

ADDRESSING HUNGER AND NUTRITION

A Tool Kit for Positive Results



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Food Stamp Program

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The Food Stamp Program, created as a pilot program in 1961, now is considered a cornerstone federal nutrition program that supplements the food budgets of low-income families and individuals. Participants receive an allotted monthly benefit on electronic debit cards, which then can be used at many grocery stores, some farmers' markets and other retail sites to purchase eligible food items. One key advantage to the local community is that the Food Stamp Program enables low-income individuals to obtain food through normal channels of trade. Recent studies indicate that, for every \$5 in new food stamp benefits, the local community appreciates an additional \$9 in economic activity.

Food stamp benefits can be used only for food. They cannot be used to buy nonfood items (such as pet food, household supplies, grooming items, etc.); alcoholic beverages and tobacco; vitamins and medicines; any food that will be eaten in the store; or hot foods. Homeless individuals can use their benefits at restaurants and shelters. The minimum monthly benefit is \$10.

In fiscal year 2004:

- 23,854,000 individuals received food stamp benefits.
- The average monthly benefit was \$86.04 per person.
- Total federal spending for the program was \$27.159 million.
- More than 50 percent of those who received benefits were children.

At the federal level, the Food Stamp Program is administered through the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). In state government, the agency responsible for administering the program is often located within the state department of human services.

The Food Stamp Program is a federal entitlement for low-income people. Benefits are 100 percent federally funded, and administrative costs are shared by federal and state governments. The federal government also provides states with matching funds for Food Stamp Outreach, Food Stamp Nutrition Education and Food Stamp Employment and Training.

Eligibility

Eligibility for the Food Stamp Program is based upon household income and resources. A household is considered a person or group of people who are living together, but who are not necessarily related, who purchase and prepare food together. For most households, except for those with an elderly or disabled member, gross income cannot exceed 130 percent of the poverty level. All households must

show that their monthly net income does not exceed 100 percent of the poverty level. Net income reflects gross income minus certain deductions. Household resources, such as cash on hand or in a bank account, cannot exceed \$2,000. Households that include senior citizens or disabled individuals can have resources up to \$3,000. States have the option to decide whether and how to count vehicles as resources. Certain groups face additional eligibility requirements, as outlined below.

Legal Immigrants

Certain legal immigrants are eligible for food stamps: children under age 18; those who receive disability assistance or benefits; those who have lived in the United States for five years; and refugees and asylees (see <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/rules/Memo/02/POLIMGRT.HTM>).

ABAWDs (Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents)

Eligibility is limited to three months in a 36-month period unless the recipient is employed at least 20 hours per week or is participating in the workforce for the required number of hours. States can protect benefits for this population by seeking area waivers for those who reside in areas with high unemployment or insufficient jobs; by using available caseload exemptions; and by providing employment and training slots.

Special rules in the wake of disasters may allow replacement food stamp benefits and/or new benefits for people who are hard hit by natural or man-made disasters.

Program Issues and Challenges

Administration, Quality Control Reviews and Error Rates

State food stamp agencies are required to conduct quality control reviews of randomly selected food stamp cases. Reviews are conducted on active cases to determine if the household is eligible and is receiving the correct benefit allotment and on negative cases to verify that the decision to deny, suspend or terminate the household from the Food Stamp Program was correct. An error is counted against the state when an incorrect benefit allotment is made (payment error) or when a household is found to have been incorrectly denied, suspended or terminated from the program (negative error).

The 2002 Farm Bill revised the quality control system to focus penalties on consistently poor performance and to provide performance bonuses for all aspects of program administration,

including customer service and program access. In terms of payment accuracy, the USDA makes monetary awards to states that have the lowest and most improved payment error rates and to states with the lowest and most improved negative error rates. Other bonuses reward states for most improved performance in serving percentages of low-income residents (Program Access Index – PAI) and for processing cases within federal deadlines. Performing well on payment accuracy, negative error rate, PAI and timelines can help increase the amount of federal food stamp funds a state receives.

Program Access for Non-Citizens

Federal policy on food stamp eligibility for legal immigrant adults and children has undergone a number of changes. The 1996 welfare reform law disqualified most legal immigrants from receiving food stamp benefits, while subsequent legislation has restored eligibility to children, the disabled and those who have resided in the United States for five years.¹ FNS anticipates immigrant eligibility restorations to be fully realized for FY 2006; more than 400,000 legal immigrant working adults, elderly and disabled, and children now are receiving benefits. Although recent legislation has helped to increase access for eligible legal immigrants, barriers to program access remain. One barrier is the concern among immigrants of becoming a “public charge.” Receiving food stamps does not make an immigrant a public charge, meaning the immigrant will not be deported, denied permanent resident status, or denied U.S. citizenship because he or she receives food stamps. Other barriers include confusion about program rules and regulations relating to immigrant eligibility, fear about sponsor liability and sponsor deeming, and language barriers.

Language Access

America’s population demonstrates a broad linguistic and cultural diversity, with significant numbers of non-English speakers. Federal guidance on equal protection requires state agencies to make services accessible to non-English speakers (“language access.”) Ensuring that all eligible non-English-speaking households are enrolled in the Food Stamp Program can increase the amount of food stamp benefits that come into a community, reduce levels of food insecurity, and lessen the burden placed on nonprofit emergency food organizations. To accomplish this, states are faced with the challenge of addressing the language and cultural needs of non-English-speaking households.

Program Models and Promising Practices

Payment Accuracy – Error Review Committee

For the past 15 years, program administrators in **West Virginia** have used an Error Review Committee to monitor and reduce their error

rate. When the Quality Control Division finds a potential error, the case is reviewed by staff from the Policy Division, Payment Accuracy Division, Data Systems, and the field office. Information from the data and paper files is considered during this review. After review, the entire committee discusses each case during a weekly conference call and reaches a consensus about Quality Control’s classification. A report is issued summarizing the review and decision. The work of the Error Review Committee helps the department to adjust policy, identify training needs, and adjust data systems processes. The goal of the Error Review Committee is not to correct the work of Quality Control but, rather, to plan and correct actions for future work of the department.

Improving Non-Citizen and Language Access

In **California**, a partnership between the Alameda County Social Services Agency (the food stamp agency) and the Alameda County Community Food Bank targets outreach to the Latino and Asian populations in the county.

Activities include Food Stamp Program eligibility training for community and immigrant organizations; prescreening clinics staffed by Spanish-speaking staff; and production of outreach materials in Spanish, Cantonese and Vietnamese. The campaign has succeeded in increasing food stamp participation among the Latino population; administrators are working to repeat this success in other immigrant communities.

Resources

- Federal Program Overview: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/>.
- State Agency Contacts: http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/contact_info/state-contacts.htm.
- Outreach Information: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/default.htm>.
- USDA Prescreening Tool: <http://209.48.219.49/fns/>.
- NCSL Publications: Katherine Gigliotti, *Food Stamp Access for Immigrants: How States Have Implemented the 2002 Farm Bill Restorations*, (NCSL, August 2004), <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/immig/immigrantandfoodstamps1004.htm>.

Note

1. For specific information about immigrant eligibility to the Food Stamp Program, see NCSL’s “Chart of Immigrant Eligibility for Federal Programs,” accessible at: <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/immig/eligibilitychart04.htm>.

The USDA coordinates a National Payment Accuracy Workgroup. Federal administrators have also published *Keys to Payment Accuracy*, a compilation of 10 tips and ideas for improving payment accuracy, which is available to food stamp

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Definitions of commonly used hunger and nutrition terms can be found in NCSL’s Hunger and Nutrition Partnership *Glossary of Hunger and Nutrition Terms* at <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/immig/Glossary.htm>.