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PROJECT NARRATIVE

Introduction

“It’s not what you know when you start but what you learn and put to good use.”

-Anonymous

This work is a narrative of our five-month field placement in Fresno and Tulare Counties in California’s Central Valley as part of our Bill Emerson National Fellowship through the Washington, D.C.-based Congressional Hunger Center (CHC). The CHC sends out 24 Emerson Fellows annually to locations throughout the United States for a field placement. The Fellows work at host organizations in their respective locations on projects centered on battling hunger. Our host organizations were Community Food Bank in Fresno, FoodLink for Tulare County in Visalia, Fresno Metro Ministry and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Western Region Office in San Francisco. Our project focused on increasing food stamp participation in Fresno and Tulare Counties. Coming into the project, one of us had never been to California while the other was a Northern California native unfamiliar with the Central Valley. It has been a valuable learning experience for all parties involved.

This report is meant to serve two purposes. First, it informs our host organizations of our findings during our five-month work experience in the Central Valley. Based on our observations, we are making recommendations that should help each of the organizations continue the project. Secondly, the report will serve as a template for other organizations or coalitions interested in conducting similar projects. One of our goals in writing this report is to ensure that a similar effort could be undertaken anywhere in the United States, be it Miami, Maine or Montana. While each city or region has its own unique economic, social and political characteristics, the basic premises and actions outlined here could be successfully applied at any location in the United States.

Since one of our primary objectives is replication, we have divided the report into three parts to assist groups who want to apply this report to their local community. One part is a narrative that describes our process of learning about the region and the issue of food stamps, formulating ideas to address the area’s low participation rate, and applying our ideas in the community. This narrative will show that the process, despite being effective, was not easy. Our narrative should uncover different ways to deal with setbacks. The second part of this report is a toolkit that will show groups how to carry out each step of the process that we have found effective in increasing food stamp participation. The third section of the report is a compilation of additional perspectives provided by other people involved in food stamp outreach work in the Central Valley and throughout California. Knowing relatively little about food stamp outreach when we began this process, we have learned a great deal and hope these lessons will be useful to food security advocates throughout the United States.

Starting Out

“Start by doing what’s necessary; then do what’s possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.”

-St. Francis of Assisi

The first thing we did upon arriving in the Central Valley in early September was learn about Fresno and Tulare Counties from the people who live and work here. Over the summer, we had received some background information describing the Valley’s economic, social and demographic situation. However, we realized it was important for our project to go beyond numbers and statistics to hear the voices of people who know more about the Valley than we could ever hope to learn in our short stay.

California’s Central Valley is a unique place. It boasts tremendous agricultural production and remarkable ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. Resting in the middle of the state, it is neither Northern nor Southern California – indeed, local author David Mas Masumoto describes the Valley as “The Other California.” “The rest of the state and world often defines us by what we are not. Not Southern California with palm tree-lined streets, balmy weather, movie stars and freeways... Not Northern California (probably thinking of San Francisco) and invigorating cool breezes, art, culture and haute cuisine. Instead, we’re the part of the state that becomes invisible, lost in between north and south, part of an inland desert that doesn’t seem to belong” (Letters to the Valley, p. 112.)

Just as the region’s distinctive personality and strengths are often ignored by the outside world, so too are its serious problems. Ironically, Tulare and Fresno Counties boast the nation’s highest rates of agricultural production but also face the highest food insecurity rates in California. According to the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey in 2003, these two counties are the fifth-poorest and the seventh-poorest in the United States. The area ranks nationally in several undesirable categories -- its air quality is among the worst in the country, and unemployment rates are often twice the national average. In February 2002, President Bush implemented Executive Order 13173, creating the Federal Interagency Task Force for the Economic Development of the Central San Joaquin Valley. A comment offered at one meeting of this task force demonstrated the severity of poverty in the Central Valley: “To compare the Central Valley to Appalachia is an insult to the latter.” Rates of obesity, IV drug use, and teen pregnancy are all above-average in the region, and many people lack regular access to quality medical care. Furthermore, the Valley rarely receives the attention and resources it deserves from the state government in Sacramento.

We gained a more in-depth and personal understanding of the Valley from early discussions with co-workers and other locals. We first interviewed several members of each of our host organizations. After gaining a better picture of the region from both reading and conversation, we were able to identify certain targeted groups that could greatly benefit from increased food stamp participation. It quickly became apparent that one of the largest eligible groups in the area was the Hispanic community. We also noticed significant numbers of eligible clients among the Hmong population, an ethnic group that has migrated from Southeast Asia and resettled in Fresno County, among other places. Therefore, we sought out organizations that

worked closely with groups including the Hispanic and Hmong populations. A summary of one such interview will serve to illustrate the many facts that can be gleaned from a brief meeting with a local organization with a strong sense of the community.

In seeking to learn about the area's Hispanic population, we met with our host organizations and then sought out a meeting with Centro La Familia Advocacy Services Inc., a community-based organization (CBO) in Fresno that works closely with the Hispanic community and whose mission is "To empower low-income people to access life sustaining resources." The people at "Centro" were very helpful and their knowledge of the area, an understanding based on 32 years of service, was useful in developing an effective plan for outreach to the Hispanic community. For example, we asked Centro staff about their opinions on a recent letter signed by the US CIS Los Angeles District Director reminding immigrants that food stamps are not relevant in immigration proceedings. While some advocates were excited about the development, we speculated as to whether or not the letter would be universally believed by the Hispanic community. Centro staff members were skeptical, stating that the Latino population is not always receptive to statements and promises made by the government. This skepticism is a result of several factors. First of all, much of the Hispanic population consists of recent immigrants from countries with corrupt governments. Secondly, rumors spread quickly through the immigrant community and deepen mistrust of the government.

One example of the reason for such skepticism had occurred a few months earlier when a group of people posing as CIS officials stopped a Hispanic family in California and made them turn over their car and money. The event had widespread consequences in the community as adults stayed home from work and kept their children home from school out of fear that they would be detained or deported. The crisis was not diffused until several community based organizations researched the issue and managed to assure people that the alarm was a false one.

The lesson we learned from the interview was that trust is a central element of the foundation of the Hispanic community. In contrast, immigrants may be skeptical of the government. The personnel at Centro were also able to identify for us the best media to work with in order to reach the highest percentage of the eligible Hispanic population. Our experience with this and other organizations led us to an important observation that applies to any outreach effort. Namely, when working on outreach such as increasing food stamp participation, it is better not to reinvent the wheel, but rather to plug into local community based organizations in order to be most effective. While this was particularly true for us, being new to the region, it is also important for groups who have worked in a region for years to obtain new and different perspectives to ensure that their outreach efforts are not only strong but also well-informed.

We also learned a great deal from early meetings with Fresno and Tulare County Food Stamp Program directors. It became apparent in our first meetings with county staff that maintaining a high Food Stamp Program accuracy rate was a top priority for them. The Fresno County Department of Employment and Temporary Assistance worked hard to increase its accuracy rate from 85% in federal fiscal year 2000 to 96% in 2003 in order to avoid large-scale economic penalties for a relatively high error rate. Currently, Fresno County enjoys one of California's highest accuracy rates for the Food Stamp Program. While both counties are committed to food stamp outreach, USDA FNS systems of penalties for low accuracy rates are

greater than the rewards for higher participation. Therefore, counties must attend to their accuracy rate above all else. Since the counties face funding concerns and must focus heavily on their accuracy rate, engagement with community-based organizations is a logical strategy for food stamp outreach.

During the orientation phase of our project, we also explored state policies shaping food stamp access in California. For example, California is the only state in which low-income elderly and disabled people who receive cash assistance from the Supplemental Security Income/State Supplementary Payment (SSI/SSP) program are ineligible for food stamps. This “cash-out” policy began in 1974 when California opted to increase the state supplementary payment instead of administering food stamps to SSI/SSP recipients. Many SSI recipients are still below the income and asset limits for receiving food stamp benefits, yet they are automatically excluded from receiving food stamps because they receive SSI. However, the policy is advantageous for families with a household member receiving SSI/SSP, because it allows the Food Stamp Program to disregard the SSI/SSP income when determining the rest of the family’s eligibility and benefit levels. The SSI cash-out policy continues to be the subject of much debate among advocates in California; further analysis by California Food Policy Advocates is available online at <http://www.cfpa.net/CashoutinCA2003.pdf>. We learned that CFPA and other regional anti-hunger organizations provided a wealth of helpful information regarding such complex policy issues.

After interviewing a variety of community activists, reading a number of articles and reports on Fresno and Tulare Counties, brushing up on relevant policy issues, and visiting several communities and farms in the area, we set out to refine the work plan that had been drawn up for us by our host organizations. For the purposes of our five-month project, we dedicated our work to a three-pronged approach in order to increase the food stamp participation rate in Fresno and Tulare Counties. The first part of our approach would be through the media. We resolved to draw up a media plan to inform eligible sectors of the community about the program and to change public opinion about the program as a whole. The second part of our work plan called for us to set up an infrastructure by which the two food banks would work with the counties to train local CBOs to perform food stamp outreach in their respective communities. The final part of our work plan was to create a Food Stamp Task Force in Tulare County and to work with and expand the Fresno County Food Stamp Advocates Group. While we identified these three objectives based on the duration and location of our project, other groups might focus on a variety of other projects such as increasing the number of stores accepting food stamps or working to have food stamps accepted by local farmers or flea markets so that recipients have access to more nutritious food.

Having addressed the issue of starting out, we will now focus on the three main components of our project in the Central Valley.

The Media

“The main cause [of changed ideals] is the modern, younger man, and the modern media, which is very effective.”

-Vijay, Indian farmer and activist

One of the foundations of our work plan was media outreach. Neither one of us had much previous experience working with the media, but our program orientation and our early interviews introduced to us the great potential of an effective media campaign, even in a limited time. Looking back on our efforts over the past five months, the results of the media work were greater than we had dared to expect. There were several contributing factors to this success. We were able to capitalize on scholarly works on non-profit media, an ethnic media conference in Fresno, the advice of other non-profit groups and the extensive knowledge and local contacts of our host organizations. These factors, combined with the socially conscious attitude of many in the media, enabled us to develop a successful media approach that we believe increased awareness of food stamps and food security issues in the Central Valley.

Just three weeks into our project, we were lucky enough to attend the Ethnic Media Conference in Fresno and learn from some of the people behind the media. One panelist, an editor with over twenty years of experience in several major newspapers, described his views on social issues in the media. “I got into this business because I believe in the power of the media to make a difference in the world, and many of the people I work with feel the same way.” While he noted that this philosophy made him more amenable to writing stories about social issues, he chastened the non-profits in the audience, saying, “I want to draw attention to topics focused on social justice, but your press releases are horrible!”

We took from this experience two valuable lessons. First, the attitudes of many members of the media make it an industry open to working with non-profit groups. The agenda of food stamp and anti-hunger advocates in particular can be easily supported by the media because there are no major pro-hunger groups to advocate against feeding people. The second lesson from the experience at the ethnic media conference was the necessity for a strong and professional relationship with media that would be solidified with an effective message and excellent press releases. It was important for us to capitalize on the favorable sentiments of the media by conducting a professional media campaign.

The importance of the media was further impressed upon us by a visit to the Alameda County Community Food Bank. Public relations personnel at the food bank described their relationship with the local Oakland and San Francisco media and emphasized the importance of several components of their media plan. They told us that central media messages were circulated throughout the office and that effectively framing issues was very important for press releases and media opportunities. A sampling of the food bank’s television coverage over the previous few months also showed the value of a well-defined media message with clearly delineated talking points. Each of the news pieces conveyed similar information and basic facts regarding the issue of hunger in Oakland and the larger Bay Area; the food bank’s media personnel attributed this consistency to an effective media plan with central talking points that were distributed throughout the organization. Our experience at the Alameda County

Community Food Bank showed that we needed to construct a media plan in order to be maximally effective in our media campaign.

Next, we created a media plan. The media plan organized our ideas into a structured approach focused on communicating various messages to different demographic groups and communities. It also helped us to separate our media outreach into a two-tiered approach. The first tier sought to inform eligible populations about the food stamp program and encourage them to enroll. Its goal was to increase the number of Food Stamp Program participants in the Central Valley. The second tier, aimed at middle- to high-income citizens and business owners and government officials, showed the benefits of increased food stamp participation to the region as a whole. The goal of this second-tier campaign was to bring more sectors of society into the effort to increase food stamp participation by showing each of these groups how it was in their own interest and in the interest of the community as a whole.

After establishing these two goals, we identified the best outlets in radio, television, and print media for reaching our respective target communities. We sought out the guidance of our host organizations as well as some local social service agencies about what mediums would be best to reach our targeted audience. We then made a chart organizing the media outlets by their respective audiences and listed the contact information, targeted section (local news, opinion, etc.), timing and particular pieces (news story, op-ed) that we envisioned for each outlet. For example, we intended to submit an op-ed for publication in the Fresno Bee during the holiday season describing hunger as a problem that exists throughout the year and food stamps as a 12-month solution. We also planned to have an interview in October on a Spanish-language radio station popular with the migrant farmer population. This interview allowed us to debunk many of the myths surrounding the food stamp program and provide other pertinent eligibility information. The finished media plan listed these and dozens of other media opportunities that we hoped to take advantage of over the next few months. The chart was a valuable checklist that allowed us to both assess our progress and show our host organizations our plans. It was a tangible barometer for us to measure the extent of our media success.

Having discussed framing at the Alameda County Community Food Bank, we realized that it would be important to frame increased participation in the food stamp program so that it made the program attractive to the entire community, not just the low-income people who might qualify. Tulare and Fresno Counties are the fifth- and seventh-poorest counties in America, respectively, and are politically more similar to the South than to much of California. The two counties rank first and second in the nation in agricultural output, but are also first and second in California in terms of food insecurity. The counties are predominately conservative and some people in the region oppose any type of perceived “government handout”. Framing food stamps as a program that strengthens the entire community was essential if we were to be effective in the second tier of our media program.

One of our most effective methods of framing was to display for everyone the economic benefit of full participation in the food stamp program for the economies of Fresno and Tulare counties. While some locals may not have agreed with the fundamental concept of the government providing food benefits to low-income individuals, few would argue with increased participation when it meant the possibility of an additional \$88 million annually in federal funds

in Fresno County and \$39 million in Tulare County. These points were stressed in several op-ed pieces that appeared in the Fresno Bee and the Visalia Chamber of Commerce newsletter and were further communicated to the public through the media as primary talking points distributed throughout Community Food Bank and FoodLink.

While we have been pleased with many positive results from the variety of media pieces accomplished during our five months in the Central Valley, two particular events demonstrated particular success. The first came in the form of an email from one of our host organizations informing us that the chief of staff of a local Congressional representative, Devin Nunes, wanted to learn more about the area's low food stamp participation rate. We met with Rep. Nunes' chief of staff and learned that he was very interested in seeing how the Congressman might be able to work toward increasing the district's food stamp participation rate. Through the course of the meeting, we learned that both Representative Nunes and his chief of staff were shocked by the amount of federal dollars unclaimed by the Valley every year and the number of eligible people in the area who were not utilizing the program and were going hungry. We were pleased to hear that several informative pieces in the local media piqued the Congressman's interest and compelled him and his staff to learn more about the Food Stamp Program.

The second instance that confirmed for us the success of our media outreach came in November. We passed a food stamp proclamation in Tulare County on Tuesday, November 9 (a similar proclamation would pass in Fresno County a month later) and left for a conference in the Southeast the following day. We returned for work the following Monday, November 15. We had sent press releases to several local media outlets, but only one television station had covered the proclamation, a local Spanish language network that ran a brief story on their nightly news program. We hoped that the publicity would garner about a dozen phone calls to FoodLink, whose number had been given out during the segment. We returned on Monday and found out that the call did not yield a dozen phone calls, but somewhere between 200 and 300 from Tuesday night through Friday. A few weeks later, an editorial about food stamps in the Fresno Bee garnered several hundred phone calls to Community Food Bank. These and other events confirmed for us the success of the first tier of the media campaign. The hundreds of phone calls to the various food banks and government offices during our stay assured us that potentially eligible people were hearing about the food stamp program and were compelled to seek out more information about it. The enormous potential of a planned and consistent media plan were made clear to us through the encouraging results of our media outreach in the Central Valley.

Outreach and Enrollment Trainings

"Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love. "

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

While the power of the media became increasingly evident to us over time and the food stamp task forces were vital as well, training local community members and CBOs to inform and enroll their neighbors in the food stamp program was the most tangible and easily measurable component of our project. Informing people about the program and organizing groups around the topic of food stamps were vital to our mission, but the project would have fallen well short of its potential had it been devoid of any contact with eligible clientele and failed to enhance the efforts of the CBOs working in the Central Valley. Instead of personally signing up as many people as possible during our five month project, we empowered local individuals and CBOs by training them to screen people for food stamps and start the enrollment process. Through this part of our work, we attempted to ensure that a lasting mechanism is in place to inform people about the FSP and to facilitate enrollment by starting the process.

From the beginning of our project, we were excited about the opportunity to work with local organizations in signing up more people for the Food Stamp Program. It would produce the most easily tracked results for our report in terms of numbers of people trained and applications completed. We began the process of developing a system for trainings after we had interviewed our host organizations and several local CBOs. The emphasis on trust in the area's large immigrant populations made us think that there was probably a segment of the population that may have heard about the FSP but was reluctant to seek it out because of a mistrust of government. This fact, combined with the knowledge that many in the immigrant community did not know about the program, showed us that an effective method of training CBOs to work with these groups could lead to substantial returns.

Upon our arrival in September 2004, the system of county workers training CBOs in food stamp application assistance was relatively new in Tulare County but had been in place in Fresno County for about 1.5 years. In Fresno, therefore, our work bolstered and enhanced an existing program. After meeting with food stamp administrators in both counties, we planned events at each county's respective food bank where county representatives would spend 60-90 minutes training volunteers and CBOs. We set up a process whereby the food banks would serve as a middleman, bringing together the county and the various volunteers and CBOs for training and then tracking applications. The volunteer outreach and enrollment workers would bring their completed applications to the food banks, which would record the necessary information about each of the applicants for tracking purposes and then deliver completed applications to the county for processing.

The counties agreed to track food stamp applications arriving from the food banks. On a monthly or bi-monthly basis, they would send the food banks a final list describing each applicant as 'Accepted' or 'Denied' and give specific reasons for denials. This way, the food banks would be able to measure the effectiveness of their trainings and the resulting outreach

network. They would also be able to examine the reasons for denials and further refine the process over time.

Once the process was agreed upon by the food banks and the county officials, it was up to us to seek out potential volunteers to be trained. We went first to the different agencies served by the food banks. The training session was advertised at the food banks' agency meetings and a sign up sheet was passed around for those interested. When a date was finally set for the county to come in and train volunteers in filling out Part I of the food stamp application, we called the agency members who had shown interest in being trained. The first round of trainings took place in late September and October. Three trainings took place at FoodLink in late September and early October, and two were held at Community Food Bank in late October. Between 30 and 35 people were trained at FoodLink's three trainings while about 15 to 20 people were trained at Community Food Bank. We told each of the agencies that we would be happy to work with them on timing and location for outreach opportunities, but most replied that they felt comfortable doing outreach at their respective pantry sites. After the first round of trainings, we waited for the results that would show us what we had done right and where we needed to improve our methodology.

By late November, several things had become apparent about the outreach and enrollment procedures. We found that the most successful efforts were occurring where volunteers had a regular vehicle by which to do outreach. Nutrition-on-the-Go (NuGo), FoodLink's mobile pantry that travels to low income communities and distributes surplus fruits and vegetables from local farms, showed the best results in Tulare County. There are nearly a dozen NuGo sites throughout Tulare County and the program was expanding even during our time there, so it was perfect for food stamp outreach. It was also utilized by several other CBOs for outreach purposes. We trained volunteers at two different sites, and they showed up at every NuGo event to enroll people in the FSP. The overwhelming majority of food stamp applications received at FoodLink from late September through late November were from one of these two NuGo sites.

In the weeks leading up to and directly following Thanksgiving, we called all of the people who had gone through the outreach trainings to ask about their experiences with application assistance to date. The vast majority of volunteers had experienced little success in completing food stamp applications with clients in the prior two months. Some explained that clients at their pantries already received food stamps, while many others explained that they did not have enough time or staff to do outreach for food stamps. The results of the outreach and our subsequent conversations with the individuals trained made us realize that we needed to reevaluate our trainings to increase efficiency and effectiveness.

After talking to those volunteers who had gone through our training, we concluded that we should focus on training individuals and groups with a preexisting effective vehicle for outreach and enrollment. Nutrition on the Go was one such vehicle. Although all food pantries should post and provide information about the Food Stamp Program, they face many challenges in performing food stamp application assistance. Outreach workers with Fresno County Department of Employment and Temporary Assistance have also found food stamp enrollment at emergency food distribution sites to be only minimally successful. We realized that our work

would be more effective if we shifted our recruitment and training efforts to focus on groups already performing outreach.

Therefore, we contacted several groups that did benefits outreach on issues such as health care and also focused on CBOs doing social service work for immigrant communities. We recognized that these groups were trusted by their respective communities and explained to them our belief that addressing poverty required a holistic approach, including attention to food stamps. While some organizations had been giving out information regarding food stamps, very few were already enrolling people in the process by assisting them in filling out Part I of the application.

For the next round of trainings, attendees included participants from organizations such as Proteus (working on farmworker issues in six counties throughout Central California), United Health Centers (with five health clinics in Fresno County and one in Tulare County), Head Start Home Base (working throughout Tulare County, with contacts in many of the county's small and isolated towns), and Tucker Associates, which did Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program outreach in Tulare County. These groups were excited to be trained in filling out Part I of the food stamp application because they knew that a high percentage of their clients would qualify for food stamps, and the training would be another tool in their campaign to end poverty in the Central Valley. Two trainings were held in mid-December at FoodLink that worked exclusively with these and other outreach groups.

As of the writing of this report, the immediate results of the trainings have been promising as both the number of applications and the number of groups submitting completed Part I applications have increased considerably. Trainings geared toward the same types of outreach groups were arranged at both Community Food Bank and FoodLink in the last week of January. Between early September and early February, approximately 100 people were trained at FoodLink or Community Food Bank in food stamp outreach and enrollment.

Another issue that has come to be a concern toward the end of our project has been the number of applicants approved to receive food stamps. A spreadsheet provided to FoodLink by Tulare County HHS in early November showing the results of our outreach in September and October revealed that between 20% and 30% of the applications taken in by our volunteers were eventually approved. We were disappointed in this low approval rate, especially because many of the denials were the result of missed appointments or failure to provide proper documentation. We were less concerned with denials caused by too much income because we felt that it was better for potential clients with borderline incomes to apply and be denied rather than lose possible benefits. At the same time, we were careful not to flood the county offices with pointless applications that would certainly be denied.

The failure of people to show for meetings was addressed in the Tulare County Food Stamp Task Force. The task force decided to work with the county to ensure widespread implementation of the waiver of the face-to-face interview, which is fully supported by the county's food stamp policy director. The second spreadsheet given to FoodLink by Tulare County covers applications from mid-November to mid-January and is much shorter because of the closing of the food bank between Christmas and New Year's and the emphasis on donations

over outreach during the holiday season. However, this spreadsheet showed an improvement in the percentage of applicants accepted as well as a smaller percentage of applicants denied for a failure to show for the interview. The success rate of enrollment efforts are an emerging concern for the outreach program and will be continue to be assessed and evaluated by the task forces in each county.

Outreach and enrollment by trained CBO staff has been the most easily measurable component of our work plan but was also a challenging process. It is a continuously developing program that will need steady supervision, analysis, and modification over time if it is to be truly successful. More than any other component of our project, however, it directly serves and delivers benefits to those low-income individuals at the heart of our work here in the Central Valley.

County Task Forces

“There are risks and costs to a program of action. But they are far less than the long- range risks and costs of comfortable inaction.”

- John F. Kennedy

The overall objective of this project was to assuage the Central Valley’s poverty and food insecurity by increasing the food stamp participation rate among the area’s large eligible population. It would be nearly impossible to achieve this goal in the span of five short months. Therefore, our work extended beyond direct service and application assistance at various sites. Rather, our work aimed to cultivate an infrastructure that would increase food stamp participation not just for five months, but hopefully five years into the future and beyond. While the work that we did during our time in the Central Valley was effective, our efforts would have been much less valuable if the project were cast aside after our departure from Fresno and Tulare Counties. The importance of sustainability and a consistent dialogue regarding food stamp access were the primary objectives for creating the Tulare Food Stamp Task Force and working with the Fresno County Food Stamp Advocates Group. The efforts of these groups ensure that our five months of food stamp outreach in the Valley will be a well-sustained project.

The Fresno Food Stamp Advocates Group was already well-established and had been working consistently on food stamp issues in Fresno for nearly four years when we arrived in the Valley in September of 2004. The group’s achievements include its part in the successful roll-out of EBT, clarification of public charge issues, attainment of ABAWD (Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents) Waivers, and other policy and advocacy work. We were not involved in the group’s assembly, but rather worked for and with them during our project. For the purpose of explaining how to organize and direct a task force, we will focus more on the Tulare County Food Stamp Task Force. While Fresno Metro Ministry already boasted a thriving Hunger and Nutrition Project, there was no comparable organization in Tulare County besides FoodLink that dealt with food stamp issues.

Lacking an organization that could partner with FoodLink to address food stamps, we sought out the advice of Sandy Beals, the executive director of FoodLink, as to what organizations we might include in the Task Force. She suggested that we partner with the Tulare Nutrition Collaborative, a group that met the first Wednesday of every month and dealt with different nutritional issues in the county. After receiving positive feedback about having the Task Force meeting immediately before the Nutrition Collaborative, we invited each of the Collaborative members to come and spent the first meeting discussing the food stamp outreach project. We also asked for ideas of other people in Tulare County who might be able to contribute a different and valuable perspective to the group. The group agreed to meet before the nutrition collaborative for one hour on the first Wednesday of every month.

The Food Stamp Task Force became very valuable and increasingly insightful because of the diverse sectors of Tulare County that were brought into the fold. In keeping with the belief in a holistic approach, the Task Force meetings were attended by several different sectors of Tulare County society. Health care workers, senior advocates, nutrition experts, physical fitness

specialists and farm worker advocates were all among the group's non-profit and CBO representatives.

While this group was strong from the beginning because of its diversity within the advocacy field, we saw the need for members of the government and business sectors. Mindy Balaam, the food stamp policy director who was also a part of the Part I application training team, was present for the majority of our meetings. A member of the Visalia Chamber of Commerce attended one meeting and later published an op-ed piece touting the economic benefits of the FSP in the Chamber's newsletter. We hope that, in the future, members of the farming community and local supermarket managers will attend meetings and provide input about how to spread support for the FSP in the Tulare food production and sales industry. We also hope to include food stamp recipients in the task force to get a consumer's perspective on program effectiveness.

While the Task Force's diversity is in itself a significant accomplishment, the group has also made immense contributions to food stamp access, particularly concerning outreach and enrollment training. Members were able to articulate the concerns and identify the myths surrounding food stamps in the various immigrant, senior, and ethnic communities in the county. The Task Force also recommended to us some of the most effective outreach and enrollment volunteer organizations that were trained. The members of the group have been instrumental in identifying some of the gaps in the enrollment process and have come up with ways to improve the efficiency of the program. Most importantly, the reliance on the group's members and the responsibilities given to them has provided them with a sense of ownership of the Task Force and the overall mission of increasing the FSP participation rate. This ownership and early involvement in several projects has ensured that the group will continue our work in both training volunteers and performing media outreach long after we have left the Central Valley.

The Fresno Food Stamp Advocates Group was already assembled when we arrived and will likewise carry on outreach and enrollment trainings as well as media outreach after our departure from Fresno. They have been carrying out some of these tasks for several years, but we hope that the extra momentum from our work will further bolster their efforts. This group also provides an excellent venue for discussion of policy and food stamp access issues such as clarifying the application procedure for undocumented immigrants seeking food stamp benefits for their citizen children.

Both the Task Force and the Advocates Group benefited from the proclamations passed in support of the Food Stamp Program by Tulare and Fresno Counties' Boards of Supervisors in November and December, respectively, and both groups can use the documents as a referendum for the support of county government in their food stamp outreach efforts. The resolution process in each county provided us with an excellent opportunity to provide the supervisors with more information about the Food Stamp Program. Also, the task forces can use the anniversary of the proclamations for media coverage to show the progress in food stamp enrollment and use the documents to enlist the efforts of other social service agencies that might be unsure of the county's commitment to increased enrollment.

The Task Force and Advocates Group have provided excellent support for food stamp outreach in Tulare and Fresno Counties. While they have been an invaluable source of information and vision during our work stay, we expect that their greatest contribution will take place after we have left the Central Valley. We are confident that these groups will maintain the momentum gained by our project and keep the issue of food stamps alive in these two counties for years to come.

Barriers to Food Stamp Access and Outreach

One of the objectives that we were given by our hosts from the beginning was to use our “fresh eyes” to examine the major barriers to food stamp access and outreach in the Central Valley. During the term of our work, we were able to witness on a daily basis the barriers standing in the way of increasing California’s low participation rate in the FSP. These barriers include: the state finger imaging requirement, myths about food stamps, poor treatment encountered in the food stamp office, and food stamp office hours incompatible with working people’s schedules.

Most advocates we worked with agreed that the State Finger Imaging System (SFIS) is one of the largest and most significant barriers to food stamp access. The finger imaging requirement lengthens the application process and deters many people, especially immigrants, from applying for the program. SFIS is also a barrier to all clients completing the application process in remote locations because portable fingerimaging equipment is needed, unless the client visits the food stamp office specifically to be fingerprinted.

The myths surrounding food stamps are as varied as they are effective at discouraging people from applying. In the course of our outreach efforts, we were told that people did not want to apply for food stamps because: it could affect their immigration status; they would not qualify because they were employed or owned a car or a house; and, most shockingly, that they feared their children would be drafted to fight in Iraq if they received food stamps. We spoke with some people who were under the impression that food stamps must be purchased from the county office or that food stamps have to be paid back later. Also, most people do not know that the Food Stamp Program is a nutrition program rather than a welfare program, which encourages the stigma sometimes associated with food stamps. All of these erroneous beliefs prevented individuals from applying for food stamp benefits.

Two other barriers to access could be eliminated through careful, consistent work by county offices and administrators of the FSP. One deterrent to applying for food stamps, voiced by potential clients and advocates alike, was the poor treatment clients sometimes received at food stamp offices. Far from condemning every caseworker as rude and intolerant, applicants who shared their opinions on the topic said that some workers were very helpful but others were impolite and unaccommodating. A few clients said they felt that caseworkers treated them as if food stamp benefits were coming directly out of the caseworkers’ pockets. One negative experience with a caseworker can spread by word of mouth and offset tremendous amounts of time dedicated to outreach and enrollment efforts by advocates and county workers.

Additionally, hours of the food stamp offices could be expanded to improve access to the program. Recent statistics show that, contrary to popular opinion, more than half (53%) of the people receiving food stamps in California have some form of earned income. With this in mind, office hours and appointment times often conflict with food stamp applicants’ work schedules. Time spent waiting in the food stamp office translates into dollars lost from applicants’ paychecks. Poor treatment by workers and limited food stamp office hours are two barriers to access that could be changed with a more client-based approach to the food stamp application process.

The barriers to access and outreach that we have encountered in the Central Valley have significantly compromised our efforts at improving the area's participation rate. While some barriers are local and others are national, it is important that they all be evaluated and addressed if participation rates are to be further improved.

Recommendations

It should be an immediate priority for California to develop a statewide Food Stamp Hotline to be utilized by potential applicants throughout the state, with a number to be distributed in both local and statewide media campaigns for informational purposes. One of the most significant difficulties we faced during our media campaign was the lack of an easily-accessible central source of information in California for food stamp information for potential applicants. Each county has different phone numbers for food stamp information and many of the county numbers we tested were difficult to navigate. Potential applicants calling for information about food stamps in Fresno County can expect to speak with a person and have their questions answered, but such callers in some other counties are not so lucky.

We added labels with local phone numbers to USDA posters because calling the national 1-800 food stamp information hotline can be time-consuming and frustrating. However, anytime a county phone number is used for outreach, it could potentially be heard or seen outside of the county and generate phone calls from potential applicants in other counties who should be calling a different number. Busy county workers should not be burdened with these extra phone calls from outside their county. Public service announcements do not provide advocates with enough time to list different numbers for various county offices and it is difficult to know the exact geographic area covered by a given radio station, TV channel or newspaper. If California had a statewide Food Stamp Hotline like those in Washington, Oregon, and Arizona, food stamp outreach workers and advocates would be able to simply encourage anyone in California to call this central number to obtain the local number for their county.

On a more localized level in Fresno and Tulare counties, waiving the face-to-face interviews (and ensuring that eligibility workers take advantage of the waiver whenever possible) could do a tremendous amount to increase participation in the two counties. Tulare County has done a commendable job waiving the interview thus far but must work to ensure that all eligibility workers are taking advantage of the waiver. Fresno County is currently working towards implementing the waiver, and its expedient realization should have a significant impact on the county's FSP participation rate.

The Food Stamp Task Force and Advocates Group must both continue the media and outreach and enrollment efforts that have been successful from September 2004 through February 2005. They must also work to include businesses, schools, hospitals, and the faith community in their future outreach and enrollment efforts. We believe that an inclusive and holistic approach to these efforts will yield the greatest success.

Comparisons and Conclusions

Our project's three main strategies of media, food stamp outreach trainings and food stamp task forces turned out to mesh together quite effectively. Each strategy incorporates and bolsters the other two approaches. For example, food stamp outreach trainings create media coverage and draw more advocates to the food stamp task forces. While the interplay between the three components was essential for the overall success of our project, an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each strategy should enable advocates to determine which of the three components they might want to emphasize based on the specific needs of their respective communities or regions.

The media work was probably the most effective component of our work plan, yielding a total of eleven newspaper articles, one editorial, three guest opinions in newspapers or newsletters, five TV news segments, four TV interviews or other appearances, and five radio shows or PSAs. It reached low-income citizens who were eligible for, but not receiving, food stamps as well as business owners who were not aware of the substantial benefits of greater participation for the local economy. Our media coverage was successful in yielding a meeting with the local Congressman's office regarding ways to improve access and increase enrollment in the district. Media is the non-profit sector's form of advertising and educating, and use of varied and different mediums broadly communicates essential messages. The challenges of conducting an effective media campaign are that the message can get stale and be cast aside by media outlets if it is not consistently reevaluated and effectively framed. Also, it can be difficult to track which applications submitted were the result of particular media events. Lastly, it must be recognized that without an effective enrollment and delivery system for food stamp benefits, even the most professional and wide-spread media campaign would be only marginally effective.

The outreach and enrollment trainings provide advocates with the most measurable results and facilitate the entire application process, starting with the initial application for eligible clients and eventually connecting them with the benefits for which they qualify. This lengthy process can be difficult, though, and the inaction of trained individuals and groups can be frustrating. Consistent communication is important to ensure that attendees of the outreach and enrollment trainings successfully initiate and maintain their food stamp application assistance program. Denials of food stamp applications submitted by trained CBOs must be analyzed to address patterns – for example, potential clients who missed interviews or failed to provide the necessary documents. For optimal success, it is essential that county officials ensure that policies such as a face-to-face waiver are not only dictated at the top but also carried out by the food stamp interviewers.

The Task Forces and Advocates Groups play an essential role in administering and guiding both the media campaign and the outreach and enrollment efforts. It is important to ensure that they are inclusive and well-balanced, promoting active discussion between the various sectors that support the Food Stamp Program and shape food stamp access. To maximize success in boosting food stamp participation, these groups must focus on key issues surrounding outreach and policy but also facilitate media and food stamp application assistance trainings.

It is important to evaluate not only the three-pronged approach in general but also the specific advantages and disadvantages of our project. We benefited greatly from a strong coalition between our four sponsoring organizations, existing food stamp partnerships such as the long-running Food Stamp Advocates in Fresno County, the support of outside groups such as the California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA), a significant number of Spanish-speakers involved in outreach, the medium-sized media market, and the prestige of the Congressional Hunger Center. It was convenient that we were doing similar work in each county and could recommend organizations to each other – for example, after several employees of Proteus were trained in food stamp outreach at FoodLink in Tulare County, many employees were contacted and attended the next training at Community Food Bank in Fresno. Perhaps most importantly, our project could not have been successful without the cooperation and commitment of those who administer the Food Stamp Program in each county.

The restrictions on our project must also be recognized. Challenges included a small budget, a minimal understanding of the local area at the project's initiation, and a prohibition on lobbying activities because of the fellowship's association with the federal government. Most frustrating was the short five-month term of our project, which forced us to leave without having explored many exciting avenues for food stamp outreach.

Despite limitations and challenges, these efforts have been successful and we are eager to see them continue to unfold through the food stamp task forces. While this project has increased the number of food stamp applicants and recipients in Fresno and Tulare Counties, it has only scratched the surface of options and opportunities for food stamp outreach. Outreach in schools and hospitals, for example, would generate striking results. Some outreach efforts were more difficult than expected but so many were surprisingly simple – for instance, the friendly director of Fresno Area Express charged us nothing to post 100 signs publicizing the Food Stamp Program in the city's buses. Optimal food stamp participation rates cannot be achieved until all procedural issues are addressed and the application process is perfected, but this project, among others, has proved that food stamp outreach yields considerable results. It has been very encouraging to witness the effects of food stamp outreach in Fresno and Tulare Counties thus far, but most encouraging is the potential for dramatic successes through food stamp outreach efforts yet to come.

TOOLKIT

Beginning A Food Stamp Outreach Project

1. Familiarize yourself with the Food Stamp Program. Helpful websites include that of the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/), FRAC (Food Research and Action Center, www.frac.org), and statewide anti-hunger groups such as California Food Policy Advocates (www.cfpa.net). Research poverty in your community by looking at U.S. Census data and other internet materials.
2. In your area, investigate the nonprofit scene, the state of food stamp outreach (currently and previously), the media, political climate, understanding of or stereotypes about low-income people, and the attitudes of elected officials. All of these local factors will affect your project.
3. Visit a local food stamp office to begin to get a feel for the application process and experience. Apply for food stamps if you might be eligible.
3. Order free food stamp outreach materials online from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/order-form.htm>.) USDA posters and flyers offer potential food stamp applicants a 1-800 number to call for more information. It is important to make your outreach materials appropriate for your county by printing and affixing labels with the phone number for local food stamp offices. When distributing materials, always keep in mind your target populations' literacy level, common languages, and geographic area.
4. Meet with representatives of the county's Food Stamp Program to discuss both the state of food stamp outreach in your county and how you can work together in this project. Find out when, where and how outreach is currently occurring. Emphasize cooperation. Ask which phone number you should advertise to be called by potential food stamp applicants. Discuss the best way for each party to keep the other informed to ensure consistent communication. Inquire about internal outreach within the Department of Human Services in the county – for example, is information about food stamps provided to people who apply for Medicaid or mental health services?
5. Make use of natural partners for food stamp outreach. Work with existing organizations that are already serving people who might be eligible for food stamps but do not yet receive them. Find out which local organizations serve your target populations and talk with them about food stamp outreach.
6. Direct service providers often operate with limited resources and, as such, are very busy. Make food stamp outreach easy for them by delivering ready-to-use materials to their facility. Take a tour of local agencies serving your target population and ask if they would be willing to put up posters advertising food stamps. Government complexes providing social services are excellent places to distribute posters – however, you may need to seek approval for your posters at the executive office before they can be used.

7. Investigate existing collaboratives or partnerships in your community. One way to find out about such partnerships is by looking at recipients of large grants – in the Central Valley, for example, many organizations working together on health issues are funded partly by the California Endowment.
8. Attend meetings of collaboratives serving your target population. Bring materials and make contacts, announcements and presentations as permitted. When presenting to a group, make it a conversation rather than a lecture. You can provide new information about the Food Stamp Program and, in addition, learn from them about their clients' or their own perceptions or experiences of food stamps. Beginning your conversation with a short quiz about food stamps quickly reveals your audience's understanding of the program; it also saves time by preventing unnecessary factual review.
9. Find out where low-income people buy food in your community. Ask store managers if they would be willing to put up food stamp posters or do outreach events. Emphasize that if more customers receive food stamps, they will have more money to spend at the grocery store, and sales will increase.
10. On a state level, investigate the governor's attitude toward food stamps and also other anti-hunger organizations and food stamp outreach efforts. We were lucky enough to have contact with and learn a great deal about food stamp issues from the California Association of Food Banks, California Food Policy Advocates, the California Hunger Action Coalition, etc.
11. You may want to make a presentation about the importance of the Food Stamp Program to your local Rotary Club or other groups of service-minded people who are influential in the community.

Food Stamp Outreach: General Advice

1. Write everything down. It is useful to keep careful notes for future reference. Good records are very important in insuring the sustainability of a food stamp outreach project.
2. Work with other organizations performing outreach to your target population – for example, you might form a mutually beneficial relationship with a group doing outreach about the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC.)
3. Trust is always an important issue in food stamp outreach projects. When working with the media, interviews are often better than public service announcements (PSAs) because the audience trusts hosts of particular radio and TV shows and will trust information provided by that host. When training organizations in food stamp application assistance, it is best to train organizations with a long history of providing quality information and services to the community.
4. Consider who is and is not allowed to engage in lobbying, according to their job description and funding. If you are not permitted to lobby, it is helpful to bring someone who is not similarly restricted when speaking to the media or to elected officials.
5. Ask everyone you work with if they know of anyone else who might be interested in your project. Reporters might know of other reporters who could help; nonprofit employees and volunteers might know of other organizations that would like to participate.
6. Follow through on everything. You cannot be sure that something has been completed unless you do it yourself or check on it yourself. For example, call your county's food stamp hotline to make sure the phone is being answered.
7. Thank-you notes are always a good idea.
8. As you work on food stamp outreach, you will undoubtedly hear from people who were displeased with their experience applying for food stamps. Keep track of these complaints and be sure to discuss them with the county.

1. Media Work

Media work is an extremely effective way to reach the public, policymakers, elected officials, community leaders, and other organizations that might be interested in joining your food stamp outreach project.

Of the three strategies utilized in our food stamp outreach project, the media undoubtedly yielded the largest number of applications. Each food stamp outreach training yielded dozens of applications over a period of several months; each newspaper article or news piece yielded hundreds of phone calls in just a few days.

Although it can be difficult to gain media coverage, one can usually manage to achieve some publicity –in letters to the editor and community calendar listings, if nothing more.

1. First, familiarize yourself with the local media. Watch the news, listen to the radio, and collect as many written publications as you can.

2. Read *News for a Change: An Advocate's Guide to Working with the Media*, published by the Berkeley Media Studies Group, or explore the organization's website (www.bmsg.org). This book is full of so many excellent suggestions that we could not attempt to list them here. However, some of the most important recommendations include:

- Catch a reporter's attention with irony, conflict, or controversy
- Make your story timely by taking advantage of holidays or anniversaries or by piggybacking on national stories
- Focus on both the problem and the solution, and assign responsibility for the problem
- Emphasize shared values
- Use visual images and "social math" to make difficult concepts more tangible
- "The messenger is the message": Make sure to choose an appropriate person to convey your message
- It is essential to have a media plan

3. Work together with your county's Department of Social Services to achieve media coverage. Ask the county to approve press releases before sending them to media outlets. Invite the county's attendance and participation at all media events.

4. In your media work, be sure to address myths and stereotypes most common about hunger and the Food Stamp Program in your community. In the Central Valley, it was important to address the myth that low-income people are often obese and therefore could not be suffering from hunger. Documents from FRAC helped to show that hunger and obesity can often coexist within communities and individuals.

5. In addition to a media plan, it is helpful to have a handy list of messages you want to convey to the media. This list, for your own personal use, guarantees that you will be prepared and will not leave out anything important. Also, provide a packet of relevant background information

anytime you meet with the media. Providing written remarks ensures that you will not be misquoted.

6. The media is most interested in stories, not issues. Reporters may ask to speak with “real people” – for example, food stamp recipients. Therefore, it is useful to keep a list of anyone who is prepared to speak with the media about food stamps – especially food stamp recipients. We lost one opportunity for a news piece because we did not have a family receiving food stamps ready to speak to the media.

7. If you plan to write an op-ed, call the opinion editor first to pitch the idea. He/she might offer feedback or suggestions. Also, it is good to introduce yourself and establish the contact so that the editor is expecting your op-ed.

8. The local media is usually your best bet. If you decide to submit op-eds to newspapers outside of your region, contact the food banks in that area to make sure that you are not stepping on anyone’s toes by “publishing in their backyard.”

9. Increase your media exposure by working with other people and organizations involved with food stamp issues, outreach programs, or low-income clients. For example, Jeremy Hofer at Fresno Metro Ministry helped the Selma Flea Market become food stamp friendly as the first flea market in the nation where shoppers can use an EBT card to purchase food items. We had the opportunity to speak at a press conference celebrating this exciting event.

10. Keep a good record of all media contacts so that you can work with the same people for coverage of future stories or events. Press releases are much more likely to generate a response if faxed or emailed to a specific person, not simply to the organization.

11. Media coverage is important; however, the presence of reporters can be distracting and a bit chaotic. Plan in advance to minimize the reporters’ impact on your event. At a food stamp outreach training, for example, one person should be on hand to welcome guests and begin the meeting while another person is available to speak with reporters. Newspaper reporters taking notes are often less distracting than TV interviewers and cameras, so they may be more appropriate for certain events.

12. Be careful when giving out a phone number – for example, the number for people to call for more information about applying for food stamps. Make sure that the phone number is appropriate for the entire area in which it will be broadcast. Ensure that the organization is prepared with sufficient staff, able to answer questions in the appropriate languages, to answer a large volume of phone calls.

13. Be persistent. Fax press releases at least twice and call to make sure that they were received. It never hurts to follow up. If an opinion editor declines to print your op-ed, ask what you could do differently to improve future submissions.

14. Avoid wearing white clothing on TV.

2. Food Stamp Outreach Trainings

Before your Food Stamp Outreach Training

1. Find out if your county's food stamp office is already training CBOs in food stamp application assistance.
2. Use phone, fax and email to contact a variety of organizations to invite them to your training. We invited most relevant CBOs listed in Fresno Metro Ministry's "Making Connections" guidebook of local community agencies. Be sure to fax flyers at a time when faxes are most likely to be received. At Community Food Bank, we were much more successful if we faxed out the flyer with the much-anticipated agencies' menu on Thursday afternoons. In addition, post flyers at the food bank.
3. Do not simply fax out informational flyers – ask people to RSVP to confirm attendance. Remind them of the training a few days in advance.
4. Send out a press release about the event.
5. Talk to the county to discuss which materials they will provide and which ones you need to offer and how many people are expected to attend. Make sure that all materials are approved by the county and available in all languages commonly spoken in your area. Prepare materials packets for all CBOs and the media as well as a few extras. Necessary materials include:
 - Sign-in sheets
 - Food stamp posters with the appropriate local phone number
 - Food stamp applications
 - Basic information about the food stamp program for attendees and their clients
 - Special information for particular groups in the region (such as Latino immigrants in the Central Valley)
 - Any "giveaways" – for example, our free USDA "Food stamps make America stronger" potholders were very popular at outreach events
 - Evaluations of the outreach training

During your Food Stamp Outreach Training

Your training will probably be about 1.5 hours long and should include:

- Overview of the Food Stamp Program, eligibility requirements and application process
- Go through every question on the food stamp application
- Discuss any issues relevant to particular groups in the region (such as public charge in areas with large immigrant populations)
- Go over all materials provided.
- Establish a clear, specific protocol for turning in completed applications to the county: Where? To whom? When? Applications should be delivered to the county as quickly as possible. Initially, you might ask trainees to email or call the county each time they turn

in an application to ensure that it is received and tracked. Also, trainees should submit monthly reports of applications submitted to be compared with the county's reports to make sure that they are identical.

- Answer trainees' questions
- Offer to role-play (as the applicant) with any trainees who will like to practice filling out the application
- Invite trainees to the Food Stamp Task Force, if there is a local group
- Mention that trainees cannot, in turn, train others in food stamp application assistance. If others at their organization would like to be trained in food stamp application assistance, they should attend the next training.
- Discuss the best way to contact people after the training for follow-up (phone, email, fax, etc.)
- If several people from one organization attend the training, ask which person would like to be the central contact regarding food stamp outreach
- Ask the attendees to fill out evaluations of the training

After your Food Stamp Outreach Training

1. Immediately after the training, provide county trainers with a photocopy of the sign-in sheet and the attendees' evaluations.
2. Soon after the training, follow up with the trainees to discuss their outreach efforts so far and to address any concerns. If anyone seems confused, offer to visit her/him to perform application assistance together so that the individual feels comfortable with the process.
3. Contact the country regularly to make sure that the protocol is running smoothly. If they are willing, ask them to track the applications received through this outreach project and record the number of cases approved and denied. Find out why cases are being denied so that any common problems can be solved. For example, if applicants are often denied because they do not attend the face-to-face interview with a caseworker, issues of transportation, office hours or child care may need to be resolved.
4. At food stamp task force meetings, follow-up on the trainings and applications generated through the program.

Criteria for Choosing Organizations to Attend Food Stamp Outreach Trainings

Although we invited people from all community-based organizations to attend the trainings, we learned that CBOs with the following characteristics were likely to be most effective in food stamp outreach:

- Paid employees or committed volunteers already case-managing, working to provide services to low-income people who are likely to be eligible for food stamps (not SSI recipients, for example)
- Low staff turnover
- Focused on social justice
- Able to transport completed food stamp applications to the county quickly and reliably

3. Food Stamp Task Forces

Nonprofits providing direct services to the community often struggle with limited resources. Therefore, many people involved in food stamp outreach may have very little time to devote to advocacy. Considering the busy schedule of many potential attendees of your food stamp task force, it is especially important to run a high-quality and inclusive meeting.

1. General advice on how to run a meeting successfully (so that your attendees come back!):

- Be organized. Use a sign-in sheet to track attendance. An agenda helps keep the meeting on track. At the end of the meeting, ask everyone to fill out a short evaluation (“What did you like about this meeting?” and “How could we improve this meeting next time?”). Such efforts show attendees that you respect their time.
- Provide a packet of background information. Go over it briefly during the meeting to pique people’s interest.
- Make sure that the time and place of the meeting is the best option for the majority of group members.
- The atmosphere matters! Refreshments, flowers, and posters on the walls will make attendees feel comfortable.
- Increase attendance by calling or emailing to remind group members of the upcoming meeting. Ask for an RSVP to confirm attendance.
- Use guest speakers and topics of interest to specific group members to entice them to attend.
- Close by briefly discussing the next meeting.

2. Make your Food Stamp Task Force as inclusive and interactive as possible – more like a discussion than a lecture. If people do not feel they are contributing to the group, they are much less likely to attend. A few ways to increase participation and members’ sense of ownership of the group:

- Ask all attendees to introduce themselves at the beginning of the meeting. If they speak right as the meeting starts, they are more likely to contribute throughout the meeting.
- When the task force is formed, members should brainstorm and establish a mission and goals for the group. Every so often, the group should reevaluate its mission and goals and discuss who is missing at the table.
- Brainstorm and choose projects as a group. Share responsibilities so that each member knows she/he is an integral part of the task force.
- Consider rotating the meeting’s location and/or group facilitator to increase participation of various members.

3. Provide food stamp posters and other outreach materials at every meeting.

4. Find out about “higher-level” partnerships between the USDA and other organizations, then establish similar connections at the local level. In Fresno County, for example, the Mexican Consulate quickly became a committed member of the Food Stamp Advocates group.

Important Resources

Organizations' Websites

USDA Food and Nutrition Service: www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/

USDA FNS Food Stamp Outreach Coalition:
www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/coalition/about.htm

Food Research and Action Center: www.frac.org

California Food Policy Advocates: www.cfpa.net (See the “2004 County By County Profile Report” and “Who Receives Food Stamps in California?”)

Berkeley Media Studies Group: www.bmsg.org

Helpful Documents

UCLA Center for Health Policy Research:
www.healthpolicy.ucla.edu/pubs/files/FoodInsecurity.pdf

Food Research and Action Center:
www.frac.org/html/federal_food_programs/FSP/Participation_Rates_03.html

USDA ERS:
www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr26/fanrr26-6/fanrr26-6.pdf

U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey:
www.census.gov/acs/www/Products/Ranking/2003/R01T050.htm

CFPA: www.cfpa.net/CashoutinCA2003.pdf

Center on Hunger and Poverty, FRAC:
www.centeronhunger.org/pdf/hungerandobesity.pdf

ADDITIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON FOOD STAMP OUTREACH

We wrote this report in hopes that the information provided would facilitate, inform and enhance other food stamp outreach projects, and we thought it was important to include a variety of voices and perspectives. Food stamp outreach is a community effort with a common goal; however, it is a different experience with unique challenges for each party involved. Food stamp task forces are diverse groups working together to improve food stamp access and participation, but each member brings her/his own ideas and concerns to the table. This section includes questions answered by advocates and county food stamp program directors in Fresno and Tulare Counties as well as organizations spearheading innovative food stamp outreach campaigns in other parts of the state. Many thanks to everyone who graciously volunteered their time to share their viewpoints and experiences in this report.

FoodLink for Tulare County
Visalia, California
Sandy Beals, Executive Director

Could you start by providing a bit of background information on FoodLink?

FoodLink has been serving Tulare County for the past 26 years. Our vision “no child goes hungry” sustains a philosophy of building a community that will end hunger forever. Partnerships and collaboration form the basis of our food distribution and nutrition programs.

When, how and why did food stamp outreach begin at FoodLink? Is food stamp outreach an entirely new program at FoodLink, or have you been able to incorporate it into existing programs as well?

FoodLink has promoted the use of food stamps for many years. We have joined hundreds of other food banks to advocate for USDA’s federal Food Stamp Program -- to protect it from budget cuts and to allow more struggling families to access food stamps. More recently, we have had the resources to become more involved in outreach to the low income population. We have been astounded at the myths that prevent families from applying for a program that could help alleviate the health problems stemming from malnutrition.

By incorporating food stamp outreach activities into our other programs, we can provide a much more valuable and well-rounded service to the families we serve. For example, our Nutrition on the Go program provides nutrition and health information along with 25-30 pounds of fresh fruit and vegetables to poverty-stricken families in rural areas on a bi-weekly basis. By assisting with food stamp applications at these rural sites, we may be able to help the families be able to purchase more fresh produce on a regular basis. Nutrition on the Go is an excellent vehicle for food stamp outreach because its friendly and festive atmosphere makes people feel comfortable.

How many employees do you have at FoodLink? Who is involved in food stamp outreach and in what capacity?

We have 12 employees who work to get food to over 100,000 people each year. Sounds impossible, but the work is accomplished by hundreds of volunteers and partnerships with dozens of community agencies. Virtually every employee and many of the volunteers are involved, in some capacity, with food stamp outreach since it is incorporated into all of our activities.

Do you have any plans for other ways in which you could increase food stamp outreach efforts at FoodLink?

1. Add food stamp information to our website, so people can get a general sense of the eligibility guidelines and where to apply.
2. We are educating local Rotarians as to the benefits of full participation in food stamps in our local area. Service clubs and other local groups are instrumental in changing public attitudes.
3. Continue media contact to inform families about food stamps.

4. Continue to train outreach workers to assist with food stamp application.
5. Empower the newly formed Food Stamp Task Force to take the lead on outreach in Tulare County.

How have you been so successful in implementing food stamp outreach so thoroughly at FoodLink?

1. Our Board of Directions is very enthusiastic and supportive of the project.
2. We have done our job of educating the public about the tremendous food insecurity problems in our local area and about the long term effect of hunger on our population. Food Stamps are a clear resource to help alleviate the problem, so it has become relatively non-controversial for people to get behind the program.
3. We also have the huge advantage of having a great network of social service agencies who understand the importance of collaboration with each other on these issues.
4. Our staff communicates well. Each staff member knows what the others are doing and they work well as a team.

What advice would you give to other food banks or CBOs working on food stamp outreach?

1. Make sure you are in a bridge-building, not adversarial, mode when dealing with county officials and other social service agencies. Attack the problem from a mutually agreeable vantage point. We all want the same outcome: healthier families.
2. Educate your Board first. Make sure they are supportive of your work. Ending hunger is not only about moving food.
3. You can incorporate food stamp outreach into virtually every activity your food bank does. It is part of our nutrition program, food distributions, public education and advocacy, etc.

Centro La Familia Advocacy Services, Inc.
Fresno, California
Gustavo Hernandez, Family Advocate

How long have you been doing food stamp outreach? What strategies have you used for outreach? Have they changed over time? What efforts have been easiest or hardest? What efforts have been most successful or least successful?

Centro La Familia has been involved in food stamp outreach for several years.

First, we incorporate it into a variety of our programs working with low-income families, from mentoring to mental health. We do a great deal of case-managing and are always prepared with a food stamp application to fill out with someone who might qualify.

Secondly, we perform application assistance for food stamps and other benefits on a bi-weekly basis at several urban and rural sites in Fresno County. After helping clients fill out initial food stamp applications at outreach sites, we explain the rest of the application process and ask them to call us if they run across any problems. We also do food stamp outreach at health fairs and other events that might attract low-income families.

We have been very successful in our collaboration and continuing relationship with other nonprofits, both individually and through the Food Stamp Advocates group. We also greatly appreciate the cooperation of Fresno County's Department of Employment and Temporary Assistance.

We utilize every opportunity to present information about the Food Stamp Program. We offer food stamp application assistance on a consistent basis so that potential applicants know to expect us every other week. We also disperse flyers beforehand so that people come prepared with the necessary documents or information to apply (such as social security numbers and income quantities.)

Our food stamp outreach program changes as we collaborate with different organizations. Centro is open to new outreach methods.

What encourages you to do outreach? What barriers have you experienced to doing outreach?

The mission of Centro La Familia is to assist low-income families in attaining self-sufficiency. Food stamps enable such families to access healthy food – that's an integral piece of self-sufficiency.

Barriers to outreach include limited resources, especially funding. Also, staff turnover at various CBOs makes consistent food stamp outreach projects more difficult.

What advice would you give to others working on food stamp outreach?

Collaborate with other organizations. Be available to make presentations, attend health fairs, etc.

What are the greatest barriers to food stamp access in your area?

Barriers to access in Fresno County include the required fingerprinting and photographing of all food stamp applicants and the lack of offices or outreach sites in certain rural areas of the county. In addition, it would help working families if food stamp offices were open past 5 p.m. one or two afternoons per week.

Do you have any other comments on food stamp access or outreach?

Food stamp outreach works best in conjunction with other services provided, through organizations that already have established relationships with low-income clients. Centro is especially well positioned for food stamp outreach considering our clients' trust in the organization and because we provide services in English, Spanish, and Hmong.

We took advantage of the trainings and support offered by Fresno County to learn about the Food Stamp Program and make sure we were not putting out any misinformation. We were successful because we worked hard to inform ourselves first, before informing others. With specific knowledge about county outreach sites and services, we could refer clients to the appropriate location at the appropriate time.

Lastly, food stamp outreach must be a sustained effort. In the media, for example, the community needs a continuous flow of information about eligibility and the economic benefit of the Food Stamp Program to the whole community.

County of Fresno Department of Employment and Temporary Assistance
Steve Rodriguez, Deputy Director
Johnie Belford and Henry Lopez, Fresno County Social Services Program Supervisors

How long has Fresno County been doing Food Stamp Outreach?

Food stamp outreach efforts date back to the late 1970's.

What strategies are used for outreach?

- Outreach efforts typically target Fresno County's rural areas. Many residents in rural areas experience difficulty in accessing services due to lack of transportation. By staffing sites within their community, transportation or access problems are removed.
- Outstation and Outreach Units have been instrumental in providing food stamp outreach in various locations throughout Fresno County.
- Locating food stamp staff at the Selma and Reedley Regional Centers provides easier access to services and eliminates the need for individuals who live in these areas to travel to Fresno to apply benefits.
- Provision of bilingual staff to assist residents in the rural areas where the predominant language is Spanish.
- Establishment of partnerships with Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to:
 - develop community awareness about the food stamp program
 - encourage eligible individuals to participate in the food stamp program
 - assist individuals in understanding the application process
 - follow-up with applicants to ensure that the application process is completed and appropriate required documents are provided.
- Maintenance of working relationships with local CBO's through regularly scheduled meetings to discuss and address a variety of current food-insecurity related issues. By maintaining ongoing lines of communication, CBO's are kept abreast of food stamp issues and program regulation changes.
- Dissemination of program information through mass mailings, brochures, advertisement on television and radio, community presentations and health fairs.

Which outreach efforts have been easiest?

- Locating food stamp staff in Outstation and Outreach Units and at the Reedley and Selma Regional Centers.
- Establishment of partnerships with Community Based Organizations.

Which outreach efforts have been hardest?

The predominant barrier preventing residents from applying for food stamp benefits has been access or transportation to a location where an application for food stamps can be completed. This barrier has been eased somewhat by locating staff throughout the county (Outstation sites and at the Selma and Reedley Regional Centers).

The most difficult obstacles to overcome have been:

- Lack of understanding of the Food Stamp eligibility rules and regulations.
- Failure of eligible individuals to apply for benefits, especially the elderly and immigrants.
- Lack of convenient office locations.
- Lack of reliable transportation in rural areas.
- Failure to provide required documentation for eligibility
- Lengthy and complex application and quarterly report forms.
- Lengthy application process
 - The average application process takes five hours and requires three office visits.
 - The time from application to approval ranges from 10 to 30 days.
 - Working poor cannot afford the loss of wages associated with office visits.
- Failure of clients to follow through after an application has been initiated

What efforts have been most successful?

- Locating food stamp staff in Outstation and Outreach Units and at the Reedley and Selma Regional Centers.
- Establishment of partnerships with Community Based Organizations.

What efforts have been least successful?

- Efforts to increase participation by eligible elderly and immigrant individuals.

What encourages you to do outreach?

The need for food stamp program accessibility for residents in various communities outside the City of Fresno.

What barriers have you experienced to doing outreach?

- Increased volume of food stamp applications require more staff to maintain these cases.
- Lack of adequate staffing due to state and county food stamp budget constraints and the lengthy recruitment process to fill vacant positions.
- CBO follow up on various issues within the food stamp application process has not always been successful. Due to internal issues or budget constraints, some CBO's have not been successful in maintaining their outreach efforts.
- Requirements for Statewide Finger Imaging System (SFIS) and Face-to-Face interviews.

The amount of State and Federal funding has been severely limited since 2000-01 due to the capped State funding available to match Federal Food Stamp funds. Although the Food Stamp benefits are 100% Federal Funded, the administration for the Food Stamp program at the County level is a shared cost with Federal, State and County matching fund requirements. The amount of the allocation passed onto the counties has been restricted due

to the State's financial situation.

Due to reduced funding from the State and the elimination of Proposed County Allocation Budget (PCAB) process by the State of California that allowed counties, until 2000-01, to identify their financial needs to support the food stamp and other social services programs, funding for food stamps has not supported the workloads associated with serving food stamp clients. This negatively impacts the counties ability to take and process food stamp applications as well as serve clients in ongoing cases once approved into the future. As more families are enrolled into the program, each worker is asked to assume the responsibility for serving more families. Eventually workers are spread too thin and cannot properly serve clients resulting in lower accuracy for benefits issued and increasing the probability of Federal Sanctions on the State passed through to the counties.

This concern is emphasized because the outreach efforts identified in this report do impact a county's ability to process new applications generated through such efforts and to continue benefits to those families afterward. As a result, some counties may decide not to participate in outreach activities that may increase their risk of Federal sanctions. The State has made it very clear at meetings to enhance outreach that although they support our efforts, the counties should not expect any additional funding from the State for outreach or resulting caseload growth.

How have outreach efforts impacted the number of food stamp applicants and recipients in your county?

- There has been a substantial increase in the number of food stamp applications processed and approved.
- Ongoing food stamp caseloads have seen dramatic increases over the last several years.

What advice would you give to CBOs working on food stamp outreach?

- Remain active in food stamp outreach efforts.
- Continue to network with Fresno County and other CBO's to maintain and expand collaborative efforts within the communities they serve.
- To incorporate Food Stamp activities into other CBO activities.

Do you have any other comments on food stamp access or outreach?

Fresno County staff attend state food stamp program conferences and meetings in order to stay current with food stamp program issues, which may impact county residents and county staff.

Fresno County supports legislation to simplify the application process and to align food stamp rules with TANF rules for program simplification.

Tulare County Health and Human Services Agency
Mindy Balaam, Food Stamp Program Director

How long have you been doing food stamp outreach? What strategies have you used for outreach? What efforts have been easiest or hardest? What efforts have been most successful or least successful?

Strategies:

- Outreach with FoodLink
- Health fairs
- Outstation staff

Partnering with FoodLink has been the easiest effort. Success can be attributed to the program training offered by the county for those who will be assisting with the application process.

What encourages you to do outreach? What barriers have you experienced to doing outreach?

Outreach makes the Food Stamp Program more accessible. A few barriers we have experienced are lack of transportation to the nearest certification office and too much paperwork (verifications, etc.)

How have outreach efforts impacted the number of food stamp applicants and recipients in your county?

So far, the impact has been minimal.

What advice would you give to CBOs working on food stamp outreach?

Take advantage of any basic training the CWD offers. By learning as much as you can about basic eligibility, you will see a greater number of successful applications.

Do you have any other comments on food stamp access or outreach?

Outreach provides for a better education of the program to those who are reluctant to apply, even though they appear to be eligible.

Alameda County Community Food Bank
Oakland, California
Elizabeth Gomez, Community Outreach Coordinator

How long have you been doing food stamp outreach? What strategies have you used for outreach? Have they changed over time? What efforts have been easiest or hardest? What efforts have been most successful or least successful?

The Alameda County Community Food Bank has been doing aggressive food stamp promotion and outreach for over two years. The first step was forming a strong partnership with our local food stamp office. Through collaborative efforts, the Food Bank and the Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) formed the Food Stamp Outreach Steering Committee comprised of various community based organizations, WIC offices, Head Start Centers, Public Health Department and other federal agencies.

The Food Stamp Outreach Steering Committee developed a plan for outreach, which included identifying barriers preventing people from applying and developing printed outreach material with key messages to help raise awareness and participation in the Food Stamp Program. Successful food stamp outreach by the Food Bank shows that of all the strategies tested (including over-the-phone pre-screening, mailings, and in-person application assistance), one-on-one, in-person application assistance at community based sites is the most effective means of facilitating successful applications. To promote this work, the Food Bank has trained more than 70 representatives from 30 community based organizations serving low-income families and individuals. Trained staff at these sites now provide pre-screening and one-on-one application assistance where eligible applicants receive other services, including emergency food, medical care, child care, employment training, and tax preparation assistance.

What encourages you to do outreach? What barriers have you experienced to doing outreach?

The interest that we have received from community based organizations when Food Stamp Program trainings have been offered has been overwhelming, but also encourages us to continue offering this service. There is definite interest among organizations in our community serving low-income people to offer application assistance. Also, call flow to the Food Bank for a free over-the-phone pre-screening has increased. Over the last two years, the Food Bank has pre-screened over 2,000 families over the phone.

The main challenge that the Food Bank is currently working to address is the capacity for the SSA, which administers the Food Stamp Program, to keep pace with the increase in applications. Funding cuts at the County level over the past year have been deep, and the successful outreach campaign has created a flood of new applications. SSA is a close partner with the Food Bank and participates actively in the Food Stamp Outreach Steering Committee; SSA acknowledges that a lengthy application process is counterproductive to successful outreach. The Food Bank will work to maintain a close relationship with the County's food stamp specialist to address these concerns and ensure that applications submitted by the Food Bank and its partners are handled adequately by the County.

How have outreach efforts impacted the number of food stamp applicants and recipients in your county?

Since the project began, the Food Bank and its partners have helped to bring in about 1,000 new food stamp applications to the County office. Latest County data indicates that since the inception of the project, there has been a 20 percent increase in the food stamp participation rate.

What advice would you give to others working on food stamp outreach?

Forming a strong partnership with the local food stamp office is a key element. This may include having regular meetings with key County personnel and soliciting their input and ideas before new outreach strategies are implemented.

What are the greatest barriers to food stamp access in your area?

Some of the greatest barriers in Alameda County include:

- limited office hours
- county staff lay-offs
- frequent carryovers at SSA/delays application processing time
- poor customer service by county staff

Do you have any other comments on food stamp access or outreach?

The Alameda County Community Food Bank outreach staff is happy to share our experiences with organizations who are interested in starting their own food stamp outreach campaign. For more information, please contact Elizabeth Gomez, Community Outreach Coordinator at (510) 834-3663 X325.

Community Action Partnership of Orange County
Garden Grove, California
Diana Darwish, Outreach Coordinator

How long have you been doing food stamp outreach? What strategies have you used for outreach? Have they changed over time? What efforts have been easiest or hardest? What efforts have been most successful or least successful?

Community Action Partnership of Orange County (CAPOC) has been conducting food stamp outreach altogether for about 2 years. CAPOC strategies have included face to face pre-screenings with potentially eligible individuals at various locations such as food distribution sites, senior centers, schools, WIC sites, Head Start and classroom presentations. Other strategies have included education and outreach to other CBOs and community leaders to provide better understanding of the food stamp program and increase access.

Presentation type settings have proven to be the least successful, especially because in a group type setting, people are sometimes embarrassed and shy at having to ask questions or appear to need help. Often, people who are interested will contact us later by phone where there is more privacy and confidentiality and they feel more comfortable.

One on one outreach with an individual has proven to be the most successful because it enables someone to ask questions that pertain to their own household and there is a certain level of privacy that they have that makes them feel more comfortable and willing to open up.

We reduce county no-show rates by conducting food stamp enrollment workshops at designated local community centers where, along with county representatives, we help applicants enroll in the program. Our goal is to make applying for the program more accessible and less intimidating to potential applicants than applying at a county office. We also provide childcare for the applicants, snacks and most importantly transportation. Our agency has a bus donated by the Orange County Transportation Authority that we use to pick-up applicants from a designated site and take to the community center to apply and also to the county office to administer the finger imaging portion of the application process. Providing these services has been significant in reducing many of the barriers that prevent qualified families and individuals from applying for the program on their own.

What encourages you to do outreach? What barriers have you experienced to doing outreach?

We are encouraged to do outreach because we think the food stamp program is a very worthy and important program that has made a positive difference in many people's lives and can play a vital role in helping those in need through very difficult times. Having access to nutritious, healthy food can be a catalyst for a better quality of life for many, especially for both younger and older generations who are perhaps more vulnerable to illness and disease. The more who can be educated about the program and its benefits, the bigger difference it can make in the quality of life for the neediest inhabitants our society.

Conducting outreach gives us the opportunity to talk one on one with individuals about the program, answering their questions and addressing concerns and apprehensiveness they might have about applying for the program. Having someone they can talk to who goes along with the outreach material has proven to be much more effective than just passing out a flyer.

One of the strongest barriers we have encountered when conducting outreach has been fear of public charge, the possible negative impact of receiving food stamps on a household member's application for U.S. residency or citizenship. Another large barrier is the fear that food stamp benefits will have to be paid back at a later date and that the adult applicants' children will owe the debt, or that a food stamp recipient's home will be taken away. Still another barrier is the negative connotation of the Food Stamp Program, especially compared to other nutrition or health related programs such as WIC or Medi-Cal. The general public primarily associates food stamps with welfare rather than nutrition, and overcoming that impression has been a huge undertaking.

How has outreach impacted the number of food stamp applicants and recipients in your county?

CAPOC works with the Orange County Social Service Agency to conduct 3 enrollment assistant workshops each month (with a maximum of 10 applicants at 2 sites and 20 at 1 site) that assist low-income potentially eligible families and individuals with applying for the program. These workshops have resulted in increased enrollment in the Food Stamp Program in Orange County.

What advice would you give to others working on food stamp outreach?

While you might find it necessary to reach as many people as possible, when starting your outreach program, an important thing to consider is quality over quantity. Barriers run deep for many people and often times taking the time to talk with someone and helping to educate them about the program as well as address their concerns is essential to getting them to apply. Outreach materials are great but are much more effective when an outreach person can explain the information at length and in depth if necessary.

Do you have any other comments on food stamp access or outreach?

Just to again emphasize the importance of education and reinforcements. Often, people need to be reassured before they agree to apply and sometimes even after they receive benefits. It is very important that they feel comfortable talking to the outreach person and feel they can trust them. Many communities CAPOC works in are very close knit. Word of mouth can play an important role in helping to make a program a success or a failure. It is very important to take the time to make the experience a positive one for the individual applying. Their positive experience can play a significant role in encouraging others in the community to apply and can be the program's best form of advertising.

For further information, please email Diana Darwish at ddarwish@capoc.org.

Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties
Watsonville, CA
Lee Mercer, Director of Education & Outreach

How long have you been doing food stamp outreach? What strategies have you used for outreach? Have they changed over time? What efforts have been easiest or hardest? What efforts have been most successful or least successful?

At least 5 years. Previous to USDA Outreach Grant we installed a centrex line on our Community Food Hotline and directed calls to Food Stamp Office. Then we completed 2 years of USDA outreach grant and we are continuing now. We moved from passive (incoming calls) to active (outreach workers at food distributions, assisting with applications, pre-screening on laptops, carrying applications to food stamp office, follow up work on case questions) plus multi media (PSA's on television, flyers, videos). The most effective is one on one work by outreach workers building trust in the community for the food stamp program. Media is helpful but indirect. The hardest "sell" is among immigrants with many fears of the system and immigration fears.

What encourages you to do outreach? What barriers have you experienced to doing outreach?

We do outreach as a holistic approach to ending hunger. We are a food bank but will never end hunger by just passing out food. Federal programs need to be strengthened and participation increased. Barriers include perceptions (thinking income is too high, thinking working disqualifies, thinking food stamps will effect immigration status). Other barriers are structural in the regulations. In California SSI recipients can't get food stamps. Previously the car rule was in place but it has been eliminated. Drug felon rule has been partially eliminated, etc.

How have outreach efforts impacted the number of food stamp applicants and recipients in your county?

There has been as steady increase in participation during the USDA food stamp outreach project. We assisted over 1600 applications, and increased the number of Latino applicants and Spanish Language applications.

What advice would you give to others working on food stamp outreach? What resources would you recommend they use?

Get outreach workers who don't just hand out flyers, but have "sales" skills to "close the deal" in doing application assistance. Handing out flyers is fine, but many people need to talk through their fears about the program and then "sign on the dotted line".

Do you have any other comments on food stamp access or outreach?

Read our USDA grant report in its entirety, especially recommendations for the food stamp program and for other outreach projects. For further information, email Lee Mercer at lee@thefoodbank.org.

APPENDICES

Congressional fellows plan to stop hunger

By Vanessa Colón
The Fresno Bee

(Updated Thursday, September 9, 2004, 3:57 PM)

Two congressional fellows will team up with local groups in the San Joaquin Valley to increase the use of food stamps in high-poverty areas.

The pair from the Congressional Hunger Center said Wednesday that they hope to draft a plan to encourage and help families living in poverty to apply for nutritional assistance.

Making poor families aware of programs is a primary goal.

"There are a lot of families that don't even apply for food stamps," said Sandy Beals, executive director of FoodLink for Tulare County. "They're going to look at the barriers to getting food stamps to the people who need them."

Tulare and Fresno counties rank close to the top among counties nationwide with populations living in poverty in 2003, according to the Census Bureau. Tulare County ranked fifth, with 22.9% in poverty, and Fresno County was seventh, with 21.8%.

The 2003 survey found that 34.1% of Fresno County children were considered to be living in poverty.

The fellows from the hunger center, a nonprofit anti-hunger training program, will work with groups including Tulare County FoodLink and Fresno Metro Ministry.

FoodLink's volunteers work with about 80 food banks, pantries and soup kitchens in Tulare County to provide food for families. They distribute items such as flour and other commodities from the Department of Agriculture's Emergency Food Assistance Program.

Volunteers conduct after-school snack and summer lunch programs for children and give away about 5,000 food baskets during the holidays. FoodLink distributes fresh fruit and vegetables to poor families in Visalia and in rural areas.



Laura Tatum and Dennis Barrett with the Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow program have been sent to the San Joaquin Valley to come up with a plan to get more poor families in Tulare and Fresno counties on food-stamp benefits.
Mark Crosse / The Fresno Bee

Fellow Laura Tatum plans to work with groups such as FoodLink as well as speak to social workers, businesses and retailers to encourage the use of food stamps.

"A lot of people don't understand food stamps are good for the community," Tatum said. "There's an economic benefit in using federal dollars from food stamps."

The average monthly food stamp benefit in fiscal 2003 was about \$195 per household, according to the Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service program.

Tatum and Dennis Barrett, the other Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow, will work in the two counties for about six months and complete a report on their findings and suggestions to reduce hunger. They will then present it to local officials and members of Congress.

"Fresno might not have the voice in D.C. that it deserves. This is a way [to do it]," Tatum said.

The reporter can be reached at vcolon@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6313.

Low food stamp participation a problem in the Valley

By Juan Esparza Loera

Vida en el Valle

(Published Wednesday, September, 22, 2004 10:10AM)

Sandy Beals, a 26-year resident of Tulare County and executive director of Foodlink of Tulare County, is all too familiar with the problem of hunger in the nation's richest farmland.

"Hunger has been a problem here forever because of the low wages and high unemployment," said Beals. "It's just a fact of life for many people."

The problem doesn't end there. Food stamp usage by eligible residents in Tulare and Fresno counties lags behind the national average. About 44 percent of eligible food stamp users in the area don't use them.

That is something Beals and other local anti-hunger organizations hope to improve. Earlier this month, Foodlink joined Community Food Bank, Fresno Metro Ministry and the USDA Food and Nutrition Service in welcoming Laura Tatum and Dennis Barrett to the area.

Tatum and Barrett are fellows in the Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows Program. They will investigate the use of food stamps in the area and look at reasons why more people don't make use of the federal program.

"We have a pretty enormous task in front of us," said Tatum, a graduate of Bowdoin College who spent a year studying in La Paz, Bolivia. "We'll be exploring the area, looking through new eyes at the system and how it works."

Tatum and Barrett will compile a report by the end of January, listing recommendations on how to improve the use of food stamps. The hunger fellows are among 20 in the country, and the only ones assigned to work in California this summer.

"The whole goal is to increase food stamp participation," said Tatum. "It's better for families, for business and for the local economy in general because it brings in federal dollars."

The Rev. Walt Perry of Fresno Metro Ministries said that 60 percent of food stamp users locally receive welfare, and that the balance are working families.

"We are concerned about the rate of food stamp usage in the area," said Melissa Daigle, outreach coordinator with the USDA. "We need to find out some solutions and benefits to that."

Anti-hunger advocates believe that not enough people know that they qualify for food stamps. Beals said many immigrants are eligible for food stamps, but are afraid to "jeopardize their immigration status."

"It's like, 'I have to stay in this country so my kids will have a chance in life,' " said Beals.

She said no information on food stamp users is turned over to federal immigration officials.

Send e-mails to: jesparza@vidaenelvalle.com

La hambre es un problema en el valle

By JUAN ESPARZA LOERA
Vida en el Valle

(Published Wednesday, September, 22, 2004 10:10AM)

Sandy Beals, quien ha residido en el condado de Tulare durante 26 años y es directora ejecutiva de Foodlink de Tulare County, está demasiado familiarizada con el problema del hambre en el área agrícola más rica de la nación.

"El hambre ha sido un problema aquí desde siempre porque los salarios son bajos y hay un alto desempleo," dijo Beals. "Para mucha gente es simplemente un hecho de la vida."

El problema no termina allí. El uso de estampillas para comida entre los residentes de los condados de Tulare y Fresno está atrasado cuando se compara al promedio nacional. Cerca de un 44 por ciento de los usuarios de estampillas para comida en el área no las usan.

Eso es algo que Beals y otras organizaciones contra el hambre esperan mejorar. A principios de este mes, Foodlink se unió a Community Food Bank, Fresno Metro Ministry y USDA Food and Nutrition Service al darle la bienvenida a Laura Tatum y a Dennis Barrett al área.

Tatum y Barrett son colegas en el Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows Program. Ellos van a investigar el uso de estampillas para comida en el área y buscarán las razones por las cuales la gente no quiere usar el programa federal.

"Tenemos una gran tarea frente a nosotros," dijo Tatum, quien es graduada de Bowdoin College y pasó un año estudiando en La Paz, Bolivia. "Vamos a estar explorando el área, mirando con nuevos ojos el sistema y la forma en que funciona."

Tatum y Barrett compilarán un reporte para finales de enero, en el cual se hará una lista de recomendaciones sobre cómo mejorar el uso de las estampillas para comida. Ellos son parte de un grupo de 20 personas en el país, y los únicos asignados para trabajar en California este verano.

"La meta completa es la de aumentar la participación en el programa de estampillas para comida," dijo Tatum. "Es mejor para las familias, para los negocios, y para la economía local en general porque trae dinero federal."

El reverendo Walt Perry de Fresno Metro Ministries dijo que un 60 por ciento de los usuarios de estampillas para comida reciben servicios de asistencia pública, y que el balance son las familias trabajadoras.

"Estamos preocupados por la cantidad de uso de estampillas para comida en el área," dijo Melissa Daigle, coordinadora de USDA. "Necesitamos encontrar soluciones y beneficios en eso."

Las personas que hablan en contra el hambre creen que no hay suficientes personas que sepan que califiquen para las estampillas para comida. Beals dice que muchos inmigrantes son elegibles para las estampillas para comida, pero tienen temor de "poner en peligro su estado migratorio."

"Es como decir, 'tengo que quedarme en este país para que mis hijos tengan una oportunidad en la vida,'" dijo Beals.

Ella dijo que la información sobre el uso de las estampillas para comida no es enviada a los oficiales de inmigración.

Mande correo electrónico a: jesparza@vidaenelvalle.com

What's for dinner, Mama?

If there's nothing nutritious in the house, maybe food stamps can help.

The Fresno Bee
(Updated Monday, November 29, 2004, 5:35 AM)

It's the Christmas season, so we thought we would share a few of the things on our wish list:

- Happier Valley children, who have better attendance, better grades in school and better behavior.
- More food and more nutritious food for needy and working families.
- Less disease and better health for everyone.
- A better year for Valley businesses.

For those skeptics out there who don't believe it could happen, consider this: If everyone who was entitled to food stamps participated in Fresno, Kings, Madera, Merced, Mariposa and Tulare counties, about \$150 million would be injected into the Valley economy. Right now, just over half the people who qualify are signed up. Imagine the boon for supermarkets alone. They have such a profound interest in the success of this program, it would be in their interest to find a way to sign people up in their stores.

So many qualified families are not getting food stamps that it is affecting the economy of the entire Valley.

That needs to change. These are not old-fashioned food stamps. They are not even stamps, but actually debit cards that look like ATM cards. You don't have to be destitute to get them. Most people who qualify are working families. The sign-up process has been streamlined and improved, thankfully, so you don't have to take time off work to get them. And now the big challenge is to let people know about the improvements. Fresno Community Food Bank and FoodLink of Tulare County are trying to help. Their staff members have been trained to register people in the program, so it is not necessary to go to the county to enroll. Food stamps are not associated with welfare nor tied in with the immigration office.

Families should be eager to sign up for this benefit.

The top priority for everyone should be the nutrition of our children. Children who eat healthfully have stronger brains and bodies, and, therefore, learn more in school and miss less school due to illness. Nutrition also affects a child's mental health, emotions and behavior.

We know from research that too many Valley children are not at their best because of obesity. Experts say that we clearly have an epidemic in the Valley with an obesity rate of 26.6% in Fresno County and 24.3% in Tulare County, which soars over the state average of 19.1%, according to the California Department of Health Services. That may look deceiving on the outside. After all, aren't chubby children well-fed and well-cared-for?

Not necessarily. A lot of cheap, empty calories are consumed when children eat too many sweet, starchy and fatty foods. Fresh fruits and vegetables, for example, are missing from the diets of many poor children, because their parents lack education, transportation or money.

It doesn't need to be that way.

Spread the word about food stamps to the families you know. For more information, call Community Food Bank at 237-3663 or FoodLink in Tulare County at 651-3663.

Food stamps feed economy

By Dennis Barrett and Laura Tatum

The Fresno Bee

(Updated Friday, November 5, 2004, 10:20 AM)

While the sluggish state of the Valley's economy is news to no one, many people would be surprised to learn that an effective stimulant that could contribute tens of millions of dollars to the local economy is not receiving the attention it deserves.

The food stamp program is one of America's oldest, most under-appreciated and least understood federal programs. Most Americans know that the program gives food to people living in poverty. While some believe that it is a moral necessity, others criticize it as a program that fosters dependency and snuffs out self-reliance. Whatever one's beliefs about the program, one thing is certain: The food stamp program is an untapped resource that, if more widely utilized, could have both immediate and long-term economic benefits for the Valley.

The immediate economic benefit of the food stamp program has been well documented, but is not widely recognized. The USDA Economic Research Service notes that every dollar spent in the program brings \$1.85 into the local economy. Since the program benefits are almost entirely funded by the federal government, every dollar unspent by eligible Californians is a gift from Washington that is wasted.

Crucial contribution

Despite significant outreach efforts by officials from both counties that have led to strong increases in participation over the past five years, the food stamp participation rate among eligible Fresno and Tulare county residents rests only slightly above the statewide average of 54%. If the program were to operate at full participation, California Food Policy Advocates estimates it would bring more than \$115 million of federal money into Fresno and Tulare counties' severely strained economies. The Food Stamp Program puts food on the plates of millions of Americans living in poverty, but it is important to recognize the crucial contribution it makes to the local economy. The long-term economic benefit of food stamps in relation to nutrition might be the most significant advantage for the economies of Fresno and Tulare counties. The rate of obesity in California, and the Valley in particular, has reached epidemic proportions. In a report released in June, the California Department of Health Services noted that Fresno County's obesity rate of 26.6% and Tulare County's rate of 24.3% are well above the state average of 19.1%.

A 2003 report by Trust For America's Health states that California spent \$216 a person on medical costs related to obesity in 2003. Research by the Centers for Disease Control concluded that Californians paid \$7.7 billion in 2003 on health care for the obese. These staggering numbers are the result of poor nutrition, particularly in low-income individuals and families.

While the South Beach Diet, the popular and healthy weight-loss diet, costs individuals more than \$91 a week on average, USDA data from 2001 shows that most people living in

poverty spend about \$30 a week on food. This disparity means that poverty-stricken individuals, whose budgets allow for less than \$2 a meal, often sacrifice nutritious diets for higher caloric intake in order to avoid the pains of hunger.

Poor choices

Additionally, the lack of nutrition education that is common in low-income and immigrant communities leads to poor nutritional choices. Food stamp benefits enable residents of Fresno and Tulare counties to purchase the locally grown, nutritious produce that would otherwise fall beyond their reach. The utilization of food stamps, combined with more nutrition education in schools and communities, could lead to a significantly healthier Valley and save Californians billions of dollars in medical costs attributed to preventable obesity related diseases.

The Food Stamp Program must be recognized for the economic stimulus it gives local economies and the billions of dollars it could save Californians by providing those living in poverty with access to nutritious foods and healthier lifestyles.

Valley residents can strengthen their economy by taking part in the food stamp enrollment efforts of the Community Food Bank of Fresno and FoodLink for Tulare County. In this time of fiscal crisis in the state, there are some who may question whether the state can afford large-scale government programs. After analyzing the economic benefits of the food stamp program, we wonder if the state can afford not to.

Dennis Barrett and Laura Tatum of Fresno are Emerson National Hunger Fellows from The Congressional Hunger Center. Barrett works at FoodLink and Tatum at Community Food Bank in Fresno.

Hunger pangs last the whole year round

By Laura Tatum & Dennis Barrett

The Fresno Bee

(Updated Saturday, December 11, 2004, 7:17 AM)

Inspiration is rarely predictable, but during the holiday season, it arrives at Community Food Bank in Fresno every morning at 11 o'clock. Their employees and volunteers work late opening armloads of little envelopes. These numerous and generous donations prove that people in Fresno care about each other; they do not want others in their community to go hungry during the holidays. With your help, Community Food Bank will provide food for warm holiday meals to approximately 200,000 people this season.

There's just one problem: Somewhere between the turkey and the pumpkin pie, we forget to ask where and what and how all of these people eat during the other 364 days of the year.

Hunger is easy to ignore because it is largely invisible. It seems impossible that approximately 40% of the people in Fresno County, so rich in agricultural production, cannot be sure they will have enough money to afford their next meal.

To the casual observer, it would appear that no one is hungry but for the few men with cardboard signs asking for money in the street. As we go about our daily lives, we do not see that the majority of hungry people are working families whose low incomes cannot cover both food and rent. We do not see the thousands of elderly Californians who must choose between food and medicine. We do not see the thousands of hungry children in school, listening to their teacher but hearing only their stomachs.

The faces of hunger are those of working poor families, year round, and the hungriest months of all are not November and December but rather the beginning of the new year when unemployment is highest. For some, low wages become no wages at all; there is no money and therefore no food.

Winter needs

"The need for emergency food assistance is greatest in January, February and March because holiday retail positions have disappeared and agricultural jobs have not yet begun," explains Tim Reese, President/CEO of Community Food Bank.

Although your contributions of cans and cash to food banks are absolutely essential every day of the year, these donations alone cannot permanently end hunger. The more donations received at Community Food Bank, the more hungry people they can feed — simple as that. However, food banks struggle desperately for resources and despite their dedication and tireless efforts, they cannot solve hunger by themselves. They are a crucial piece of a larger solution.

Holiday donations feed hungry people on Thanksgiving and Christmas, but nutrition programs such as the Food Stamp Program provide much-needed food every day of the year.

They also bring federal dollars into the local economy, benefiting the entire community. The Economic Research Service of the USDA estimates that every food stamp dollar spent generates \$1.84 in economic activity. This economic multiplier provided through food stamps has the potential to attack hunger from a different angle — through the creation of jobs that results from economic expansion.

However, California's food stamp participation rate is the lowest in the nation, meaning that our state leaves this gift from Washington D.C. unopened in the bottom of the stocking.

Full participation in the food stamp program would deliver an additional \$88 million in federal money to Fresno County each year. Kudos to Fresno County's Department of Employment and Temporary Assistance, which administers the Food Stamp Program, for exemplary improvements in their processing system within the past few years.

Federal nutrition programs mesh with food banks and other nonprofits to form a safety net to protect people from hunger, but this net is far from perfect. In Fresno County alone, its holes are 343,000 people wide. But there is good news, too: hunger is a solvable problem. It can exist only so long as it remains quiet and relatively unnoticed. Hunger is powerless in the face of consistent, determined and widespread efforts to eliminate it.

It may seem that people are hungry only during the holidays and that donations are the only way to help, but actually there are hundreds of ways to fight hunger every day of the year.

Serve others

You can volunteer to serve food at a soup kitchen, sort food at Community Food Bank, or educate others about hunger. You can help to get the word out about food stamps. You can also contact your legislators to discuss how they can join the fight against hunger.

Thanksgiving is no more the beginning of hunger than Christmas is the end of it. January does not throw out hunger along with the Christmas tree. Hunger knows no season; it lasts the whole year through. Our generosity, commitment and compassion must do the same.

Laura Tatum and Dennis Barrett are Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows at the Congressional Hunger Center.

Fresno County Supervisors support food stamp program

Vida en el Valle

(Published Wednesday, December, 22, 2004 11:00AM)

The Fresno County Board of Supervisors, following the example set by its counterparts in Tulare County, gave food stamp usage a boost last week by proclaiming its support of the federal program.

The board unanimously voted for a resolution proclaiming the value of the Food Stamp Program. Supervisors were told the program benefits both hungry people and the local economy by bringing millions of federal dollars to local grocery stores.

"Low food stamp participation hurts everyone in California because we all pay federal taxes and yet the money is not coming back to our state to stimulate economic growth," said Laura Tatum, a Congressional Hunger Fellow at Community Food Bank.

Only 54 percent of eligible Californians have signed up for the food stamp program. Full participation could result in an additional \$88 million to Fresno County's economy annually.

Apoyo para el programa de cupones para comida

La Mesa de Supervisores del Condado de Fresno, siguiendo el ejemplo establecido por sus contrapartes en el Condado de Tulare, le dio al uso de cupones para comida un impulso la semana pasada al proclamar su apoyo al programa federal.

La Mesa unánimemente votó por una resolución que proclama lo valioso que es el Programa de Cupones para Comida. Los supervisores dijeron que el programa beneficia tanto a la gente que tiene hambre como a la economía local al traer millones de dólares federales a las tiendas de abarrotes locales.

"La baja participación en los cupones de comida lastima a todos en California porque todos pagamos impuestos federales y aún así el dinero no está regresando al estado para estimular el crecimiento económico," dijo Laura Tatum, colega del Congreso de Hunger Fellow en Community Food Bank.

Sólo un 54 por ciento de los californianos elegibles han solicitado ayuda del programa de cupones para comida. La participación completa pudiera resultar en \$88 millones adicionales para la economía del Condado de Fresno cada año

Flea market now accepts EBT cards

Selma program allows shoppers to buy fresh produce.

By Denny Boyles / The Fresno Bee

(Updated Thursday, December 23, 2004, 6:20 AM)

SELMA — A new program at the Selma Flea Market has reopened doors to proper nutrition for many Valley families and has raised the hopes of organizers that a windfall of federal dollars also will be on the menu soon.

For years the flea market has been a popular shopping destination for families from a variety of cultures. From clothing and low-cost electronics to fresh fruit and vegetables, the vendors at the flea market serve as the main shopping destination for many local families, particularly minorities.

Last weekend, the flea market also became the proving ground for a new idea that many hope will help customers and vendors thrive.

Saturday, the flea market became the first venue of its type in the nation to start accepting electronic balance transfer, or EBT, cards from the federal food stamp program.

The Golden State Advantage cards issued in California have replaced most of the traditional food stamps. The EBT cards allow recipients to use the card just as they would an ATM or credit card, except that EBT cards can only be used to buy foods approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In the past, many customers at the flea market would exchange traditional food stamps for fruit and vegetables. When the EBT cards appeared, that stopped because none of the vendors could accept them.

Now people in the EBT program can bring their card to a special kiosk where flea market employees can check their balances, then exchange transfers from the cards for tokens that can be used to buy fresh fruits and vegetables and other food items.

Michael Mikaelian, co-owner of the Selma Flea Market, said the idea to accept the EBT cards came after many of his vendors told him that their sales dropped as much as 60% when use of the traditional stamps stopped.

"My partner and I knew immediately that a lot of our vendors, and their customers, were missing out by not being able to participate in the program. We knew something needed to be done," Mikaelian said. Mikaelian and his partner, Alan Borba, approached USDA



Jesus Murillo, a vendor at the Selma Flea Market, helps a customer Sunday. People in the EBT program can bring their card to the flea market where employees can check their balances, then exchange transfers from the cards for tokens that can be used to buy food items.

Renee Knoeber / The Fresno Bee

representatives about finding a way for customers to use their new EBT cards at the flea market, but were daunted by the numerous "bureaucratic hoops" and gave up.

"It was too complicated. We had to drop the idea," Mikaelian said.

That is, until Jeremy Hofer, a hunger and nutrition project assistant with Fresno Metro Ministries, came up with a way to make the EBT program work at the flea market.

"Jeremy told us that he had heard of farmers markets getting approval to accept the cards by setting up an association to qualify for the program and getting one central machine to do the transfers," Mikaelian said.

Hofer said he had heard of Mikaelian's idea and thought it was a good plan that just needed some refinement. So he contacted the USDA and helped the flea market's owners navigate the maze of government approvals, including selling the concept of something new to the program officials.

"They had to come and see what we were talking about, since no one else had ever tried to accept the EBT cards in this type of environment. Once they saw the market, however, they knew it was an idea that could work," Hofer said.

What USDA officials saw is an environment that draws families not only for the shopping but for a uniquely cultural experience.

The market reminds many customers of shopping in their native countries, said Samantha Ponce, a flea market employee for three years. She sees many of the customers and their families at the market every week.

"There are some people who shop here that don't shop anywhere else. For some of them, it may be the only social experience they have all week," Ponce said.

Among the shoppers was Jose Carmen Alvanado of Reedley, who exchanged \$20 of EBT credit to buy tomatoes and chiles. Through an interpreter, Alvanado said he comes to the Selma market every week and was glad that he could once again use his food stamp benefits to buy fresh vegetables.

"I come here anyway, so it's nice to be able to buy food here again. It also means that I can use that credit and save my other money to buy my kids other things they need," Alvanado said.

Laura Tatum, a Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow working at the Community Food Bank in Fresno for six months, said having the EBT program at the flea market will help not only people who use the program, but the surrounding counties as well, especially if making the program more accessible encourages more people to sign up.

"The dollars spent on the food stamp program are federal dollars. Fresno County, for instance, could see more than \$80 million in new federal money each year if everyone eligible for food stamps took part," Tatum said.

Dennis Barrett, another Hunger Fellow working in Fresno, said one of the ways food stamp enrollment can be increased is to break the myths associated with the program.

"Food stamps are a nutritional program, not welfare. It's designed to help families meet nutritional goals set by the USDA. It also isn't restricted for people who own their own home," Barrett said.

One of the biggest myths about food stamps is that people applying for the benefit may be turned over to immigration authorities, he said. It's a myth he and Tatum are working to dispel.

"That's why we think the flea market is a perfect fit. The people we want to reach shop here anyway, and there are lots of nutritional options in the fruit and vegetable stalls," Barrett said.

Barrett and Tatum said they or other program representatives would be at the flea market in the coming weeks to help eligible families sign up for the federal food stamp program, and to explain how the EBT cards work.



Samantha Ponce answers questions and hands out new wooden EBT tokens Sunday at the Selma Flea Market. The market is the first in the nation where people can use the cards to buy food.

[Renee Knoeber / The Fresno Bee](#)

The reporter can be reached at dboyles@fresnobee.com or (559) 622-2411.

Food stamp application process is simplified

By Vanessa Colón / The Fresno Bee

(Updated Wednesday, January 26, 2005, 6:58 AM)

People battling hunger in the Central Valley soon will have a more convenient way to apply for food stamps.

They can go to their local community-based organization, fill out the form and let the agency do the rest.

Two Fresno County representatives held a training session Tuesday for about 25 members of various nonprofit groups and other organizations that serve the poor and immigrant community.

The representatives informed the crowd at Community Food Bank in downtown Fresno that California's food stamp participation rates are the lowest in the country.

"We believe the organizations already have the trust," said Laura Tatum, who organized the training session and was sent to Fresno County by the U.S. Congressional Hunger Center.

"These organizations already have established relationships with clients," she said.

Food stamp applicants can simply fill out the form, and a participating group will deliver it to the county. If an applicant needs emergency food stamps, the person must be referred to a county office.

Officials of community-based organizations say taking over the food stamp application procedure is the best way to ensure that more people apply. They say immigrants, in particular, will feel more comfortable filling out a form in their offices than at Fresno County offices.

The Food Stamp Outreach Training program is a collaborative effort that involves Community Food Bank, Fresno Metro Ministry, Foodlink of Tulare County, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Fresno County spruced up its outreach activities a few years ago, resulting in an 80% increase from fiscal year 1999-2000 to 2003-04 in the number of people who are only food stamp recipients.

The county had 111,698 people receiving food stamps in November 2004, Tatum said. Full participation in the program might bring in an additional \$88 million to the county's economy each year, she said.



Members of local nonprofits undergo food stamp training Tuesday at Community Food Bank in Fresno. Food stamp applicants will be able to entrust their forms to participating nonprofit organizations.

Mark Crosse / The Fresno Bee

There are many myths about food stamps, Tatum said. Many local people don't apply because they think it's a welfare program. Many believe working people don't qualify and that people who own a home or a car can't apply, Tatum said.

About 53% of food stamp recipients in the state have income, she said.

Legal immigrants and children of undocumented immigrants are eligible to apply. Some of them don't apply because they believe it could hurt a person's chances of becoming a U.S. citizen, officials say.

Ray Dominguez, an eligibility worker at the county's Department of Employment and Temporary Assistance, told the crowd that the office doesn't ask or question a person's immigration status

Having community-based organizations handle food stamp applications is "long overdue," said Monica Chavez, a community worker for the California Rural Legal Assistance.

"A lot of people are afraid to go to the county," Chavez said. "I like the confidentiality of the process."

Other groups say it will make it easier for them to help their clients.

"We don't want to send clients to another agency," said Bao Thao, an advocate for the Fresno Health Consumer Center.

She added: "I will be able to have my hands on the applications."

The reporter can be reached at vcolon@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6313.

Organizations learn to help clients toward food stamps

By LUZ PEÑA
Vida en el Valle

(Published Wednesday, February, 2, 2005 12:50PM)

More than 20 community-based organizations throughout the Central Valley joined forces to combat hunger last Tuesday.

Representatives participated in the Community Food Bank's 1 1/2-hour training session on how to help their clients apply for food stamps.

Because many clients are hesitant to apply for food stamps, organizers believe they will be more receptive about having the organizations assist them in filling out the application.

Once the applications are processed, the applicants will be contacted by the food stamp office for an appointment.

"We have thousands and thousands of people who are eligible to receive food stamps, but they are not," said Laura Tatum, a Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow. "This is bad for the families that should be receiving help and are possibly going hungry."

Currently, California has the nation's lowest food stamp participation rate. If there were 100 percent participation in Fresno County, it would generate \$80 million in federal funds a year.

Tatum added that the Community Food Bank is working to try to get the word out while "breaking myths." Myths include that only the unemployed qualify for the food stamps program, that it's a welfare program, that the program hurts the economy and that receiving food stamps may hurt a person's chances of becoming a citizen.

The federally funded food stamp program is a nutrition program, and doesn't ruin the economy or the chances of those who apply who want to become U.S. citizens.

Undocumented residents can apply for food stamps for their children who are U.S. citizens or legal residents.

Aneli León, from Children's Agency, said she came to learn how to help her clients apply for food stamps.

"We're going to help a lot of children in our agency and their families," León said. "This is going to help the community on all fronts."

The immigrants who are eligible for food stamps are:

Any legal resident.

Refugees or people granted asylum or withholding of deportation or paroled into the United States.

A Cuban or Haitian entrant.

A battered spouse (or child), and your spouse (or parent) who has filed a visa petition for you, or if you have filed a visa petition for yourself or an application for cancellation of removal under the Violence Against Women Act.

Olivia Vega, from Proteus Inc., in Kerman, said she was ready to share the information she learned with her clients. She said Proteus is always looking for ways to serve the community.

"A lot of people who are our clients work in the fields," she said. "This program can help many of them and/or their children."

For more information in Fresno County, call (559) 453-4998. In other counties, contact your local food stamp office.

Send e-mail to: lpna@vidaenelvalle.com

Campaña empuja más uso de estampillas de comida

Por LUZ PEÑA
Vida en el Valle

(Published Wednesday, February, 2, 2005 12:50PM)

Más de 20 organizaciones comunitarias de todo el Valle Central unieron esfuerzos el martes pasado con el propósito de combatir el hambre.

Los representantes participaron en un entrenamiento del Community Food Bank, que duró una hora y media y trató sobre cómo ayudar a los miembros de sus organizaciones a solicitar cupones para comida (food stamps).

Debido a que muchas personas tienen dudas sobre cómo solicitar los cupones para comida, los organizadores creen que serán más receptivas si las organizaciones les ayudan a llenar los formularios de solicitud.

Una vez que las solicitudes son procesadas, los solicitantes serán contactados por la oficina de asistencia para programar una cita.

"Tenemos miles y miles de personas que son elegibles para recibir cupones para comida, pero no están recibiendo el beneficio," dijo Laura Tatum, miembro de Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow. "Esto es perjudicial para las familias que deberían estar recibiendo ayuda y probablemente pasan hambre."

Actualmente, el estado de California tiene la tasa de participación más baja de la nación en cupones para comida. Si hubiera un 100 por ciento de participación en el condado de Fresno, esto generaría \$80 millones de fondos federales al año.

Tatum añadió que Community Food Bank está trabajando para tratar de esparcir la información al mismo tiempo que "acaba con los mitos." Entre los mitos conocidos está la idea de que sólo las personas sin trabajo califican para el Programa de Cupones para Comida, de que es un programa de bienestar (welfare), de que el programa es dañino para la economía, y que el recibir cupones para comida puede perjudicar las posibilidades que una persona tenga para hacerse ciudadano.

El programa de cupones para comida que funciona con fondos federales, es un programa para ayudar en la nutrición y no arruina la economía, ni tampoco perjudica las posibilidades de las personas que solicitan la ciudadanía estadounidense.

Los residentes indocumentados pueden solicitar cupones de comida para sus hijos que son ciudadanos estadounidenses o residentes legales.

Aneli León, de Children's Agency, dijo que ella asistió para aprender a cómo ayudar a los participantes de su agencia a solicitar la asistencia. Ella dijo que el entrenamiento fue realmente informativo.

"Vamos a ayudar a mucha gente en nuestra agencia y a sus familias," dijo León. "Esto va a ser de ayuda para la comunidad en todos los aspectos."

Los inmigrantes que son elegibles para recibir cupones para comida son:

Cualquier residente legal.

Refugiados o gente a quien se le otorgó asilo o que está en espera de deportación o en libertad condicional en los Estados Unidos.

Cubanos o haitianos entrantes.

Un cónyuge que haya sido víctima de maltrato (o niño), y su pareja (o padre de familia) que sea el peticionario de visa para la persona que solicita la asistencia, o que haya solicitado una cancelación o remoción bajo la Ley de Violencia Contra Mujeres.

Olivia Vega, de Proteus Inc., en Kerman, dijo que ella está lista para compartir la información que aprendió con los participantes de su programa. Ella dijo que Proteus siempre está en busca de maneras en que se pueda servir a la comunidad.

"Muchas personas que participan de nuestro programa trabajan en los campos," mencionó ella. "Este programa puede ayudar a muchos de ellos y/o a sus hijos."

Para más información en el condado de Fresno, llame al (559) 453-4998. En otros condados, comuníquese a la oficina local de cupones para comida.

Mande correo electrónico a: lpna@vidaenelvalle.com

Food stamp barriers exposed

Fingerprinting, poor treatment scare many in the Valley away, report says.

By Vanessa Colón / The Fresno Bee

(Updated Friday, February 4, 2005, 7:24 AM)

The use of fingerprinting and poor treatment of some clients by county employees are barriers to many Central Valley people seeking food stamps, according to a report made public Thursday.

"If the community realizes how important the food stamp program is for the physical and economic health of the area, then the food stamp program and access to the program would dramatically increase," said Laura Tatum, co-author of the report and a Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow.

Tatum and Dennis Barrett spent five months studying food stamp participation and outreach in the Valley.

Their report, "Growing Health and Wealth," details the reasons that some people don't apply for food stamps. These reasons include a lack of trust toward the government among immigrants.

The report recommends the creation of a statewide hot line and waiving face-to-face interviews of applicants to help diminish food insecurity. The food stamp program could bring in \$117 million in federal funds to Fresno and Tulare counties with full participation, the report said.

Fresno County had 111,698 people receiving food stamps in November 2004.

More than 256,000 people in Fresno County were receiving food stamps, Medi-Cal, CalWORKs and other assistance as of June 30, 2004.

Hispanics made up 68% of public-assistance recipients, according to the Fresno County Department of Employment and Temporary Assistance.

The report found that the state Finger Imaging System is one of the biggest barriers to food stamp access.

Some Hispanic immigrants don't want to apply because of the system.

"It keeps legal immigrants from applying. They have a fear of becoming a public charge ... of jeopardizing their immigration status," said Sandy Beals, executive director of FoodLink for Tulare County.

Even illegal immigrants who apply for their U.S.-born children but not for themselves are asked to be fingerprinted, she said.

The system was initiated to reduce fraud, but it hasn't succeeded, Beals said.

"It's not cost-effective," she said.

The county food stamp office asks immigration status questions to better determine the eligibility of applicants, said Steve Rodriguez, deputy director of the Department of Employment and Temporary Assistance.

"We do not report people who are undocumented," he said.

The report found that some immigrants don't apply because they don't know they qualify for food stamps. Some people believe they don't qualify if they own a home.

Applicants are asked whether they are U.S. citizens. If they say no and are undocumented immigrants, they are not eligible. Children born in the United States to undocumented immigrants are eligible.

If applicants are legal immigrants, they are eligible and are asked for proof of their legal status.

To obtain food stamps, applicants are asked questions about their incomes.

Some community-based organizations might offer the applications in their offices, but the applicant must still go to the food stamp office to get it processed. Fresno County, however, recently began allowing participating groups to deliver applications to the county.

Other barriers include poor treatment of clients in the food stamp offices in the Central Valley, the report said.

"Far from condemning every caseworker as rude and intolerant, the people who shared their opinions on the topic said that some were very helpful but that they encountered too many who were impolite and unaccommodating," the report stated.

Rodriguez said the Fresno County food stamp caseload continues to grow, but that the staffing and resources have not kept pace with the growth.

He said there is no excuse if a caseworker in any county is rude or unhelpful to a client.

"If it does happen, we ask the clients to request the worker's supervisor and let that supervisor know how they are being treated," Rodriguez said.

The reporter can be reached at vcolon@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6313.

Myths and FACTS

About the Food Stamp Program in California

Myth: The Food Stamp Program is a welfare program.

FACT #1: The Food Stamp Program is a nutrition program through the USDA to help low-income people eat more nutritious foods.

Myth: Working people do not qualify for food stamps.

FACT #2: Most food stamp households in California DO have earned income. The Food Stamp Program is for people with a small income or no income.

Myth: People with a car or a home cannot receive food stamps.

FACT #3: People who own a car or a home can still receive food stamps.

Myth: Receiving food stamps could hurt a person's chances of becoming a citizen.

FACT #4: If legal permanent residents apply for and/or receive food stamps, it will not hurt their chances of becoming a citizen (NO PUBLIC CHARGE!) Furthermore, undocumented immigrants can receive food stamps for their children who are citizens or legal permanent residents.

Myth: Non-working single adults (ABAWDs, Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents) can only receive food stamps for three months.

FACT #5: In several counties in California (including Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, Stanislaus and Tulare Counties) there is a special waiver so that non-working single adults can continue to receive food stamps.

Myth: The Food Stamp Program hurts the economy.

FACT #6: The Food Stamp Program helps the local economy. If everyone in Fresno County who is eligible for food stamps were to receive them, it could bring an additional \$88 million to our county's economy each year.

TO APPLY FOR FOOD STAMPS, CALL OR VISIT YOUR LOCAL FOOD STAMP OFFICE.

In Fresno County, call (559)453-4998.

Food Stamp Eligibility Questions

1. Are you a citizen or legal permanent resident of the United States, or do you have children or other people living with you who are citizens or legal permanent residents? **YES**

2. Does your income fall within the guidelines for family size? **YES**

People in Household	Gross Monthly Income Limits
1	\$ 1,009
2	1,354
3	1,698
4	2,043
5	2,387
6	2,732
7	3,076
8	3,421
Each additional person	+345

3. Are you receiving SSI? **NO**

4. Do you have more than \$2000 in resources, or \$3000 for a household with an aged/disabled person? **NO**

If you answered YES, YES, NO, and NO, you could be eligible for food stamps. You must apply for food stamps in the county where you live. In Fresno County, call (559)453-4998.

Board of Supervisors
County of Tulare, State of California

Proclamation

PROCLAIMING TULARE COUNTY “A FOOD STAMP FRIENDLY” COUNTY

WHEREAS, *in Tulare County approximately one in four persons live in a household with income below the federal poverty level; and*

WHEREAS, *only one in eight persons receive nutrition assistance from the Food Stamp Program; and*

WHEREAS, *studies reveal that hunger and malnutrition impede education and work productivity; and*

WHEREAS, *the Food Stamp Program is the first line of defense against hunger and malnutrition, and contributes to the current and future health and well-being of the people of Tulare County; and*

WHEREAS, *Food Stamp Program funding currently provides the local economy with more than \$48 million every year – a figure that could increase dramatically if all eligible persons participated in the Food Stamp Program; and*

WHEREAS, *Foodlink for Tulare County is partnering with Tulare County’s Health & Human Services Agency; the Congressional Hunger Center; the USDA Western Region Office and other local organizations to increase the county’s participation rate in the Food Stamp Program through widespread outreach efforts and cooperation with Community Based Organizations (CBOs).*

Now, Therefore, Be It Resolved, *that we the members of the Board of Supervisors do hereby proclaim Tulare County a Food Stamp Friendly County and the year leading to the 2005 holiday season as Food Stamp Outreach Year. We call upon the communities of Tulare County to work to improve access to the Food Stamp Program.*

November 9, 2004

William Sanders, Chairman
Connie Conway
Lali Moheno
Steven Worthley
Jim Maples

PROCLAMATION

*Fresno County Board of Supervisors
December 14, 2004*

WHEREAS, the County of Fresno is committed to promoting healthy eating, good nutrition, and active lifestyles; and

WHEREAS, in November 2002, the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) revealed that more than 2.24 million low-income adults in California cannot always afford to put food on the table and, as a result, almost one out of three of these adults (658,000) experience episodes of hunger; and

WHEREAS, the ranks of food-insecure Californians include not just the most impoverished but: working adults, the elderly with fixed incomes and many families; and

WHEREAS, food insecurity and poor nutrition pose substantial risks to health resulting in large costs to society through increased needs for medical care relating to obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, etc., and impede education and work productivity; and

WHEREAS, nutrition education and access to quality food improve health, education, and employment outcomes; and

WHEREAS, the U.S. Census Bureau's 2003 American Community Survey indicates that Fresno County has the seventh-highest poverty rate of all counties in the United States of America; and

WHEREAS, the Federal Food Stamp Program was first established as the Food Stamp Plan in 1939 to help needy families and a lagging economy during the depression era and was revised in 1961 with additional changes made in 1977; and

WHEREAS, the Food Stamp Program is the first line of defense against food insecurity and malnutrition; and

WHEREAS, fifty-one percent of all food stamp recipients are children and nine percent of recipients are age 60 or older; and

WHEREAS, the Food Stamp Program supports local farmers and federal benefit dollars could potentially contribute an additional \$88 million to Fresno County's economy, with an economic multiplier effect of 1.84, resulting in an economic gain of \$161.9 million annually; and

WHEREAS, Fresno County's Department of Employment and Temporary Assistance has successfully improved business practices that resulted in a significant increase in the Food Stamp Program Accuracy rate from 85% in Federal Fiscal Year 2000 to 96% in 2003; and

WHEREAS, California's food stamp participation rate is the lowest in the nation, but Fresno County is actively addressing access to food stamps in the County and has increased outreach

activities that resulted in an 80% increase in the non-assistance Food Stamp Program participation from Fiscal Year 1999-00 to 2003-04; and

WHEREAS, Community Food Bank is undertaking a partnership with Fresno County, the Congressional Hunger Center, Fresno Metro Ministry, Foodlink for Tulare County, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service Western Region Office and other County businesses and organizations to continue to increase County residents' access to the Food Stamp Program through widespread outreach efforts and cooperation with Community Based Organizations.

Now, THEREFORE, as the Food Stamp Program contributes to the current and future health and well-being of the people of Fresno County, Be It Resolved, that we the members of the Board of Supervisors do hereby proclaim the year leading to the 2005 holiday season as Food and Nutrition Access Year in Fresno County. We call upon the communities of Fresno County to work with state and federal agencies to improve access to the Food Stamp Program to strengthen this region's people and economy and to improve the health of our County.

ADOPTED by the Fresno County Board of Supervisors this 14th day of December 2004.

*Susan B. Anderson, Chairman
Phil Larson
Judith Case
Henry Perea
Bob Waterston*

UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

February 1, 2005

Sandy Beals
Executive Director
PO Box 1544
Visalia, CA 93279

Dear Sandy:

It is my understanding that the two Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows from the Congressional Hunger Center – Laura Tatum and Dennis Barrett – have completed their study of hunger in the San Joaquin Valley and will be releasing the results of their work at an event planned for Thursday, February 3, 2005, in Fresno.

First, I would like to take this opportunity to applaud the efforts of both Laura and Dennis, as well as the food distribution organizations and government agencies that have contributed to the study. Having read about some of the preliminary findings in recent newspaper articles, it is apparent that hunger among those below the poverty line, and particularly children in that category, is a major problem in the valley.

Clearly, poor performance in school, persistent and prolonged illnesses, high rates of early onset diabetes an, indeed, even obesity are manifestations of chronic hunger and poor nutrition. As a result, numerous social and health care services at the local level are adversely affected, bringing undue burden to already strained delivery systems. Thus, alleviating hunger must continue to be of the highest priority to elected officials at all levels, as well as to our valley society as a whole.

It is disturbing to me that a significant number of otherwise eligible recipients in the valley are not taking advantage of the USDA's Food Stamp Program. Estimates I have seen indicate that as much as \$243 million in food stamp benefits are going unclaimed in the seven-county region identified in Executive Order #13173 and within the area falling under the jurisdiction of the Federal Interagency Task Force created by that order.

Without question, it would be of major benefit to the well being of food stamp recipients, the region's economy and to the continuing viability of our local social and health care delivery systems to qualify as many people as may be eligible as quickly as possible. I will look to the work of Laura and Dennis to suggest some of the ways we may get this job done.

Sincerely,
Devin Nunes
Devin Nunes
Member of Congress

***Press Conference 2-3-05
Congressional Hunger Center Fellows
Submitted Remarks***

“I would like to take this opportunity to thank the four organizations – Community Food Bank of Fresno, Fresno Metro Ministry, FoodLink for Tulare County, and the USDA Western Region Office – who came together to work with the Congressional Hunger Center by bring the Hunger Fellows, Laura Tatum and Dennis Barrett, to the Central Valley. The work of the Fellows has brought to light the number of people in Fresno County who are food insecure and has illuminated the fact that the County is losing out on millions of dollars in federal funds annually. I support the Food Stamp Program and believe that it serves to strengthen the entire community. I am enthusiastic about the outreach that has occurred before and during the term of the Fellows’ work and am hopeful that food stamp participation and access will continue to grow and benefit everyone here in Fresno County.”

-Susan Anderson, Fresno County Board of Supervisors

“Many families and individuals in our community rely on the Food Stamp Program to support themselves and their families. Food stamps lend a helping hand during difficult times. Without this public assistance, many would not be able to provide balanced, nutritious meals.

“As a Council Member, I will continue to support and collaborate with organizations that promote food stamp awareness and provide opportunities for individuals and families to receive assistance.”

-Councilmember Cynthia A. Sterling, District 3, City of Fresno

Press Conference: Remarks by Edie Jessup, Fresno Metro Ministry Hunger & Nutrition Project

**Growing Health and Wealth:
Food Stamp Outreach and participation in California's Central Valley and Beyond**

The impact of the US Congressional Hunger Center Fellows project here in Fresno and Tulare is at its halfway point.

We are here acknowledging receipt of the Fellows report after working closely with Fresno Metro Ministry, the Community Food Bank, Foodlink Tulare County, and the Western Region USDA for the last six months. The Fellows learning curve was steep as they surveyed and launched their project with the lofty goal of 'ending hunger'.

Our learning curve and our challenge to action is just beginning. This report, a product of their interaction with experts: professionals, county, state, and federal agencies; the faithful community based organizations, the media, and the low income experts who qualify for a good nutrition program like Food Stamps.

Our learning curve involves making a good program work here on the ground by working together.

Our learning curve involves utilizing our agricultural assets and reclaiming the federal dollars that belong here, working in our agricultural community. That requires commitment to enrollment of eligible neighbors, and making the process accessible.

Our learning curve involves acknowledging that the system is complex, and then commitment as advocates to making the changes legislatively and administratively that will make the Food Stamp program better, and assure that our hardworking county staff has the tools they need to assure appropriate levels of staffing that will assure full enrollment, good nutrition, and great health outcomes for families here in the Valley.

Our challenge is to take the recommendations of Laura and Dennis's Report and work to implement good policies and cooperation to see this project through to full food security for all Fresnoans and Tularites.

Our challenge is to coordinate with Laura, Dennis and our congressional delegation who will be hearing about good solutions for food security from the Fellows.

I invite all of you to join the Food Stamp Advocates Task Forces in Fresno and Tulare Counties. Fresno meets the 4th Thursday at Fresno Metro Ministry. Tulare meets the 1st Wednesday at Tulare Co. Foodlink.

Let's get to work.

Great thanks to the US Congressional Hunger Center for placing these bright and committed young leaders with us in Fresno and Tulare. We look forward to great progress in assuring food security in this bountiful valley.



Contact Information

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