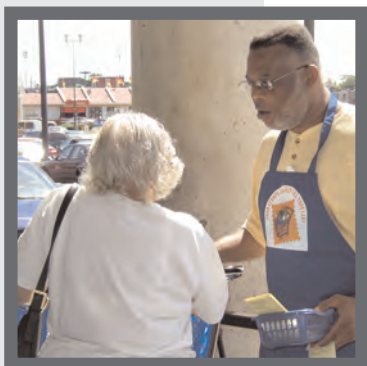
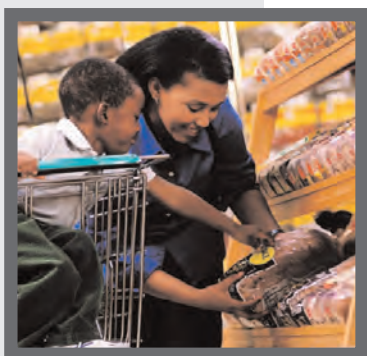


Making Food Stamps Work



A Report on the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger's Food Stamp Enrollment Campaign 2003-2006



Mary Summers
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“Service Linked to Citizenship”

This report describes a Food Stamp Enrollment Campaign that has brought millions of dollars into the city of Philadelphia by engaging volunteers in helping low-income people apply for benefits for which they are legally eligible. This campaign has used data collection and reports from the field not only to shape its outreach strategies, but also to highlight obstacles to food stamp enrollment. As a result of their findings, the staff of the Coalition Against Hunger has been able to work effectively with the state and county Department of Public Welfare to start to address some of these barriers. The result is an outstanding example of service linked to citizenship: volunteers mobilized to insure that our laws and institutions are truly serving such great public purposes as the elimination of hunger through nutrition support programs.

—John J. Dilulio, Jr., Frederick Fox Leadership professor, University of Pennsylvania and first Director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives

“Service-Learning at its Best”

The Coalition Against Hunger’s Food Stamp Enrollment Campaign was pioneered in an academically based community service seminar at the University of Pennsylvania. The faculty, students, staff, and volunteers who participate in this Campaign provide a direct service to low-income people throughout Philadelphia; they also learn face-to-face about the many challenges poor people encounter in accessing public benefits. An example of service-learning at its best, this campaign teaches the critical need to mobilize our campuses and our communities to work together to address the critical problems associated with poverty.

—Ira Harkavy, Founding Director and Associate Vice President, Center for Community Partnerships, University of Pennsylvania

Executive Summary

In January 2003, the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger, in partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, the Fox Leadership Program of the University of Pennsylvania, the Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development (PHENND), and Pathmark Stores, Inc., embarked on an 18-month Food Stamp Enrollment Campaign funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). This effort to test the efficacy of using student and faith-based volunteers in a program of outreach and screening to promote food stamp enrollment among potentially eligible low-income people reveals the following findings:

- Nearly 7500 clients were screened, and 6,000 were informed of their potential eligibility for food stamps. 2,600 (43% of those eligible) applied for the program. 2,100 (82% of the applicants, 36% of those found eligible) successfully enrolled.
- Anticipated benefit levels did not appear to be a decisive factor in generating higher application rates, suggesting that significant barriers prevent many clients, who are eligible for substantial benefits, from accessing this critical nutrition support program.
- The Campaign provided important data for ongoing work with the Department of Public Welfare at the state, county, and individual County Assistance Office levels to address these barriers.
- Estimated potential benefits for subsequently enrolled clients indicate that annually the Campaign brought more than \$3.2 million dollars to low-income Philadelphia residents and more than \$5.9 million in increased business to the local economy.
- 46% of all screenings were conducted on the Campaign's Hotline, with word-of-mouth referrals, posters advertising the hotline in service agencies like WIC offices, and an ad campaign on the city's public transportation system (funded by other sources) generating the most calls.
- The community sites that proved most effective for outreach and screenings were health centers, Career Links (Pennsylvania's one-stop service centers for job seekers) and food cupboards.
- The volunteers who proved most effective were those who put the most hours into the Campaign, especially work-study and service-learning students, who also found the Campaign a rewarding educational experience. Students from 14 area campuses have participated in outreach and screening efforts.
- Subsequent efforts to improve application and enrollment rates with a strong focus on application assistance have boosted application rates of potentially eligible clients to 53% and enrollment rates of eligible clients to 40%.
- As of June 2006, the Coalition has continued to build this Campaign with new sources of funding and has screened more than 12,000 clients.

Making Food Stamps Work

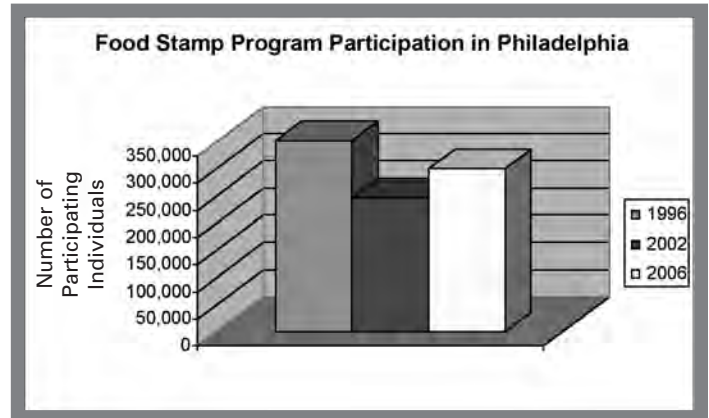
For more than thirty years, the Food Stamp Program has been the nation's largest program to alleviate hunger. Now issued electronically and accessed through a debit (Electronic Benefits Transfer or EBT) card, food stamps help low-income individuals and households pay for



groceries, thereby allowing available cash to be used for other basic needs such as housing and heat. In Philadelphia County enrollment has fluctuated from about 350,000 individu-

als in 1996 to 245,000 in 2002 to 290,000 in 2005 (see table at right). Using data from the 2000 census, the Brookings Institute estimates that in 1999, a year in which the Food Stamp Program was bringing more than a quarter-billion dollars into Philadelphia, there were still 73,000 eligible but unenrolled people in the city.¹ Meanwhile soup kitchens and food cupboards have been struggling to meet the rising demand for emergency food.²

The Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger (the Coalition) has been helping Philadelphians gain access to this vital nutrition program for several years. In September 2002 the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA –the federal agency that administers the Food Stamp Program) awarded the Coalition one of 19 national outreach grants. The Coalition used this grant to initiate a Food Stamp Enrollment Campaign that tested the efficacy of using volunteers, placed at a variety of community sites,



to screen low-income people for food stamp eligibility. Potentially eligible clients were given estimates of their benefits and information about how to apply for the program. The Coalition also provided similar services and information via its Food Stamp Hotline, which was advertised through the local public transit system and in area newspapers, as well as by Coalition posters, leaflets, and volunteers.³ This report summarizes the results of this campaign during the first 18 months of USDA funding and reviews some of the ongoing challenges of effective food stamp outreach.



Philadelphia Public Transit Food Stamp Advertising

¹ Matthew Fellowes and Alan Berube, "Leaving Money (and Food) on the Table: Food Stamp Participation in Major Metropolitan Areas and Counties," The Brookings Institution Survey Series, May 2005 (http://www.brookings.edu/metro/pubs/20050517_FoodStamp.pdf, accessed February 28, 2006.)

² Eugene Lowe et al, The United States Conference of Mayors – Sodexho USA Hunger and Homelessness Survey, 2004, December, 2004, 9-15. (<http://www.usmayors.org/uscm/hungersurvey/2004/online/online/HungerAndHomelessnessReport2004.pdf>, accessed June 28, 2005.)

³ Advertising, which the Coalition used to leverage well over \$70,000 in donated goods and services, was funded by a modest outreach grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare.

The Campaign

After developing a model for involving volunteers in food stamp outreach with students in an academically based community service seminar at the University of Pennsylvania in the fall of 2002, the



Food Stamp Outreach at a Philadelphia Supermarket

Coalition initiated its Food Stamp Enrollment Campaign in January 2003. Coalition staff worked with colleges and community groups to recruit, place, train and supervise volunteers who were responsible for providing interested individuals

with food stamp eligibility screenings, estimates of their benefit levels, and application assistance. During the first 18 months of the Campaign, approximately 150 students and 190 community/faith-based volunteers participated in four hours of classroom training. About 70 of the students and 50 of the community/faith-based volunteers participated in two hours of field training and logged a screening for at least two clients.⁴ Staff and volunteers engaged in food stamp outreach efforts at a variety of sites including: soup kitchens, food cupboards, CareerLinks (Pennsylvania's one-stop service centers for job seekers), health centers, social service agencies, schools, community school programs, community events, grocery stores, and sites like libraries and churches where the Campaign for Working Families offered assistance with filing for the Earned Income Tax Credit.

Staff and volunteer screeners went through a step-by step process with individual clients, gathering information about household size, income, resources, and several other factors to determine if they might qualify for food stamps (see table at right). If clients appeared eligible, further information, such as shelter expenses, resulted in an estimate of the client's potential monthly food stamp benefit and clients received detailed information about how and where to apply. (Depending

on their address, Philadelphia residents must go to one of 17 Philadelphia County Assistance Offices [CAOs] to submit an application for food stamps.) Most were given copies of the food stamp application and offered help with filling it out, as well as a list of the 11 types of documents (rent receipts, pay stubs, etc.) that they might need in order to successfully complete the application process.

Staff and volunteers also filled out logs on all clients that included the information required for the screening, whether the clients were found potentially eligible for food stamps, estimated benefit levels, if application assistance was given, and the location of the screening. The information

Monthly Income Limits and Food Stamp Benefits

From October 1, 2005 to September 30, 2006

Household Size	Monthly Income Before Taxes*	Maximum Monthly Food Stamp Benefit
1	\$1,037	\$152
2	1,390	278
3	1,744	399
4	2,097	506
5	2,450	601
6	2,803	722
7	3,156	798
8	3,509	912
Each additional member	+354	+114

*Different income limits apply to elderly and disabled applicants.

on these logs was subsequently entered into a campaign database. The names of all screened clients were periodically submitted to the Department of Public Welfare (DPW – the administrator of the Food Stamp Program in Pennsylvania) in order to obtain data on whether or not screened clients had applied for food stamps, whether they had been approved or denied if they applied, and reasons for denial if that were the outcome. These data helped the Coalition staff and their research partners to identify and learn

⁴ At least 10 students participated in screening activities, but never turned in logs; several classes of 10-15 students each were trained in the context of a service-learning course that involved only one screening activity: organizing a grocery store fair. The majority of the community/faith-based volunteers used their food stamp training to make referrals to the Food Stamp Hotline or County Assistance Offices without doing formal screenings or filling out logs.

lessons from the most successful sites and volunteers as well as to begin looking at barriers to program participation. Service-learning and work-study students from 14 college campuses (who received course credit or pay for their participation) played an especially important role in the Campaign, frequently making commitments to screen clients for several hours a week. These students also helped to maintain the Campaign database and engaged in other outreach and research projects.

Participating Area Colleges and Universities

Arcadia University
Bryn Mawr College
Cabrini College
Drexel University
Eastern University
Haverford College
LaSalle University
Philadelphia Biblical University
St. Joseph's University
Swarthmore College
Temple University
University of Pennsylvania
University of the Sciences in Philadelphia
Villanova University

Campaign Results

During the 18 months of food stamp outreach covered by the USDA grant, the work described above resulted in:

- 7,463 clients screened for food stamp benefits⁵
- 5,959 (80% of those screened) appeared eligible for food stamps
- 2,583 (43% of those potentially eligible) applied to the program
- 2,123 (82% of applicants, 36% of potentially eligible) successfully enrolled in the program.



- The Campaign Hotline proved an especially successful site for outreach with 3469 screenings (46% of total). Word-of-mouth referrals generated a significant number of calls to the Hotline, as did advertisements on the public transit system and in community newspapers, posters placed in service agencies and grocery stores, and leaflets distributed by volunteers.
- The sites that produced the largest number of successful applications were CareerLinks, city health centers, and food cupboards.
- Estimated potential benefits for clients whose applications were approved suggest that the Campaign brought in more than \$3.2 million dollars a year to low-income city residents.⁶ The USDA's estimate of food stamps' "multiplier effect" – the additional benefits that food stamps bring in terms of increased business for grocery stores and their suppliers – brings the total economic benefit of the increased food stamp enrollments to the local economy to \$5.9 million a year.⁷

⁵ 7908 clients were actually screened, but screeners failed to obtain either a social security number or a date of birth on 445 of these clients, which made follow-up on their application status with DPW too uncertain. The decision was made, therefore, to exclude these clients from this study of the campaign.

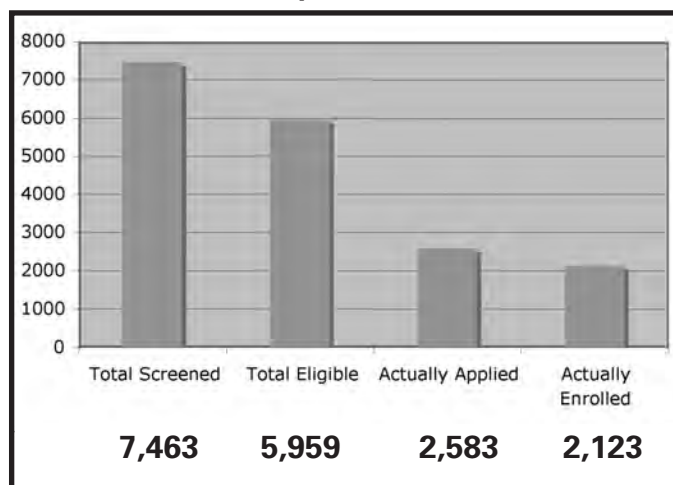
⁶ Estimates here are based on the assumption that most clients continue to receive food stamps for at least six months. (Applicants approved for ongoing benefits are certified for one year but must file an interim report at six months.) Data on estimated benefit levels was missing on 111 of the approved households, and there is not yet sufficient data from DPW to know how closely estimated benefit levels correspond with those that clients were actually awarded.

⁷ K. Hanson and E. Golan, "Effects of Changes in Food Stamp Expenditures across the U.S. Economy," Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report Number 26-6, August, 2002.

Data Reveal Obstacles to Food Stamp Participation

Data on the Campaign's outcomes challenged several widely accepted hypotheses that initially shaped the Coalition's outreach strategies. First, both local and national surveys have repeatedly reported that the vast majority of income-eligible households that are not on food stamps state that they are unaware of their eligibility for the Food Stamp Program and would apply if they knew they were eligible.⁸ The "common sense" logic of several of the most significant outreach programs around the country has, therefore, been that informing clients of their eligibility, especially for a relatively significant benefit level, would give them the incentive to go through the application process.⁹ The Coalition's preliminary campaign data suggest, however, that most of the clients screened had some knowledge of the Food Stamp Program and in fact had previously received food stamps. Even more significantly, **less than half (43%) of those clients screened as eligible went on to submit applications (see graph at right). Furthermore, anticipated benefit levels did not appear to be a decisive factor in generating higher application rates.** For those screened clients who did go on to apply for food stamps, the median estimated monthly benefit was \$141; for those who never submitted an application, the median estimated benefit was \$139.¹⁰ In a program with benefit levels ranging from \$10 per month to more than \$500 per month, (depending on household size, income and expenses), the difference in the median estimated monthly benefit between those individuals who applied for the program and those who did not was only \$2.

Food Stamp Enrollment Campaign From January 2003 – June 2004



Less than half of the clients screened as eligible went on to submit a food stamp application. More than 80% of those who applied were approved and enrolled in the program.

As a result of these findings, the Coalition encouraged its staff and volunteers to engage in more intensive application assistance with potentially eligible clients, including offering to submit on-line applications for clients on the Hotline and at sites with internet access. In this second phase of the Campaign, potentially eligible clients' application rates increased to 53% and their enrollment rates to 40%. Interestingly, these findings are close to those of a much larger United Way funded Food Card Access Project (FCAP) and Food Force campaign in New York City, in which paid staff, recruited by community organizations, engaged in a similar program of outreach, screening, and application assistance.

“The Coalition estimates that the Campaign brought in more than \$3.2 million dollars a year to city residents with benefits of more than \$5.9 million a year to the local economy.”

⁸ An Abt Associates, Inc. 2004 study for the USDA's Economic Research Service found, for example, that 69% of surveyed "eligible nonparticipants" stated that they would apply for food stamps if they were certain that they are eligible. (Bartlett et al, 2004, Food Stamp Program Access Study Final Report, Electronic Publications from the Food Assistance & Nutrition Research Program, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/efan03013/efan03013-3/>, 3-1, accessed, May 15, 2005.)

⁹ This hypothesis was supported by survey data and experimental work with a relatively small population in Pittsburgh. (Beth Osborne Daponte et al, "Why Do Low-Income Households Not Use Food Stamps: Evidence from an Experiment," *The Journal of Human Resources*, XXXIV, 3, 1999, 612-687.)

¹⁰ Medians are derived here from estimated benefit levels provided to clients by Campaign volunteers and staff. (Estimated benefit levels were missing for 170 of 2,583 applicants and 231 of 3,376 non-applicants.) There was some difference in the average benefit levels of clients who did apply (\$175) vs. those who did not (\$140), indicating that at the extremes, higher and lower benefit levels did make some difference in application rates—but certainly not as much as expected at the onset of the Campaign.

This campaign screened almost 40,000 low-income New Yorkers and their families as eligible for food stamps between July 2003 and July 2005 and showed 54% of the clients applying for food stamps and 42% ultimately enrolling.¹¹

These campaigns' outcomes clearly indicate the need for a better understanding of why clients who are informed that they are likely to be eligible for food stamps choose not to apply for the program. A 2004 national study of food stamp access reports that 64% of respondents, who believe they are eligible for benefits but would not apply, cite the perceived costs of applying as at least one of the reasons for this decision: paperwork, time away from their jobs, dependent care responsibilities, and difficulty getting to the food stamp office. Twenty-one percent point to low expected benefits; 25% recall a previous "bad experience"; and 45% report fears of stigmatization.¹² In this national study clients who did apply for food stamps report that they spent an average of 6.1 hours in the food stamp office and made an average of 2.4 food stamp office visits and 1.2 additional trips to other locations to acquire necessary documents.¹³ A study of the New York campaign experience demonstrates similar findings. In part as a result of the requirement for an interview at a food stamp office, the restricted hours, and long waits at these offices, the application process is especially difficult for working families, the elderly, and clients with medical problems. Only 37% of households with earned income enrolled compared with 45% of unemployed clients—despite the fact that households with earned income are eligible for significantly higher benefits. Reasons for denial of food stamp benefits to clients screened as eligible in the New York campaign also highlight the difficulties of document collection and submission in the application process, with 35% of rejections due to documentation problems and 13% due to clients not returning to the office for an interview.¹⁴

The Philadelphia campaign's data also reflect this picture of significant barriers to the application

process. 970 (24%) of the applications filed by clients, who had been screened as eligible and frequently given application assistance by Coalition staff and volunteers, were denied. A significant number of these households were persistent and submitted another application, but the fact that many ultimately enrolled households had to submit more than one application in the course of the Campaign again suggests significant barriers to food stamp enrollment.

24% of the denials were issued on the basis of a failure to furnish required information, such as a pay stub or a rent receipt. A separate Coalition analysis of all denials in Philadelphia County during the month of August 2003 resulted in findings similar to those for Campaign clients. During

Potentially Required Supporting Documentation
ID
Income (earned and unearned)
Rent/mortgage costs
Utility expenses
Bank statements and proof of other resources
Medical bills (for elderly and disabled)
INS status (for non-citizens)
Court ordered child support
Childcare expenses
Property tax
Homeowner's insurance

August 2003 29% of all food stamp applications from Philadelphia County were denied; 21% of these denials were based on failure to furnish required information. **These findings from both New York and Philadelphia suggest that the complex process and large number of documents required for a successful food stamp application result in denials to households whose circumstances make them eligible for food stamps.**

¹¹ Rebecca Widon et al, January, 2006. "A Better Recipe for New York City: Less Red Tape, More Food on the Table," www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/publications/better_recipe_full_rpt.pdf, accessed 4/22/06.

¹² Bartlett et al, Ibid, 3-7, 8.

¹³ Bartlett et al., Ibid, 4-9. For evidence that different approaches to simplifying application procedures and giving application assistance can significantly increase food stamp application rates among the elderly (one of the more underrepresented groups among food stamp participants), see a report prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. for USDA's Economic Research Service. (Scott Cody and James Ohls, 2005, "Evaluation of the USDA Elderly Nutrition Demonstrations, Vol 1, Evaluation Findings" <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/CCR9-1/>, accessed, Aug. 9, 2005.

¹⁴ Widon et al, Ibid.

Policy Implications of Research

The findings from the first 18 months of the Philadelphia campaign have five major implications:

- This campaign, like that in New York, challenges several long-held assumptions regarding the reasons that eligible adults do not apply for food stamps.
- The data suggest that *simplifying* the food stamp application process is a strategy for increasing participation worth testing. Any changes to the Food Stamp Program that increase the documentation burden on applicants should be carefully evaluated with regard to whether they discourage participation.



Volunteers Conducting Food Stamp Screening at a Local Supermarket

- The data and interviews with DPW staff suggest some specific operational reforms for processing food stamp applications, some of which have already been implemented.
- The Coalition has developed a number of new approaches to outreach and to addressing the barriers to food stamp enrollment.
- Engaging college students in food stamp outreach gives students direct personal encounters with a wide range of people living in poverty and broadens their understanding of the challenges faced by

low-income households. The Campaign demonstrates the benefits of a well-managed food stamp outreach, screening, and application assistance program as an approach to service-learning in higher education.

Challenging the Conventional Wisdom on Food Stamp Participation

The hypothesis behind the initial Philadelphia campaign was that staff and volunteers, using pocket calculators and software to estimate potential benefits, could give people who were eligible for food stamps enough incentive to apply for the program. The data clearly demonstrate, however, that knowledge of potential eligibility and the likelihood of significant financial incentives (the estimated monthly food stamp benefit) were not enough to motivate 57% of potentially eligible households to apply for food stamps.

The findings from this campaign challenge the hope that outreach and education programs alone represent the key for reaching the majority of the low-income, eligible households that are not participating in the Food Stamp Program. These findings underline the importance of tying outreach to systematic efforts to understand, document, and address the obstacles to participation in the Food Stamp Program for those whom it is supposed to serve. It is clearly easier to underwrite and implement outreach and education activities among the poor than to establish the close, often complex collaboration between state agencies and grassroots programs necessary to evaluate and learn lessons from outreach efforts and collaborate on addressing barriers to food stamp enrollment. But at a minimum the findings here suggest the need to evaluate the effectiveness of food stamp outreach whenever possible with data on application and enrollment rates.

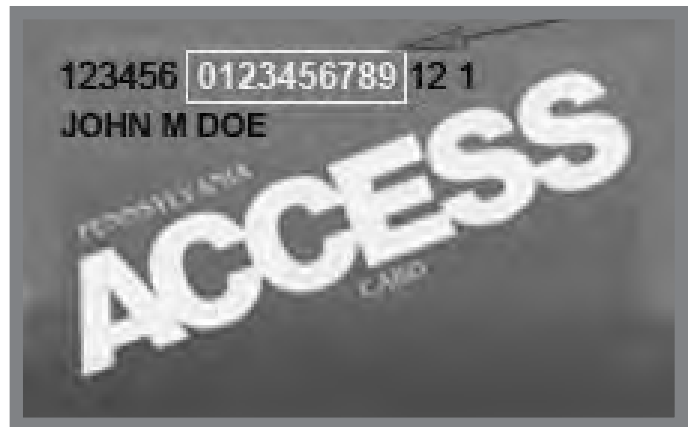
More research is needed to determine why people who have been told that they are eligible for

significant benefits under the Food Stamp Program fail to apply. But both the Philadelphia and the New York campaigns demonstrate that the majority of clients who express interest in the Food Stamp Program, take time to be screened, and frequently receive application assistance still fails to successfully enroll in the program. **These findings suggest that simplifying food stamp enrollment and participation may be more critical to delivering the vital benefits of this program to low-income households and communities than education and outreach that are not tied to serious efforts at institutional reform.**¹⁵ The data here also point to the need to carefully evaluate any proposed changes to the Food Stamp Program that increase the documentation burden for clients for their impact on participation rates.

Pennsylvania-Specific Reforms

This campaign in Philadelphia also demonstrates that collaboration between state agencies and a non-profit that uses its outreach efforts to inform its advocacy can help to establish systematic efforts to facilitate participation. The Coalition's work with DPW at the district, county, and state levels has resulted in some significant clarifications and policy changes.

- A food stamp liaison has been appointed at each of Philadelphia's District Offices to assist with questions and concerns regarding food stamps.
- Memos went out to all Philadelphia intake workers noting that picture IDs and Social Security cards are not required for food stamp application processing.
- A Coalition staff member has been working with DPW and the Philadelphia Welfare Coalition to clarify and simplify client notices. Client follow-up interviews suggest, for example, that the denial of expedited benefits (access to food stamps within five days of application for clients without any source of income) leads many clients to assume that their



Electronic Benefits Transfer Card, the Food "Stamp" of the 21st Century

application has been denied. They therefore fail to keep scheduled appointments or to bring in needed documents for verification.

- Elderly and disabled applicants with no earned income are no longer required to appear at the County Assistance Office for an interview. Other clients with a broadly defined list of hardships (work hours, child care, transportation problems, etc.) may also request a phone rather than a welfare office interview.
- In June 2005 the Philadelphia CAO launched a new call-in Change Center, which allows low-income residents to access a wide variety of services. It is now possible to request information about a program and inquire about the status of an application over the phone. Established clients can report changes such as the addition of a new household member without having to make a trip to the CAO. The Coalition Against Hunger and the Philadelphia Welfare Coalition have worked closely with DPW on protocols for the Change Center, which served 18,000 clients in December 2005.
- Coalition staff members have been working with DPW to encourage the implementation of further reforms: a project to automatically enroll Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients (low-income elderly and

¹⁵ The USDA itself may be coming to similar conclusions. Their latest round of participation grants called for proposals "to help simplify food stamp application and eligibility systems" from "state agencies working in partnership with faith and community-based organizations." ("USDA awards \$5 million in food stamp participation grants," Aug. 3, 2005, USDA Release no. 02902.05; http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/Press_Releases/2005/PR-0292.htm, accessed Aug. 11, 2005.)

disabled) in the Food Stamp Program; a two-year eligibility certification for elderly and disabled clients with no earned income; and central issuance of the EBT card and “remote pinning”, which will allow clients to receive their card through the mail and save them a trip to the CAO.

Data Driven Approaches to Outreach and Advocacy

The Coalition’s success in recruiting and training volunteers, its Hotline, its partnerships, and the lessons learned over the last three years provide a solid foundation for improved outreach efforts closely tied to efforts to work with DPW to identify and address obstacles to food stamp participation. Staff and volunteers now make a priority of helping every potentially eligible client fill out and submit an application. Campaign data demonstrate that this application assistance has improved enrollment rates, which are now up to 40% of potentially eligible clients. On the Hotline and at outreach sites with internet access, volunteers and staff are helping clients file on-line

www.compass.state.pa.us

applications at the state’s COMPASS website. The data, thus far, indicate a 45% enrollment rate for these clients. The Coalition’s work with COMPASS has also made possible ongoing feedback to DPW on ways to make the investment in this on-line application system more user-friendly for both clients and community partner organizations.

The Building Bridges Project

The Campaign data that demonstrated the obstacles to the food stamp application and enrollment process for clients also revealed the extra work that these barriers create for over burdened CAO staff in the form of multiple appointments and

resubmitted applications. Once the limitations to their outreach efforts became clear, Coalition staff realized that they needed to work more closely with CAO employees to identify the problems that make successful applications more difficult and workers’ jobs harder. The Coalition, therefore, approached the county DPW administration to ask for an opportunity to build a partnership with one of Philadelphia’s 17 CAOs. Together they made a decision to build on the relationship already developing between Derek Felton, a community volunteer who had been running a food cupboard in West Philadelphia for nine years, and the West District CAO, an office that had a good reputation for customer service. Mr. Felton and the volunteers at his cupboard had been helping all their clients fill out food stamp applications that he took to the West District Office himself. He had thus helped to create some interest in the Campaign at the CAO, where the staff were favorably impressed by how well prepared his clients were. At a series of meetings, Coalition, West District, and DPW staff, partners from the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) and community volunteers discussed key obstacles to the food stamp application process from the point of view of both CAO employees and clients and ways that they could work together to make this process less frustrating and burdensome.

The suggestions made at these meetings shaped a Building Bridges Project – an effort designed to promote more mutual understanding, support and referrals between the CAO and community organizations. Coalition staff and volunteers began furnishing the CAO waiting room with magazines, children’s books, and crayons. DPW administrative staff helped locate some tables for clients to sit at and fill out forms in the waiting room and a desk and chair for the security guard. Students from Penn painted the waiting room as one of their Martin Luther King Day projects. Coalition staff and Penn students designed a guide to help social service agencies and CAO staff offer clients referrals to each other’s resources, most especially the soup kitchens and food cupboards so critical to clients, whose food stamp support fails to last the month. With the assistance of the

Coalition and the Philadelphia County DPW administration, the West District CAO hosted two open houses for community leaders and service providers, both of which were well attended and covered by community newspapers. To spearhead all these efforts, the Coalition decided to bring Derek Felton on staff in a new position as Community Organizing Coordinator.

The Building Bridges Project has subsequently expanded to include work with clients who are approved for expedited food stamps, an “emergency” benefit that is made available within five days of their application to clients who have no immediate source of income. Approval for expedited food stamps requires relatively limited documentation; clients then have up to 30 days to collect the additional documents that would allow them to receive “ongoing” food stamps. Unfortunately, however, some households do not succeed in meeting the requirements for approval for “ongoing” food stamps. The West District office is now offering all clients approved for expedited benefits a referral to the Coalition Hotline for assistance with collecting their documents; and Penn students are assisting clients at the West District office two mornings a week. The Coalition’s hope is that this project will help to identify key obstacles to the food stamp application process for these severely stressed households that will ultimately suggest broader administrative and policy changes that will serve to make the Food Stamp Program more accessible for all eligible households.

Service-Learning for College Students¹⁶

One of the strengths of the Coalition’s Food Stamp Enrollment Campaign is that it has been educating student volunteers to care about the Food Stamp Program and how it operates. Food stamp screening gives these volunteers a chance to understand what low-wage workers, the unemployed, the elderly and the disabled are up against when buying groceries and paying rent, utilities and medical bills. These volunteers see the potential of the Food Stamp Program to support better nutrition for struggling households – and at the same time they see the barriers that keep this program from serving these households more effectively. Their experience in the field gives these volunteers the potential to become important allies and advocates not only for the low-income households that need the Food Stamp Program to work better, but also for the beleaguered staff and administrators, who seek to implement the program’s complex rules and regulations.

George Weiner, a student from the University of Pennsylvania, described screening people for food stamps as “like no other volunteer...experience I’ve ever had...I felt that the potential to help a needy individual was far greater through the Food Stamp Enrollment Campaign than through other food distribution programs.” Alex Verno, a Political Science major from Temple University, characterized his work with the Campaign as a critical learning experience: “I am familiar with many of the theories about welfare policy, but as a

“...the most successful internship I’ve had for my Sociology of Poverty course, in terms of both student satisfaction and learning...”

—*Judith Porter, Professor of Sociology, Bryn Mawr College*

¹⁶ This campaign also used community and faith-based volunteers, whose contribution was significant. The conclusions here are focused on college student volunteers because there was significantly more data on their experience.

screeener, I have witnessed the more human side to the story. Through one-on-one interactions with clients, I now understand the stigma and barriers facing those in need.” Professors have been similarly enthusiastic. Judith Porter, a professor of Sociology at Bryn Mawr College, declared that the Food Stamp Enrollment Campaign was “the most successful internship I’ve had for my Sociology of Poverty course, in terms of both student satisfaction and learning.... It’s the only internship that has a cross-section of the poor, including the working poor. Students were stunned at how little people were living on.... And they gained an understanding of public policy from hands-on experience....”

This campaign has demonstrated that involving students and volunteers in a well-managed program of food stamp outreach, screening, and application assistance can result in a profoundly educational experience for staff and volunteers, faculty and students – and for many of the clients, administrators, policymakers, and politicians they work with.

The State and National Context

The Coalition has been working with DPW and community agencies to insure that initiatives to make the Food Stamp Program more accessible are well publicized in low-income communities and within the County Assistance Offices themselves. But there are still many additional steps needed to make the program more efficient. Pennsylvania’s *simplified* food stamp application is eight pages long. In addition to filling out the form, applicants have to produce as many as 11 different types of supporting documents. Coalition clients repeatedly report that it is not unusual to wait more than three hours to be seen at a district office, only to be told that they will have to come back with yet another document before their application can be processed.

Establishing a more efficient Food Stamp Program will require change at the national level. The findings from Pennsylvania are consistent with what researchers have found in other states. Frustrated DPW administrators and caseworkers explain that it is the USDA’s system of auditing food stamp case records and threatening sanctions for missing documentation that drives the burdensome application process. Specially funded pilot projects have demonstrated that minimizing application requirements or providing systematic application assistance to new clients can significantly increase food stamp participation rates – but such pilots typically require not only additional funding but also special waivers of rules and regulations from the USDA.¹⁷ Making the Food Stamp Program function better throughout the nation will ultimately require systematic attention to simplifying its administration at the federal, state and local levels.

Fortunately, this is also an era when great opportunities exist to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the Food Stamp Program. There is much to learn from the private sector about how to use new technologies to make it easier to apply for and participate in this vital program, including reducing the burden of document collection on clients. Pennsylvania has led the nation with its on-line COMPASS application for food stamps and other public benefits. This innovation would be much more effective in facilitating food stamp enrollment, however, if accompanied by a systematic effort to waive the requirement for a subsequent face-to-face interview at the County Assistance Office.

We live in an era when rates of nutrition-related diseases like obesity and diabetes are rising at an especially disturbing rate in low-income communities. Fast food outlets with their high fat/high calorie menus are far more prevalent than fresh

¹⁷ Cody and Ohis, *Ibid*, xxi-xxii.

fruit and vegetables in poor communities. Alarmed by these trends, an increasing number of public officials, non-profits, and neighborhood organizations are working hard to establish more grocery stores in low-income and underserved communities. A well-functioning Food Stamp Program, providing benefits that will allow low-income people to purchase nutritious foods, will be critically important to the success of these endeavors.

The Food Stamp Program represents an historic covenant: a national commitment to the idea that no one should go hungry in a land of plenty. The rules and regulations that govern food stamps, however, and the benefits they actually provide reflect the many compromises and red tape that accompany efforts to put national commitments into practice. When the Food Stamp Program has come up for reauthorization every five years as part of the nation's Farm Bill, anti-hunger advocates have repeatedly urged Congress to simplify this program's eligibility rules and to provide reasonable benefits that allow clients to purchase healthy food. Despite their best efforts, food stamp benefits for households trying to fight their way out of poverty have continued to be based on the outdated assumption that they can afford to spend a third of their budget on food.

One premise of the Food Stamp Enrollment Campaign is that volunteers who have come to know and care about the Food Stamp Program can play a role in educating their fellow citizens and public officials about the importance of this

program. We look forward to evaluating whether these volunteers get involved in efforts to improve food stamp benefits and access in years to come. If they do, the Coalition will have developed a critically important model for service-learning and volunteer programs: evidence that effective public benefits campaigns can mobilize volunteers as citizens in the political process, working to improve our laws and institutions to better serve low-income Americans.



“Volunteers who have come to know and care about the Food Stamp Program can play a role in educating their fellow citizens and public officials about the importance of this program.”

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Fighting hunger through education, outreach and advocacy

The Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger brings together policy makers, community-based emergency food providers, public health and social service professionals, faith-based volunteers, students, and other concerned individuals to address hunger and food insecurity in Southeastern Pennsylvania. We fight hunger through education, outreach, and advocacy. Our education and advocacy programs aim to empower emergency food providers, to inform and mobilize concerned citizens, and to help shape public policy. Through our outreach efforts, we are also working to improve participation in and access to the Food Stamp Program.

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