

Food Stamp Outreach: A “How To” Guide for Oregon Communities

Using the
Food Stamp
Program
to help end
hunger
in your
community



Acknowledgements

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Finally, we would like to express our appreciation for the helpful feedback given by our focus group participants, the real experts on food stamp outreach.

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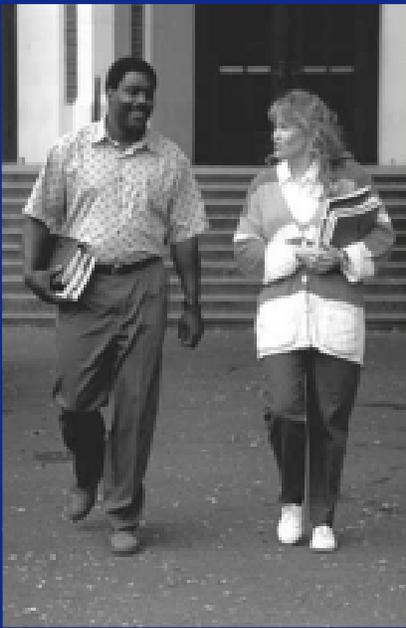
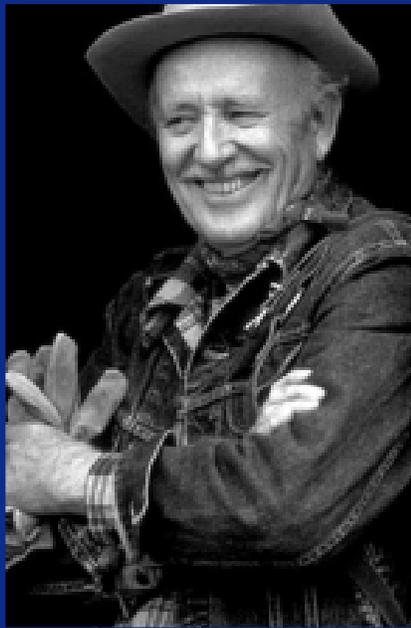
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Food Stamp Outreach: An Introduction

As the state with the highest incidence of hunger in the nation and with emergency food box use on the rise, Oregon implemented a statewide food stamp outreach project in 2000. The goal is to reduce hunger by enrolling at least 80% of all eligible persons in the Food Stamp Program.

Such outreach is especially timely with recent statewide rules about the implementation of categorical eligibility for food stamps. Beginning December 1, 2000, Oregon added a new group of people eligible for food stamps. This new group included households whose income is below 185% of the federal poverty level and are given a pamphlet for information and referral services. This means that all families who are eligible for free or reduced school lunches or WIC benefits are now income eligible for at least some food stamps. Food stamp offices can now exempt client resources such as bank accounts and vehicle values when determining eligibility. All changes apply to senior citizens and childless adults as well as households with children. On June 1, 2001, food stamp offices began statewide implementation of a new, simplified 2-page application for the Food Stamp Program.

These changes have the potential to impact thousands of low-income Oregonians, and we want to get information about food stamps out to as many people as possible. The Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force (OHRTF) has designed a series of outreach fliers, posters and brochures in English, Spanish, Russian and Vietnamese. Each piece includes the toll-free phone number for Oregon SafeNet (a health and human service hotline) for callers with questions about accessing benefits.

In the last year, the number of Oregon households receiving food stamps increased by 30%. Not only does this increase bring food stamp enrollment back up to pre-welfare reform levels, it brings in more than \$4 million in additional federal food dollars into local communities **each month**.

Based on the success of food stamp outreach to date, the suggestions included in this guide have been compiled for communities wishing to replicate these methods in their local areas.

Creating a Successful Outreach Campaign

Step 1. Form a Steering Committee of interested community members to oversee the outreach efforts. It is best if meetings are held at least once a month, with one point person designated to communicate regularly with the committee and the statewide outreach coordinator at the Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force (OHRTF). The Committee should include representatives from some or all of the following groups, depending on who is most active in your community:

- 🗳️ Food stamp recipients and/or low-income community members
- 🗳️ Department of Human Services (DHS) food stamp offices [the agencies formerly known as Adult and Family Services and Senior and Disabled Services], both administrative and line workers
- 🗳️ Local Area Agencies on Aging (AAA), both administrative and line workers
- 🗳️ Food banks and food pantries
- 🗳️ Commission on Children and Families
- 🗳️ Community Action agencies
- 🗳️ County and community health clinics
- 🗳️ Senior centers
- 🗳️ Head Start centers
- 🗳️ WIC offices
- 🗳️ Churches
- 🗳️ Community centers
- 🗳️ Schools and/or school districts
- 🗳️ Neighborhood groups
- 🗳️ Advocacy organizations
- 🗳️ Social service agencies serving low-income families and individuals
- 🗳️ County extension offices and Farm Service Agencies

Please do not limit your list of potential Steering Committee members to these suggestions--be sure to think about other resources that may be specific to your area. Steering Committee members should be encouraged to identify and recruit new participants throughout the process.

Step 2. Have the community Steering Committee brainstorm a list of partners and locations for collective outreach efforts. Compile a list of local outreach and distribution sites and available networks that can help you distribute outreach materials. Be creative! Think about all the places within your community where people have access to food, but don't forget to include places where low-income households can access other services as well.



Some examples might include:

- Head Start centers
- Churches
- Libraries
- Summer Food sites
- Health clinics
- Laundromats
- Grocery stores
- Any in-home worker opportunities, such as Meals on Wheels, day care home monitors for the Child Care Food Program, and in-home support services
- Food pantries
- Community centers
- Schools
- Senior centers
- Social Service agencies
- Apartment complexes

Step 3. Have the Committee brainstorm ways to reach low-income people in your community using available outreach materials. The Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force has produced a number of outreach materials. Some materials are intended for a general audience, while others target specific populations such as working households, immigrants, senior citizens, and families with children. All of these materials can be obtained free of charge by individuals and organizations in Oregon communities. See the Publications Order Form included with this guide for a complete list of what is currently available. (If the order form is missing, call the OHRTF office at (503) 963-2291 to have one sent to you.) If your local Steering Committee wants to develop other materials specific to the needs of your community, you may find it helpful to get some advice from the statewide outreach coordinator.



Step 4. Work with community partners to schedule local focus groups with low-income community members and identify local barriers to access. Local agencies and organizations may be able to host and recruit focus group members, provide space for the focus group to meet, provide childcare or childcare facilities, or act as translators if needed.

Examples of focus group host agencies may include:

- Head Start centers
- Food pantries
- Health clinics
- Churches
- Senior centers
- DHS food stamp branch offices
- Community centers
- WIC offices
- AAA offices

OHRTF focus groups usually involve up to 10 people. The OHRTF has offered participants \$10 gift certificates from grocery stores, provided onsite childcare

and translators when appropriate, and supplied participants and their children with refreshments. After introducing him or herself and the goals of the focus group (identifying client barriers), the facilitator focuses the discussion around a set of 5 central questions/issues. Participants are usually seated around a table, and the facilitator encourages participants to take turns around the table until each person who wishes to comment has had opportunity to do so. The OHRTF also uses focus groups to test outreach material and media messages about food stamps with people likely to use food stamp benefits and to obtain editing feedback and further outreach suggestions.

Central focus group questions/issues may include:

1. What works or does not work well about the Food Stamp Program?
2. What do you think prevents people from using food stamps?
3. How could we make the program easier to use?
4. If you could re-design the program, what changes would you make?
5. Discuss food stamp messages, myths, outreach ideas, and other access issues.

OHRTF can provide the facilitator and, in some instances, a small stipend for focus group participants, if the local committee wants assistance.



Step 5. Establish a point person at local DHS food stamp offices and AAA branch office(s) who will work with the local steering committee to resolve barriers identified in focus groups. Ideally this point person will attend the monthly steering committee meetings. The statewide coordinator may also be helpful in suggesting solutions to barriers.

Step 6. Discuss identified barriers and other focus group findings with your community's steering committee. Brainstorm and share new strategies with your DHS food stamp office point persons and the statewide outreach coordinator. Encourage committee members to visit their local offices to observe how things are done.

Step 7. Order an adequate supply of printed outreach materials from the Department of Human Services (DHS) Distribution Center using the Publications Order Form. Distribute the materials to the outreach partners and locations identified in Step 2.

Step 8. Write a press release/media advisory about the outreach efforts of the community steering committee. Depending on the needs and interests of your local media, you may want to frame the story by presenting it in the context of a local family or situation. Distribute the release to local media sources (i.e. local and community newspapers, TV and radio stations). The release should include Oregon SafeNet's statewide toll-free phone number, 1-800-SAFENET. Please contact Oregon SafeNet's administrative office at (503) 988-5519 prior to any media release to prepare them for increased caller volume. Don't forget to appoint one or two people from your local committee to be media contacts, and be sure their names and phone numbers are listed on the release.



Step 9. Work with the local steering committee to schedule community presentations about food stamps. The statewide coordinator can provide an outline of talking points to assist you with your own local presentations.

Other Helpful Food Stamp Outreach Strategies

1. **It is very important to include the perspectives of low-income community members early on in the steering committee process.** They are one of the best resources you have in determining how to reach other low-income people. If possible, offer low-income committee members stipends and/or childcare and mileage reimbursement, in respect for the value of their time and commitment.
2. Be sure to include DHS food stamp office staff, both administrative and line workers, on your committee. They can help you understand food stamp rules and branch protocols, and resolve some barriers as they arise.
3. Allow enough time at meetings for all members to find and establish common ground and priorities.
4. The East Multnomah County Pilot Project Steering Committee found that the school flier was the most effective piece of outreach material. Working with the school district to have it sent home along with school newsletters greatly increased the chances of getting the information and Oregon SafeNet's number into low-income homes. However, be aware that district superintendents usually need to give their approval before materials can be distributed to schools.
5. The statewide outreach project routinely noted a very high volume of calls to Oregon SafeNet following the statewide distribution of a food stamp outreach message on Oregon Health Plan cards.



Photo: Holly Wilkalis

6. Remember to think creatively about networks and mailing lists, etc., for widespread distribution of outreach materials.
7. So far the least effective outreach method has been stacking literature on racks in the lobbies of centers, agencies and clinics. People often do not pick it up and read it. Instead, arrange to have a receptionist or some other worker at outreach sites offer it directly to people as a resource.
8. Keep in mind the list of responses to some common misperceptions about the food stamp program (page 11).

These suggestions were designed as an introduction to food stamp outreach methods for local communities. If you would like further help or more information on any of the topics or methods listed here, please feel free to contact Oregon's statewide outreach coordinator:

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Responding to Some Common Misperceptions About the Food Stamp Program

#1: “Applying for food stamps is too much of a hassle.”

- 🕒 Oregon’s Food Stamp Program application is now only 2 pages long, and most offices offer extended hours and appointments to make it more convenient for you to apply.
- 🕒 If you do encounter problems with the application process, the client Bill of Rights poster in your local Food Stamp Program office can tell you how to get help.

#2: “Other people need food stamps more than I do.”

- 🕒 There are enough food stamps for everyone who needs them. When you get food stamps, you are not taking them away from someone else.
- 🕒 If you are eligible for food stamps but do not get them, you and your family aren’t the only ones who lose. Food stamps also help support grocers in your area and bring more money into your local economy. In fact, if every household in Oregon that is eligible for food stamps applied for them, our state would receive at least \$91 million more per year in federal funds that would be spent at local businesses.



#3: “Food stamps are welfare, and I would be ashamed to get welfare.”

- 🕒 The Food Stamp Program is *not* welfare. It is a nutrition support program that was designed to help families just like yours stay healthy during tough times.
- 🕒 Food stamp benefits are 100% federally funded and when you use them, you help ease the pressure on other social service agencies, like your local food pantries.

#4: “I would be embarrassed to use food stamps at my local grocery store.”

- 🗣️ Instead of getting paper food stamps, you now use the *Oregon Trail* card to access your food stamp benefits at the grocery check-out counter. The *Oregon Trail* looks just like any other debit card and helps keep you from being identified as a food stamp recipient.
- 🗣️ Every dollar you spend at the grocery store, whether it comes from your paycheck or food stamps, helps support that business.

#5: “I can’t get food stamps because I own a house and/or a car.”

- 🗣️ You may be able to get food stamps regardless of the value of your resources like your home, car, or bank account. However, you will still have to meet the income guidelines.
- 🗣️ You may also be able to receive food stamps if you get unemployment insurance, if you are a student, or if you are working full or part-time and qualify under the income guidelines.

#6: “I might lose my home or car if I get food stamps.”

- 🗣️ Getting food stamps does not endanger your house or your car. You do not have to pay the government back for food stamps you are qualified to receive, and no lien will be placed on your home or car.

#7: “I make too much money to qualify for food stamps.”

- 🗣️ You might be surprised who qualifies! Recent changes to food stamp program rules and income guidelines have made thousands more Oregonians now eligible, including senior citizens and childless adults, as well as people with children.
- 🗣️ All families who use WIC or school meal programs are now income eligible for food stamps.

#8: “It is a sign of failure if I use food stamps.”

- ❶ Many people these days are finding that their jobs do not pay enough to cover the basic costs of living. Even hard work is sometimes not enough to keep food on the table, and pride should not stop you from accepting any help you are entitled to.

#9: “I do not have children, so I am not eligible for food stamps.”

- ❶ Recent expansion of income guidelines and policy changes now make thousands more Oregonians eligible, including childless adults.
- ❷ Oregon’s food stamp program no longer has time limits for single adults without children.



Photo: Vicki Grayland

Summary of Food Stamp Focus Group Findings

During August 2001, OHRTF held food stamp focus groups with a total of thirty current and former food stamp clients in Dallas, Coos Bay, Gold Beach, and Hermiston. Although the primary focus of each focus group was to capture feedback about perceived barriers to accessing food stamps, each group also identified other barriers and issues affecting low-income families in each area.

In addition to focusing on client-perceived barriers, OHRTF recognizes that administrative barriers to low-income households accessing food stamps include the lack of:

- ◆ Adequate agency staffing to cover increased food stamp caseloads.
- ◆ Statewide protocol on verification/documentation procedures.
- ◆ A “no wrong door” policy statewide between all food stamp offices.

Client focus group questions included:

What works well about the Food Stamp Program?

The majority of participants reported that food stamp benefits were the primary source of food for their households. While some participants were able to feed their families on food stamps alone, others were only able to stretch monthly food stamp dollars for a few weeks. Many participants said that the simplified application and Oregon Trail EBT card made the program easier to use. Several noted having “nice” food stamp caseworkers.

What do you think prevents people from using food stamps?

Several population-specific issues emerged from focus group feedback and information from service providers. For example, immigrant groups are often concerned about information being shared with INS, while seniors most often equate food stamps negatively with “welfare” and may be uncomfortable using the technology of the Oregon Trail card. It is also recognized that many Oregon families who could benefit from nutrition programs like food stamps are over-income for assistance.

Apart from these specific concerns and issues, focus group feedback has identified **5 basic areas of client-perceived barriers** to low-income persons attempting to access food stamps.

- 1. People do not know they are eligible:** Feedback indicates that would-be applicants are often confused or misinformed about basic eligibility and access. Some may not have heard about changes such as categorical eligibility that may now help them qualify for food stamps.
- 2. There is too much paperwork:** This includes a re-certification form that is much longer than the original application, various documentation forms that are seen as intrusive and often excessive, and the frequent occurrence of the agency losing client paperwork. Many households have not yet seen the shortened food stamp application, and the application process is too long for people who only qualify for the minimum benefit (\$10.00).
- 3. People are ashamed, or are too proud, to receive food stamps:** This refers to the common stigma associated with the use of food stamps, which are often equated negatively with “welfare.” It also refers to the humiliation of poor treatment by cashiers and other customers in grocery stores.
- 4. It is hard to get to a food stamp office:** This includes issues with transportation and traveling long distances, especially in rural communities. There are also issues with food stamp office intake and access hours, which may not accommodate individual needs.
- 5. Work requirements are too strict:** This includes feedback about being required to work more than the minimum number of hours, and about the lack of local rural jobs. Most participants were not aware of the elimination of time limits for single adults, and many believed that income earned by children in the household should not be used to disqualify the household.
- 6. People are afraid of being treated badly at the food stamp office:** This includes numerous reports of people feeling personally humiliated or demeaned by less than positive interactions with agency staff.

If you could redesign the program, what changes would you make?

Participant recommendations for change ranged from the obvious: “Treat clients with dignity and respect,” to the practical: “Raise income and benefit levels.”

Other suggestions included:

- ◆ Ease work requirements (allow families to keep food stamp benefits for at least 6 months after they begin working, don't require people to go back to work until children are at least a year old, don't require people to accept a minimum wage job or take more than one job, don't penalize people when they have a crisis, etc.)
- ◆ Align food stamp applications with WIC and the Oregon Health Plan so applicants only have to complete the process once
- ◆ Have food stamp applications available in the community
- ◆ Have food stamp commercials on TV and radio
- ◆ Allow deli food purchases (especially for homeless)
- ◆ Provide bus passes to enable people to reach food stamp offices
- ◆ Allow college classes to count as work requirements
- ◆ Allow non-food purchases (like soap, diapers, etc)
- ◆ Make EBT machines operate in a uniform fashion in each store
- ◆ Provide food stamp users with a 10% discount at grocery stores

Other participant issues included:

- ◆ Lack of emergency food sites
- ◆ High housing costs
- ◆ Difficulty obtaining Section 8 vouchers and other low-income housing
- ◆ Low wages
- ◆ Job shortages
- ◆ Transportation issues
- ◆ Lack of domestic violence and homeless shelters
- ◆ Child custody issues
- ◆ Need for work phone/message service

About the Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force

The OHRTF, created by the Oregon State Legislature in 1989, acts as a resource on hunger within government and as a statewide advocate on hunger issues.

The OHRTF also serves as the policy advisory arm of the Interagency Coordinating Council on Hunger (ICCH), which in turn advises the Governor on policies and issues related to hunger.

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