INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

HOW TO MILK THIS TOOLKIT FOR ALL IT'S WORTH!

INTRODUCTION

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is an investment in our future. It offers nutrition benefits to participating clients, supports work, and provides economic benefits to communities. However, too many low-income people who are eligible for the program do not participate and thus forgo nutrition assistance that could stretch their food dollars at the grocery store. Their communities lose out on the benefits provided by new food stamp dollars flowing into local economies.

In fiscal year 2003, only 56 percent[1] (*All footnotes are research citations. You can find them in the "Resource" section at the end of this toolkit.*) of those eligible for food stamp benefits participated. The most common reason eligible people do not participate is because they do not realize they may be eligible. Others choose not to apply because of myths or misunderstandings about food stamp benefits or because of stigma that continues to persist. Others make a cost-benefit decision that the time involved in applying for benefits is not worth the expected return. Some do not want to accept government assistance. For specific populations, there may be additional compounding factors, such as language barriers for legal immigrants, or time and transportation barriers for the working poor. Seniors may not understand the nature of the program and choose not to apply for benefits, thinking children or families need the help more.

Outreach and education are powerful tools in overcoming barriers to food stamp participation. Even a small increase in food stamp participation can have a substantial impact. If the national participation rate rose five percentage points, 1.7 million more low-income people would have an additional $1.1 billion in benefits per year to use to purchase healthy food and $2 billion total in new economic activity would be generated nationwide.

> *"Food stamps are the first line of defense against hunger in our community. Making sure low-income people receive food stamps accomplishes many things. First and most importantly, people get fed. Second, community and faith-based organizations such as ours are relieved of having to provide a higher level of food assistance. Third, the local grocers do business with customers that they may not have otherwise. And fourth, we are all healthier and happier."*
>
> **BILL BOLLING**
> ***Executive Director***
> **Atlanta Community Food Bank**
> **Atlanta, Georgia**

Why does increasing participation in the FSP make sense for your community?

THE FSP GENERATES ECONOMIC ACTIVITY.

The FSP brings Federal dollars into communities in the form of benefits which are redeemed by food stamp participants at local stores. These benefits ripple throughout the economies of the community, State, and Nation. For example:

- Every $5 in new food stamp benefits generates $9.20 in total community spending.[2]
- Every additional dollar's worth of food stamp benefits generates 17 to 47 cents of new spending on food.[3]
- On average, $1 billion of retail food demand by food stamp recipients generates 3,300 farm jobs.[4]

> *A successful [food stamp] redemption program probably means that we are successfully servicing the needs of our community. By being able to meet our customers' needs during a particular time in their lives, we are often able to establish a relationship that outlives the time a person is eligible for food stamps. In that case we benefit from that customer both now and in the future. Food stamp redemption is a way to get your best customer in the front door and to establish a long-term relationship with that customer.*

GEORGE MATICS
Purchasing Director
Cardenas Markets, Inc.
Ontario, California

> *To reach common ground, we need to go to higher ground. Together with our business and government leaders, we can build community and economic prosperity for all.*

DANIELLA LEVINE
Executive Director
Human Service Coalition
Miami, Florida

In fiscal year 2004, the average monthly food stamp benefit per household was approximately $200.[5] These benefits, funded by Federal dollars, create business when they are redeemed at your local food retailers. Eighty-six percent of benefits, totaling $21 billion, were redeemed at the Nation's 35,000 supermarkets. The remaining benefits, totaling $3 billion, contribute to the viability of 118,000 other firms which include grocery stores, convenience stores, combination stores, farmers markets and other retail food stores, plus wholesalers and meal services.[6]

Food stamp benefits are positively and significantly related to household food expenditures.[7] Although estimates of the impact vary, studies have shown that a $1 increase in the value of food stamp benefits of a typical recipient household leads to additional food expenditures of between 17 and 47 cents.[8] Food stamp recipients spend more dollars on food at local retailers in communities than eligible nonparticipants.

Food stamp benefits can be used at authorized farmers markets that sell local produce. This provides additional customers for local farmers and provides food stamp recipients access to healthy, locally grown fruits and vegetables that might otherwise be unavailable to them.

THE FSP SUPPORTS WORK AND HELPS LOW-INCOME PEOPLE MAKE THE TRANSITION TO SELF-SUFFICIENCY.

Twenty-eight percent of participating food stamp households have earnings.[9] Employees whose nutrition needs are met at home may be healthier and thus may take fewer sick days for themselves or their children. Employees may stay longer with companies that care about them by sharing information about food stamp benefits and its importance as a work support.

The FSP helps families become financially stable and make the transition to self-sufficiency, getting them through the tough times. Half of all new participants will leave the program within nine months.[10]

Food stamp benefits are a work support. Food stamp benefits help those leaving the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program and transitioning to work by supplementing their food budgets so that they can stay independent and work toward self-sufficiency.[11] Since food stamp benefits decrease only by 24 to 36 cents for every additional dollar of earnings, food stamp recipients have incentives to work since they will be better off working rather than receiving food stamp benefits alone.[12]

THE FSP HELPS LOW-INCOME FAMILIES MAKE HEALTHY FOOD CHOICES AND PUT MORE NUTRITIOUS FOOD ON THE TABLE.

Dietary patterns among low-income people, as well as those of the general public, indicate an excessive consumption of calories, unhealthy fats and sugars, while fruit, vegetable and whole grain intakes are modest.[13] These poor eating habits contribute to making overweight and obesity a national health problem. In addition to the toll on personal health, this "epidemic" of obesity has economic implications as well. Obesity-attributable medical expenditures in the United States reached $75 billion in 2003. Taxpayers financed about half of these costs through Medicare and Medicaid.[14]

However, research shows that low-income households participating in the FSP have access to more food energy, protein, and a broad array of essential vitamins and minerals in their home food supply compared to eligible nonparticipants.[15] Nationwide, if there were a five percentage point increase in the food stamp participation rate, an additional 1.7 million low-income people would reap the nutrition benefits of the FSP. The FSP also helps participants manage their food resources more wisely through food stamp nutrition education. States may exercise the option to provide targeted nutrition education activities or social marketing campaigns designed to help persons eligible for the FSP make healthier food choices and pursue active lifestyles.

Because food stamp benefits are available to most low-income households with few resources, regardless of age, disability status, or family structure, food stamp households are a diverse group. Nine percent of food stamp recipients are aged 60 or older.[16] For the elderly, a particularly vulnerable and underserved population, participation in the FSP and other food assistance programs can help improve nutritional status and well-being and increase independence. More than 50 percent of food stamp participants are children.[17] Children who are well nourished may have better attendance at school and, once there, may be more focused on learning.

> *"The additional support which food stamps provide to needy individuals is readily seen in our stores that serve customers in low-income areas. This benefit not only helps those who require some additional assistance in making ends meet, but is also an aid to the supermarkets making a commitment to serving economically challenged communities. Our partnership with nonprofit organizations in outreaching to potential participants speaks to Pathmark's commitment to this important program."*
>
> **RICH SAVNER**
> ***Director of Public Affairs and Government Relations***
> **Pathmark Stores, Inc.**
> **Carteret, New Jersey**

COMBINED EFFORTS ARE NEEDED

The FSP is the cornerstone of the Nation's nutrition safety net, providing assistance to those who qualify. It helps relieve pressure on emergency food providers, enabling them to provide more assistance to those who do not qualify for food stamp benefits. Because of the nutrition benefits to participants and the economic benefits to the Nation and to States and communities, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has made increasing participation in the FSP a priority. Increasing participation in the FSP requires the combined efforts of national, State, and local public leaders as well as nonprofit community agencies, employers, and anyone else who touches the lives of potentially eligible people.

The rest of this "Introduction" section provides an explanation of the Toolkit, an overview of the Food Stamp Program, food stamp question-and-answer sheets (Q&As), talking points, information about nutrition education providers, and other background materials.

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

Why was this toolkit developed?

We all have a common goal: to improve the ability of low-income people to access nutritious food by participating in the Food Stamp Program (FSP). The information and materials in this toolkit will help you share information about food stamp benefits with those who are eligible but not participating. They will also help you let potential partners, government officials, and the public know how food stamp participation helps the local economy and addresses the national health problem of obesity.

What is food stamp outreach?

Food stamp outreach is providing information or assistance to someone who might be eligible for the Food Stamp Program. The goals of food stamp outreach are to help someone make an informed decision about whether to apply for the program, and ultimately to increase participation by eligible individuals and families.

What is in the toolkit?

This toolkit includes information on:

- ☑ The Food Stamp Program
- ☑ Maximizing your outreach efforts through developing partnerships
- ☑ Placing public service announcements (PSAs)
- ☑ Resources

Each section features easy-to-follow instructions, helpful hints, and useful materials (such as PSA scripts and recipe cards). We also have included templates (for letters, etc.) that you can customize with local and State specifics and enhance with information about your organization.

How do I use the toolkit?

The materials in this toolkit show a number of outreach possibilities, and offer your organization the flexibility to pick and choose pieces that work for your specific needs. Throughout the toolkit there are tip sheets that you can duplicate for yourself and your colleagues. You do not have to conduct every one of these activities or invest a lot of time in each one. Do what works best for you and your community.

TARGET POPULATIONS

Findings show that, in addition to the general low-income audience, there are distinct groups that are significantly underrepresented in accessing food stamp benefits. The national outreach campaign is focused on reaching:

GENERAL LOW-INCOME: Eligible, nonparticipating individuals and families;

WORKING POOR: Employed individuals and families who may not understand that even though they work, they still might qualify;

ELDERLY: People 60 years old or older who may have misunderstandings about the process and potential benefits; and

LEGAL IMMIGRANTS*: Immigrants may misunderstand eligibility requirements related to citizenship.

** There are other immigrant groups that could benefit from this educational effort. You may want to connect with local food stamp eligibility workers in your community to identify other distinct groups to target. Some FNS outreach materials are available in 35 languages and can be downloaded from the FNS web site. Refer to the "Resources" section of this toolkit.*

How do I get started with outreach?

The best way to begin is to ask other organizations in your community if they are currently conducting a food stamp outreach project, or if they have a resource guide, task force, or advisory group. Other food stamp offices and community-based groups would be a good starting point for such a discussion. They may be able to share State and local information and may also have informational materials to add to your effort. By working together, you will be able to further your goals and avoid duplication.

As you start your project, be sure to keep food stamp workers informed of your activities. Explore ways of working together to reduce application barriers — the best outreach efforts will not work if people run into barriers at the food stamp office. Extended office hours, child care areas in waiting rooms, and shorter applications are some examples of how food stamp offices can increase accessibility. Potential roadblocks such as crowded offices, long waiting lines, or repeated visits to the food stamp office may counter your efforts to educate potential applicants about the FSP and prepare them for certification interviews.

Are funds available to help pay for my outreach project?

One way to pay for part of your outreach project is through a State outreach plan. Outreach is an allowable administrative cost for the Food Stamp Program. States can receive 50 percent reimbursement from the Federal Government for necessary, reasonable, and allowable FSP outreach expenditures. States have the option of developing an outreach plan and submitting it for approval to their FNS regional office. FNS encourages States to develop and submit an outreach plan since it provides structure for the activity and enables FNS regional offices to provide technical assistance. The outreach plan also formalizes the State's plans and may be used as a powerful tool to garner community support and resources. Instructions for developing and submitting a plan, as well as examples of allowable and unallowable outreach activities and applicable fiscal policies for State plans, can be found at: *www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/stateplan.htm.*

For more information about State outreach plans, contact your FNS regional office. Contact persons and e-mail addresses are included at the end of this toolkit.

Can I provide nutrition education, too?

Similar to outreach, nutrition education is an allowable administrative cost for the Food Stamp Program. States can receive 50 percent reimbursement from the Federal Government for necessary, reasonable, and allowable nutrition education expenditures. States can develop a nutrition education plan and submit it for approval to their FNS regional office. Almost all States have optional nutrition education plans in place. For a list of organizations participating in State nutrition education plans, go to the Food Stamp Nutrition Connection web site at *www.nal.usda.gov/foodstamp/Stategates/index.html.*

What outreach is happening on a national level and how do we fit in?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has a nationwide effort to educate and inform eligible nonparticipants — with special emphasis on working poor, elderly, and immigrants — about the Food Stamp Program.

The campaign's primary goal is to increase enrollment in the FSP and to reinforce its role as a nutrition assistance program. The objectives of the education effort were developed with advice and input from many local food stamp offices and partners. These objectives are to:

- Expand awareness of the FSP as a nutrition assistance and work support program;
- Inform eligible, unenrolled people about where and how they can apply; and
- Ensure that people who are eligible to enroll have reasonable access and can participate with dignity and respect.

This effort, designed to raise awareness of and change beliefs about the FSP, includes promotion of a national toll-free information line through a variety of English and Spanish paid radio advertisements. These advertisements run on stations in major population centers, and in areas with particularly large numbers of eligible but unenrolled populations. Preliminary results from the 2004 advertising effort have indicated a 50 to 55 percent increase in requests for information packets via the national toll-free number over the previous year. (Calls could not be tracked in areas where the ads offer a local toll-free number rather than the national one.)

You are an important part of this national effort to inform low-income people across the country about how they and their families can eat right, even when money's tight. The outreach you conduct on a local level is a vital part of the national campaign.

Whether you work at a food bank, at a community or faith-based organization, or with the State or county government, you are an important part of this national effort to inform low-income people across the country about how they and their families can eat right, even when money's tight. The outreach you conduct on a local level is a vital part of the national campaign.

What if I have more questions?

If you have any questions about this toolkit, or about how to conduct outreach to increase local enrollment in the FSP, please e-mail us at *fspoutreach@fns.usda.gov* or refer to the FNS web site, *www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach.htm.*

You may also wish to tap the Food Stamp Outreach Coalition, a Web-based network of national advocacy groups and partner organizations, for helpful insight about ways to reach FSP target audiences. Details about this group can be found in the "Resources" section under "General Food Stamp Outreach Resources", or by visiting *www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/coalition/about.htm.*

OVERVIEW OF THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

NUTRITION ASSISTANCE

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is the cornerstone of the Federal nutrition assistance safety net, serving as the first line of defense against hunger. The FSP provides much-needed nutrition support to millions of low-income people. More than 50 percent of them are children.

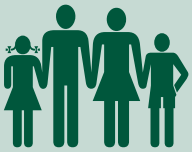
ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Not only do food stamps help individuals and families when money's tight, but your State and local community also benefit. The average food stamp benefit per person is about $86 per month (fiscal year 2004 data), which is spent in local grocery stores. In fact, every $5 in new Federal food stamp benefits generates almost double the amount in local economic activity. Also, every additional dollar in food stamp benefits generates 17 to 47 cents of new spending on food.

ELECTRONIC ISSUANCE

In June 2004, the FSP completed a transformation from paper coupons to an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card. Participants receive a plastic EBT card (similar to a bank debit card) with the dollar amount for which they are eligible each month. There is evidence that EBT also decreases fraudulent use of food stamps.

UNDERSERVED POPULATION



Millions of low-income people are not accessing the nutrition benefits for which they qualify. To be effective, it is important that our national and local outreach efforts counter myths about the FSP among those who think they are not eligible or have beliefs that discourage them from enrolling.

MYTH	TRUTH
FOUR COMMON FOOD STAMP MYTHS HEARD FROM POTENTIAL APPLICANTS	
"The Food Stamp Program is a welfare program."	The Food Stamp Program is a nutrition assistance program designed to help individuals and families buy nutritious food when money's tight.
"Some people receive only $10 a month in food stamp benefits."	While some receive $10, the average monthly food stamp benefit per person is about $86 (fiscal year 2004 data).
"You cannot get food stamp benefits if you have a job."	Individuals may work and still have income low enough to receive food stamp benefits. In fact, one-fourth of food stamp benefits go to households with earnings.
"Other people need food stamps more than I do."	By receiving food stamp benefits, you are not taking benefits away from another person. Everyone who applies and is determined to be eligible by the State/local eligibility worker will get food stamp benefits.
FOUR COMMON FOOD STAMP MYTHS HEARD FROM ELIGIBILITY WORKERS	
"Outreach could mean more quality control errors."	The number of low-income people participating in the FSP is growing; however, the error rate is at an all-time low.
"Community workers cannot prescreen for eligibility or help gather verification documents."	Community groups can prescreen clients using the FNS prescreening tool known as "Step 1" (or the State prescreening tool, if one exists). Additionally, they can help fill out application forms, gather verification information, etc. However, the responsibility for the actual certification of households for program benefits remains with FSP staff.
"Certification interviews must be held at local FSP offices."	Local FSP offices can take applications or certify households for benefits at remote locations, such as food banks and grocery stores. Local offices may offer telephone interviews when appropriate.
"Outreach will increase my workload."	Community workers help potential applicants gather appropriate verification documents so that clients are better prepared for the interview and bring the proper paperwork.

FOOD STAMP PROGRAM FACT SHEET

The Food Stamp Program is the first line of defense against hunger. On average, it helps more than 23 million (fiscal year 2004 data) low-income people buy nutritious food each month and make healthy food choices within a limited budget. Eating healthier foods helps low-income people and their families stay well and have the energy they need for today's active lifestyles.

To apply for Food Stamp Program benefits, a person must go through the local food stamp office. If it is not possible to get to the office, a person may apply by telephone or make an appointment for another time or place. Any knowledgeable adult in the family can initiate an application, or the household may designate an "authorized representative" to apply for them.

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

Applicants must have INCOMES under certain levels, based on household size. A household is defined as people who live together and eat meals together.

Applicants may have RESOURCES, but they must be less than a certain level:

- $2,000 for most households
- $3,000 for a household with an elderly person (age 60 or older) or disabled person
- Most States exempt one or more vehicles from household resources
- A household's home does not count as a resource

An immigrant is eligible to apply for food stamp benefits if he/she:

- Has been in the United States as a legal resident for five years
- Is a legal immigrant child (not born in the United States)
- Has earned, or can be credited with, 40 quarters of work
- Is a refugee or asylee
- Has a military connection
- Is a member of certain Indian tribes

NOTE: A child born in the United States or a legal immigrant child is eligible for food stamps*, even if he/she is in a family where other members of the household are not eligible.*

The amount of the Food Stamp Program benefit for each household takes into account the household's income, current living expenses, and resources.

Food Stamp Program outreach is critical to reaching those low-income people who are not aware that they may be eligible for, or do not know how to apply for, program benefits. The Food and Nutrition Service has several efforts under way to help with local outreach:

TOOLS AVAILABLE
A prescreening eligibility tool, written at the 6th grade level in both English and Spanish, is available for anyone with Internet access. The tool helps people learn if they are eligible and how much they might receive in monthly benefits. It can be found at *www.foodstamps-step1.usda.gov*.
A toll-free information line (1-800-221-5689) is available in Spanish and English.
Free educational posters and flyers in Spanish and English can be ordered at *www.fns.usda.gov/info*.
Five basic documents in 35 languages can be found online at *www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/translations.htm*.
A national Food Stamp Outreach Coalition (FSOC) brings together national and local organizations interested in food stamp outreach and helps to empower these groups to do more and better outreach.
The FSOC listserv was developed to be a communication mechanism for those interested in outreach at the local, State, and national levels, and to share ideas among groups. To join, send an e-mail to *fsoc@fns.usda.gov*.

Certified households receive their benefits through a debit card called an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card. EBT cardholder accounts are credited monthly, and food stamp recipients spend their benefits by using the card to buy eligible food in authorized retail food stores. Only food and certain food preparation items can be purchased with food stamp benefits.

FOOD STAMP PROGRAM FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)

What is the Food Stamp Program?

The Food Stamp Program is a nutrition assistance program that helps low-income families and individuals purchase nutritious, healthy food. It is the cornerstone of the Nation's nutrition assistance safety net. The U.S. Department of Agriculture oversees the Food Stamp Program at the Federal level through its Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). State agencies administer the program at State and local levels. Their responsibilities are determining eligibility and distributing benefits.

Who is eligible to receive food stamp benefits?

Anyone who meets the eligibility requirements can get food stamp benefits. Household income and other resources have to be under certain limits and are reviewed. The program allows for certain deductions like housing costs, child support, medical expenses, or child-care costs. A household may also have up to $2000 in assets. Households with a member age 60 or older — or a disabled member — may have up to $3000 in assests. Assets that do not count toward eligibility requirements include: a home, a vehicle to carry a physically disabled member of a household, the fair market value of one vehicle (up to $4,650; higher limits in most States), and the resources of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients. Specific details are outlined in the FNS-313 brochure at *www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/general.htm*.

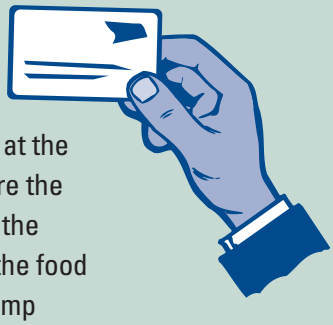
Where can I go to find out if I'm eligible to receive food stamp benefits?

If you have access to a computer, you can quickly find out if you might qualify for food stamp benefits through the prescreening tool available on the USDA web site, *www.foodstamps-step1.usda.gov*. Local food stamp offices can provide information about eligibility, and USDA operates a toll-free number (1-800-221-5689) for people to call if they want to receive information about the Food Stamp Program by mail. Most States also have a toll-free information/hotline number that can be found at *www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/contact_info/hotlines.htm*.

Some community organizations work closely with food stamp offices and can provide information on the application process.

WHAT IS THE EBT CARD?

All 50 States have made the transition from paper coupons to the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card. The EBT card is like a debit card and can be used at USDA-authorized grocery stores across the country. At the cash register, the customer or cashier swipes the EBT card through the card reader at the point of sale and the customer enters a personal identification number to secure the transaction. The system deducts the exact dollar amount of the purchase from the customer's EBT account and deposits it into the retailer's bank account. Once the food stamp EBT transaction is complete, a receipt shows the amount of the food stamp purchase and the amount of food stamp benefits remaining in the EBT account.



What are some of the Food Stamp Program's benefits?

Food stamp benefits provide much-needed help so that low-income people can put good, healthy food on the table. Food stamp benefits help with the grocery bill. Households can use benefits to purchase breads, cereals, fruits and vegetables, meats, fish and poultry, and dairy products. Many States offer free nutrition education materials and programs for food stamp benefit recipients. [Localize here if your State offers materials and/or classes.]

Food stamp benefits also help the local community. Each $5 in new food stamp benefits generates almost twice that amount in economic activity for the community. Plus, food stamp benefits are funded with Federal dollars — so when everyone who is eligible for the program receives benefits, State and local economies also benefit.

Why is there a national Food Stamp Program outreach effort?

Currently, only about half of those eligible for food stamp benefits are enrolled. The goal of this national Food Stamp Program outreach effort is to raise awareness of food stamp eligibility and benefits. The campaign includes promoting a national toll-free information line (1-800-221-5689) (or State toll-free lines where available) through a variety of English and Spanish radio advertisements in major population centers and in areas with large numbers of eligible but unenrolled people.

Who is involved in food stamp outreach?

Food stamp outreach is a community-wide effort enlisting the help of State and local food stamp offices, faith-based groups, food banks, and others. Together, these groups play an important role in helping low-income families learn about and access the Food Stamp Program. Community groups can help in many ways. For example, they can distribute informational materials, conduct prescreening for program eligibility, provide application assistance and forms, and help gather verification documents.

A core group of national antihunger advocacy groups and other organizations are part of a group called the Food Stamp Outreach Coalition. The coalition members also collaborate to promote the nutrition benefits of the Food Stamp Program through outreach to local antihunger projects.

FOOD STAMP PROGRAM TALKING POINTS AND MESSAGES

Following are suggested talking points regarding the Food Stamp Program. You are encouraged to localize this information with State or local Food Stamp Program data, or promote State-specific resources such as a toll-free food stamp information line or prescreening tool.

The Food Stamp Program is the first line of defense against hunger.

- Food stamp benefits provide much-needed temporary help with the grocery bill so that low-income people can put good, healthy food on the table.
- About half of those who receive food stamp benefits are children.

The Food Stamp Program is a nutrition program that helps low-income families and individuals purchase nutritious, healthy food. It is the cornerstone of the Nation's nutrition assistance safety net.

- Low-income people get financial support to help with their grocery bills so they can buy fruits and vegetables, whole-grain foods, dairy products, and other healthy foods. In addition, many Food Stamp Program participants are offered free nutrition education materials and classes to help them make good purchasing choices and stretch their food dollars.

The Food Stamp Program has made some fundamental changes in recent years that make it easier to:

- Find out about the program
  - Individuals can call 1-800-221-5689 for a free information packet to learn more about the Food Stamp Program and how to apply. Information is available in English and Spanish.
  - Individuals can go to a web site featuring a prescreening tool and, by answering a few simple questions, determine if they are eligible for food stamp benefits and how much they might receive. The web site address is *www.foodstamps-step1.usda.gov*.
- Apply for benefits
  - FNS and States are working to simplify the application process.
- Shop for healthy food
  - There are no more paper coupons. Now, benefits are delivered with an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card that works like a debit card at the grocery store.

The Food Stamp Program is a win-win for low-income people, local retailers, and local communities.

- Each $5 in new food stamp benefits generates almost twice that amount in economic activity for the community.
- The average benefit per person is about $86 a month (fiscal year 2004 data). That translates into money spent at local grocery stores.
- Food Stamp benefits are funded with Federal dollars. When everyone who is eligible for the program receives benefits, State and local economies also benefit.
- Research shows that low-income households participating in the Food Stamp Program have access to more food energy, protein, and an array of essential vitamins and minerals in their home food supply compared to eligible nonparticipants.
- Since food stamp benefits help defray the costs of buying healthy foods, low-income people are less likely to have to make hard choices between eating right and paying for other essentials.

USDA and the antihunger community are working as partners to ensure that everyone who is eligible for the Food Stamp Program knows about it and is able to access benefits.

- Many low-income people are not aware of their eligibility and how to apply, particularly those who are working, seniors, or legal immigrants.
- To ensure that everyone who is eligible knows about the benefits of the program, USDA is conducting a national media campaign.

FOOD STAMP PROGRAM QUESTIONS & SUGGESTED ANSWERS
FOR PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS AND SPOKESPERSONS

Why are Questions and Answers (Q&As) important? Q&As are anticipated questions and suggested answers that program administrators and outreach spokespeople can study to help get ready for media interviews or other public speaking. You might receive these questions from the media, the public, or others.

Here are some examples of Q&As about food stamp outreach:

Why are you encouraging people to enroll in the Food Stamp Program?

The Food Stamp Program is a nutrition assistance program that helps low-income people put healthy food on the table. The Food Stamp Program supplements the food budgets of low-income people who are having a tough time paying for food for themselves or their families. Children have important nutritional needs and they make up about half of those currently receiving food stamp benefits. We want everyone who is eligible to have the opportunity to apply for benefits so that they can have access to healthier diets. Our outreach efforts are specially targeted to people who are least likely to understand that they may be eligible: elderly persons, immigrants, and working poor.

Why are you encouraging the use of food stamp benefits when application numbers are increasing already?

Yes, enrollment numbers are increasing. However, there are still many people who need help. Currently, about half of the eligible households are NOT receiving food stamp benefits. This is usually because they do not think they qualify, or think there are people in greater need of the benefits. We want to reach out to those people, encourage them to get prescreened, and, if appropriate, apply for food stamp benefits so they can get help with their grocery bills. Food stamp benefits are not only good for low-income people; they also help the local economy.

Are the financial benefits worth the effort to enroll?

Food stamp benefits are not intended to be the only means of paying the grocery bill, but they do help low-income people purchase healthier food items, such as fruits and vegetables. Monthly benefits vary based on income and household size. On average, an eligible person receives around $86 per month (fiscal year 2004 data). This additional support will help low-income households purchase nutritious foods for a healthy diet.

Can people purchase whatever they want with their food stamps?

Food stamp benefits are intended to supplement households' grocery budgets and help them purchase healthier foods. Households can use food stamp benefits for a wide range of food items. Participants are encouraged to use their food stamps wisely to maximize their nutrition impact and economic value. To that end, they are encouraged to buy nutrient-dense foods such as whole-grain bread and cereals; fruits and vegetables; lowfat meats, fish, and poultry and milk products. Other items that can be purchased with food stamp benefits are seeds and plants that produce food. Nonfood items cannot be bought with food stamp benefits.

I have heard that enrolling in the Food Stamp Program is difficult. What does it involve?

USDA and State and local agencies that administer the Food Stamp Program are working to improve the application process by simplifying forms, offering extended office hours, and, in some instances, allowing online applications. Anyone can check to see if they might qualify for benefits through an online prescreening process at *www.foodstamps-step1.usda.gov*.

Anyone interested in finding out more about how to apply should call 1-800-221-5689 for information. [Localize this information if your State or community has a toll-free number.]

How long does it take to start receiving benefits?

If you are in special need because of very low income, you may receive benefits within 7 days, if eligible. However, for others, it may take up to 30 days to receive benefits. At the time of application, an eligibility worker will give applicants this type of information.

What measures are taken to prevent food stamp fraud?

USDA is committed to integrity in all of its nutrition assistance programs. USDA has taken several steps to make it easier to identify and punish those who misuse Food Stamp Program benefits. Retailers who violate program rules, recipients who try to obtain their benefits based on false information, or recipients who sell their benefits can be removed from the program, fined, and even jailed. Also, with the introduction of the electronic benefit card (EBT), which works much like a debit card at a grocery store, the USDA is better able to track and deter fraud.

Doesn't the EBT card make it easier for people to abuse the system?

No. The EBT card makes it more difficult for people to commit food stamp fraud. EBT eliminates paper food stamps and creates an electronic record for each transaction, making fraud easier to detect. Not only does the EBT card cut down on Food Stamp Program abuse, but it also reduces the stigma some people associate with receiving food stamp benefits.

Why are you advertising a free benefit for poor people?

The Food Stamp Program is a nutrition program that helps low-income people have better diets, and better eating can mean better health. There are many people who are eligible for food stamp benefits but are not participating in the program. The FSP is a win-win for local retailers and local communities. Each $5 in new food stamp benefits generates almost twice that amount in economic activity for the community. Average food stamp benefits are about $86 a month per person (fiscal year 2004 data), translating to money spent in local grocery stores. Everyone wins when eligible people take advantage of benefits to which they are entitled.

COLLABORATING WITH THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM:
NUTRITION EDUCATION PROVIDERS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Many communities have a wealth of information available to help your organization promote the nutrition benefits of the Food Stamp Program (FSP). Focusing on nutrition can help your organization get the attention of individuals who might not be inclined to pick up food stamp informational materials. This gives your organization an opportunity to explain the FSP as a nutrition assistance program to potential applicants — as well as employers, community leaders, and others — who might still associate the FSP with welfare programs. Learn more about FSP nutrition education providers in your community and what role each organization can play to increase FSP participation.

What is the goal of Food Stamp Nutrition Education?

The goal of Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE) is to improve the likelihood that persons eligible for the FSP will make healthy food choices within their limited budget and choose active lifestyles, as the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the USDA Food Guidance System (MyPyramid) recommend.

Why should my organization consider collaborating with Food Stamp Nutrition Education providers?

Outreach and FSNE can work together to communicate messages about how the FSP can help needy families obtain healthy foods. The possibility of better nutrition can help generate interest in the FSP among potentially eligible persons as well as community workers serving that population. FSNE providers have conducted needs assessments to identify which nutrition messages to promote and strategies for communicating these messages to the FSP-eligible population. They also have access to nutrition education materials that are consistent with national nutrition initiatives. By working together, outreach and nutrition education can communicate accurate, unified, and reinforcing messages that have a more powerful reach.

WHERE CAN I GO LEARN MORE ABOUT FOOD STAMP NUTRITION EDUCATION?
States often provide nutrition education to FSP participants through contracts with the Cooperative Extension System, State Nutrition Networks, public health departments, and other organizations.
The Food Stamp Nutrition Connection, a project of the USDA Food and Nutrition Service and the National Agricultural Library, maintains a list of State FSNE providers. You can access it online at *www.nal.usda.gov/foodstamp/Stategates/index.html,* request a print copy by phone at 301-504-5719, or e-mail *FSNC@nal.usda.gov*.
You can also contact your State or local food stamp offices for information on FSNE activities in your area.