

# **Best Practices to Improve the Food Stamp Program in California**

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A Compilation of Ideas to Increase Access and Outreach  
to the Food Stamp Program in California

Susan Chen, Dan McLaughlin  
& George Manalo-LeClair



# INTRODUCTION

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The number of people receiving food stamps in California has plummeted over the last several years. In June of 1996 there were 3,128,369 people on food stamps in California. In June of 2000 there were just 1,789,943 people participating in the program. This represents a 42.8% drop in participation during that period.

County food stamp managers and anti-hunger advocates in California have not been idly watching the rolls plummet – they have been taking action. Because the 58 counties have considerable autonomy in implementing the Food Stamp Program, each has an opportunity to stop the drop in food stamps by taking steps to improve access and increase outreach. CFPA has visited roughly half of the counties in California to see what steps they are taking to improve the program. We have been impressed with what we have seen, and we are pleased to have this chance to let the counties shine.

This booklet contains one-page fact sheets on the Food Stamp Program practices we think will be of most interest to other counties. There is quite a mix of practices described here. Some practices simply sound like common sense. Others are more unusual and innovative. Some will work best in rural areas, while others will work best in urban regions. Not every practice will work in every county, but certainly there will be several practices in this menu of opportunities of use to each county.

We also have included several best practices that require state implementation. California has not yet exercised several options that other states have leapt on, notably the expansion of categorical eligibility, and we include them in this booklet in the hope that they will stimulate consideration at the state level and advocacy among county food stamp managers and anti-hunger advocates.

We know that this list of best practices, already long, is not exhaustive. We encourage local administrators and advocates to send us additional practices for future publication. We also encourage those who implement the practices in this booklet to provide us feedback on the challenges, opportunities, successes and failures encountered along the way.

Finally, we wish to thank all of the state and county administrators and the anti-hunger advocates who took time out of their busy schedules to document these practices for us to share.

Sincerely,

California Food Policy Advocates Food Stampers  
George Manalo-LeClair, Director  
Susan Chen, Policy Analyst  
Dan McLaughlin, Policy Analyst

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## **BEST PRACTICES FROM CALIFORNIA**

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- *Practices to Improve Food Stamp Office Access*
- *Practices Utilizing Alternative Application Sites and Methods*
- *Practices to Increase Outreach*
- *Practices Aimed at Underserved Groups*
- *Practices to Stimulate New Approaches and Collaborations*

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## PRACTICES TO IMPROVE FOOD STAMP OFFICE ACCESS

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- *Non-Traditional Food Stamp Office Hours*
- *Assisting Clients with Applications*
- *Customer Service Standards*
- *Appointments or No Appointments*

# NON-TRADITIONAL FOOD STAMP OFFICE HOURS

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Sacramento County, CA, Susie Gaines Mitchell

**Contact Person:** Robert Hunt, Sacramento Department of Human Assistance (916) 875-8235

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** The Sacramento County Department of Human Assistance can take applications for food stamps (and other public assistance programs) from 7:00am until approximately 9:00pm, Monday through Friday. Two shifts of supervisors and caseworkers are employed to cover the day and night. The workers have staggered schedules and share spaces with the other shift.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The primary goal of this best practice was to accommodate a large caseload without having to build a new facility. At the same time, this practice seeks to increase access for working families and others who cannot get to the office during traditional hours.

**Implementation Challenges:** In implementing this change the anticipated obstacles were:

- Union/labor issues. The union wanted to ensure that no jobs were lost and that no one would be forced to work the 2<sup>nd</sup> shift if they did not want to. No jobs were lost and no one was forced into the 2<sup>nd</sup> shift.
- Would enough workers want to work the second shift? This turned out to be a non-issue. Because of child care arrangements, many workers welcomed the opportunity to work the 2<sup>nd</sup> shift. 2<sup>nd</sup> shift employees were given a boost in pay (7.5% pay differential).
- Security for the evening shift. Security was also raised as a potential issue, however, no additional security precautions were needed in the evening since the high quality security from the day shift proved acceptable for the evening shift as well.
- Possible transportation issues for clients? Fewer buses running in the evening hours may pose difficulties.
- Computer system batching/backup. This is typically done at night and requires several hours. This means that the system is backed-up after the already extended hours.

**Evaluation/Results:** No formal evaluation has taken place as of yet. However, since the addition of the evening shift:

- Worker satisfaction is high; almost all enjoy the flexible hours.
- There is the possibility evening shift workers have more time late in the evening to catch up on paperwork at the end of the shift and thus might be doing higher quality, less error-prone work;
- The heaviest traffic in the office has occurred late in the afternoon, peaking between 3:00pm and 5:00pm;
- The move to evening hours has proven more cost-effective than opening a new building;
- Working families do not have to miss work to apply for assistance.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Inform the community of the additional office hours and let current recipients know the evening hours. Client “word of mouth” may be an effective way to spread the news to the community. Spend time at the start addressing space-sharing issues that would arise with day and night shift workers sharing desks and phones. Consider that most client traffic may occur from early to late afternoon. Set up a Supervisor/Staff committee to work out implementation issues. Have an overall office manager and two shift managers. Besides food stamp applications, consider adding other services to be provided to clients during evening hours.

# ASSISTING CLIENTS WITH APPLICATIONS

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency, Watsonville Office

**Contact Person:** Gloria Luna, Clerical Supervisor (831) 763-8501

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** Because of the complexity of the Food Stamp Program and because of lengthy and confusing food stamp forms, clients often have a need for assistance in completing their food stamp applications. To address this problem, at the Watsonville office in Santa Cruz County a member of the clerical pool is assigned each day to assist clients with the forms and application. This person is available from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily to assist clients with reading and understanding the questions, and writing responses. This assister does not make eligibility determinations.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The goal is to assist clients who have literacy difficulties to complete their application. In addition, the practice seeks to:

- Make the process less overwhelming to the clients;
- Maximize the clients' understanding of the questions; and
- Increase the accuracy of responses from clients.

**Implementation Challenges:** Getting embarrassed clients to use this service, making sure clients know it is available and providing adequate staffing. The reception staff is sensitive to literacy issues when an incomplete application is received. Clients are generally aware of this service and request assistance when needed. If the office is short staffed, the client may set an appointment to receive assistance when a staff member is available or the client may be referred to a community agency that offers this service.

**Evaluation/Results:** Application assistance has been available for two years. On average 40 people a month are assisted in completing the application process for food stamps, Medi-Cal and CALWorks. The busiest days have been at the beginning of the month, when most people are applying for benefits.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** The clerical staff is only responsible for assisting the applicant in answering questions on the application, not for determining eligibility. Any eligibility questions must be directed to the Eligibility Workers.

# CUSTOMER SERVICE STANDARDS

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Tulare County

**Contact Person:** Jon Perrott, (559) 737-4660, x2356 Email: [jperrott@tularehhsa.org](mailto:jperrott@tularehhsa.org)

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** The Tulare County Health and Human Services Agency believes that its clients are the reason for its existence as an agency. As a public service agency, they believe their purpose is to do just that—serve the public. In the eyes of the public, the staff members they see are the agency. Their workers are asked to treat clients with respect and to offer service in a courteous and professional manner.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The goal of the best practice is to serve clients with the same respect given to any other business “customer”. A strong deterrent to applying for aid is the way the client is treated by workers. When a client comes into Tulare County offices, the County’s objective is to make the client feel comfortable by providing a relaxed atmosphere and by having its workers present themselves in a courteous and professional manner.

**Implementation Challenges:** In implementing this way of operation the anticipated obstacles were:

- **Worker attitudes:** In the past, some workers may have held the belief that since they are providing a service to a “welfare” client, the clients are not deserving of the same courtesy and respect they would get as business customers. Also, due to heavy caseloads and the stress of the job, some workers may not realize that they are not being courteous and respectful to clients. The Division Manager held meetings with the workers reinforcing that food stamps are not welfare, rather a supplemental benefit to assist families in their efforts to become self sufficient and that customers should be treated with courtesy and respect at all times. Workers are informed through written policy and frequent verbal reinforcement to be courteous to clients and to conduct themselves in a professional manner. Workers are immediately counseled when complaints are received.
- **Client attitudes:** Some clients do not feel good about their situation and/or themselves when coming into a welfare office. They may not expect a good experience based upon past visits. Tulare intended to change that by having workers show compassion and understanding to even the most irate clients. The adage that it takes two to argue was stressed to staff. Clients are far less likely to maintain negative attitudes when they see a person who is genuinely interested in their situation sitting on the other side of the table.
- **Making applications available outside welfare offices:** Clients may be reluctant to come into welfare offices. The concept of making applications available off-site was explored and implemented. This increases the likelihood of reaching families and individuals who may not have otherwise applied.
- **Notifying clients of Tulare’s policy:** Word-of-mouth among clients was defined as one of the most effective ways to communicate agency policy. During community outreach meetings, Tulare’s “client-friendly” policy is mentioned.

**Evaluation/Results:** No formal evaluation has taken place yet. However, since the policy on client treatment has been stressed:

- Fewer confrontations have been reported;
- Clients appear more relaxed when they come into the district offices;
- Workers are dealing with clients more effectively and in a more understanding manner;
- The agency has a greater community presence as a result of having outstationed workers; and
- Community meetings on programs such as food stamps, Medi-Cal, and cash aid have increased and program awareness and agency philosophy have been promoted to the public.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Communication with staff and a genuine commitment are key. The attitude of how to treat clients has to come from the top. Providing workers with a written policy and reinforcing that policy with a proper management attitude and regular reinforcement of the importance of the philosophy is a successful way to change worker attitudes. Also, make an effort to reach out to community groups and speak to the clients. Having a presence in the community and allowing the clients to see the agency as more than an impersonal organization will help client attitudes. Word of mouth will be vital in how the agency and, ultimately, the workers are perceived.

# APPOINTMENTS OR NO APPOINTMENTS

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Santa Cruz County Human Resources

**Contact:** Irma Marquez, Food Stamp Supervisor, (831) 763-8506

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## **Brief Description of Best Practice:**

This best practice is combining two apparently contradictory best practices, each with the same goal: to make the food stamp application process more convenient for the client. In some counties, especially those with high volumes of traffic in their welfare offices, the use of appointments may be beneficial to their clients. By knowing exactly when they will be seen by their worker, applicants can avoid long waits. In other counties, such as smaller traffic counties, not using appointments may be benefit clients, if they can be seen quickly upon arrival.

Many counties use the appointment setting approach; several fail to tell their clients about the option of setting appointments. Many more do not set appointments, however, Santa Cruz is unique in its commitment to quickly moving “drop-in” applicants through the process. Specifically, most Santa Cruz applicants do the face-to-face interview on the same day that clients arrive in the office. In many counties, applicants pick up an application, submit it and then they are scheduled to come back for an appointment. Santa Cruz attempts to remove this step.

This office sees clients applying for food stamps during the following hours between 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. Interviews begin at 10 a.m. and the last interview is at 4:00 p.m. Clients are seen on a first come, first served basis. Appointments are given on case by case basis.

## **Goal of Best Practice:**

The “no appointment necessary” policy allows clients flexibility to come in at the most convenient time for them.

## **Implementation Challenges:**

Clients are seen on a flow basis. Due to the seasonal nature of the local economy, the winter months are the busiest in the Watsonville office. To overcome this challenge the county Food Stamp Program has designated a “floater” Eligibility Worker position that is assigned to the district office demonstrating the greatest need for client application assistance. During the winter months this person is located in Watsonville, because of the high need, to assist with the increased client demand.

## **Evaluation/Results:**

Most people are seen on the same day and spend approximately one hour at the office to complete the application and interview process. Finger and photo imaging are conducted following the interview. People appreciate that they can come in at their convenience. It is important to have the option of appointments for the few who need an appointment.

## **Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:**

Eligibility Workers are committed to providing excellent customer service as contained in Santa Cruz Human Resources Agency’s mission statement. The importance of customer service is an integral part of the hiring and training practices. This is an important part of Santa Cruz’s success in the “no appointment necessary” practice.

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## PRACTICES UTILIZING ALTERNATIVE APPLICATION SITES AND METHODS

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- *Using Food Banks to Initiate Applications*
- *Mail-in Applications (pending)*
- *Outreach and Outstationing of Workers*
- *Outstation Food Stamp Workers*

# USING FOOD BANKS TO INITIATE APPLICATIONS

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Napa County Health and Human Services Agency

**Contact Person:** Nancy Forrest, (707) 253-4662, [NFORREST@co.napa.ca.us](mailto:NFORREST@co.napa.ca.us)

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** Napa County Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA), Napa County Food Bank, and California Food Policy Advocates developed a new project to help enroll food bank clients in the Food Stamp Program by allowing them to initiate an application on-site at the food bank. The county and the client later complete the application process.

**Goals of Best Practice:** One goal of this practice is to eliminate additional trips to the welfare office for clients. By providing an application at the food bank site, a trip to the welfare office to pick up an application is eliminated. By providing a checklist in advance of the face-to-face interview, a follow-up trip to provide further documentation can be avoided. The second goal is to utilize the food bank as a source for reaching eligible, needy people not participating in food stamps. Though not all food bank clients are eligible, the food bank is a great place to look for likely eligibles.

**Details of the Best Practice:** Napa County developed an application packet for use at emergency food sites which included:

- A coversheet describing a mail-in application process
- A checklist of things to bring to the food stamp interview
- The DFA 285 A1 Food Stamp Application (part 1 only), which is the first page of the application

The emergency food provider (in this case the Napa Food Bank) offers this packet to their clients to begin the food stamp application process. They assist clients only in putting their names, social security numbers and contact information on the application. They do not provide technical assistance or answer questions about the food stamp program; they simply serve as a conduit to the county process by encouraging clients to apply.

Napa County provides the Food Bank with postage paid envelopes in order for the applicant to send their application to the county office. Upon receipt of the application, county clerical staff will date stamp the application (which establishes the date when benefits should begin). A caseworker is assigned and a face-to-face interview is scheduled. The screener then mails the appointment letter to the applicant.

A tracking mechanism, the “Food Bank Mail-In Tracking log” was developed to record and keep track of the number of applications received from emergency food providers and the processing time for these applications.

**Implementation Challenges:** After some time was spent setting up the initial meetings between HSSA staff and the local Food Bank, plans went smoothly. A more recent challenge was translating the introductory cover letter appropriately into Spanish. They did not want to implement the program until all translated portions were completed.

**Evaluation/Results:** This project will be implemented by October 2000. An initial evaluation will be done to see how many applications were given out to clients and how many of the clients proceeded to go to the food stamp office.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Try to establish good working relationships with CBOs (community based organizations) for potential partnerships. Napa’s food bank was eager to help and had already been doing a good deal of food stamp outreach. Larger counties may need to do more strategic planning in coordinating with different district offices in terms of where applications are sent. Napa has only one office, so implementation was easier. Questions to keep in mind are: Does the food bank have enough time to do this type of outreach? If this project succeeds, will something similar be done at WIC offices?

# OUTREACH AND OUTSTATIONING OF WORKERS

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Tulare County-Agency Policy

**Contact Person:** Jon Perrott, (559) 737-4660, x2356 email: [jperrott@tularehhsa.org](mailto:jperrott@tularehhsa.org)

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** The Tulare County Health and Human Services Agency believes in making the services offered to clients as accessible as possible. To increase accessibility to services, Tulare County has established food stamp outreach workers at sites (CBOs) throughout the county. The County has also embarked upon an aggressive campaign to promote the Food Stamp Program, including, but not limited to, conducting question-and-answer sessions, developing informational flyers, and monthly public service announcements over a broadcast fax.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The goal of this practice is to increase client awareness of the Food Stamp Program and to make services more accessible to clients. The County's expectation is that there will be an increase in applicants and, ultimately, an increase in the numbers of clients served as the application process is made more convenient and clients are better informed of the Food Stamp Program.

**Implementation Challenges:** In implementing outreach efforts, the anticipated obstacles were:

- **Community Cooperation:** In establishing workers off-site, an obstacle is the availability of locations. Some of the community-based organizations (CBOs) may not have the space or time to accommodate a county employee. Some may not have the desire to do so based on a preconceived notion of working with the county.
- **Client attitudes:** Potential applicants may have negative opinions or distrust of government in general, including the county. The immigrant community was a particular concern. We sought to change this type of opinion by working with organizations trusted by the target population. We placed advertisements in Spanish speaking newspapers, scheduled question-and-answer sessions at English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and produced flyers in Spanish to be distributed by outside agencies as well as by Health and Human Services Agency staff at various community functions.
- **Maintaining benefits:** Another issue that was encountered was the belief held by some clients that if they are no longer eligible for cash assistance, they could no longer receive food stamps and/or Medi-Cal. County policy was modified from just sending a written notice regarding ongoing Medi-Cal and food stamps to having a personal contact made with each family when they close their cash case to explain ongoing eligibility. The Division Manager held meetings with all workers stressing that all cases closing for cash assistance be reviewed for food stamp and Medi-Cal eligibility and that workers inform clients that they may be eligible for food stamps and/or Medi-Cal, even if their eligibility for cash assistance ends. This concept is reinforced to workers regularly in unit meetings and mentioned during question and answer sessions held throughout the county.
- **Worker attitudes.** The issue of getting staff to travel off-site to distribute applications was considered. Workers were willing to go out into the community and do outreach, which was vital for the success of this program.

**Evaluation/Results:** No formal evaluation has taken place as of yet. However, since the policy on food stamp outreach was implemented clients who may have been reluctant or unable to come into a welfare office are now better able to apply for assistance. The county has established more positive relationships with community-based organizations and has a greater community presence and better public image as a result of having workers off-site. Community meetings on the Food Stamp Program have included information on programs such as Medi-Cal and cash aid; consequently, community knowledge of programs and agency philosophy has increased.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Communication with community-based organizations is a key factor in successful outreach. Most community members trust CBOs, and establishing a relationship with these organizations is necessary in order to reach the greatest number of potential recipients. Outreach can be a slow process and investment of time is crucial. Allow time for clients to let their family and friends know about the county presence in their communities. Finally, be creative in getting the word out about out-stationed workers and the ways in which outreach can be done using community media outlets.

# OUTSTATION FOOD STAMP WORKERS

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Solano County Health & Social Services Staff

**Contact Person:** Gina Tucker (707) 553-5637 [gtucker@solanocounty.com](mailto:gtucker@solanocounty.com)

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** Solano County sends county food stamp workers out of the welfare office into community locations to take applications. Applicants can get their required face-to-face interview at these community locations and can conduct almost all food stamp “business” without having to come into the county welfare office.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The goal of the practice is to get more needy, eligible people into the Food Stamp Program. Some eligible people are not able to come into the county to apply for benefits. Others might be intimidated or be embarrassed to be seen in the county welfare office. This practice seeks to reach these people with food stamp benefits.

**Details of the Best Practice:** In Solano County, as in many counties, there is a population of people eligible for food stamps who can't come into the office to apply. People living in drug and alcohol treatment programs are often either not allowed to leave or are better off not leaving the treatment facility. For safety reasons, many victims of domestic violence should not go to public spaces like county welfare offices. To reach these populations, the county sends workers at regular intervals to treatment facilities and domestic violence shelters to take food stamp applications.

In addition, the county has identified other locations where there are likely to be people eligible for food stamps, but who may not know about the program or might be hesitant to apply. At regular intervals the county sends county workers to take applications for food stamps at migrant worker camps and at homeless shelters. Before the end of 2000, workers will begin to outstation at the local air force base.

At all of these outstation locations, potential applicants can:

- Get eligibility questions answered
- Receive help filling out an application
- Turn in food stamp monthly reports and paperwork
- Fill out an application
- Have their required face-to-face interview
- Meet their finger imaging requirement

## **Implementation Challenges:**

### Staffing

Staffing is the biggest challenge with outstationing. The locations chosen have to have enough potential recipients to justify a county worker's time. In Solano, as in many counties, staffing pressures in the office make it difficult to be able to have enough staff free to do outstationing.

### Finger Imaging

With new finger imaging requirements in California, outstationing is a bit more difficult. Either costly, heavy and portable finger imaging equipment has to be used or the recipient will need to meet the SFIS requirement when and if they come into the office for any other reason. This adds another step for the caseworker and an additional requirement for the food stamp recipient when they come into the office.

**Evaluation/Results:** In August 2000, 35 applications were taken that may not have been taken if Solano County did not offer applications at outstations. That's 35 people who may have gone hungry or food insecure during that month.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Solano County encourages others counties to order portable finger imaging equipment and encourages counties to ensure that funding for additional staff for outstation activities is included in the county budget.

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## PRACTICES TO INCREASE OUTREACH

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- *Using Food Banks & Food Pantries to Deliver Messages and Materials*
- *Comprehensive Food Resources Guide*
- *1800 Hotline Numbers for Food Stamp Information*
- *Funding and Contracting Outreach*
- *Linking Food Stamps to Health Outreach*
- *Outreach and Retention*

# Using Food Banks & Pantries To Deliver Food Stamp Messages & Materials

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Los Angeles County and the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank

**Contact Person:** Lupe Luque, (562) 908-8422, email: lluque@dpss.co.la.ca.us

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** Beginning in late September 2000, the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank began distributing Food Stamp Program informational flyers, which include the toll free hotline number, in many food bags their member programs distribute. The Regional Food Bank provides food to over 900 food pantries and they plan to distribute 20,000 flyers per month.

The idea to distribute food stamp materials from food pantries originated during the county's "Nutrition Access Work Group" monthly meeting. This work group is made up of the LA County Department of Social Services (DPSS) and a number of advocacy groups and community partners, including the Regional Food Bank as well as other County Departments. When the question arose about how food stamp outreach could be conducted in the community, the Regional Food Bank was willing to help.

Each month, the Regional Food Bank staff picks up thousands of food stamp flyers from a central location. The flyers are then distributed to local food pantries when they arrive at the main warehouse to pick up their food products. When individuals and families visit their local pantries for food assistance, they receive not only food, but also information encouraging them to find out if they qualify for food stamps.

The flyer that is currently being distributed includes information about income and resource limits and the food stamp hotline number. The flyer is written in both English and Spanish. LA County is in the process of translating this flyer into other languages. A business-sized palm card which advertises the hotline number will also be translated.

**Goal of Best Practice:** To reach as many low income people as possible who are obviously in need of food assistance. With over 900 pantries throughout the county, LA County is able to reach large numbers of people in an efficiently.

**Implementation Challenges:** Some challenges include the following:

- Reproducing large quantities of materials – Because LA County is large and has such an extensive system of food banks and pantries, outreach flyers have been given out at a fast pace. Within one month, their "two month supply" of materials had already run out. It has been a challenge to keep up with production and monitoring of the large quantities of outreach materials.
- Choosing Outreach Materials – There was some difficulty deciding which type of food stamp materials to use. They wanted to develop a flyer that would draw clients' attention but also give sufficient amounts of information.
- Distribution to Food Pantries – This was an initial challenge, but an efficient system is now in place for the distribution of outreach materials to food pantries, as described above.

**Evaluation/Results:** This best practice has just been implemented. In the future, the county will evaluate the success of this best practice by looking at the number of hotline calls received and seeing if the number of food stamp applications has increased. The goal is to increase food stamp caseloads by 35%. The county has seen the caseloads increase, but not as quickly as desired. They will be continuing this and other forms of food stamp outreach with that goal in mind.

Other Food Stamp Program Barriers – LA County realizes that even though people may know about the Food Stamp program, there may be other barriers to the program that prevent people from applying, such as having to go into the Food Stamp office, the long application form, etc.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** If a county wants to distribute food stamp information via food banks and food pantries, it is important to have a hotline number or phone number listed to resolve any questions that people may have.

# 1-800 HOTLINE NUMBERS FOR FOOD STAMP INFO

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** LA County Department of Public Social Services

**Contact Person** Lupe Luque, (562) 908-8422, Lucia Carinio, Hotline Supervisor (213) 763-7659

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** In March 2000, Los Angeles County changed the name of their Medi-Cal Hotline to the Health & Nutrition Hotline. The hotline provides information about the Medi-Cal and Food Stamp Programs. Information about the number is distributed through outreach materials, such as flyers, pencils, bus advertisements, and business-sized cards. One message states, "Help Keep Kids Healthy with Good Nutrition. Do you know you may qualify for the Food Stamp Program even if you work? Find out how. Call toll free (877) 597-4777."

Most hotline staff are experienced Medi-Cal eligibility workers. Prior to providing Food Stamp Program information, Medi-Cal Hotline workers were trained in basic Food Stamp Program rules. All workers are bilingual Spanish speakers. For non-Spanish or English speakers, the hotline uses translation services provided AT&T.

The hotline is available to callers dialing within Los Angeles County. It is currently staffed by 7 workers from 8am to 5pm, Monday through Friday. Depending on the volume of calls, a caller may be asked to remain on hold until a worker is available. By January 2001, the hotline will move to a larger office to accommodate an increased number of workers. Hours will most likely be expanded until 9pm to allow for those who work during normal business hours.

Beginning in late September 2000, the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank began distributing Food Stamp Program informational flyers, which include the toll free hotline number, in many food bags their member programs distribute. The Regional Food Bank provides food to over 900 food pantries and they plan to distribute 20,000 flyers per month.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The goal of the hotline number is to provide more specific information to families who are potentially eligible for health and nutrition programs. When people call the hotline number, information is given about basic eligibility requirements, the nearest site locations to apply for Medi-Cal and food stamps, and basic documents that applicants need to bring to their appointment. If callers want to know where to apply for food stamps, they are often referred to a non-traditional site or a district office, depending on the caller's address. If more technical assistance is needed, Hotline staff have direct access to Food Stamp Program Specialists.

**Implementation Challenges:** There has been a smooth transition to include food stamps information. There were no problems experienced with training hotline staff. Some potential challenges include:

- Caller wait time: The hotline receives very few hang-ups, but if non-English/Spanish speaking callers receive a message about "holding for the next representative," they may not understand. Hotline staff have noticed that most non-English/Spanish speakers find an English speaking person to assist with making the initial call. When the translator service is arranged, the phone is then transferred to the original caller.
- Limitations on help provided: Callers sometimes do not understand that the hotline can only provide information and cannot determine eligibility. (See additional limitations below).

**Evaluation/Results:** Outreach efforts to publicize the hotline number have been successful. Before the LA Regional Food Bank mailing, approximately 1500 calls were received per week, primarily for Medi-Cal. Out of these, about 4% of calls were relating to food stamps (~60 per week). Over 50% of callers spoke Spanish and approximately 5% spoke another language other than English. In September, 286 food stamp-related calls were received by the hotline. 96 of these calls were received during the last week of September, almost certainly as a result of the new food bank outreach efforts.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Utilize an existing hotline number, if possible. Provide simple and clear program information to hotline workers and ensure that they have a place to call for unresolved questions. Workers should have adequate directions to application sites, including information about public transportation links. It is important that workers know what the hotline limitations are and how to handle a wide variety of requests. Often workers will get case complaint calls that cannot be resolved by the hotline, and they need to know where to refer clients for questions that cannot be handled by the hotline.

# COMPREHENSIVE FOOD RESOURCES GUIDE

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Employment Support Initiative and Safety Net Committee, Santa Clara County

**Contact Person:** Alette Lundeberg, (408) 441-5826 Email: [alette.lundeberg@ssa.co.santa0clara.ca.us](mailto:alette.lundeberg@ssa.co.santa0clara.ca.us)

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** A comprehensive food resource brochure was developed to inform county staff and community partners of the available food resources in the community. The guide provides more than just information on food stamps. Resources on a wide variety of programs and services are contained in a colorful folder with cascading inserts.

Insert topics include: *Hunger and Malnutrition, Advocacy Tips for Assisting Immigrants, Supplemental Food Programs, Bulk Food, Fingerprint/Photo Imaging, School and Summer Meals Programs, Food Stamps, WIC, and Food Stamps and the Homeless.* Each topic is labeled clearly and boldly at the top of each insert, for easy access. The inserts include a brief description of services, eligibility criteria for the services, schedule of hours and locations where the services can be obtained. All of the information contained is kept current. This resource is available in English, Spanish and Vietnamese.

**Goal of Best Practice:** One clear goal is keeping County staff and community based organizations informed of the food resources available to low-income and working poor families in the area. But in addition, the resource guide and the training that has accompanied it seek to:

- Bring about a greater awareness of hunger in the community. The resource brochure leads many staff to realize how under-utilized many of the food programs are in Santa Clara County.
- Lead staff and community partners into a more proactive approach to addressing hunger, one that emphasizes the nutritional value of the available food programs.
- Remind families that even if they were found ineligible for one program, it does not mean that they are unable to get assistance from every other program. Families are also encouraged to take care of their nutritional needs by using more than just one program to meet dietary needs.

**Implementation Challenges:** In order to reach the largest audience possible, the distribution of the guide needs to be widespread and must be accompanied by specific training of county workers. Worker training is vital, since the guide will promote resources and programs which they might not be aware of.

An additional challenge is keeping information updated to reflect changes in the various programs.

**Evaluation/Results:** The brochure was introduced in late July, and training did not take place until August.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Form a workgroup to facilitate the creation of the brochure from a broad base of community-based organizations in partnership with the county. Identify point people in the county to be trained in food resources and then be responsible for training staff at District Offices, and at various departments inside and outside of Social Services (a train-the-trainer model).

# FUNDING AND CONTRACTING OUTREACH

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Fresno County

**Contact Person:** Clayton Walker (559-453-4399), [CHWalker@fresno.ca.gov](mailto:CHWalker@fresno.ca.gov)

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** Fresno County has two main offices, the Fresno Main Office and Selma Regional Office. The Fresno office is made up of a unit of 6 to 7 workers who conduct full-time outreach during the hours of 8am-5pm, including some weekends. These outreach workers are sent to 6 different sites anywhere from 1 to 10 times a month depending on scheduled activity. Outreach sites include schools, health centers, and community centers. The unit also schedules future sites when requested. Because workers may have lower client caseloads, they can be shifted from their normal work duties to do outreach activities. In March 2000, Medi-Cal outreach workers have also added food stamp outreach to their list of responsibilities.

The Selma office conducts its outreach after normal work hours, on evenings and weekends only. Outreach workers are chosen on a voluntary basis. The staff is sent to a variety of functions, including school fairs, harvest festivals, high school football games and commercial areas such as the Wal-Mart Shopping Center. Workers have begun taking applications at outreach locations.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The goal is to initiate the use of surplus and available funding for important food stamp outreach activities. Funding is readily available for counties to initiate an outreach planning process to use TANF or surplus county funds. The planning process can involve setting up meetings between county representatives, community members and advocates. Discussions are centered on using outreach funds effectively to inform potential applicants of the Food Stamp Program, as well as dispelling myths and confusion about the program.

**Implementation Challenges:** Challenges of using available funding for outreach activities include:

- Decision to pursue outreach funds: The decision to make use of outreach funds was an initial barrier because the state and federal government judge the effectiveness of outreach by translating it to the number of applications received. However, outreach is beneficial because it increases knowledge about food stamps in the community even if it may not guarantee an immediate increase in applications received.
- Shifting current staff for outreach activities: If outreach is conducted during normal working hours using existing staff, the outreach assignment negatively affects co-workers remaining at the department since duties that are normally the responsibility of the workers assigned to outreach have to be absorbed by the remaining staff. For work after hours or on weekends, the staff is given compensatory time off. Work production may be affected at a later time as compensatory time is taken.

**Evaluation/Results:** The outreach planning process has been a beneficial use of the surplus county funds. The planning group is still waiting for the request for proposals for the use of state budgeted TANF outreach funds.

Comments from potential applicants show that outreach was effective in informing clients about the program and reducing their levels of confusion.

There has been little or no result in the Food Stamp application rate from the activities done by the Fresno office. The Selma Regional Office has reported a slight increase in Food Stamps application rate.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Selma is a small rural area town. For outreach efforts, the Regional Office chooses workers who live and work in the small communities and are familiar with the needs of community members. It appears that the community are more receptive to the outreach being done by local workers who are familiar with area issues.

# LINKING FOOD STAMPS TO HEALTH OUTREACH

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Los Angeles County

**Contact Person:** Lupe Luque, (562) 908-8422, email: lluque@dpss.co.la.ca.us

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** Los Angeles County has a very successful Medi-Cal outreach program recognized nationally as the Child Medi-Cal Enrollment Project (CMEP). The project houses Medi-Cal eligibility staff in various non-traditional sites such as clinics, hospitals, schools and community centers. These out-stationed workers evaluate the eligibility of potential applicants for the Medi-Cal programs, approve initial benefits and transfer the case to a Medi-Cal office near the family's home. With this system already in place, there was an initiative made to have CMEP workers conduct food stamp outreach as well as health care outreach. Workers were trained about the basic aspects of the Food Stamp Program and equipped with food stamp materials in order to enroll families or individuals in the first step of the application process.

Beginning in February 2000, Medi-Cal applicants were also evaluated by CMEP staff for food stamp eligibility and encouraged to apply, if eligible. The majority of individuals surveyed to date have been primarily interested in applying for Medi-Cal only. For individuals that indicate an interest in applying for food stamps, the CMEP eligibility worker (EW) completes an initial screening for eligibility and assists potentially eligible individuals with completing the application. The CMEP EW sets an appointment for the applicant to see a designated worker at the nearest District Office to complete the application process. CMEP staff members refer emergency/expedited food stamp applicants directly to a worker at their district of residence for same-day processing.

If the potential applicant refuses to apply for food stamps, CMEP staff document the reasons for refusal in an effort to identify potential program participation barriers.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The goal is to ensure that nutrition insurance, in the form of the Food Stamp Program, is as available as health insurance. To date, non-traditional sites that serve six of our 31 district offices have been phased into the project.

**Implementation Challenges:** One of the main challenges encountered in linking food stamps to health care outreach is the face-to-face and finger-imaging requirement of the Food Stamp Program. People applying for food stamps at a health care outreach site need to return to a county office to complete a face-to-face interview and to be finger imaged. Another problem is the greater amount of documentation and verification information that is required in the Food Stamp Program, versus that of Medi-Cal. Those who are applying for food stamps need to spend additional time to gather this additional paperwork.

**Evaluation/Results:** No formal evaluation has taken place yet. However, the acceptance of food stamp applications at CMEP sites that feed into the traditional district offices provides a vital streamlining of outreach service for potential applicants. Feedback from the community has been positive and indicates both a real interest in the Food Stamp Program and a need to educate the public on food stamp eligibility.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Emphasize to the Medi-Cal field workers just how vital the Food Stamp Program is to provide good nutrition and better health to low income families. Ensure that there is an open line of communication with the out-stationed eligibility worker and the district staff who are receiving the applications for processing. Provide the out-stationed staff with the necessary support, including training forms and answers to day-to-day questions.

# OUTREACH AND RETENTION

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Santa Clara County Social Services Agency

**Contact Person:** Tony Gonzales, Supervisor, Department of Employment and Benefit Services (408) 441-5735

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## **Brief Description of Best Practice:**

Outreach: The Santa Clara County Food Stamp Outreach and Retention Project will designate a Supervisor and two full-time, Level III Eligibility Workers to implement an extensive outreach effort in collaboration with Second Harvest Food Bank and its affiliates.

Retention: The Project will concurrently determine the continued eligibility for food stamp benefits for all households discontinued from cash assistance and for which no future benefits are recorded within our Computerized Data Systems. The retention objective will occur simultaneously with the expansion of client case reviews conducted by the Project staff members.

## **Goals of Best Practice:**

- To maximize the number of families eligible to receive food stamp benefits in the County of Santa Clara by following-up with those families who have not yet taken advantage of the Program.
- To ensure that all efforts will be made to notify those families discontinued from cash assistance of their potential continued food stamp eligibility, and the continuation of those benefits if they are still eligible.

**Implementation Challenges:** Anticipated obstacles:

Union issues: Due to the alternate work hours needed to maximize assistance to clients and various other work issues, union/management discussions were required.

Outreach materials: Only limited outreach materials and data gathering tools were available. New materials had to be developed. This process has been ongoing.

Training: Adequate training of the outreach staff on the objectives and goals as well as new computer software was necessary for the project. Training will be ongoing based on the anticipated changes caused by fluctuations in outreach and retention results.

**Evaluation/Results:** No current evaluation results exist since the project is in its initial stages. The project's anticipated commencement date is November 1, 2000 and it will be conducted for a period of six months, ending April 30, 2001. Monthly evaluations of the data collected relative to the number of new families processed for benefits and the decline in the average number of discontinued families without continued benefits will be done. Currently, an average of 255 households are discontinued from cash assistance each month without continued benefits.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Maximize the number of team members required to discuss and formulate the Practice goals, objectives and procedures to insure that all areas of concern are clarified and resolved. Collaborate with a committed partner. Seek support at all levels of agency administration so that all available resources will be made accessible to your project.

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## PRACTICES AIMED AT UNDERSERVED GROUPS

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- *Outreach to the HIV Positive Community*
- *Increasing Food Stamp Access to the Immigrant Community*
- *Utilizing ABAWD Exemptions*

# OUTREACH TO THE HIV POSITIVE COMMUNITY

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Office of AIDS Coordination, Office of Public Health, San Diego

**Contact Persons:** John Rasmussen (619) 515-6680 email: jrasmuhe@co.san-diego.ca.us  
Steve Eldred (619) 515-6649, email: seldrehe@co.san-diego.ca.us

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** San Diego's Office of AIDS Coordination, along with the Food Services Task Force of the San Diego HIV Planning Council, initiated a project to try to enroll people living with HIV and AIDS into the Food Stamp Program. The task force recognized that many individuals who were already participating in Ryan White-funded food programs could be transitioned to receive food stamp benefits, leaving extra space available for the Ryan White funds to serve those that do not qualify for food stamps. At the same time, the task force is making efforts to increase outreach and awareness about food stamps in the HIV community in order to reach those who are not enrolled in any of the food programs.

An estimated 30-40% of clients who are currently receiving Ryan White food vouchers may be eligible for food stamps. These clients will be required to transition into the Food Stamp Program. Clients will be informed about the benefits of transitioning to the Food Stamp Program. If clients are not able to apply for food stamps or are not eligible, they may show documentation and be allowed to continue receiving Ryan White food benefits. A two to four week transition time will be allowed so that no one will be without food assistance. Clients whose food stamps benefits are of lesser value than the Ryan White benefit (currently \$40/month) will be eligible to continue to receive partial Ryan White assistance, so that there is no reduction in total benefits provided.

This pilot project is still in the implementation stage. Trainings sponsored by the County will be conducted for case managers, food providers, and other HIV service providers to become more familiar with food stamp rules and regulations. Case managers are especially important because they are usually the informational entry point for people to access to community services. In addition, community forums will be conducted for people who will experience the impact of the transition from Ryan White food program to food stamps. This is aimed at alleviating the concerns of those who are worried about no longer receiving Ryan White food vouchers.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The goal is:

- To provide adequate nutritional services to people living with HIV and AIDS;
- To educate the community, including the food stamp staff, about the unique nutritional needs of people living with HIV due to complications from medicines and other health concerns; and
- To maximize participation in the Food Stamp Program and Ryan White funds for food assistance.

**Implementation Challenges:** Challenges include:

- Understanding the complicated eligibility rules and guidelines in the Food Stamp Program and how it relates to clients living with HIV and AIDS.
- Concern that clients may be required to accept work or labor that is detrimental to their health. This task force has explored issues surrounding a waiver that would exempt people with HIV from work requirements because of debilitating effects of HIV.
- The extra efforts needed to educate people in health and social services about the needs of people with HIV, to be more sensitive to clients transitioning into the Food Stamp Program.
- Outstationing food stamp intake workers at HIV and AIDS service organizations.
- Encouraging counties to do more outreach in promoting the Food Stamp Program as a nutrition program; decreasing the stigma associated with receiving food stamps.
- Educating clients about who can receive food stamps and dealing with the HIV community's misconceptions about the program.

**Evaluation/Results:** This project will be implemented in the fall of 2000.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Encourage open dialogue between members of the HIV/AIDS community and County food stamp representatives. It is important to stress the unique nutritional needs of people with HIV and that there are barriers relating to stigma and discrimination that people might face.

# INCREASING FOOD STAMP ACCESS TO THE IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Los Angeles County

**Contact Person:** Dennis Kao, Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern CA, (213) 9777500

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** Advocacy groups such as the LA Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness and the California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA) have been working with Los Angeles County's Department of Social Services (DPSS) to address problems relating to food stamp access for the immigrant community. In LA County as well as the rest of California, immigrants have been disproportionately affected by welfare reform. According to the USDA, between 1994-1998, food stamp participation has dropped 83% for legal immigrants, and 75% for US-born children of legal immigrants. Along with the LA Coalition and CFPA, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) and the California Immigrant Welfare Collaborative (CIWC) have identified barriers to immigrants accessing food stamps and other programs. Efforts have been made to encourage DPSS to address these barriers and advocacy groups have collaborated with DPSS in conducting food stamp educational forums. The following are some major barriers and solutions:

Public Charge - One of the major issues that has hindered access to the food stamp program is public charge. Advocates have worked with LA County to develop a Public Charge Outreach Campaign, which included developing a video for eligibility workers and potential participants, getting the word out through ethnic media, and conducting public charge forums continuously throughout the past year. LA County has produced public service announcements in approximately 10 languages and is in the process of developing a 5-10 minute training video (also to be translated in the same 10 languages) to be played in the waiting rooms of DPSS offices and clinics. The county has been distributing food stamp outreach flyers at area food banks and pantries. The flyers advertise a 1-800 number as well as a statement about food stamps not affecting one's immigration status. The work DPSS has been doing around public charge is moving in the right direction towards addressing the fears or confusion that the immigrant community may feel.

Food Stamp applications at Nontraditional Venues - Counties may need to change the way they work with the community. Any effort that takes the application process out of the DPSS offices and into nontraditional venues will work towards addressing issues of distrust in the immigrant community. The availability of mail-in applications at nontraditional venues, such as community based organizations (CBOs) is a positive step. Advocates are concerned that the immigrant community has a hard time trusting government, whether it is the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), DPSS or other entity. Some immigrants are afraid to go into governmental offices. Additional reasons why nontraditional venues are effective in accessing certain communities include:

- 1) Nontraditional venues are often located at the heart of certain communities;
- 2) The staff at non-traditional venues, such as CBOs, have been able to establish a relationship with the community and may often be from the community themselves;
- 3) The community may be able to trust and feel comfortable going to nontraditional venues; and
- 4) Nontraditional venues could be places where people already go to on a regular basis, such as markets, clinics, community centers, places of worship, hospitals and WIC offices.

Language Access - Language continues to be an important issue which advocacy organizations have prioritized. LA advocates have filed a civil complaint with the Department of Health & Human Services Civil Rights office to enforce laws on language access. The complaint alleges a lack of translated "notices of action" and language access problems encountered in the county. Continuing efforts have been made to urge DPSS to translate its notices and other materials into all pertinent languages and to make sure bilingual staff are available. The food stamp application is currently translated into Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian and Cambodian. More progress needs to be made to address this issue.

Mail-in Applications at CBOs – allowing mail-in applications from CBOs and other sites will make applying for food stamps more convenient for individuals and families and will encourage them to begin the first step of the application process.

Ongoing Working Groups to Address Immigrant Issues - With the urging of the advocate community, DPSS has established two working groups: the DPSS/Immigrant Advocates Work Group and the Medi-Cal Work Group Nutrition Subcommittee. It is in these two groups where issues impacting immigrant communities can be brought up, discussed and advocated for.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The goal is to identify ways that advocacy groups can work with county representatives to address issues important to the immigrant community and to encourage a collaboration among both groups to develop successful outreach practices to increase the participation of immigrants in the Food Stamp program.

**Implementation Challenges:**

Public Charge: There are continuing questions about what the correct message should be to immigrants about public charge. When immigrants receive different messages from a variety of sources, it is difficult to dispel the confusion. It is important to present a clear and consistent message about public charge to the community. Smaller counties may be doing little or no public charge outreach, potentially due to lack of resources or not knowing where to find information. Counties wishing to adopt public charge outreach campaigns are welcome to contact APALC at the above address.

Mail-In Applications: For mail in applications at CBOs, there are concerns about whether CBOs are able to add another activity to their over-burdened staff. For this reason, some CBOs may be unwilling to volunteer to help send in food stamp applications. However, if food stamp application takers could get paid, just as they are in the Healthy Families program, a great deal of progress could be made to hire additional staff to do this important outreach work.

**Evaluation/Results:** It is too early to evaluate the success of recent efforts by the County and advocate groups to increase food stamp access to the immigrant community. Some members of the immigrant community are still confused or fearful of applying for food stamps, but any efforts that are made can make a difference.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** It is important for advocates to be at the table with the county when the county makes implementation and operations decisions, and advocates should push for formal mechanisms to give feedback and input to the county.

# Utilization Of ABAWD Exemptions

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**Who Implemented the Process and Where:** Santa Cruz County

**Contact Person:** Lynn Miller, Director of the Benefits Services Division, (831) 454-4236

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## **Brief Description of Best Practice:**

Santa Cruz County implemented a policy to use its Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) exemptions for recipients who do not qualify for any other exemption from work and would otherwise be ineligible or discontinued due to failure to meet work requirements. Applicants are screened to see if they fit into any one of four categories that the county uses for work requirement exemptions. These are:

- Seasonally high unemployment,
- Natural disasters (earthquake, flood, or agricultural freeze),
- Loss of employment due to business closure or relocation, or
- Presence of severe barriers to employment as determined by eligibility workers and approved by management staff—examples of these barriers include homelessness, lack of education/transportation, or substance abuse.

Additionally, the County is considering an expansion of the criteria for the ABAWD exemptions to include:

- Working between 10-19 hours a week,
- Would otherwise be discontinued the following month, and
- Incomplete or confusing ABAWD history.

Workers who recommend an exemption must have it approved by a supervisor and a manager; they are granted on a case-by-case basis. The exemptions are given as a three-month block, with the possibility of one three-month extension.

## **Goals of the Best Practice:**

This practice created a formal procedure and criteria for Food Stamp workers to use to grant 15% ABAWD Exemptions. Santa Cruz County has had a significant number of ABAWDs discontinued due to a failed work requirement. It is the intention of Santa Cruz County to use as many 15% Exemptions as we are allowed to increase food security for the ABAWD population.

## **Implementation Challenges:**

To make best use of ABAWD exemptions, eligibility staff must be specially trained to identify situations that call for the exemptions to be used.

## **Evaluation/Results:**

If used in significant numbers, the ABAWD exemptions have the potential of continuing vital food assistance to those truly in need who would have otherwise been timed-off of assistance.

## **Tips for others hoping to replicate this process:**

Train workers to be proactive in identifying recipients who would fit into the criteria for ABAWD exemptions to make best use of the system that has been created.

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## PRACTICES TO STIMULATE NEW APPROACHES AND COLLABORATIONS

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- *Setting Target Goals for Increasing Participation in Food Stamps*
- *Advocate-County Collaborations*

# SETTING TARGET GOALS FOR INCREASING PARTICIPATION IN FOOD STAMPS

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services

**Contact Person:** Lupe Luque, (562) 908-8422, email: [lluque@dpss.co.la.ca.us](mailto:lluque@dpss.co.la.ca.us)

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** Success in the Food Stamp Program is measured by the U.S. Department of Agriculture almost entirely on the basis of error rate. While there are enormous benefits to hungry people and the local economy when food stamp participation increases, there are no fiscal rewards for local governments for increasing participation nor penalties for drops in participation. With this best practice, Los Angeles County took the initiative to set their own goals for increasing participation among a sub-population of their food stamp caseload in April 2000.

Los Angeles County set an overall goal of increasing their non-assistance food stamp caseload by 35%. They felt that it was important to have a concrete goal to reach. Based on this overall target, individual goals were set for each district office. Directors in each district office were given the opportunity to develop policies and practices to increase participation, while still maintaining program integrity. Each district director was told, "Based on your portion of the county's caseload, here is what your percentage increase will be." With this goal in mind, each district director had the flexibility to decide how he or she wanted to reach his or her goal. This resulted in a variety of unique outreach activities on a district-by-district basis.

The goal was communicated to each district's food stamp staff in a variety of ways. It was important for staff to believe in and embrace the goal. The county tried to saturate district offices with outreach talk in monthly newsletters, and outreach was discussed the county's Food Stamp Program Manager on a monthly basis at district directors' meetings. The county held district kick-off events to initiate the targeted goals campaign. As a part of the kick-off, staff members performed skits about importance of healthy food and nutrition. Special marketing promotions were also developed by the department, such as key chains saying, "Invest in the future of our children." District staff conducted outreach at malls, partnered with area food banks, and launched other collaborations with the community.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The goal of this practice is to raise participation as an important measure of food stamp program success, to stimulate new ideas on increasing food stamp outreach, and to provide county workers incentives to improving access to the program.

## **Implementation Challenges:**

- **Setting the target:** With food stamp rolls dropping and with some external factors like the economy beyond the control of the county, it is difficult to set realistic but challenging goals. The county looked at the current caseload and determined how much an increase of 10%, of 20% or of 30% would be, and finally decided that 35% would give them a satisfactory increase in food stamp caseloads.
- **Encouraging local initiative while adhering to existing regulations:** Since the Food Stamp program is a federal program; much of what is done in local food stamp offices is dictated by federal and state policies. There is some amount of county discretion to increase access within these constraints. In order to ensure innovations were not squelched, district directors were informed of the targeted goal, but were given flexibility to meet the goal in their own way.

**Evaluation/Results:** A formal evaluation has not yet been conducted. The overall evaluation will determine if caseloads have increased by 35% over a one year time period.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** When counties have a goal to increase the food stamp participation rate, it is important to have a specific number to strive for, rather than just saying, "we want to increase outreach efforts." In order to be successful, the goal has to be communicated from the highest level of the county food stamp program to all food stamp employees.

# ADVOCATE-COUNTY COLLABORATIONS

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**Who Implemented this Practice:** Alameda County Community Food Bank and Alameda County SSA

**Contact Person:** Karen Bridges, Alameda County Social Services Agency (510) 267-9457

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**Description of Best Practice:** Community-based anti-hunger advocates and County Social Services agencies have created partnerships to address the recent drop in participation and to increase food stamp participation in their communities. In order formalize their commitments to reducing hunger through the Food Stamp Program, advocates and county administrators throughout the state have formalized their working relationships. Alameda County offers an excellent example. In March 2000 the Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) and the Alameda County Community Food Bank (ACCFB) established ongoing meetings to discuss concerns and identify solutions with various problems regarding the Food Stamp Program.

The meetings are scheduled for mutual convenience, and the location alternates between the Food Bank and the county office building. Before each meeting, the County and the Food Bank identify action items that are to be addressed at the meeting, so that there are preset agendas.

This practice was initiated when the Food Bank brought several problems to the attention of the County. A meeting was scheduled to discuss the issues and, since that time, meetings have been regularly scheduled.

**Goal of the Best Practice:** The meetings are scheduled so that there is an “open door” policy between the County and the Food Bank, allowing for the lines of communication to be kept open. Because the Food Bank is trusted by the community and hears the needs of the recipient population, they can easily identify issues that need to be addressed with the County.

**Implementation Challenges:** This practice poses no significant implementation challenges.

## **Evaluation/Results:**

- Improved communication between the Social Services Agency and the Food Bank;
- A common mission and set of goals is highlighted and reinforced with regular meetings;
- SSA developed a cover letter with input from the Food Bank to inform potential applicants about the food stamp application process;
- Outreach material contains the 800 number for both the SSA and the Food Bank;
- In April 2000, Food Bank staff made a presentation at the SSA’s Managers workshop;
- In July 2000, Karen Bridges, Food Stamp Program Specialist made a presentation on Food Stamp Outreach at the ACCFB’s Network meeting;
- A SSA Food Stamp Outreach Committee was formed to address outreach and access issues;
- Food Stamp applications have been placed at the ACCFB to be mailed to individuals who call the Food Bank hotline requesting assistance and who are not currently on Food Stamps;
- The SSA mailed a flyer to customers informing them of the services available at the Food Bank.
- Ongoing concerns about outreach and increasing participation in the program are continually addressed and amended as needed.

## **Tips:**

A common interest in the advocate’s operation, as well as recognition of the valued services it provides for the same target populations, helps to set the tone for conversations that lead to progress. Capitalize on the common, shared goals of serving the needs of low-income families and individuals.

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## **BEST PRACTICES FROM OTHER STATES**

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- *Expanding Categorical Eligibility*
- *Exercising Reporting Options*
- *Food Stamp Application Simplification*
- *Combined Work Support Application*
- *Customer Service Improvements*
- *Food Stamp Education*
- *Matching Federal Funds for Outreach*
- *ABAWD Exemptions/Labor Surplus Waivers*
- *Customer Service Tracking of TANF Cases*
- *Working Family Supports Media Campaign*

# EXPANDING CATEGORICAL ELIGIBILITY

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** The State of Maine

**Contact Person:** Mary Henderson, Maine Equal Justice Project, (207) 626-7058

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** In California, families who own a reliable car are most often ineligible for food stamps. A policy option called categorical eligibility can address this problem. The federal Food Stamp Act grants “categorical eligibility” to households receiving benefits under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. With categorical eligibility the resources of households are not counted in determining eligibility for food stamps. This means that the value of a car owned by a family would not be counted, and a family could own a car over the \$4,650 limit in California without it hurting their eligibility.

Guidance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture released in July of 1999 allows states to make families receiving **SERVICES** funded by TANF, not just cash benefits, categorically eligible for food stamps. In response, many states have taken steps to get families out from under the onerous auto-resource rule by expanding categorical eligibility to include TANF services. The state of Maine has the most promising practice, since it expands categorical eligibility and provides low-income families with valuable referral information on TANF funded services.

**Goals of Best Practice:** To remove the value of a low-income family’s automobile from consideration in determining eligibility for food stamps, to reduce costly administrative errors and to provide useful referral information to low-income families.

**Implementation Issues:** In expanding categorical eligibility to TANF funded services, USDA requires the state to do three things:

1. Authorize families to receive the service;
2. Tell the families how to access the service; and
3. Identify whether the service is funded with TANF block grant or maintenance-of-effort monies

To expand categorical eligibility and address these three issues, the State of Maine created a double-sided two-page resource guide, which contains referral information to help families get or maintain employment. This guide lists numbers for information on childcare, the Earned Income Tax Credit and other work supports. All families with children under the age of eighteen were authorized to receive this valuable guide. Families could access the service by applying for food stamps – these guides are given at the initial food stamp interview and at re-certification. Thus when a food stamp worker gives applicants one of these guides, they are categorically eligible for food stamps and the asset tests are skipped. The process is even easier than it appears – it will save workers time and feed more families.

The Maine example is just one approach. Many states have utilized existing TANF funded services to expand categorical eligibility, while others have created new, low-cost services.

**Challenges for California:** California has not yet taken significant steps to expand categorical eligibility. The challenge for California is to identify a single TANF service that would embrace many food stamp recipients – using several small reaching TANF services would be a nightmare to administer. California can use a service like childcare or create a resource guide (it appears this will require legislation), as Maine has done.

**Evaluation/Results:** This expansion was just implemented in Maine on August 1, 2000 so there has not been formal evaluation or review.

Determining whether a family’s automobile or other assets makes them ineligible creates errors. Roughly 5% of errors are caused by a mistaken determination of assets. Therefore, if a state removes the automobile and asset test through categorical eligibility it will remove these potential errors. The State of California is facing an error rate penalty of between \$10 million and \$25 million and will be looking for ways to reduce errors. Expanding categorical eligibility can do that and, more important, improve access to food assistance for hungry, working families.

# EXERCISING REPORTING OPTIONS

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Several States

**Contact Person:** Dorothy Rosenbaum, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (202) 408-1080

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** Throughout California, counties require food stamp recipients to file a monthly report (CA-7), even if there has not been a change in income or household composition. Often, this creates a situation where redundant paperwork is filed, causing busywork for recipients and county workers as well as increased administrative costs. When there were huge drops in the number of recipients nationwide in the mid- to late- nineties, states that used quarterly reporting showed a less drastic loss in food stamp households. This indicates that quarterly reporting is a better way of retaining eligible recipients, while monthly reporting may play a role in limiting the effectiveness of the Food Stamp Program.

The USDA approved waivers for Los Angeles and up to eight other counties (AB 510) to move from monthly reporting to a combination of quarterly and change reporting. Recently, however, the District Attorney in Los Angeles expressed serious reservations with the proposed reporting plan and, as a result, Los Angeles has decided not to move forward with the change. Other states have less confusing approaches and have moved away from monthly reporting. California's challenge is to find a way to do the same.

Quarterly reporting affords counties the option of less frequent, more accurate reporting. As of July 2000, 12 states are using a quarterly reporting system. Ideally, each food stamp household reports one month's information each quarter as a snapshot of their eligibility status and the county determines next quarter's benefits based on that information. Illinois, for example, asks that food stamp households report eligibility information from the second month of the quarter at the beginning of the third month, in order to calculate the benefits for the next quarter.

Status reporting allows for food stamp households to report changes in income or other eligibility criteria only if an established threshold is reached, and is used in 22 states. Food stamp households could go up to one year without the burden of coming into the office for interviews, provided recertification is allowed through the mail and the necessary changes in eligibility information, if any, were properly reported throughout the year.

A change from monthly reporting to either quarterly or status reporting will remove a significant barrier to the Food Stamp Program for working families.

**Goal of the Best Practice:** A change to quarterly or status reporting will ease the paperwork crunch that prohibits working families from accessing the Food Stamp Program.

Additionally, a reduction in amount of required paperwork removes burdens from an already stretched eligibility staff. Quality control rates may improve with a reduction in unnecessary paperwork and a shift in emphasis to reporting only those things that will affect benefits.

**Implementation Challenges:** As demonstrated by the recent rejection of AB 510 by the DA in Los Angeles, there is a very real tension between safeguarding the integrity of the program and improving access and making the program work better for working families.

Erecting barriers to the program to guard against the minimal numbers of people committing fraud places the focus of the Food Stamp Program in the wrong place; its primary goal should be to help working families and other recipients access and remain on the program as long as there is a need for assistance.

An additional challenge is that counties using a monthly reporting system most frequently budget retrospectively, while all states currently using quarterly reporting budget prospectively. Status reporting, on the other hand, may be more confusing for recipients as they transition from monthly reporting into a new system.

**Evaluation/Results:** Quarterly reporting offers the advantage of a less abrupt change from monthly reporting; households are still required to report as they have in the past, only less frequently. A shift away from monthly reporting clearly works better for both counties and recipients.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:**

Develop a status reporting system that will fulfill the needs of the District Attorney to protect against fraud but will also ease the burden of reporting and allow greater flexibility for recipients and eligibility staff.

# FOOD STAMP APPLICATION SIMPLIFICATION

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Several States

**Contact Person:** Kimberly Pendergrast, Second Harvest, (312) 263-2303

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**Brief Description of Best Practices:** Several states have taken promising approaches to shortening their food stamp applications, among them:

- ❑ Doing away with scores of extraneous questions that confuse and intimidate potential recipients.
- ❑ Using a “tear-off” first page to initiate the application process with only the most crucial, basic information. Fifteen states have done so.
- ❑ Asking “contingency” questions on a shortened form and saving complex, follow-up questions for the face-to-face interview required by federal law. Idaho has a four-page form with a coversheet including a checklist of the essential information necessary to receive food stamps. Florida’s form is one side of one page and still includes an area for expedited food stamps and income.

Legislation requiring the State of California’s Department of Social Services to simplify and shorten the application was passed in September 2000. The state should use a combination of these best practices in this process.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The goal of the best practice is to cut down on the length of the application process, as well as the confusion that excessive paperwork causes for recipients as they attempt to access the Food Stamp Program. Shortening the application expedites the process and makes it less confusing to potential recipients, removing a large barrier to access for working families.

## **Implementation Details:**

Based on existing best practices, the State of California should:

1. Remove the extraneous questions identified in the report “The Red Tape Divide” at [www.secondharvest.org](http://www.secondharvest.org).
2. Of the information elements required to be collected by federal food stamp regulations, identify which elements are best gathered in a written application and which are best kept for the face-to-face interview.
3. Develop a one-page, tear off or stand alone application, using models from others states
4. Test the applications readability with client focus groups.

## **Implementation Challenges:**

- **Increased error rate.** One fear is that in shortening the application, the state may limit the amount of essential eligibility information that is collected. However, by interviewing the client to get more complicated information (like assets and income), the county insures that it is clear about what specific information is being requested. Applications are often confusing; clients may not know exactly what does and does not apply but, with a face-to-face interview, they can ask questions and both the county and the client can have more confidence in the response.
- **Additional work for eligibility staff.** Training all intake and eligibility workers on a new process can be a challenge. In the end, however, workers will have a process that is easier to facilitate and will require less time in correcting and re-explaining, as they will be able to get essential eligibility from the client, rather than review it from an application that may not have been understood. The shorter application will also save valuable time for workers.

**Evaluation/Results:** There is no relationship between the length of a state’s food stamp application and higher than average error rates. West Virginia, with a 33-page application, has an 8.8 quality control error rate. Wyoming, with a three-page application, has only a 2.9 error rate. Additionally, in California it is expected that a shorter application will save the state over one million dollars in administrative fees annually, as it will take less time to process applications.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Inform the community that the application will be changing to get their input, as well as that of interested stakeholders in the area. Establish a workgroup with organizations and recipients to design the new application. Test the application in small recipient focus groups prior to implementation.

# COMBINED WORK SUPPORT APPLICATION

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Oregon, District 2

**Contact Person:** Patti Whitney-Wise, Executive Director, Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force (503) 963-2290

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** The pilot food stamp outreach committee in East Multnomah County decided to simplify the food stamp application as part of a test project. Because of statewide pressure and interest, the committee was expanded and the simplified application will go statewide in July 2000. The application is 4 pages long and combines eligibility for work support or “working family” type programs: food stamps, childcare, emergency assistance, and medical programs. A cover page explains the process and what to bring to appointments. Only one sheet needs to be added for TANF.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The goal is to remove barriers to applying for food stamps. People are often overwhelmed with the 15 pages of application and addenda now distributed. With the four-page format and a good cover sheet on what to bring to the appointment, applicants can fill out the application and submit it on the spot to reduce the time it takes to begin receiving benefits.

**Implementation Challenges:**

- Labor issues: Workers may be nervous about added work during the visit, since less paperwork is filled out in advance. The form was developed to mirror the worker’s computer program to make it easier. Because certain forms are optional depending on the client’s situation, a second packet tailored to the food stamp applicant at the time of the visit should help limit unnecessary documentation and save time. Workers may be able to more accurately capture client information because of greater levels of interaction with the client and with direct input of information into the computer.
- Giving out the second packet: The rights and responsibilities and voter registration will need to be given at the visit along with any additional verification pieces, depending on the client’s situation. Clients will be able to mail in any missing information so that they will not have to make a second visit.
- Rural areas: Workers who are not able to have a face-face interview with the client may find information gathering more complicated with the simplified form.

**Evaluation/Results:** No formal evaluation has taken place as of yet.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Put together a committee that includes advocates. Hold a focus group with potential clients to find out what parts of the application process are barriers to participation. A sixth grade readability level could make the simplified form more accessible to the community. Combine programs where possible. A pilot project could be done to test the new forms and to make any necessary changes before full implementation.

# CUSTOMER SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Oregon, District 2 planning/statewide implementation

**Contact Person:** Patti Whitney-Wise, Executive Director, Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force (503) 963-2290  
Linda Montgomery, Adult and Family Services, District 2

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** District 2 of Adult and Family Services formed a committee, including nonprofit and advocate representation, to focus on improving customer service for those applying for food stamp benefits. The committee came up with a list of several changes that could be made in the district. Several of the changes have already been implemented and the entire list will be adapted for statewide implementation.

Changes on the list included: not sending people away because they were not residents of the zip code of that particular office, offering some level of help regardless of the time an applicant came to the office, making sure applicants and recipients were aware of office hours and the availability of appointments, and making sure reception staff had a higher level of program knowledge.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The goal of this committee is to remove barriers to applying for food stamps. The goals of the customer service changes are:

- Allow people to apply in one visit,
- Determine eligibility within one day,
- Treat applicants with respect; and
- Continuously improve customer service.

**Implementation Challenges:** In implementing this change the anticipated obstacles are:

- Labor issues: Altogether, these changes represent a change in culture from previous years. Some workers will readily embrace it, others will need lots of reinforcement.
- Getting the Word Out: This change in practice will need to be advertised, especially to those who have had bad experiences in trying to apply for benefits. Outreach efforts will be important.

**Evaluation/Results:** No formal evaluation has taken place yet.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Put together a committee that includes advocates. Hold a focus group with potential clients to find out what parts of the application process are barriers to participation. Combine different programs where possible.

# FOOD STAMP EDUCATION (FSE) PROGRAM

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS)

**Contact Person:** John Atherton, Director, Division of Assistance Programs, WA DSHS, (360) 413-3214

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** The Food Stamp Education (FSE) program is a statewide system of community-based education and outreach through prime contractors in each of six regions, and multiple subcontractors serving geographic or cultural sub-populations throughout the state.

This practice helps promote the Food Stamp Program by going into communities and dispelling misinformation about food stamps and, at the same time, reaching out to potential recipients and, through education, encouraging them to apply for the program.

**Goal of Best Practice:** State funds were restored to FSE in 1998 to support the following goals:

- Reduce the food stamp error rate by helping families arrive at the food stamp office ready to apply and aware of reporting requirements;
- Assist in implementation of EBT in 1999; and
- Help eligible families apply for and receive food stamps.

**Implementation Challenges:** In implementing this change the anticipated obstacles were:

- State match is \$200,000 per year – which means that funds are spread pretty thin among six prime contractors and many more subcontractors. Subcontractors must come up with their own matching funds to supplement the state funding. For small organizations serving vulnerable populations, this is a challenge.
- Although the program does not establish eligibility, there is still concern at the local office level about the role of food stamp educators.
- The program is stronger in some areas of the state than others.
- Evaluation is needed to determine the best practices of local agencies.

**Evaluation/Results:** Data from the project has not yet been evaluated to determine how many people seen by FSE workers applied for and received food stamps, and which practices by local agencies are the most successful.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** State funds are critical to form a core of matching funds for the federal match. The local workers need training and guidance in working with local offices, reaching eligible families, and providing outreach and education in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways.

# MATCHING FEDERAL FUNDS FOR OUTREACH

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Several States

**Contact Person:** Daria Thomas-Daniel, Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) (202) 986-2200

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** The Food Stamp Act authorizes a 50% federal match for state funds used for activities that inform low-income households of eligibility requirements, application procedures and benefits of the Food Stamp Program. These include project costs that are financed with cash that was contributed or donated from non-federal public agencies and institutions as well as private funds, provided there are no restrictions that limit the funds for a particular individual or institution.

For FY 1999, nine states submitted a State Food Stamp Outreach Plan: Arizona, Connecticut, Kentucky, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Tennessee, Vermont, and Washington.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The food stamp drop is occurring without a corresponding drop in poverty. There is clearly a need for outreach: A USDA survey conducted by Mathematica found that over 72% of people eligible but not receiving food stamps did not know they were eligible. Large states like New York and Texas already utilize federal matching money to do outreach on food stamps, such as letting families know they can work and receive food stamps.

Utilizing a federal match for outreach allows states to better serve potential recipients by more widely promoting the benefits of the program and spreading eligibility and program information. This works to combat misinformation, which is consistently identified as one of the key barriers keeping many eligible households from applying for benefits.

**Implementation Challenges:** A State agency seeking federal outreach matching funds must submit a plan to the regional USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) office, including details on the intended outreach activities, media to be used, targeted populations and geographic areas, as well as other organizations that would be involved in the effort. Although a state's Department of Social Services will receive the matching funds, outreach programs are often administered by a different state agency (e.g., Department of Health in New York, Office of Economic Opportunity and Department on Aging & Disabilities in Vermont, Department of Public Health in Massachusetts). All or most of the outreach funds are typically contracted to state or regional non-profit organizations to conduct outreach programs. Typically, funds are distributed to local subcontractors that include: community action organizations, food pantries/food banks, schools, senior services agencies, faith-based agencies, emergency shelters and anti-hunger advocacy groups.

**Evaluation/Results:** Misinformation is consistently identified as a primary barrier to the Food Stamp Program. The use of federal matching funds to increase outreach will help to ensure that correct program information reaches potential recipients, increasing the chances that they will receive benefits. A state funded outreach effort would also help reward work, since a combination of food stamps and the Earned Income Tax bring full-time minimum wage earning families to the poverty level. All states currently accessing federal outreach dollars have increased participation in their targeted communities. Every dollar invested by the state is likely to attract over \$10 in federal revenues to food stores and farmers' markets in low-income communities.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:** Create partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) to facilitate outreach, as they are in the best position to reach potential recipients and more effectively communicate with the target populations than state or county DSS or DHS offices.

# ABAWD EXEMPTIONS/LABOR SURPLUS WAIVERS

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** Oregon

**Contact Person:** Patti Whitney-Wise, Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force, (503) 963-2290

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:**

Oregon utilizes a combination of USDA approved labor surplus waivers and its allotment of 15% Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) exemptions to insure that recipients are not timed out of the Food Stamp Program at the conclusion of the three-month eligibility period.

All but six counties in Oregon are eligible for the labor surplus waivers and, in the remaining counties, the ABAWD exemptions are used to cover those who would not otherwise be protected from being timed-off of assistance.

**Goal of Best Practice:**

Oregon has taken innovative steps—combining ABAWD exemptions and labor surplus waivers—to make it possible for participants to continue to receive assistance after the three-month timeout period has expired. The end effect of these steps is that necessary assistance is extended to those in need and participation is increased in an oft-neglected segment of the recipient population. The number of food stamp recipients has been stabilized to more effectively meet the need for assistance, and the state has made use of its 15% ABAWD exemptions.

**Implementation Challenges:**

- The principle challenge is securing labor surplus waivers from the USDA for counties that qualify. California has 38 counties that are eligible for these waivers, including Los Angeles.
- When the federal welfare bill limited Food Stamps to ABAWDs to 3 months out of 36, Congress sought to mitigate the harm of this 3-month ABAWD food stamp limit by allowing for individual exemptions. Make use of the available ABAWD exemptions. For the fiscal year 2000, over 115,000 ABAWD exemptions were distributed to the counties, of which less than 3,000 have been utilized.
- Additional training is recommended for eligibility workers to proactively identify recipients who would qualify for ABAWD exemptions.

**Evaluation/Results:**

**No one** is timed-off food stamps at the conclusion of the three-month eligibility period in Oregon.

According to the most recent data, there are 38 counties in California that qualify for a labor surplus waiver. If these waivers were secured, there are more than enough ABAWD exemptions in the remaining 20 counties to extend all ABAWDs in the state beyond the three-month deadline.

In 1997, California was granted 3,527 exemptions a month. Since the state accumulates unused exemptions, there are many, many unused exemptions. Exemptions that aren't used one year (or month) can be rolled over to subsequent months. A great thing about these exemptions is that they don't affect the error rate or result sanctions.

# Customer Service Tracking of TANF Cases

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**Where was it implemented:** Tennessee

**Contact Person:** Russ Overby, Tennessee Justice Center (615) 255-0331

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** Reports of dramatic drops in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) caseload have spurred growing concern that many families are suffering because of inappropriate case closings. Tennessee has taken steps to protect families by taking another look at all cases scheduled to be closed due to noncompliance or in which a parent had requested that their case be closed. The review process includes attempts to contact the family to try to determine if there is miscommunication or a simple eligibility problem and, if so, to see if it can be resolved. This includes an attempt at contact outside of normal business hours. The review takes place prior to closure, and the case is not closed if the review finds that there has been an error in fact or policy, or if there is a good cause reason for non-compliance.

Cases not subject to this review are those closed because of:

- Excess income or resources,
- Household moved out of state, and
- No more children under the age of 18 in the house.

If a case is closed after the customer service review, families are sent specially designed notices that inform them of the specific reasons their case was closed and what can be done to maintain eligibility. The notice also informs families of the availability of safety net payments for households who are in danger of losing shelter or utilities, as well as the existence of emergency payments for lack of sufficient food. A postage paid postcard is also included, telling families that if they initial the card and mail it, information about their case will be available to the Tennessee Justice Center (TJC) for a review of the correctness of the determination. TJC is a non-profit law center that serves low-income persons without charge with respect to health care and public assistance.

**Goal of Best Practice:** The Customer Service Review process was initiated by Tennessee as a quality assurance measure after a precipitous decline in the number of families receiving public assistance. The practice ensures that TANF cases are only discontinued for justifiable reasons and that those who were incorrectly cut off will regain their eligibility. A secondary effect of this policy is that those recipients who have had their TANF cases closed are reminded upon contact that they may still be eligible for food stamps, Medicaid, and other programs designed to meet specific needs.

**Implementation Challenges:**

- Creation of a unit of workers who deal specifically with internal quality control issues.
- Special outreach materials and training.
- Provision of additional materials for recipients, including postage paid postcards.
- Securing the cooperation and partnership of local organizations that work with assistance recipients.

**Evaluation/Results:**

- Approximately thirty percent of cases scheduled for closure have remained open. There has also been a significant reduction in the number of cases in which an initial determination of closure has been made.
- Those who are ineligible for TANF or cash assistance are reminded that they may still be able to receive other benefits, like food stamps or Medicaid.

**Tips for others hoping to replicate this practice:**

Design a customer service review process as a partnership between county assistance departments and community based organizations and legal aid offices.

# WORKING FAMILY SUPPORTS MEDIA CAMPAIGN

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**Who Implemented the Practice and Where:** The State of Washington

**Contact Person:** Barbara Gorham, Office of Financial Management, (360) 902-0555

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**Brief Description of Best Practice:** Since many working families assume that food stamps is a program only for people who are not working, Washington Governor Gary Locke allocated \$500,000 in TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) monies and \$100,000 in food stamp error rate sanction funds to fund a media campaign aimed at working families and highlighting the availability of food stamps, child care subsidies, Medicaid and child support services. The campaign was launched in summer 2000 as “Help for Working Campaign.”

**Goals of Best Practice:**

- Increase the visibility of various supportive services for working families, and “repackage” them to be more attractive;
- Increase participation of working families in food stamps, childcare subsidies, and other programs.
- Through a toll-free number, initiate the food stamp application and provide access to childcare subsidies and Medicaid by phone to reduce extra visits to local offices.
- The campaign is based on a very successful Earned Income Tax Credit media campaign managed by OFM several years ago.

**Details of the Best Practice:**

The State of Washington hired a public relations group that gathered target families together in focus groups to find out their attitudes toward these public benefits and work supports. The focus groups help the state “package” these benefits and develop effective messages.

The public relations firm used social marketing research to find the best vehicles for reaching families with this media campaign. As a result, the campaign utilizes transit ads and radio to reach the target audiences. Some of the media spots were unpaid public service spots and some were paid spots.

The media spots focus interested parties to a call center which can provide further info on the food stamp program and other benefits. About half of the funding for the project went to creating and staffing this call center.

A website provides additional information and resources: <http://www.wa.gov/WORKFIRST/workingfamilies/>

**Implementation Challenges:** In implementing this change the anticipated obstacles were:

- Establishment of a toll-free number with operators knowledgeable about program eligibility was a key problem – the decision was made to use the financial staff of local welfare offices to answer the phone, beginning with a core group and expanding to include other staff at these offices on an as-needed basis.

**Evaluation/Results:** The campaign was launched in summer 2000, evaluation not available.

**Tips for others for implementing this practice:**

Those involved in the campaign encourage states to not try to do this in house, but rather contract the campaign out to a public relations firm that is better suited for this work.