



# Excellent Service for All

Innovation in the Food Stamp Program

Access, Outreach, Payment Accuracy, Certification Policy & Quality Control

U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Food and Nutrition Service  
Mid-Atlantic Region  
Food Stamp Program

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## USDA Awards \$30 Million to 16 States for Payment Accuracy Excellence

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently announced that it will award \$30 million to 16 states for achieving exemplary payment accuracy in 2004. Within the states in the FNS, Mid-Atlantic Region, New Jersey and Pennsylvania are among the seven states that have the best payment accuracy rates for 2004. The New Jersey Department of Human Services will receive \$2,003,796, and \$5,010,200 will be awarded to the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. Three other states will each receive a bonus for the most-improved payment accuracy rate. Additionally, four states are being awarded for the best negative error rate and two states have earned a bonus for most-improved negative error rate. The efforts of these states contributed to an overall payment accuracy rate of 94.12 percent for 2004.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture provides the bonuses, authorized by the 2002 Farm Bill, to states that have the best and most-improved payment accuracy rates, the lowest and most-improved negative error rates, the best and most-improved participant access rates and the highest percentages of timely-processed applications. The bonuses for participation and timeliness will be announced later this year.

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### New Jersey - Three-time Accuracy Achiever

The New Jersey Department of Human Services also received a performance bonus from USDA this past year; its 2.43 percent payment error rate for 2003, earning the state \$1,628,344 (see *Excellent Service for All*, November 2004). In addition, New Jersey received \$14,452,563 in enhanced funding from USDA for its 2002 payment error rate of 4.08 percent. Read on for information about the error reduction activities described by New Jersey as having served them best – simplified reporting, error review committee, interview training and case accuracy reviews. ➔

## Simplified Reporting

Simplified reporting was implemented statewide in August 2001, prior to passage of the 2002 Farm Bill, and it affected households with earned income. In February 2003, the state extended simplified reporting to all remaining food stamp households except: WorkFirst NJ/TANF and WorkFirst NJ/GA with no earned income; ABAWDs in exempt and non-exempt areas with no earned income; elderly or disabled persons with no earned income; migrant and seasonal farm workers with no earned income; and homeless individuals.

Recently the state re-checked the effectiveness of simplified reporting. During a six-month period this past year, if the state had not implemented simplified reporting, the number of cases in error would have been almost double, explains Marybeth Schaadel of the New Jersey Department of Human Services.

## Error Review Committee

The Error Review Committee has been in full-swing for close to four years. The members are subject-matter experts - state assistant directors and deputy directors who represent policy, program, systems, quality control and payment accuracy. They only need to meet now when there is an error; previously they met every week. Although their gathering has decreased because the error rate is especially good, they meet as soon as an error notice is issued - before it is sent to the appropriate local agency.

The committee examines error cases from all angles. The group tries to determine the causes of the errors and what course of action will prevent them from recurring.

As a result of the efforts of the Error Review Committee, errors have been significantly reduced in the areas of the standard utility allowance, income calculation and ineligibility, Marybeth says.

## Case Accuracy Reviews

The Case Accuracy Reviews, conducted by quality control reviewers, focused on the accuracy of income in a sampling of cases from each of the local agencies and were conducted for a six-month period, to establish a base line of performance and an improvement goal for each local agency.

Implemented July through December 2001, the Case Accuracy Reviews really prioritized payment accuracy within the local agencies, which were appreciative of the mechanism to review and make corrections to cases, says Marybeth.

## Interview Training

A professionally-produced video on interviewing also has been an effective tool in reducing the error rate, says Marybeth. The video, used in training sessions for all employees of the 21 local agencies, identifies common mistakes made by eligibility specialists during the interview. The script was developed by a contracted vendor.

## Error Rate Goals for Local Agencies

Data from the Case Accuracy Reviews was used to establish a benchmark and target performance measures for each local agency (see "Case Accuracy Reviews"). The local agencies had to meet the following criteria:

- Submit and comply with the content of a corrective action plan based on errors found by quality control;
- Submit and comply with the content of a corrective action plan based on deficiencies found by management evaluation; and
- Participate in 80 percent of training provided by state and local agency staff and a contracted trainer.

The local agencies also had to meet an accuracy benchmark. For example, if the county had an accuracy rate of 94 percent prior to this initiative, it had to achieve an accuracy rate that was at least 97 percent the following year.

This activity really helped to focus the local agencies on what they needed to accomplish, says Marybeth. She adds, establishing an error rate goal for the local agencies created a competition and motivated improvement, which made the local agencies want to be better. The extra attention given to cases also allowed the local agencies to review how efficiently cases were being processed.

To swap information, contact: Marybeth Schaadel, New Jersey Department of Human Services, (609) 588-2197, [mary.schaadel@dhs.state.nj.us](mailto:mary.schaadel@dhs.state.nj.us).

# 10 Keys to Payment Accuracy

To help state and local agencies improve and maintain excellent payment accuracy rates, the Payment Accuracy Workgroup, made up of the payment accuracy coordinators from each of the FNS regional offices, developed a publication called *Keys to Payment Accuracy*. The handbook identifies 10 key strategies that state and local agencies throughout the country have found useful in maintaining high accuracy rates. Here's a sample of what you'll find in *Keys to Payment Accuracy*.

## 1 Commitment

Dedication to excellence leads to excellence. The message of payment accuracy must be articulated to all stakeholders within an organization. Performance goals must be set each year and management must demonstrate commitment to make the goals a reality.

## 2 Communication

New technology and faster access to information transforms the way we do business. It is important, however, to remember the basics, such as: objectives and performance expectations must be communicated clearly to all parties of an organization; performance must be monitored and communicated to staff; it must be conveyed to staff that they are knowledgeable partners and their views are valued; and front-line staff must be provided with useful tools.

**Keys to Payment Accuracy** can be downloaded from the FNS Payment Accuracy/Quality Control Partner Web at [www.fnspartner.usda.gov](http://www.fnspartner.usda.gov).

## 3 Error Review Committee

Error review committees can be found in many forms. Typically, they consist of representatives from quality control, corrective action, policy, systems, training and field operations. Error review committees are most effective when:

- The members are senior staff who review both active and negative error cases.
- Eligibility specialists and supervisors are required to participate in committee meetings when a case they are responsible for is found to contain an error.
- The office responsible for the error is required to prepare a corrective action plan after the committee review is final.
- The committee makes recommendations for corrective actions, and state leadership holds staff accountable for performance.

Error review committees have experienced positive changes in working relationships and communications among their organizations and improved active and negative error rates.

## 4 Data Analysis

Knowing the root cause of a problem, when the error occurred and what caused the error is crucial to correcting the problem and preventing recurrence. Several steps can be taken to ensure a complete understanding of errors: gather data from all available sources; monitor data continuously; identify the source of the problem; and determine whether analysis reports are providing useful information.

Although quality control provides substantial information, there are other important data sources, including case reviews, customer complaints, fair hearings and management evaluation reviews. It also is very important to have a thorough understanding of how quality control decides which error code to use. Communication between corrective action and quality control is essential.

## 5 Corrective Action Plans

Documenting corrective actions and sharing the plan with all levels of staff confirms top-level commitment to improve payment accuracy. Developing a plan is not complex. The sample format provided in *Keys to Payment Accuracy* helps the plan developer to include the elements required by federal regulations. Each corrective action initiative should include:

- Thorough description of the deficiency, including associated error element and root cause →

## ...10 Keys

- Magnitude of the deficiency and geographic extent
- Data source used to identify the deficiency and magnitude
- Complete description of the corrective action initiative developed to resolve the deficiency
- Tasks, time frames and person(s) responsible for each step of implementation
- Description of the plan to monitor implementation
- Evaluation of the initiative's effectiveness
- Current status of the initiative
- Name and title of the person who has overall responsibility for the initiative



### Policy Options, Waivers and Initiatives

Stay up-to-date on policy news. Relevant information is easily accessible through the FNS website and FNS regional office staff and organizations such as the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA). When policy alternatives are being considered, vigorous discussion among all the stakeholders can be of great value. By including various viewpoints on how a potential change might impact the error rate and access, the best possible alternatives can be chosen. Training on any policy change also is of great importance to assure that the change is understood and will be applied correctly.



### Case Reviews

- There are a number of different approaches to case review; for example, short-term projects, sweeps, peers, supervisory, third-party, new eligibility specialist and targeted.
- It is not productive to conduct case reviews if errors are not analyzed to determine their causes and the results are not shared.
- The process simply becomes a "find and fix", and the next time the case is touched, the same error could easily be repeated.
- *Keys to Payment Accuracy* provides tips that can help to make case reviews most effective.



### Training

- *Keys to Payment Accuracy* offers information on a variety of creative and low-cost training methods: train-the-trainer, centralized, advisory team, unit, regional, newsletter, computer-based and workshop.



### Employee Recognition

- Even relatively small rewards can have a huge positive effect. Some inexpensive ways to reward employees: individual certificate or note from management, unannounced award, annual luncheon, recognition in newsletter, lunchtime picnic and group breakfast.

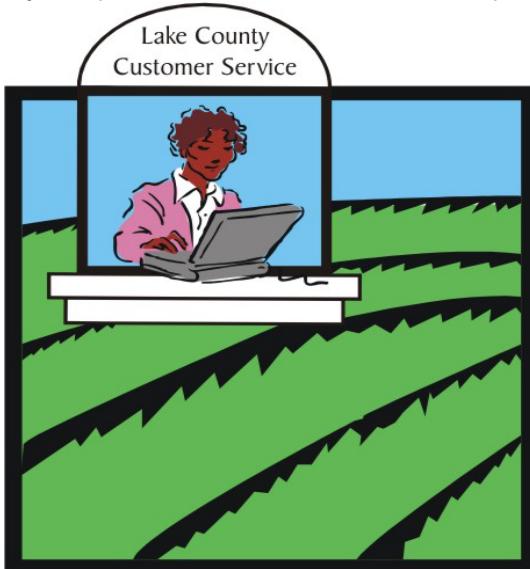


### Change Centers

- Centralized change centers were created originally to handle reported changes. With the advent of simplified reporting, the usefulness of a change center has been questioned. However, offices are not disbanding their change centers and units. Many have begun to process computer alerts and matches and handle customer phone calls. The benefits of change centers include reduced errors, reduced (or redistributed) workloads, prompt response to phone calls/voice mail messages, improved customer service, measurable improvement in work performance and dedicated phone lines. The mere presence of a change center or unit should reinforce change reporting with customers.

Change centers vary in terms of the degree of automation, staffing configuration and geographic coverage. Change centers have operated as two-person units or larger scale as 15-person centers. In some locations, eligibility specialists, who are not part of the change center or unit, are prohibited from accepting changes. When implementing a change center or unit, applicants and recipients must be notified. Multiple messages seem to be the most effective way to do this. Flyers, magnets and other materials help to ensure success in advertising the telephone number.

## Helping Seasonal and Migrant Farm Workers



While the majority of the farm worker families live in Lake County, Montana, only a few weeks each year, they fulfill an important role in the economic structure of the county. Through their labor, the Mexican migrants picked 3 million pounds of cherries during the 2004 growing season, for example.

To help the farm workers, the Lake County Office of Public Assistance (LCOPA) brings the Food Stamp Program and other assistance quite literally to the field. And in spite of the fact that its "satellite field office" is under several tents and awnings, which are assembled and disassembled daily, LCOPA staff have been issuing timely, accurate benefits to more than 400 seasonal farm worker households during a two-week period each July, says Marilyn Becker, agency director.

Years ago, farm workers had to apply for benefits at the local agency, and it wasn't working well for the customers, growers and the agency. LCOPA staff tried group interviews. All the paperwork was done together as a way to try and speed up the process, but it took farm workers out of the orchards during picking hours. It also proved difficult to conduct group interviews with so many non-English-speaking people, Marilyn says.

"Although the growers wanted the farm workers to receive benefits," she continues, "they wanted us to find a way to issue benefits that wouldn't take the workers out of the fields during the most critical work hours of the day. For most households, there really

wasn't anyone who could go to the office to do the paperwork. Everyone, even grandma and grandpa, picks cherries," she says. "We were suddenly serving an influx of hundreds of people. Not only was our lobby full, but there was a line out the door, and people hanging out all around town just waiting. Our regular clients felt that they couldn't get help when they needed it," Marilyn adds.

So LCOPA staff met with growers to talk about the best hours of operation. Because early morning is prime picking time, and cherries aren't picked mid-day when it's hottest, LCOPA set up around 10:00 a.m. They found a big open field, right next to the packing warehouse, in the midst of the orchards, as close as they could get to where customers were, and they set up shop with a laptop computer.

Last year they added a high-speed telephone connection and more computers, and the telephone company strung lines and put in a telephone pole in the middle of the field. With these capabilities, LCOPA staff processed applications immediately, and by using laptops that were connected to the mainframe in Helena, were able to authorize benefits right away, Marilyn says.

To further improve its customer service, LCOPA partnered with other agencies. As a result, people can get food stamps and medical services, advice →

### Food Stamp Message Reaches 500,000 Philadelphians

The advertisement on the next page appeared in a recent issue of a consumer newsletter published by the Philadelphia Gas Works. The Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger (GPCAH) had worked with the natural gas utility to design the food stamp message, which was inserted into envelopes with gas bills and delivered to 500,000 households in Philadelphia during the course of a few weeks.

At the time of this writing, it was too soon to determine the outcome of this outreach activity, but hotline staff for GPCAH reported that they had already received a lot of calls, most of them from →

## ...Lake Co. farm workers

And in spite of the fact that its "satellite field office" is under several tents and awnings, which are assembled and disassembled daily, LCOPA staff have been issuing timely, accurate benefits to more than 400 seasonal farm worker households during a two-week period each July, says Marilyn Becker, agency director.

on which orchards are hiring and where the cherries are ripe, gas vouchers and commodities to tide families over until their food stamp benefits are available, all in one place.

While there isn't any "extra" funding for staff or equipment for the short-term customer demand, LCOPA manages to hire two temporary interpreters. It also calls upon its partners during the harvest; a bilingual eligibility specialist from a nearby county helps out. Together they assist the LCOPA eligibility specialist with the certification interviews. Co-workers cover the ongoing caseload of the field eligibility specialist.

Immigration status also was a challenge at first. LCOPA staff was provided with training on counterfeit documents, and over the years has gotten very good at identifying them, says Marilyn. For a couple years, an immigration agent had run all the documents for LCOPA. Now it has computerized information on people who already have been identified as having provided counterfeit documents.

Technology-wise, the biggest problem LCOPA experienced was 100-degree temperatures; three laptop computers burned out the first year, running all day.

In spite of the tests faced, the satellite field operation should earn an A+. Expedited food stamps are available as early as the very next day, says Marilyn.

elderly and disabled gas customers, and most callers appeared to be eligible for the Food Stamp Program.

GPCAH unites community-based food providers, communities of faith, health professionals, public food assistance providers, students and others to address issues related to hunger and malnutrition in southeastern Pennsylvania. Its mission is to increase hunger awareness, influence public policy and support leadership development and grassroots empowerment.

**To swap information, contact: Tanya Thampi-Sen, Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger, (215) 430-0555, tsen@hungercoalition.org.**

6★Excellent Service for All

Obviously this benefits the customers. It's also been positive for the orchard growers because it saves yet more time. It also means that food banks don't have to provide groceries to sustain families for five days. It is an effective way to serve a large number of people.

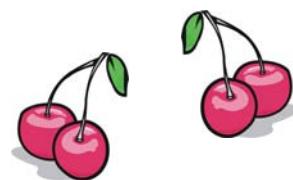
"Every year we have a meeting and discuss what has worked well, what we can do differently. Every year we tweak it, and improve it and find a way to do something better. We get smarter and more efficient every year," Marilyn exclaims.

"You would not believe what goes on here. We're a small office. It's amazing to deal with that many people and provide timely, accurate benefits. And this staff does it year after year after year."

The care and concern for the farm worker population has not gone unnoticed. The Lake County Office of Public Assistance received the 2004 Governor's Award for Excellence in Performance.

Incidentally, when someone is hired at LCOPA, they are told from the get-go, no vacation during the cherry harvest...

**To swap information, contact: Marilyn Becker,  
Lake County Office of Public  
Assistance, (406) 883-  
7830, mbecker@mt.gov.**



## Get help with your grocery bills!

If you are having a hard time juggling your bills, you may be surprised to find out you could be eligible for help with groceries. If you qualify, you will receive food stamp benefits on an Access card that works just like a bank debit card.

Check the chart at right for income guidelines. For more information, call the Food Stamp Information Hotline operated by the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger at 215-430-0556. Details are also available on the organization's Web site: [www.hungercoalition.org](http://www.hungercoalition.org).

### INCOME GUIDELINES

Household Size	Monthly Income
1	\$1,009
2	\$1,354
3	\$1,698
4	\$2,043
5	\$2,387
6	\$2,732
7	\$3,076
8	\$3,421

Note: Higher income limits may apply for households with elderly or disabled residents.

Note: GPCA received a grant in the amount of \$310,882 from USDA to conduct outreach activities from October 2002 through September 2004. It also receives outreach funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, and the monies are matched by USDA.

# National Hunger Awareness Day

The U.S. Department of Agriculture participated in events June 7, 2005, with America's Second Harvest and other faith- and community-based organizations throughout the country, commemorating the 4<sup>th</sup> annual National Hunger Awareness Day.

National Hunger Awareness Day provides a special opportunity for public and private partnerships at the national and local levels to show what Americans can do to combat hunger in their communities.

Staff of the FNS, Mid-Atlantic Region participated in activities throughout the region.

## Shining the Light on Hunger

The hunger awareness event in **Washington, DC**, featured speakers from neighboring churches and community groups, a convocation service that included dozens of leaders from world religious organizations and a walk from the **Church of the Annunciation** to the Washington National Cathedral, lead by **Yvette Jackson**, regional administrator.

## Open House

It was open house at the **York County Food Bank** in Pennsylvania where many local businesses, agencies, legislative offices and the media received a guided tour and lunch (for purchase). **Bill Kluxen** and **Marian Wig**, both of the Food Stamp Program, provided food stamp information and promotional items.

## Summit on Childhood Hunger

During the two-hour summit at the **Food Bank of Delaware**, **Jim Harmon**, Special Nutrition Programs, was among the panelists who spoke on childhood hunger, and **Kim Jabat**, Public Affairs, provided information on FNS programs.

## Sort-A-Thon

**Tim Walsh**, Public Affairs, and Towson Field Office staff **Sally Duncan**, **Joe Pecora**, **Kirk Wilborne**, **Tina Landis** and **Keith Wyatt**, helped to salvage, sort and pack food items at the **Maryland Food Bank** in Baltimore.



## Agency Conference of the Virginia Peninsula Food Bank

The event at the **Chestnut Memorial United Methodist Church** in **Newport News**, highlighted Governor Warner's promotion of healthy lifestyles, "Healthy Virginians: A Healthy Life is a Better Life". **Irene Goins** of the Richmond Field Office was available to provide information on FNS programs.

## Honors for Community Partners

Pittsburgh Field Office staff **Bill Jenkins** and **Tom Landish** provided program information at an awards luncheon hosted by the **Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank** in honor of local businesses, service organizations and media outlets that have shown a substantial long-term commitment in the fight against hunger.

## Barbeque for Supporters

**Chester County Cares Food Bank** and two national food industry chains served up a barbecue to supporters and clients of the food bank. **Alice Kandray** of the Philadelphia Field Office passed along information on FNS programs.

## You Make a Difference

The event, sponsored by the **Chesapeake Food Bank** in Virginia, honored companies that made a difference in fighting hunger and poverty. **Donna Hamblet** of the Richmond Field Office was among the attendees.

## New Jersey

# Grant Project Simplifies Application Process and Much More

The U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded the New Jersey Department of Human Services (NJDHS) a participation grant of \$848,570 in June 2003. New Jersey was one of five states that received funds that year, to simplify food stamp application and eligibility systems through the use of innovative technological strategies – projects authorized by the 2002 Farm Bill.

The three-year project began in July 2003, and NJDHS expects that its well-timed and well-designed mix of outreach and marketing activities will increase participation by 10 percent, or 14,200 households. An average monthly benefit of \$170, or \$2.2 million for the added households, will enable the state's poor to avoid hunger and other health problems and help them to maintain housing and meet other pressing needs. The local economy also will benefit from the infusion of additional income that can be directed to purchase other goods and services.

Three partners play key roles in the participation project – Mercer Street Friends, a private, not-for-profit agency, the Mercer County Board of Social Services and the New Jersey Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program at Rutgers University.

The project has six key components and focuses on vulnerable or underserved populations: the elderly, Hispanics, immigrants and the working poor.

### **Interactive Voice Response System and Reminder Call Obtain informational assistance through a single toll-free number and receive an automated reminder of the interview appointment**

The interactive voice response system has been available since September 2004, in English and Spanish. Twenty-four hours a day, 7 days a week, customers can obtain key information on the Food Stamp Program, such as the eligibility requirements and how to apply. The system has a simple logic tree that helps callers to select their points of interest and their language preference, which will be expanded eventually to 10 languages.

The system also gives customers a unique option. A day before the interview, the interactive voice response system calls a customer-provided telephone number, between 5 p.m. and 8 p.m., and reminds the customer of her/his scheduled appointment with the local agency.

### **Outreach Pilot Reach the elderly**

An outreach worker was hired by project partner, Mercer Street Friends, and is pre-screening\* at 20 sites throughout Mercer County, New Jersey.

An outreach worker with another project partner, Mercer County Board of Social Services, will make presentations to organizations and facilities frequented by seniors. Pre-screenings are tracked to determine whether applications were completed, and project partner, Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program at Rutgers University, will evaluate the impact of pre-screening.

Note: \*Prior to receiving the participation grant from USDA, NJDHS and Mercer Street Friends developed a pre-screening tool, which can be operated without internet access. The calculator, created through a popular spreadsheet software program, also is available through the NJDHS website and can link with the five-page on-line food stamp application.

New Jersey was one of five states that received funds from USDA to reduce the complexity of the food stamp application and eligibility systems.

## **Application and Interview Tool**

### **Complete the application and the interview tool on-line**

A five-page food stamp application, which can be downloaded and printed, was posted to the NJDHS website in English, Spanish, Arabic, French-Creole, Gujarati, Korean, Polish and Portuguese.

Additionally, through [www.njhelps.org](http://www.njhelps.org), New Jerseyans can apply for the Food Stamp Program. Users type information directly into an on-line form, review and edit at several key summary points and transmit the information directly to the local agency. The on-line application system also provides information about the Food Stamp Program, submission and enrollment processes and customer rights. After sending the application on-line, the data is encrypted and e-mailed to the appropriate local agency.

In the future, an on-line interview tool, based on the full-length food stamp application, will be available in English and Spanish, and it will present customers with a summary fact sheet at key points; prompt for edits as needed; provide the customer with a unique password and PIN number, which will allow them to end the application process and return at a later date; detail the next steps with a summary page of what happens next; provide customer rights on filing for benefits; include a question on the validity of the information; and advise of on-line security and risks.

## **Eligibility Pre-Screening**

### **Determine potential eligibility on-line**

Customers can access an active pre-screening tool, [www.njhelps.org](http://www.njhelps.org), and find out whether they may be eligible for the Food Stamp Program, Medicaid, health insurance, LIHEAP, TANF, General Assistance, child care assistance and assistance for relative caregivers. This tool links to the on-line food stamp application and also with the five-page application that can be downloaded and printed.

## **Marketing Initiative**

### **Increase participation**

NJDHS launched a large-scale campaign, *Everyday people use food stamps every day*, which was funded with food stamp reinvestment dollars. The various components are timed to other pieces of the participation grant and include advertisements in English and Spanish on buses and radio stations and in newspapers that are popular among seniors, Hispanics and African-Americans.

## **Pre-Screening Evaluation**

### **Measure impact**

A multi-tiered system was developed to evaluate whether pre-screened customers actually apply for benefits and the applications are approved or denied.

**To swap information, contact:** Marybeth Schaadel, New Jersey Department of Human Services, (609) 588-2197, [mary.schaadel@dhs.state.nj.us](mailto:mary.schaadel@dhs.state.nj.us).

Note: Information for this article was obtained from the NJDHS proposal for the participation grant and the project's quarterly progress report for January through March 2005.

The four other states agencies that received a participation grant from USDA in 2003 are: Virginia Department of Social Services, Rhode Island Department of Human Services, Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services and Oklahoma Department of Human Services.

## **York County, Pennsylvania**

### **Informing LIHEAP Customers of Food Stamps**

When applications for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) are received by mail at the York County Assistance Office in Pennsylvania, the eligibility staff checks to see whether the applicants are on other assistance programs. If not already on food stamps, they will get a letter that advises of their potential eligibility for the program, along with an application, a postage-paid envelope and the web address for the state on-line application system, COMPASS.

The income limits for LIHEAP and food stamps are similar. If the office that processes the LIHEAP application has access to food stamp information, then implementing this outreach activity is an even bigger snap. The additional time to screen is negligible, and the only other costs are the return envelope and postage.

This outreach effort, which is in its second year, has been very successful overall, says Fred Landau, executive director ➤ PAGE 12 ➤

# A Dozen Outreach Lessons - The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

- 1) **The goal is enrollment.** It's important to distinguish between the goal and the tools for reaching the goal. Conducting outreach is about more than distributing posters and flyers and broadcasting public service announcements. These are important, traditional outreach tools. But, the point is to sign up eligible people for benefits. Outreach efforts should lead people to where they can get more information and enrollment assistance.
- 2) **Keep it simple.** Both the message and the process (for applying and retaining a benefit) must be easy to understand and follow.
- 3) **The messenger can be as important as the message itself.** Work with organizations and leaders who already have earned the trust of the community.
- 4) **Present facts. Debunk myths. Speak the language.** Outreach materials and outreach workers have to "know their stuff". They should spell out basic information and address common misconceptions in a straightforward manner. Avoid using jargon – but know how to decipher or interpret "program-speak" to help potential beneficiaries understand what they are eligible to receive and how to get it.
- 5) **Remember why they rob banks.** As the legendary story goes – when asked why he robbed banks, Willie Sutton responded, "because that's where the money is." Identify where the target population lives, works, plays and seeks services – and reach out. And don't forget about the places where you can find their family, friends and others who influence decision-making and behavior. There is no "one place" to go to or "one strategy" to try – effective outreach covers as many bases as possible and multiple strategies proceed on parallel tracks.
- 6) **Direct, community-based assistance is key.** No matter how easy the process, there always will be people who need and want direct help completing applications, understanding correspondence and otherwise navigating the system. Often, community-based organizations with which beneficiaries are familiar and comfortable will be in the best position to provide this help.
- 7) **Avoid promising something you can't deliver.** If someone might be eligible for benefits, encourage him or her to apply. Even when someone's income seems a little too high, deductions or special rules sometimes can help them qualify. Be honest and realistic about the benefits available, how difficult the application process will be and how long it will take. If a government agency is charged with determining eligibility, be careful not to guarantee what any particular person can expect to receive. To the extent possible, assure that you will be there to help throughout the process and to troubleshoot if there are snags.
- 8) **Create a mechanism for regular follow-up.** Communicating with applicants you've helped while they await an eligibility decision can be reassuring and can identify whether additional information is needed and deadlines are met. If benefits must be renewed sometime down the road, having a system to alert beneficiaries will facilitate retention.
- 9) **Pay attention to the special needs of the population you wish to reach.** Are you prepared to help individuals who have low literacy skills? limited English proficiency? special hearing or visual needs? special health care needs? transportation challenges?
- 10) **Link with outreach efforts to provide other benefits to the same population.** Eligible families and individuals are likely to have a variety of needs and may not be aware of all opportunities to get help. Coordinating outreach can provide a more robust package of support and can help avoid asking people to give the same information multiple times.
- 11) **Work to promote system integration.** Coordinating efforts "inside the system" is crucial. Information that one agency may have on hand can help to qualify someone for another important benefit. A systems approach can decrease the paperwork, time and costs associated with securing and retaining benefits for beneficiaries and program administrators.
- 12) **Track your efforts.** Keeping track of the number of people you assist and whether they have been able to obtain the benefits they were seeking can provide essential information. This is key to learn what strategies are most effective with particular populations in particular communities. A record of success in connecting families and individuals to benefits can help in gaining support for future, expanded outreach efforts. Information about procedural bottlenecks can be used to push for further simplification of the system.

## FOOD STAMP PROGRAM Products★Services

### Public Service Announcements to Air Again

As mentioned in the March 2005 issue of this publication, public service announcements (PSAs), developed by FNS to increase participation in the Food Stamp Program, will air on radio stations during August and September. The PSAs, one component of the FNS food stamp outreach campaign, are aimed at increasing participation among the elderly, the working poor, immigrants and the general audience.

The messages in English will be heard through 31 media markets and four state networks. The Spanish ads will air through 10 of these 31 media markets. Within the states in the Mid-Atlantic Region, the English-version of the PSAs can be heard in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Norfolk and Baltimore on the stations and at the times listed below, and the messages will provide the national toll-free number of the Food Stamp Program (1-800-221-5689).

Please take advantage of this opportunity to provide information about the nutritional benefits of the Food Stamp Program, by conducting outreach activities concurrently with the PSA schedule. To view and download a copy of the PSA scripts for the food stamp outreach campaign, go to this FNS web address: [www.fns.usda.gov/cga/radio.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/radio.htm).

Station	Established Spots	Start Time	End Time
Philadelphia	KYW-AM	16	6 a.m.
	KYW-AM	12	10 a.m.
	KYW-AM	8	6 a.m.
	KYW-AM	16	6 a.m.
	WBEB-FM	6	6 a.m.
	WBEB-FM	14	10 a.m.
	WBEB-FM	12	6 a.m.
	WDAS-FM	8	6 a.m.
	WDAS-FM	16	10 a.m.
	WDAS-FM	8	6 a.m.
	WJJZ-FM	16	10 a.m.
	WJJZ-FM	10	3 p.m.
	WJJZ-FM	12	6 a.m.
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Baltimore	WBAL-AM	10	6 a.m.
	WBAL-AM	20	10 a.m.
	WBAL-AM	5	6 a.m.
	WERQ-FM	8	7 p.m.
	WERQ-FM	26	6 a.m.
	WERQ-FM	8	6 a.m.
	WLIF-FM	8	6 a.m.
	WLIF-FM	16	10 a.m.
	WLIF-FM	9	6 a.m.
	WPOC-FM	16	10 a.m.
	WPOC-FM	8	6 a.m.
	WWIN-FM	8	7 p.m.
	WWIN-FM	26	6 a.m.
	WWIN-FM	16	6 a.m.

...Radio ads

Station	Established Spots	Start Time	End Time
Pittsburgh	KDKA-AM	16	6 a.m.
	KDKA-AM	12	5 a.m.
	WAMO-FM	20	6 a.m.
	WAMO-FM	18	10 a.m.
	WDSY-FM	13	6 a.m.
	WDSY-FM	16	10 a.m.
	WDVE-FM	20	10 a.m.
	WSHH-FM	16	6 a.m.
	WSHH-FM	20	10 a.m.
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Norfolk	WGH-FM	24	10 a.m.
	WGH-FM	8	6 a.m.
	WGH-FM	11	3 p.m.
	WKUS-FM	24	6 a.m.
	WKUS-FM	24	3 p.m.
	WOWI-FM	8	10 a.m.
	WOWI-FM	24	3 p.m.
	WWDE-FM	16	6 a.m.
	WXEZ-FM	24	6 a.m.
	WXEZ-FM	16	6 a.m.
	WXEZ-FM	24	3 p.m.
			7 p.m.

...LIHEAP

of the York County Assistance Office. So far this year, the office has received 6,500 LIHEAP applications, mailed more than 1,200 food stamp applications and opened between 225 and 250 cases as a result of the activity, Fred says. (The local agency tracks the paper applications by marking the return envelopes; applicants also have the option to apply on-line, so the outcome may be even greater.)

An additional benefit of this activity is a reduction in payment errors. If a LIHEAP applicant is already receiving food stamp benefits, the local agency checks to be sure the household receives the appropriate Standard Utility Allowance, explains Fred.

To swap information, contact: **Fred Landau, York County Assistance Office, (717) 771-1257, flandau@state.pa.us.**

Note: The county assistance offices in Adams, Beaver, Mercer and Washington counties also have done similar projects. For more information on the activities of these local agencies in Pennsylvania, contact: Gayle Bentz, Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, (717) 787-9006, gbentz@state.pa.us.

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