

Excellent Service for All

Innovation in the Food Stamp Program



Access
Outreach
Payment Accuracy
Nutrition Education
Certification Policy
Quality Control

Issue 15
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Maryland Produce Give-Away/Outreach Day

Fellowship Through Caring

On a pleasantly chilly morning a group of seniors gather at the New Gethsemane Baptist Church in Baltimore. There is an excited anticipation in the air as people chat about the latest happenings in the neighborhood. As usual, conversations center on the familiar: How are the children and grandchildren? How did you do at the doctor's office?

Today, however, another topic of discussion ruled: What do you think will be on the truck? I hope there are apples. The grandkids really love fresh apples. I think that I will talk to the food stamp people. I wonder if my son qualifies. He and the family could sure use the help.

Today is different because the Produce Give-Away is making a stop here, and it will be held in conjunction with Food Stamp Outreach Day.

Produce Give-Away

The Produce Give-Away Program is operated by the Maryland Food Bank and distributes nearly 2 million pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables annually. The donors include Produce People Care and the Mid-Atlantic Gleaning Network, which collects thousands of pounds of fresh products directly from farmers'



fields. Since 1998, nearly 900 low-income households that have limited access to fresh, healthful foods benefited from this service each week.

Deborah Flateman, Maryland Food Bank CEO, sees the Produce Give-Away as a means to deliver nutrient-rich, fresh foods directly to area neighborhoods. "We realize that there are transportation and availability issues in many areas of Baltimore," Deborah observes.

Another equally important aspect of the program is the positive effect it has on its participants. Providing a source of companionship and a sense of community, coupled with the spirit instilled through the New Gethsemane congregation, the Produce Give-Away creates a nurturing, secure environment in which people can share experiences and information and receive needed support. - *continued next page*

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Outreach Opportunity

The comfortable setting also is a natural fit for opportunities to share information about a myriad of assistance programs, including the Food Stamp Program. And that's exactly what the Maryland Food Stamp Outreach Workgroup does each month during the Produce Give-Away/Food Stamp Outreach Day.

Members of the association, representing federal, state and local government and non-profit, faith- and community-based organizations, set up shop in a congregation meeting hall, church basement or a community center. While the participants wait for the produce, they get direct assistance, from food stamps to energy assistance to tax help, for example.

Staff from the Maryland Department of Human Resources offers food stamp pre-screening services in a private area. Once screened, those who qualify have an application completed and entered into the system within 24 hours.

"The Give-Away/Outreach Day provides an excellent opportunity to ensure participants in the program, mostly seniors, know about a variety of social service programs including food stamps," says workgroup member, Kirk Wilborne, FNS, Mid-Atlantic Region, Towson Field Office. "Through the food stamp



Kirk Wilborne

pre-screening process, we can identify and enroll qualified individuals right on the spot."

Convenience is a key when providing services. "Applying for the many available benefits can often be confusing and intimidating; however, through this venue, we are able to bring our services to where our customers are most comfortable – in their own neighborhood," says workgroup member, Sara Johnson, area coordinator for EarnBenefits Baltimore, a national non-profit organization that creates opportunities for low-wage workers and their families.

Big City, Small Neighborhood Attitude

Life in a large, urban setting like Baltimore can sometimes be difficult - especially for seniors. However, through the combined efforts of many caring people, the Produce Give Away/Food Stamp Outreach Day serves as a reminder that the concepts of community and neighborhood are alive and well.

Get more from here



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Exceptional Customer Service

Congratulations -Maryland and West Virginia

The Maryland Department of Human Resources and the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources were among the 14 state agencies that received performance bonuses recently from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for increased participation and application timeliness in 2006.

Maryland was one of the four states that had the most-improved Program Access Index, which measures the number of participants in relation to the number of people whose income is below 125 percent of poverty. Maryland was awarded \$1,104,772.

West Virginia received \$719,588 for its achievement as 4th best nationwide in processing applications timely.

The awardees for **best** Program Access Index were Maine, Missouri, Tennessee and Oregon, and the others for **most-improved** were Massachusetts, Mississippi and Vermont. The other awardees for application timeliness were Massachusetts, Kentucky, South Dakota, North Carolina and New Hampshire.

Get more from here

www.fns.usda.gov

York County, Pennsylvania Modern Office, Improving Business

The Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) and its county assistance offices developed the Modern Office project, which was aimed at improving the experiences of customers and staff, increasing efficiency and productivity in key areas such as case workflow, document and information management, technology, staffing and office layout, resulting in less paper and better business operations.

The following is a look at some features of the Modern Office project at the York County Assistance Office, where the concept got off the ground in April 2006.



The York County Modern Office workgroup, made up of agency supervisors and DPW staff, divided into teams to tackle the various tasks of the application and case maintenance process. They worked several months on a plan to improve efficiency and customer-friendliness of the county assistance office. This is a summary of the initiatives and the benefits and potential of each element.

Reception

The reception team utilizes a customer-focused approach to service delivery. The team components include a greeter, a self-service center and customer service representatives. The greeter provides triage for customers by directing them to the appropriate area for service. The self-service center includes a forms rack and phones for customer connection to the statewide change center, the EBT information and service center, and Health Choices (for choosing a medical provider). Privacy screens separate the self-service phones and ensure confidentiality. Customer service representatives assist individuals whose information requests and case changes cannot be made by calling the statewide change center.

DPW: Implementation of a reception team has reduced the amount of time customers wait and the number of interruptions to the eligibility specialists, accelerating the application process. Reception was found to be the most successful component of the Modern Office project and has been adopted as a pattern for statewide implementation. The creation of the self-service area has reduced the amount of walk-in traffic and significantly condensed the wait time for new or replacement EBT cards.

Scanning and Imaging

Scanning and imaging makes documents available immediately to the eligibility staff. After the original documents are scanned, they are returned to the customer.

DPW: The benefits of this technology include reduction in the amount of time it takes to process applications and case changes and less risk of losing or misplacing important documents.

Get more from here

- continued next page



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Intake

Since the Modern Office pilot, York's intake unit has undergone several changes. This experience will serve to inform future roll-outs as the Modern Office concept is adapted to meet the needs of each county assistance office. The current process divides intake into two teams – TANF and non-TANF (General Assistance, food stamps and medical assistance). All applications are assigned using a round-robin system. *DPW: Under this system, application timeliness has improved overall and customers receive their benefits much faster.*

The Modern Office project has been a significant change in the way the York County Assistance Office does business, says Cynthia Williams, who was a

Paula Copeland, supervisor, York County Assistance Office, sums up the Modern Office pilot: "It's like remodeling all the rooms of a house at once. An important lesson learned from the pilot is to 'start in the living room and do one room at a time.'"

manager there when the project began and currently is the communications coordinator for the Office of Income Maintenance. Staff members recognize that innovative changes and improved technology are needed to maintain efficiency and provide the best customer service, she adds.

And the changes appeal to the customers. A survey was conducted approximately six weeks after the Modern Office piloted; it provided positive feedback, with the variations to the reception area of the office drawing the most praise.

"When Modern Office first went into effect, it was a little overwhelming, but we got a lot of good feedback from clients," says Tabatha Crouse, clerical supervisor, York County Assistance Office.

USDA Awards Participation Grants

Participation grants totaling close to \$5 million were awarded recently to the following agencies by the U.S. Department of Agriculture:

Pennsylvania Dept. of Public Welfare

CONGRATULATIONS!!

Develop, test and implement a process that will permit individuals to scan verification documents and attach them to the online application/re-certification.

Vermont Dept. for Children & Families

Design and develop a state-of-the-art, document-imaging and indexing system, an automated telephone help-line with voice response and an online, web-based application.

Louisville/Jefferson Co. Metro Government

Pilot an online benefits tool, expand program access points and use remote site staff in community-based organizations to facilitate applications, collect and scan documentation and submit the information to the local food stamp office.

Mississippi Dept. of Human Services

Implement an online, web-based application.

Montana Dept. of Public Health & Human Services

Develop and implement a paperless system for food stamp case files, an online application and a campaign to promote the new process, and provide application assistance.

Utah Dept. of Workforce Services

Develop and establish an online application process accessible at local food banks and senior citizen centers throughout the state.

Oregon Dept. of Human Services

Purchase software to create an online application accessible at community sites.

Get more from here

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For Answers to Policy Questions, Ask Professor Pat

Q: "I have a food stamp application and the only income is child support. The applicant brought receipts showing she received \$250 on March 20; \$200 on March 5... How do I decide what income to count?"
– At A Loss



Q: "My caseload includes a public housing complex where some of the tenants pay an extra \$14 a month for air-conditioning. Are these households eligible for the HCSUA?"
– Newby at Northeast

For the answers to questions like these and other problematic policies concerning the food stamp, TANF or medical assistance programs, staff of the Income Maintenance Administration (IMA) in the District of Columbia can ask Professor Pat.

The voice for this fictitious policy wizard actually is a think tank of experts, and the method to deliver the answers is a bi-monthly newsletter of the same name, *Ask Professor Pat*.

Besides questions from eligibility staff, the content of *Ask Professor Pat* is based on negative and active quality control error cases and fair hearing cases and also includes information on food stamp nutrition education. Professor Pat - actually managers representing policy, administrative review and training - holds an editorial meeting before each edition to run through the available questions and work out the answers.

First released in March 2007, the newsletter is a different

method for IMA to provide training outside of the classroom and an inexpensive way to highlight policy issues and share lessons learned.

"I wanted something that spoke to the issues and concerns of the front-line staff, using an easy-to-understand format," says Ellen Wells, deputy administrator, Program Development and Training, the area of IMA responsible for policy dissemination. "Also, this is part of our error reduction efforts."

IMA staff members conducted a survey on the value of the newsletter after they had two editions under their belts. The response was very good, and the unsolicited comments received were positive as well, Ellen says.

She adds this advice for approaching policy clarification in a new way: "Make it a team effort so you have buy-in from people who are doing the front-level work. Dissect issues as a team, make sure it is easily understood by the target audience and have fun with it."

Get more from here



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2007 Food Stamp Hunger Champions

The 2007 Food Stamp Hunger Champions were announced recently by the Food and Nutrition Service. The program honors local food stamp offices that provide exemplary service in helping eligible customers obtain food stamps.

MENTORS

- Department of Economic Security, Family Assistance Administration, Sierra Vista, Arizona
- Hennepin County Human Services and Public Health Department, Minneapolis

HONORABLE MENTORS

- **Essex County Division of Welfare, New Jersey**
- Orange County Social Services Agency, Santa Ana and Anaheim Regional Centers
- Albany Department of Social Services, Food Stamp and Energy Programs Division, Menands, New York
- Catawba County Department of Social Services, Food Assistance Unit, Hickory, North Carolina
- Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services, Wilshire Special District #10 and South Family District #31
- Renton Community Services Office, Washington
- Merced County Human Services Agency, California
- San Antonio Health and Human Services Commission

HUNGER CHAMPIONS

- Alameda County Social Services, Oakland, California
- Ashtabula County Department of Job and Family Services, Ohio
- Barbour County Food Stamp Office, Clayton, Alabama
- **Baltimore City Department of Social Services, Change Center**
- Buchanan County Department of Human Services, Independence, Iowa
- **Bucks County Assistance Office, Warminster, Pennsylvania**
- Carbon County Department of Family Services, Rawlins, Wyoming
- Cuyahoga County Department of Job and Family Services, Cleveland, Ohio
- Denver County Department of Human Services
- Family Assistance Administration, SC113C, Phoenix, Arizona
- Family Assistance Administration, St. Johns, Arizona
- Food Stamp Office, F14, New York, New York
- **Garrett County Department of Social Services, Oakland, Maryland**
- Hartford District Economic Services Office, White River Junction, Vermont
- Social and Rehabilitation Services, West Region, Hays, Kansas
- Kansas City Metro Social and Rehabilitation Services
- Lake County Human Services Department, Two Harbors, Minnesota
- Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Southeastern Service Area, Lincoln
- Onondaga County Department of Social Services, Syracuse, New York
- Oregon Department of Human Services, Clackamas County, Klamath Falls and Lake County, Portland, Salem, Washington County, NW Seniors and Disability Services, Salem and Dallas Offices
- **Patrick County Department of Social Services, Stuart, Virginia**
- **Prince Edward County Department of Social Services, Farmville, Virginia**
- Santa Clara County Department of Employment and Benefit Services, San Jose
- Schenectady County Department of Social Services, Food Stamp Unit, New York
- St. Louis County and St. Louis City County Offices, Missouri
- **Summers County Department of Health and Human Resources, Hinton, West Virginia**
- **Washington County Department of Human Resources, Hagerstown, Maryland**
- Wayne County Department of Human Services, Detroit
- **Worcester County Department of Social Services, Snow Hill, Maryland**
- Yazoo County Department of Human Services, Mississippi



Get more from here

www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/default.htm

Chesterfield/Colonial Heights, Virginia

Continual Improvement is Key to Success

Although the Chesterfield/Colonial Heights Department of Social Services has been experiencing a continual increase in people seeking assistance, and losing staff due to retirement, promotion and other reasons, the agency remains committed to be the leader in providing exceptional and innovative social services. “Continuous improvement and quality is right out in front – we’re not afraid to evaluate, and if we find out something’s not working, we make changes,” says Chesterfield supervisor, Nikole Cox.



Recruitment and Training

Many modifications were made during the past several years in this agency located outside of Richmond, Virginia. For one, the agency implemented a training unit and includes a 2-1/2 day orientation on quality during its training for new employees. Seasoned staff members are encouraged to complete coursework for a certificate from the Chesterfield University, School of Quality Improvement. Chesterfield also uses competency-based questions designed to pinpoint nine overall proficiencies and other skills, such as policy knowledge and computer abilities, when interviewing potential new staff. The agency employs open recruitment, regularly interviewing candidates.

Caseload Organization

Chesterfield also reorganized the caseload along functional lines and specialization by programs. “All staff members were doing intake and ongoing functions for all programs,” Nikole explains. “There was just too much to know. People weren’t as proficient in their jobs as they could have been if they were more specialized. Now, we’ve separated intake from ongoing case work. Workers have become very good at what they do.”

Appointment System

The changes also included the appointment system. Since the implementation of the new practice, customers only wait approximately nine minutes to be served, says Nikole. When a customer’s name is entered into the appointment calendar designed by staff, the individual is assigned the next slot, and an appointment letter is sent to the customer. When the customer arrives at the office, the receptionist clicks on the person’s name, and an e-mail advises the eligibility specialist of the individual’s arrival. “Overall it’s been a real improvement in the

way we’re able to organize and manage our work,” says Beth Moore, Chesterfield supervisor.

Managing Change

Chesterfield takes the sting out of change through its Quality Council that was established to coordinate and promote quality principles and initiatives throughout the agency and meet strategic goals for serving customers better. The members of the council - the agency director, social workers, supervisors, administrative support staff and customer service representatives - meet monthly to work on areas of concern and are the information conduits between staff and the administration. “If you involve the people who do the work, you get a much better idea about what’s going on,” Nikole says. “People feel more committed and more like part of the agency if they have a voice.”

“If you involve the people who do the work, you get a much better idea about what’s going on,” says Nikole Cox, Chesterfield supervisor.

“People feel more committed and more like part of the agency if they have a voice.”

Get more from here



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Local Office Creates Effective Training Technique

The Dauphin County Assistance Office formed a training committee, one of several newer tools to improve the accuracy of eligibility and benefit determinations. The large agency in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, had experienced a rise in its error rate in 2005. At the time, nearly 70 percent of staff had two or less years of experience.

The Trainers

The training committee of managers, supervisors, eligibility specialists and clerical staff develops and presents topics and materials on a continuous schedule. Who actually conducts the training is based on the material to be presented and expertise and interest levels. The techniques used within the small groups of trainees include actual case circumstances, role-play, interactive dialogue and staff development of materials. If the training will run one to two days,

it will be provided in sections, by different presenters, using various presentation methods. The effectiveness of the training is monitored through the supervisory review system and the payment accuracy reviews conducted by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW).

The Trainees

New staff members participate in sessions that provide them the opportunity to talk about the process of learning the job. Examples of topics might be interviewing, caseload management and the agency's income verification and overpayment system. The training provided by the committee builds on the more formal training that is provided by DPW. Seasoned staff members are trained periodically, usually in high error-prone areas.

The training committee of talented and creative staff provides interesting and effective instruction and provides an avenue to address new initiatives more easily, says Liz Pliszka, income maintenance administrator,

Dauphin County Assistance Office.

More Ideas

Among the other initiatives that have been implemented to reduce errors is the reorganization of some work functions; in particular, Dauphin established a processing unit and a renewal unit, both of which handle food stamp and medical cases. With high turnover, the office was constantly reassigning entire caseloads. By splitting up the tasks, Liz says, eligibility specialists can improve their skills, focus more on one area and ultimately reduce errors. In working closely as a team, even across units, the work is organized, and supervisors can look at the caseload and identify problems and trends, she says. The design has lessened the effects of staffing changes because there is no longer a question of what to do with the work when someone is out or is promoted, Liz adds.

The payment accuracy rate of the Dauphin County Assistance Office for fiscal year 2006 was a very admirable 98 percent.



Get more from here



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The Food and Nutrition Service launched a nutrition education initiative this past summer. *Loving Your Family, Feeding Their Future: Nutrition Education Through the Food Stamp Program* provides a collection of materials that is based on the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPyramid. The brochures, flyers and guidebooks focus on adopting a healthy lifestyle and address barriers food stamp customers may face such as income, culture, literacy and language. The campaign is geared towards mothers because they play a key role in choosing and purchasing food for their households.

For Food Stamp Nutrition Education Participants

The messages in the materials deliver a mother's point of view and include "real-world" examples, both of which make them more relatable to the target audience. The publications use various strategies to address important nutrition information and challenges faced by busy families, such as low-cost menus and recipes, tips to prepare quick and easy meals, ways to increase physical activity and how to include healthier foods into the daily routine. They are available in English and Spanish and a self-teaching format.

"Nutrition education" is highlighted in the brochures to emphasize its critical association with the program. Eye-catching handouts emphasize fruits, vegetables, exercise and the preparation of tasty meals. Twelve black and white, reproducible flyers focus on the adoption of achievable habits related to the messages delivered in the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPyramid. The guidebook further stresses taking up habits relative to the dietary guidelines. It also includes tips for feeding and increasing the physical activity of children and addresses questions frequently asked by food stamp participants, such as stretching food dollars, shopping with children and locating resources for additional recipes and menus.

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For Food Stamp Nutrition Education Providers

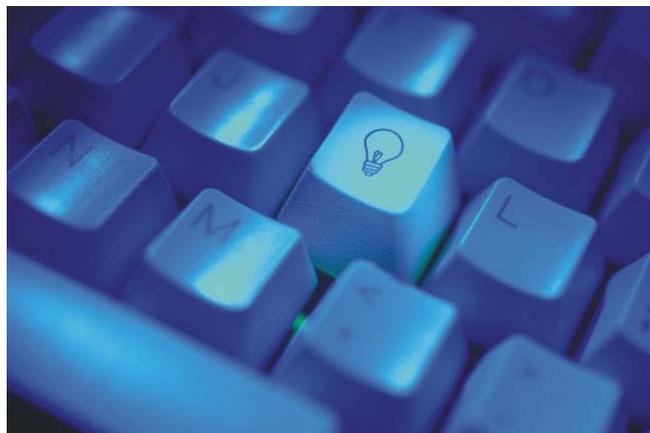
A handbook, discussion materials and an online training module are available for food stamp nutrition educators. The materials focus on the most challenging aspect of any nutrition education program - changing behaviors. The handbook presents an overview of the *Loving Your Family...* initiative and materials, explains the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPyramid recommendations and provides information on marketing and implementing the initiative. It also gives tips for addressing low-literacy skills and cultural barriers and encouraging parents to serve as role-models regarding healthy lifestyles for their children.

Similar to the handbook, the online training module presents an overview of the initiative and materials. Interactive features and “knowledge checks” help increase and reinforce learning. The module is self-paced so users can spend as much time exploring it as they prefer. Active hyperlinks connect to many website resources. The materials labeled “Discussion Seminar” provide ideas for activities that can be conducted with audiences.

Get more from here

View the virtual training tip sheets, check-out the online module, download or order* materials, access the Food Stamp Nutrition Connection website:
www.nal.usda.gov/foodstamp

**Due to limited quantities, materials can only be ordered by those who work directly with the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program.*



Keys to Modernization

Don't be left behind as others implement changes to modernize the way they do food stamp business. To find a potential solution to a current challenge in your state or local office, get a copy of *Keys to Modernization*, written by the National Payment Accuracy Workgroup.

The 22-page publication provides tips on further developing the automation components of the food stamp process. There are sections on Graphic User Interface, image scanning, data matching, system alerts, training and call/change centers. There also are parts on streamlining the interview process, redesigning procedures and involving community partners.

In the following article, you'll find some highlights from *Keys to Modernization*.

Get more from here

State and local food stamp agencies can obtain a copy of *Keys to Modernization* from the FNS Partner Web or by contacting their FNS regional payment accuracy coordinator.

Graphic User Interface

Graphic User Interface is reported to be a user-friendly way for eligibility staff and customers to enter data into a state eligibility system. A Graphic User Interface may appeal to a state agency that cannot replace its existing automated eligibility system and needs a system much more accessible to all users of the application process.

Scanning

Document imaging could help in the management of caseloads statewide. Documents are scanned and indexed. In more sophisticated systems, documents received by fax are automatically scanned through the fax/scanner. Eligibility staff is notified when new documents are in the system. The information can be viewed and managed online.

Data Matching

Developing subsystems that automatically conduct data matches and populate the eligibility system can save staff time and help them make accurate eligibility determinations. Taking this to another level, data brokering is an option to increase the value of data matching and improve accuracy. It enables the eligibility staff to access all hits “before or at the time of the interview or receipt of the information.”

Alerts

Over the years, it has been important to prioritize the alerts that inform or remind

eligibility staff to make a change in a case or determine whether a change is needed based on the information provided by the customer. Prioritizing alerts can be an effective method of ensuring the most critical alerts are handled timely (categorize them as low, medium, high or critical).

Procedures

Examples of how some state agencies have modified longstanding procedures and reorganized staff in non-traditional ways:

- Staff have been assigned to call centers, change report centers and automated voice response units.
- Receptionists have moved from the front desk to self-service lobbies where they guide customers through a paperless application process.
- Intake units have assumed many different roles, from call center representatives to greeters who help with online applications and re-certifications.

Partnering

Faith- and community-based organizations provide more points of access for potential customers. The elderly, disabled and immigrants may feel more comfortable obtaining service from these familiar groups. The partners may offer one-on-one service, help customers access the organizations' computers and fax equipment, provide information during a telephone interview, apply online and verify their identity.

FOOD STAMP PROGRAM Products★Services

Food Stamp Outreach Grants Available

The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced a food stamp outreach grant competition. The purpose of the grants is to implement and study effective strategies to inform and educate potentially eligible, non-participating individuals about the nutrition benefits of the Food Stamp Program, the eligibility rules and how to apply. Specifically, these grants will target the two most significantly underserved populations in the program – seniors and Hispanics.

At least \$1 million, contingent upon availability, is offered for grants under this competition. The maximum grant award is \$75,000, and the grant period can range from one to two years.

Entities eligible for these outreach grants are private non-profit organizations, including community and faith-based organizations and others, and public organizations. State and local food stamp agencies are not eligible to apply for this grant award.

The Request for Application will be open for 90 days. Applications are due to the Food and Nutrition Service by 5 p.m., Eastern Time on February 19, 2008.

Get more from here

To obtain detailed information about who is eligible to apply for a grant, the due date, application process and format, checklists, templates, tools, lists of resources, etc., www.grants.gov, or www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/grants/2008/default.htm

Business Case Packet Updated

Materials in the Business Case Packet, published by the Food and Nutrition Service, show what is possible economically by increasing participation of eligible people in the Food Stamp Program. The data show how it makes sense from an economic development perspective for states and communities to support outreach efforts that lead to increased participation. For example:

If the national participation rate rose just five percentage points – an additional 1.9 million low-income people would have an additional \$971 million in benefits per year to purchase food, and \$1.8 billion in total new economic activity would be generated nationwide.*

*Based on national participation rate for 2005.

Similar state-by-state information is displayed in the table “Potential Increases...” at the bottom of the business case web page.

Get more from here

www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/business-case.htm

Excellent Service for All is published for state and local food stamp agencies.

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