**SNAP OUTREACH INITIATIVE**

**Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**

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This training manual offers recommendations and best practices for SNAP outreach training based off my experiences working on SNAP outreach in Pittsburgh, PA with the Southwestern Pennsylvania Food Security Partnership. Included, are my recommendations on how to approach agencies, training techniques, follow-up proposals, and frequently asked questions.

**Introduction to Hunger In Southwestern Pennsylvania**

 Hunger is a significant problem in the United States as 50.1 million people are considered food insecure by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA); this has a cumulative impact on individuals leading to chronic diseases and health impairments, which deters growth and development in children. The state of Pennsylvania has over 63,000 family farms; over 7.7 million acres of land dedicated to agriculture, and is home of two the world’s largest food companies Heinz and Hershey’s Food Corporation (Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, 2012). Despite this, Pennsylvania has 1.2 million people at risk of hunger according to the USDA. Within the 12-county region that makes up southwestern Pennsylvania, 332,000 individuals or 12.3 percent of the population live in poverty. Allegheny County alone has more than 100,000 people eligible for SNAP (Food Stamps) and not receiving benefits due to challenges in the system (Feeding America, 2009).

The Southwestern Pennsylvania Food Security Partnership’s goal is to significantly reduce hunger in 12-counties by effectively utilizing government agencies and non-profit organizations to increase outreach to federal nutrition programs. The goal is to close the hunger gap by working to reduce the number of hungry in the region by nearly 50 percent by 2015.

The cumulative impact on society will have lasting influence as children who lack adequate nutrition will see stunted brain development and slowed physical impairment. Children who face food insecurity are more likely to be hospitalized in their lifetime and require longer inpatient stays. Food insecure families are further prone to problems such as obesity, as they alternate between cycles of binge eating and scarcity. The correlation between poverty and obesity was once oxymoronic, is now apparent in modern society. Issues such as lack of reliable transportation and low quality supermarkets exacerbate the hunger epidemic. According to Food Research Action Agency, to make matters worse, when healthy food is available, it is often more expensive in low-income neighborhoods compared to suburban neighborhoods.

 By one estimate, the cost of hunger in our 12-counties is roughly $500 million per year, due to health complications, poor education, employee absences and underperformance, and the costs of charitable efforts that address hunger, whereas the national average is $90 billion (Greater Pittsburgh Food Bank). The Southwestern Pennsylvania Food Security Partnership is working with government agencies, health advocates, and non-profit organizations, to ensure that Pennsylvania families have access to federal nutrition programs to mitigate the effects of hunger.

**Southwestern Pennsylvania Food Security Partnership**

The Southwestern Pennsylvania Food Security Partnership (SPFSP) is completing year two of a five-year commitment to address the crisis of food insecurity in southwestern, PA. The SPFSP is working to reduce food insecurity in a 12-county region that includes Lawrence, Butler, Beaver, Greene, Fayette, Somerset, Cambria, Indiana, Armstrong, Washington, Westmoreland, and Allegheny County. The goal is to close the hunger gap and work to reduce the number of food insecure individuals in the region by 50 percent, by 2015. With the help from local community leaders and partnering organizations, the SPFSP created a task force to address hunger in southwestern Pennsylvania. These committees were comprised from organizations including non-profit leaders, educators, healthcare workers, and for-profit entities to help reduce the number of food insecure people within the community. The structure of the Partnership includes a steering committee, research committee, communications committee, advocacy committee, summer food committee, SNAP committee, and a nutrition committee.

**Population Receiving SNAP Benefits**





The Southwestern Pennsylvania Food Security Partnership is committed to ending hunger by increasing access to federal nutrition programs such as SNAP (food stamps), WIC, Summer Food, and School Breakfast. Federal Nutrition programs offer assistance to children, adults, and seniors to help alleviate food insecurity. Without these programs low-income families are often forced to make difficult decisions when choosing between food, rent, medication, and gas. Food typically takes a back seat to other necessitates, as people suffer the consequences of relying on high calorie cheap food for nutrition. Highly successful government programs such as SNAP (Food Stamps), provides families with additional resources to ensure they are receiving nutritious foods. SNAP also allows families the ability to not make difficult decisions of choosing between bills, rent, medicine or food. The SPFSP goal is to increase access and awareness to government programs while improving the effectiveness and distribution to the community.

The Food Security Partnership five-year plan identified 5 goals:

1. Increase access to and use of public and private food assistance programs.
2. Build broad community engagement in reducing food insecurity.
3. Advocate for strong public policy to improve hunger relief efforts.
4. Collaborate with social services providers to address other needs associated with poverty.
5. Ensure more efficient administration of anti-hunger systems and resources.

The Southwestern Food Security Partnership’s main objective is to utilize under subscribed government programs such as SNAP (Food Stamps), School Lunch, School Breakfast, Summer Food and WIC. A collaborative approach between agencies is an essential part in sharing and accessing resources to end hunger in our 12-county region. SNAP (Food Stamps) is an effective way in reducing the number of people who are considered food insecure. Programs such as the COMPASS system, is a state ran program by the Department of Public Welfare, which allows people to apply online for SNAP. Applying for government benefits online reduces the stress and stigma that accompanies long lines and the hours of waiting in welfare offices. The COMPASS system is a comprehensive application that has many benefits to applying online, but has several barriers and flaws within the program. These flaws can lead to an application being denied for simple clerical errors that might arise. SPFSP goal is to identify these imperfections and train organization on how to troubleshoot these flaws when assisting applicants.

The Partnership has focused three interns on connecting agencies to incorporate SNAP into their daily regiment. As of February 2013, the SPFSP has over 150 agencies affiliated with the Partnership. The goal for SPFSP is to connect with trusted organization deeply rooted within the community and train them in the online COMPASS system. Training will empower agencies to overcome the flaws helping produce successful applications, free of clerical errors. The Department of Public Welfare is responsible for shouldering heavy caseloads while accounting for new and existing applicants. By recruiting agencies that are willing to adopt SNAP into their daily activities, SPFSP will help alleviate the burden on the public welfare offices. If 100 organizations sign an average of 2 people a week, within three years there would be over 20,000 new people in Allegheny County receiving SNAP benefits. Every agency is diverse in its own nature and operates as such. The willingness for certain organization to dedicate more of their personnel to become proficient in the COMPASS system will allow agencies to reach more people in need.

**Best Practices**

**Contacting Agencies**

 Our job as outreach interns was to train and support our partner organizations in the online COMPASS system. With over 150 different agencies affiliated with the Food Security Partnership, we identified 20 organizations best suited to immediately incorporate SNAP into their program. I began contacting these agencies to meet with and then set up training dates. Here are some of the best practices I learned through my time working in Pittsburgh as an outreach specialist.

After conducting research on the best practices post training, the results showed that organizations that we met face-to-face with, prior to training, had higher rate of success. The importance of meeting face-to-face with agencies cannot be understated. We were asking a lot from already strained organizations to take on more responsibility by adding the SNAP to their regimen. Contacting agencies came in four essential parts, contact, initial meeting, training, and post follow-ups offering support. Contact with agencies began with an email or phone call to start the conversation, then informing them of who we are and what we were offering. The barriers we encountered when attempting first contact with email included, a waiting period, no response, and easy dismissal. The most effective method was a phone call requesting a face-to-face meeting. The next step included having a one-on-one meeting with agency leaders and their staff. Meetings let us connect on a personal level, as we stressed the importance of SNAP to their clients and their community. Individual meetings had an important overarching affect, which included more knowledge about what was expected during and after the training in the COMPASS system.

 Allegheny County Department of Human Services sent out a mass email on behalf of the Partnership to hundreds of non-profits around Pittsburgh to generate interest in SNAP. This produced a flood of emails and calls to set up immediate training dates, and within a couple days, we doubled to amount of trained agencies. The influx was a positive experience since our goal was to train as many community organizations as we could. After training the newest agencies, we discovered a slight predicament that arose from the flood of responses. Fist, we noticed organizations that showed minor interest, were more likely to fall below the waistline. Second, we experienced a great deal of miscommunication between agencies and their staff. This led to trainees having little, to no prior information about training. Third, we discovered agencies that had face-to-face meetings had higher rates of success. When one-on-one meeting occurred prior to training we noticed the willingness to train increased, and less confusion between employees and employers. Individual meetings prior to training were an opportunity to express the significance of SNAP, expectations, and goals by SPFSP. When personal meetings were skipped we are forced to lump both the importance of SNAP and the Partnerships goals with training.

**FAQ’s**

1. Is there a time limit on how long I can receive Food Stamps?

As long as you are eligible for Food Stamps, you can receive them for as long as you remain qualified.

1. How many times do I have to reapply?

Every 6 months you have to reapply to insure that your finical situation has not changed and that you are still eligible to receive benefits.

1. If I own a vehicle, can I still receive Food Stamps?

Yes. One vehicle per household, no matter the value it does not count against you. The second vehicle will count as a resource as long as it has a value greater than $1,500.

1. Should I fill out all of the information asked?

Yes. The more you fill out the less chances of errors.

1. If I have a roommate do I still have to put them on my application?

Yes. The Department of Welfare wants to know who is in the household even if they are not applying for any benefits.

1. Can I save my application if I cannot finish it?

Yes. If you input your e-form number and password you can resume the application where you left off.

1. Why should I put my SS# on COMPASS?

Adding your Social Security Number allows you to e-sign your signature on the SNAP application. If you chose not to put your SS#, the Department of Welfare will personally mail the documents, which you have to sign and send back.

**Sustainability of SNAP Outreach**

The Southwestern Pennsylvania Food Security Partnership measure of progress involves our commitment and sustainability of SNAP to help reduce hunger in Allegheny County. It is imperative that SPFSP shows our dedication to trained agencies, ensuring them that we are enthusiastic about SNAP. The outreach component is essential in connecting people to food assistance programs that allow people not to fall between the gaps. Our work will ensure that the community is fully utilizing government programs by training public and private organizations properly in the COMPASS system. Our goal for SPFSP is closing the food gap by operating a comprehensive plan to significantly reduce hunger by providing access to government programs.

The Partnership has dedicated its time and resources to dispersing our knowledge and experience in navigating SNAP to willing participants. Within five months we have collectively trained over 30 organizations, and closing the loop is imperative to the sustainability of SNAP. We as the SPFSP intend to ensure communication with trained agencies is constant, guaranteeing that organizations continue utilizing SNAP. It is crucial to SPFSP that we remain in contact with agencies making sure they accurately report signups. SPFSP has created a simple online data recording system that easily tracks the progress of each organization. SPFSP is also in the process in creating a monthly SNAP news letter that congratulates agencies on their participation on training and awarding others for their outstanding efforts to support their community. Offering awards and providing affirmation will help boost interest in SNAP by reminding agencies the need for food assistance programs in reducing hunger.

**Recommendations**

1. Face to face meeting

 The significance of face-to-face meetings has become apparent since we participated in reconnecting with trained organizations. The data has shown that agencies we meet face-to-face with had a higher rate of success in providing SNAP to their clients and their community. Personal meetings allow trainers the ability to pass our knowledge on about SNAP, and what is expected during and after the COMPASS training. Individual meetings let us connect with agencies on a personal level explaining the immediate need for government benefits in Allegheny County. SPFSP goal is to ensure that trained agencies provide SNAP to the community for the foreseeable future. This will assure the sustainability of SNAP as agencies utilize under subscribed government benefits to alleviate hunger. Face-to-face meeting reduce the likelihood of interagency miscommunication while dramatically increasing the sustainable of SNAP compared to agencies that skip individual one-on-one meetings.

2. SNAP Immersion

 SNAP immersion is incredibly important in understanding the laws and requirements regarding government benefits and the process involved in obtaining them. Maneuvering the COMPASS system can be complicated, but being well informed about SNAP can greatly reduce the stigma accompanied by Food Stamps. As interns, we were obligated to learn everything about government benefits. SNAP laws and regulations can be very confusing even to the most experienced individuals as inconsistencies continually arise. My recommendation to new interns is to become completely immersed in SNAP, which includes filling out mock applications dealing with special circumstances and scenarios that might appear. It is also important to read articles and stay on top of legislation that affects SNAP on the state and national level, since questions about legislation will inevitably arise in meetings and training sessions. Another important aspect about SNAP is the willingness to go out and find answers for organizations after a training session. I learned more about SNAP from questions that I had no answers for, but uncovered by making calls to the Department of Welfare and other knowledgeable agencies.

3. Making contacts with Just Harvest/ Urban League as resource

 The most important resources we have as interns are organizations such as Just Harvest and the Urban League as they are crucial in dispensing their knowledgeable and understanding about the regulations regarding SNAP in Pennsylvania. These agencies are very close to SPFSP and very willing to offer their support regarding SNAP. Just Harvest and the Urban League are valuable assets to SPFSP as we rely on them to clarify a response when complicated questions would arise from trainings. Cultivating these relationships will ensure that interns are able to pick up the phone and get a correct answer to agencies in a quick and responsible manner to assist their clients.

4. Stay connected to agencies

 Staying in contact with trained organizations is the most important aspect interns can be responsible for, since reporting accurate numbers to us is imperative. I have personally seen the value of reconnecting with agencies as I stressed the importance of reporting the numbers to us. Accurately reporting numbers will have a positive influence as SPFSP shows community and political leaders the need for government assistance in the community. Remaining in contact allows SPFSP to provide services whenever a problem arises with trained organizations. Correctly solving problems could be a determining factor in swaying organizations to fully commit their time and energy to SNAP outreach, since they have strong support from SPFSP.

5. Do more direct SNAP signups.

 Certain organizations understand the need within the community to receive government benefits especially for their clientele, but as agencies experience rapid growth, there is little to no help to alleviate the pressure. My recommendation includes offering direct signups with certain agencies that have an influx of interest, but lack adequate staff. Interns need to use their discretion to ensure there isn’t a dependence on direct signups by SPFSP. We do not want agencies to rely solely on SPFSP to sign people up; instead we want to promote independence. Volunteering will require accurately facilitating a predetermined time where clients can sign-up before hand ensuring a guaranteed attendance. Directly signing people up though COMPASS will also present unique scenarios a trainer can learn from, guaranteeing a well-rounded instructor.

6. Once a month call certain agencies to remind them to report numbers.

 There are certain agencies that need monthly reminders about reporting numbers to SPFSP. With the help of interns, SPFSP has committed itself to ensuring that trained agencies remember to report their numbers. The importance cannot be understated to the Southwestern Pennsylvania Food Security Partnership to retrieve accurate numbers from every trained organization. This might require calling agencies that fall behind and kindly reminding them to use the online reporting method.

7. Work with agencies to create a cover letter to reduce the likely hood of missing documentation.

 The online COMPASS system allows agencies the capability to take on more responsibility and properly help their clients to send the correct documentation to the Department of Welfare. If organizations are willing to go the extra mile for their clients, they can fax the required documents to a nearby welfare office. If agencies choose not to fax any personal information they can assist their clients in other creative ways. Suggesting that clients create a sample cover letter, stating what proper information and documents are included in their packet, can greatly reduce the probability of making mistakes. One of the biggest barriers people encounter are missing documents, as they are grounds for immediate dismissal. A cover letter can be a way to ensure that clients double-check their paperwork before Department of Welfare receives their packet. This can be a very beneficial part of training that can help reduce the number of missing documents, which requires little effort from organization to put into practice.

Conclusion

 The Southwestern Pennsylvania Food Security Partnership is entering its third year of a five-year commitment to reduce hunger by half within a 12-county region. SPFSP has made a massive push to alleviating hunger within southwestern Pennsylvania by utilizing under subscribed government benefits already in place. Connecting the community to government benefits such as SNAP, WIC, School Breakfast, and Summer Meals, will be the most effective way in reducing hunger. The commitment to SNAP by the SPFSP will greatly reduce the pressure from over burdened programs by training new agencies to incorporate SNAP into their regimen. Spreading the burden between numerous agencies will successfully reach more people in need, thus reducing hunger. SPFSP has a strong staff in place dedicated to reaching a 12-county region to reducing hunger by half. Working for the Southwestern Pennsylvania Food Security Partnership has been an illuminating experience, as their dedication to the anti-hunger movement is inspiring and encouraging. There is no doubt that SPFSP will have a positive impact on reducing the number of people who face food insecurity in southwestern Pennsylvania.

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