

► Making Food Stamps Work For Working Families: Outreach

Contact: George Manalo-LeClair at 415.777.4422 ext. 103 or george@cfpa.net

► Issue

The Food Stamp Program, a federally funded entitlement program, is the largest hunger-prevention safety net for California's poor children, families, and individuals. Since 1996, California has seen a 42% drop in participation in the program. Though still eligible for and in need of assistance, almost 2 million people in California are not getting food stamps. In many cases families do not know they can be working for low wages and still be eligible for assistance. The federal government provides matching resources for outreach and education on the Food Stamp Program to groups such as the working poor. California has not utilized these resources, despite this enormous drop in participation.

► Need

There were approximately 1.3 million people who experienced hunger in California in 1998. Yet during that time every county saw a drop in food stamp participation. Despite a good economy, more Californians are eligible, not less. Among this eligible population, more people have earnings from work and less from welfare. This exacerbates a problem of perception: that food stamps are only available for people on welfare. Many that hungry, low-income workers believe that they can't get help.

A USDA survey conducted by Mathematica found that over 72% of people eligible but not receiving food stamps did not know they are eligible. Seventeen states, including large states like New York and Texas already invest money to do outreach on food stamps, such as letting families know they can work and receive food stamps, if their incomes are below eligibility limits.

► Request

State-funded outreach on food stamps	\$2,000,000
<i>\$2 million of state money would be matched with \$2 million in federal money. Counties and other local entities could competitively apply for use for targeted activities in their communities.</i>	

► History

In 2000 the legislature put \$3 million of TANF funds into outreach. The fact that this money did not draw down the dollar-for-dollar federal match is just one problem. The State Department of Social Services (DSS) believes that since the outreach money is TANF money, it cannot be directed solely for food stamp outreach. DSS has sent the money to counties but does not require that it be spent on food stamp outreach. As a result, little if any of this money will fund the intended food stamp activities.

► Outcomes

A state funded outreach effort would help reward work, since only with food stamps and the Earned Income Tax Credit do full-time minimum wage earning families even reach 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.

► Quote

"There is never enough to eat in our house. My wife is employed.....we don't know food stamp procedures."

- Father seeking help for his kids