance, but in reality were unable to do so. Other food stamp workers believed that their jobs were at risk of being taken over by staff from the private sector, and in some

instances this influenced their desire to cooperate fully with demonstration project staff.

### ***The Skill Level of Project Staff***

The skill level of project staff also influenced the development of cooperative relationships. A number of project staff lacked the necessary training and skills with which to adequately prescreen and assist clients to complete the FSP application form. This served to increase food stamp workers' workloads in some offices. Some project staff, for example, referred people to the food stamp office who were not eligible for the FSP. Eligibility workers at the local food stamp offices resented having to tell clients that they were not actually eligible for food stamps after project staff had implied that they were. In addition, project staff did not always ensure that clients had accurately and completely filled out the application form or that clients had all the necessary documentation for their interview with the eligibility worker. Given the fact that eligibility workers were already overwhelmed by their jobs, these circumstances made it even more difficult to develop cooperative relationships.

### ***Elements Critical to the Development of Public/Private Partnerships***

Elements that were found to be necessary to create a successful partnership between the FSP and the nonprofit agencies included the following:

- ◆ Mutual creation of a shared common vision and philosophy;
- ◆ Agreement on specific goals, and objectives to be attained as well as activities to be conducted;
- ◆ Development of and agreement on clearly defined roles and responsibilities of staff from each agency;
- ◆ Development of a consistent system of communication between agencies;
- ◆ Development of a process by which both agencies could evaluate the progress of the partnership and their mutually developed goals;
- ◆ Identification of leadership and contact persons for each agency; and,
- ◆ Commitment of staff from both agencies to the development of the collaborative relationship.

Certain efforts were also found important to continuing and strengthening collaborative relationships. For example, one project that developed a strong collaborative relationship with the local food stamp agency further strengthened the relationship by inviting eligibility workers to visit the project. Project staff used the occasion to explain their activities to eligibility workers and to answer questions. In turn, the FSP supervisor invited project staff to FSP staff meetings during the course of the demonstration project so that project staff could update eligibility workers about the status of the project.



In addition to the experiences of clients and food stamp eligibility workers, it also is important to take into account contextual features that ultimately affect the participation of those in need of food assistance in the FSP. Without such an understanding the projects cannot be understood in their entirety. For example, natural events were found at times to have an impact on service delivery. One such event was the major earthquake in Los Angeles. This required both project staff and FSP eligibility workers to deliver emergency services, thereby providing services to a much larger population than originally anticipated and changing the nature and focus of the demonstration. In addition, at the South Dakota demonstration site, where the target population consisted of people in widely dispersed rural households, the combination of a record-breaking severe winter and extraordinary spring floods forced staff to curtail or cancel project activities for a number of months. In the manner of project staffs' response to such unforeseen events, strengths and weaknesses in project design were exposed, including those relating to staff training and collaborative relationships. The ability of project staff to accommodate disruptions to, and other influences on, their planned activities and to redesign and re-focus activities, or be prepared to do so, as needed was essential for the success of these demonstration projects.

## 2. Evaluation of Client Identification Methods

Table 2 shows the number of clients identified and contacted as reported by the sites. Although the number of clients receiving assistance from the projects was lower than expected, staff of the demonstration projects succeeded in reaching a reported total of 54,591 people. Projects varied widely in the number of people contacted, and in what was counted as a "contact," as shown in Table 2. In the table, projects are identified as being from the first or second cohort [FNS I or II] of projects where there were two awards for a single site.

Table 2.  
Number of Clients Contacted

Site	Contacted	Site	Contacted
Richmond, VA	8,191	Portland, OR	1,360
Bangor, ME	6,648	Seattle, WA	1,276
Greenville, MS	4,861	San Jose, CA	1,148
East Bloomfield, NY	4,015	Washington, D.C. [FNS II]	781
New York, NY [FNS II]	3,834	Norfolk, AR	625
New York, NY [FNS I]	3,750	Independence, WI	538
San Francisco, CA	3,510	Rapid City, SD	407
Chicago, IL	2,786	Syracuse, NY	364
Washington, D.C. [FNS I]	2,521	Jackson, TN	323
Denver, CO	2,326	Norfolk, VA	119
Boston, MA	2,080	Los Angeles, CA	NA
Morristown, TN	1,807	Phoenix, AZ	NA
Honolulu, HI	1,681	Barre, VT	NA

The variance in contacts by the projects may be attributed to a number of factors, including the fact that the definition of "contact" differed across sites. Some sites also used a variety of methods of identifying and contacting potentially unserved individuals. In some instances, a "contact" included every person in an audience to which a presentation was made, whereas in others a "contact" included only those prospective clients who were spoken to individually by project staff. Despite an attempt to more closely define and control this category of data during the second round of funding, the category itself did not present the type of data that was highly useful across sites. Further, some of the projects targeted populations in which there were low numbers of potentially eligible clients. For example, reaching potential clients in small rural areas was a special challenge for the demonstration projects. Unlike densely populated urban areas, rural populations tend to be widely dispersed and have fewer public sites at which to contact potential clients. Some projects that targeted specific ethnic groups with small numbers living in the service area also experienced difficulties locating the numbers of people anticipated.

The number of people contacted was also influenced by the methods staff used. For example, projects that were widely advertised were at times able to make large numbers of potentially eligible clients aware of the project's existence. The effectiveness of the different activities initiated by staff to locate potentially eligible interested clients are discussed below.

### ***Canvassing***

In general, door-to-door outreach as practiced by staff in these demonstration projects was not a productive method for contacting interested and potentially eligible people. Workers reported that the people they contacted had little interest in or ability to use the FSP. However, the ability to assess the effectiveness of canvassing is complicated by other issues, including the fact that in most cases volunteers, rather than staff, conducted this outreach. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether the method itself was not especially effective, whether volunteers were not sufficiently trained or supported to be effective in such an effort, or whether success was influenced by a combination of these and other elements. Further, in many cases volunteers were residents of the targeted communities, raising concerns about potential clients' confidentiality and privacy.

### ***Identifying Clients Using Other Service Providers***

Methods of identifying clients that made use of sites where other services were being provided or made use of pools of clients utilizing other services, proved successful in locating potentially eligible clients across sites. This outcome is not surprising given that staff found that most clients and potential clients in the target populations had needs beyond those that the FSP alone was meeting or

could meet. These methods include networking with other agencies for referrals, reviewing agency records and screening new clients in the grantee agency, and contacting people receiving public assistance other than food stamps.

- ◆ **Networking with Other Agencies for Referrals:** Joining with a system that was already providing assistance to the target population was found to be an important strategy for locating potentially eligible clients. For example, the staff of one grantee agency identified many potentially eligible clients through networking with other social service agencies that served older, low-income clients, who were the targeted population group for their project. By providing the other agencies with a description of the demonstration project activities and a contact or 1-800 telephone number, many older persons were referred for client assistance.
- ◆ **Reviewing Agency Records and Screening New Clients:** For some of the multi-service grantee agencies, relying first on their own agency client records as well as making sure all new clients were informed about the FSP and received pre-screening if appropriate, proved successful. The success of these strategies was due, in part, to the fact that these larger agencies tended to serve low-income members of the populations targeted by the demonstration projects. Also, these methods required only minimal staff time and resources.
- ◆ **Contacting People Receiving Public Assistance Other than Food Stamps:** Contacting people receiving other benefits was an efficient method of reaching a large number of potentially eligible clients. In one project, staff contacted people from a list of those receiving low-income heating assistance and were able to quickly determine their need for and interest in obtaining food stamps. Although this strategy allowed staff to locate a large numbers of potentially eligible people in a short amount of time, invariably many of those contacted were already receiving food stamps or were not eligible for the benefit because of minor differences in eligibility requirements between the two benefit programs.

### ***Visiting Alternative Sites***

Visiting alternative sites to contact potential clients was at times extremely effective, especially sites where other benefits were being provided, although effectiveness was influenced by several factors. Choice of alternative sites was

critical to staff's ability to locate potentially eligible and interested clients. When choosing a site, projects found the following to be important:

- ◆ People's comfort level at the site. Sites should be comfortable and safe, with a private space for potential clients and workers to sit so that clients could discuss the FSP and complete the necessary forms. Because the FSP often has a negative connotation attached to its use, people tend not to want others to see them making inquiries about or applying for food stamps.
- ◆ People's time. When choosing an outreach site, it is important to consider whether people will be able or willing to take time to discuss the FSP, given the activity being conducted at the site.
- ◆ The number of potentially eligible people who frequent a particular site. When possible it is important to target locations that serve high concentrations of people likely to be eligible for the program.
- ◆ People's readiness to accept assistance. It was beneficial to contact people in places where they were already attempting to obtain other types of public assistance and in places with a natural connection to food stamps, such as meal sites or food pantries.

Staff who attempted to contact people in locations that did not have some or all of these attributes were less successful in reaching large numbers of interested people. For example, in a few projects, grocery stores were used as outreach sites. Although large numbers of people were encountered, staff were unable to engage many of them in accessing the FSP benefits, despite apparent eligibility and need for the benefit. Staff believed that the people contacted at this type of site did not have enough time to engage in a conversation about food stamps. Perhaps more significant, generally grocery stores and other such public places do not offer a private, quiet, comfortable place where private and sensitive issues can be discussed. Staff of several projects noted the importance of continually assessing the productivity of each outreach site and recommended eliminating or substituting sites that did not produce a sufficient number of interested potential clients.

### ***Hiring Appropriate Staff***

Another factor that influenced the effectiveness of locating potential clients was employing staff who were familiar with the population[s] being targeted. Often these staff members could suggest potentially successful locations for contacting clients. In addition, it was important that staff who were involved in outreach be persistent and committed to their goal of reaching an adequate number of clients. Without these qualities, staff's effectiveness was diminished. In one project, for example, staff consisted of people who prior to the demonstration project had conducted outreach with isolated farm families about an issue

unrelated to food stamps. With the institution of the demonstration project these same staff members were expected to incorporate into their existing efforts the added tasks of informing families about and assisting them to apply for the FSP. In many instances, these staff tended to ask only superficial questions about a family's experience with or interest in food stamps, spending the bulk of their time addressing the issues with which they were more familiar. Just as was noted in reports by EW's in local food stamp offices, this outcome points out a possible disadvantage in attempts to "piggy back" one program onto another without careful preparation. It also underscores the importance of ensuring that staff provide the time to and are invested in performing their job duties.

### ***Placing Volunteers in an Outreach Role***

Volunteers, who tended to be representatives of the target community, were used by a few projects in an outreach role. These projects found that volunteers could be useful in certain aspects of outreach, and were particularly helpful in suggesting possible sites to contact potential clients, referring friends, and spreading the word in the community. As noted, however, volunteers were not found to be especially successful in a canvassing role.

### **3. Evaluation of Public Information and Education Services**

As mentioned, the initial purpose of providing information and education was to reach potentially eligible clients and prompt their interest in learning more about the FSP and the project. For those who were initially hesitant to apply to the FSP, providing accurate, understandable information and education played an important role in encouraging eligible clients to enroll. Often messages were developed to respond to specific beliefs or attitudes that presented barriers to prospective clients applying for and/or enrolling in the FSP. For example, in instances where people were concerned about the small amount of the food stamp benefit they would receive, staff discussed ways in which they could use a minimal amount of money in the most efficient ways. In addition, negative community attitudes towards food stamp recipients and potential recipients' embarrassment around becoming enrolled in the program prompted a number of projects to focus on presenting the FSP in a more positive light and emphasizing the benefits of enrolling. This was particularly true for those clients who viewed food stamps as a form of "welfare" or as an admission of personal failure. As noted by one client,

*She explained to me something I didn't know before. I didn't know that the food stamps came from the Department of Agriculture. I thought it was all welfare and I've had several other people tell me too that they thought you had to get welfare before you could get*

*food stamps and she explained to me all of the differences than what it used to be.*

As noted, a major barrier that kept recent immigrants from applying for food stamps was the belief that applying would have a negative impact on their future involvement with the Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS] and their ability to acquire citizenship or sponsor other family members. Staff addressed this fear in a number of ways, including contacting immigration rights groups in order to provide accurate information to clients about the possible consequences of applying for food stamps. Few efforts attempted by staff tended to be successful in overcoming this barrier.

Some projects tracked how people had heard about their project. Based on this data, projects' success in using electronic media, localized media, and presentations to reach potential clients is detailed below.

### ***Electronic Media***

Traditional approaches to advertise projects, including running Public Service Announcements [PSAs] on television and radio, served to increase people's awareness of the FSP. They were not, however, especially effective in overcoming the often complex reasons potentially eligible clients presented for not seeking food stamp assistance. PSAs did not generate a large number of inquiries, although language-specific messages on radio and television stations targeting particular ethnic populations showed some success in prompting inquiries about the FSP. The process of developing and disseminating electronic media campaigns was expensive, time intensive, and required specific expertise that most project staff did not have. Additional problems encountered by staff of projects that developed television and radio PSAs included difficulty in getting PSAs run during prime listening hours and on stations that were watched or listened to by the target population. Based on the difficulties staff encountered in developing and disseminating PSAs, and given the small number of responses projects received as a result of even specifically targeted efforts, developing electronic media campaigns may not be the best use of staff time or resources.

### ***Localized Media***

Although results varied, in general localized media efforts generated more inquiries from potential food stamp applicants than did broader electronic media campaigns. Local efforts included, for example, placing advertisements and articles in shopper guides, small community newspapers, and newsletters. A possible reason for the higher number of responses from local media efforts was the fact that distribution of these materials was extensive and more people may have had access to the information. Television and radio PSAs, as noted, were often aired at inopportune times and on stations that were not watched or

listened to by the target population. In addition, it was also theorized that shopper guides in particular had high response rates because people who read them were already in search of ways to save money.

### ***Presentations***

Presentations in and of themselves were not found to be an especially effective means by which to interest people in learning more about the project and the FSP, as evidenced by the low number of inquiries following presentations. However, inquiry rates were higher when presentations included providing a 1-800 number, which allowed interested people to call privately for additional information at a later time.

### ***Toll-Free Telephone Assistance***

Providing opportunities for people to obtain information about the FSP privately through a 1-800 number proved to be a critical strategy. People preferred learning about the FSP in this manner rather than discussing the program in person in a public place after a group presentation. The telephone assistance allowed clients to inquire about the FSP anonymously and without embarrassment. Clients also appreciated the opportunity to discuss program requirements before contacting the local food stamp office, noting that this service saved them both time and an extra trip to the office.

## **4. Evaluation of Application Assistance Services Including Follow-up and Advocacy**

Often the first step in providing application assistance was to conduct some form of pre-screening for eligibility. One project found that providing potential clients with an estimate of their eligibility and of the range of food stamp benefits they might receive was a powerful way to affect their decisions to apply. Clients noted that having their potential eligibility determined by project staff was a quick and common sense activity that saved them a great deal of time in preparing an application that might not have been accepted. Determining potential eligibility was also an important step in helping clients to overcome their apprehension about applying to the FSP. According to one client:

*After hearing about so many people trying and being turned down, you're scared to go apply. [Client]*

Pre-screening, in many cases, gave potentially eligible clients the incentive they needed to go forward with the application process resulting in enrollment and receipt of needed benefits.

Many project staff were surprised by how few of the low-income people who were identified were determined eligible for participation in the FSP. As mentioned, a number of people were found ineligible because they had assets in excess of the food stamp requirements, such as a car with a value over the FSP allowed amount. In addition, some people, particularly older people, had accumulated savings for emergencies, medical expenses, burial plans, etc. Most people were not willing to divest themselves of these savings in order to receive food stamps, particularly during a time of rising medical costs and possible cuts in such programs as Low Income Heating Assistance, Social Security, and Medicare. Many people also felt that disposing of their car solely to become eligible for the FSP was too great a sacrifice. It was often viewed as an ineffective cost option, especially for people in rural areas who needed reliable transportation. Money gained from selling a reliable car and purchasing a less expensive one would most likely be needed for repairs. It is important to note here that, across projects, both eligibility workers and project staff personally identified such clients as in need of food assistance even though they were technically ineligible for assistance. Staff were also surprised by the number of clients who were identified and found to be potentially eligible for the FSP were not interested in enrolling in the benefit program [reasons for this lack of interest were considered in Section A, above]. Those people who project staff found to be potentially eligible were considered by project staff to be “referrals” to the FSP. Many such referrals were also given an application and/or helped to complete the application by demonstration project staff. Table 3 shows the rate of client contacts that became referrals to the FSP.

**Table 3.  
Contact/Referral Rate**

Site	Contact/ Referral Rate	Site	Contact/ Referral Rate
Washington, D.C. [FNS II]	90%	Portland, OR	37%
New York, NY [FNS II]	80%	Washington, D.C. [FNS I]	37%
Seattle, WA	72%	Norfolk, AR	37%
Boston, MA	72%	Greenville, MS	36%
New York, NY [FNS I]	72%	Honolulu, HI	30%
Denver, CO	70%	Bangor, ME	25%
Independence, WI	66%	East Bloomfield, NY	24%
Jackson, TN	61%	San Francisco, CA	12%
San Jose, CA	60%	Chicago, IL	8%
Morristown, TN	59%	Richmond, VA	7%
Syracuse, NY	49%	Los Angeles, CA	NA
Norfolk, VA	45%	Phoenix, AZ	NA
Rapid City, SD	37%	Barre, VT	NA



Differences in the contact/referral rates can be explained by the following three factors.

***Clients' Readiness to Accept Assistance and Apply to the FSP***

As noted in Section A, certain populations, such as older people, immigrants, and people living in rural areas were found to be especially reluctant to apply to the FSP. As a result, projects that solely targeted these populations generally referred fewer people to the FSP. The specific needs of these populations and their reasons for not applying to the FSP were extremely difficult to overcome by the projects. On the other hand, as noted, it was beneficial to contact people who were already attempting to obtain other public assistance and in places that had a natural connection to food stamps, such as meal sites or food pantries.

***Specific Informational Messages and/or Assistance Provided by the Projects***

Project staff presented potential clients with new and accurate information, corrected misconceptions about the FSP, and informed them about the assistance available to them through the demonstration project. For clients whose only barrier was accurate information, this was a successful strategy.

***The Skill Level, Knowledge, and Attributes of Staff Providing the Assistance***

Some staff were extremely skilled in identifying, engaging, informing and assisting potentially eligible clients. Others lacked the knowledge and skills needed to adequately assist people through the process. Most successful staff had the ability to build rapport with clients, to treat them non-judgmentally and to provide them with clear and accurate information about the FSP application process in a respectful manner.

It is important to note that clients' decisions about whether or not to apply to the benefit program were often complex and multifaceted. Therefore, demonstration project activities to provide information designed to clarify clients' misconceptions, for example, simply did not overcome all of the barriers and disincentives clients had for not applying to the FSP.

Once people were referred to the FSP, various forms of client assistance were provided to ensure a smooth application process. Table 4 shows that after clients were referred, it was difficult to overcome all of the barriers and disincentives to their actual enrollment. Many needed extensive and intensive assistance in order to become enrolled, which is discussed below. Those projects most likely to see a high percentage of their client contacts become enrolled were those with populations [1] eligible for expedited services; [2] for

whom stigma was not a major issue; and, [3] who were assisted through the process by the skilled and appropriate interventions of project staff.

**Table 4.**  
**Referral/Enrollment Rate**

Site	Referral/ Enrollment Rate	Site	Referral/ Enrollment Rate
Honolulu, HI	84%	Bangor, ME	40%
Jackson, TN	78%	Norfolk, VA	38%
Richmond, VA	76%	Greenville, MS	37%
Washington D.C. [FNS II]	72%	Norfolk, AR	36%
New York, NY [FNS I]	67%	New York, NY [FNS II]	36%
Denver, CO	65%	Boston, MA	31%
Portland, OR	63%	Independence, WI	30%
Seattle, WA	59%	Morristown, TN	20%
San Jose, CA	57%	East Bloomfield, NY	18%
Rapid City, SD	49%	Syracuse, NY	NA
Washington, D.C. [FNS I]	49%	Los Angeles, CA	NA
Chicago, IL	43%	Phoenix, AZ	NA
San Francisco, CA	41%	Barre, VT	NA

***Clients Who Were Eligible for Expedited Service***

People who were eligible for expedited service tended to enroll in the FSP more often than those who were not, primarily because a number of barriers to their enrolling were reduced. For example, in the initial interviews and expedited application forms for these clients, eligibility workers are required to obtain only a minimum of documentation. Further, clients themselves had the added incentive of completing the process because food stamps were available immediately, within seven days [and in some cases sooner] as opposed to 28 days from the time an application was returned to the food stamp office. The requirement to gather and present sufficient documentation to continue to receive the benefit needed to be addressed by clients receiving expedited service during that first month. Although data was not collected on how many such clients remained in the program, limited data from some of the sites suggest that for some clients, the second stage of the application process did not occur. In some instances, obtaining documentation was not easily accomplished without added help from the project staff. In other cases, personal reasons for not wanting or being able to further document their identities and circumstances kept clients from continuing on the food stamp rolls.

***Clients for Whom Stigma Was an Issue***

As noted in Section A, stigma was a major barrier that served to keep people from participating in the FSP. Few interventions were found to overcome this

barrier. One potentially useful strategy included providing clients with information on a number of benefits, both public and private, at the same time as pre-screening for food stamps occurred. This tied the FSP to other, less stigmatizing public benefits, such as fuel assistance. On the other hand, requirements for each program vary, making providing information about a number of different programs at one time more difficult and complicated for staff, increasing the possibility of inaccurate or incomplete information being provided. Another strategy that met with some limited success in overcoming stigma was having staff from the same ethnic or age-cohort population, who were using or had used food stamps, present information about the usefulness of the benefit to clients.

### ***Clients Assisted By Skilled Staff Implementing Appropriate Interventions***

It is difficult to state that one service is more important than another, rather it was important, although not always practiced, to provide a full array of individualized client services. As noted, many of the clients served by the projects had complex needs. For these clients, it was overwhelmingly found that any effort made by project staff to simplify clients' tasks and provide in-depth assistance during the application process increased the likelihood of the process being completed.

Even though it is difficult to pinpoint one specific activity or factor as being key to providing effective client application assistance, project staff did find that certain factors were particularly important to ensuring clients' completion of the application process, including but not limited to the following:

- ◆ Hiring skilled and committed staff members;
- ◆ Ensuring that project staff received on-going training on the FSP application process;
- ◆ Having staff serve as an on-going resource and advocate for clients;
- ◆ Allowing staff the necessary time to work with clients, so that clients received the intensive services that they needed;
- ◆ Providing client assistance in places other than the food stamp office;
- ◆ Arranging for food stamp eligibility workers to work from alternative client assistance sites;
- ◆ Providing client assistance at times convenient for the population being served; and,
- ◆ Arranging for project staff to hand-deliver FSP applications to the food stamp office for their clients.

### ***Hiring Skilled and Committed Staff Members***

In order to effectively provide client assistance, staff's familiarity with the FSP application form, rules, and regulations was critical. Staff also needed to be

confident and skillful interviewers and providers of FSP information and application assistance. Commitment and follow-through were also essential, as were appropriate linguistic and cultural sensitivity. Cultural sensitivity was of particular importance; workers needed to have the knowledge, ability, and desire to assist clients to understand and respond to the questions being asked during the application process in the context of the broader U.S. culture. Similarly, it was critical to be sensitive to a client's self-perceived needs and to understand their values and beliefs.

Whereas some staff were able to effectively assist clients in the process, ensuring that application forms were completely and accurately filled out and that clients had copies of the necessary documentation, other staff were less able to be of assistance to clients. Project staff found the application process complex, especially when they were assisting those clients whose lives were in flux and who did not have standardized living arrangements or predictable wages. In addition to the complexity of FSP rules and regulations, the application form itself was lengthy. For example, in one state, which had combined application forms from a number of benefit programs, the application was 26 pages long.

### ***Carefully Consider the Use of Volunteers***

Several projects used volunteers in outreach activities with decidedly mixed results. Volunteers typically did not have the skills needed to perform the complex activities expected of them, and many required intensive supervision and on-going training. Volunteers also had difficulty conducting the type of client assistance offered by the projects. Many found the application process as difficult as did the clients, even when they had received training in its completion. Staff must therefore have the time to provide volunteers with the support and training they need to be effective in their role[s]. It is also important to consider the time volunteers are expected to spend on a project. Just as staff must be committed to their responsibilities, so too must volunteers. It may be unrealistic to expect volunteers, who are not monetarily compensated for their actions, to maintain a high level of commitment to performing complex, sensitive activities for large amounts of time over an extended period.

### ***Ensuring On-Going Training to Project Staff on the FSP Application Process***

Given the complexity of the FSP application process, having food stamp agency staff available to provide FSP training to project staff was found to be essential to their provision of accurate client assistance. As noted, the FSP application process is complicated, and project staff with a thorough knowledge of the process were found to be most helpful to clients. A one-time training was found to be inadequate for most staff; additional training was needed in order for staff to thoroughly understand the FSP rules and regulations.

Also important to enhancing staff skills and knowledge, and therefore enhancing the quality of the client assistance provided, was designating a contact person at the food stamp office for staff members to call with questions. Project staff often needed to inquire about a particular client's case during the course of the project and ask for clarification about further assistance they should or could offer. Food stamp eligibility workers were a particularly beneficial resource for project staff when they were available to provide information and to help them to address specific client dilemmas.

### ***Providing Clients With an On-Going Contact Person and Advocate***

An integral part of assisting clients included providing them with information about the FSP application process and assuring them that they were properly complying with the process. Project staff attempted to ensure that clients knew what would be expected of them in order to successfully complete the application process, providing them with detailed instructions and lists of required documents. Explanations were typically given in clients' own languages and in a manner that clients clearly understood. Staff were available to answer questions, and assured clients that they were not alone; if mistakes were made, staff were there to help.

Project staff also assisted clients through situations they found difficult at the food stamp office. Project staff served at times as advocates for clients, working to ensure that they received the benefit to which they were entitled. As one project staff person said to a client, "You can count on us being there with you every step of the way." In some projects, even after clients completed the application form, staff continued to serve as a resource for them, checking on the progress of the application, inquiring about questionable decisions made by the local food stamp offices' eligibility workers, further explaining FSP decisions and additional requests to the clients, and serving as client advocates. Project staff attempted to develop trusting one-to-one personal relationships with their clients, to be available to answer client's questions, and to intervene when necessary. Staff, with knowledge of both client circumstances and FSP regulations, acted as buffers and interpreters for clients, bridging the gap between the culture of the food stamp office and that of the community being served.

### ***Allowing Staff the Time Required to Meet Clients' Needs***

As noted, many clients had complex needs that required time and effort on the part of staff to ensure that they were successfully enrolled in the FSP. Often projects could not have helped their clients to enroll in the FSP without providing intensive services and committing significant time and resources to the effort. This was particularly true of projects whose clients were frail or had disabilities, spoke little or no English, or were very hesitant to expose their needs or personal problems. Projects that invested less time and resources with the client

identification and assistance process, at times found the result to be fewer clients enrollments.

### ***Providing Client Assistance in Accessible and Comfortable Settings***

Providing client assistance services in places other than the food stamp office gave people an opportunity to apply for food stamps when they otherwise might not have done so. Some clients were apprehensive about visiting the food stamp office for a number of reasons, including the fact that the office was often located in rough parts of town and difficult to find and/or get to. Further, the food stamp office and/or the food stamp eligibility workers were sometimes intimidating. Staff from several projects noted that people preferred to be in a comfortable, familiar, and non-threatening setting with an advocate to assist with problems rather than in an unfamiliar and perhaps intimidating environment. Clients themselves reported being more comfortable and secure in an environment other than the food stamp office, citing that their feelings of stigma were lessened when going to these off-site locations.

### ***Arranging for FSP Eligibility Workers to Work at Alternative Sites***

Arranging for food stamp eligibility workers to work with clients at alternative assistance sites was a particularly effective strategy employed by some projects, serving to keep some clients from dropping out of the application process. Eligibility workers met with clients at alternative client assistance sites and helped them to complete the FSP application form. Eligibility workers then took the completed applications back to the food stamp office where eligibility was determined. Interaction with clients in these situations tended to be more personal; project staff were in some instances familiar with the clients being served and were able to introduce clients to eligibility workers and inform workers of particular needs of the clients. In this way, project staff were able to build bridges between clients and the FSP. Further, when eligibility workers were available to provide assistance at off-site locations, issues related to clients' apprehension about going to the food stamp office were often overcome.

### ***Providing Assistance at Times Convenient for the Population Being Served***

Just as it is important to provide assistance in sites that are comfortable and convenient for clients to access, so too is it important to provide assistance during convenient times. In one site, for example, project staff targeted homeless people at a day shelter and therefore were available during the morning and afternoon hours to provide assistance. In another site, which served farm workers, assistance was often provided during evening hours. Clients in this particular project noted that they liked the fact that there were no long lines and waiting periods and that the evening hours made it easier for them to get to the site. They did not have to take time off from work, and it was also easier to arrange transportation at this time.

### ***Hand-Delivering Applications to the Food Stamp Office***

A higher follow-up rate by clients was seen when project staff hand-delivered completed client applications to the food stamp office and made appointments for clients to interview with an eligibility worker. This saved clients a trip to the local food stamp office and assured them that an appointment had been made. However, only a few projects received a waiver from the FSP regulations to deliver applications themselves.

### ***Assisting Clients With Their Documentation Needs***

It was found that when project staff assisted clients in gathering the documents necessary for the FSP application process, there were a higher number of client enrollments. Project staff who provided this service helped clients acquire documents such as employment and/or housing verification letters and updated bank statements. This could require, for example, staff going to a client's home to help those who had no organized record system locate the necessary documents. It could also require staff providing transportation to local banks, etc., to obtain new copies of the needed documents, or staff talking to clients' employers to convince them to write a letter verifying income.

### ***Providing On-Going Assistance Beyond Enrollment***

One major finding from the demonstration projects was that people who need in-depth assistance throughout the entire FSP application process in order for them to become enrolled in the program also need assistance with the recertification process. Again and again people who were enrolled in the FSP dropped out when it was time to recertify because they required additional assistance to keep them enrolled in the program. Some people could not read or understand the letters informing them about recertification, and others may not have received their letter. Although providing assistance with and gathering data on recertification were not part of the mandated demonstration project activities, reports from the sites indicated that follow-up activities in client-assistance projects may need to include recertification assistance for some of the clients who require substantial assistance during their initial enrollment.

## **C. Successful Collaborative Project Activities**

Elements predictive of successful collaborations, created between local and state level FSP and private, non-profit agencies to enhance access to the food stamp benefit for previously unserved, eligible clients, included: 1. agreements that clearly defined goals, roles and responsibilities of each agency staff; 2. sufficiently knowledgeable and well-trained staff in both agencies; 3. assistance activities directed to the individual needs of clients; 4. good systems of interagency or interstaff communication allowing intervention with staff, client or

both; and, 5. a system for following the progress of clients' applications and enrollments, with provision for client advocacy. The local and state level food stamp offices most effectively supplied knowledge and training on FSP rules and procedures, changes in hours, places and ambiance of applying for the benefit, and the ability to contact non-profit staff when they notice a challenge to a client's enrollment. The private, non-profit agencies most effectively supplied linguistically, culturally and cognitively appropriate interventions to help provide correct information and application assistance to the client on the FSP, more intimate knowledge of client circumstances and culture to provide to the eligibility worker, time to help clients complete application and documentation requirements, and the role of culture broker for the FSP and the client as well as client advocacy. The public/private collaborations and the comprehensive methods and combination of services provided at the successful demonstration project sites were shown to best serve those people who need accurate information about the FSP and the enrollment process, those who require different hours or places to apply, those with particular language and literacy barriers, those who are frail, isolated, have some mental or cognitive impairment.



## **VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Section A., below, summarizes the evaluation in terms of the first two research questions posed: "What barriers do eligible clients encounter in gaining access to the FSP?" and, "What methods of outreach and client assistance are most effective in helping eligible persons overcome these barriers?" Section B., Conclusions, addresses the third question: "Can public-private collaboration between project sponsors and local food stamp offices facilitate eligible persons' completion of the enrollment process?", and presents the broader lessons drawn from the evaluation of the FSP client-assistance demonstration projects.

### **A. Summary**

The evaluation increased the scope of the methods used to study nonparticipation to include a qualitative examination of the behavior and the decision-making of potentially eligible clients, as well as those of local food stamp office workers and the staff of the non-profit grantee agencies during the FSP application enrollment process. The quantitative data gathered at the 26 demonstration sites on the numbers of potentially eligible clients identified, assisted, applying and enrolling proved useful in showing the project staff and the evaluators the location of anticipated and unanticipated barriers during the project activities. These data were essential in differentiating among successful strategies and unsuccessful strategies, especially when used within one site in evaluating changes in approach and activities by the projects over time. These data alerted project staff and researchers to barriers and allowed them to ask new questions leading to richer qualitative data and promoting flexibility in project resource allocation. In turn, the qualitative data enabled researchers to elaborate and explore the real meanings and processes behind categories of challenges, for example, such as 'stigma,' which were used in very general ways in the previous literature on non-participation. The use of qualitative data allowed researchers to explain, in some cases, and to speculate on, in others, the reasons that activities were or were not successful in overcoming the identified barriers to enrollment.

#### **1. What Barriers Do Clients Encounter in Gaining Access to the Food Stamp Program?**

Barriers or challenges to participation in the FSP are approached and characterized in four separate ways. The first way is to categorize the gaps in clients' personal and social assets that make it difficult for them to access food stamps. This approach contrasts these gaps with assets possessed by clients who are able to enroll in the FSP with little or no assistance. The second approach focuses on the experiences, beliefs and social values around

accessing the FSP which present barriers to the clients during their decision-making processes. The third approach is to categorize barriers by where and how they appear to discourage clients over the course of the information, application and enrollment activity process. The fourth approach is to categorize the challenges to successful application and enrollment that are situated within the local food stamp office in terms of procedures, program demands, and client-EW preconceptions and interactions.

#### **a. Challenges Inherent in Clients' Personal Asset Inventory**

First, the findings from the demonstration project data on program barriers are presented from the perspective of the characteristics of personal situations and capabilities of clients' contacted during the demonstration projects. These barriers were approached in terms of gaps in personal assets and contrasted with the characteristics that appeared necessary for clients to negotiate the application process without outside assistance. These client-centered challenges were categorized as an absence of some of the qualities of life and living conditions, as well as personal health and social supports, which may have made enrollment easier (See Section IV, The Findings, A.1, Chart 1., Challenges Inherent in Client Asset Inventory). Barriers presented in this way locate the gaps that needed to be addressed by the broad roles and activities undertaken by demonstration project staff. These gaps in client assets may include:

- ◆ Lack of access to technical support,
- ◆ Lack of adequate personal support systems,
- ◆ Lack of adequate life skills,
- ◆ Lack of stable living conditions, and
- ◆ Lack of adequate physical and mental health.

#### **b. Context and Program Barriers Affecting Client Decisions on Participation**

Second, barriers that appeared in client decision-making were characterized as context and program barriers. These barriers tended to be highly influenced by personal and community values, the individual experiences of the clients and those they knew, and their personal judgments on the expenditures of personal resources in a quest for food security. These barriers include:

- ◆ Clients' perceptions of the FSP, as an internal or external marker of diminished personal status;
- ◆ Clients' concerns about how becoming enrolled in the FSP might affect other personal status issues such as immigration or access to other government programs;

- ◆ Clients' concerns that working with an 'impersonal,' large government system could put them in danger of making costly mistakes in terms of compliance or in actual money;
- ◆ Clients' concerns or actual experiences with government workers in which they felt intimidated or treated poorly;
- ◆ Clients' fears of the benefit 'costing' them too much in terms of a possible low benefit amount, of disclosing personal information, or of the difficulty of using the benefit;
- ◆ Clients' abilities to and perceptions of the costs of accessing alternative food resources in the community.

**c. Application Process Barriers Affecting Participation**

Third, evaluators presented these barriers or challenges in terms of the point that they appeared as clients learn about the FSP benefits and eligibility requirements and take part in the application and enrollment process. Presented in this way, the barriers tend to reflect the challenges anticipated by the grantee sites in their original proposals. These barriers include:

- ◆ Problems of Lack of Reliable Information on the FSP
- ◆ Outdated information on the FSP;
- ◆ Incorrect knowledge of the FSP and FSP eligibility requirements;
- ◆ Lack of knowledge of the FSP and FSP eligibility requirements.
  
- ◆ Problems of Access
- ◆ Lack of availability of or the high cost of transportation;
- ◆ Lack of a telephone and the limited availability of food stamp workers when contacted by phone.
  
- ◆ Problems Understanding the Application Process
- ◆ Finding the application process confusing in terms of eligibility and documentation requirements and in terms of language used on forms.
  
- ◆ Problems Providing Appropriate Documentation
- ◆ Lack of documents due to unstable living situation;
- ◆ Inability to provide documents because of unwilling landlord, family member or employee to complete verification.
  
- ◆ Problems with Language
- ◆ Limited knowledge of written or spoken English;
- ◆ Limited literacy or non-literate;
- ◆ Limited cultural literacy.

- ◆ Problems with Cognition and Basic Life Skills
- ◆ Frailty due to physical or mental illness or age;
- ◆ Frailty due to unusual stress;
- ◆ Frailty due to substance abuse.

#### **d. Challenges to Participation at the Local Food Stamp Offices**

Fourth, challenges were presented by conditions for both clients and food stamp workers at the local food stamp offices in terms of physical surroundings, service delivery and program demands. These barriers, in some cases, kept food stamp workers from being able to provide the in-depth help that they would like to clients. These barriers also resulted in conditions where both clients and food stamp workers were stressed and more likely to respond in defensive and sometimes offensive ways to perceived judgments or 'power plays' between them. Among the elements found at some local food stamp offices which presented barriers to clients and food stamp workers easily completing an application and enrollment are:

- ◆ Uncomfortable or inhospitable waiting room conditions;
- ◆ Changes in local and state programs that require local workers to handle learning new rules and handling new types of clients while still handling their regular caseloads;
- ◆ Changes in local and state budgets which have resulted in staff cutbacks and larger caseloads for workers;
- ◆ Technological updates that require workers to spend time learning new skills while experiencing no relief from usual caseloads;
- ◆ A lack of information sharing among government agencies causing difficulties for eligibility workers in confirming client information and sometimes short circuiting the application procedure for a client;
- ◆ Food stamp workers perception of difficulty in determining eligibility because of confusing and changing rules as well as difficulty of getting proper documents from the clients;
- ◆ Food stamp workers' conflicts in trying to perform their duties to monitor and prevent fraud without compromising their roles as social service providers in the eyes of their clients.

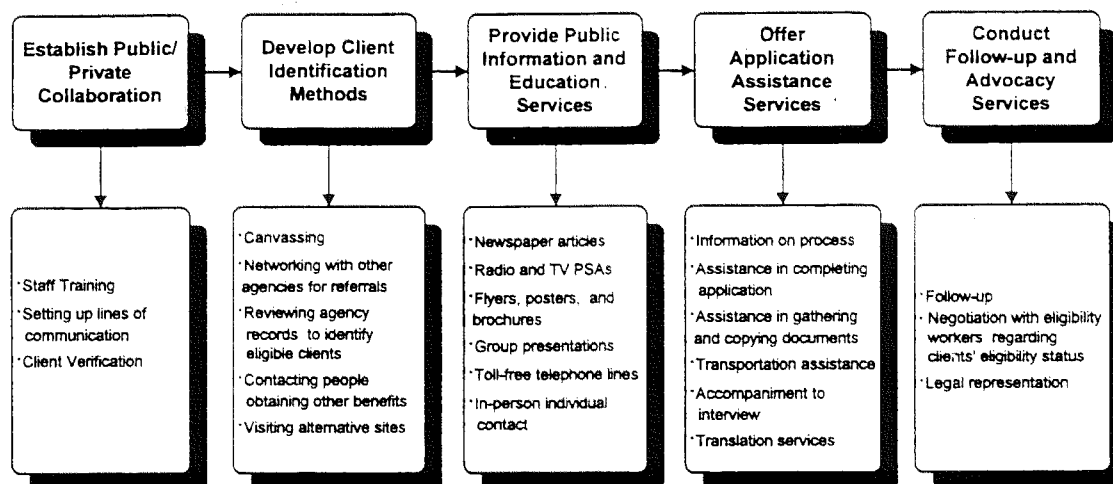
## **2. What Methods of Outreach and Client Assistance Help to Overcome These Barriers?**

The strategies used by the various grantees to overcome barriers to participation were examined in terms of: 1. those used to establish and maintain effective public/private partnerships on behalf of clients; 2. those used to identify and contact non-participating, potentially eligible clients; 3. those used to supply correct information, broadly or on a one-on-one basis, about the FSP and its eligibility and

application requirements; and, 4. those employed to assist clients in successfully engaging in the application and enrollment process including those used to follow-up on applications and provide advocacy for clients, as reflected in Figure 6, Section V, The Evaluation, and repeated below:

FIGURE 6

**Activities Pursued During the Client Assistance Process**



**a. Public/Private Agency Collaboration**

Not surprisingly, establishing and using public/private agency collaboration proved useful in overcoming barriers that related to client challenges, to program challenges, as well as to those challenges experienced at the local food stamp offices. What was apparent across grantee sites was that most local food stamp offices did not have the funds or staff time to adequately take on the activities that were performed by the grantee agency staff. Successful collaborative relationships allowed the client needs to be the focus of the energies of all concerned so that food stamp workers and demonstration staff could play to their strengths.

The existence of previous on-going relationships, whether collaborative in community social service delivery and needs assessment venues, or adversarial, or a combination, were very predictive of successful collaboration on behalf of the clients during the demonstration projects. Relationships in some cases enabled interventions by the project staff with the food stamp staff not only to assist a client with a problem but also to alert the food stamp office to a problem before it required a fair hearing or increased their FSP error ratings. Close relationships between public and private agency personnel allowed each to more fully understand both the program rules and working restraints in the food stamp

office and within the private agencies, and their effects on the successfully filling the needs of the clients. In some cases, information sharing alleviated the necessity for brokering between the EW and the client by agency staff, or made such an intervention easier.

An adequate level of skill and training on the part of food stamp agency staff and of non-profit agency staff were essential in accomplishing the three activities that the demonstrations employed during their collaboration; providing training for non-profit staff in FSP eligibility rules and application procedures, establishing key people and methods of communication between agencies to allow for easy access to information and quick interventions; and establishing consistent systems of verification or follow-up on the progress of client applications so that interventions could be made at the food stamp office or with the client to avoid surmountable barriers.

Elements that appeared critical to establishing and maintaining strong public/private agency collaboration on behalf of clients are:

- ◆ The mutual creation of a shared common vision and philosophy;
- ◆ The agreement on specific goals, and objectives to be attained as well as activities to be conducted;
- ◆ The development and agreement of clearly defined roles and responsibilities of staff from each agency;
- ◆ The development of a consistent system of communication between agencies;
- ◆ The development of a process by which both agencies could evaluate the progress of the partnership and their mutually developed goals;
- ◆ The identification of leadership and contact persons for each agency; and,
- ◆ The commitment of the staff of both agencies to the development and sustenance of the collaborative relationship.

#### **b. Identification of Unserved, Potentially Eligible Clients**

Of the methods used to identify and contact unserved clients, ones that made use of the facilities of, client lists of, or referrals from other social service providers as well as canvassing their own client bases in the case of large grantee agencies, proved to be very successful. Researchers and staff found that many of the clients reached during the demonstrations were in need of multiple services to stabilize their living situations, not just food stamps. One successful method of this type was for the grantee agency to supply general eligibility and application information in trainings to staff in other agencies as well as supplying them with a 1-800 number that referrals could call to make contact with the grantee agency. Another successful method of this type was for larger

agencies to review their own client lists for people who might be in need of food stamps and fit the eligibility requirements, as well as informing all new clients at in-take about the FSP and providing a pre-screening for potential eligibility. A third method, contacting people already enrolled in other public assistance programs such as low-income energy assistance, proved useful but provided more contacts with people already accessing the program than the first two.

Trying to contact unserved clients in the target populations at sites where they might congregate for other reasons proved successful. However, success was closely associated with the following criteria being met at the individual site chosen:

- ◆ Comfort and safety. A site with private space for potential clients and workers to sit to discuss the FSP and do paper work with some sense of confidentiality.
- ◆ Availability of time. Chosen site should be one where the primary activity being conducted would suggest that people may be able or willing to take time to discuss the FSP.
- ◆ Concentration of potentially eligible, unserved clients. The site should be a location that serves high concentrations of people likely to be eligible for the program.
- ◆ Natural connection to the food stamp benefit. The site should be one where people are attempting to obtain other types of public assistance or in places where they are accessing alternative sources of food assistance such as meal sites or food pantries.
- ◆ Knowledgeable, experienced staff. The demonstration staff making the contacts at the sites should be familiar with the target population, be well-trained and knowledgeable about the FSP and the application process, and be dedicated to the project agenda, i.e., not working with competing or conflicting agendas.

### **c. Information and Education Services**

Of the various information and education methods employing media, the ones which seemed to provide the highest rate of response were messages placed in local, community-focused electronic or print media, especially those which were language specific and could present the message in culturally appropriate ways. These categories of media, i.e., local language specific papers or radio stations, were also more likely to put ads or public service announcements in places or at times that unserved clients would access them. They were also more willing to handle these placements at low or no cost. Local shoppers' guides were a print source that provided particularly good response at sites that monitored how clients were motivated to contact them.

Personal presentations to groups of potentially eligible members of targeted populations were successful if the audience was well selected, and, especially if, rather than providing application assistance directly after the presentation at the site, the group was provided with a local or 1-800 number they could use to make more private inquiries at a later time. The exception to this scenario was among the homeless population, where telephones and alternatives to the presentation site were usually not options.

Any of the above methods, when they provided clients with new and accurate information or corrected misinformation, were able to overcome information barriers. For clients for whom a lack of information or misinformation were the only barriers, providing these services could be enough to guarantee successful access to food stamps.

#### **d. Application Assistance Including Client Follow-up and Advocacy**

For clients who needed services that required application assistance, it was found that supplying pre-screening was extremely helpful. Many clients mentioned that they were reluctant to go to the food stamp office, to fill out the long form, and wait many hours for appointments, if they had no idea whether they would be qualified for the benefit. In part their decision-making was based on the best use of personal resources, but many clients also mentioned the risk of humiliation involved in possibly being told that they were not eligible. Pre-screening, of course, did not assure clients of enrollment or guarantee them a certain level of benefit, but did prove helpful in encouraging those clients who were apprehensive and unwilling to waste time. Pre-screening proved even more successful if clients were being screened for eligibility for other public and private benefits at the same time. As was mentioned above, most of the clients contacted during the demonstrations were in need of a variety of services and also were more prone to consider food stamps if they were associated with less stigmatized benefits such as telephone rebates or energy assistance.

For others who needed on-going assistance through the application and enrollment process because of frailty, language or literacy problems, or other psychosocial issues, a group of factors that greatly assisted in successful enrollments were identified including:

- ◆ Using skilled and committed staff members in the private agency and in the food stamp office;
- ◆ Providing on-going training on the FSP application process to private agency staff;
- ◆ Allowing staff in both types of agency the necessary time to work with clients who require more comprehensive assistance;
- ◆ Providing client assistance in places other than the food stamp office;



- ◆ Arranging for food stamp eligibility workers to work from alternative client assistance sites;
- ◆ Providing client assistance at times convenient for the population being served;
- ◆ Arranging for project staff to hand-deliver FSP applications to the food stamp office for their clients; and,
- ◆ Having private agency staff serve as an on-going resource and advocate for clients.

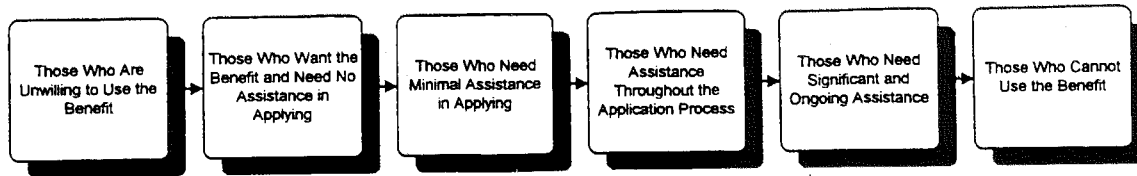
For those clients with literacy, language, mental or physical frailty, or other psychosocial deficits, the services offered by projects, using the criteria above, could include pre-screening, help in filling out applications and locating and copying needed documentation, accompanying a client to an interview or arranging for a food stamp worker to interview by phone, following up with clients if an application is not submitted or is returned for more information, acting as a culture broker to ease misunderstandings between clients and food stamp workers, and acting as an advocate when clients applications go astray or seem to be denied unfairly. Much of the work on the part of the non-profit staff can be time consuming. At the same time, these staff can often accomplish things more quickly and efficiently with this particular client base than a food stamp office worker can because they possess a more intimate knowledge of and a more trusting relationship with members of a specific target population.

Offering services to clients with familiar staff that they knew and with whom they could establish trust, offering services in surroundings that were familiar and where waiting was not extensive, offering services at hours that fit in with the other demands that were placed on clients by their family, health and work obligations, and treating clients with respect and patience all were strategies that project staff used with success. These were also strategies used successfully by some local food stamp offices alone or in conjunction with committed private agency partners.

Section IV, The Findings, categorized clients from the demonstration projects into one of three groups representing a continuum of need: those needing no or minimal assistance, those needing substantial assistance to complete the enrollment process, and those who would not or could not be helped. The continuum was illustrated in Figure 4, which is repeated below.

FIGURE 4

Continuum of Client Need for  
Food Stamp Application Assistance



Most of the clients who fall into group one or group two have needs located in the middle range of the continuum represented in Figure 4, and were able to be enrolled successfully in the FSP by those projects employing optimum services. The first group are clients who need minimum assistance and who frequently require no more than basic information regarding the FSP benefit, eligibility requirements and application process in order to gain access to the program. The second group are clients who need relatively significant, thorough and on-going support without which they are unlikely to complete the application process despite their need for food security. The third group, however, experienced challenges located at either end of the continuum and were unable to access benefits. These individuals are discussed below.

Some people are in need of FSP benefits but remain outside the program due to extraordinarily complex needs or because of strong beliefs that accessing the benefit could negatively affect their legal, societal, moral or financial status. In some cases these are people with such severe problems in negotiating daily life, that only the intervention of another person in their lives could guarantee access to the FSP as well as the ability to make use of the benefit. In other cases, clients beliefs about the social stigma of receiving the benefit or their need to retain a sense of self-sufficiency they feel would be lost in enrolling, were not possible to overcome despite the best efforts of the demonstration projects. In other cases, previous bad experiences in personal interactions with workers or in experiencing losses when adjustments were made during a previous experience with the FSP or with another government assistance program, or even the stories of others who had such experiences, were sufficiently unpleasant to make clients unwilling to enroll. Project staff encountered special fears among immigrants that enrolling might endanger their immigration status or among elderly clients that divesting themselves of nonrenewable assets to access the FSP were just not risks they were willing to take.

## B. Conclusions

Changes in the FSP in recent years have resulted in the food stamp benefit being more broadly available to, and utilized across all populations in need of food security. There still remain potentially eligible clients in certain populations which prior research indicates are not being served by the FSP. The successful FSP client enrollment assistance demonstration projects enabled numerous people within these previously unserved populations to obtain food stamps. Without the interventions carried out by the demonstration projects, many of these clients would not have received the benefit. Staff from non-profit organizations, when provided with adequate training and information about the Food Stamp Program benefits, and the application and enrollment procedures, can develop and provide outreach, education, and services related to the FSP to clients. The methods used by demonstration project staff were particularly successful for individuals who had not applied for benefits simply because they lacked basic FSP eligibility and application information, or needed extended hours or more accessible places to make application. Given such services, these clients were generally willing and capable of going through the application process on their own. However, for certain categories of individuals eligible for food stamps, challenges still remain.

For the most vulnerable or the more difficult to reach members of the populations targeted by the demonstration grants, even the combined efforts of the public/private partnerships could not provide them with the assistance they needed and for which they were eligible. The public/private demonstration projects had limited success in overcoming barriers for people who perceived the FSP as a welfare program or as a marker of personal failure. They were also limited in their success with those who were afraid that applying for food stamps would endanger their rights or other benefits, or who perceived the benefit as too low to compensate them for the effort in completing the process [primarily rural older persons]. For those people experiencing transitional need for food security who are increasingly employed in part-time or temporary work, the FSP verification system proved a barrier to both the client and the eligibility worker. The demonstration projects were unable to assist a number of clients, including those with mental illness or those lacking essential life skills, whose comprehensive needs placed them beyond the capabilities of both public and private agency staff.

On the other hand, the grantee agencies also demonstrated that non-profit staff can provide highly individualized, supportive services to clients requiring additional help to access and successfully complete the FSP application process. Many of the more difficult to serve clients are in need of multiple services outside the FSP. When the benefits, demands and drawbacks of the

FSP compete with those of other benefits or of opportunities for temporary employment, many of these clients decide to forego the needed food stamp benefit for themselves and their households in order to place scarce personal resources of time, energy, and personal support systems into other activities contributing to their marginal security. Therefore, successful application assistance strategies were based on recognizing such multiple needs and being able to identify the particular needs of individual clients. For both non-profit agency and FSP staff, technological tools that allow them to take information from clients that can be provided to multiple programs, pre-screening or screening that provides clients with eligibility, enrollment and benefit information on other available public or private resources, and the ability to network with similar and complementary community services, were important aspects of successful service provision.

The demonstration projects which provided successful individualized assistance to clients took into consideration all aspects of the application process that make it difficult for individual clients to complete the process fully. These methods of assistance generally included services that food stamp personnel were unable or did not have time to provide. As stated, for these clients any effort made by project staff to simplify clients' tasks and provide in-depth assistance during the application process increased the likelihood of the process being completed. Often these services involved overcoming linguistic, cultural or cognitive challenges. The levels of trust and the informal and formal networks of information established as well as the degree of privacy provided for and respect shown to many potential clients by either grantee or FSP staff had an impact on clients' readiness to apply to the FSP.

In many cases, barriers that were the most difficult to bridge were those resulting from ideas and judgments that were fixed in the minds of the clients and the eligibility workers. It was clear from the demonstration projects that the need of clients for FSP benefits is not simply categorical, but is also conceptual. Clients' concepts of acceptability, accessibility, and appropriateness of both benefits and costs were critical to food security. Eligibility workers' concepts of fairness, the time available to them in which they assist clients and determine eligibility, and the conditions in which they operated, in some cases had significant influence on client interviews and case outcomes. In some of these cases, the grantee agency staff could provide appropriate interventions with or between clients and the FSP staff in order to bridge gaps that might otherwise deter enrollment.

Grantee agencies whose demonstration projects included a strong public/private partnership were able, without compromising their advocacy role, to act as adjuncts to the food stamp office, smoothing the path for both the client and the Food Stamp Program. The partnerships showed the best results when the

communication between them was routine and especially when the agencies had a history of cooperative relations. Best results also occurred where the private agency conducted thorough follow-up on clients and provided client advocacy. The cooperative demonstration activities not only allowed the client to be served in an enhanced manner, often taking some stress off both client and eligibility worker, but also provided a way that the eligibility worker could deal as an agent of the FSP while the private agency staff could perform in social service and client advocacy roles. Such successful partnerships illustrated that, for many of those formerly unserved clients, barriers could be overcome allowing their eligibility, rather than their knowledge of the FSP or their endurance, to be the criterion for accessing the food stamp benefit.

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