

Improving Access to Food for Low-Income Families: The Food Stamp Program

This paper is part of a series of nutrition policy profiles prepared by Prevention Institute for the Center for Health Improvement (CHI).

Background

Poverty-related malnutrition has been a long-standing problem in the United States. In 1999, 11.8 percent of Americans were living in poverty; California's poverty rate in 1998-1999 was 14.6 percent.^{1,2} Poor households are much more likely to experience hunger and to lack access "at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life."³ The high costs of housing, health care, and medical care put pressure on families who live on limited incomes. As the most flexible cost in a family's budget, food is often the first expense to be cut.

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is the centerpiece of a set of federal nutrition programs developed to improve low-income households' access to food. Its origins can be traced to the Food Stamp Plan, which was started in 1939 to help needy families. The modern program began as a pilot project in 1961 and was authorized as a permanent program in 1964. The program was dramatically expanded after 1974, when Congress required all states to offer food stamps to low-income households. The Food Stamp Act of 1977 tightened eligibility criteria and ended the requirement that participants purchase food stamps.⁴ Today's FSP is a supplemental entitlement program that provides food coupons or electronic benefit cards to enhance participants' food purchasing power and nutritional status.

The FSP is the largest domestic food and nutrition assistance program in the nation, with an annual budget of over 28 billion dollars.⁵ The program serves one in ten Americans; 7.7 million households and 18.2 million individuals received food stamps each day in fiscal year 1999. Approximately 88 percent of all benefits go to households with children or elderly persons.⁶ The average monthly benefit in fiscal year 2000 was about \$73 per person and almost \$173 per household.⁷ The majority of food stamp recipients do not receive federal cash assistance. Only 10 percent of food stamp households are above the federal poverty line.⁸ After federal welfare reform legislation was passed in August 1996, many legal immigrant families lost their food stamps. These families experienced significantly more hunger and difficulty meeting their nutritional needs than families who kept their benefits.⁹

Policies

- 1. Establish state-funded programs to provide food stamps to legal immigrants ages 18 to 64 who are no longer eligible for federal assistance.*

To address increased hunger among immigrant families who lost their food stamp benefits after welfare reform, California established the California Food Assistance Program (CFAP) in 1997. The program provides food stamp benefits to eligible legal immigrants. Initially, CFAP was designed to assist children under age 18 and seniors age 65 or older who resided in the U.S.

before August 1996. Subsequently, the federal government restored benefits for many children and elderly immigrants who lived in the U.S. before the passage of welfare reform. CFAP was then expanded to include legal immigrants ages 18 to 64 who lived in the U.S. prior to August 22, 1996, as well as some who came to the U.S. after this date.¹⁰ The program reaches thousands of legal immigrants who remain ineligible for federal food stamps.

2. Improve access to food stamps by conducting outreach and simplifying the application process.

The Food Research and Action Center documented a 29.9 percent decline in food stamp program participation between October 1996 and October 2000; in California, participation rates declined by 42.4 percent during the same time period. An improved economy and changes in eligibility standards may have contributed to this decline, but such factors are not sufficient to explain the drop in food stamp use. Experts believe confusion over the changes brought by welfare reform and the initial elimination of benefits to legal immigrants are primary reasons for fewer eligible individuals enrolling for food stamps. An estimated 33 percent of eligible California households are not utilizing food stamps.

California has taken steps at the state and county levels to improve food stamp participation among eligible individuals. California's Governor Davis signed Senate Bill 2013 on September 24, 2000, requiring the Department of Social Services to simplify and shorten the application for food stamps. (A prototype of the application is to be completed by mid-year 2001.) In addition, California Food Policy Advocates recently completed a review of best practices to increase outreach for and access to the food stamp program.¹¹ Examples of promising local action in California include:

- The Sacramento County Department of Human Assistance has expanded hours for accepting food stamp applications. Its offices are now open from 7:00 a.m. until approximately 9:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Two sets of supervisors and caseworkers are employed to cover the day and night shifts. These workers have staggered schedules and share workspaces.
- In Solano County, Food Stamp Workers conduct community outreach to clients who are living at drug and alcohol centers, domestic violence shelters, homeless centers, and the migrant camp. By bringing applications to these sites, the Department hopes to provide Food Stamps to individuals who are unable to come into their office to apply for benefits.
- In Santa Cruz County (Watsonville office), a member of the clerical staff is assigned each day to assist clients in filling out Food Stamp applications. S/he is available from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily to help clients read and understand questions and write responses. (S/he does not make eligibility determinations.) By assisting low-literacy clients to complete their applications, the Office strives to support clients, maximize their understanding of questions, and improve application accuracy.
- In Los Angeles County, the Department of Social Services (DSS) has collaborated with advocacy groups to increase food stamp enrollment among legal immigrants. The "Public

Charge Outreach Campaign” educates eligibility workers and immigrants about food stamp eligibility standards for immigrants. Public service announcements in ten languages, outreach fliers distributed to food pantries, and public forums all seek to address “fears or confusion that the immigrant community may feel.”¹² Advocacy groups recommend establishing application centers in nontraditional venues such as community-based organizations, translating written materials into more languages, and increasing access to bilingual staff.

Effectiveness

In November 2000, CFAP served more than 92,000 legal immigrants in California¹³ who would not be entitled to receive food stamps by federal eligibility standards. Use of food stamps increases household food purchases and availability of nutrients. In a 1998 study, Basiotis, Kramer-LeBlanc, and Kennedy found that people who use food stamps show improved intake of vegetables, dairy, and meats. In households in which weekly food stamp benefits were more than \$17.54, nutritional quality improved.¹⁴ Preschoolers whose families used food stamps consumed more zinc and iron (two nutrients that are critical and hard to get for this age group) than children of the same age and income level who did not use food stamps.¹⁵

As overall participation in food stamp programs continues to decline both nationally and in California, it is difficult to assess the impact of application assistance and outreach efforts. The steps outlined above represent the best thinking of Social Services staff, nonprofit human services providers, and advocacy groups, based on their understanding of the experiences of low-income individuals seeking assistance.

Contact

California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA)

Tel: (415) 777-4422

Web site: www.cfpa.net

Acknowledgments

California Food Policy Advocates, San Francisco, CA

Advisory Committee

Kate Clancy, Ph.D., Director of the Henry A. Wallace Center for Agriculture and Environmental Policy at WINROCK International, Rosslyn, VA

Andy Fisher, Executive Director, National Community Food Security Coalition, Venice, CA

Arnell Hinkle, RD, MPH, CHES, Executive Director, California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness Program (CANFit), Berkeley, CA

Sheldon Margen, MD, Professor Emeritus, Public Health Nutrition, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, CA

Marion Nestle, MPH, Ph.D., Chair, Department of Nutrition and Food Studies, New York University, New York, NY

Margo Wootan, D.Sc., Director of Nutrition Policy, Center for Science in the Public Interest, Washington, DC

Prevention Institute's nutrition policy profile series is funded in part by a grant from The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF). Created in 1992 as an independent, private foundation, TCWF's mission is to improve the health of the people of California by making grants for health promotion, wellness education, and disease prevention programs.

¹ Dalaker J, Proctor BD. *Poverty in the United States 1999* [online report]. US Census Bureau Web site. September 2000: 7. Available at: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2000pubs/p60-210.pdf>. Accessed May 13, 2002.

² US Census Bureau. Poverty 1999 graphs: number of poor and poverty rate: 1959 to 1999. Available at: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/poverty/poverty99/pov99.html>. Accessed April 26, 2002.

³ Nord M, Jemison K, Bickel G. *Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Hunger, by State, 1996-1998*. Washington, DC: Food and Rural Economics, Economic Research Service, US Dept of Agriculture; September 1999. Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report, No. 2.

⁴ Food and Nutrition Service, US Department of Agriculture. Food stamps: frequently asked questions. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/MENU/FAQS/faqs.htm>. Accessed April 26, 2002.

⁵ Dapont BO, Sanders S, Taylor L. Why do low-income households not use food stamps? Evidence from an experiment. *Journal of Human Resources*. 1999;34:612.

⁶ Food and Nutrition Service, US Department of Agriculture. Food stamps: frequently asked questions. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/MENU/FAQS/faqs.htm>. Accessed April 26, 2002.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Food and Nutrition Service, US Department of Agriculture. Characteristics of food stamp households: fiscal year 1998. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/FSP/FILES/Participation/char98.HTM>. Accessed April 26, 2002.

⁹ Arnold A, Manalo-LeClair G, Marinacci A, Robinson S. *Understanding and Improving the Food Stamp Program in California: A Primer and Policy Guide for Advocates* [online report]. November 2001: 22. California Food Policy Advocates Web site. Available at: <http://www.cfpa.net/foodstamps/UnderstandingFSPinCA.pdf>. Accessed May 13, 2002.

¹⁰ California Department of Social Services. Food stamp program. Available at: http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/cdssweb/FoodStamps_194.htm. Accessed May 13, 2002.

¹¹ Chen S, McLaughlin D, Manalo Le-Clair G. *Best Practices to Improve the Food Stamp Program in California: A Compilation of Ideas to Increase Access and Outreach to the Food Stamp Program in California* [online report]. 2000. California Food Policy Advocates Web site. Available at: <http://www.cfpa.net/foodstamps/BestPractices.pdf>. Accessed May 13, 2002.

¹² Ibid:22.

¹³ California Health and Human Services Agency. *Food Stamp Program Participation and Coupon Issuance Report, November 2000*. Sacramento, Calif: California Dept of Social Services; January 2002.

¹⁴ Basiotis PP, Kramer-LeBlanc CS, Kennedy ET. Maintaining nutrition security and diet quality: the role of the Food Stamp Program and WIC. *Family Economics and Nutrition Review*. Spring and Summer 1998;11:4-16.

¹⁵ Rose D, Habicht J, Devaney B. Household participation in the Food Stamp and WIC programs increases the nutrient intakes of preschool children. *The Journal of Nutrition*. 1998;128:548-555.