

**Final Report & Evaluation
Community Action Program of Madison County
USDA/FNS Grant 59-3198-2-066
December 1, 2004**

by

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Executive Summary

In September of 2002, the Community Action Program for Madison County received a two-year grant from the Food and Nutrition Service of the USDA to increase food participation. Partners on the grant are the Madison County Department of Social Services and the Upstate Institute at Colgate University. The goal of the project was to increase the number of new households participating in the Food Stamp Program in Madison County by approximately 25% in the year following implementation of our project. We proposed to increase participation by meeting three major objectives - (1) streamlining the application process, (2) lowering the stigma and costs associated with applying for food stamps, and (3) increasing awareness of the eligibility requirements and the nutritional benefits of the food stamp program. The most important changes implemented to meet these objectives included shortening the food stamp application from 16 to two pages, launching www.madisoncountyfoodstamps.org - an online prescreen and application tool, and initiating a media blitz to publicize Madison County's new Food Stamp Program by touting both the simple application process and the nutritional goals of the program

Our findings indicate that the project was successful. The number of new food stamp cases opened increased from 1,072 in the base year to 1,349 in the post-intervention year. Given that there was not a significant downturn in the Madison County economy in the intervention year, these results imply that our intervention resulted in 277 additional households joining the food stamp program. This increase in the total number of new cases opened is 26% - slightly above our goal of increasing the

number of new cases by 25%. However, the number of applications denied also increased significantly. Most of the additional denials were caused by incomplete documentation. It seems that while the shortened application, prescreen, web application, and outreach lowered the costs of applying for food stamps, a large number of applicants started but did not complete the application process. We believe that the reason is that completing the application process still involved some significant costs for many applicants. Future interventions should more aggressively address this issue.

Our project evaluation indicates that lowering the costs of applying for food stamp increases food stamp participation. In a rural area like Madison County where substantial transportation barriers exist for low-income families, technology is an effective way of reaching the eligible but not enrolled. Through our website, families could learn about their food stamp eligibility and initiate the application process. We also found that our efforts to lower the application costs by shortening and simplifying the application form paid off.

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I. Goals

In 2001, the Community Action Program of Madison County, the Madison County Department of Social Services, and Colgate University undertook a study of the well-being of former welfare recipients in Madison County. One important finding from that study was that many of those who left welfare did not take advantage of the other benefits available to them. In particular, we noticed that only 41 % of former cash assistance recipients were enrolled in the food stamp program. More remarkably, only 60% of those living below the federal poverty line were enrolled. In our study, although only 41% were enrolled in the food stamp program, 63% used the local food pantries and 34% reported that there was a time when they had no money to buy food. These statistics concerned us. While most former welfare recipients indicated a strong desire to never return to cash assistance, the high poverty rate of this sample indicated the need for some type of assistance in the move from welfare to self sufficiency. As a group, we agreed that we needed to do something to provide the needed assistance and that increasing food stamp participation among this group would be important.

Our research on former TANF recipients and much anecdotal evidence collected from years of experience by CAP advocates identified three major explanations for under-enrollment in food stamps (and other benefit programs) in Madison County.

Stigma. Despite the fact that the Food Stamp Program is a USDA Food and Nutrition Program, the program is administered by DSS and seen by many as a welfare program.

Although the introduction of the EBT card significantly reduced the stigma of using food stamps, the stigma of applying for food stamps remains. For many former TANF recipients, leaving cash assistance is a significant accomplishment, and returning to it is considered a step back. Many associate DSS with "administrative hassle" and don't believe that the food stamp benefits are worth the effort. Stigma also appeared to be a significant barrier to participation for some who have never been on cash assistance but are eligible for food stamps, as they perceive this as asking for welfare.

Costs of participation. The costs of participating in the Food Stamp Program in Madison County seemed to be significant and include time, loss of income and emotional risk. Applicants had to drive to Wampsville where DSS is located (75 mile round trip from several townships in the county) where public transportation is almost nonexistent. The DSS office can be an overwhelmingly intimidating experience. At the time of our application the New York State food stamp application was a 16-page document accompanied by a 10-page document that explained "How to Complete the Food Stamp Application." Once the application was completed and reviewed, the applicant may have had to return to Wampsville to provide the necessary documentation, which included supplying a photo and a finger-image.

Awareness of eligibility. Awareness of eligibility did not seem to be a significant barrier to enrollment for those with some experience with the welfare system; 85% of our former TANF survey respondents realized that they were likely to be eligible for food stamps. However, many elderly and working poor who have never received any type of public assistance are less likely to realize that they are eligible for food stamps or understand that food stamps is not welfare but an USDA nutrition program.

The goal of our project was to increase the number of new households participating in the Food Stamp Program in Madison County by approximately 25% in the year following implementation of our project (from approximately 1530 to at least 1900 households).

We proposed to increase participation by meeting three major objectives - (1) streamlining the application process, (2) lowering the stigma and costs associated with applying for food stamps, and (3) increasing awareness of the eligibility requirements and the nutritional benefits of the food stamp program.

II. Proposed Objectives

The objectives that we proposed to meet our goal of increasing food stamp applicants in Madison County by 25% from October 1, 2003 to September 30, 2004 and how we met those objectives during the granting period are outlined below.

Objective #1: Reduce the current 16-page application to a one-page application

We did significantly reduce the length of the food stamp application in Madison County – from 16 pages to two pages. We applied for and received a waiver from the state to use the two-page application approved for Onondaga County instead of the standard state application. The two-page application went into effect in Madison County in late May of 2003 and remains the standard application.

Objective #2: Develop an online prescreening tool. In order to increase awareness of eligibility and, therefore, participation we proposed to develop a simple online pre-screen to determine likelihood of eligibility for food stamps. We hoped that our prescreen would also provide the consumer with information about the benefits of the Food Stamp Program including (1) the maximum monthly benefit for his/her family size and (2) the estimated monthly cost of a nutritionally adequate diet for his/her family size. This could

be accomplished at CAP (office locations at both ends of Madison County), other nonprofit offices or the consumer's home, due to acquisition of laptop computers. Our prescreen tool was developed and can be viewed at <http://www.madisoncountyfoodstamps.org>. Since it was launched on October 1, 2003, we have had 840 hits on the prescreen tool, representing 2,776 individuals.

Objective #3: Develop an online application tool. If a positive response is received from the pre-screen, our goal was that the consumer would then have the option to continue with the on-line application form for food stamps. We hoped that the new application form would take no longer than 15 minutes to complete online. As part of the initial preparation for the development and deployment of our website, our Technology Consultant tested all aspects of the online application and made the requested changes that allowed the Madison County website to mirror the format and function of the state-approved food stamp application. In addition, our consultant worked closely with the Outreach Coordinator in taking the necessary steps to register the site's Domain Name and Secure Socket Layer certificate with Verisign. The website was officially launched on October 1, 2003 and can be viewed at <http://www.madisoncountyfoodstamps.org>. Since it was launched, 267 applications have been submitted online.

Objective #4: Automate the online application process. Our goal was to have completed on-line applications automatically transmitted to the Madison County DSS office where the web page and server would be hosted. The application would be printed out in usable form (the format of the paper application) to be entered into DSS software. Eligibility would be verified by an in-office DSS case worker. We have successfully automated the online application process. Applications are now automatically printed at

the DSS offices where a caseworker assigned to process online applications determines each application and then assigns to a food stamp caseworker. This process will remain in effect after the grant period.

Objective #5: Develop a new process for processing online applications. Our initial idea was that after receiving the application, DSS would send a letter indicating that the application was received and that approval is pending providing documentation. The documentation requirements would be clearly outlined in the letter, as well as information regarding the times and location where documentation may be submitted. We hoped that that consumer would be able to call DSS or CAP to set up an appointment. This process worked quite effectively. A food stamp case worker followed up each online application received and the letter was sent to indicate the documentation required. Note that we revised the traditional documentation requirement letter that was sent by DSS to make it easier to understand as well.

Objective #6: Establish a way for consumers to complete application (finger imaging and documentation) in multiple ways. In addition to making it easier to make the initial application for food stamps with the website, we also hoped that the Traveling Food Stamp Outreach worker from DSS would be available at consumer convenient locations during traditional and nontraditional working hours to both take new applications (paper or online) and to complete the application process (photo ID and finger-imaging and documentation). Our efforts to lower the barriers to applying for food stamps were somewhat successful. Continual outreach efforts in the community allowed the Food Stamp Outreach Coordinator and Traveling DSS Outreach Worker to collect more than 100 new Food Stamp applications as well as spread the word to the county's

most remote residents. The portable imaging equipment has been frequently utilized to acquire necessary identification measures in more remote areas.

Objective #7: Train service providers to assist consumers with online application. In coordination with the launching of the online food stamp pre-screen and application, we planned to train and educate other service providers and organizations that work with potential applicants. The training sessions were to be targeted at training CAP and other nonprofit and governmental workers (staff at the Department of Health - including PCAP workers, The Office for the Aging, WIC, domestic violence shelter, schools, libraries, Madison County businesses, Head Start centers, and food pantries) to assist their consumers in prescreening and applying for food stamps online and also informing them of the nutritional goals and benefits of the food stamp program. The following activities were carried out to train local service providers and employers to use the food stamp prescreen and online application:

- Provided laptop computers, dial up service, and training to our project partners (Office for the Aging, and Department of Health).
- Trained our own Community Action Program advocates to use the prescreen and online application tool.
- Informed area employers of the initiative and encouraged their participation in the project.
- Provided training for use of site to public service employees, including librarians and food cupboard coordinators.

Objective #8: Organize data collection for project evaluation. The goal of our research project was to increase food stamp participation in Madison County by 25% in the year following implementation. As a result, our evaluation would require comparing food stamp participation, applications, and denials before and after implementation of our project. Therefore, we proposed to collect data on each of these variables for the year before the implementation and the year after. We set up a plan to collect the needed data based on entering each day's food stamp activity in Madison County into an EXCEL spreadsheet beginning on October 1, 2002. Each day the food stamp activity for that day - applications received, approved, withdrawn, reasons for withdrawal, denied, reasons for application denial, cases opened, reopened, closed, reasons for case closure, applications for recertification and all activity involved – was to be emailed from DSS to the Research Coordinator. One full year of food stamp data prior to implementation was to be collected in a relatively costless manner. Once the website was up and the project was implemented (October 1, 2003), we continued to collect data for another year. Our goal was that the final data set would include two years of food stamp case activity in Madison County.

We followed our data collection plan throughout the two year granting period. The local DSS sent daily food stamp records for the county to the local evaluator every Friday. The final data set includes all case activity in the two year period under review, which is a total of 8,489 entries.

Objective #9: Encourage enrollment and publicize the nutritional benefits of the program. Following implementation of the website and new food stamp application procedures, we proposed to initiate a media blitz to publicize Madison County's NEW

Food Stamp Program by touting both the simple application process and the nutritional goals of the program. Posters, brochures, and PSAs would lead with nutritional information and then illustrate how easy it now is to apply. Copies of the new application were to be printed in all accessible local publications as well as distributed to advocates of nonprofits, employers, libraries, food pantries and grocery stores. Again, these ads would lead with nutritional information and focus on the food stamp program as a nutritional program sponsored by the USDA. We followed through on our media blitz as planned.

The Food Stamp Outreach Coordinator and Traveling DSS Outreach Worker performed continual outreach throughout the county by being available to assist with applications at public flu shot clinics, senior nutrition sites, senior housing, medical day care facilities, and area emergency food cupboards. They also participated in community seminars to inform the public of the program and the new application initiative.

Community Action program launched a significant marketing campaign by putting up information about the site and the nutritional benefits of food stamps at local businesses, libraries, health centers and schools. Other efforts in the publicity campaign included radio announcements, printing the new two-page application in the local *Penny Saver*, and generating local press coverage.

III. Data & Evaluation Method

The most important data for the evaluation was provided by the Madison County Department of Social Services, one of the three major partners in this project. Mike Fitzgerald, now Commissioner of that office, was a member of the team that wrote the original grant and designed the evaluation. He agreed that DSS would provide daily food

stamp case records, at the individual-level. Data collection began on October 1, 2002 after we received notification that we received the USDA grant and continued through September 30, 2004. DSS sent these daily food stamp records for the county to the local evaluator every Friday. These data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet each week. The variables include: date of application, case status (open, denial, recertification, etc.), case reason code (for example, for denials, this code is the reason for denial), sex of applicant, work status of applicant, citizenship status of household members, household composition (number of children, elderly person in household, married couple, etc.), and zip code. The final data set includes all case activity in the two year period under review, which is a total of 8,489 entries. In addition, each month, the food stamp case worker at DSS sent the evaluator a list of all applications received online. These were matched and noted in the Excel spreadsheet.

Our project aim was to increase new food stamp participants in Madison County by 25% by making the application process easier (shortening the application and allowing families to apply online), lowering the stigma and costs associated with applying for food stamps (online application, outreach, etc.), and increasing awareness of the eligibility requirements and the nutritional benefits of the program (online prescreen, outreach, publicity, etc.). Evaluating the success of our project would require comparing food stamp participation, applications, and denials before and after implementation of our project. Therefore, we collected data on each of these variables for the year before the implementation and the year after. We expected that, in the year after the implementation of our project, successful food stamp applications in Madison County would increase (hopefully, by at least 25%) and that the total number of applications received each

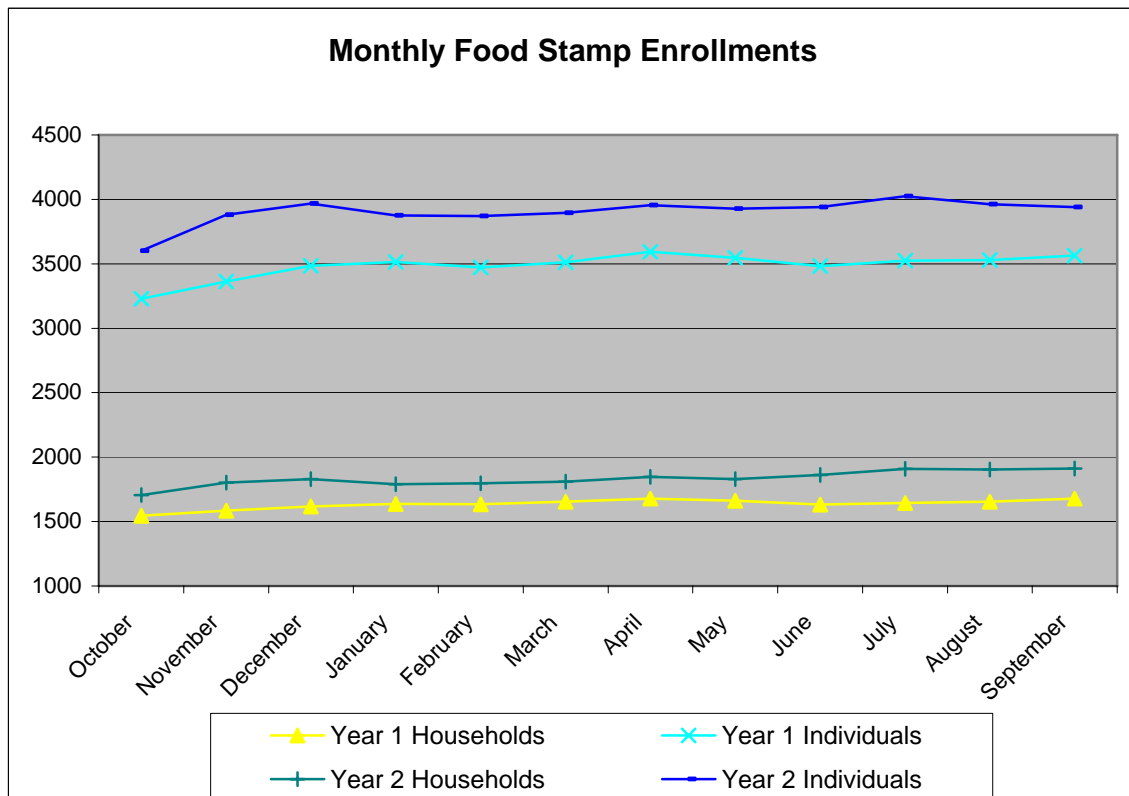
month would increase significantly. We also expected that denials would increase because as the stigma and costs associated with applying for food stamps fall, the number of families beginning but not completing the application process is likely to increase.

Assuming that any increase in food stamp participation during the period October 1, 2003 to September 30, 2004 relative to October 1, 2002 through September 30, 2003 is the result of our project requires that there was not a major, negative change in the Madison County economy over this time period. Employment data indicate that this was not the case as employment was stable over this time period. The New York State Department of Labor reports that private sector employment in Herkimer, Madison and Oneida counties (the Utica-Rome metro area) remained relatively stable during the time period under review, increasing slightly from 100,900 in September 2003 to 101,200 in September 2004. At the same time, the unemployment rate declined slightly from 5.6% in September 2003 to 5.0% in September 2004.

IV. Findings

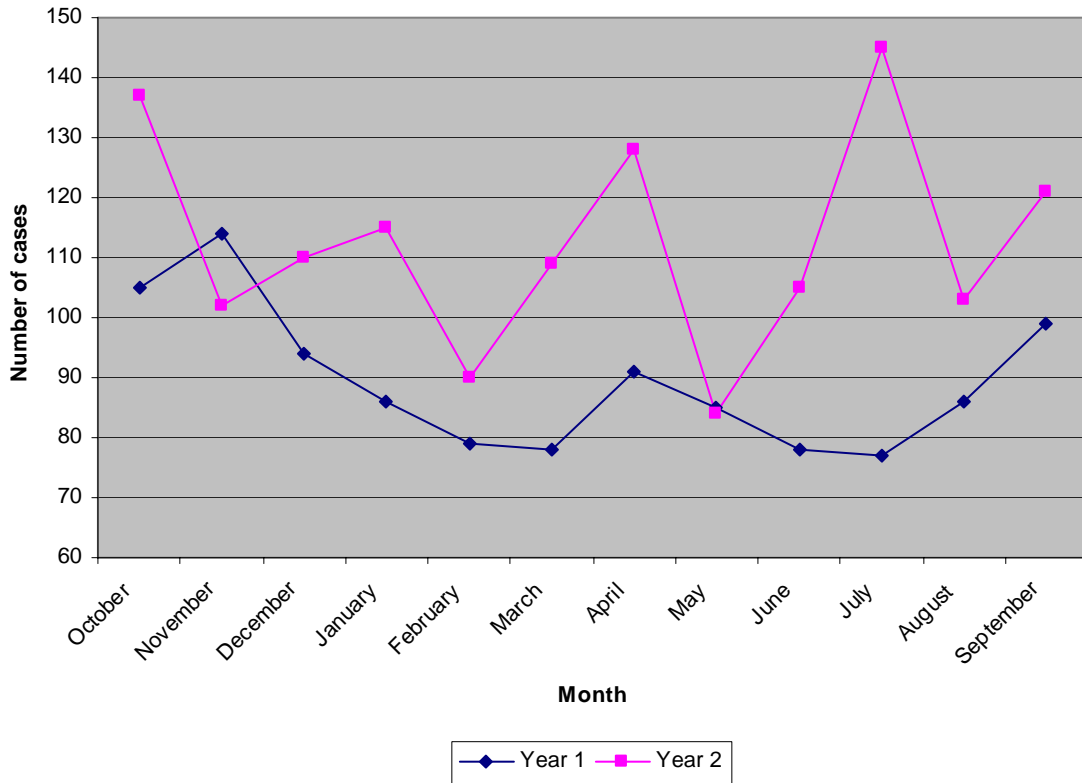
Overall participation in the Food Stamp Program in Madison County increased significantly after our intervention. The average number of households participating in the program each month increased from 1,635 in the year before the intervention (October 1, 2002 through September 30, 2003) to 1,833 in the year after (October 1, 2003 through September 30, 2004). Note that these figures represent non-public assistance food stamp cases, as do all food stamp figures reported here. Public assistance food stamp cases, that is, households that automatically receive food stamps because they qualify for cash assistance, are not the focus of our intervention. However, for the record, the number of these cases did not change significantly over the time period under

review (the monthly average number of public assistance food stamp cases increased from 54 to 56 households from 2003 to 2004). The observed increase in non-public assistance food stamp enrollment implies that approximately 198 additional households were participating in the program each month after our intervention and represents an increase of approximately 12%. The average number of individuals participating in the program each month increased from 3,485 in the year before the intervention to 3,903 in the year after. This implies that approximately 418 additional people were participating in the program each month as the result of our intervention and, again, represents an increase of approximately 12%. The following chart shows the monthly enrollment for both households and individuals in the years before and after the intervention.



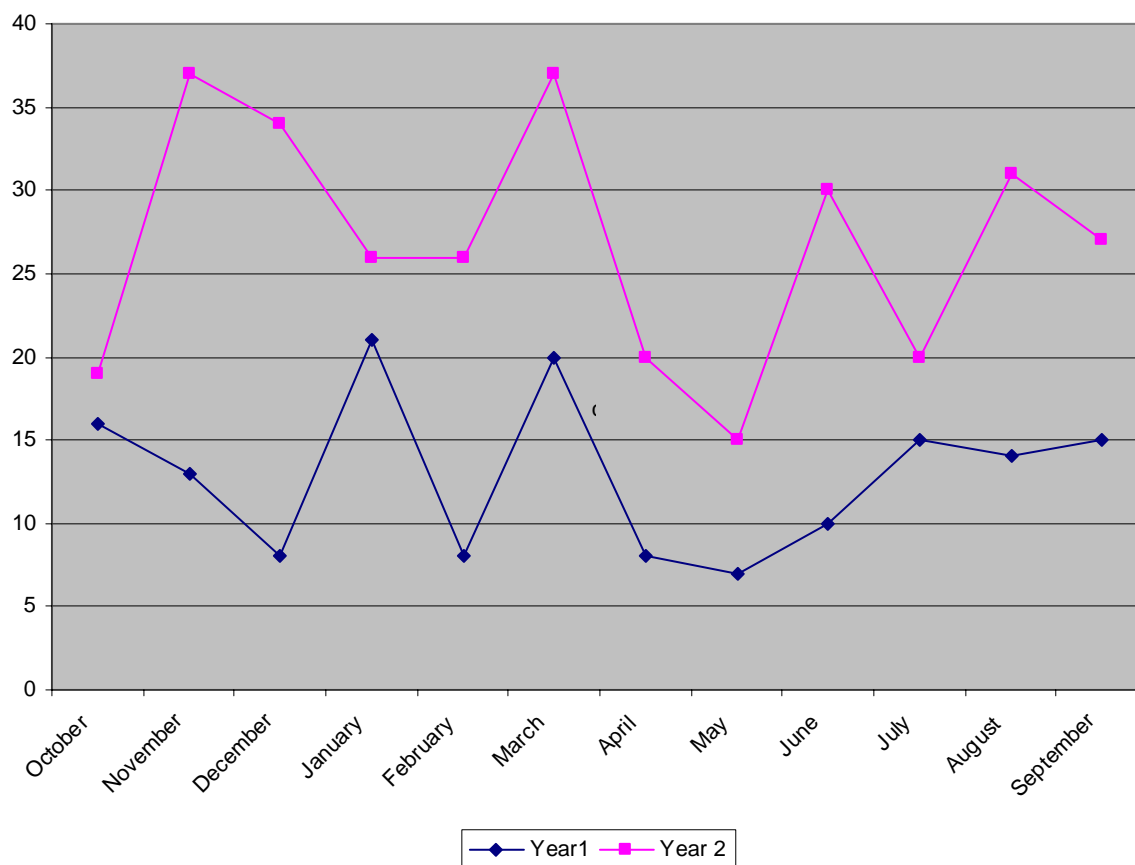
Of course, food stamp enrollment figures can change because the number of those continuing on food stamps changes (re-certifications increase or decrease) or because there is an increase or decrease in the number of new households joining the rolls. The goal of our intervention was to increase enrollment by increasing the number of new households participating in the program. A closer look at the data shows that the number of new cases increased significantly in the year after our intervention. In the base year, 1,072 new food stamp cases were opened in Madison County. This number increased to 1,349 in the post-intervention year. These results imply that our intervention resulted in 277 additional households joining the food stamp program. This increase in the total number of new cases opened is 26% - slightly above our goal of increasing the number of new cases by 25%. The average number of cases opened each month increased from 89 in the base year to 112 in the year after our intervention. On average, an additional 23 new households were added to the food stamp program each month in the year after our intervention. The following chart shows the number of new cases opened each month in the base year and the year following the intervention. It is important to note that the shortened application was introduced in June of 2003, right after we received the state waiver. We decided not to wait until the intervention date, October 1, 2003, because we felt that the potential impact was too great. The chart shows that applications immediately began to increase after the new application was introduced.

Food Stamp Participation - Cases Opened



Although the increase in the number of new participants, shown in the chart, above indicates that our intervention was successful in increasing food stamp enrollments, denials also increased. As previously mentioned, we expected that denials would increase because as the stigma and costs associated with applying for food stamps fall, the number of families beginning but not completing the application process would be likely to increase. As shown in the chart below, denials did increase significantly after our intervention. The average number of denials each month more than doubled from 13 to 27 from the base year to the post-intervention year.

Food Stamp Participation - Denials



There were 155 total denials in the base year and 322 total denials in the year after the intervention. As shown in Table 1, the doubling of the number of denials over these two years is largely due to an increase in the number of applications started but not completed. The number of applications denied because of incomplete documentation increased from 68 in the base year to 197 after the intervention. These denials represented 44% of all denials in the base year and 61% of all denials in the post-intervention year. The number of denials for excess income and excess resources increased only slightly from 50 to 63 and 13 to 24, respectively.

Table 1: Reasons for denial

Reasons for denial	Base year	Post-intervention year
Excess income	50 (33%)	63 (20%)
Excess resources	13 (9%)	24 (8%)
Incomplete documentation	68 (44%)	197 (62%)
Other	24 (14%)	38 (10%)
Total	155 (100%)	322 (100%)

While our goal was to increase overall food stamp participation in Madison County, we also hoped to increase participation among targeted sub-groups. Specifically, we targeted resources (laptops and training for advocates at CAP and the Office of the Aging) toward increasing food stamp participation among the working poor (often with minor children in the household) and the elderly. Table 2 shows the numbers of new food stamp applications in both years by three groups: (1) households with an elderly person (aged 60 or older), (2) households with minor children (under age 18), and (3) households with non-elderly adults only.

Table 2: New food stamp cases by household type*

Household type	Base year	Post-intervention year
Elderly	58 (5%)	119 (10%)
Children	361 (34%)	377 (28%)
Non-elderly adults only	654 (61%)	842 (62%)
Total	1073 (100%)	1338 (100%)

*9 food stamp cases could not be classified by household type.

The number of cases opened from the base year to the post-intervention year increased for all three household types. However, we seem to have done a better job of targeting the elderly than households with children. While the percentage of total cases including non-elderly adults remained about the same from year 1 to year 2, the percentage of elderly cases doubled and the percentage of households with children declined slightly from 34% to 28%. While the advocates found the elderly reluctant to fill out online applications and also wary of participating in food stamps because they often view it as “welfare,” the shorter application and significant outreach to the elderly community seemed to have had a positive impact on their enrollment in the food stamp program.

As shown in Chart 3 above, denials also increased significantly as a result of our intervention. Were some household types more vulnerable to denials than others? Table 3 shows the numbers of new food stamp applications denied in both years by the same three groups: (1) households with an elderly person (aged 60 or older), (2) households with minor children (under age 18), and (3) households with non-elderly adults only.

Table 3: Food stamp cases denied, by household type

Household type	Base year	Post-intervention year
Elderly	9 (6%)	32 (10%)
Children	57 (37%)	113 (35%)
Non-elderly adults only	89 (57%)	177 (55%)
Total	155 (100%)	322 (100%)

As was the case with new cases opened, the number of cases denied from the base year to the post-intervention year increased for all three household types. While the percentage of elderly denied increased from 5% to 10%, these percentages mirror their representation in the opened cases as well. Therefore, elderly households were not overrepresented among applicants that were denied. However, while the percentage of households with children that were denied decreased from 37% to 35%, households with children were overrepresented among those denied as these households made up only 28% of new cases opened. Households with children may face more barriers – mainly, lack of child care – to providing documentation and completing the application process than other households.

In summary, our findings indicate that the project was successful. The number of new food stamp cases opened increased from 1,072 in the base year to 1,349 in the post-intervention year. Given that there was not a significant downturn in the Madison County economy in the intervention year, these results imply that our intervention resulted in 277 additional households joining the food stamp program. This increase in the total number of new cases opened is 26% - slightly above our goal of increasing the number of new cases by 25%. The number of new cases increased across all three measured groups – the elderly, families with children, and adults without children. However, the elderly were overrepresented in new cases opened in the intervention year. Our project's outreach to the elderly community in Madison County seems to have been effective. However, denials also increased significantly. In fact, denials increased more than new cases – over 100% in the intervention year relative to the base year. Most of the additional denials were caused by incomplete documentation. It seems that while the

shortened application, prescreen, web application, and outreach lowered the costs of applying for food stamps, a large number of applicants started but did not complete the application process. We believe that the reason is that completing the application process still involved some significant costs for many applicants.

V. Challenges, accomplishments, and lessons learned

During the course of the project, we encountered several potential set backs with our target groups – the elderly and working families with children. We found seniors were reluctant to participate in our project because they often viewed food stamps as “welfare” and were hesitant to use new technology. In addition, transportation barriers seem to disproportionately hinder seniors from traveling to DSS to apply or follow through on their applications. Challenges faced in enrolling working families was that they often were not able to apply during normal business hours and also could not submit follow-up documentation to DSS during normal business hours. Our biggest challenge with all groups was that a large number of our new applicants did not complete the application process and, therefore, were denied.

To increase participation among seniors, our project included continual marketing and outreach to SNACK sites and senior apartments to address their concerns and explain the new program. The CAP advocate and DSS Outreach worker visited five senior apartment complexes, 12 SNACK sites, 13 Flu clinics and all 11 Madison County food cupboards to meet with seniors. However, they often found it difficult to penetrate the stigma of food stamps among the elderly. They often found that the elderly were interested and eager until they uttered the words “food stamps” at which point the seniors made it clear that they do not accept “welfare.” CAP and Office of the Aging advocates

also offered assistance with using the online prescreen and application and were also always willing to help seniors fill out the traditional paper application form. Overall, we found that seniors were reluctant to use the internet to sign up for food stamps and were more willing to submit a paper application.

In order to combat the transportation barriers of all groups, our intervention included acquiring a portable AFIS machine so that applicants would not have to travel to Wampsville to complete the application process. We encountered several problems in making this equipment useful. Chief among the issues for the portable AFIS machine was the requirement to have an individual's Client Identification Number (CIN) to complete the enrollment process. While at the various sites, the DSS worker and CAP Advocate encouraged walk-in applicants and this population would have to wait until the CIN number could be retrieved from the local office before the interview could be completed. Additionally, the equipment did not hold an electrical charge for a sufficient time period and would require an electrical connection. The county is largely rural and some of the sites where outreach occurred did not have available outlets, reducing the effectiveness of the portable workstation.

Our intervention seemed particularly well-suited to deal with the barriers faced by working families. These families often do not apply for food stamps because they cannot take time off of work and/or find child care so that they can initiate and complete the application. The website, www.MadisonCountyFoodStamps.org, is available at all times. Working families or single mothers with children could apply online from home, a local library or food pantry, local WIC sites or even at work in some cases. However, while they could apply online, they could not complete the application online. After the first

few months of the intervention year, we noticed that a large number of applications were being denied due to incomplete documentation. In order to understand how to get more of these new applicants to become participants rather than denials, we surveyed 42 consumers who were denied food stamps due to failure to provide the documentation needed to complete the application process. In phone interviews conducted by the CAP, applicants who applied but did not complete the required documentation indicated that they:

- Were not aware of the extent of the documentation required when they applied
- Requested the documentation requirements should be simplified
- Were unable to get to the LDSS office (lived over 1 hr. away)
- Did not receive return phone calls from a DSS worker
- Felt that the process violated their privacy
- Did not want to go to the DSS office

These results suggest that while our intervention was successful in lowering the barriers to *initiating* a food stamp application, we did not adequately address the barriers to *completing* a food stamp application. Although online applications make it easier to apply for food stamps, as long as a trip to DSS during normal working hours, extensive documentation requirements, and finger imaging are necessary to complete a food stamp application, many of the elderly, working poor, and single parents will be underrepresented among food stamp participants.

We did several things to make the entire process less onerous for eligible households. First, we added more nontraditional hours at our outreach sites to both

collect applications and required documentation. The AFIS machine allowed finger imaging and photos to be taken. In addition, we reworked the follow-up letter that DSS sends to applicants after receiving the initial paperwork either online or on paper. The letter that was formerly used was confusing and made the remaining requirements seem overly burdensome. We hoped that a friendly and straight-forward letter would encourage more applicants to complete the process.

While denials did begin to trend downward in the latter part of the intervention year, they remained significantly above those in the base year. We had hoped to receive additional funding from the USDA in order to continue to iron out the process and lower the percentage of denials. We wanted to continue to conduct research to better address the needs and concerns of our targeted groups by working closely with Madison County agencies that serve them, including Head Start, Cooperative Extension, Evenstart, Office for the Aging, TASA, Public Health, WIC, and the Department of Social Services. Unfortunately, our request was denied.

Although we will not be able to continue to innovate without additional funding, much of our intervention will continue in Madison County. The prescreening tool and website will be maintained and the local DSS will continue to accept online applications. The two-page application is here to stay as well. In addition, in the course of our contacts with the State agency (OTDA) we hope to make arrangements to reproduce our on-line web access throughout New York State. Officials from OTDA have verbally expressed interest in exploring this project. We would like our website to become NYSfoodstamps.org! Transferability is possible as most other counties in NYS now use the shortened version of the food stamp application and could adopt the web prescreening

and application software. These, and the informational brochures, posters and other publicity items could be provided and modified for individual counties at a relatively low cost. In addition, the strong public/private partnership between CAP and DSS in Madison County is a model that other counties in NYS could benefit from adopting.

VI. Recommendations for future projects

Our project indicates that lowering the costs of applying for food stamp increases food stamp participation. In a rural area like Madison County where substantial transportation barriers exist for low-income families, technology is an effective way of reaching the eligible but not enrolled. Through our website, families could learn about their food stamp eligibility and initiate the application process. We also found that our efforts to lower the application costs by shortening and simplifying the application form paid off. Applications immediately started to increase after the shortened form was introduced.

However, future projects that make online applications possible must also, more aggressively, address the barriers to completing the food stamp application process by:

- initiating procedures to provide more information on the application process to clients by phone or in person
- continuing to work with DSS to simplify the paperwork and verification process and together advocate for permanent changes at the state level
- offering to home visit or meet folks who are unable to get to the local DSS at their local libraries
- follow up with each applicant

- discuss reasons why requested information is needed
- create posters for groceries, Laundromats, clothing closets and food cupboards and publish eligibility levels in local newspapers as well
- create county wide stations that make applying and recertifying accessible
- make it easier to provide the required documentation by extending the hours and places to verify.

We made significant gains in encouraging participation in the food stamp program in the past year; however, more innovation is needed to reach the most vulnerable and isolated groups. Local groups must also continue to affect positive changes in the local food stamp office procedures. Working together with the local DSS, nonprofits must advocate to the state governing agency for simplifying procedures and abolishing the requirements of finger imaging, which often makes our consumers feel like criminals. New York State is one of five remaining states that continue to require finger printing as part of the process for obtaining food stamps. It should be noted that the local department has eliminated most households from the finger imaging requirement, including the elderly, workers, and those with small children. It would have been interesting, if funding had continued, to determine the effect of this program change on food stamp use. Our experience indicates that increasing participation to record levels requires changing the culture of the Food Stamp Program that is over 63 years old.

On a local level, agencies should provide easier access to food stamp participation by offering non-traditional office hours for enrollment. These locations must be convenient to and utilized by our consumers (i.e. food cupboards, free hot meal locations,

worksites, food stores—Wal-Mart is a potential partner). Wherever possible, agencies should attempt to streamline the application procedure to eliminate the need to travel to the local DSS office.

Our experience also indicated that media campaigns can be quite successful in increasing participation and would have been a major focus of our efforts had our project received additional funding. A media campaign to educate the public that the food stamp program is a nutrition program administered by the Department of Agriculture, not a welfare program, would be particularly helpful in attracting seniors to the program. Ideas include sponsoring commercials featuring local food stamp participants on the local radio station and sponsoring a poster contest for junior high students to promote food stamps as a nutritional program. Other ideas we hoped to include:

- Identify and visit at least one senior citizen housing complex per month in order to customize an effective education and application campaign targeted at this group.
- Attend clinics for pre-natal and child immunizations monthly in order to provide nutritional information and assist with food stamp applications for those prescreened to be potentially eligible.
- Educate all district school nurses, guidance counselors, and elementary teachers to promote this new process of applying for food stamps
- Train and coordinate with at least 3 other agencies to do outreach and referral for expanded hours and locations

- Train the Volunteer Income Tax Assistant workers (a program sponsored by a collaboration with the Upstate Institute at Colgate University, LDSS and CAP) to distribute information and demonstrate the accessibility of the on-line food stamp application on one of the available computers in the VITA program.
- Mobilize and provide training in area churches to provide food stamp information days.
- Enlist librarians in the campaign and visit them monthly in order to ensure that current flyer information is available and library personnel/volunteers are trained to assist with the web-site. A supply of paper applications should also be distributed.
- Identify one major grocer in each town and visit each on a bi-monthly basis to ensure educational materials are still posted. Use gift certificates from each grocery store as an incentive for applying for food stamps.
- Contact 10 area employers and choose 5 work sites to process food stamp applications on a trial monthly basis.
- Continue to advocate on a state and federal level for program eligibility changes that include a lessened eligibility standard for the elderly. Ideas include not verifying resources for those 60 years or older, longer certification periods for the elderly, and coordination between Medicaid, HEAP and other low-income programs to make one eligibility decision.

Our recommendation is that local groups interested in increasing food stamp participation focus on lowering the costs of both initiating and completing the food stamp

application and changing the local food stamp culture. The former might include a website with prescreening tool and application as well as a short application with friendly, straight-forward follow-up documentation. In states like New York where finger printing and photo as well as significant documentation are required, outreach is crucial. Families must be able to complete the application process in multiple locations and at convenient times. Changing the local food stamp culture is a harder task. A sustained media campaign combined with local educational outreach is one step. However, truly changing the climate requires a broader effort. State and federal-level changes – such as eliminating the finger printing requirement or changing the name of the program - that lower the barriers to applying and decriminalize food stamps would be significant.