



**MAINSTREAMING THE RESPONSE
TO HOMELESSNESS:**

ACCESSING FOOD STAMPS

**SUMMARY REPORT OF
CONFERENCES AND LOCAL
POST-CONFERENCE ACTIVITIES
TO INCREASE FOOD STAMP
PROGRAM BENEFITS BY PEOPLE
WHO ARE HOMELESS**

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Background

The safety net benefit Food Stamps Program offers crucial support for persons experiencing homelessness. However, despite high levels of poverty, many homeless people are not receiving Food Stamps. Annual Progress Report data from HUD Continuum of Care Supportive Housing Program (SHP) and Shelter Plus Care (S+C) grant recipients in the San Francisco Region (Northern California/ Nevada/ Arizona) evidence low access rates for Food Stamps.

Ensuring that unhoused people are receiving the full range of benefits for which they are eligible is a crucial aspect of putting together the comprehensive array of assistance they need to regain housing and maintain stability for the long term. Accordingly, the long-term strategic plans of many Continua include strategies to break down these barriers, including to Food Stamp Program benefits.

Technical Assistance to Address Low Access

To address these issues, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development – San Francisco Regional Office (HUD-CPD), the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Food Stamp Program (FNS-FSP), and HomeBase, a HUD Technical Assistance Provider, designed a day-long conference. The conference was designed to increase awareness about the underutilization of food stamps among the homeless population, identify local barriers to access, present best practice solutions and provide opportunities for networking and partnership among service providers and government agencies to consider local solutions. The goal of the conference was to leave participants with tools and collaborative agreements to take post-conference action which would result in increased food stamps access for people who are homeless.

Co-sponsored by HUD-CPD and FNS-FSP, HomeBase presented “Mainstreaming the Response to Homelessness: Accessing Food Stamps,” on March 1, 2006 in Sacramento, March 8, 2006 in Oakland, July 10, 2006 in Phoenix, November 6, 2006 in Reno, and May 2, 2007 in Las Vegas. The agenda and presenters for each conference was determined by a focus group of local stakeholders – the Continuum of Care Coordinator(s), FSP representatives, and homeless services providers.

In attendance at the conferences were directors, managers, and staff of HUD-funded homeless services and housing providers, emergency food providers, state and local managers and staff from the Food Stamp program as well as representatives from HUD-CPD and FSN-FSP. These workshops helped participants to better understand the Food Stamp application process, to learn best practices of how to help clients overcome common barriers when attempting to access the Food Stamp Program, and to brainstorm ways to implement changes in their own communities.

Conference attendees worked to find solutions to barriers in accessing Food Stamps. These barriers include language barriers, applications that are difficult to understand, and arduous documentation requirements. Conference presenters highlighted best practices to overcome some of these barriers, including using food stamps at restaurants and farmer's markets, processing Food Stamp applications in one day, and increased outreach and education around the Food Stamp Program. After the conferences, many communities implemented some of these best practices, including increased communication and collaboration, expedited Food Stamp processing, and improved Food Stamp customer service.

Best Practices Highlighted in the Conferences

The following is a summary of some of the best practices highlighted in the 5 conferences:

Using Food Stamps at Restaurants to Purchase Hot Meals – San Francisco

Begun in April 2003, the "Food Stamp Restaurant Meal Program" enables elderly, disabled and homeless food stamp recipients to use food stamps to purchase prepared meals at restaurants. Often this population does not have access to cooking facilities or may not be able to prepare meals themselves. Currently, 28 restaurants participate in the program. Restaurants include many Subways, Carl's Jr's, and several independently-owned "mom and pop" restaurants. On average there are about 8,000 meals purchased every month in the program; an average of about \$5/ meal is spent (averaging approximately \$40,000 in meals every month).

Using Food Stamps at Farmer's Markets – San Francisco

In San Francisco and several other communities nationwide, Food Stamp EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) cards can be used at local farmer's markets, offering an opportunity to buy affordable and healthful food that is locally grown.

Processing Food Stamp Applications in a Day – San Francisco

In San Francisco, the Food Stamp Office sends six eligibility workers to one of the largest soup kitchens in the city to do screenings and applications with clients. While patrons line up outside to wait for their meals, eligibility workers, armed with laptop computers, process applications for food stamps and volunteers assist with the application process. Food Stamp program staff provide guidance for every step of the Food Stamp application process. The Food Stamp office brings a Card Activation and PIN (personal identification number) selection machine to the site so applicants can receive and activate their EBT cards on the same day. This program resolves barriers due to transportation and dislike and distrust of government offices and systems. For most clients, the program requires no visit to a Food Stamp office. The result is a simplified, less time-intensive application process. In addition, it fosters cooperative relationships between community and government organizations.

Special Service Counter at the Food Stamp Office for Customer Service – San Francisco

"Service Counter B", as it is called, is a separate service counter at the San Francisco Food Stamp office. At the counter, eligibility workers help clients

replace EBT cards so they do not need to leave messages or wait. Staff at Counter B also assist with Food Stamp information, help clients with forms, issue temporary IDs, and assist with other customer service issues.

Processing Food Stamps at a One-day Homeless Outreach Event – San Francisco
Project Homeless Connect is a one-day event that occurs every-other month in San Francisco and in many other communities across the nation. During this event, volunteers join with nonprofits, corporations, government agencies, faith-based organizations and providers to offer a variety of housing and services to people experiencing homelessness. Volunteers engage homeless people on the streets or in shelters and invite them to a central location. The Food Stamp office is one of the organizations delivering services at the central location. Eligibility staff help clients apply for food stamps that day. Eligibility workers assist clients in completing the first portion of the Food Stamp application and conduct a brief screening interview. Appointments are scheduled for the following day at the Food Stamp office, where clients finish the interview and receive their EBT cards.

Statewide Food Stamp Information Line – California
In March 2006, the California Association of Food Banks kicked-off its pilot statewide food stamp information line. The hotline features virtual technology and offers pre-recorded information about the food stamp program and a direct connection to live operators in the pilot counties.

Food Stamps Outreach – Alameda, Santa Cruz, Pima and Washoe Counties
The Alameda Food Bank created new outreach materials designed to increase working families' participation in food stamps, including a video and brochure which feature peer role models. Outreach materials are being distributed at schools, WIC offices, food pantries, churches and clinics. In partnership with the Alameda County Social Services Department, the Food Bank facilitates free food stamp training workshops for hunger relief agencies and homeless service providers.

Santa Cruz County began a multi-level marketing approach combined with community-based outreach and public education to increase food stamp participation. The campaign addresses some of the barriers to participation including the perception of ineligibility, the inconvenience of the application process, and the negative social stigma. The targeted population is Hispanic immigrants and low-income families and individuals residing in Santa Cruz County, California. The project uses outreach workers to educate and assist clients with the new, simplified California application; trains "Promotores" (community peer volunteers) for face-to-face interaction and trust building relationships with the clients; and, the public education campaign which includes print, radio and television media.

Northern Nevada began a marketing approach similar to that of Santa Cruz, with public service announcements advertising the Food Stamp Program, debunking myths of eligibility, and addressing the negative social stigma. Northern Nevada also began an outreach campaign targeting seniors.

At the Community Food Bank in Tuscon, Arizona, a Food Stamp outreach office

opened at the Food Bank's Multi-Service Center. An outreach coordinator pre-screens clients for food stamp benefits and provides application assistance. Volunteers staff the reception area, which is stocked with informational materials. The outreach coordinator also delivers weekly food stamp educational sessions at partner agencies such as pantries, health clinics, churches, senior centers, and neighborhood centers and trains staff there to provide food stamp information on a regular basis. Bilingual materials are available at all sites.

New Websites to Create Ease in Applying for Food Stamps, TANF and Medicaid – Arizona

Arizona is making it easier to apply for Food Stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The Governor's Office for Children, Youth and Families designed a new program called AZSecure, which will allow Arizonans to apply electronically for Food Stamps, TANF and Medicaid at six pilot sites. The pilot sites will be located in three Foundation for Senior Living offices and three Community Action Program offices throughout the State. In addition, Arizona's BenefitsCheckUp and Arizona Self-Help websites have been updated to help Arizonans learn how to apply for Food Stamps, TANF and Medicare Part D (subsidized prescription drugs).

Best Practices Adopted by Conference Attendees

HomeBase followed up with participants to learn what changes they were able to make at the local level as a result of the conferences. Some communities have made impressive changes to overcome barriers homeless people face in accessing Food Stamps, including the following:

Barrier: Food Stamps cannot be used to purchase prepared food

Solution: The Restaurant Meal Program

- In March 2007, Santa Clara County adopted the Restaurant Meal Program, which will enable homeless, elderly, and disabled food stamp households to use food stamp benefits to purchase meals.
- Arizona has implemented the Restaurant Meal Program.

Barrier: We have no contacts with the Food Stamp Program staff

Solution: Increase collaboration

- In Merced County, the Continuum of Care became a member of the nutrition network in order to coordinate an approach for nutrition education to the community. The Continuum also became a member of the Hunger Taskforce, a community-based organization focused on combating hunger in Merced County.
- The Monterey County Continuum of Care began meeting with the Central Coast Hunger coalition to discuss issues and strategies to increase access to Food Stamps.
- The Phoenix Food Stamps office participates in conferences, health fairs, network teams and community events to share information about the Food Stamp Program and to learn about other programs.

Barrier: Some Food Stamp Program staff may not be sensitive to the needs of people who

are homeless

Solution: Food Stamp employees educated and given more discretion

- In Marin County, eligibility workers were educated about issues specific to homeless persons to encourage these employees to provide greater leeway over residency and ID issues as well as ABAWD exemptions.

Barrier: Poor customer service at Food Stamps offices

Solution: Improved customer service

- Upon return from the conference, Marin participants discussed USDA priorities and shared the realization that many more Food Stamp dollars are available to ensure that homeless processing is a priority. Customer service improved around this issue.

Barrier: Lack of transportation to get to the Food Stamp office for interviews

Solution: Provide bus tickets

- Marin County has taken steps to improve transportation (shuttle buses) and to provide bus tickets when possible.

Barrier: Lack of transportation to get to the Food Stamp office for interviews

Solution: Meet homeless people where they are

- As a result of discussions at the conference, the Nevada Division of Welfare and Supportive Services was able to receive approval of a waiver from USDA-FNS to have trained “Trusted Partners” assist applicants with the completion of Food Stamp applications and conduct an initial interview. This has allowed “Trusted Partners” to help applicants complete applications at local pantries and homeless shelters, increasing the number of applications and thus the number of individuals receiving Food Stamp benefits.
- The Food Bank of Northern Nevada is one of Nevada’s “Trusted Partners”. They visit a local food pantry and a drop-in center each Tuesday for several hours. Through the “Trusted Partner” waiver they assist with applications and complete interviews with clients. As the clients are able to do their interview with the Food Bank, they are no longer required to go to the Welfare Office.
- The Food Bank of Northern Nevada will accommodate clients with home visits as requested.
- Staff from the Reno District Food Stamp Office have been processing applications at a local community center one day a week.
- In Arizona, the Prescott local office decided to move to a more centralized location.
- In Arizona, an eligibility worker goes to a local job-training center to assist with Food Stamp applications and conduct interviews. The job-training center requires their applicants to apply for Food Stamps, yet they also have to attend 40 hours a week of training. This creates a scheduling conflict, so the Food Stamp office interviews around the clients’ schedules.
- Marin County is currently working to make interviews available by phone, mail, or in person at more locations.

- Merced County received a grant through which they are developing a community outreach website. This will allow families to apply for Food Stamps from any computer available to them.
- In Maricopa County, the Food Stamp office outstations two eligibility workers at a local day resource center to assist the homeless population. They have also participated in two Project Homeless Connect Events.
- In Santa Clara County, the Social Services Agency's Department of Employment and Benefits has trained outreach workers from partnering nonprofit organizations to assist in the process of helping the homeless apply for food stamp benefits. The workers fill out paper work for the "hardship waiver" to expedite the process, enabling the applicant to get food stamps the same day or within three days without making additional trips to the Social Services office.

Barrier: Some homeless people do not know that the program exists or have been told misinformation about the program, including misinformation about eligibility requirements

Solution: Improved outreach and education about the Food Stamp Program

- Marin County improved outreach by providing better information about program availability, rules, etc., to local agencies.
- The Reno Food Stamp office made flyers, posters and applications available at all community resource centers, homeless shelters and senior centers and housing complexes.
- Outreach messages are painted on all Northern Nevada Food Bank delivery trucks and Public Service Announcements are frequently run on public radio, local newspapers and associated newsletters.
- Arizona has been conducting Food Stamp Program outreach presentations statewide at various forums such as conferences, health fairs, community network meetings, etc.
- Merced County has increased outreach efforts to try to reach those families that could be eligible for food stamps. They developed a nutrition education and outreach effort, and invited community based organizations to join in these outreach efforts by providing training to them on how to complete a Food Stamp application.
- In Arizona, Food Stamp staff participate in community events (such as the VA Stand Down) to help educate both community agencies and low-income residents about the Food Stamp Program.
- Monterey County started monthly outreach events at areas that target the homeless population in the county.

Barrier: Application processing takes too long, including waiting time for an appointment; sometimes the applicant has moved on to an unknown location in-between application steps

Solution: Expedited application process

- Santa Clara County began a pilot project involving 5 agencies for expedited Food Stamp applications for homeless persons. For clients of those agencies it now takes only 3 days to obtain an EBT card. If the pilot is successful, it will be implemented Countywide.

- For the Reno District Offices, the average timeframe to process applications submitted by the Food Bank is 6 days.

Barrier: Documentation requirements can be arduous, and many homeless people have difficulty locating and storing the required documents.

Solution: CBOs to help explain and collect the documentation requirements

- In Nevada, the “Trusted Partner” CBOs advise clients what will be required of them. They also explain what the food stamp office will need in order to process an application for benefits. They created pre-printed large envelopes, listing all possible required information. They check off what will be needed, assist the clients in collecting the information in the envelope, and hold it until the Food Stamp office requests it.

Barrier: Case managers have no one to contact at the Food Stamp office with questions on behalf of their clients

Solution: Food Stamp office assigning contacts

- In Nevada, the Food Stamp office has assigned a few contact people so case managers can call directly and determine if a client has a problem or a question that can be easily solved or answered.
- In Alameda County, the San Pablo Food Stamps office and the Homeless Action Center have partnered to overcome this barrier.

Barrier: Community based organizations don't know the eligibility rules and so cannot help assess who might be eligible

Solution: Make pre-screening tools available to CBOs and others

- In Arizona, the DES/Family Assistance Website www.azdes.gov/faa has links to two pre-screening tools. Arizona Self Help www.arizonaselfhelp.org and Benefits Checkup www.benefitscheckup.org are available to applicants and community agencies to pre-screen for potential benefits.

For More Information

To apply for Food Stamps:

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/map.htm>

To find out more about the conferences and best practices discussed in this report:

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