

15 WAYS TO PROMOTE FOOD STAMPS IN YOUR COMMUNITY



INTRODUCTION

Despite California's current affluence and its legendary agricultural abundance, millions of the state's low-income residents, including a disproportionately large number of children, have too little nutritious food to eat.

In 1995-96, one out of six Californians lived below the poverty line (\$13,332 for a family of three). The share of the state's residents living in poverty increased by 28% between 1989 and 1996.

While poverty strikes with equal force regardless of where someone lives in California, hunger amidst plenty in the state's abundant rural heartland is especially harsh. Imperial, Fresno and Tulare counties all have poverty rates above 28%.

The consequences of hunger go far beyond a few missed meals. Children who do not eat enough nutritious food risk serious limitations on their growth and development. Studies show they have lower achievement test scores, higher rates of tardiness and absenteeism, and more disciplinary and health problems. In fact, children who are hungry experience twice as many specific health problems than children whose families are not hungry. Hunger, an avoidable and wholly solvable symptom of poverty, is threatening our state's future.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is the nation's single most important program in the fight against hunger. By putting purchasing power into the hands of the hungry, the Food Stamp Program improves nutrition, promotes sound household budgeting, and provides people with low incomes access to nutritious, affordable food.

WHY ARE FOOD STAMPS IMPORTANT?

Food stamps provide a significant boost to the budgets of low-income households. Even a single parent working part-time at minimum wage can increase total income by one-third. Households are issued a monthly food stamp allotment — the maximum allotment for a three-person household with zero net income is \$329. The average benefit for a three-person household is \$218.

Research shows that food stamps make a significant difference in the dietary well-being of poor children, by reducing deficiencies in food energy, calcium, iron and zinc. Research also shows that people using food stamps buy more nutrition per dollar of food stamps than consumers who do not use food stamps.

However, many who could benefit from the Food Stamp Program aren't participating. Many people — including many working families — are eligible for food stamps but do not know they are. While 2.16 million Californians received food stamps in December of 1998, a recent USDA study estimates that approximately 2.2 million eligible Californians do not participate in the FSP.

In 1994, California had the second lowest participation rate of any state in the country – 57%, compared to a national average of 71%.

Participation dropped 30.5% in California between March 1994 and July 1998.

Fewer poor people are receiving the benefits of participation – in 1995, 72% of all people in poverty received food stamps, but by 1997, that number had dropped to only 62%.

Recently, California Food Policy Advocates conducted a series of focus groups that included current and former food stamp participants and people eligible for, but not participating in, the program. These focus groups identified the following challenges in making the program accessible to all:

A lack of awareness and limited availability of program information.

Misinformation about eligibility requirements with no organized information dissemination system.

A stigma associated with using food stamps – as a “welfare” program, and the assumption that people using food stamps were selling or otherwise defrauding the program.

No positive messages regarding food stamp users.

The overwhelming reason people do not participate in the Food Stamp Program is because they do not believe they are eligible. People eligible for food stamps may know of the program, but they do not see themselves as eligible. In fact, a 1986 study noted that nearly 40% of those eligible but not participating in the Food Stamp Program incorrectly believed their income or assets were too high.

The time has come to reverse years of declining knowledge of, and participation in, the Food Stamp Program. The single most important thing advocates can do is to provide accurate information about program eligibility and resources.

That makes our message a simple one:

Food Stamps can help put food on your table. Many people are eligible — if you need some help in getting enough food for your family, apply for the Food Stamp Program. Food stamps work.

15 WAYS

OUTREACH STRATEGIES

There are many ways to encourage people to participate in the Food Stamp Program. This guide outlines some successful strategies used in a variety of communities. Not all strategies work everywhere, and some strategies take more effort than others, but they have all been successful in fighting hunger by encouraging people to participate in the Food Stamp Program.

GET THE WORD OUT!

Distribute accurate information about the food stamp program. The most successful form of outreach is personal contact — word of mouth, direct solicitation, and information coming from a trusted source. Community groups can play a vital role in getting accurate, useful information into the hands of people needing food assistance. Keep in mind your message and tailor it, if necessary, to the community you are reaching. Many of the outreach materials in this kit can be found on our website (www.cfpa.net) and fine-tuned for your community.

- 1** Provide flyers to charitable food programs, especially churches with food pantries, soup kitchens, food giveaway programs, and food closets.
- 2** Provide flyers to community based nonprofits that serve low-income families and individuals. Some examples include: health centers, afterschool programs, tenant organizations, community centers and job training programs.
- 3** Include information, like flyers, as part of special events like those around the holidays — holiday food baskets, toy giveaways, and other events.

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- 4** Send a localized version of the public service announcements in this kit to local media like community newsletters, church bulletins and organizational newsletters.
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- 5** Encourage community leaders in low-income communities (like clergy, elected officials and activists) to promote the importance of food stamps and good nutrition.
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- 6** Don't forget to include local contact information. Outreach experts have learned that including a local contact number on all outreach materials is critical for success.
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- 7** Know of some key food stamp information that should be shared with others promoting the program? Give us a call, and we'll distribute the information.
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ENLIST SOME HELP!

Work with community partners. While individual contact and basic informational materials help address some of the ignorance about the Food Stamp Program, you need not do all the work alone. One successful strategy developed by other outreach efforts has been to get information out through existing networks. Use both likely and unlikely partners. Be creative! The following ideas can help you get started.

- 8** Set up information booths at health fairs and other community events. Better yet — partner with other groups sharing information targeted to the same population, especially Healthy Families, MediCal and school nutrition programs.
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- 9** Make presentations at community centers, places of worship, Head Start Centers and other sites where families gather.
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- 10** Include food stamp flyers and information in county mailings to MediCal and Healthy Families households. Call the county health department to inquire about inserting a stuffer into a mailing. If they're interested, give CFPA a call to get materials of the proper size.

11 Work with school officials to encourage the families of all students receiving free or reduced price meals to enroll in the Food Stamp Program. School districts and county social service departments can share information to make this process easier.

12 Contact local job training organizations, starting with the local Private Industry Council (PIC). Many of these organizations are helping people on assistance find and keep jobs (a target population for food stamp outreach), and should be interested in providing support services like food stamps to their clients. Work with them and the local food stamp office to make sure all eligible job training participants are participating in the FSP.

GIVE A HAND!

Assist interested individuals and families in applying.

13 Set up a Food Stamp Assistance Booth at the county welfare office. Trained volunteers (from churches, legal aid groups or local graduate/law schools) can provide information and help in filling out forms and tracking down necessary information. Check with the local welfare office first, and contact CFPA for trainings and materials.

14 Encourage your county eligibility workers to go out to where the people are. A surprising number of low-income families seeking medical assistance — at the county hospital, community clinics — are eligible for, but not receiving food stamps. The waiting rooms at these sites are good places for county eligibility workers to visit. Some counties have had great success in having eligibility workers come out to county hospitals, other benefit program offices and even community centers and soup kitchens.

15 Help identify potential applicants at community sites — like Healthy Start schools, community clinics and community centers. Staff an information booth with a volunteer familiar with the program, and provide applications, a phone for setting up appointments, and outreach materials. Work with your local food stamp office on this.

RESOURCES

There is no denying that the Food Stamp Program is complicated. It may seem intimidating, especially for people already busy running programs or volunteering. But you are not alone! Nor do you need to know everything about the program. Numerous resources exist to make your efforts more effective and easier. All these materials can be obtained by calling us at 415-777-4422 or 800-218-3663.

CFPA Flyers —We have a number of different flyers, in different formats, with different messages and in different languages.

A Brief Guide to the Food Stamp Program —For more information about the rules governing the Food Stamp Program, this easy-to-read guide covers eligibility information, income and resource guidelines, work requirements and more. Call 800-218-3663.

People's Guide —A comprehensive overview of all cash and noncash benefit programs for Californians, including county contact information. Call us for a copy, or check out the website: www.peoplesguide.org

USDA Hotline — Newly created by USDA as part of a developing food stamp outreach campaign. By calling 800-221-5689, and leaving a message, anyone can get some basic information and an application.

If you have any questions regarding Food Stamp Program policies, rules or legislation, please call CFPA at 415-777-4422.