

Increasing Participation in the Food Stamp Program



A Best Practices Guide to Food Stamp Outreach

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I. INTRODUCTION



The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is America's nutritional safety net. It is the last line of defense that has prevented hunger for millions of families since it evolved during the Depression in the 1930s. Initially, the FSP was operational only in concentrated areas until 1943. After remaining dormant for eighteen (18) years, widespread support and interest across the nation assisted in reviving the FSP as a pilot program in 1961. Once operational again, support for the program intensified and it was extended nationwide in 1974 as an entitlement benefit for low-income families. Minor adjustments were made to the program structure until 1977, when the existing program structure was adopted (www.frac.org). This structure places a focused concentration on alleviating hunger and malnutrition by allowing low-income households to obtain food through traditional methods.

Entitlement programs are very sensitive to changes within the economy. During recessions, unemployment rises and many individuals and families, who were previously self-sufficient, find themselves in need of food stamps. Likewise in times of economic prosperity, the number of families receiving food stamps declines. This phenomenon was apparent throughout the 1990s. This decade welcomed a withstanding tide of economic prosperity with low unemployment rates and robust economic growth creating economic opportunities for individuals who had been unable to gain access to them previously.

The food stamp caseload consistently fell due to the economic forces of the 1990's. Although a portion of this reduction was attributed to slight reductions in poverty and an improvement in the unemployment rate, a large discrepancy remained after these factors were considered. The most significant reduction in the number of FSP recipients occurred following the passage of Welfare Reform in 1996. This legislation, more commonly known as the cash assistance program titled the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), dramatically altered the landscape of the welfare system in America. Many stringent requirements and activities were imposed on welfare recipients complicating the process of obtaining benefits. Many FSP recipients, who also received TANF, were unable to comply with the new requirements. When an individual or family neglected to comply with these new requirements, they were found to be ineligible for TANF and removed from the TANF caseload. Unfortunately, this process also inadvertently removed these individuals from the FSP and Medicare caseloads as well. When individuals were notified of their removal from these caseloads, they incorrectly assumed they were no longer eligible for the FSP and Medicare programs and neglected to reapply. According to the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), from December 1996 through December 2000, the food stamp caseload fell nationally by over 6.7 million persons.



National anti-hunger organizations first noticed a dilemma when the percentage of the eligible population participating in the FSP began to decrease. To combat this trend, organizations initiated food stamp outreach projects that focused on spreading accurate information about FSP eligibility criteria across communities. In 2002, the Illinois Community Action Association (ICAA) conducted research to determine the percentage of the eligible population participating in the Food Stamp Program for each county in Illinois. In 2003, the ICAA published this report titled *The Food Stamp Program: A Vital but Underutilized Safety Net for Low-Income Illinoisans*. The report used poverty and Illinois FSP participation data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Illinois Department of Human Services (the state agency that administers food stamps) to conclude that only 55% of Illinois' eligible population was participating in the FSP. The ICAA decided this finding identified a need for food stamp outreach in Illinois. The ICAA used an RFP process to select four of its member Community Action Agencies (CAAs) to conduct food stamp outreach projects within their service areas.

The goals of the outreach projects were to:

1. Increase participation in the FSP;
2. Identify barriers that impede participation;
3. Take action to alleviate the existing barriers;
4. Improve existing and create new relationships with local social service agencies and DHS offices; and
5. Fund a public education campaign to portray a positive image of the FSP with accurate information about the eligibility requirements.

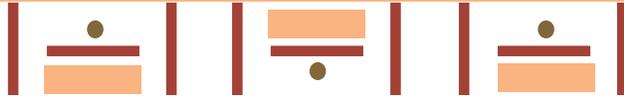


While focusing on the established goals, the ICAA implemented food stamp outreach projects in the selected communities. The outreach coordinators publicized the project through the available media outlets, focused on improving the Community Action Agency's (CAA's) relationship with the local food stamp office, and integrated the food stamp pre-screening into the current intake process that individuals must complete to receive other services provided by CAAs.

The conclusion of ICAA's second year administering the food stamp outreach projects lead to documented success and accomplishments. In addition to meeting the project goals, ICAA engaged in several activities that have been recognized by the University of Illinois at Springfield as worthy of a Best Practices award. The following sections identify and explain four practices that have contributed to the success of ICAA's Food Stamp Outreach Project.

III. PRACTICE TO EFFECTIVELY ORGANIZE

THE COMMUNITY



The four CAAs selected to receive a single-year grant for FY 2002-2003 to conduct food stamp outreach projects (FSOPs), were Champaign County Regional Planning Commission, Madison County Community Development, Peoria Citizens Committee for Economic Opportunity, Inc., and Project NOW, Inc. These CAAs have service areas spanning the following six Illinois counties: Champaign, Henry, Madison, Mercer, Peoria, and Rock Island.

The grantee selection process was led by a proposal review committee that considered:

1. The identified need or the percent of the eligible population participating in the FSP;
2. The plan to develop and improve community partnerships;
3. The plan to incorporate the pre-screening process into an existing screening process at the agency; and
4. The overall quality of the proposal.



The chart below includes data from ICAA’s report on the utilization of the FSP in Illinois for the selected four grantee agencies.

Data on the Selected Food Stamp Outreach Grantee Agencies

<i>Community Action Agency: County Served</i>	<i>Total County Population</i>	<i>Total FSP Participants 11/30/02</i>	<i>Total Population Below 125% of Poverty</i>	<i>Percent of 125% Poverty Population Participating in the FSP 11/30/02</i>
CCRPC: Champaign	164,670	11,034	32,601	34%
MCCD: Madison	253,062	19,625	33,687	58%
PCCEO: Peoria	176,841	19,119	30,894	62%
Project NOW: Henry	50,346	2,331	5,902	39%
Mercer	16,643	990	1,716	58%
Rock Island	144,505	12,059	21,449	56%



The four outreach sites recruited 216 private, public and governmental agencies to partner in the food stamp outreach projects. The level of involvement of each of these partners varied, however the main activities consisted of: 1) passing out food stamp outreach literature; 2) displaying posters in high traffic areas; 3) referring clients to a local hotline number staffed by the outreach coordinator to be pre-screened or to acquire additional information; 4) and in some cases conducting food stamp pre-screenings.

Organizations That Were Recruited as Community Partners

The outreach coordinators approached

social service and non-profit organizations including:

churches, food pantries, child care facilities, homeless shelters, Boys and Girls Clubs, Head Start, etc.

businesses and private organizations including:

grocery stores, gas stations, banks, restaurants, currency exchanges, liquor stores, utility offices, etc.

and *governmental agencies and public organizations including:*

Women, Infants & Children (WIC), Planned Parenthood, public housing offices, township offices, schools, USDA extension offices, public health departments, etc.

Once the coordinators identified potential partners, they recruited them by explaining the goals of the project, the present need in the community, and how enrolling eligible individuals in the FSP will benefit local businesses and bring federal dollars into the state and local economies.

The community agency partners that opted to take an active role in the project utilized various methods to integrate the food stamp pre-screening instrument into their existing daily operations. For example, when individuals receive food from a pantry, there is usually a limited amount of necessary paperwork. During the process of completing this paperwork, food pantry personnel asked their customers if they were receiving food stamps. Depending on their response, food pantry staff either chose to refer the individual to the outreach coordinator or to conduct a pre-screening themselves. If the

individual was found to be potentially eligible, the pantry staff then referred the individual to the local food stamp office.

Improved Relations with the Food Stamp Offices

In addition to the partnerships that have developed between local public, non-profit, and private organizations due to the outreach project, relations between local CAAs and their corresponding local food stamp office, the Department of Human Services (DHS), have also improved. One of the main contributing factors to this is that the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) has identified an employee at each of the local food stamp offices that can be contacted for information on the status of referred applications and client inquiries. The identification of this central point of contact has founded a working relationship that has since improved among the agencies.

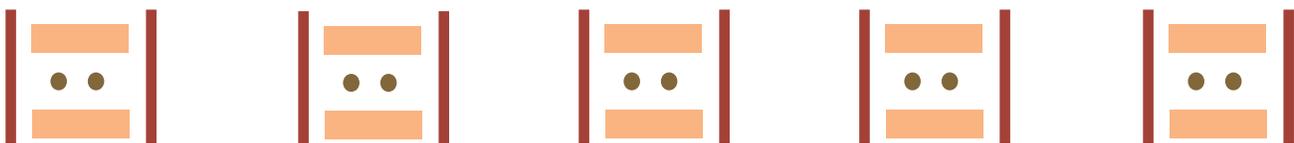
III. PRACTICE TO SUCCESSFULLY PROMOTE

THE OUTREACH PROJECT & A PUBLIC EDUCATION CAMPAIGN

The four food stamp outreach coordinators commenced their outreach campaigns with paid advertising and public service announcements that aired on the radio and TV. These activities continued throughout the duration of the year. The outreach coordinators also purchased printed advertising on billboards, buses, bus stops, in newspapers and local newsletters. Food stamp outreach fliers were sent home with children through local schools districts, to adults through social service agencies, food pantries, child care centers, WIC offices, public housing offices, etc. Outreach posters were strategically placed at grocery stores, gas stations, churches, currency exchanges and other facilities where low-income individuals and families frequently visit. These targeted areas were saturated with images portraying participation in the FSP as a positive program that assists individuals and families into self-sufficiency. The outreach also focused on highlighting accurate information about the eligibility requirements for participation in the FSP.



At each of the four outreach grantee agencies, training was provided by a representative from the IDHS. This training provided a brief history of the FSP, an explanation of the more commonly misconstrued FSP rules, and instructions on how to use the pre-screening instrument. Although two-hundred and sixteen (216) representatives from community partner organizations attended these trainings, the true depth of the public education campaign was unknown. The impact of events, such as this training, cannot be adequately measured by just identifying the number of physical attendees. For example, attendees went back to their organizations and through the course of doing their day-to-day activities, shared information that was learned at the training with their co-workers, friends, family members, and clients. Each of these individuals, in addition to those that came into contact with one of the various forms of advertising, have collectively contributed to the process of transforming the public image of the FSP in the outreach communities. This outcome can be partially documented by the increased number of applications that were submitted at the local DHS offices.



IV. PRACTICE TO FOSTER COLLABORATIONS

TO EFFECTIVELY DOCUMENT OUTCOMES



As the structure for the outreach project was developed, it became apparent that tracking and accurately reporting the quantified impact of the outreach activities was going to be difficult, but necessary. ICAA wanted to document the effect its outreach activities were generating by tracking the number of pre-screenings, approved applications, and community partnerships that developed. However, identifying the method to accurately yield this data was complicated. The selected method ICAA chose was to have IDHS cross-check the status of its referred applications each quarter and report to ICAA which ones were approved, denied or pending.

This method required each the four outreach coordinators to maintain a spreadsheet that contained information about everyone that

called the local hotline and completed the pre-screening process. This information included their name, phone number, and if they permitted, their social security number. Each quarter, the outreach coordinators forwarded this spreadsheet to the ICAA. ICAA then assimilated each of the spreadsheets into a single document sorted by date and county.

Once this process was completed, the spreadsheet was forwarded to the IDHS Bureau of Food Stamps, where its staff cross-checked the referred applicants against their system to determine if an application was received, and if so whether the application was approved, denied, or pending. IDHS then forwarded the spreadsheet back to the ICAA where it was split back up by county and forwarded to the appropriate outreach site.

The Tracking Process has Enhanced the Success of the Outreach Project by:

1. Tracking the application status of its referrals;
2. Allowing outreach coordinators to provide follow up services to the referred applicants who neglected to follow through with the application process;
3. Identifying why referred applicants were denied (which assisted in identifying and providing solutions to barriers); and
4. Improving the working relationship between IDHS, ICAA, the food stamp outreach sites, community partner organizations, and the local DHS offices.

For FY 2002-2003, the ICAA determined that its outreach activities generated 1441 pre-screenings, 276 approved applications, and 216 community partnerships. The coordinated tracking process was essential to determine the results that can be attributed specifically to ICAA's outreach activities. However, ICAA's success at documenting its results through the coordinated tracking process did necessitate a sizable time commitment by its state agency that administers food stamps, IDHS. For this process to be successful, it required that IDHS be wholly supportive and cooperative throughout the entire outreach process.

V. PRACTICE TO IDENTIFY AND TAKE STEPS

TO OVERCOME BARRIERS



To identify obstacles that prevent eligible individuals from participating in the FSP, ICAA researched the existing literature to identify what has impeded FSP participation in other communities throughout the nation. The following section includes six barriers that the literature search and the food stamp outreach activities identified to be present within each of the outreach communities. Underneath each of the identified barriers is a list of activities the outreach coordinators have engaged in to weaken or eliminate the barriers.

Barriers Identified by Literature Search and Outreach Activities

1. The Food Stamp Program application is tedious and intimidating.

- a. The outreach sites assisted clients with completing the Food Stamp application.
- b. One of the outreach coordinators is also a graphic designer and offered suggestions to the IDHS to improve the visual appeal of the Food Stamp Program application. These suggestions included adjusting the font from all capital letters to lower case and allowing for more free space on each page. The IDHS implemented these recommendations into the Illinois food stamp application distributed in the fall of 2003.

2. The absence of transportation makes it difficult to attend required physical appointments.

- a. Advocacy efforts by ICAA caused IDHS to provide an amended first page to the FSP application that allowed applicants to replace their first physical interview with a phone interview if childcare, transportation, or work related constraints made it impossible for them to attend a physical appointment at the local DHS office. This revised first page only accompanied the applications distributed by the outreach staff. The ICAA recommended to IDHS that this ability should be highlighted on the FSP application that is used statewide. IDHS implemented these recommendations into the Illinois food stamp application distributed in the fall of 2003.
- b. Another solution attempted by the outreach site coordinators was to use outreach grant money to rent a bus or large vehicle to transport a group of individuals from a rural area to the local food stamp office for their required physical interviews, which were purposefully scheduled within similar time frames.
- c. The outreach sites provided transportation vouchers to urban applicants in the form of a metro pass or bus pass if needed.
- d. The outreach sites distributed gas vouchers to their referred applicants who did not have sufficient financial resources to purchase the necessary gas to travel to the local food stamp office. Some applicants needed gas money to get across town, while other applicants had to travel sixty to ninety miles roundtrip.



3. Limited food stamp office hours often conflict with applicant’s employment, child care and transportation schedules and abilities.

Again, the IDHS provided an amended first page to the FSP application that allowed applicants to replace their first physical interview with a phone interview if childcare, transportation, or work related constraints made it impossible for them to attend a physical appointment at the local DHS office.

4. Negative perceptions of the customer service quality provided by local food stamp offices resonate throughout communities.

- a. The IDHS led a training in each of the outreach communities on the Food Stamp Program. Local non-profit, public, and private organizations were present and provided with the opportunity to meet local DHS personnel and identify a central point of contact. This training contributed to eliminating some negative perceptions and it set the stage for possible future collaborations.
- b. When outreach coordinators received complaints about DHS caseworkers, they shared that information with the local DHS management staff. When appropriate, outreach coordinators also assisted clients to file grievances if they felt they had been treated inappropriately.



5. The stigma associated with the FSP is that participation is exclusively for poor, unemployed individuals.

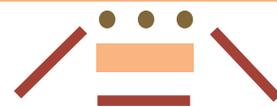
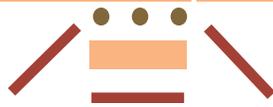
- a. The IDHS hosted Food Stamp Program trainings in each of the outreach communities where a representative was invited from the non-profit, public, and private partner agencies that agreed to refer their clientele to be pre-screened for food stamp eligibility by the outreach coordinators. These trainings shared accurate information about the FSP and assisted in combating the misconceptions of the FSP that are prevalent at all levels throughout communities.
- b. Each of the outreach coordinators used the grant to purchase a range of advertisements through various media outlets that portrayed participation in the FSP in a positive manner.

6. Immigrant households were wary of sharing their household information.

Outreach coordinators obtained the specific rules that pertained to immigrant households. Information, such as children in immigrant households can receive food stamps, and that household information contained on the FSP application will not be shared with any other governmental agency, was shared with those households.

A more intimate description of the prominent activities that occurred at the outreach sites to alleviate or eliminate the identified barriers follows.

VI. Narrative Examples for Reducing Barriers



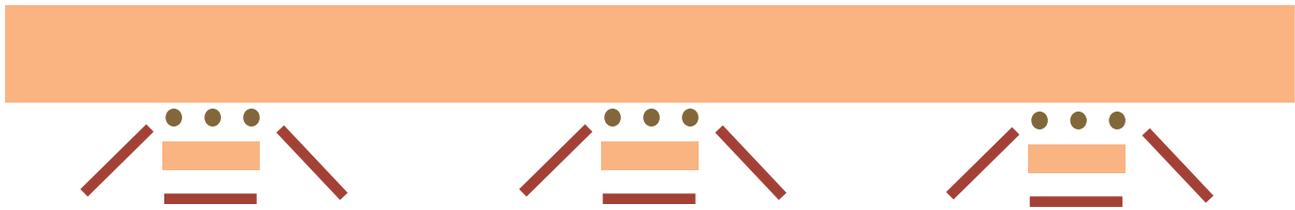
Example 1: Reducing the Barriers of Transportation and Limited DHS Office Hours

As the food stamp outreach public education campaigns became more visible, there was an influx of individuals contacting the local hotline numbers in search of information and assistance. The outreach sites responded by pre-screening and appropriately referring hundreds of individuals with FSP applications to the local food stamp office (DHS). Initially, the outreach coordinators expected a successful approval rating for the applicants they referred. Unfortunately, this expectation was not met once IDHS cross-checked the status of the outreach referrals. In the third quarter of the outreach activities, 79 percent of the five-hundred thirty-four (534) referred applicants either never followed through with submitting their application or were denied by the local food stamp office. This data led the outreach coordinators to suspect that one or more barriers were present.

A follow-up review with referred applicants that had been denied revealed that they perceived several barriers to be present. Based on data from IDHS and the referred applicants that were denied, ICAA was able to determine that more than half (54%) of the denied referred applicants were the consequence of applicants missing required physical appointments. This discovery suggested the barrier preventing these potentially eligible individuals from receiving food stamps was the application process itself, specifically the requirement for applicants to attend a physical interview at the local DHS office. To circumvent this barrier, the ICAA proposed that the application process needed to be modified to accommodate FSP applicants that were unable to attend physical appointments. The ICAA approached IDHS with this request and they were willing to make several accommodations to increase the accessibility of the FSP to applicants with special circumstances that impeded their ability to attend the physical appointments.



The first accommodation was to modify the first page of the outreach food stamp program applications. The modified page offers applicants the choice to replace their first physical interview with a phone interview if transportation, job, or child care constraints hinder their ability to be present at the local food stamp office. The ability to waive the first physical interview when these constraints were present has always been an option for applicants, however, the local food stamp offices did not publicize it and FSP applicants were unaware of it. Highlighting this option on the front page of the application informed many applicants of its existence and their ability to access it if necessary. This modification to the FSP application contributed to diminishing two barriers; transportation and the limited food stamp office hours.



Example Two: Reducing the Barrier of Transportation

The second accommodation made by the IDHS was to reaffirm with local food stamp offices that if FSP applicants are immobile, it is permissible for local food stamp office personnel to conduct an off-site interview at the applicant's home or place of employment. This policy provision was designed to increase the accessibility of the FSP to eligible elderly and disabled individuals. This accommodation was made following a situation that arose from a rural Illinois community.

The outreach coordinator pre-screened a group of immobile elderly individuals. The pre-screening process found them to be potentially eligible for food stamps. Given their circumstances, the outreach coordinator requested that the local DHS office send an employee to the rural community to conduct off-site interviews. Although her request encountered some resistance from the DHS office, she eventually prevailed. The Bureau of Food Stamps alleviated the resistance by informing the local DHS office and the outreach coordinators of which situations warrant offsite interviews.

These two narrative examples demonstrate how the outreach activities have been able to reduce the impacts of the identified barriers. Applicants with transportation, child care, and job constraints were provided with an opportunity to fulfill the initial interview requirement over the telephone in place of the physical interview. Immobile individuals were also provided with the opportunity to avoid the initial physical interview at the local DHS

office because DHS employees were able to conduct home interviews for immobile individuals.

Example 3: Reducing the Barrier of the Perceived Lack of Customer Service at Local Food Stamp Offices (DHS)

Negative perceptions of the quality of customer service present at local food stamp offices persisted throughout the four outreach communities. This problem is partially responsible for creating a barrier that discourages communication and collaboration between community-based service providers, advocacy organizations and the local food stamp offices. These perceptions have also contributed to discouraging potentially eligible recipients from completing the FSP application process. Oftentimes, applicants feel ashamed about asking for assistance, and when confronted by what they perceive to be deficiencies of customer service, their desire to follow through with the rigorous requirements of the application process diminishes.

Our outreach activities uncovered a number of these perceptions at varied levels within each of the outreach communities. There were several instances when individuals found to be potentially eligible for food stamps, through the pre-screening process, refused to file an application at the local DHS office. Other individuals refused to attend any physical meetings at the local DHS office without the outreach coordinator also present. At community meetings (where local non-profit direct service and advocacy groups gathered to network and discuss community needs) numerous complaints and



negative perceptions were shared about the existing customer service at the local DHS offices. The ICAA shared this information with IDHS and inquired about what was being done to address the concerns. IDHS suggested that the food stamp outreach sites document the complaints made by their clients and other service providers. These documented complaints included the dates, times, caseworker name, and a brief description of the event that transpired. This information was then forwarded to IDHS for review. The outreach coordinators also encouraged the individuals that made the complaints to file a grievance at the local DHS office.

An example of how the activity of documenting the complaints of clients and service providers has been successful occurred at one of the outreach sites. The outreach coordinator attended a community meeting where most of the local direct service and advocacy organizations were present. As the discussion proceeded, many of the organizations expressed their discontent with the customer service that existed at the local DHS office. Shortly thereafter, the outreach coordinator attended a separate meeting for managers in the social service field. While at this meeting she discovered the local DHS administrator was seated next to her. She took that opportunity to share with her what some of the public perceptions were of that food stamp office and its employees. The administrator was unaware and disturbed by the apparent perceptions. Following their discussion, the DHS administrator invited the outreach coordinator to attend a meeting at the local food stamp office to share the public perceptions with the staff. The meeting was successful and resulted in several positive activities. The most important was that the local food stamp office agreed to meet each quarter with local non-profit management staff to discuss community concerns.



Example 4: Reducing the Barrier of Immigrant Household's Wariness of Sharing their Household Information

One of the outreach communities has a significant immigrant population. The outreach coordinators focused targeted outreach activities to this population by partnering with local migrant groups. The outreach efforts soon identified a trend that many of the immigrant families that were pre-screened and found potentially eligible for food stamps, repeatedly neglected to follow through with the application process at the local DHS office. Additional probing by the outreach coordinator uncovered that these immigrant families feared that their information on the food stamp application would be shared with other governmental agencies. In an effort to alleviate their concerns, the ICAA obtained the rules pertaining specifically to immigrant households and the outreach coordinator publicized them throughout the immigrant community. The outreach staff also began to provide assurances to immigrant families that the information they provided to the food stamp office was confidential. They also focused on highlighting the rule that although adult immigrants may be ineligible to receive food stamps, oftentimes their children can receive them. The sharing of the specific rules pertaining to immigrant households, accompanied with the targeted activities of the outreach sites have encouraged many immigrant families to obtain food stamp benefits who would have neglected to otherwise.

ICAA Mission

The Illinois Community Action Association is a membership organization which serves as the network for Illinois' not-for-profit corporations and units of government which strive to raise the health, education and economic standards of Illinois' low-income population. The Illinois Community Action Association serves the collective interests of its members by:

- Aggressively and pro-actively advocating public policies that serve its members and the low-income population of Illinois.
- Actively promoting the value of the Association, its member network services and programs to stakeholders and the general public.
- Building member capacity and effectiveness through training, technical assistance and other value-added services.
- Providing timely and reliable information on core issues important to members and stakeholder.
- Education and informing the membership and general public on issues that impact the low-income population of Illinois.
- Building partnerships that advance the community action network and stakeholder interests

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