

Summary

In 2001, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) awarded \$3.7 million in grants to 14 organizations in 11 States to improve Food Stamp Program access through partnerships and new technology. These projects generally aimed to improve access among the elderly, immigrants, the working poor, and other hard-to-reach groups. The projects used a variety of approaches, including targeted advertising campaigns through community media outlets, informational web sites, computer-assisted pre-screening for eligibility, and direct application assistance.

All projects succeeded in reaching some portion of their target population, and most projects have evidence that their effort generated new applications for food stamp assistance. Approval rates of submitted applications were generally high, usually between 50 and 75 percent. The number of families and individuals touched in some way – if only by providing some information – was fairly small, in no case much more than 8,000 households in any single site (excluding web site visits and general media campaign exposures). Although the reported data are incomplete, the projects can account for roughly 4,000 new applications in total.

The collective experience of these projects offers some useful lessons for future efforts. Strong partnerships with State and local offices are critical, and should be established and functional before embarking on community-based outreach. Community- and faith-based organizations can play a variety of roles in food stamp outreach. Better tracking of outcomes and costs could enable better targeting of Federal, State, and local resources. Lack of information about eligibility remains a major reason for non-participation, though the elderly expressed reluctance to pursue small benefits, and non-citizens were concerned about the implications of food stamp participation on their immigration status.

Introduction

The Food Stamp Program (FSP), the Nation's basic program of nutrition assistance, is designed to be available to all eligible individuals and households in the United States. Over the course of the last ten years, food stamp participation fell 40 percent, from 28.0 million people in March 1994 to 16.9 million in July 2000, and then increased 40 percent to 23.8 million in March 2004. This pattern reflects, in part, the program's automatic response to changing economic conditions, contracting as the economy grows and expanding as the economy slows. But the pattern also reflects changes in the percentage of potentially eligible households that participate in the program.

Despite its nationwide availability, only about 3 in 5 people eligible for the program received benefits in 2001. This rate of participation reflects a significant decline since the program's peak participation level in 1994 (Cunningham 2003). The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) – as the agency responsible for administration of the Nation's food assistance programs – is committed to ensuring that all those eligible for these programs are able to easily access

the benefits available to them. FNS has taken a number of actions in recent years to address the issue of a substantial number of eligible non-participants. This report presents the results of one such action, a set of grants awarded in fiscal year 2001 to 14 community organizations interested in improving program access through partnership and technology.

In the sections that follow, the report provides background information on FNS efforts to improve program participation, describes the goals and objectives of the 2001 grant program, profiles the activities and results of the grant recipients, and concludes with some lessons learned.

Efforts to Improve Participation

A substantial body of research suggests five broad reasons to explain why some eligible people choose not to participate (McConnell and Ponza 1999):

- *Lack of Information:* Many low-income non-participants do not think they are eligible. A few have not heard of the program, and others do not know how to apply for benefits.

- *Perceived Lack of Need:* Some believe that they "can get by" without food stamp benefits or that "others need them more" even though program benefits are available to anyone who is eligible.
- *Small Expected Benefits:* Although most are eligible for more, many elderly households believe they are eligible for only the minimum benefit of \$10.¹
- *Administrative Reasons:* Some are deterred from applying because of the time, money, or inconvenience involved.
- *Stigma:* Some associate a stigma with applying for and using food stamp benefits.

To address these barriers to participation in the program, a number of initiatives have been undertaken in recent years:

- In 1999, USDA launched a national public education campaign to inform potentially eligible people about the program's availability, including a toll-free telephone hotline that now provides additional information on food stamp benefits in both English and Spanish.
- In 1999 and 2000, new options and guidance were provided in regulations to simplify program requirements and better support the participation of working families in the transition from welfare to work.
- As part of the 2002 Farm Bill, USDA successfully advocated for restoration of food stamp eligibility to many legal immigrants, as well as new options for States to use in simplifying program administration and improving access.
- USDA and the Social Security Administration expanded a series of combined application projects, which allow the elderly to apply for Supplemental Security Income and food stamps with a single application.
- USDA launched a second national public education campaign to inform potentially eligible people about the program's availability, with the theme *Food Stamps Make America Stronger*. More than 2 million flyers and posters in English

and Spanish have been distributed for use by State and local communities and organizations.

- USDA issued five basic documents in 35 languages. The documents are posted on the web for free and easy download by State and local communities and organizations.
- In 2003, USDA launched *Food Stamps Step1*, a web-based pre-screening tool to help partner organizations help their clients determine potential eligibility for food stamps and get an estimate of the amount of monthly benefits they could receive.
- In 2003 USDA launched a national media campaign to reinforce the importance of food stamp benefits as nutrition assistance and work support. The campaign featured radio advertising in English and Spanish as well as transit advertising.

The 2001 grant program described here, and similar programs in 2002 and 2004, was part of this series of activities intended to improve access to the FSP.² Its purpose was to support research related to improving FSP access by informing potential participants of program benefits and requirements and by facilitating applications through community partnerships.

Program Goals and Objectives

Early in fiscal year 2001, FNS announced a competitive grant program to make available approximately \$3 million for projects of up to \$300,000 each. The projects were intended to:

- Develop and test ways to help inform potentially eligible individuals and families about the benefits that may be available to them under the Food Stamp Program.
- Identify and document barriers that may prevent potentially eligible households from applying for benefits.
- Develop and carry out community partnerships that use new technologies and improved service delivery methods to reach potential participants and improve service for existing recipients.

FNS ultimately awarded 14 grants to organizations in 11 states. Grant awards ranged from \$99,372 to

¹ In fiscal year 2002, households with elderly members received an average of \$64 each month; elderly living alone received an average of \$50 (Rosso and Faux 2003).

² FNS awarded a contract to the Urban Institute in 2003 to evaluate the outcomes of the 19 grants awarded in 2002.

\$300,000, totaling \$3,682,382. FNS funded a variety of grant projects to support the intended goals, ranging from traditional outreach – such as public education about eligibility rules and direct application assistance – to new technologies that make the application process faster and more efficient. Grantees were allowed to use the grant funds for the duration of their projects, up to a maximum of 24 months.

While all projects were designed to improve food stamp participation rates among eligible populations, the range of grantees was intended to represent a variety of approaches and targeted populations across the country, as shown in the appendix. In summary:

- Grants were awarded to projects in a variety of urban and rural locations.
- Projects generally sought to improve food stamp access among the elderly, immigrants, the working poor, and other hard-to-reach groups, separately or in combination.
- Outreach methods covered a number of different technologies at various levels of technical sophistication, including targeted advertising campaigns over conventional media, new Internet websites, and computer-based eligibility pre-screening programs.

Six of the 14 grantees were organizations that dealt strictly with food or hunger-related issues. Others were advocates for the elderly, low-income children and families, or health and human services groups targeting specific minority and immigrant populations.

Project Profiles

This section contains brief narratives with summary overviews and results of the 2001 outreach grant projects. Some of the projects succeeded as initially planned, while others confronted unexpected obstacles that required program modifications or limited their success.

The profiles that follow are drawn largely from self-assessments conducted in each of the sites.³ Many of

the small community-based organizations that received 2001 outreach grants had limited expertise and resources to conduct detailed, quantitative evaluations. As a result, some projects were more successful in tracking their results than others.

Grantee: Asian Pacific Health Care Venture
Location: Los Angeles, CA
Amount: \$210,000

The Asian Pacific Health Care Venture (APHCV) project targeted Chinese, Cambodian, Korean, and Vietnamese communities in Los Angeles County. The project sought to increase community awareness and enrollment through community outreach and education, web-based pre-screening for eligibility, and direct application assistance. The project was built on grassroots efforts to reach immigrants and non-English speaking minorities.

To increase community awareness, APHCV provided one-on-one information about the Food Stamp Program to 4,509 individuals who were seeking health information and services. The project also conducted 77 educational presentations and workshops, primarily in the Vietnamese and Korean communities, with over 1,500 attendees. Information about the project and the Food Stamp Program was disseminated through a variety of print, radio and television media that targeted the various ethnic groups within the Asian-Pacific Islander community. The project also developed a web-based pre-screening tool in Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Khmer (Cambodian), though delays and limited resources prevented extensive use of the tool and implementation in community-based kiosks.

To increase enrollment in the Food Stamp Program APCHV and its partners provided direct assistance with applications and case management for eligible families. The project helped 631 households apply for food stamps, nearly all of whom had lived in the United States for less than three years and spoke a language other than English in the home. The project reports that 55 percent of the households that applied for food stamps were approved, 40 percent were denied, and the balance was either pending or clients who refused benefits even though approved.

Based on information from 193 denied cases, only 15 percent were denied due to income or resources that exceeded the food stamp eligibility thresholds. More than half (55 percent) were withdrawn at the request of the client or denied because the client refused to sign the statement of facts necessary to complete the application process. Outreach workers remain

³ One of the grant recipients, the Union Snyder Agency on Aging in Lewisburg, PA, had not submitted a final self-assessment at the time this report was compiled. This site is not included in the discussion that follows.

concerned that language differences and continuing fears about the implications of applying for Federal assistance on immigration status may prevent some needy applicants from receiving food stamps.

Grantee: Atlanta Community Food Bank
Location: Atlanta, GA
Amount: \$274,500

The Atlanta Community Food Bank (ACFB) project was designed to improve food stamp participation among immigrants, the elderly, and working poor families in DeKalb County (metropolitan Atlanta). The project offered eligibility pre-screening services through emergency food providers, strengthened collaboration among a network of public and private agencies, and conducted a countywide public awareness campaign.

Pre-screening services were located at over a dozen sites throughout the area. These sites were co-located with existing emergency food network providers. The project trained staff at these sites to use a computer-based pre-screening calculator to predict food stamp eligibility and anticipated monthly benefits, provide assistance completing the application form, and counsel clients about the application process. Initial plans to test an electronic application filing system could not be implemented. The project instead printed a complete application for each client at the end of each pre-screening session.

ACFB pre-screened at least 197 clients, and determined over 90 percent to be potentially eligible for food stamp benefits; 55 households applied for food stamps and 31 were approved.⁴ Thus, over half of the screened households subsequently applied for benefits, and over 60 percent of those who applied were approved. The average monthly benefit for approved households was \$237.⁵ The project supplemented pre-screening services with a public awareness campaign, focusing on clients and employers. ACFB distributed 600 client and 300 employer information packets.

Grantee: Community Partners for Food
Location: Hartford, CN
Amount: \$275,036

The overall goal of this project was to test the influence of social capital on food stamp participation by better linking the program with the community. The project targeted former TANF recipients, able-bodied adults without dependents, low-income families with children, elderly, and non-English speaking individuals in the city of Hartford.

The project began with the hypothesis that individuals who are provided information and support for the FSP through informal, personal channels will be more likely to apply for food stamps than individuals who are provided standard information through traditional methods.

The project recruited 127 community sponsors to promote and share information about the FSP. While a valuable component of the outreach project, it was easier to recruit sponsors than to retain them. Moreover, sponsors provided only limited assistance with the food stamp application process. Instead, those in need of assistance were more often referred to the central project staff. Outreach workers would work with these households, and use a pre-screener to determine their eligibility for benefits. The project thus evolved from a train-the-trainer approach to one-on-one assistance.

The project collected information from 1,879 surveys completed by people applying for food stamp benefits at local food stamp offices in December 2001, and April, July and October 2002. The purpose of the survey was to determine if people were aware of the outreach project, and their reasons for applying for food stamps.

Overall, fewer than 7 percent of the respondents had heard of the outreach project. The most common sources of information about the outreach project were their church, another individual, or the project's flyers. The survey also showed that the primary reason individuals had not applied for food stamps sooner was that they did not believe they were eligible.

The project concluded that social capital outreach is a viable outreach model when combined with one-on-one food stamp pre-screening assistance and an active community-based advisory board.

⁴ An unknown number of pre-screening results were lost due to operator error. Thus, these statistics may understate project results.

⁵ The average monthly benefit per household for the nation as a whole was \$186 in fiscal year 2002.

Grantee: Empowerment Center of Greater Cleveland
Location: Cleveland, OH
Amount: \$279,480

The Empowerment Center of Greater Cleveland (ECGC) tested a social marketing and awareness campaign designed to increase awareness and access to the FSP among low-income people in Cleveland, Ohio. Efforts were targeted primarily in the urban Eastside and Westside sections of Cuyahoga County with the highest concentrations of people potentially eligible for food stamp benefits.

ECGC used four primary strategies:

- Outstation staff in sites that drew large numbers of people seeking goods and services. These included grocery stores, schools, community centers, churches, and senior communities.
- Conduct home visits with people who sought assistance with the food stamp application but were unable to travel to the outreach staff.
- Distribute literature and public service announcements in English and Spanish to local media, schools, churches, businesses, and other public and private agencies.
- Conduct informational presentations in community centers, churches, and other sites. These presentations served to provide information on food stamp eligibility and solicit outreach assistance from other service providers.

By the end of the project, the project had reached over 8,400 persons with information about the FSP. About 1,716 applications (covering 3,293 individuals) were referred to the local food stamp office for processing. Approved applications resulted in 1,376 new participants (42 percent of the individuals covered by the submitted applications).

Grantee: Florida Impact Education Fund
Location: Tallahassee, Jacksonville, and Daytona Beach, FL
Amount: \$294,258

The Florida Impact Education Fund (FIEF) tested outreach to the elderly, immigrants, and working poor. The project's primary strategy was to provide full-time in-person outreach staff in five community-based organizations in six locations serving the target populations. These outreach staff used laptop computers to pre-screen clients for eligibility and projected benefits using software developed for the State. Project workers also shared information and

conducted pre-screening at other events and locations, including senior congregate meal sites.

In total, the project reached 8,363 individuals with information or services; 4,750 of these individuals elected to be pre-screened for potential food stamp eligibility. Among those that were screened, the State was able to identify 1,502 applications as of December 2002; 1,461 had been approved, and 41 denied.

About 37 percent of the pre-screened households were working poor, and just over 10 percent were seniors. Despite aggressive efforts at immigrant service centers and events, health clinics, legal services, and migrant camps, the number of immigrants served was relatively small (just under 5 percent of all screened households). The immigrant communities targeted by FIEF appeared to have a number of anxieties about participating in the FSP, including concerns that receiving food stamps would affect their immigration status. The project's outreach workers tried to address these concerns by emphasizing that immigration status would not be affected by applications for food stamp benefits.

Grantee: Human Services Coalition of Dade Co.
Location: Miami, FL
Amount: \$300,000

The Human Services Coalition of Dade County (HSC) promoted food stamp participation among African-American, Hispanic and Haitian agricultural workers. An access guide, in English, Spanish and Haitian Creole was distributed throughout the county. Informational flyers were distributed through local grocery stores. Outreach coordinators provided food stamp information at community centers, churches, health fairs, and other locations within their communities. HSC also enlisted community organizations – most notably churches – to promote the Food Stamp Program. HSC used the *RealBenefits* pre-screening tool to determine clients' eligibility.

The HSC project provided limited quantitative information, but the project sponsors believe their efforts appeared to help make food stamp participation more accessible to their target populations in Dade County.

Grantee: Illinois Hunger Coalition
Location: Chicago, IL
Amount: \$300,000

The Illinois Hunger Coalition (IHC) project was designed to increase food stamp participation for

working families and individuals by developing a web-based tool to assess eligibility. The project trained over 200 service providers in 27 community-based organizations to use the web-based tool *RealBenefits* to pre-screen clients for potential eligibility and produce a printed application ready for submission to the local food stamp office.

IHC-trained service providers in various community-based organizations used *RealBenefits* to pre-screen over 1,700 individuals for food stamp eligibility. A total of 790 applications were completed by the community partners using *RealBenefits* between March and December 2002. The Illinois Department of Human Services received and processed 516 of the completed applications and approved 350 (an approval rate of 68 percent), with a median monthly benefit of \$100. Over 90 percent of the applicants had never received food stamp assistance. The main reasons for denied applications included failure of applicants to appear for interviews or to submit required information. Only 18 percent of the denials were the result of income or assets above the eligibility limits.

Grantee: Los Angeles Regional Food Bank
Location: Los Angeles, CA
Amount: \$300,000

The Los Angeles Regional Food Bank tested an intensive outreach model to reach and enroll eligible clients who had previously not received food stamps. The approach used mobile outreach centers with specially trained workers to pre-screen clients at various charitable distribution sites for potential food stamp eligibility. Initial attention was focused on sites with large numbers of immigrants and seniors.

A group of four trained outreach workers visited an average of 13 agencies per week; 121 different sites participated during the course of the project. Workers at the mobile centers were equipped with information materials and laptop computers loaded with eligibility pre-screening software (developed in conjunction with the Asian Pacific Health Care Venture). Clients were provided with information about the Food Stamp Program, and pre-screened for eligibility at the same time. Outreach staff also accepted completed applications from clients that were pre-screened as potentially eligible. Completed applications were sent to Los Angeles County Department of Social Services (DPSS) for processing each week.

Between June 2001 and December 2002, 1,048 food stamp applications were submitted through the

outreach program to DPSS. Of those, 255 were approved for participation, an approval rate of 24 percent. Approximately 70 percent of the applications resulted in denials. Reasons for denial included client requests, refusals to sign statement of facts, failure to provide information, inability to contact client, excess income, and other miscellaneous reasons. The Food Bank attributed the low approval rates to problems encountered with DPSS application processing, and lack of follow-through on the part of applicants.

While not anticipated as part of the original project plan, the Food Bank developed a capacity for backend advocacy – using outreach workers as the liaison between clients and caseworkers – to ensure that applications were filed and processed, appointments scheduled and kept, and questions resolved.

Grantee: Michigan Food Stamp Partnership
Location: Antrim, Berrien, Cheboygan, Ingham, Oakland, and Saginaw, MI
Amount: \$299,762

The Michigan Food Stamp Partnership targeted three underserved groups – able bodied adults without dependents, former TANF recipients, and low-income families with children. This project worked in partnership with several types of nonprofit organizations and tested two models – one staff-directed and the other customer-directed.

The staff-directed model tested a relatively intensive screening and referral process. Staff in participating community organizations were trained on food stamp eligibility rules, application procedures, and estimating benefit levels, and then offered one-on-one screening of that organization's clients for potential food stamp eligibility. The customer-directed model was less intensive. In this model, staff in participating organizations were trained to distribute self-screening and food stamp education tools, forms, and other information on the State's telephone helpline and other web-based resources, and then responded to questions from those who called the helpline.

The Michigan Food Stamp Partnership identified local organizations that would participate in three urban (Ingram, Oakland, and Saginaw) and three rural counties (Antrim, Berrien, and Cheboygan). Project staffs in each county were trained to implement the project's outreach models. The project began to operate in the summer of 2001 after the first organizations were trained.

The project reports several conclusions. First, it suggests that intensive counseling is not necessary to generate food stamp applications. The likelihood that individuals not currently receiving food stamps applied for benefits was independent of the outreach models tested in this project. This may have reflected constraints on staff time for outreach in most community organizations. Moreover, it suggests that independent hotlines offer an effective way of supporting clients and staff of community organizations.

Grantee: New Mexico VOICES for Children
Location: Statewide
Amount: \$300,000

The New Mexico VOICES for Children project targeted low-income families with children, immigrants and non-English speaking minorities, TANF recipients and recent leavers, and Native Americans.

The project developed public service announcements, designed informational brochures and a self-determination kit (in English, Spanish, and Navajo) containing the latest eligibility guidelines, made educational presentations to community organizations, and partnered with other State and local agencies and the Navajo nation.

The project reports that food stamp participation increased by 14 percent during the year ending November 2002, but it is not clear how much of this increase can be attributed to the project's efforts.⁶

Grantee: North Central-Flint Hills Area Agency on Aging
Location: Rural Kansas
Amount: \$299,974

The North Central-Flint Hills project sought to increase knowledge and awareness of food assistance programs, healthful eating practices, and frugal shopping behaviors among rural Kansas community members, and increase use of food assistance programs among eligible rural senior adults. Many of the projects activities were integrated through senior center staff and community aging group partners. The project included an informational media campaign, food stamp outreach and utilization

training, and community networking in 18 rural counties in north-central Kansas.

The project developed a food stamp outreach and utilization manual for county cooperative extension service, Area Agency on Aging, and senior center managers. The manual provides those who work with seniors a guide of where to refer clients and information on additional available resources. Project staff trained more than 160 people to use the outreach manual, raising awareness among community leaders of the way elderly perceive the Food Stamp Program, improving their understanding of program rules, and shaping a commitment to increase access to food stamp benefits for the elderly.

The project implemented a public, community-based informational campaign using multiple distribution mechanisms to disseminate a variety of educational materials, in English and Spanish, to rural older adults and their families. The campaign included electronic, print, and other materials. The project estimates that it delivered program-relevant information more than 1.1 million times throughout the 18-county region.

The project evaluation compared application, enrollment, and closure trends in the project counties to a similar set of counties beyond the project boundaries. These data suggest that food stamp participation by older adults increased 10 percent over the life of the project, while participation in the comparison counties showed no increase. Application rates increased slightly in the second year of the project, while falling in the comparison counties. Approval rates were unchanged in the comparison counties, but increased from 54 percent to 63 percent in the project area. Over the course of two years, the project generated 1,008 new applications, of which 636 were approved. The average monthly benefit per person was \$47.

Grantee: Pennsylvania Hunger Action Center
Location: Philadelphia, Carlisle, and Harrisburg
Amount: \$150,000

The Pennsylvania Hunger Action Center provided pre-screening services to determine potential eligibility for food stamp benefits. The agency used two methods to assess eligibility: face-to-face and telephone. Face-to-face pre-screening services were offered in food pantries in Philadelphia, a WIC clinic in Carlisle, and in private homes in Harrisburg. In most instances, pre-screening was offered to clients seeking other services. Telephone pre-screening was initiated by callers to a statewide toll-free number.

⁶ Nationwide, the number of food stamp participants increased by 10 percent over this period.

Each pre-screening lasted between 5 and 15 minutes and provided a determination of eligibility status, expected benefit level, contact information for the local food stamp office, a food stamp application, and a list of supporting documents needed to accompany the application.

The project pre-screened 2,116 households, 902 in face-to-face interviews and 1,214 by telephone. Project staff encouraged 718 of those pre-screened in person to apply for food stamps; 257 of these individuals submitted an application, and 185 were approved at a cost of \$213 per enrollment. Project staff encouraged 736 of those pre-screened by phone to apply for food stamps; 395 did apply, and 276 were approved at a cost of \$322 per enrollment.

The two methods appear to have the same level of effectiveness: 21 percent of the households who were pre-screened face-to-face were eventually enrolled in the Food Stamp Program compared to 23 percent of those who were pre-screened via telephone. The face-to-face method appeared to be somewhat more cost effective because of its ability to attract a comparable number of new participants for each contact at a much lower cost. However, telephone pre-screening did have a higher application rate (54 vs. 36 percent). The high rate of application following telephone pre-screening suggests this outreach method can be effective if a high volume of requests for the service is elicited through effective publicity that targets low-income, potentially eligible individuals and families.

Grantee: Project Bread
Location: Massachusetts (statewide)
Amount: \$300,000

Project Bread sought to eliminate barriers to food stamp participation in Massachusetts by:

- developing a food stamp information web site to make it easier for applicants to obtain, complete, and submit necessary application materials; and
- promoting access to the web and the information web site through a media campaign and concentrated outreach in three communities.

The food stamp information web site provides a screening tool, making it possible for users to determine if they are likely to be eligible for benefits. It also allows users to print government forms, eliminating unnecessary trips to the local food stamp

office. The resource is provided in English and Spanish.

The website was launched in December 2001 and experienced a steady increase in usage over the subsequent months. Between January 1 and December 31, 2002, the web site served 31,565 unique visitors in 142,637 visitor sessions. The average number of sessions per day increased from 94 in January 2002 to a peak of 814 in November 2002. Approximately 14 percent of the total visitor sessions (a total of 20,042 sessions) used the site's eligibility calculator.

An examination of the outcome of applications printed from the information web site and submitted to local food stamp offices shows that most were approved for benefits. Of the 105 food stamp applications clearly linked to the web site, 99 of those applications were fully processed, and 76 (about three-quarters) were approved.⁷

Feedback from a voluntary survey and e-mails from site users indicated that it was reaching its intended audience, including elderly and disabled persons, the working poor, and persons who recently lost their jobs. This feedback also indicates that there is a significant portion of the low-income population in Massachusetts that does have access to the Internet and can successfully use it to begin the food stamp application process.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The 2001 outreach grant program was designed to help small organizations improve food stamp participation within their communities. Grantees were encouraged to experiment with new approaches that combined technological advances and expanded partnerships between local governments, community-based organizations, and other stakeholders in each community.

In general, grantees pursued these goals through a combination of three methods.

⁷ The printed applications clearly linked to the web site are probably a sub-sample of applications submitted by web site users, since relatively few users actually printed applications, and local office workers may not have identified all printed applications.

	Approvals as a Percentage of:	
	Screened Cases	Submitted Applications
Asian Pacific Health Care Venture	n/a	55
Atlanta Community Food Bank	16	56
Community Partners for Food	n/a	n/a
Empowerment Center of Greater Cleveland	n/a	42
Florida Impact Education Fund	31	97
Human Services Coalition of Dade County	n/a	n/a
Illinois Hunger Coalition	22	44
Los Angeles Regional Food Bank	n/a	24
Michigan Food Stamp Partnership	n/a	n/a
New Mexico VOICES for Children	n/a	n/a
North Central-Flint Hills Area Agency on Aging	n/a	63
Pennsylvania Hunger Action Center	22	71
Project Bread	n/a	72

- Computer-based prescreening for food stamp eligibility and benefits:** Many projects developed automated programs – either stand-alone or web-based – to help screen low-income families and individuals for potential eligibility and provide an estimate of expected benefits. Several included the capacity to print out applications that could be submitted directly to the local food stamp office.
- Information dissemination and media campaigns:** All projects disseminated information about the Food Stamp Program in one form or another. There was substantial variation in their type and purpose, however. Some offered simple brochures and flyers to inform potential clients of the availability and benefits of the Food Stamp Program or the services of the outreach project. Some launched broader campaigns to raise awareness of the program and its benefits. And at least one sought to engage community stakeholders and organizations in a systematic effort to change the public perception of the program.
- Partnerships with community organizations and stakeholders:** All grantees had substantial roots in their communities before their selection. All were required to develop new or stronger

partnerships with local government agencies and community-based organizations to execute their outreach projects. In some cases, grantees worked closely with others to publicize the outreach projects and assist clients in eligibility screening and application processing. Some projects used partner organizations as sites for outreach activities, distributing materials and screening clients at churches, clinics, community centers, emergency food providers, and grocery stores. Some partner organizations trained their staff and encouraged them to promote food stamp participation to their clients.

Many positive actions resulted from these efforts. All projects apparently succeeded in reaching some portion of their target population, and most projects have evidence that their effort generated new applications for food stamp assistance. The rate of approval of applications generated by the outreach projects was generally high, with a few exceptions, as shown in the table above.

Nonetheless, the results can be best described as mixed. The number of applications submitted as a percentage of households screened for eligibility is relatively small in the few sites where data are available. In every instance, the number of families and individuals touched in some way – if only by providing some information – was fairly small, in no

case much more than 8,000 households in any single site.⁸ Although the reported data are incomplete, the projects can account for roughly 4,000 new applications in total.⁹

While these projects were not designed to offer conclusive answers to questions of the effectiveness of outreach, their collective experience offers some useful lessons for future projects.

- **Strong, collaborative partnerships with State and local food stamp offices are critical.** State and local food stamp agencies are essential partners in any outreach effort. Food stamp agencies can provide useful training on food stamp rules and procedures, must process any new applications generated, and are the principal source of information to track outcomes. In general, cooperation between the 2001 grantees and their local food stamp agencies was positive. Some organizations had long-standing working relationships in place; others developed such relationships over the course of the project. But in some instances, project plans were developed independently of the local offices, did not fully account for limited staff resources and competing priorities, and failed to achieve the cooperation needed for success. Future partnerships should be established and functional before embarking on community-based outreach.¹⁰

⁸ This excludes counts of hits against web sites and exposures to general media campaigns. Several sites generated fairly large number of hits on their web sites, though relatively few followed-up with applications that could be linked back to the project. Prospective designers of web sites may need to consider other ways to measure the value of the information they provide.

⁹ To put this in perspective, the average monthly number of households participating in the Food Stamp Program increased by 745,000 between fiscal years 2001 and 2002, and by another 960,000 in 2003. Thus, participation was generally increasing over the period that these grants operated, and no project was designed to determine how many cases might have applied for benefits even in their absence.

¹⁰ Note that the application requirements for similar outreach grants in 2002 and 2004 required firmer evidence of food stamp office commitment prior to award.

- **Faith-based organizations played a variety of roles in food stamp outreach.** The Human Services Coalition of Dade County worked with churches in African American and Hispanic communities in Miami to promote the benefits of the Food Stamp Program. Community Partners for Food in Hartford worked with 127 local sponsors – at least 35 of which were faith-based – to share information on food stamp benefits with their clients. The Empowerment Center of Greater Cleveland formed a community-wide coalition that included churches, and made presentations to congregations to solicit their assistance in linking eligible non-participants to the program. The Florida Impact Education Fund placed full-time outreach workers onsite at Catholic Charities of Jacksonville and the Redlands Christian Migrant Association to pre-screen clients. The Illinois Hunger Coalition trained staff in Catholic Charities, the Cathedral Shelter of Chicago, and the Franciscan Outreach Association in the use of an automated pre-screener. The Atlanta Community Food Bank worked with several faith-based food pantries.
- **Better tracking of results is needed.** Most grant recipients invested more time and energy in the design and execution of outreach strategies than in the design and execution of a meaningful evaluation. In some cases, the inability or unwillingness of local food stamp offices to track the number of applications processed and approved proved an insurmountable barrier to measuring outcomes.

With only one exception none of the project sites reported direct estimates of the cost of their outreach activities, either in total or per successful applicant. It is not possible to make meaningful assessments of the cost-effectiveness of outreach strategies, or comparisons of relative effectiveness across strategies, without such cost information.

Better tracking and dissemination of the results of outreach and other efforts to increase participation could enable better targeting of Federal, State, and local outreach efforts and maximize the benefits of available outreach funding.¹¹

¹¹ Note that a separate contract was awarded to the Urban Institute to provide technical assistance on evaluation to sites awarded 2002 outreach grants.

- **Lack of information about eligibility remains a major reason for non-participation.** Two projects affirmed that many of the people they screened for eligibility did not think they would qualify for benefits. The Michigan Food Stamp Partnership reported that 41 percent of a sample of non-participants did not think they were eligible. Community Partners for Food reported that 33 percent of their clients reported they had not applied sooner because they did not think they were eligible. These findings are consistent with national survey results that suggest lack of information is the most frequently cited reasons for non-participation (Ponza et al 1999; Bartlett and Burstein 2004). In Kansas, 71 percent of senior center customers reported they would use the Food Stamp Program if they knew they were eligible.

- **Some groups proved to be particularly hard to reach.** FNS encouraged grantees to focus on hard-to-reach groups with low participation rates, and many of the organizations selected have extensive experience working with special populations. Nonetheless, despite the best efforts of project organizers and committed community partners, the elderly, immigrants, and the working poor sometimes proved resistant to many offers of assistance. The concerns expressed by each group were often unique: the elderly were reluctant to pursue what they viewed as a small benefit, non-citizens were concerned about the implications of participation for their immigration status, and the working poor were hard to identify and reach.

Misperceptions about eligibility and the resistance to seek food stamp assistance among these groups were sometimes exacerbated by their experience with local offices. Some grantees reported delays in local office processing of applications, perceptions of burdensome and overly intrusive paperwork requirements, and poor quality customer service.

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References can be found on-line at www.fns.usda.gov/fns or www.ers.usda.gov.

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Appendix: Summary of 2001 Research Grants to Improve Food Stamp Access

	Project Design	Outcomes
Asian Pacific Health Care Venture (Los Angeles)	Targeted Chinese, Cambodian, Korean, and Vietnamese communities.	Provided one-on-one information to 4,509 individuals seeking health information and services.
	Distributed information, conducted mass media outreach (print, radio and television), made educational presentations and workshops, and provided direct assistance with applications.	Conducted 77 presentations and workshops, with over 1,500 attendees. Helped 631 households apply; 55 percent were approved.
Atlanta Community Food Bank	Targeted to immigrant and working poor families, the elderly.	Pre-screened at least 197 clients and determined over 90 percent to be eligible; 55 households applied for food stamps, and 31 were approved for an average benefit of \$237.
	Provided prescreening services supplemented with public awareness campaign.	
Community Partners for Food Hartford, CT	Targeted former TANF recipients, low-income families with children, unemployed adults without dependents, elderly, and non-English speaking minorities.	Limited quantitative information on outcomes reported.
	Recruited 127 community sponsors to promote and share information about the FSP. Provided pre-screening services.	
Empowerment Center of Greater Cleveland	Targeted low-income individuals and families.	Reached over 8,400 persons with program information.
	Located outreach staff in various community sites; conducted home visits with those unable to reach out stationed staff.	About 1,716 applications (covering 3,293 individuals) referred to the local office. Approved applications resulted in 1,376 new participants (42 percent of the individuals covered).
	Distributed information in English and Spanish and conducted informational presentations.	

	Project Design	Outcomes
Florida Impact Education Fund	<p>Targeted elderly, immigrants, and working poor.</p> <p>Stationed full-time outreach staff in five community-based organizations in six locations to prescreen clients for eligibility and projected benefit.</p>	<p>Provided information to 8,363 individuals; prescreened 4,750 individuals; 1,502 applications; 1,461 approved, and 41 denied.</p>
Human Services Coalition of Dade County	<p>Targeted African-American, Hispanic and Haitian agricultural workers.</p> <p>Conducted web-based prescreening and application assistance.</p>	<p>No quantitative information on outcomes reported.</p>
Illinois Hunger Coalition	<p>Targeted low-income individuals and families.</p> <p>Developed web-based pre-screening tool to be used by community partners.</p>	<p>Screened over 1,700 individuals; completed 790 applications; 350 approved (among 516 received and processed); median monthly benefit of \$100.</p>
Los Angeles Regional Food Bank	<p>Targeted users of emergency food assistance and other charities.</p> <p>Developed mobile outreach centers to provide prescreening in community settings.</p>	<p>1,048 applications submitted by mobile outreach centers; 255 approved (24 percent).</p>
Michigan Food Stamp Partnership	<p>Targeted unemployed adults without dependents, former TANF recipients, and low-income families with children.</p> <p>Tested two models—one staff-directed and the other customer-directed.</p>	<p>Limited quantitative information on outcomes reported.</p>

	Project Design	Outcomes
New Mexico VOICES for Children	<p>Targeted low-income families with children, immigrants and non-English speaking minorities, TANF recipients and recent leavers, and Native Americans.</p> <p>Developed public service announcements, designed informational brochures (in English, Spanish, and Navajo), and made educational presentations to community organizations.</p>	Limited quantitative information on outcomes reported.
North Central-Flint Hills Area Agency on Aging (Kansas)	<p>Targeted rural elderly in 18 counties.</p> <p>Used informational media campaigns, outreach and utilization training, and community networking in partnership with rural senior centers.</p>	1,008 new applications; 636 approved (63 percent); average monthly benefit of \$47 per person.
Pennsylvania Hunger Action Center	<p>Targeted families with means-test public subsidies (school lunch, WIC, Head Start).</p> <p>Compared effectiveness of telephone pre-screening through a toll-free hotline to face-to-face pre-screenings during home visits, at WIC clinic, and at food pantries.</p>	<p>Screened 2,116 households resulting in 652 food stamp applications and 461 enrollments, at an average cost of \$278 per enrollment.</p> <p>Face-to-face screenings were more cost-effective, but telephone screenings had a higher rate of applications.</p>
Project Bread (Massachusetts)	<p>Targeted low-income individuals and families.</p> <p>Developed food stamp information and pre-screening website.</p> <p>Promoted access to the web and an information web site through a media campaign and intensive localized outreach.</p>	<p>Over 30,000 unique website visitors during 2002.</p> <p>At least 105 completed applications, 99 fully processed, and 76 approved.</p>

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