

Serving Up Solutions

A Best Practices Guide to high-quality customer service in the Los Angeles County Food Stamp Program and policy recommendations to improve participation.

Serving Up Solutions

A Best Practices Guide to high-quality customer service in the Los Angeles County Food Stamp Program and policy recommendations to improve participation.

Rachel Lopez
Matthew Sharp

February 2004



This report produced in partnership with:

Congressional Hunger Center

The Congressional Hunger Center is a bi-partisan nonprofit anti-hunger organization located in Washington, D.C. The Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows Program is a year-long leadership development program that trains emerging leaders in the fight against hunger in the United States.

California Food Policy Advocates

California Food Policy Advocates is a public policy and advocacy organization whose mission is to improve the health and well-being of low-income Californians by increasing their access to nutritious and affordable food.

Los Angeles Regional Foodbank

The mission of the Los Angeles Regional Foodbank is to mobilize the resources of our community to fight hunger, the causes of hunger and the problems related to hunger. Los Angeles Regional Foodbank is a private, nonprofit, and charitable organization that has been serving the disadvantaged of our community for 29 years operating a charitable food distribution network that includes over 1,000 charities in Los Angeles County.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Western Regional Office

USDA's FNS mission is to reduce hunger and food insecurity by ensuring better access to food, a more healthful diet, and nutrition education for children and needy families. USDA nutrition assistance programs serve 40 million Americans per year and build a strong foundation to help families eat better, learn better, and earn better.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express our deepest appreciation to the United States Department of Agriculture Western Region, Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services, the Congressional Hunger Center, and the Los Angeles Regional Foodbank. These partners provided the funding and design for this project. We are especially grateful for the constant assistance and thoughtful advice of Bridget Purdue, Congressional Hunger Fellow and Alma Gonzalez, nutrition educator with Los Angeles Trade-Technical College.

We would like to single out a few of the many community partners who made this report possible. Frank Tamborello, Jeff Dronkers, Valerie Grab, Dennis Kao and Daniel Ichinose all helped gather and organize information. We are indebted to our government partners – Charlotte Lee, Melissa Daigle, Dennis Stewart, Olga Miranda and Joyce English – who graciously provided us with a window to look into their important work of operating and administering the Food Stamp Program. CFPA's Jessica Reich provided excellent structural and editorial revisions. As always, Timothy Feder and Public Media Center provided invaluable design and production assistance.

Finally, we would like to dedicate this report to the over 200 "real people" who offered a few minutes of time while waiting in line at a food pantry, WIC clinic or DPSS office. We hope the recommendations enclosed in this report will ease their path to feeding their families.

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Summary of Recommendations	3
Introduction	7
Replicating Best Practices	11
Improving County Procedures	15
Strengthening Accountability	35
Appendices	41

Executive Summary

Despite their eligibility for vital nutrition assistance, too many low-income residents of Los Angeles County are not participating in the federally-funded Food Stamp Program. This report is designed to assist local partners to increase participation. Its release is timed to coincide with implementation of recent legislative improvements scheduled to take effect in 2004, as well as increased outreach and reduced stigma for participants. A key ingredient to increasing participation is sensitive, client-oriented delivery of the program, through Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) offices. Through replicating the best practices of model offices, improving County procedures, and strengthening accountability, DPSS can close the food assistance gap for hungry families. Deepening relationships with close partners is critical to implementing the following recommendations.

Replicating Best Practices

Two model food stamp offices – West Valley (Chatsworth) and Metro Special (just south of downtown Los Angeles) – provide a template for how caring, committed food stamp champions transmit the value of the Food Stamp Program to clients and staff. By focusing on the positive, connecting with local partners and improving the office environment, these leaders present a viable model for high-quality customer service. DPSS should take several steps to support and cultivate food stamp champions. Creating a food stamps ambassador to facilitate anti-hunger training, sharing of local "best practices", and mentoring staff across the county, will reward and encourage food stamp leadership, thus, making food stamps a priority in all District Offices.

Improving County Procedures

To support model offices, there are several steps DPSS can take to improve client's experiences, and ultimately, participation, in the Food Stamp Program. Observations gathered through conversations with over two hundred clients, community-based organizations

and a variety of food stamp partners suggest that DPSS can set the standard for leadership by enlarging smart customer service practices. Conducting targeted outreach, simplifying the application process, expanding accessibility to DPSS offices, supporting courteous client-staff transactions, and quickly remedying mistakes, will all contribute to higher participation. These improvements are broadly applicable to food stamp offices statewide and nationally, though the detailed recommendations are based on observations in Los Angeles County.

Strengthening Accountability

Several systems are currently in place to evaluate the delivery of food stamp benefits, mainly through ensuring accurate payments are provided to eligible recipients. USDA and the State of California should broaden these measures to capture a wider variety of client experiences, barriers and the perspective of eligible, non-participants. Adding customer service elements to the current accountability yardsticks will encourage administrative emphasis on providing clients with high-quality service. DPSS should amplify existing service standards and expectations to clients, staff and community partners to support higher performance.

Summary of Recommendations

During the Fall of 2003, Los Angeles Department of Public Social Services, California Food Policy Advocates, Los Angeles Regional Foodbank, Congressional Hunger Center and US Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Services, Western Region, jointly sponsored an examination of two exemplary food stamp offices: West Valley (Chatsworth) and Metro Special (south of downtown LA).

The inquiry sought to identify the elements of customer service that contributed to the offices' effectiveness. The report of that investigation generated multiple recommendations that are compiled in the report and organized in three categories.

The first group of recommendations contains personnel approaches and office practices adopted in the model offices that other locations might consider and are fully transferrable. The second category consists of practices that need county (DPSS) approval and leadership for replication. The third cluster of recommendations deals with strengthening accountability for customer service and requires either county, state or federal approval.

Replicating Best Practices at DPSS District Offices

The common threads between model offices include:

- Focusing on the positive
- Connecting with local partners
- Improving office atmosphere

Additional recommendations for DPSS include:

- Creating a Food Stamps Ambassador
- Developing standardized anti-hunger training for District Office staff
- Sharing and applauding innovative ideas and practices across District Offices
- Developing a formal mentoring program

The report recommends District offices replicate Five Best Practices:

- Initiating fundraisers
- Utilizing food stamp tables
- Posting food stamp bulletin boards
- Wearing huge buttons with ribbons
- Expanding local food stamp outreach

Improving County Procedures

Outreach Recommendations

DPSS leadership can reach underserved populations by:

- Identifying the specific populations for outreach
- Developing precisely-targeted outreach materials
- Using the extensive network of local partners

Efforts to enhance the role of local partners should include:

- Formalizing partnerships with the WIC program
- Using existing school-based resources
- Building on recent health insurance opportunities
- Establishing partnerships with the grocery industry

Evaluating outreach requires:

- Rewarding outcomes
- Rewarding depth
- Formalizing communications structures

Application Process Recommendations

Efforts to improve the application process include:

- Developing and distributing department-wide policy on documents

Managing complex regulations requires:

- Ensuring even-handed implementation of regulations
- Establishing constant point person for clarification

Reporting procedures can be improved by:

- Simplifying language on reports
- Establishing a tracking system for all reports
- Enhancing Central HelpLINE's role

Accessibility Recommendations

To serve limited English proficient applicants and clients, DPSS should:

- Use "Resolution Agreement" to improve procedures
- Automate all communications in the primary language requested

Child care services are essential to improved accessibility and recommendations include:

- Creating designated child care areas
- Seeking funding to improve the office environment for children

District Offices' should:

- Implement reasonable food policies

Office hours recommendations include:

- Expanding the pilot extended hours program to reach all clients in target District Offices.
- Expanding the number of District Offices open in the evening
- Expanding the use of face-to-face interviews
- Expanding use of appointments

Courtesy Standards Recommendations

Addressing staff levels by:

- Researching and publicizing staffing ratios
- Establishing a process to set staffing goals

Using technological improvements to:

- Taking advantage of existing District Office technology
- Equipping staff to use email
- Establishing voicemail

Improving training by:

- Identifying training needs through technology
- Involving the community in sharpening training

Supporting staff interaction by:

- Building teams among District Office employees
- Rewarding effective teamwork
- Scheduling more informal events

Improving office environments by:

- Identifying low-cost upgrades
- Adding colorful bulletin boards
- Re-organizing seating areas

Complaints & Appeals Recommendations

Oral Denials can be improved by:

- Providing all clients with written information

Compliance with Fair Hearings can be improved by:

- Adhering to and implement Fair Hearing decisions

Strengthening Accountability

To ensure more uniform service, USDA should:

Use error rates to:

- Identify yardsticks to measure customer service
- Expand bonus system to reward high-quality service

CDSS and USDA should expand Civil Rights/Program Access

Reviews by:

- Conducting separate reviews
- Using community partners when possible
- Improving the Program Access Reviews by:
 - √ Assessing the experience of non-participants and denied clients.
 - √ Investigating staffing ratios
 - √ Evaluating compliance with fair hearing procedures
 - √ Assessing additional key aspects of District Office operations
 - √ Including surprise visits

Accountability systems can be enhanced if CDSS and USDA:

- Use CBOs to strengthen the Review process and results
- Design reviews with community partners
- Involve community partners with corrective action plans

DPSS should improve personnel procedures by:

- Using technology to identify problematic trends
- Formalizing mentoring partnerships
- Amplifying customer service goals

Introduction

Los Angeles County: Enormous Nutrition Challenges and Resources to Meet the Need

More than 2.5 million residents of Los Angeles County were "touched by hunger" in 2002; 777,000 adults reported hunger or food insecurity that year and 1,734,000 additional people lived in those homes. These statistics from the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research underscore the importance of the federally funded Food Stamp Program to provide critical nutrition assistance to low-income families. Indeed, in August 2003, nearly 640,000 Los Angeles County residents received food stamp coupons worth about \$59 million. The program consistently makes the difference for families choosing between food and rent or between providing their children healthy food choices and paying medical bills.

Since the 1996 overhaul of the welfare system and plummeting cash assistance caseloads, participation in the Food Stamp Program has precipitously sunk, declining 37% in Los Angeles County from 1995-2003. State options to expand eligibility for food stamps, along with increasing numbers of working households eligible for nutrition assistance, has given the Food Stamp Program its own identity. According to recent USDA estimates, the program reaches only approximately half of those who may be eligible across Los Angeles County. Under-participation is also a national problem, with only a few states reaching over 90% of eligible households.

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) is the county agency responsible for administering several public assistance programs, including CalWORKs, Medi-Cal and Food Stamps. As the third largest welfare agency in the country, DPSS provides services and assistance to 1.9 million customers (out of a population of 9.8 million) and employs more than 13,000 employees in over 50 offices, covering more than 4,000 square miles. Of this employee base, nearly 8,000 are public contact "front-line" staff. In a county that is home to the largest immigrant

community in the nation, more than 40% of the population served by DPSS identifies a language other than English as their primary language.

Why Examine Customer Service?

Recent efforts to expand food stamp eligibility and benefits through state and federal legislation have not dramatically increased participation, particularly among the most underserved populations in Los Angeles County. In addition, efforts run mainly by food pantries to increase program awareness through marketing and outreach have failed to enroll large numbers of families. Participants frequently report finding the application process confusing, frustrating and less-than-inviting. Legal services attorneys, when asked their view on the persistent underutilization of food stamps, identified apparent patterns of denials, enormous local office discretion and a seeming lack of Eligibility Worker accountability. The common thread of all of these concerns is the nature and quality of what happens during the interpersonal delivery of the Food Stamp Program.

The Genesis of this Project

In 2001, the Los Angeles Regional Foodbank and Asian Pacific Health Care Venture received funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) to test an intensive outreach model. The goal was to enroll people likely to be eligible for, but not receiving, food stamps. This effort, known as the Food Stamp Outreach and Research Project (FSORP), trained outreach workers and developed software to determine eligibility. The workers were then placed at charitable food distribution sites throughout Los Angeles County.

Soon after beginning the project, it became clear that "back-end advocacy" (working with clients after the submission of applications) was necessary, consuming significant Foodbank staff time originally intended for outreach. Even so, by the end of the Los Angeles Regional Foodbank project, less than a quarter of all applicants who were initially screened and preliminarily determined eligible by the Food bank staff and software were actually approved for participation. Most were denied, with a few applications missing or terminated. Lack of accountability for processing the mail-in applications and uneven customer service at different DPSS offices were identified as two top barriers to application approval and, consequently, increasing participation.

At the same time, a food stamp outreach project was launched through Daughters of Charity Health Services to reach families at parochial schools and health clinics. The outreach efforts by Daughters of Charity and Asian Pacific Health Care Ventures were less successful than hoped, but successfully enrolled a higher number of applicants the Foodbank project. Numerous meetings to address under-participation were held,

bringing in other community groups such as the Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness, Asian Pacific American Legal Center and California Nutrition Network-Los Angeles Trade Tech College.

During spring 2003, USDA, LA County DPSS, California Food Policy Advocates and the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank submitted a proposal to secure a Congressional Hunger Fellow to examine "best practices in customer service". Rachel Lopez began working out of CFPA's Los Angeles office starting in August 2003. The observations and recommendations in this report are designed to assist DPSS, USDA and local partners in improving participation in the Food Stamp Program among hungry, underserved families in Los Angeles County. Additionally, we hope the framework for discussing customer service and these recommendations can be used statewide and nationally.

This report comes at an extremely important juncture for the Food Stamp Program in Los Angeles. During 2004, a number of important improvements will get underway. State legislation replaces monthly with quarterly reports and extends nutrition benefits for five additional months to welfare leavers. Owning a reliable car won't prevent hungry families from receiving benefits, and shiny new "California Advantage" EBT cards make their appearance this winter. The error rate is way down and interest from the grocery industry is up; the Food Stamp Program is developing its identity as an essential nutrition support for low-wage households.

Methodology

The project partners decided to begin with an analysis of two DPSS District Offices, identified by the Department as models where food stamps are a top priority for staff. The offices profiled are Metro Special (serving communities just south of downtown Los Angeles) and West Valley (serving the communities of Chatsworth, Canoga Park, Reseda and Northridge). To examine the best practices of the model offices, we spoke with clients, community partners and program administrators. For our interviews with clients, we developed four surveys for non-participants, current applicants, current recipients and denied clients.

To get a better understanding of the factors influencing participation, we interviewed over 200 clients at WIC clinics, pantries, and food stamp offices. We also spoke with a dozen community partners and stakeholders, including health care clinics, legal aid services, local advocacy groups and community food providers, such as pantries. During office visits, we monitored the application

process, observed client interviews and interviewed staff, including the District Director, Case Opening Clerks (COCs), Eligibility Workers, Customer Service Representatives and Receptionists. Finally, we evaluated several studies, documents, and analyses of the Food Stamp Program in Los Angeles, as well as statewide and nationally.

What the Report Covers

The report contains three sections: the first two highlight opportunities for DPSS, while the third section focuses on opportunities for the State of California and USDA.

- ▶ First, we identify the unique characteristics of the model offices and staff leadership;
- ▶ Second, we recommend improvements in county policy and local procedures that would contribute to improved customer service countywide;
- ▶ Third, we spotlight opportunities to strengthen the measurement of high-quality service.

Replicating Best Practices

District Offices, the front line for increasing food stamp participation, do not uniformly focus on the Food Stamp Program. Clients may receive benefits from one DPSS program, such as MediCal, but leave the office unaware that they may be eligible for food stamps. One former legal services advocate states, "Food stamps are not a priority in the offices." Organizations working to enroll potentially eligible families through mail-in applications and referrals have experienced uneven responses from District Offices; while some of these efforts were received with enthusiasm, many were met without strong cooperation.

DPSS selected two District Offices as good examples of putting Food Stamps at the forefront of their work. They suggested that practices and staff at the Metro Special (just south of downtown Los Angeles) and West Valley (Chatsworth) District Offices should be profiled as models for the county and state. After spending time at these offices, it quickly became clear that they have created a culture of caring very different from that found in many other District Offices—one that encourages and supports food stamp participation.

What sets these offices apart are food stamp champions who ensure that clients applying for food stamps receive adequate attention and assistance. These champions play several key roles:

✓ Focusing on the positive. The food stamp champions have the unique role of keeping co-workers focused on the goal: providing timely, high-quality services to families in need of assistance. Over years on the job, one former eligibility worker told us, line workers develop an expectation of suspecting and detecting fraud. Yet, the food stamp champions constantly remind their co-workers of the significant benefits that food stamps provide to the families they serve. This mantra allows the workers to feel good about providing benefits, instead of focusing just on fraud. These champions prove that amplifying food stamps does not come at the expense of fraud prevention and detection.

√ Connecting with local partners. Food stamp champions find opportunities to engage key neighborhood partners. All DPSS District Offices host monthly community meetings with local organizations, but not all local meetings are equally effective. Not only do local direct service organizations find the West Valley District Office meeting an excellent networking opportunity, but the food stamp champions also use it as an entrée to build relationships and strengthen ties to community partners doing referrals to DPSS services. For example, West Valley currently implements an outreach program a perfect connection for the emergency food providers and the District Office. In addition, food stamp champions are working with the Los Angeles Regional Foodbank to facilitate connections and relationships between the food stamp office and the local food pantry. Through these conversations, a more broad-based response to hunger in Los Angeles will emerge, bringing the public and private sector together in collaboration.

√ Improving the office atmosphere. Food stamp champions work to make their District Office pleasant for clients and staff alike. Metro Special and West Valley have created visibly more welcoming and inviting offices for clients. First-time visitors are greeted and provided immediate assistance and triage. When staffing was more generous, Metro Special staff literally wore food stamps on their sleeves, with buttons, balloons and flyers.

Framework to Replicate Best Practices

DPSS can take steps to encourage the development of more such food stamp champions throughout the county. In particular, the DPSS Food Stamp Program Manager already plays an enormous role in fostering food stamp leaders, stimulating commitment to nutrition and facilitating the linkages between food stamp offices and local partners. These activities can be formalized and broadened to ensure a champion is cultivated in each District Office.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Build on the current Food Stamp Program Manager job description and existing initiatives to create a formal structure for nurturing champions.

- **Develop standardized anti-hunger training for District Office staff.** By partnering with local anti-hunger organizations, the Food Stamp Program Manager can draw from a vast pool of resources designed to communicate the experience of hungry families. Materials include the Hunger 101 program, videos of emergency food recipients from Second Harvest and Los Angeles Regional Foodbank and a shopping basket vs. grocery cart skit to demonstrate the value of food stamp benefits to a family struggling to make healthy food choices.

- **Regularly share and applaud innovative ideas and practices across District Offices.** Form an ad-hoc working group of committed staff to exchange materials and foster creativity. This group can also identify the appropriate incentives to acknowledge and reward office staff who contribute to a food stamp-friendly office culture. Annual awards and recognition are critical to cultivating and sustaining enthusiastic staff.

- **Develop a formal mentoring program.** The Food Stamp Program Manager can build the bonds between employees in different District Offices to communicate enthusiasm. The leaders at Metro Special and West Valley should be encouraged to visit other District Offices and develop relationships to foster positive food stamp energy with younger, newer staff. This mentoring program can also provide professional development opportunities.

Five Best Practices for District Offices

Even as a new corps of food stamp champions is being nurtured, the two model District Offices provide a core set of smart and fun activities that support high-quality customer service that can be easily replicated. While modest, these locally grown ideas will foster a collaborative spirit among staff—directly resulting in a better District Office environment and better interactions with clients.

1. At Metro Special, the champions **initiate fundraisers** for an extra project. For instance, they started ice cream socials each Friday, where District Office employees purchase ice cream and use the profits for food stamp promotion activities.
2. These fundraisers pay for the **food stamp tables** in the MediCal office lobby, where enthusiastic staff pass out balloons and pencils and do outreach to potentially eligible clients.
3. Staff created colorful **food stamp bulletin boards** in all of the office lobbies with attractive pictures of fruit and vegetables. These bulletin boards also provide information about applying for food stamps.
4. Eligibility Workers **wear huge buttons** with ribbons that say "Ask me about Food Stamps." The buttons are in Spanish and English. This serves not only as a promotion of food stamps to clients, but also serves as a reminder to workers to promote food stamps during interviews for other programs.
5. At West Valley, the champions created a pilot project to do **very local food stamp outreach** at the SOVA food pantry in Reseda and at local Head Start (state preschool) meetings. At Metro Special, staff initiated outreach and promotion at a local grocery store.

Improving County Procedures

The model District Offices also feature numerous procedures that should be institutionalized by county policy. Of course, successful implementation will still depend on local staff leadership.

To capture a client's perspective throughout the application process, we organized the policy recommendations into five categories:

- The **Outreach** section evaluates strategies used to market the Food Stamp Program to non-participants, as well as what current non-participants think about the program and why they may not be participating.
- The **Application Process** describes enrollment procedures.
- In **Accessibility**, we examine how clients get to the offices, how language barriers are addressed in offices and how the hours and location of the offices affect participation.
- **Courtesy Standards** offers perspectives on the complex interactions between clients and staff.
- The **Complaints and Appeals** section evaluates the way clients address concerns and challenge terminations, as well as how they are informed of their rights to appeal or complain.

While these sections contain observations and suggestions particular to Los Angeles County, clearly these challenges are common to many food stamp offices—across California and nationwide. This information can assist Los Angeles in setting the standard for leadership in delivery of high-quality customer service.

OUTREACH

As discussed in the introduction, challenges uncovered during increased food stamp outreach activities since 2000 provided substantial impetus for this customer service project. In addition, there are several outreach projects underway that will benefit from a better understanding of how to improve customer service. These efforts include USDA's national public awareness campaign that is using local bus shelter advertisements; the California Department

of Health Services' Nutrition Network project with the California Association of Food Banks to reach more eligible families at food pantries; and a variety of local outreach partnerships.

According to USDA estimates, approximately 600,000 Los Angeles-area residents may be eligible but are currently not participating in the Food Stamp Program. Reaching these households is difficult and complex; thousands of fliers have been distributed without creating a commensurate bump in participation. Yet a recent "hoax" proclaiming broader eligibility for food stamps—and subsequently generating tens of thousands of calls to USDA's food stamp hotline—demonstrated the incredible power of word-of-mouth. In addition, surveyed clients identified outreach programs as the number one measure needed to encourage more people in their community to apply to food stamps. Thus, enhanced and strategic outreach clearly has the potential to be highly successful.

Still, our survey results also indicated that outreach alone is not sufficient to address low participation in Los Angeles. Based on a review of several local outreach campaigns and survey findings, it is clear that successful efforts involve a combination of factors: careful planning, key partners, reputation of high quality service, adequate resources and timing. Indeed, the timing of this customer service project could not be more opportune: with several important legislative changes underway (transitional benefits, eliminating the car rule, quarterly reporting), implementation of the Electronic Benefits Transfer system (easing stigma for participants) and a reduced error rate (enabling DPSS to expand its focus), the Food Stamp Program is truly on the move. Thoughtful outreach can finally increase enrollment.

Reaching Underserved Populations

Background: Conversations with local outreach partners indicated that each cultural and ethnic community holds unique assumptions and faces unique obstacles when considering and applying for nutrition assistance. For example, one food stamp outreach partner told us, "Our experience with the Cambodian community was that most of the community members had fairly good knowledge about food stamps and how to use it... We've had a harder time outreaching to the Thai community because many of them have no knowledge about the food stamp program or many other government programs."

Local Snapshot: Los Angeles County has already begun to take the unique cultural and ethnic issues into account when seeking to promote food stamp participation with underserved populations.

For example, the county has partnered with the Asian American Health Care Venture to reach Asian communities and with SOVA food pantry to target working individuals. Considering that 38 of 63 non-participants and current recipients surveyed, found out about food stamps through word of mouth, partnerships with organizations that have close ties to a specific community can streamline the outreach process, since the partner knows the issues that affect the specific population and are already embedded in the community. In an evaluation of Washington state's Food Stamp Outreach Project, it was determined that targeting populations through CBOs was very effective.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Develop clear information about the eligible-but-unenrolled population and then partner with community organizations to reach those individuals.

- Using localized (by Service Planning Area) food insecurity data and localized ethnic data from the Census, **identify the specific populations for outreach**, both at the District Office level, and countywide.
- **Develop precisely-targeted outreach materials** to dispel community myths about eligibility, benefits and perceived consequences of participation in the Food Stamps Program.
- Reach the underserved populations by **using the extensive network** of community based organizations.

The Role of Local Partners

Background: Since the Food Stamp Program is still perceived as "welfare" by many non-participating working families and "dangerous" by many immigrants, the very groups that are making up a larger and larger share of the food stamp-eligible population, it is essential to enlist allies in reaching families with sound information. Valuable partners include organizations, government programs and businesses that serve potentially eligible households and have an interest in ensuring that families and individuals have the resources to put enough food on the table. Recent successful Los Angeles-area initiatives to encourage families to use the Earned Income Tax Credit, Summer Food Service Program and Child Health Insurance Program (Healthy Families) relied heavily on formal relationships with interested stakeholders. These successful outreach campaigns built information conduits into communities, gathered critical feedback from them and designed systems to smoothly enroll eligible households.

Local Snapshot: DPSS' Food Stamp Program has sought to

conduct outreach with a variety of partners, including the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Childhood Medical Enrollment Project, Hollywood Community Action Network, Los Angeles Regional Foodbank and its member agencies, Daughters of Charity Ministry Services and dozens of other community-based organizations. The Metro Special and West Valley District Offices have already started developing relationships with several of their local partners. Recent interest from the California Grocers Association has sparked renewed excitement about involving local markets in promoting greater food stamp use.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Form partnerships with allies whom eligible non-participants currently trust.

- **Enroll families in Food Stamps through MediCal.** Many families potentially eligible for food stamps contact DPSS to seek health insurance. While several asset tests and state rules (e.g. finger-imaging) distinguish food stamps from MediCal, there is great potential in finding ways to coordinate the two programs. Efforts are currently ongoing to inform families applying for MediCal of the availability of Food Stamps, yet far more MediCal workers must be trained to process food stamp applications.
- **Formalize partnerships with the WIC program.** There is significant interest and need to establish a more direct referral and enrollment system with WIC. Los Angeles-area WIC clinics serve many underserved families: 84% of income-eligible WIC participants in local clinics are not using the Food Stamp Program. A recent CFPA training on food stamps for WIC staff reinforced what we already knew: WIC employees understand the value of adequate nutrition for their clients and have recently led award-winning efforts to facilitate enrollment in health insurance, increasing vaccination rates and breastfeeding. WIC staff have tremendous potential to boost Food Stamp participation.
- **Use existing school-based resources.** Nearly all school districts offer health center services to families, including helping parents sign up for health insurance. In addition, most school districts in Los Angeles County participate in a USDA-funded nutrition education initiative in which food stamp promotion is part of the annual work plan. By using existing MediCal workers and scheduling food stamp out-stationed Eligibility Workers in coordination with school-based health programs, DPSS can reach significant numbers of eligible families who may trust only their local schools to enroll them in social service programs.
- **Build on recent health insurance opportunities.** Efforts have begun to modify One-e-App for Los Angeles County. One-e-App enables community organizations to efficiently and accurately

enroll families into MediCal and Healthy Families through the use of scanners, electronic signatures and state-of-the art software. DPSS should ensure this process integrates the Food Stamp Program. DPSS should also seek all necessary waivers to facilitate widespread use of One-e-App by food pantries and local partners.

- **Establish partnership with the grocery industry.** The Food Stamp Program benefits hungry families, farmers, food processors and local grocers by pumping nearly \$700 million annually into the local food economy and generating nearly \$1.3 billion in economic activity. The local grocery industry thus has a strong interest in increasing food stamp enrollment and should be a new partner to distribute promotional materials, make public service announcements and boost enrollment capacity.

Evaluation

Background: Correlating outreach efforts to overall participation is exceedingly difficult, especially with the large number of families using CalWORKs and Food Stamps jointly and how those households' participation is impacted by time limits, unemployment and other factors. It remains tricky to measure the impact of outreach efforts.

The Washington State's Basic Food Program Education and Outreach program serves as the best model of measuring targeted outreach. The structure of the program is similar to the recent California Food Stamp Outreach Project (a partnership between the State Department of Health Services and the California Association of Food Banks). Washington's project has reached over 50,000 households in a year and produced outstanding results: nearly three fifths of these contacts enrolled in the Food Stamp Program.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Children's Alliance, a Seattle-based non-profit, was hired to evaluate the Washington State outreach program and made a number of recommendations that could assist California outreach projects. Due to severe budgetary constraints, outreach funding in California is only available from California Nutrition Network and a few private foundations. Current and future outreach supporters should consider these lessons learned from previous outreach efforts.

- **Reward Depth.** Develop a two-tier system of contract rates to acknowledge the variation of outreach activities and properly distinguish extensive contact from broader, quicker contact with eligible households. Provide bonus awards for successful enrollment of families and individuals.

- **Formalize communications structures.** Ensure key regulatory and legislative changes, as well as additional pertinent program information, are quickly and accurately provided to local agencies through frequent phone contact, email and face-to-face meetings. DPSS' Nutrition Subcommittee Workgroup should augment regular meetings with email updates and conference calls.

APPLICATION PROCESS

For many households who never previously applied for public benefits, the application process can be daunting; intrusive questions, extensive documentation, and long wait times can discourage families from applying. In any given month, more than half the applications submitted in Los Angeles County are denied, whereas of those submitted through Los Angeles Regional Foodbank agencies during the eighteen-month outreach project, less than a quarter were approved.

Several developments provide an important base to improve the application process: 2001 state legislation required use of a shorter and simpler form and, several web-based screening programs enable potentially eligible households, and community organizations assisting them, to gauge preliminary eligibility.

Supporting Documentation

Background: Federal regulations require extensive verification of required documents to determine income, assets, household, immigration status, etc.

Local Snapshot: Advocates and outreach partners complained consistently that they did not know which documents were needed for which steps in the application process. We also heard that District Offices have different rules about what documents a client needs. We decided to explore these discrepancies by calling a District Office. Unfortunately, the staff seemed unclear about the documents list and were further confused when questioned about document substitutes, such as photocopies of the Social Security card, out-of-state driver's licenses and what other documentation is needed to prove residency.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Create and distribute to all staff, including phone staff, a department-wide policy on the required application documents and acceptable substitutes.

Managing Complex Regulations

Background: The regulations governing the Food Stamp Program are immense. Extensive federal, state and local policies seek to take complex life situations and translate them into appropriate benefit levels. Each state and federal legislative change creates complex implementation challenges and the need for computer re-programming; court decisions and state policy clarifications also generate new program rules. While Eligibility Workers are responsible for fairly applying a vast web of regulations to each case, several other key District Office staff interpret regulations daily, these include Deputy Directors, Eligibility Worker supervisor, and Quality Control monitor.

Local snapshot: Nearly every community organization and client interviewed reported that too many DPSS Eligibility Workers are unfamiliar with some Food Stamp Program rules and regulations. Some clients expressed concern that they were incorrectly denied by a misinterpretation of the regulations. Legal services advocates reported that onsite advocacy restored benefits for clients that were incorrectly denied or terminated. However, after restoration, some Eligibility Workers still argued that regulations had not been misinterpreted or improperly implemented. Instead, Eligibility Workers believed that advocates effectively assisted clients to get benefits to which they were not entitled.

According to several DPSS supervisors, the process for communicating policy changes to Eligibility Workers is frequently haphazard:

- Most regulations are passed down from program administration staff to the District Office supervisors.
- District Office supervisors then determine how and, in some cases, if, training on new rules and policies will be developed for Eligibility Workers.
- It is possible that some regulations changes are not transmitted to the Eligibility Workers at all or that they are explained in a memo that staff might not read.

DPSS has already taken several steps to address these concerns:

- In 2001, DPSS created **Customer Service Representatives (CSR)** to serve as liaisons for clients in District Offices, yet in all of our conversations with CSRs, they never listed regulations advocacy as one of their functions. Many CSRs provide information, triage and monitoring of client wait times (all useful activities), yet are not serving as in-house advocates for two main reasons. First, most CSRs are former Eligibility Workers without in-depth

regulation expertise. Second, CSRs are not authorized to discuss Eligibility Workers' decisions on specific cases.

- The **Food Stamp Newsletter** distributed by DPSS' Bureau of Health and Nutrition Programs is an excellent tool to provide program updates, clarifications and useful information to Eligibility Workers. The newsletter lists rules and regulations that Eligibility Workers should be aware of and effectively communicates policy changes, yet despite widespread distribution of the newsletter, problems persist.
- The **Central HelpLINE** (877) 481-1044 is available to resolve client concerns, confusion and case complaints.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Ensure even-handed implementation of new policy changes and improve the accuracy of regulatory interpretation by clarifying who has the primary responsibility of being the expert on regulations in each District Office. These could be the role of an Eligibility Worker supervisor, a Deputy Director, a Advocate Liaison or a Quality Control monitor, but should be limited to one worker's principal functional. Yet, this responsibility should not go to the Customer Service Representatives who do have the authority to direct Eligibility Workers.

- Provide Eligibility Workers a **constant resource** for clarifications on rules and regulations.
- Design and standardize **appropriate training materials** and formats.

DPSS should also continue conducting staff regulations trainings by working with outside partners on recent legislation, court rulings, and important administrative policy changes. Looking to the community to assist holds several advantages:

- DPSS' community partners are very committed to reaching the department's goal of increasing participation in the Food Stamp Program.
- Including outside partners in trainings will provide the client's perspective on persistent problems in the program that inhibit participation.

DPSS may consider testing out this idea through a pilot project. Possible first steps include:

- Identify exceptional staff to take on this role. When calculating program costs, consider the cost savings associated with increased application approvals, lower error rates, fewer complaints and appeals and more benefits in the hands of needy families.

- Use the Joint Dialogue Process to systematically identify staff training needs. Standardize training procedures countywide. Establish structured follow-up.
- Initially, the Regulation Specialists would focus solely just on food stamp regulations, but eventually, they could serve as a resource for all of programs and services provided by DPSS.

Reporting Procedures

Background: CW7, the State DSS form verifying income and household composition, has long caused confusion for both clients and workers. Client errors submitting CW7s and processing errors were a significant driver of the high error rate of Los Angeles County. "Change centers" were created to track, organize and process CW7s. When DPSS implements 2002 state legislation requiring quarterly reporting in June 2004, clients will have to file 67% fewer reports and will experience a system that is generally less overwhelmed by paperwork. However, additional steps can be taken to ensure that CW7s do not overburden clients.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Use the transition to quarterly reporting as an opportunity to improve other components of the reporting process.

- **Simplify language on reports.** DPSS should work with state DSS to simplify the CW7 form so that it is easier for clients to fill out, thus, more likely that clients will submit forms with more accurate information.
- **Establish a tracking system for all reports.** Technology should enable District Offices to follow CW7s from the moment they enter the office, instead of just waiting for them to be processed at the change center. Another opportunity for greater tracking of CW7s would be to pilot the use of online CW7s with recently approved electronic signatures.
- **Enhance Central HelpLINE's role.** Use HelpLINE to address specific case problems, including missing reports. In addition, the number should be circulated more widely so that clients know they can call this number if they are unable to come into the office or reach their Eligibility Worker.

ACCESSIBILITY

A variety of challenges face clients seeking to apply for food stamps. Office hours and locations, as well as language proficiency, are among the barriers most commonly documented. DPSS model District Offices, Metro Special and West Valley, have taken steps to

increase client access through bringing program staff into the community and working to identify clients with special needs when they arrive at the District Offices.

Limited English Proficient Applicants and Clients

Background: Low participation among many underserved communities is exacerbated by a lack of application assistance for non-English and non-Spanish speakers. Moreover, if the client speaks one of the dozens of languages that fall below the 5% threshold needed to trigger the formal services stipulated by the Dymally-Alatore Bilingual Services Act of 1973, services are even less available. In addition to not providing interviews and materials in non-threshold languages, DPSS has not funded the computer re-programming necessary to mail Notices of Action to participants whose primary language is neither English nor Spanish.

Not only are language-specific materials lacking, but some District Office staff may not be aware of resources that are available. In the 2002 Civil Rights Compliance Review, California Department of Social Services found that "many (District Office) staff were not aware if a telephone interpretation service was available to them for use" and "other district office staff had heard of a language line but most were not able to produce any identification aids or telephone numbers."

There is precedent to expand the availability of materials and services in more languages. In October 2003, DPSS entered into a Resolution Agreement to settle a 1999 complaint regarding Limited English Proficient applicants and clients. The resolution includes dozens of important changes to ensure CalWORKs recipients receive Welfare-to-Work and other U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-funded programs in their primary language, including the development of materials, improved District Office procedures and ongoing input and monitoring of DPSS' progress through a Community Advisory Board.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Apply the programmatic, procedural and training improvements recommended in the Resolution Agreement to the Food Stamp Program.

- **Include a food stamp component to all CalWORKs improvements.** Improve Food Stamp Program materials, procedures and training for staff working with Limited English Proficiency applicants.
- **Automate all communications in the primary language requested by clients.** Work with state DSS to identify funds to replace manual distribution of Notices of Action for non-English,

non-Spanish households, ensuring more even distribution of materials in primary languages.

Child Care

Background: The December 2003 USDA Economic Research Service review of barriers to the Food Stamp Program identified a child-unfriendly atmosphere in food stamp offices as one of the largest factors contributing to a less-positive experience for families. The USDA review estimated that 43% of non-participants are families with children and also that only 15% of food stamp offices nationally have staffed child care capacity.

Local Snapshot: Most District Office lobbies that we visited do not cater to the small children that have come to the District Office with their parents. The result is that in the office waiting room the most prominent sounds are the wailing babies and impatient children. This incessant din not only makes parents uncomfortable, but it also has a negative impact on other clients, especially clients with mental illness and other conditions.

DPSS West Valley District Office has taken several important steps to improve the child care environment for clients. The facility contains a separate room with colorful murals on the wall and a carpeted floor so that children can sit on the ground. Even so, this room could be greatly improved with child-care staff watching children while adults waited in the main lobby.

However, addressing child care needs will be a very complex undertaking. A District Director explained, "providing a play center for children is too big a liability for the County". Staff time, as well as insurance costs and necessary facilities upgrades, creates significant barriers to creating child care-friendly District Offices, according to several DPSS staff.

WIC offices, which face similar space and staffing constraints as DPSS District Offices, may provide a good model. During the research process for this report, we observed WIC clinics (whose clientele are mothers with young children) that have taken a number of steps to improve the office environment. Chairs are arranged in a circle with a play center in the center so that mothers can fill out paperwork and listen for their appointment, while watching their children play. Tiny chairs surround wooden tables and toys that have no loose pieces. There are also blocks that are safe for very young children to play with. Some offices also solicit volunteers to organize a community reading corner.

RECOMMENDATIONS: While providing staffed and supervised child care is an important, and costly, long-term goal, DPSS can take several short-term steps to make District Offices more child-friendly.

- **Create designated child care areas.** Use WIC office layouts as a model for establishing child care corners that provide a safe play-space, books and child-sized toys and chairs.
- **Seek funding to improve the office environment for small children.** Both the well-funded First Five (Prop 10) Commission and the federally funded California Nutrition Network are ripe partners to provide funding for a few simple facilities upgrades at District Offices. Inexpensive investments (such as painting nutritional foods on the walls of a child care corner, laying carpet, putting out small chairs, tables and toys) will go a long way to improving the child-friendly feel of District Offices.

District Office Food Policies

Background: In most offices that we visited, except Metro Special, there were strict anti-food policies. With the average office visit lasting several hours, often four or more, clients and children get hungry and short-tempered. This creates a recipe for tense interaction between the worker and the client.

RECOMMENDATION: Implement reasonable food policies that balance clients' comfort with District Office concerns about mess and liability. Sample policies include:

- **Designate an area where food is allowed,** with wastebaskets and signage to encourage cleanliness.
- **Contact clients eating immediately outside District Offices.** Install intercoms and benches outside where food vendors are usually located.

Office Hours

Background: According to the California Department of Social Services' Annual County Food Stamp Program Questionnaire, 55 of 58 counties are open for appointments until at least 5:00 M-F. Fifty-three of the 58 counties have extended their office hours beyond 8:00 – 5:00; however many only offer appointments (as opposed to allowing drop-in visits) during the extended hours. It is important to remember that, according to studies including USDA's May 2003 Food Stamp Participation Rates and Benefits Analysis, over 60 percent of non-participants eligible for a monthly benefit over \$200 are working households. Moreover, a 2000 study

of four California counties found the average food stamp applicant made three office visits and waited an average of four hours to complete the application process.

Local Snapshot: In contrast to the State norm, DPSS District Offices are open weekdays from 7:00-3:00. Procedures to enable after-hours appointments are in place, but nearly all DPSS staff that we observed did not provide any information or even confirm, to us or to clients, that after-hours appointments are available. Legal services advocates confirm that after-hours appointments are rarely made available.

This issue is not new. In 2001, the Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness and California Food Policy Advocates formally requested that DPSS pilot extended office hours. This request was renewed in 2002 with the Los Angeles Regional Foodbank adding its voice. These requests to extend office hours were denied. The reasons cited included competing priorities and workers' objections. However, incentives like overtime pay and flexible schedules would likely reduce staff scheduling challenges.

In response to a Board of Supervisors motion in April 2003, DPSS began piloting a combination outreach-extended office hours project at the West Valley and Compton District Offices. The outreach components of this project were discussed in the Outreach section of this report. The pilot project enables clients who initiated a food stamp application with an Eligibility Worker stationed at a community-based organization to visit the local District Office from 3:00 - 6:30 PM. However, only 9% of the applicants initiating the process at the pilot sites scheduled their face-to-face interviews during extended hours.

Separately, conversations with several legal services advocates, other community partners and District Office staff indicated that the availability of extended office hours was clearly limited to those applicants contacted through the selected outreach partners. There are many clients using those District Offices who could benefit from the extended office hours.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Expand office hours to meet clients' schedules, while recognizing the needs of District Office workers.

- **Expand the pilot program to reach all clients in District Offices.** The current extended hours pilot should be formally expanded to offer all clients the opportunity to visit the pilot District Offices from 3-6:30 PM. Use local partners to publicize these extended office hours across the community.

- **Expand the number of District Offices open in the evening.** Beyond the pilot program in West Valley and Compton, there are a number of communities ready to direct working families into DPSS offices during non-traditional hours. Addressing overtime pay and flexible schedules will improve employees' acceptance of extended hours.
- **Expand the use of face-to-face interview waivers.** California state law now makes many working households (as well as those with transportation barriers and disabilities) eligible for a waiver from the face-to-face interview requirement. Increased use of these waivers would reduce the impact of current office hour limitations for some clients.
- **Expand use of appointments.** Each community agency assisting clients with mail-in applications indicated significant difficulty in scheduling and re-scheduling appointments. Clients frequently reported long wait times, even with appointments. To solve these mix-ups, clarify appointment-scheduling procedures through staff trainings and community outreach materials.

COURTESY STANDARDS

Overarching the procedures, policies, rules, regulations and office environment, the food stamp application process is ultimately a personal transaction between client and Eligibility Worker. The character and quality of this interaction is the most significant contributor to many applicants' experience with public benefits. Clients who successfully receive benefits for their family and who feel well-treated by DPSS employees maintain a positive perception of the county and the Food Stamp Program. Applicants who do not receive timely service, who feel humiliated for applying or who feel suspected of fraud leave the process with a far different, less enthusiastic experience and share this experience with others in their community (who will be discouraged from applying).

In April 2002, DPSS distributed a department-wide administrative directive to implement the Customer Service Program. As part of a comprehensive County Strategic Plan, DPSS spelled out a range of expectations for staff to treat clients with respect and sensitivity. The directive contains dozens of specific steps for District Offices and a variety of staff to implement higher-quality customer service. It is unclear what evaluation mechanisms are in place to gauge the impact of the Customer Service Program on client-worker interactions, workplace wellness and, ultimately, program participation.

Sifting through a variety of public sector and private industry reports on customer service, as well as using notes from dozens of

conversations with DPSS staff, state and USDA administrators, we recognize that quantifying and describing the ingredients of respectful, efficient service is challenging. We selected a few slightly more measurable and replicable components of customer service to highlight, prioritized based on their likely impact on participation.

Staffing Ratios

Background: Dozens of DPSS staff and clients consistently indicated, with no direct questioning, that the most significant barrier to high-quality customer service is inadequate numbers of staff at the District Office. Welfare rights advocates and legal services attorneys noted a long history of efforts in Los Angeles County to ensure appropriate ratios of Eligibility Workers to clients.

Local Snapshot: Information was not available regarding staffing levels or formulae used to determine staffing assignments per District Office.

RECOMMENDATIONS: More information is needed for LA County-specific recommendations. The general recommendation is to address chronic understaffing.

- **Research and publicize staffing ratios.** Communicating the impact of administrative cuts on program delivery can assist the development of political support to maintain administrative funding and can help community partners understand current delays.
- **Establish a process to set staffing goals.** Legal services partners and other welfare advocates, as well as internal food stamp champions, can assist in identifying District Offices where severe understaffing limits program access.

Technological Improvements

Background: Technology can help mitigate the impact of low staffing levels by automating certain procedures, thus cutting the amount of repetitive tasks that need to be done by staff and reducing their stress and, in the long term, turnover. Several successive years of state administrative budget cuts and recent county budget cuts make staffing shortages a critical challenge for years to come—and technological solutions even more important.

Local snapshot: DPSS offices have upgraded technology in recent years to meet a variety of client and staff needs: clients may use copy machines, Vision-Writer machines broadcast pertinent information in waiting rooms and information kiosks are available to answer

Frequently Asked Questions. These machines with kiosks provide information on all the programs offered by DPSS, local maps to District Offices, details on how to file a complaint and other resources. Sadly, several office visits suggest that these kiosks are barely utilized. One security guard noted that only kids play on them, since few signs direct clients to them.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Maximize the use of technology to facilitate food stamp access.

- **Take advantage of existing District Office technology.** Post signs highlighting information easily available through the kiosks. Increase the visibility of yellow Central HELPLine phones to resolve questions and concerns.
- **Equip staff to use email.** Email would be extremely useful for client advocates working with Eligibility Workers to clarify case details and resolve complaints. Increasing numbers of clients are also attaining access to email.
- **Establish voicemail.** Previously available to Eligibility Workers, DPSS should immediately implement a voicemail system and develop a protocol for returning calls. Central HELPLine reports indicate clients face persistent difficulties reaching Eligibility Workers.

Training

Background: DPSS administrators agree with local food stamp partners that courtesy standards are an essential element to improving customer service and, ultimately, participation. Strong support from the County Strategic Plan's Customer Service Program, along with administrative support within DPSS, gave rise to the Customer Service and Cultural Diversity/Sensitivity training program. The Cultural Diversity/Sensitivity initiative is strongly supported by State DSS Civil Rights Compliance Review.

Local Snapshot: The DPSS University currently offers a three-day course titled, Customer Service Cultural Diversity/Sensitivity training. A half-day course titled, Personal Service Delivery, is also offered, addressing courtesy as well as other subjects pertaining to good customer service. The training is not District Office-specific and can be used for all DPSS staff. Customer Service and Personal Service Delivery trainings are provided annually. They are also offered to the Department whenever specially requested.

The training available at the DPSS University is helpful in a number of ways. First, it emphasizes that customer service is a priority

for DPSS. Second, it reviews both explicit communications, such as phone etiquette and availability, and workplace standards, such as dress code, which enforce positive customer service. Third, the exercises help develop worker empathy for the client. A post-test creates immediate accountability for the training.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Maximize the use of the courtesy standards curriculum of the DPSS University to reinforce customer service messages.

- **Identify training needs through technology.** While limited funding makes it infeasible to train all Eligibility Workers, DPSS' computer system (called LEADER) can track District Offices with quality control problems that should receive immediate training services. Central HelpLINE data and input from legal services advocates can also help identify the offices to target.
- **Involve the community in sharpening training.** Achieving high-quality customer service for the complex ethnic and cultural diversity in Los Angeles will require highly refined messages and highly skilled messengers. Numerous community-based organizations can assist University staff with advice on how best to work with different populations.

Staff Interaction

Background: Although difficult to measure, and therefore frequently overlooked, District Office staff cohesion influences customer service. Creating a spirit of collaboration and partnership among employees is a challenge in every workplace. With 13,000 employees, DPSS faces an even more daunting charge. However, Los Angeles County's recent success in payment accuracy was partly driven by creating new "change centers." Reorganizing and improving the efficiency of staff interaction are possible—and can achieve important results.

Local Snapshot: At one office, we spoke with an Eligibility Worker who described tense relations between herself and the District Office reception staff. Immediately afterwards, we observed a receptionist refuse to speak directly to an Eligibility Worker who was working on a food stamp case, stating that she would only respond to a supervisor. This type of interaction truly affects the efficiency and service provided in each District Office.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Promote positive staff interaction to maximize efficiency.

- **Build teams among District Office employees.** By forming

units of receptionists, Case Opening Clerks and Eligibility Workers who work together to approve the same food stamp cases, problems can be more quickly solved and inconsistencies ironed out. More formal teamwork will also create internal checks on self-described "denial queens" and improve application approval rates.

- **Reward effective teamwork.** District Directors should sponsor annual awards for the best-performing (accuracy and service) team in each District Office. Creating friendly competition among teams will build cohesion among staff with different job descriptions.
- **Schedule more informal events.** As led by the model offices, West Valley and Metro Special, activities like the ice cream social fundraisers help build unique District Office identity and workplace culture. Regularly scheduling fun, interactive events will improve job satisfaction, pride and, ultimately, better collaboration to serve clients.

Office Environments

Background: County welfare offices in Los Angeles and around the country have never been inviting facilities. Budget constraints and a focus on program delivery give office environments a back seat to many other priorities. In the 1990s, DPSS received private foundation funding to improve the facilities, loudspeakers, signage and ambiance in several District Offices. This funding improved lighting, seating areas, loudspeakers and basic technology.

Local snapshot: Dreary and dark walls, uncomfortable chairs, harsh lighting and unappealing design characterize many DPSS offices. Several District Offices, including West Valley, El Monte and Exposition Park, have beautiful new buildings. Undoubtedly, the facilities affect the professionalism and productivity of staff, while creating a more relaxed atmosphere. One District Director observed an immediate difference in staff attitude when they moved offices. The staff dressed and acted more professionally and seemed happier to come to work.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Until funding becomes available for broad-scale change, fund smaller-scale environmental changes to improve District Office environments.

- **Identify low-cost upgrades.** Use warmer, more inviting paint colors, instead of darker grays, to make a measurable difference in atmosphere.
- **Add colorful bulletin boards.** As led by model offices, West Valley and Metro Special, distribute free materials and post

posters and pictures of client "success stories" to make the District Offices immediately more cheerful.

- **Re-organize seating areas.** By arranging chairs in clusters, loose circles and less rigid rows, clients will feel more comfortable and relaxed during long wait times.

COMPLAINTS & APPEALS

Federal and State law provide for a State Hearing Officer to formally resolve client complaints. It is our hope that full implementation of the recommendations in this document can reduce some persistent problems that result in hearings. There are two aspects of the Fair Hearing Process that emerged as priority areas for improvement during conversations with District Office staff, denied/former food stamp recipients and legal services advocates.

Oral Denials

Local Snapshot: Of the small number of former Food Stamp Program applicants interviewed, we found that, if they received a written denial, most were aware of information on the back of their denial notice about their right to request a hearing. However, half of applicants who receive only verbal notice of denial during their interview were not informed of their right to request a State Hearing. During one interview, we observed an applicant for food stamps and MediCal being determined by the Eligibility Worker as ineligible for food stamps and then being encouraged to withdraw from the application process. Since she withdrew her application, she did not receive any information about the Fair Hearing process, because applicants who voluntarily withdraw their applications are not entitled to a State Hearing.

In addition, there are dozens of anecdotes from the immigrant community reflecting the misperception that all immigrants are ineligible for food stamps. When immigrant families are denied for benefits, they often erroneously assume this denial is due to their immigration status—and therefore don't appeal the denial. These misperceptions may be best defeated with accurate information, such as written denials.

RECOMMENDATION: Provide all clients with written information about the status of their application to reduce misinformation throughout the community and ensure full use of the appeals process.

Compliance with Fair Hearings Decisions

Local Snapshot: According to several legal services advocates, CalWORKs, MediCal and Food Stamp Program clients who are due to receive a payment of incorrectly denied back benefits consistently wait a long time for the compensation. We heard one extreme story in which a client waited five months before an error settled by a Fair Hearing was corrected. Although procedures specify a 30-day period to implement rulings, client advocates consistently observe District Offices only beginning to remedy the problem at the end of the time limit and frequently begin to seek extensions.

RECOMMENDATION: Adhere to Fair Hearing compliance rules. Related recommendation enclosed in Strengthening Accountability section.

Strengthening Accountability

A strong accountability system will assure clients and employees that high-quality service is a priority. Boldly communicating expectations to staff and clients—and measuring the results—will improve benefits processing, office environments and program perception among staff and clients.

Various accountability mechanisms are currently in place; in this section we explore the relevance and effectiveness of the current accountability framework to supporting high-quality customer service. In *Courtesy Standards* we briefly explored opportunities to build on the county’s Customer Service Program. Here we venture into far more complex territory: quantifying and evaluating service delivery and improving mechanisms for responsibility.

We look at three current accountability systems (error rate, program access reviews and personnel procedures) to identify opportunities to support and broaden high-quality customer service. Unlike previous sections of this report, these recommendations require implementation by USDA and State DSS.

Error Rate

Background: Federal administrators have established national quality control standards to ensure that states make accurate food stamps payments to eligible people. These standards help to prevent error, fraud and abuse within the program—but they have also discouraged states from making their programs more accessible and accommodating to working families and others in need of assistance.

Because the household income of low-wage workers tends to change from month to month, counties are more likely to make errors in issuing benefits for these cases. As counties and states feel increasing pressure to reduce their error rates, the Food Stamp Program’s quality control system creates a clear disincentive to assist families with earned income—the majority of those currently

underserved across Los Angeles County. Until the 2002 Farm Bill, state Food Stamp Programs with error rates above the national average—even if only slightly, and improving—were sanctioned with significant fines. As a result, states' laser-sharp focus on payment accuracy trumped all other program goals. During FY 2001, LA County DPSS received a significant share of the \$114 million penalty levied on California.

During FY 2004, USDA will direct penalties towards the few states with consistently high error rates, while maintaining the flexibility to address problems in states that have more short-term problems with payment accuracy. In addition, the nutrition section of the 2002 Farm Bill includes incentives for states to improve program performance, without sacrificing payment accuracy. States can receive High Performance Bonus Awards for:

- Highly accurate payments/significantly improving payment accuracy
- Lowest/most improved "negative" error rate (measuring improper denials)
- Highest percentage of applications processed in a timely manner (within 30 days)
- Highest level of participation (using poverty rates, SSI participation, FDPIR, etc)

Local Snapshot: DPSS' Food Stamp Program has recently made incredible improvements in payment accuracy, measured by the county's reduced error rate from 25% in early 2001 to less than 10% today. By improving LEADER system utilization, analyzing data, creating "change centers" and increasing accountability, DPSS reduced a major liability and received significant accolades.

This remarkable achievement has significant implications for customer service. First, high payment accuracy helps the county avoid fiscal liability and redirects scarce resources towards core program functions. Second, the reduced error rate allows DPSS administrators and District Office staff to focus on priorities beyond payment accuracy, such as outreach and staff training. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the dramatic reduction in error rate demonstrates DPSS' ability to isolate and resolve serious operational problems.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Build on the success of reducing the error rate to improve participation and Food Stamp Program delivery by defining key service measures and expanding recent bonus awards.

- **Convene working group to identify yardsticks to measure customer service.** First, pull together a group of administrators and advocates to identify aspects of high-quality customer service which can be measured. Initial aspects might include office hours, targeted outreach and staff courtesy trainings. Second, identify tools to measure the quality and depth of these practices, such as gathering information on applications received through community partners, collecting data on Fair Hearings, frequency of staff trainings and personnel evaluations, non-assistance food stamp caseload, etc.
- **Expand bonus system.** Add additional customer service measures into the USDA criteria for receiving bonuses. Increase the amount of monetary rewards for achieving higher performance standards.

Program Access Reviews /Civil Rights

Background: In order to ensure adequate implementation of program procedures and to observe and reduce barriers to participation, USDA mandates reviews of Food Stamp Program offices. State DSS selects the office locations based on complaints and best practices.

Responding to administrative budget cuts, in October 2002, State DSS combined the USDA-required Program Access Review and the USDA-Civil Rights Compliance Review. The combined reviews are led by the State DSS Civil Rights Branch, with participation from USDA FNS. Although this administrative simplification has fused procedures and saved money, these efficiencies have come at the cost of depth. While the civil rights regulations need constant vigilance, the current combined review process does not adequately measure the experience of the vast majority of applicants.

The framework for Program Access Reviews is detailed in the Food Stamp Client Access Review Guide for FNS Regional Offices. The review is structured to highlight several important client access areas, yet very few were suitably examined in the April 2002 review of the West Valley District Office. The only exception was a thorough look at the availability of bilingual staff, services and materials. The combined review did evaluate staff development and training, but only regarding civil rights and cultural awareness issues; no other aspect of staff training was examined.

The Review process should serve to protect the rights and needs of protected classes. It should also not sacrifice an opportunity to adequately assess the experience of every client and applicant.

Local Snapshot: The April 2002 Civil Rights Compliance Review of DPSS' West Valley District Office demonstrates several important distinctions between the Civil Rights Compliance Review and the Program Access Review. First, the text of the report contains more than five pages of detailed assessment of facility accessibility, such as the availability of wheelchair ramps and the weights of doors. Yet, only one page of text highlights observations gleaned from a review of case files. Facility accessibility is certainly a key concern for many program applicants, but more common barriers to evaluate are:

- inappropriate denials,
- encouragement to withdraw an application
- limited office hours

RECOMMENDATIONS: Strengthen the review process as much as possible under current fiscal constraints.

- **Conduct Separate Reviews.** Over time, USDA and State DSS should separate the Program Access Review and Civil Rights Compliance Review. Even if the District Office visits are conducted jointly, the reports should be distinct.

- **Use Community Partners When Possible.** In the short term, because of a real lack of sufficient resources, several components of the joint review can involve community partners to interview non-participants, denied participants and others, without compromising confidentiality issues.

- **Improve the Program Access Reviews.** Several key changes to the USDA guidance shaping Program Access Reviews can increase their effectiveness in measuring clients' experience and its relation to participation.

- √ Assess the experience of non-participants and denied clients. Interviews with these two groups would provide clarity about outreach targets and the complaints process.
- √ Investigate staffing ratios. Nearly everyone cites understaffed District Offices as the largest barrier to high-quality service. Program Access Reviews should evaluate the adequacy of Eligibility Workers' caseload compared to offices that receive fewer complaints, approve more applications and have higher overall participation.
- √ Evaluate compliance with fair hearing procedures. Legal aid agencies consistently identify unevenness in the fair hearing process.
- √ Assess several additional key aspects of District Office operations. Include review of child care facilities, overall office environment, client food policy, innovative outreach (partially profiled by

annual State DSS survey), observable worker interaction and professional development opportunities.

- √ Include surprise visits. While most aspects of the Reviews are conducted with full participation and preparation of local staff, adding a few unannounced visits is more revealing by providing a more accurate snapshot of the average client's experience and the District Office environment on an average day.

- **Use CBOs to strengthen the Review process and results.** There are a number of local stakeholders who should participate in the Review process and see the results. Interested partners include community organizations conducting outreach, advocacy organizations pushing legislation, and legal services agencies representing recipients.

- √ Design reviews with community partners. As is often done in other states, use CBOs to select target District Offices for review. Ask CBOs to identify issues of local concern, such as non-threshold language procedures, to improve precision of Reviews.

- √ Assist with corrective action plan. Distribute corrective action plan to CBOs. Community partners can provide useful assistance with formulating solutions to noted violations and with measuring the timely implementation of corrective actions. This feedback should be built into the correction action plan.

Personnel Procedures

Background: There is no easy fix to ensure each Eligibility Worker answers the phone promptly, processes cases accurately and quickly handles difficult clients with a smile. There is no clear path to guarantee a standard of high-quality service and satisfaction in all District Offices at all times. In every business, there are constantly evolving efforts to improve standards. From "your call may be monitored to ensure quality service" to ubiquitous comment cards, businesses and government are taking steps to gather feedback to re-engineer systems, train employees and monitor performance to improve delivery of services.

Local Snapshot: The Deputy Director at DPSS' Civic Center District Office has sponsored activities and professional development meetings to help staff envision their career goals within DPSS. As part of the project, District Office staff identify steps to accomplish their professional goals. With an emphasis on positive customer interactions as a key component of staff promotion, this District Office creates clear incentives to serve clients well. As part of the strategic planning process to improve payment accuracy, DPSS works through the Labor/Management Committee, a monthly, union-management meeting, to conduct performance reviews, assess staff satisfaction and identify new customer service and quality standards.

DPSS has also developed policies for discipline, suspension and dismissal. However, with 13,000 employees, including 8,000 Eligibility Workers, DPSS has a difficult challenge holding employees equally accountable for poor treatment of clients. It is unclear how often existing procedures are used to dismiss employees and how the threat of suspension or dismissal contributes to the office environment and client-Eligibility Worker interactions.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Improve personnel policies to promote staff development and respond to staff performance problems.

- **Use technology to identify problematic trends.** Success at reducing the error rate demonstrates the possibility of locating offices and even clusters of workers not reaching high standards. DPSS can use information, such as reports from the Central HelpLINE, to identify Eligibility Workers who are consistently unavailable over the phone to clients. Tracking applications submitted through community outreach partners can also increase awareness of systematic glitches, such as groups of seemingly eligible applicants being denied benefits, failing to receive timely benefits or not receiving forms in a requested primary language.
- **Formalize mentoring partnerships.** Build on successful models across DPSS to provide support, upward mobility and job rotation for District Office staff. Refresh and challenge employees by rewarding those who pursue professional development and perform additional program functions, such as learning to provide a different DPSS service. The existing Staff Development Specialists (SDS) could be used to construct mentoring activities that enforce the value of learning additional programs and customer service.
- **Amplify customer service goals.** By informing community partners that customer service is an important accountability measure, DPSS will not only improve the public's perception of the program, but will also remind employees of this priority, DPSS could use each District's Labor/Management Committee to involve community partners in evaluating District Office performance in reaching customer service standards. This committee could also engage community partners in developing appropriate tools to measure customer service.

Appendices

- A. Glossary of Terms**
- B. 2004 Program Milestones**
- C. Participation Chart**
- D. Methodology**
- E. Survey Results**
- F. Error Rate and Bonus Awards**
- G. Outreach Project Outcomes**
- H. Contact Information**

Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

It may be useful to define several recurring acronyms and phrases threaded throughout this report.

CAFB - California Association of Foodbanks. Statewide nonprofit organization organized to provide a unified voice among food banks to maximize their ability to build a well-nourished California.

CalWORKs - The California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program provides cash benefits for the care of needy children, when one or both parents are absent, disabled, deceased or unemployed. CalWORKs replaced AFDC. Counties run the program locally, but many CalWORKs rules were established as part of 1996's welfare reform.

CBO - Community-based organization, local non-profit organization.

COC - Case Opening Clerk. DPSS employees initiate the first part of the food stamps application, which is then assigned to an Eligibility Worker.

CSR - DPSS Customer Service Representatives, staff positions created as part of the Los Angeles County's "customer service plan" in April 2002.

CW7 - A state-mandated report submitted by recipients to maintain accurate benefit levels. In 2004, California counties will begin requiring reports four times a year, instead of monthly.

DPSS - County of Los Angeles Department of Public Social Services. Local agency administering a variety of assistance programs CalWORKs and Food Stamps.

EW - Eligibility Worker. DPSS employees who screen families for benefits, determine eligibility and respond to client questions and changes in case status.

Joint Dialogue - Monthly meetings with client advocates (legal services) and DPSS to resolve consistent case complaints raised by Food Stamp, MediCal and CalWORKs recipients.

LEADER - DPSS' automated eligibility and benefits determination system.

Limited English Proficiency - Individuals whose primary household language is not English. 40% of DPSS clients are self-declared Limited English Proficient.

MediCal - The publicly-funded health insurance program provides health care and reimbursement for health services provided to millions of low-income Californians. The program is funded through a combination of state and federal funding and administered locally by DPSS.

SPA - Service Planning Area. Los Angeles County is divided into eight geographic regions

USDA FNS - United State Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Federal agency providing the funding and oversight for \$40 billion worth of annual nutrition assistance, through the Food Stamp, School Lunch, Child and Adult Care Food Program, School Breakfast, and the WIC Programs. USDA FNS' Western Region Office provides significant technical assistance and convening to Food Stamp Program administrators and advocates.

WIC - (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program) for Women, Infants, and Children. By providing targeted nutrition education and food packages, this program safeguards the health of low-income women, infants, & children up to age 5. WIC is a major portal to health insurance for low-income families.

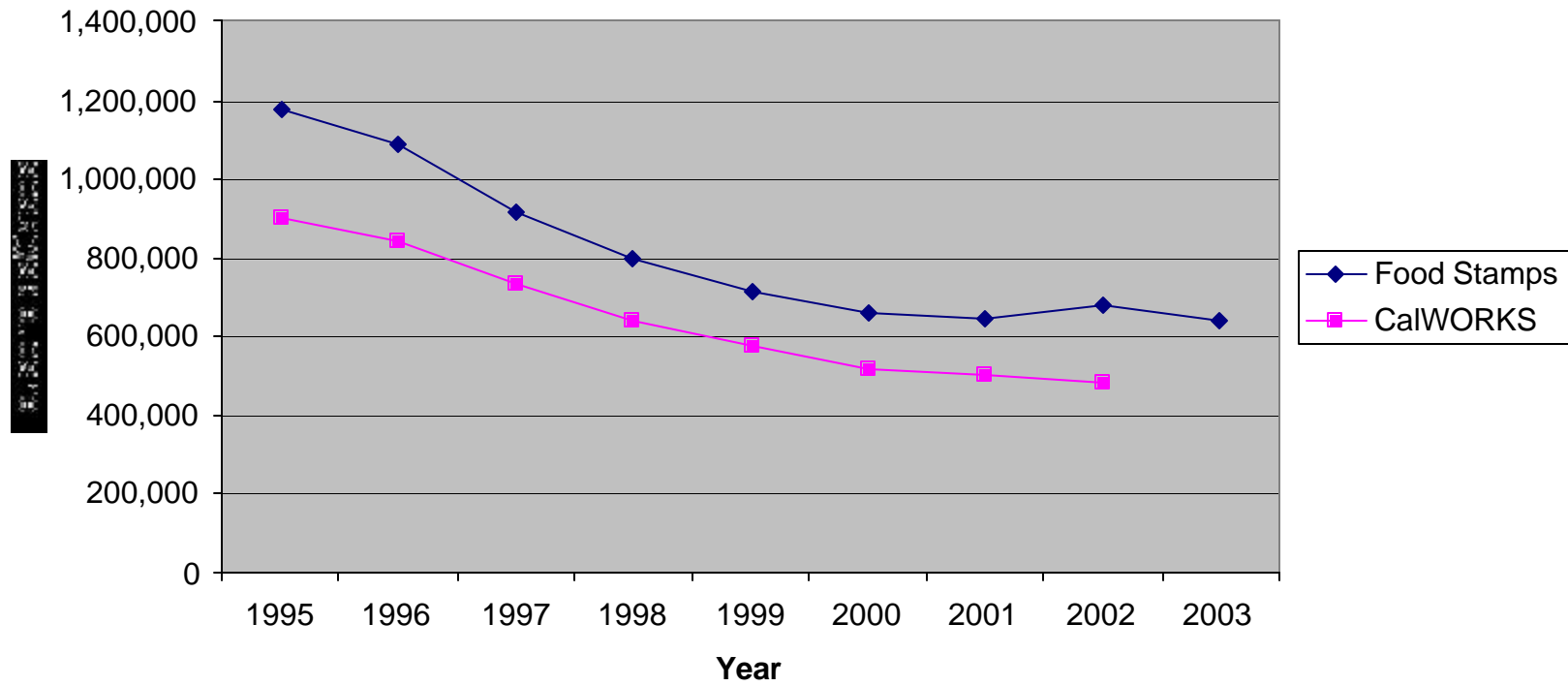
Appendix B: Calendar Highlighting 2004 Food Stamp Program Milestones in Los Angeles County

The Food Stamp Program: On the Move in 2004

2004	Application	Auto-resource Change	Electronic Benefit Transfer	Face-2-Face Interviews	Quarterly Reporting	Transitional Benefits
<i>Notes</i>	Legislation in 2000 ordered the development of a new simpler food stamp application, which is available.	Legislation requires that automobile ownership is no longer a factor in determining food stamp eligibility.	Federal law requires that all states have a system for electronically issuing food stamp benefits.	Legislation requires that counties screen applicants for their need for an exemption of the face-to-face interview requirement.	Legislation established a quarterly reporting system for food stamp recipients.	Legislation makes most households leaving CalWORKs eligible for 5 months of transitional food stamp benefits.
Year-Round Activities	<i>Simplified Food Stamp applications are available year-round</i>					
January		January 1st		January 1st		January 1st
February			Los Angeles (Phase 2)			
March			Los Angeles (Phase 3) March 1 st			
April						
May						
June					Los Angeles	

Appendix C: Food Stamp Participation Chart for Los Angeles County

Public Assistance Participation in Los Angeles County



Appendix D: Methodology, Information Gathering Activities

In order to get a broad view of the food stamp application process for the clients, this report seeks to examine the entire experience for eligible individuals, from several distinct perspectives.

Clients

We met a range of people whose nutritional needs intersect – or don't – with the Food Stamp Program. We spoke with potential clients prior to any knowledge of the program, as well as clients both during the application process and after they were approved or denied. We developed and administered surveys to non-participants, current applicants, current recipients, and denied clients. We interviewed non-participants at three food pantries and five WIC clinics located within the zip codes that the model offices serve. Not all of these interviews are represented in the table because the decision was made to change the format of the surveys after speaking with Charles DiSogra, the Director of the California Health Interview Survey at UCLA Center for Health Policy Research in order to avoid bias or incongruence in the surveys. We also interviewed some non-participants at DPSS offices.

We interviewed current applicants and recipients mostly at the food stamp offices, but also at food pantries and WIC clinics. The denied clients were harder to reach and were mostly found at food pantries and through legal services agencies. For all interviews, we developed strict interview procedures. To prevent interviewer bias, we created the following procedure: each interviewer was given a number and interviewed the people, who corresponded with that number in line or in order of their arrival to the site. After the first interview was finished, the interviewer naturally moved on to the next person who had not been interviewed, whether it was the next person in line or the next person who entered the office or pantry. This process ensured that an interviewer never chose a person to interview because they appeared calmer or easier to talk to. An introductory dialogue was developed in English and Spanish in order to communicate seamlessly with all the interviewees.

Interviewees were informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous, and would not affect their use of the pantry, WIC, or food stamps. For each interview, we gathered basic information about ethnicity, primary language, and location of the interview. We asked all questions in an open-ended format and used the answer choices solely to help categorize answers.

Community Partners

We also completed community interviews with legal services agencies, CBOs contracted for outreach, pantries, and local advocacy groups. All interviewees, except for the former EW worker, had had direct and regular exposure to the two model offices. Each group gave narratives of their experience with the food stamp program. These conversations were more open-ended and less-formal. The interviews were with food stamp-familiar staff at the following organizations: Public Counsel (past and current employees) Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles Neighborhood Legal Services, Asian Pacific Health Care Venture, Asian Pacific American Legal Services, Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness, Daughters of Charity Ministry Services, Orange County Foodbank, former EW workers, Los Angeles Regional Foodbank, St Agnes Food Pantry, and SOVA food pantry. Conversations with staff at several WIC sites visits

contributed significantly.

Program Administrators

We visited Metro Special and West Valley District Offices, as well as several other DPSS offices across Los Angeles and Orange counties. A checklist of questions was developed to evaluate the offices that we visited. Also during the site visits, we interviewed Eligibility Workers, District Directors, Deputy Directors, Case Opening Clerk's, Receptionists, and Customer Service Representatives. Additionally, several meetings and conversations with the Food Stamp Program Manager and other administrators shaped our understanding of the intersection of customer service and participation.

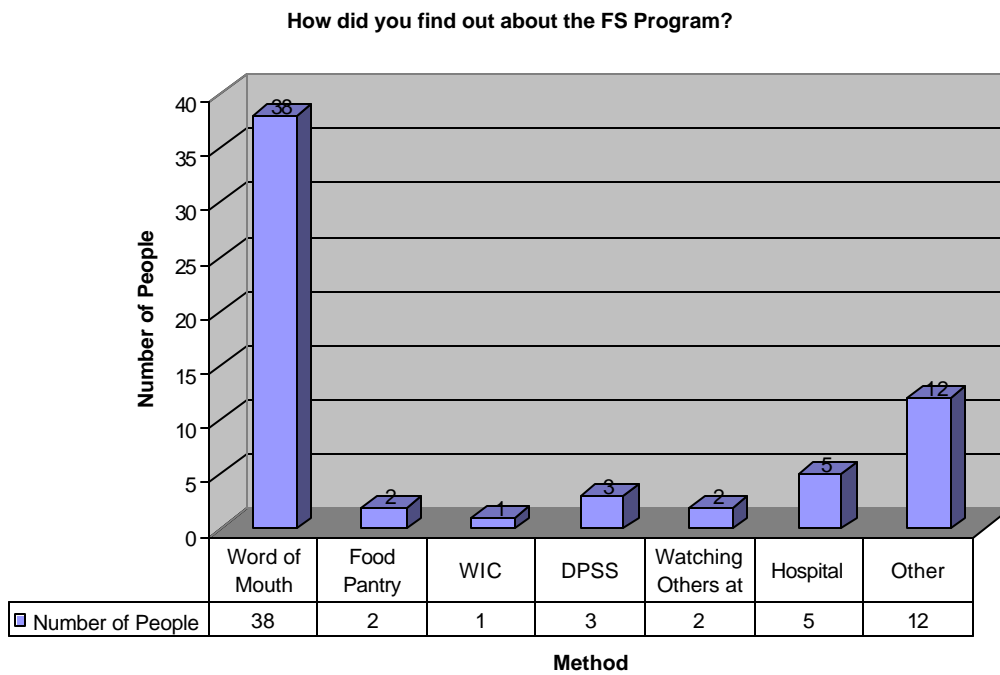
Data

In addition to observational and experiential data, we sifted through a range of reports and data. These included:

- U.S. Census Data for Los Angeles County (2000)
- DSS Civil Rights Compliance Review Report for Los Angeles DPSS, April 7-11, 2003
- Problems with DPSS' LEADER Computer System and Recommendations by Advocates, Preliminary Report, March 1, 2002
- USDA Food Stamp Program Complaint Prevention and Resolution course materials
- Food Stamp and CalWORKs Business Process Improvement Strategic Plan for California Department of Social Services, by GovConnect Inc., April 8, 2002.
- All County Information Notice No 1-72-03, Compliance of Annual County Food Stamp Program Questionnaire, and Review of Hours of Operation and Access and Awareness Activities Survey Results, October 22, 2003
- Los Angeles County Health Survey, Food Insecurity Indicators, 2002-2003
- DSS Food Stamp Program Monthly Caseload Movement Statistical Report (DFA 296) September 2003 (Version 1)
- DPSS Central Helpline (CHL) July 2003 Report
- DPSS Bureau of Program, Policy, Research, & Evaluation- Approved Caseload for All Programs by Primary Language- September 2003
- DPSS Food Stamp and Medi-Cal Outreach Pilot District Report (Draft) (2003)
- DPSS Caseload Characteristics, July 2003.
- DSS Food Stamp Program Participants by Ethnic Group, July 2003
- Los Angeles Regional Foodbank – Food Stamp Outreach & Research Project, Final Report to USDA Food & Nutrition Services (2002).
- Asian Pacific American Legal Center-DPSS Resolution Agreement (October 2003).

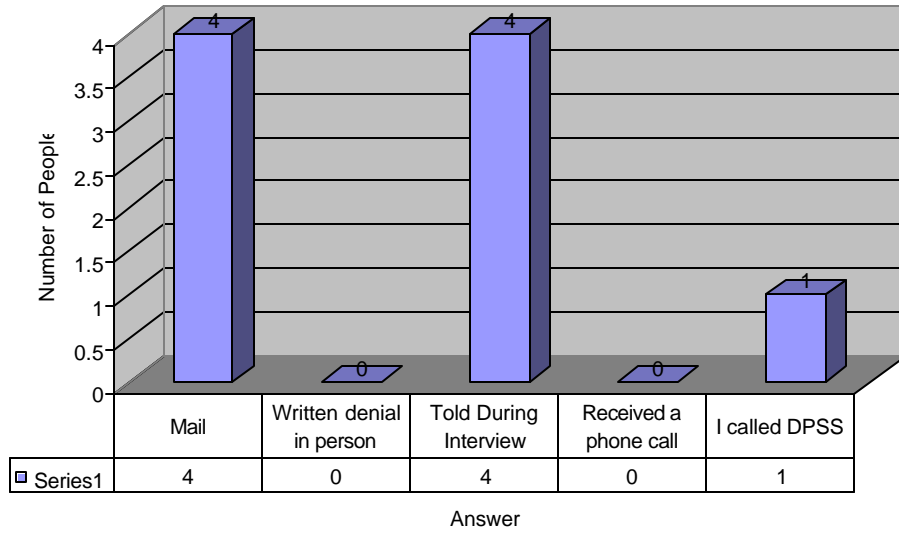
- California Food Policy Advocates Reports
 - Understanding and Improving the Food Stamp Program in California (2002)
 - Cash-Out in California: A History of Help and Harm (2003)
 - How Long Does It Take? (2001)
- County of Los Angeles Strategic Plan, DPSS Customer Service Program (2002)

Appendix E: Survey Results



* Non-participants and Current Recipients
N= 63

How were you told you had been denied?

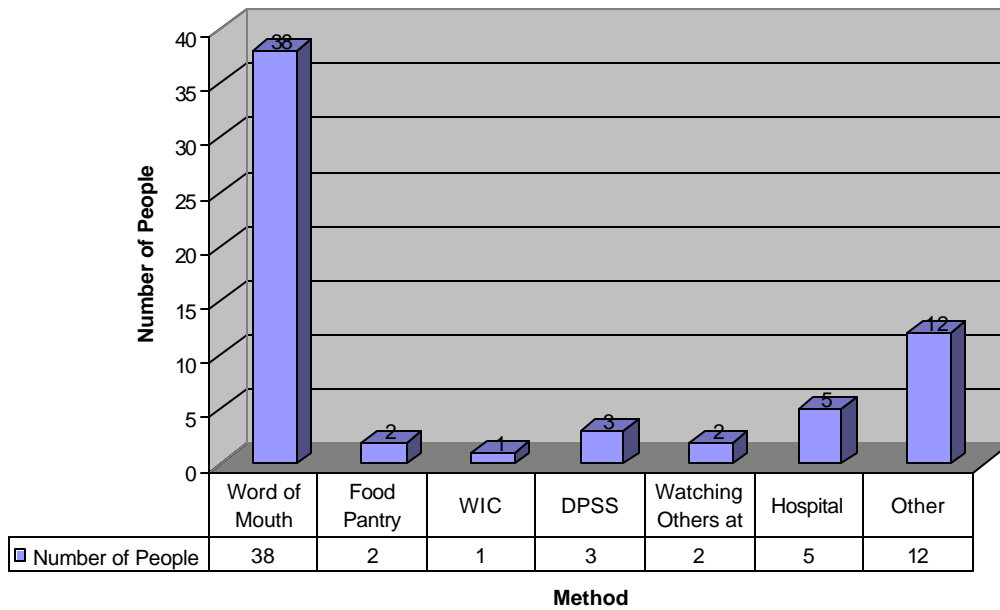


N= 9

* Denied Clients

Appendix E: Survey Results - continued

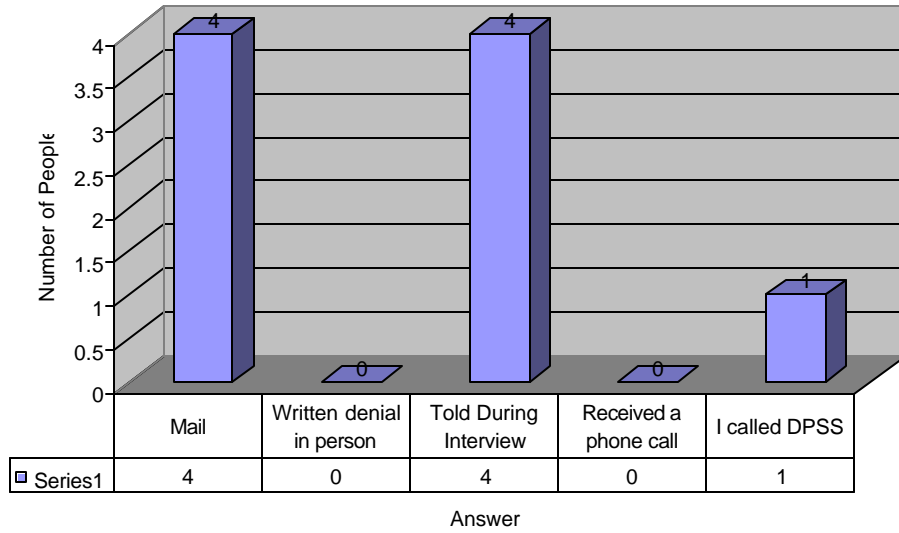
How did you find out about the FS Program?



* Non-participants and Current Recipients

N= 63

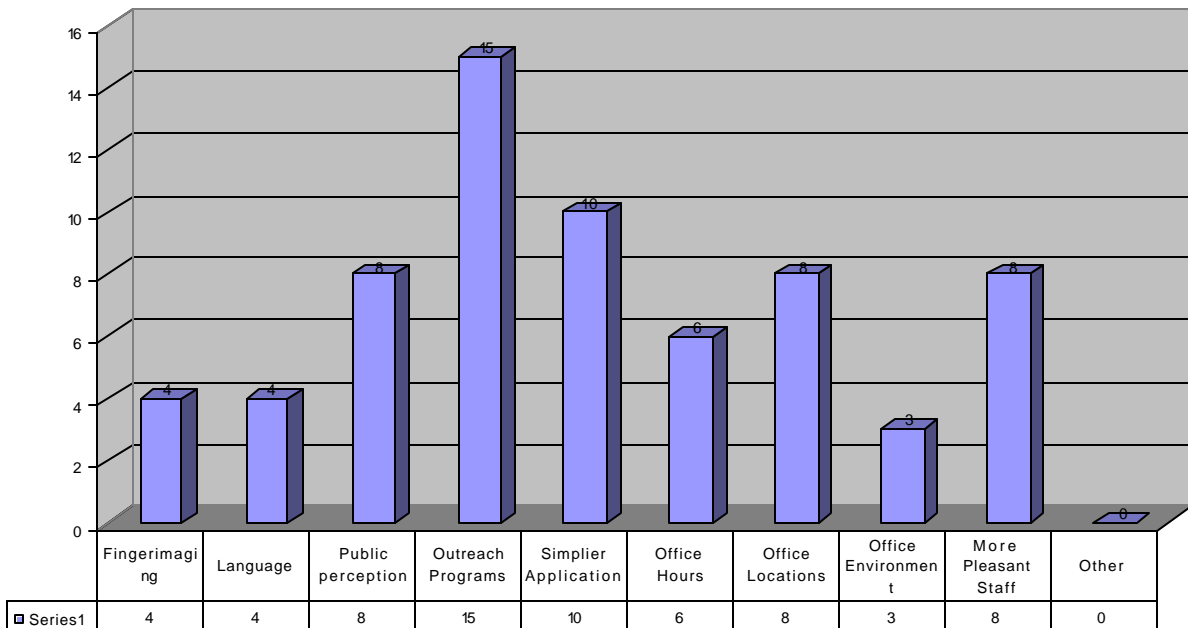
How were you told you had been denied?



N= 9 * Denied Clients

Appendix E: Survey Results - continued

Non-participants and Current Recipients answered:
What changes in the FSP would encourage more eligible people to apply?



Appendix F: USDA 2003 Error Rate and High Performance Bonus Awards

Section 4120 of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Pub. L., 107-171) authorized \$48 million to be awarded to States with high or improved performance in the administration of the Food Stamp Program (FSP). Cash awards will be given in 4 different categories. These categories and the performance measurement methodologies are listed below.

Category 1 – Payment Accuracy - \$24 Million

The \$24 million will be divided up among the 10 winning states in both A and B of this category in proportion to the size of their caseloads.

A. Excellence in Payment Accuracy

# of Awards in this Category	Methodology Used to Determine Awards	Awards Based On
7 States	Lowest combined error rates for FY 2003	FY 2003 validated Quality Control Payment Error Rates

* To receive an FY2003 bonus in this category, a State need not have a payment error rate below the national average.

B. Most Improved Payment Accuracy

# of Awards in this Category	Methodology Used to Determine Awards	Awards Based On
3 States	Largest percentage point decrease in combined error rates for FY 2003 compared to FY 2002.	FY 2003 validated Quality Control Payment Error Rates

Note: For B the percentage points of improvement will be used instead of the actual percentage of improvement so that absolute value of improvement rather than the relative value of improvement is rewarded. For example, if State A has a payment error rate of 10% in FY 2002 and a payment error rate of 6% in FY 2003, its improvement is 4 percentage points, or a 40% improvement. If State B has a payment error rate of 6% in FY 2002 and a

payment

error rate of 4% in FY 2003, its improvement is 2 percentage points, or a 50 percent improvement. State A would be ranked higher than State B because

its absolute improvement is greater even though its relative improvement is less. For example, if States A and B both issued \$100 million in benefits,

State A would have reduced its payment error by \$4 million while State B would have reduced by only \$2 million.

FY2002 Official Payment Error Rates for Western Region States

Alaska – 10.99	Arizona – 5.27	California – 14.84
Guam – 6.05	Hawaii - 5.03	Idaho - 9.04
Nevada – 6.41	Oregon - 11.07	Washington - 8.16

For FY 2003 a State agency that has improved its payment accuracy rate by the most percentage points, but whose payment accuracy rate is above the national average, will still be able to win a bonus award.

Category 2 – Negative Error Rate - \$6 Million

The \$6 million will be divided up among the 6 winning states in both A and B of this category in proportion to the size of their caseloads.

A. Lowest Negative Error Rate

# of Awards in this Category	Methodology Used to Determine Awards	Awards Based On
------------------------------	--------------------------------------	-----------------

4 States	Lowest negative error rate for FY 2003	FY 2003 Quality Control (QC) validated negative error rate.
-----------------	---	--

*To receive a FY2003 bonus in this category, a State need not have a negative error rate below the national average.

B. Most Improved Negative Error Rate

# of Awards in this Category	Methodology Used to Determine Awards	Awards Based On
2 States	Largest percentage point decrease in the negative error rate for FY 2003 compared to FY 2002	FY 2003 Quality Control (QC) validated negative error rate.

FY2002 Official Negative Error Rates for Western Region States		
Alaska – 7.44	Arizona – 7.58	California – 10.01
Guam – 17.76	Hawaii – 2.80	Idaho – 5.25
Nevada – 6.42	Oregon – 3.18	Washington – 12.23

Note: For B the percentage points will be used instead of the actual percentage of improvement so that absolute value of improvement rather than the relative value of improvement is rewarded. For example, if State A has a negative error rate of 3% in FY2002 and a negative error rate of 1% in FY2003, its improvement is 2 percentage points, or 66 percent. If State B has a negative error rate of 10% in FY2002 and a negative error rate of 5% in FY2003, its improvement is 5 percentage points, or 50 percent. State B would be ranked higher than State A because its absolute improvement is greater, even though its relative improvement is less.

Category 3 – Application Processing Timeliness - \$6 Million

The \$6 million will be divided among the 6 winning states in this category in proportion to the size of their caseloads.

# of Awards in this Category	Methodology Used to Determine Awards	Awards Based On
6 States	Highest percentage of timely processed applications certified during the measurement of FY 2003	FY2003 Quality Control Data used to determine if an applicant was given the “opportunity to participate” within 30 days (7 days for expedited processing)

There is no FY 2002 comparison data for the timeliness category

Category 4 – Participant Access Rate - \$12 Million

The \$12 million will be divided among the 8 winning states in both A and B of this category in proportion to the size of their caseloads.

A. Highest Level of Participation

# of Awards in this Category	Methodology Used to Determine Awards	Awards Based On
------------------------------	--------------------------------------	-----------------

4 States	Highest Participation Rate calculated by taking the average monthly participation in the calendar year divided by the Census Bureau's count of people in poverty, adjusted for SSI participation in California and FDPIR participants in all states.	Participation rates will be calculated based on poverty data that will become available in September 2004.
-----------------	---	---

B. Most Improved Level of Participation

# of Awards in this Category	Methodology Used to Determine Awards	Awards Based On
4 States	Most improved percentage points of participation from CY2002 to CY2003 determined by comparing the CY2003 Participation Access Rate to the CY2002 Participation Access Rate.	Participation rates will be calculated based on poverty data that will become available in September 2004.

2001 Participation Access Rates for Western Region States

Alaska – 75%	Arizona – 42%	California – 39%
Guam - NA	Hawaii – 78%	Idaho – 42%
Nevada – 51%	Oregon – 75%	Washington – 51%

Until poverty data is available in September 2004 states can monitor the total number of participants from month to month in 2003 as the year progresses to get an understanding of whether or not the numbers they are serving are going up or down. This does not measure the participation rate, just the number served.

Appendix G: LA Regional Foodbank's Outreach Project Outcomes

This table compiles results from LA Regional Foodbank's Outreach project and is a complete report of ALL intake completed from June 2001 through December 2002:

Results TOTAL June 2001 – December 2002 (18 months)

Applications Approved for Participation	255	24.3%
Applications Denied (Reason Provided by DPSS):		
Other Reason	220	21.0%
Clients Request	184	17.6%
Refusal to Sign Statement of Facts	134	12.8%
Failure to Provide Information	83	7.9%
Unable to Contact	57	5.4%
Excess Income	22	2.1%
Miscellaneous Reasons	46	4.5%
Sub-TOTAL Applications Denied 746/ 71.2%		
Applications Missing	33	3.1%
Terminated	14	1.3%
TOTAL Applications Submitted 1/2002 thru 12/2002	1048	100%

Appendix H: Contact Information

Matthew Sharp
Regional Advocate
California Food Policy Advocates
3450 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 300
Los Angeles, California 90010
(p) 213.252.8233
(e) matt@cfpa.net

Rachel Lopez
Congressional Hunger Fellow
California Food Policy Advocates
(p) 213.252.8233
(e) rlopez@hungercenter.org

Dennis Stewart
Regional Director, Food Stamp Program
Food and Nutrition Service
United States Department of Agriculture
550 Kearny Street, Room 400
San Francisco, California 94108-2518
(p) 415-705-2229 x 301
(e) Dennis.Stewart@fns.usda.gov

Melissa Daigle
Food Stamp Outreach Coordinator
United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service
550 Kearny Street, Room 400
San Francisco, California 94108-2518
(p) 415-705-2229 x 304
(e) Melissa.Daigle@fns.usda.gov

Charlotte Lee
Food Stamp Program Director
County of Los Angeles
Department of Public Social Services
12860 Crossroads Parkway South
City of Industry, CA 91746
(p) 562.908.3525
(e) clee@ladpss.org

DPSS Metro Special District Office
Olga Miranda, "Food Stamp Champion"
2707 S. Grand Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90007
(p) 213.744.5611

DPSS West Valley District Office
Joyce English, "Food Stamp Champion"
21415 Plummer St.
Chatsworth, CA 91311
(p) 818.718.5000

Congressional Hunger Center
John Kelly
Co-Director, Bill Emerson Hunger Fellowship
229 Pennsylvania Ave, SE
Washington DC, 20003
(p) 202.547.7022 x 16
(e) jkelly@hungercenter.org

Los Angeles Regional Foodbank
Jeff Dronkers
Program Manager
1734 East 41st Street
Los Angeles, CA 90058
(p) 323.234.3030 x 141
(e) jdronkers@lafoodbank.