

Food Stamps Out Hunger



Hunger in the West and
what Governors and Congress
can do about it



Northwest Federation of Community Organizations
August 2001

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Executive Summary

“My family receives food stamps each month worth \$145, an amount that barely gets us through the month. I always make sure that my children eat first and I frequently skip a meal in order to guarantee at least a little bit of nourishment for my growing girls. I don’t have a car, and I have to shop at the local grocery store where the prices are extremely high. I’ve tried to get food donations in the past, but what I received was old and out of date. My two children have unfortunately gone to bed at night with empty stomachs.”

— Tracey Romero, mother of 12-year-old and two-year-old daughters, Billings, Montana.

The Food Stamp Program is the nation’s largest and most effective anti-hunger program. The program provided 7.7 million families with food stamp benefits in 1999, the vast majority of which contained a child, elderly person, or a person with a disability. Nearly all families receiving food stamps officially live in poverty, which means that they have insufficient income to meet their basic needs. Without access to food stamps, these families would have a difficult time obtaining the food and nutrition they need to stay healthy.

While the Food Stamp Program provides an essential benefit that allows millions to acquire food that they otherwise could not have obtained, the program was severely damaged in 1996 by Congress and has never been updated to reflect today’s families and how they eat and live. In addition, state governments, which are responsible for enrolling eligible families in the Food Stamp Program, have failed to enroll 41 percent of eligible families. Nationwide, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports that 31 million people, 40 percent of whom are children, continue to struggle to obtain sufficient food. A strong Food Stamp Program that provides food assistance to all eligible families could ensure that these families and children have sufficient nutritious food.

Food Stamps Out Hunger assesses how well low-income families in six Western states — California, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Texas, and Washington — are obtaining the food they need to remain healthy. A total of 650 low-income families were interviewed regarding how they obtain and prepare their food, their ability to meet their families’ food needs, and their experiences with the Food Stamp Program. More than 100 low-income families (those earning less than 150 percent of the federal poverty line, or \$26,475 a year for a family of four) were interviewed in each state.

These 650 in-depth interviews with low-income families revealed that these families are struggling to purchase sufficient food and that there are serious problems with the Food Stamp Program.

The study’s findings include:

- Over half of the families reported that they did not have enough money to buy sufficient food

during the previous month.

- Thirty percent of adults and 11 percent of children reported that they had not eaten for an entire day during the last year due to lack of money to buy food.
- While people using food stamp benefits were less likely to be hungry than those not using food stamps, very few families reported that their food stamp benefits were sufficient to meet their dietary needs for an entire month.
- Only 26 percent of those using food stamps with a special diet could afford to buy the food they need to remain healthy.
- Nearly all food stamp families reported difficulties when they applied for the Food Stamp Program.

Food Stamps Out Hunger provides straightforward policy solutions that governors and their food stamp agencies can adopt to rid the Food Stamp Program of the problems identified by families in the survey. In addition, the report provides solutions that Congress can adopt during the 2001-2002 Food Stamp Reauthorization to ensure that the Food Stamp Program can meet its goal to “to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s population by raising levels of nutrition among low-income households.”

The report recommends that states fully embrace the streamlining and simplification enrollment options recently offered by the USDA. These options allow states to minimize many of the barriers families face when attempting to apply for food stamps, yet no state examined in this report has fully embraced these options. For its part, the federal government, which provides the bulk of the funds for the Food Stamp Program, needs to do more than provide states with these streamlining options. Congress must address the food stamp “quality control” system that discourages states from fully simplifying and accelerating the enrollment process. Congress can also simplify the enrollment and benefit determination process in other ways that ease burdens on state food stamp agencies and eligible food stamp families.

In addition, Congress can update the value of food stamp benefits so families can obtain sufficient food. The benefits currently provided are much too low and the program assumes that a family has someone available to seek out the cheapest bulk food available and cook three meals a day from scratch. The survey found that these expectations are unrealistic for today’s working families. Families need more food stamp benefits to obtain enough nutritious food to eat.

The report also urges Congress to restore eligibility to groups of people it eliminated from the Food Stamp Program in 1996, most notably legal immigrants. Eliminating certain groups from eligibility makes the process more difficult and time-consuming for all applicants and state workers and leaves legal immigrant families and others in need of food without help.

Food stamp re-certification is the right time to strengthen the Food Stamp Program, America’s most important weapon against hunger.

Introduction

For the first time in five years, the U.S. Congress is considering significant changes to the nation's most important weapon against hunger — the Food Stamp Program. For western states, which suffer from the highest percentage of food insecurity in the nation, this is an important opportunity to make improvements in a program that provides more than 7.7 million families with the ability to meet some of their dietary needs.

The effectiveness of the Food Stamp Program has been damaged in recent years by federal changes made in 1996 and by the failure of states to enroll all eligible families in the program. The program must be strengthened at both the state and federal level to ensure that it can meet the nutrition needs of eligible families. This reports show how this can be done.

Section one of the report shows that Western families do not have access to sufficient nutritious, affordable food. It relies on data collected from NWFCO's hunger survey administered to 650 families in six Western states (California, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Texas, and Washington) as well as data from government sources to show that many families are going without needed food.

Section two of the report examines how states can ensure that families have enough nutritious food to remain healthy. It shows that food banks, while an important part in a community's safety net, cannot meet the growing need for emergency food without a strong Food Stamp Program that provides ongoing food support to low-income families.

Section three of the report discusses how to improve the Food Stamp Program at both the state and federal level. The 650 families interviewed for this report shared their problems with accessing and using the Food Stamp Program and the report presents straightforward solutions to these problems. Many of the solutions proposed for state governments can be adopted today without cost to state budgets. In fact, state governments may save money by adopting the streamlining suggestions in this report.

Section three also discusses changes that the federal government can adopt during food stamp reauthorization occurring right now. The federal government can support states as they streamline their food stamp programs by creating a quality control system that rewards full enrollment rather than punishes states for making mistakes caused by the overly complicated eligibility and benefit determination system for food stamps. In addition, the report provides specific solutions to respond to a key problem identified by the food stamp families surveyed. Families reported that the food stamp benefit is simply too low and must be increased if the program is to successfully ensure the health and food security of low-income families.

Lastly, section five urges Congress to restore eligibility to legal immigrants and other groups that it eliminated from coverage in 1996.

Section One: Western families do not have access to sufficient nutritious, affordable food

Western families are not making enough money to meet their needs

State economies are failing to provide living wage jobs for all workers. Poverty levels remain high in every state. The cost of purchasing basic needs like food, shelter, and energy has risen rapidly in the region. This combination of sinking real wages and the rising cost of living forces families to choose which basic needs to satisfy and which to sacrifice. For too many families, this means going hungry or surviving on food that does not meet minimum nutritional standards.

State economies are not creating jobs that pay a living wage.

A living wage is a wage that allows families to meet their basic needs without resorting to public assistance and provides them with some ability to deal with emergencies and plan ahead. According to the Northwest Job Gap Study, the economies of Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington are failing to create living wage jobs for all of the families living in those states. With three to 16 job seekers competing for each living wage job opening in the region, many more families are living on insufficient incomes while searching for better paying jobs. In addition, in all six states studied in this report, real wages of low wage workers, adjusted for inflation, dropped between 1979 and 1999.¹ An economy that fails to provide jobs that can support families' basic needs requires families to rely on government assistance to meet those basic needs.



Bonnie Chambers — Lynnwood, Washington

My husband, James, and I have four children between the ages of one and 15. James used to work at Boeing and made a decent living as a drafter, making over \$15 an hour with benefits. In 1999 he was laid off, and since then he has had a difficult time finding work. The last job he held was at Rite Aid, working for \$10 an hour.

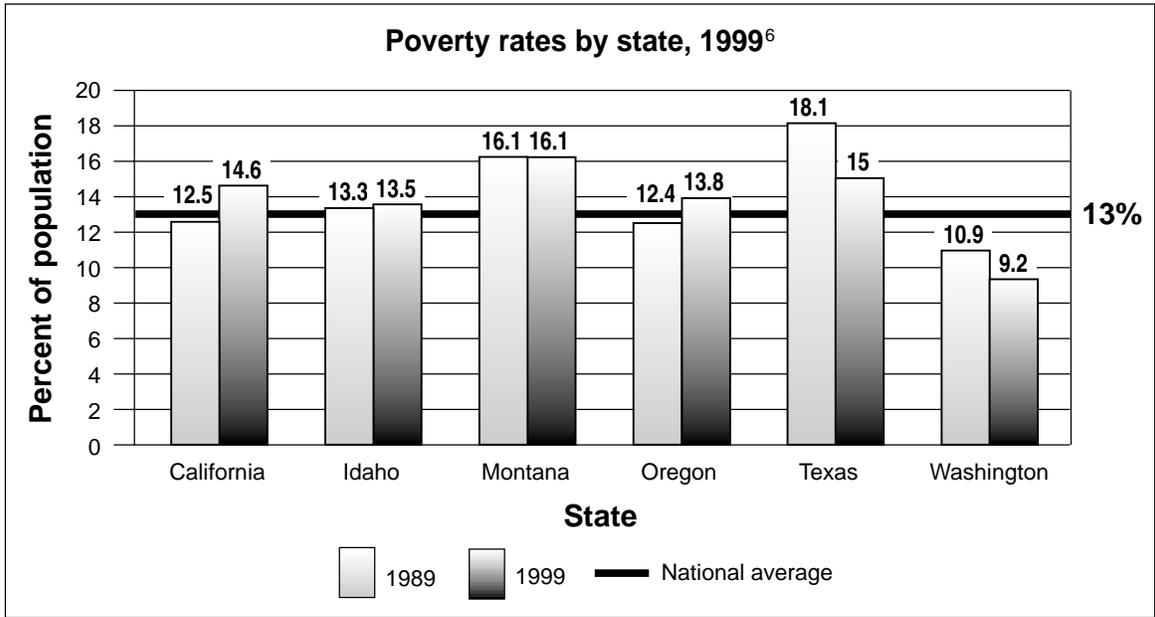
However, he had to quit because his schedule kept getting switched around and we were paying too much in daycare when we both had to work at the same time.

We are receiving food stamps, but not enough. When James was working at Rite Aid and bringing home about \$1,300 a month (for a family of six), we received \$120 in food stamps. James and I only ate one meal a day then. We were always hungry and felt extremely malnourished. We wanted our children to eat, so we didn't. Now that James is out of work our food stamp amount has gone up, but not by very much. We go to the food bank, but you can only go once a month. Plus we don't have a car, which makes it difficult because the food bank is not close by. If my family had enough to eat, things would be less stressful and we would be able to do more to change our situation. I always feel like I am dealing with crisis after crisis now instead of making progress.

Western States Lack Living Wage Job Opportunities²				
	Idaho	Montana	Oregon	Washington
Living wage	\$14.98	\$15.38	\$16.99	\$17.52
Job openings failing to provide living wage	75%	82%	79%	70%
Living wage job gap ratio	8 job seekers for 1 living wage job opening	16 job seekers for 1 living wage job opening	13 job seekers for 1 living wage job opening	7 job seekers for 1 living wage job opening

Western families continue to live in poverty.³

Many families in the west continue to live in poverty. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a family of four with income lower than \$17,650 in 2001 was officially living “in poverty,” although most people consider families with incomes considerably higher than \$17,650 to be living in poverty.⁴ Families living at the poverty level cannot afford to meet basic needs without assistance. According to one survey, 23.7 percent of Washington families and 27.5 percent of California families living on incomes below the poverty line reported that they skipped meals in 1996.⁵



Housing and Energy costs are rising for families in Western states.

Housing costs consume a large portion of low-income families’ already squeezed budgets. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, 35 percent of renters or more can’t afford

the fair market rate for a two-bedroom apartment in Western states.⁷ To afford rent, low-income families often have to make sacrifices on basics needs, such as food, or take multiple jobs.

Low-income families' budgets are also squeezed by higher energy prices. California is feeling the power crunch more than any other state in the country. While demand for electricity in California has increased 4 percent since last year, wholesale prices have jumped more than 266 percent.⁸ Although low-income households often consume less energy than the average household does, the income burden of energy costs on those households is almost twice that of average households.⁹ Rising energy and housing prices squeeze family budgets, leaving them with less money to spend on food.

The lack of living wage jobs, high poverty levels, and increased costs of living results in large numbers of hungry families in the West.

More than one out of ten families in the United States are considered “food insecure” by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.¹⁰ This means that these families do not have assured access, at all times, to enough food for a healthy life. Families living below the federal poverty line (\$17,650 for a family of four) are three and half times more likely to be food insecure than the general population. Black and Hispanic households are two times more likely to be food insecure than the general population.¹¹ Households with children also experience higher food insecurity rates than those without children; they are twice as likely to be food insecure.

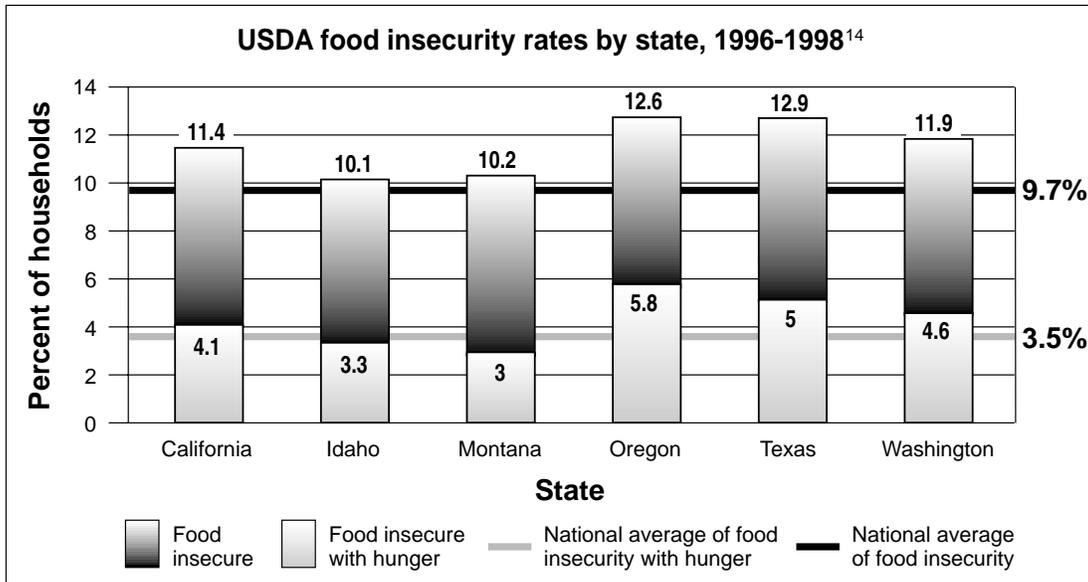
The 14 most Western states have the highest percentages of food insecure households¹² and have the highest percentage of food insecurity among likely food stamp eligible families (22.7 percent) compared to the South, Midwest, and Northeast.¹³



Yolanda Hernandez — Kent, Washington

I am 26 years old and a single mother of my son, Kerrigan, who is four. I am working about 37 hours a week at an assisted living home for the elderly, right down the street from where I live. I bring home about \$900 a month after taxes. Currently I am on food stamps, but I only get \$10 a month to help with food expenses. This amount just isn't enough when I am paying for rent, utilities and other expenses, like keeping a growing boy in clothes that fit him. I only eat two small meals a day; I always put my son first, and he needs to eat so that he grows up healthy and strong.

I would like to go to school and work part time so that I can get out of working minimum or just over minimum wage jobs, but I cannot cut down on my hours to do this. I need every penny to get by. If I got a food stamp benefit that actually reflects what I take home and not what I make before taxes, I would get more food stamps and be able to eat regular meals. I shouldn't have to skip meals when I am working hard and doing everything I can to provide a home for my son.



Hunger causes children and families irreparable harm

NWFCO’s survey of 650 low-income families confirmed that a large proportion of families living in the West suffer from hunger. Fifty-nine percent of adults and 50 percent of children said they were hungry in the previous month because their family didn’t have enough money to buy food. Survey responses showed that 36 percent of adults and 16 percent of children had not eaten for an entire day



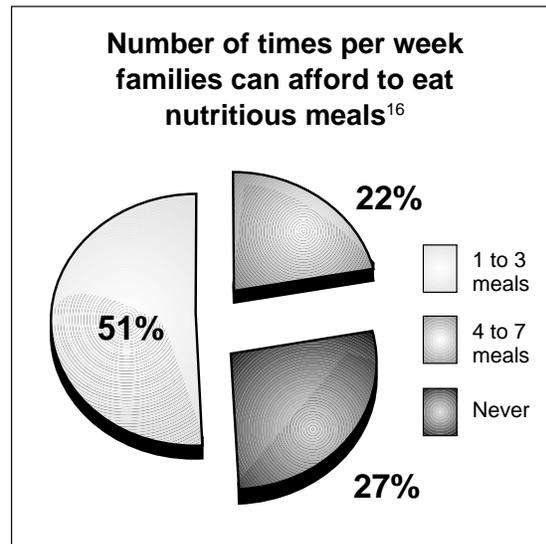
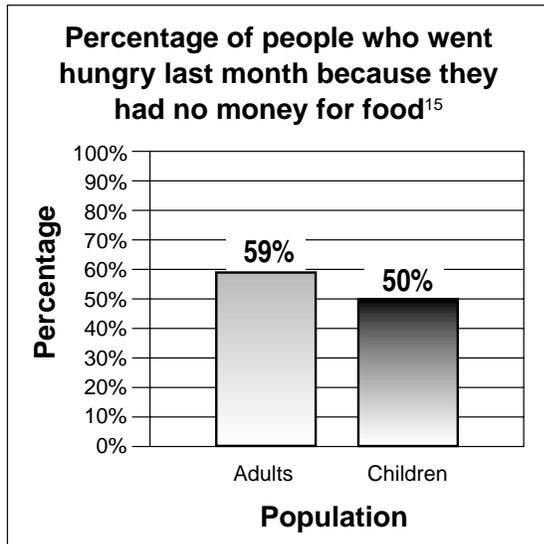
Carol Ann Hovland —
Lolo, Montana

My name is Carol Ann Hovland and I am a disabled woman living in a small town near Missoula, Montana. I have a limited income of \$548 a month, which comes from both Disability and Social Security. In addition to this money, I have a Section 8 subsidy for my housing, and I currently receive \$36 a month in food stamps.

Most months the food stamp benefits are all I have to buy food. My income barely covers my rent, utilities, medications, upkeep of my car, and household and personal items that food stamps cannot be used for. With increasing utility costs, my income probably won’t even cover these necessities next winter.

The lack of enough food stamps has had a big impact on my life. I eat mostly carbohydrates because that is all I can afford to buy. I get very little protein, and as a result, I am tired all the time. My overall health has deteriorated and my immune system doesn’t protect me like it should. Living with a disability has impacted my life enough; not having enough food and a balanced diet is an added burden that I should not have to face. I believe that if I was able to receive more assistance, I could eat a more nutritious diet, allowing me to improve my health and quality of life.

at least once in the previous 12 months because there was not enough money to buy food. Sixty-one percent of adults surveyed and 38 percent of children in the families surveyed had to skip a meal or eat less than normal in the past year because there wasn't enough money to buy food. Some adults reported that they were sometimes able to buy enough food to satisfy their families' hunger, but not to satisfy their families' nutritional needs.



Lack of food has a detrimental effect on the health of children.

Hunger harms children in many ways beyond the immediate misery it causes. Health problems are frequent among children who face hunger.¹⁷ Hungry children suffer two to four times as many health problems, including unwanted weight loss, fatigue, headaches, and irritability. Hunger also causes children to suffer from frequent colds and difficulty concentrating. Inadequate nutrition is also linked to stunted growth and iron deficiency anemia.

Inadequate nutrition and hunger are also linked to school performance and behavior problems.

Hunger and poor nutrition affect a child's ability to learn and perform in school. This can have life-long consequences for the child and society. Children who are hungry have difficulty concentrating in school and do not do as well as others on assigned tasks. Inadequate nutrition also has a negative effect on a child's cognitive development. A 1998 study of low-income Philadelphia and Baltimore public elementary schools found that the teachers of hungry children reported higher levels of hyperactivity, absenteeism, and tardiness.¹⁸ The study found that when these schools implemented the School Breakfast Program, children's participation in the program led to greater achievement in math and decreased rates of absence and tardiness. Teens and adults who suffered from hunger when they were young are more aggressive and become frustrated more easily than those who didn't suffer from hunger as children.¹⁹ Food deprivation is also related to depression and anxiety.

Hunger or inadequate nutrition can cause health problems or exacerbate existing health problems.

An inadequate diet can turn a temporary illness or mild disability into a permanent and completely disabling condition. Fruits and vegetables, and the vitamins and nutrients in these foods, are known to boost the immune system, making people who do not get enough fruits and vegetables have weaker immune systems and at higher risk for chronic diseases.²⁰ For some low-income families, fresh foods can be difficult to obtain due to their higher cost and availability.

An April 1998 study in a Minneapolis hospital examined the relationship between hunger and health and found that 14 percent of those who were hospitalized reported going hungry because they could not afford food.²¹ One of the researchers reported that “routinely skipping meals poses significant health problems for at-risk groups, particularly diabetics who need to eat regularly to balance their insulin intake.” The study also found that one-third of the diabetics who reported having insulin reactions said it was because they could not afford food.

Newer research examining the relationship between lack of food and obesity — a serious health problem that can increase a person’s risk of heart failure — finds that low-income women who report not having enough to eat are one and half times more likely to be overweight than those who are food secure.²² Researchers at the University of California, Davis, explored this paradoxical idea by examining a 10,000-person government survey on food security. The research suggests that obesity strikes the poor because they lack control over their food supply. “Americans relying on government food programs receive food vouchers once a month. If they run out [of food stamps] in the last week of the month, they may over-eat rich foods at the beginning of the next.”²³ The study also noted that low-income people living in poor neighborhoods often lack large grocery stores, forcing those people without transportation to shop at small, local convenient stores that stock few fresh foods but plenty of high-fat, high-start processed food.



Kim Bennett — Medford, Oregon

I am 33 years old and married with two children. Currently my family is homeless and we are staying with friends. I have diabetes, among other health problems, and I am unable to work.

While I am trying to feed my family, I must also watch my own diet very closely. As an insulin-dependent diabetic, I need to eat the right foods such as a lot of fruits and vegetables and sugar-free foods for diabetics. Unfortunately, these foods are very expensive and I cannot afford them. When I am unable to eat the foods I need, I get very sick. Twice in the last year I have fallen into a coma, and I don’t know how much more my body can take.

The stress of both feeding my family and trying to supply myself with the special-needs diet I require deteriorates my health even more. I want to continue to be there for my two children, but at times I get very discouraged. If we were getting more food stamps and the application and re-certification processes weren’t so daunting, I feel that I would be in a better position to support my family and take care of my health needs.

Section Two: How can we ensure that families have enough to eat?

Food banks alone cannot meet the growing need for food assistance in the region

America's Second Harvest, the nation's largest food bank network, reports that in 2000, over one million people seeking emergency food assistance were turned away due to lack of food resources at local food banks.²⁴ Second Harvest also notes that, "At the same time that demand for hunger relief is increasing, food banks and charities are unable to meet all the demand." Food bank operators around the Western region confirm that record numbers of people are seeking emergency food assistance at food banks.²⁵ Some food banks have begun limiting the number of times a family can obtain food at the food bank due to insufficient food resources.

Dixie Saunders, Director of Services at the Community Ministries food bank in Boise, Idaho, noted that Idaho food banks are struggling to feed those who need help. Saunders reports dramatic increases in Idaho food bank participation by people of all age groups: seniors, disabled people, and families with and without children. She also notes that many of the families receiving food from Community Ministries have two working family members, and many individuals who receive food from the food bank are working two or more jobs.²⁶

Washington food banks are facing a similar problem. "Our 19- to 54-age group is steadily increasing. Many of them just can't find work or are being put in part-time hours. Some young parents are working several part-time jobs with no benefits. Utility and fuel prices are hurting all age groups," said a Reach Out food bank staff member in Washington state.²⁷

More and more families are relying on food banks as a primary source of food, and not just for temporary emergency assistance. Yet, food banks cannot be expected to satisfy all of the nutritional needs of families and people with diverse dietary requirements. Food banks depend on donations of food and money and cannot provide an uninterrupted balanced diet to all of those who need it.

"Without the federal Food Stamp Program, emergency food agencies could not meet the needs of hungry people in our community. If there were no food stamps, we would not be able to feed everybody. It's that simple. In fact, we are working to increase food stamp participation because food stamps provide greater access to nutritious food and also help local economies," said Tina Kotek of the Oregon Food Bank.²⁸

A strong federal Food Stamp Program ensures families can get the food they need

The Food Stamp Program is the nation's largest and most effective anti-hunger program. The Food Stamp Program provided 7.7 million families with some means to purchase food for a nutritious diet in 1999. More than half of these households included children, one-fourth included a disabled person, and one-fifth contained an elderly person.²⁹ Approximately 89 percent of food stamp households live in poverty,³⁰ which means that they have insufficient income to meet their basic needs. Without access to food stamps, these families would have a difficult time obtaining the food they need to stay healthy.

“Without the federal Food Stamp Program, emergency food agencies could not meet the needs of hungry people in our community. If there were no food stamps, we would not be able to feed everybody. It’s that simple.”

— Tina Kotek, Oregon Food Bank

The Food Stamp Program is a particularly effective program for many reasons. The program is national in scope and provides uniform benefits based on need to families across the country. The Food Stamp Program can respond quickly to changes in the national and local economies. “The program is the second most important anti-recessionary resource we have when unemployment rises; only unemployment insurance has a greater counter-cyclical impact. At the same time, food stamp spending automatically decreases during times of economic prosperity, such as the late 1990s.”³¹

“The program is the second most important anti-recessionary resource we have when unemployment rises; only unemployment insurance has a greater counter-cyclical impact.”

— Stacy Dean, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

The Food Stamp Program also helps local economies by bringing in federal dollars that are spent on food at local grocery stores. “Food stamps represent a high percentage of our income,” noted one grocery store official.³² Grocery stores and their surrounding communities benefit from the more than \$15 billion dollars spent on food with food stamp benefits each year.³³

The Food Stamp Program determines eligibility almost exclusively on financial criteria. This means that the program serves a diverse population, from elderly widowers to families earning low wages at work. Except for some groups of people that Congress eliminated from the Food Stamp Program in 1996, notably legal immigrants, some unemployed adults, and other groups, the Food Stamp Program provides benefits to a broad group of low-income people.

Section Three: Strengthening the Food Stamp Program and increasing access is the long-term solution to hunger

The federal Food Stamp Program is our most effective weapon in the fight against hunger. However, some of its basic components — like the enrollment process and the value of its benefits — need to be improved if it is to maximize its effectiveness. The Food Stamp Program has not been fully addressed since 1996, when Congress severely damaged the program by eliminating certain eligible groups and reducing the benefit size. The current Congress is considering changes in the program during the Food Stamp Reauthorization process that started in the summer of 2001. Now is the time to strengthen the Food Stamp Program to ensure that all eligible families participate and receive sufficient benefits to obtain nutritious food.

Eligible families are missing out because of barriers in the Food Stamp Program

While the Food Stamp Program is primarily a federal program (the federal government pays the entire cost of the benefits), states are responsible for enrolling eligible families in the program. The federal and state governments equally share the cost of enrollment administration. States are provided with wide latitude in how they can set up their enrollment system for food stamp applicants, although they must follow some federal laws. The law requires that a local food stamp office provide food stamp applications upon request, inform applicants that they can apply for benefits immediately, provide “expedited” service to families in crisis, and provide equal treatment to all applicants, including those who speak languages other than English.

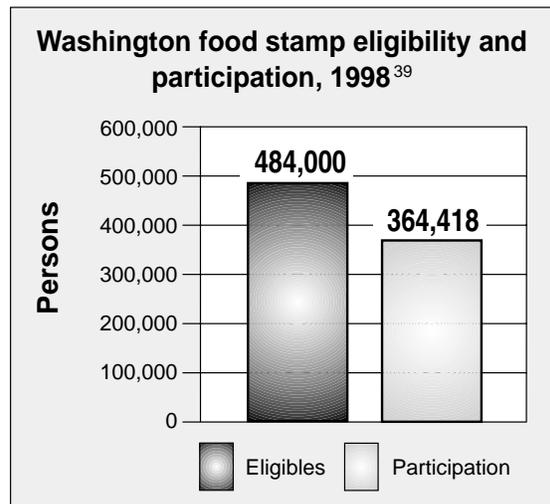
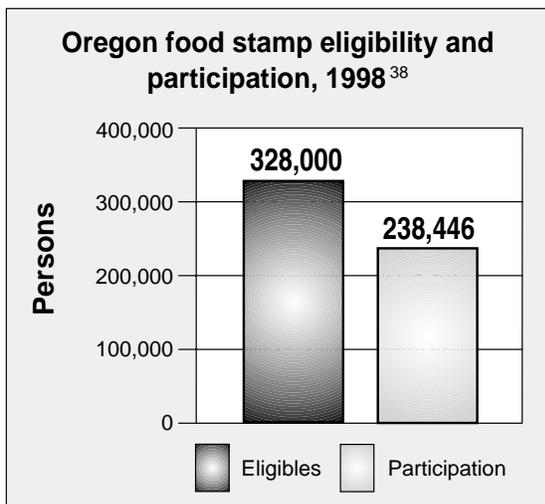
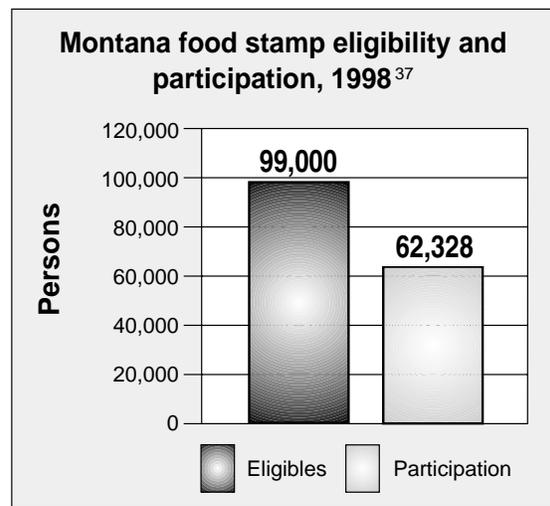
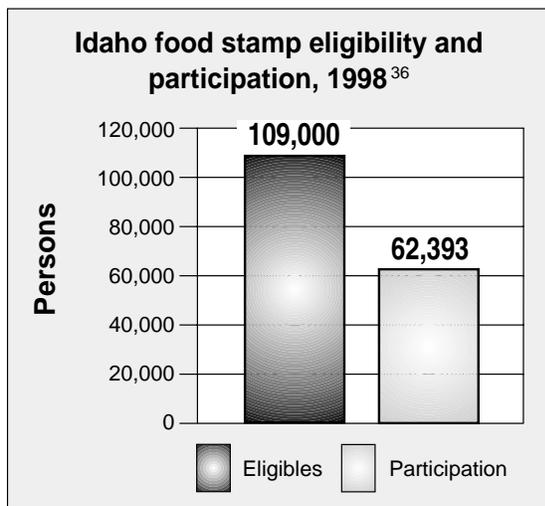
After meeting the basics of federal law, states can design their enrollment processes as they desire. States can choose to use a lengthy application or a short one. They can use enrollment policies that enable working families to apply without missing work or they can open enrollment offices only during regular business hours. Enrollment workers can provide applicants with a specific list of verification documents and help applicants obtain these documents or they can require applicants to repeatedly return to the office with more and more documents. If local offices are not enabling applicants to enroll in the program by adopting family-friendly practices, the Food Stamp Program cannot succeed no matter how strong it is at the federal level.

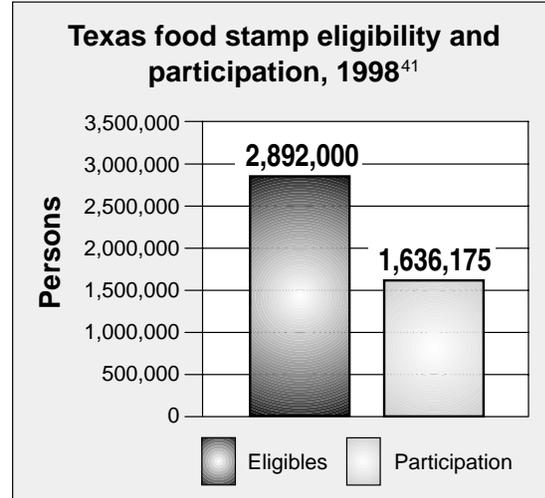
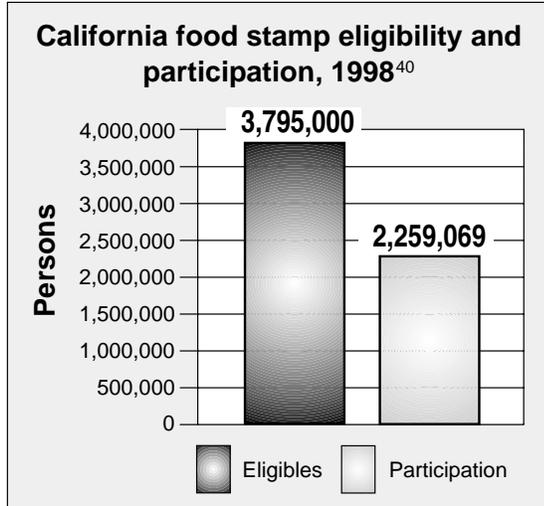
The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is aware of the importance of strong local offices that enroll families in the Food Stamp Program. Over the last several years, the USDA has provided states with more support and freedom to eliminate many of the barriers to enrollment. It has encouraged states to submit waivers to simplify their enrollment processes, it has provided states with outreach funds to educate more families about the Food Stamp Program, and it has created a tool kit to be used by local communities to eliminate barriers. However, not all states have taken advantage of this new freedom to make applying for food stamp easier.

Government statistics show that many eligible families are not enrolled.

Families must enroll in the Food Stamp Program in order to benefit from the program and get financial help to buy food. Eligibility and participation data from USDA show that only 59 percent of eligible families are participating in the program. States have never enrolled all eligible families into the Food Stamp Program, but over the last several years, the gap has become worse. The eligible families not enrolled in the program represent a need gap — they are likely in need of food assistance because their income is near or below the poverty line, but they aren't getting the help they need from the Food Stamp Program. Nationally, food stamp participation dropped by more than one-third between 1994 and 1999.³⁴

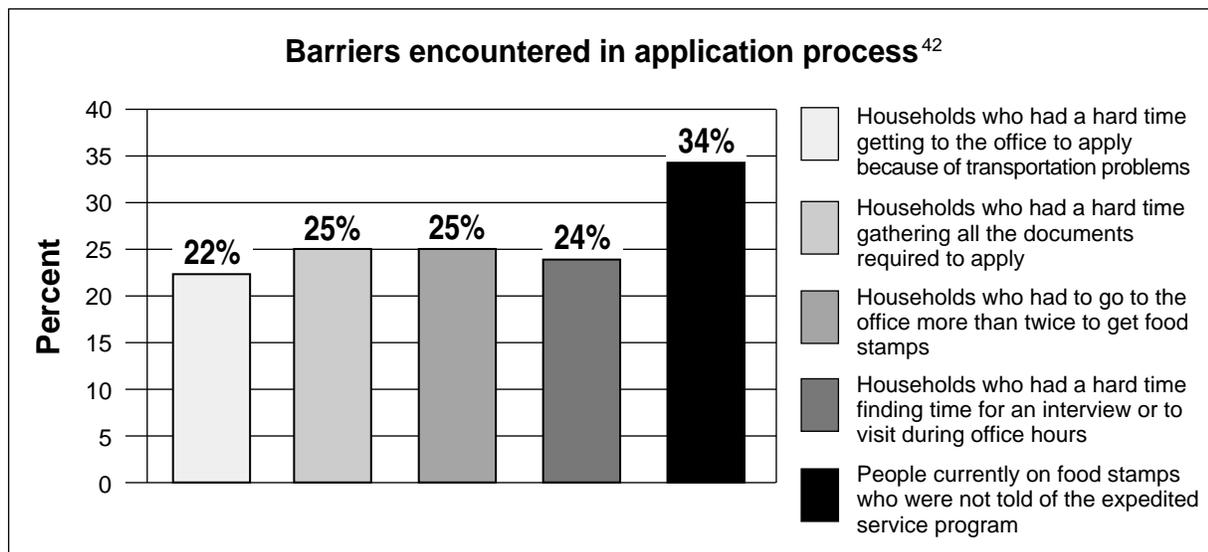
Western states like California, Washington, Idaho, and Oregon had the lowest participation rate among all potential eligible participants in both 1997 and 1998, the last time federal figures were available.³⁵

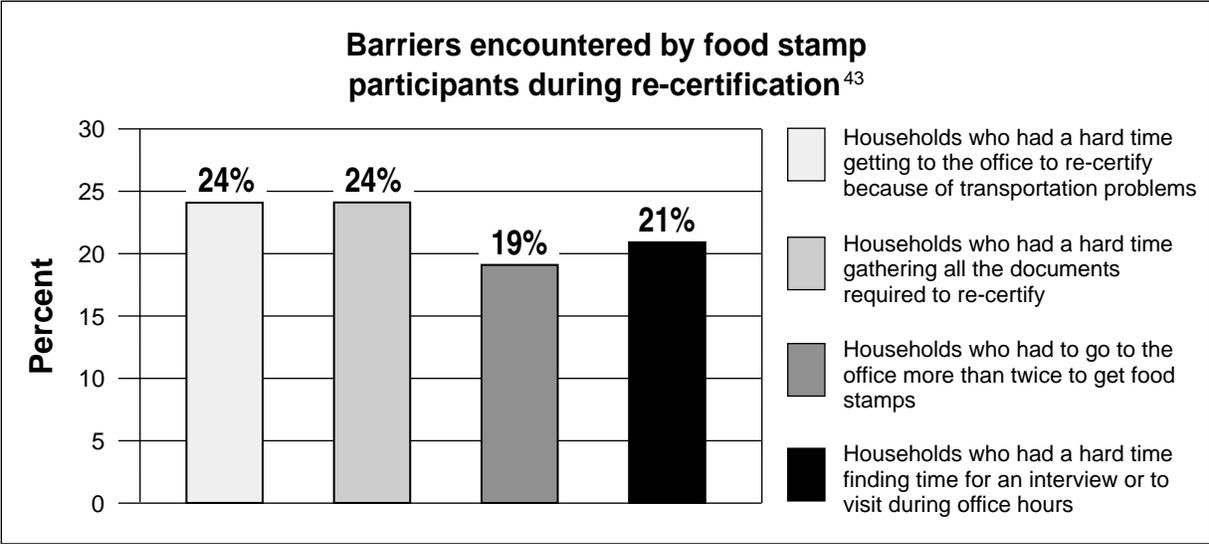




Program barriers increase the gap between eligibility rates and participation rates.

In order for the Food Stamp Program to live up to its mission to protect the health and well being of our nation’s families, barriers in the food stamp enrollment process must be eliminated. Hungry families cannot benefit from the program if they are not enrolled. Families that responded to the NWFCO survey described many difficulties navigating the application process. They explained that the current rules make the application process so complicated and time-consuming that it is not a practical option for some families. In many low-income households, every adult is working full-time. For these households, it is not possible to repeatedly meet with caseworkers during limited office hours so enrollment is impossible. Other families face similar barriers such as unclear instructions, lack of support, and excessive verification requirements. All of these barriers keep eligible families out of the program and depress participation rates.





Tammy Bradburn — Lynnwood, Washington

My name is Tammy Bradburn and I am a proud mother of a five-year-old daughter and a three-year-old son. My husband, Ken, and I used to run a carpet and upholstery cleaning business. It was successful for quite a while and we were even able to buy our own home. Recently, the business has suffered and we cannot afford our house anymore. We have no savings, because it takes a while for a business to turn a profit. Our house is now being foreclosed and my family is lucky enough to have a friend who will take us in. I had no choice but to apply for food stamps at the Welfare office.

The amount of difficulty I had even applying for food stamps, let alone receiving them, was unbearable as I watched my family go hungry. I had to wait a week for an appointment, which meant five more days without food. I was then informed

that I did not have the correct documents, and had to come back in another three days. In the end, I only could get \$234 each month. That amount of money does not provide enough food for the four of us. My worker stated that because we weren't paying rent, our benefit amount was lowered. In addition, I found out that there is supposed to be emergency food stamps available for people like us who were in a crisis. When I questioned my caseworker, she stated that there wasn't any program like that.

My children, my husband, and I had to go hungry for a week and a half. The excess amount of paperwork that has to be done in order to get food stamps in addition to the lack of appointment time at the office are barriers that keep my family from eating. I hope that these barriers are broken down so that another child does not have to go another day without food.

States agencies can minimize these barriers by adopting streamlining strategies.

It is in the power of the states to eliminate these barriers. The federal government has provided the states with some freedom to design state programs and has even encouraged states to make optional changes to their enrollment systems. Unfortunately, many states have chosen not to exercise these options. States are free to make all of the changes that are suggested below. Adopting these policies will help ensure that all eligible families receive the food stamp benefits they need.

Allow applicants to self-verify information. Documentation problems make every kind of barrier more onerous for families. Each time the applicant is required to produce more documents or acquire verification for documents, the problems they have with transportation, office hours, and taking time from work or family are exacerbated. States should allow recipients to self-verify required information like some state Medicaid programs do.

Assist families with completing applications. Current law requires agencies to provide assistance in the completion of application forms. This means that an enrollment worker should be trained to assist the household when applying.

Expand office hours at application sites. Application sites should remain open in the evenings every weeknight, and should open on Saturdays. Applicants working full-time or more should not have to choose between meeting job obligations and applying for food stamps. Offices should also promptly reschedule missed appointments and accept walk-in applicants on an emergency basis.

Expand the number and variety of venues for food stamp enrollment. States should provide out-station sites or mobile vans to bring application sites closer to families with limited transportation options. Bringing the application sites closer to applicants can reduce travel time for applicants and reduce the time applicants have to take from family and work. States should also allow caseworkers to do home visits to households with transportation problems.

Provide translators on demand for all applicants who need the service. Providing translation would reduce the amount of time caseworkers spend with applicants and reduce the frustration for both caseworkers and families. Providing translators would decrease the number of visits families make to the office and streamline the application process. In the meantime, agencies should follow existing law, which requires that they provide bilingual information and materials and have interpreters in localities where five percent of low-income residents speak a particular language other than English.

Streamline the application form. Simplify the application form and reduce it to one page. One page application forms have been successfully developed for programs like CHIP and Medicaid.

Allow families to apply for several programs with one application form. Many means-tested programs, like Medicaid and the school lunch program, have income eligibility levels that overlap with food stamps eligibility levels. States should also develop joint application forms that allow

households to apply with one form to all of the programs they are likely to qualify for. This can save families and caseworkers time and effort, and increase outreach to eligible families.

Expand categorical eligibility to make it easier for people to apply/receive food stamps. States have the option of using the definition of categorical eligibility broadly to allow more families to



Quang Tran — Lynnwood, Washington

I came to Seattle from Vietnam in 1992 with my four children, ages eight through 17, and my mother. I became a legal citizen of the United States in 1997. I am a single mom raising my four children completely on my own. When I first came here I found a job working on the assembly line at Boeing. I made \$15 an hour and had health benefits as well. I even worked seven days a week in order to save money. Then in December of 1999 I was laid off along with many other workers at Boeing. I cried when I got that pink slip because I knew that it was going to be hard to find another job as good as that one.

When I was laid off I received the maximum amount of unemployment because I had worked 7-day weeks. I decided to take the opportunity to go to a vocational school and become a beautician because I heard they made a decent living. I was having trouble finding a job that paid well and I knew that I could not support my family on minimum wage. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to find a decent-paying job cutting hair and right now I make about \$890 a month.

I recently applied for food stamps to help with the expense of living. I was not going to receive my first paycheck for a month after my unemployment stopped and I could not feed my family without help. I went into the office to get an application for food stamps and I filled it out and returned it right away. I was told to wait for a letter in the mail that would tell me when to come in for an interview with a caseworker. Ten days later, I received the letter and went in for my interview a couple days after that. During the interview I was told that I needed to bring back more paperwork for my application. I returned the following day with the paperwork and it was put with my application. I did not hear anything back from my caseworker so I returned to the office four more times over the next two weeks. I needed to know if I would qualify because if I didn't I was going to have to get a second job to pay for food. Each time I went to office I was told that no one knew anything about my application and I would have to call my caseworker. I had tried to call my caseworker, but all I ever got was the answering machine.

Finally, on my seventh visit to the food stamp office, I asked to speak to a supervisor or someone who knew anything about my application. I was told that I could only see another caseworker between 1:00 and 3:00 p.m. I explained I could not do that because I worked from 11:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m.

I was able to see another worker and she told me that my caseworker had been on vacation. She said I should qualify so she gave me my food stamp card. I had to call to activate the card when I returned home. I tried that day, but was told that my application had not been processed. I kept trying and three days later I was told that money would be on my card by that evening.

I don't understand why it is so difficult to apply for food stamps. I do not think that families should have to wait a month like I did just to get food stamps when they have no money and no food. I am working full time, but I make such low wages that I do not make enough money to pay all of my bills and buy food for my family. The Food Stamp Program is necessary for my family to afford enough food to eat.

receive food stamps. For example, Oregon used categorically eligibility to eliminate the vehicle and assets test, which significantly reduces the amount of paperwork required to apply for food stamps.

Simplify the re-certification process. The federal government has encouraged states to make the re-certification process easier by extending the reporting period to six months. People should be able to report their income by mail or by phone rather than in a face-to-face interview. Currently, the certification period varies from one month to two years, depending on the state and the household type. Face-to-face interviews are currently required for almost all household types, which can be extremely difficult for working families, especially if re-certification interviews are required each month. Face-to face interviews should be required no more often than once a year.

Institute a three-month transitional benefit to families leaving welfare. Congress has passed into law a provision that gives states the option of implementing an automatic three-month transitional benefit for those who leave welfare. Currently, many who leave welfare assume that they are no longer eligible for food stamps, even though they may need assistance. Implementing the automatic transitional benefit helps families to stay off welfare. This freedom from additional bureaucratic hurdles would be particularly helpful to people adjusting to new work-related obligations.

Provide expedited service to all eligible families. Existing federal law requires state agencies to talk with each household during the application process to determine whether the household qualifies for expedited services. This service was created to ensure that families in crisis would receive food stamp benefits right away so they could quickly obtain food. States should ensure that agencies meet this requirement.



Tracey Romero — Billings, Montana

My name is Tracey Romero and I am a single mother raising 12-year-old and two-year-old daughters. I currently receive \$145 in food stamps per month, an amount that barely gets us through a few weeks. Towards the end of the month I am often forced to pawn something in order to buy food for my family. I always make sure that my children eat first; I frequently skip a meal in order to guarantee at least a little bit of nourishment for my growing girls. I have even tried to get food donations in the past, but what I received was really old and out-of-date, so I don't use that

method anymore. My two children have unfortunately gone to bed many nights with empty stomachs.

Because I have no car, I have to shop at the local grocery store, where the prices are extremely high. If I am able to, I travel to another store about three miles from my apartment. But because I am disabled with a bad back, I cannot always go the distance.

My caseworker recently informed me of some changes in the system. If utilities are included in the rent, our food stamp benefits will be reduced. For us, this means we lose \$49 a month, therefore, only having \$96 to use for food. I don't know how we will survive then. If the food stamp system would reevaluate their guidelines, we could get a sufficient amount of food, and we would not have to go hungry another night.

States need support from the federal government to remove barriers to the Food Stamp Program

While states have considerable flexibility and freedom to streamline administration and reduce barriers to food stamps, the federal government must do more to support states in these activities.

The USDA Food Stamp Quality Control System should support state efforts to streamline administration of the program, not hinder them.

When state food stamp agencies work with community groups to remove barriers to the Food Stamp Program, they often indicate that their powers to remove barriers to the program are limited by the quality control system that the federal government uses to measure performance in the Food Stamp Program. States are accountable to the federal government for their administration of the program because it is almost entirely federally funded. Currently, a state's performance in the Food Stamp Program is assessed solely on whether the state has issued benefits accurately. "The present quality control system penalizes states that grant benefits to ineligible families in borderline cases, rather than penalizing states that deny benefits to eligible families."⁴⁴ This puts pressure on states to request excessive verification documents, talk to participants frequently, and generally require more interaction between the food stamp participant and the welfare office.

"The present quality control system penalizes states that grant benefits to ineligible families in borderline cases, rather than penalizing states that deny benefits to eligible families."

— Children's Defense Fund

The error rate system measures how much money a state has spent on families that do not qualify for the program, how much it has spent on overpayments to eligible families, and how much it has underpaid eligible families. States that have error rates that exceed the national average are sanctioned with financial penalties. This means that half of all states are considered to have unacceptable error rates each year. In addition to the financial penalties, the state officials are under great political pressure to prove that they do not waste money and a high error is an embarrassment.

It has grown more difficult for states to maintain low error rates because of the national effort to move people from welfare to work. When people leave cash assistance for entry-level jobs, the jobs they find do not provide steady income. Many people begin with temporary or part-time positions that turn into full-time positions. Some find seasonal work. Almost all find jobs that pay hourly wages rather than salaried positions. None of these jobs provide an income that is completely stable from week to week. States are under pressure now to keep up with every minute fluctuation in a family's income.

Many of the administrative practices that states have implemented to achieve lower errors rates have actually created barriers that prevent eligible families from applying to the Food Stamp Program. For example, many states repeatedly, as often as every month, re-assess each household's eligibility status.⁴⁵ Many states that implemented this policy saw declines in their participation rates among working families who would constantly have to compile paperwork and take time off from work for re-certification interviews in order to remain in the Food Stamp Program. If food stamps are to serve as a true support to working families, states must have some flexibility to issue benefits to working families without requiring families to expend more effort to obtain the benefit than they can afford. Quality control should be more focused on providing incentives for states to enroll eligible hungry families, rather than placing penalties on the states whose error rates for benefit calculation is above the national average. Success should be measured by determining which states have high participation rates for eligible families and provide the most accurate information to families about the program.

The federal eligibility and benefit determination must be simplified if states are to streamline their enrollment processes.

The Food Stamp Program's eligibility and benefit determination process is extremely complicated. Eligibility and benefits are based on a gross income test (130 percent of the federal poverty line) *and* a net income test (100 percent of the federal poverty line). Net income is calculated after applying numerous deductions, many of which families must provide verification documents to obtain. The key non-standard deductible expenses that are applied to a family's gross income are housing costs (including utility costs), child care costs, and medical expenses (if at least one family member is disabled or elderly). It is a very individualized system that bases eligibility and benefits on a family's particular expenses and how well a caseworker applies all available deductions to a family's income. While this is helpful for some families with very high expenses, it elongates the process for all applicants. In addition, the process disempowers applicants because only experts can calculate benefits and there is no way applicants themselves can assess if they are receiving the correct benefit levels, or even if they should qualify for the program.

The American Public Human Services Association (APHSA), a nonprofit, bipartisan organization that includes all state human service agencies, agrees that the food stamp benefits must be calculated in a simpler manner.⁴⁶ It suggests creating a simpler benefit determination system based on higher monthly gross income limits and standard percentage-based disregards to applicants' incomes. Preliminary estimates based on their proposed model show that additional low-income families would be eligible under this system and the majority of families would receive benefits equal to or higher than their current benefits.

Making the food stamp eligibility and benefit process less individualized and less dependent on particular caseworkers will take time. An immediate switch could result in some households with high individual expenses receiving less food stamps than they need to survive. NWFCO suggests moving towards a simpler benefit calculation system that applicants themselves can understand, but using safeguards to ensure that families do not miss out on the benefits that they need. One solution

is to provide applicants with the option to use the simpler eligibility and benefit calculation system that APHSA proposes, or use the individualized system that requires more verification documents and time. Families would likely opt for the simpler, faster system, but those with usually high expenses could continue to use the longer, individualized deduction process.

The Food Stamp Program has not been updated to reflect today’s reality

The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), designed by the USDA in 1975 and slightly revised in 1983 and 1999, is the basis for the food stamp benefit allotment. The Thrifty Food Plan finds its roots in the 1933 Economy Food Plan, which was created by the USDA as an emergency food plan during the Great Depression. When the Thrifty Food Plan was designed in 1975, the USDA limited its cost to no more than the Economy Food Plan it replaced. The Economy Food Plan was not designed to provide a long-term nutritionally adequate diet. The USDA described the plan as being “designed for temporary or emergency use when funds are low.”⁴⁷

The USDA has created numerous meal plans, menus, and other instructional materials to help recipients buy the food allowed by the Thrifty Food Plan. The USDA’s, “Preparing Nutritious Meals at Minimal Cost” and, “Recipes and Tips for Healthy, Thrifty Meals,” list a number suggestions on how to create low cost meals.⁴⁸ From these tips and suggestions, one can see a pattern of assumptions and expectations about low-income families and how they live.



Emily Jones — Garden City, Idaho

I live in a small trailer with my son, his wife, her 12-year-old daughter, and my eight-month-old grandbaby. I have a pace maker and I am unable to work due to my heart condition. My son has a mental disability and cannot have a job. He works on cars for a little bit of money, and his wife has a part-time job. All of their money goes to medical bills that they have accrued over the years. That means that the whole family is dependent on the \$800 that I receive every month from SSI and my widow’s pension. I have to pay for rent, utilities, loan repayments, and my over-the-counter drug costs with this money. After everything is paid for, I have very little money left over for food.

Fortunately, we get help from the food stamp program; unfortunately our family gets only \$10 a month in food stamps. That hardly buys anything! I’m supposed to be on a low-fat, low-sodium diet, but I can’t afford all of the healthy foods that I should be eating. I never get fruits and vegetables, and neither do my grandchildren, because we cannot afford them on food stamps. My son and his wife try to help as much as they can with groceries, but we’re just not able to get a healthy diet with the money that we have.

The suggestions in these materials assume that a family has the ability and facilities to cook all foods from scratch, has no special dietary needs, can shop at the cheapest grocery stores, can buy in bulk, never eats out or uses convenience foods, and has available 30 percent of its income to spend on food. The data from NWFCO’s survey along with other research on the Thrifty Food Plan, however, shows that USDA’s expectations of food stamp families are out of tune with the realities facing low-income families today.

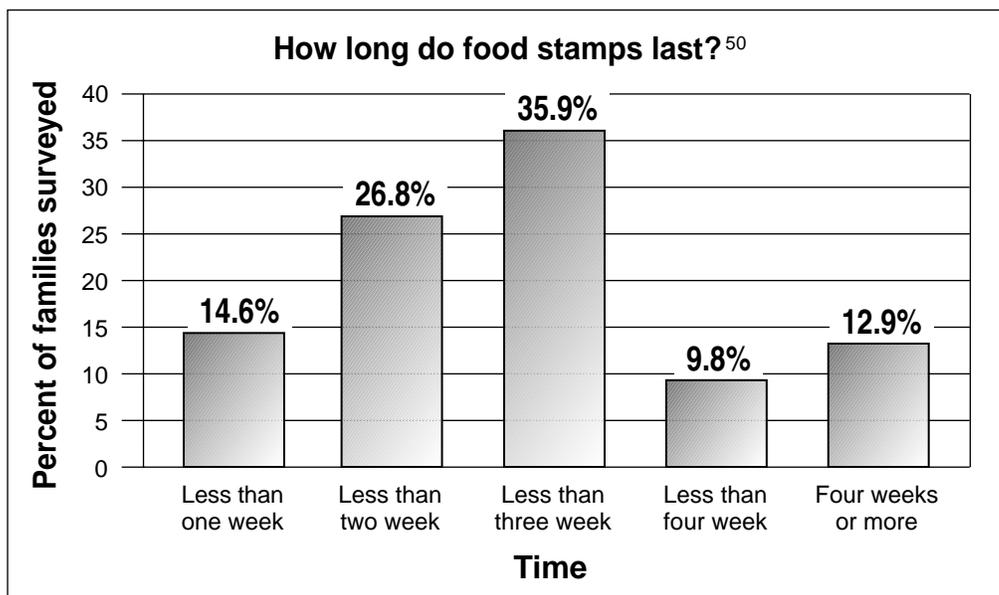
The following list illustrates what the Food Stamp Program expects of program participants and compares these expectations to the realities low-income families face.

1. Expectation: Families that spend their food budget carefully can purchase a fully nutritious diet with their food stamp benefits.

Reality: According to studies carried out by the USDA in the 1980s, only 12 percent to 20 percent of low-income households spending at the full food stamp allotment level were obtaining 100 percent of the Recommended Daily Allowance and only 34 percent were reaching 80 percent of those standards. Current studies show improvements in food stamp participants diets, but still show inadequacies in the intake of calcium, iron, zinc, and vitamins E, C, A, and B vitamins.⁴⁹

2. Expectation: Food stamps can provide families with food-buying assistance for an entire month.

Reality: Seventy-seven percent of families surveyed said that their food stamps last at most three weeks. Forty-two percent of families surveyed said the benefits don’t last any longer than two weeks.



3. Expectation: Families receiving food stamps benefits can afford the food items listed in sample menus and grocery lists found in food stamp educational materials such as, “Recipes and Tips for Healthy, Thrifty Meals.”⁵¹

Reality: Research studies have found the actual cost of obtaining all the food items listed in the Thrifty Food Plan to be higher than the maximum food stamp allotment.⁵² The Food Marketing Institute has noted that on average, individuals spent \$35 a week on groceries in 2000.⁵³ The average per person monthly food stamp benefit for 2000 was just under \$73, ensuring only two weeks of food if a recipient relied on food stamp benefits alone to purchase food.⁵⁴

4. Expectation: Families will use food stamp benefits to buy items needed to prepare all meals from scratch and have three and a half hours a day to cook.⁵⁵

Reality: When surveyed, 83 percent of families said that they spend at most two hours a day cooking. Forty-six percent of families said that they spend no longer than one hour a day cooking. As people comply with state requirements to leave welfare for work, families will have even less time to spend cooking.

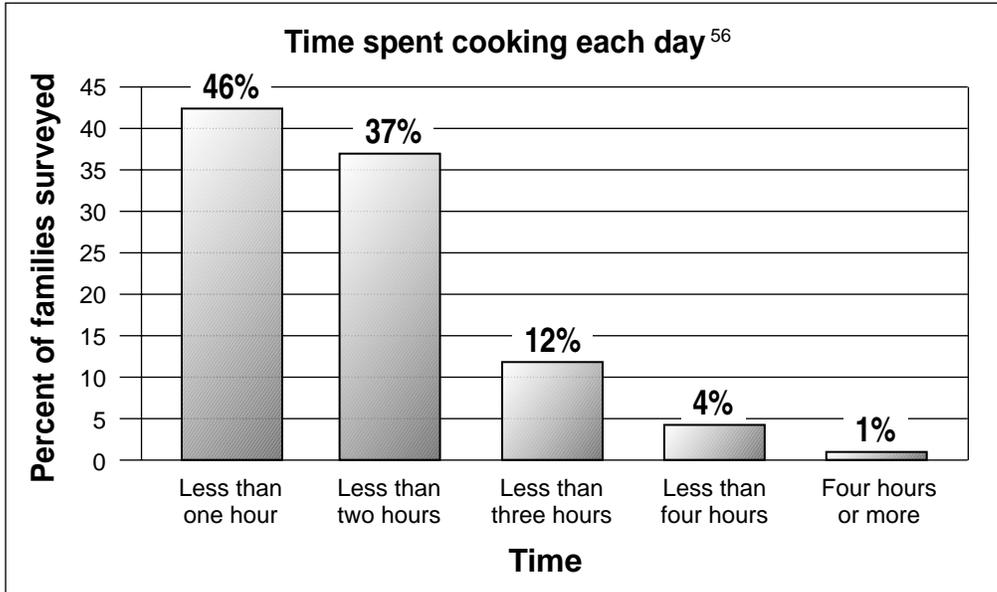


Jane Romich — Boise, Idaho

My name is Jane Romich, and I am a disabled widow with the responsibility of taking care of two teenage boys. I have a monthly income of \$583 in addition to receiving \$267 in child support for my grandsons. I have rent and utilities to pay for every month in addition to paying a debt to my bank and Social Security for an overpayment that they mistakenly made to me. Add that to a little money that I donate to my church and other miscellaneous costs that inevitably come up for a family, and I have very little money left over for food. We depend on our food stamp benefit for our grocery needs.

I have congestive heart failure, cardio artery disease, and an ulcer. On top of all that, I am an insulin-dependent diabetic. I need to eat a low-fat, low-sodium, low-sugar diet. That means a lot of fresh produce, lean meats, and high fiber grains. The \$133 a month I receive in food stamps is hardly enough to feed two teenage boys and a special health diet.

I have to make my food money stretch, and cheap bulk food is not necessarily what I need to be eating, but it's all that I can afford to put in our stomachs. I appreciate all the help that food stamps provide, but I just wish that I could get a little bit more so that I could feed my boys and myself healthy meals.



5. Expectation: Low-income families have 30 percent of their income available to spend on food each month.⁵⁷

Reality: The amount a family has available to spend on food is much smaller now due to rising housing costs that can absorb up to 80 percent of low-income families' incomes.⁵⁸ If the amount a family is expected to spend on food each month were to be lowered to 20 percent of income, for example, it would allow for more food stamp benefits for each household. Households could then reduce the amount of money that they would have to take out of their own pockets to buy food when food stamps run out.

6. Expectation: Families should not buy pre-packaged or "convenience" foods.

Reality: Eighteen percent of the surveyed families do not have a continuously operational stove, 14 percent do not have a continuously operational refrigerator, and 25 percent do not have continuously operational reliable freezer. When one of these



essential food preparation appliances is non-functional, families have no choice but to eat out or buy pre-packed food. Thirty-eight percent of surveyed families said that they serve convenience or pre-packaged foods at three meals a week or more.

7. Expectation: Families can buy in bulk for maximum economy. Food stamp educational materials also suggest that families cook in large batches to save time and money and store leftovers for future meals.⁶⁰

Reality: Buying in bulk is only a useful strategy if a family has transportation, the physical ability to carry large quantities of food, and adequate storage and refrigeration space for bulk quantities of food and leftovers. The NWFCO survey found that 35 percent of families are without access to a vehicle to transport bulk food. In 23 percent of families, there is no family member who could carry bulk food without help.



William Markey — Portland, Oregon

My name is William Markey, and I am a 51-year-old homeless man. After moving to Portland several months ago to live with an old friend, I was dealt an unlucky set of cards, as my new roommate was forced to move because of his job. Alone in a new city with nowhere to stay, I found myself living on the streets, struggling to regain my life. When I'm lucky, I can go to work with a company that hires day laborers, yet this is only temporary and there is no chance for advancement. As a result, I have no consistent income. I work with an advocate at a center to help homeless people and do volunteer work around the building in order to rent a locker to store my personal belongings. With zero income, I receive \$130 a month in food stamps.

I am very appreciative of the food stamp help, but as a homeless individual, I run into a variety of barriers to using them. I do not have access to a major grocery store, so I must rely on more expensive and less nutritional food from convenience stores. A large grocery store is a bus ride away, and for someone with no income, accessing this type of transportation is a huge obstacle. Thus, the food stamps only last me a couple

of weeks. In addition, because I have no home, I have no place to cook or store my food.

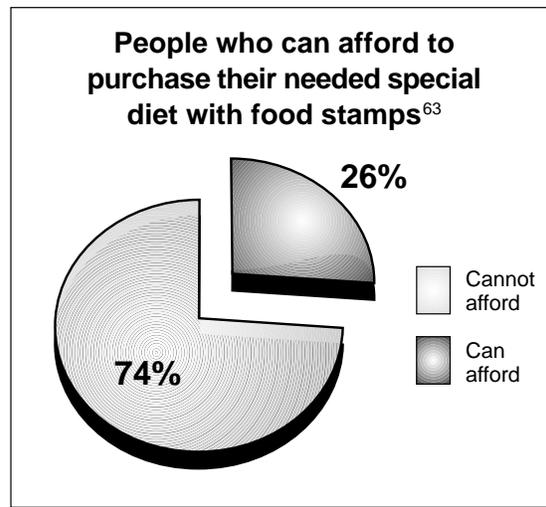
I am a persistent man, and I believe that I could get a good job, but it would take a couple months before I had enough saved to pay for rent. When I begin working, I will no longer qualify for food stamps. If the barriers that exist for a homeless man to eat and live a healthy lifestyle could somehow be eliminated, I would be able to get back on my own two feet, get a job, and support myself the best way I know how.

8. Expectation: Families can make choices about where they shop to find the cheapest food.⁶¹

Reality: Seventeen percent of families surveyed had no food markets or stores within walking distance of their homes. Less than 50 percent of families surveyed had a large grocery store within walking distance of their home. Forty percent of families surveyed do not have access to consistent and inexpensive transportation to a fresh, affordable market.

9. Expectation: A family receiving food stamps has no one with a special dietary need or high calorie needs.⁶²

Reality: Twenty-seven percent of families surveyed had at least one member who was on a special diet for health or other reasons. Seventy-four percent of those families could not afford to purchase the foods that family member needed to meet that special diet.



The Thrifty Food Plan's expectations for Food Stamp Program participants are not realistic. If the Food Stamp Program is to meet its goal of providing food assistance to low-income families and being a safeguard against hunger, the benefit levels must be sufficient to provide low-income families with the means to obtain nutritious food. In order to fully provide adequate food assistance for low-income families, three changes in the Food Stamp Program need to be implemented: the benefit level needs to increase and indexed to current food costs, the excess shelter deduction needs to be adjusted to reflect true housing and utility costs, and the vehicle test needs to be eliminated.

How to ensure that the Food Stamp Program provides sufficient food to families in need.

Increase benefit levels to reflect the real cost of food today. The food stamp benefit allotment should be based on the Low Cost Food Plan rather than the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP). The Low Cost Food Plan is a dietary plan designed by the USDA, like the TFP. The Low Cost Food Plan, however, is estimated to provide approximately 25 percent more food to families than the TFP. This benefit level is more likely to provide enough money to purchase a diet that is nutritionally adequate for long-term dietary needs. Increased food expenditures leads to an increase in the consumption of all 13 food groups listed in the thrifty food plan. Consequently, the consumption of 25 key nutrients also increases when food expenditures rise.⁶⁴ In addition, the current minimum benefit level of \$10 a month is too low considering the difficulty of obtaining food stamps and the high cost of food.

Adjust benefit levels to reflect inflation of food prices. The food stamp benefit allotment should be based on more current food prices or on future CPI food price projections. Currently, food stamp benefit allotments are based on the cost of food four to 16 months before the household receives the benefit and goes out to purchase food.

Increase eligibility for the Shelter Deduction and increase the Standard Utility Allowance (SUA). Housing costs have increased in many states and now occupies a significant percentage of a low-income family's budget. However, only families that pay 50 percent or more of their current income on housing costs are eligible for the shelter deduction, even though HUD defines housing as "unaffordable" when a family spends more than 30 percent of its income on housing costs. All families with unaffordable housing costs should be considered eligible for the excess shelter deduction. In addition, the arbitrary \$340 cap on the value of the deduction should be removed.

Utility costs in many states have risen to the point that current state Standard Utility Allowances (SUAs) do not reflect the true costs of utilities. The SUA needs to be increased to reflect the sharp rise in gas and electricity this past year. An increased standard utility allowance that reflects real costs of utilities will increase the amount of benefits for which a family can receive and ensure that there is sufficient food.

Eliminate the vehicle test. Current federal policy penalizes people who have good, running cars by counting as an asset any car whose value is over \$4,650. This means that families with reliable cars are not eligible for the Food Stamp Program unless a state eliminates this test.⁶⁵ In rural areas and areas with high unemployment or poor public transportation, a car is essential to obtain and maintain steady employment. A reliable car is also an essential asset for a family attempting to purchase low cost foods and live within the budget allowed by the food stamps benefit levels. The federal government should eliminate this test and allow families to both own a decent car *and* receive food stamp benefits at the same time.

Restoring benefits to groups eliminated from coverage in 1996 will ensure that the Food Stamp Program works for all

The Food Stamp Program is an entitlement program based on need. The law creating the Food Stamp Program states that the purpose of the program is "to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation's population by raising levels of nutrition among low-income households."⁶⁶ Despite that statement of purpose, a large percentage of our population is ineligible for food stamps. Immigrants, able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs), people with drug felony convictions, many students, and striking workers are excluded from the program, regardless of their need for food assistance. Adequate nutrition is a prerequisite to living a healthy life and denial of food assistance can place an additional challenge in front of people who are already struggling to make ends meet.

Restore Benefits to Legal Immigrants.

The 1996 welfare reform law cut all legal immigrants out of the program, causing food stamp participation among needy legal immigrants to plummet by 74 percent. Benefits have since been restored for children, elderly and disabled immigrants who arrived before 1996, but millions remain ineligible. As of July 2000, states could use state money to purchase federal food stamp coupons for legal immigrants ineligible under federal guidelines. Thirteen states, California and Washington included, instituted such state programs.⁶⁷ Although these state programs are a better remedy than no benefits at all, they are solely funded by state budgets and there is a danger that the programs may be abandoned in the event of an economic downturn.

Food stamp eligibility should be based on need, not citizenship status. Children, many of whom are citizens born to immigrant parents, are hurt by these rules. Parents are deterred from applying for their children due to confusion and fear around who is eligible for benefits.⁶⁸ This year 37 percent of all children of immigrants lived in families who worried about or encountered difficulties affording food.⁶⁹ Legal immigrants are also taxpayers, and should be entitled to the same benefits purchased with tax dollars as all other contributors. This expansion will not only improve their lives, but, due to improved health, will also reduce health care costs by helping legal immigrants avoid diet-related diseases and other physical problems.

Restore benefits to the unemployed.

The 1996 reforms also cut benefits to most people between the ages of 18 and 50 who are not disabled or raising minor children (officially called able bodied adults without dependants or



Rebecca Mee — Caldwell, Idaho

I have four children ages eleven months to 7 years. My husband, Patrick, changed jobs to benefit our family last year. He became partial owner of a business and our income has gone down considerably. We don't see a paycheck until the employees and all the bills are paid. In the long run we should be doing well, but right now our family of six is living on \$650 a month. It is impossible for me to get a job because any money I would earn would have to go for childcare costs. We are behind on all of our bills and had to turn our gas off in March because we couldn't afford it.

We qualify for food stamps and other assistance programs according to our income, but our eligibility was denied due to the value of our vehicle. We have a large, dependable van that suits the needs of our family that is valued at about \$9,900. Our caseworker at Health and Welfare has suggested that we find a dealership that will appraise it for less, but we

have taken good care of it and haven't had any luck. To sell our van would be a loss for us and wouldn't make any sense because it is our only means of transportation. I am unable to feed my family a good balanced diet on my husband's income. Meat and fresh fruits and vegetables are impossible to afford without the help of food stamps. If only our van was not included as a part of our income, my family would be well fed.

ABAWDs) to three months while unemployed out of each three-year period.⁷⁰ This provision has resulted in the denial of food stamps to individuals who are willing to work but unable to find a job. States have the ability under the federal law to provide food stamps beyond the three month limit to ABAWDs who live in counties that do not have a sufficient number of jobs to provide employment-called labor surplus areas (LSAs)- identified by the USDA. States should exempt all eligible counties from the work requirement. States are also able to make discretionary exemptions from the work requirements for individuals at no cost to the state. Many states are not using these exemptions and could afford to waive the work requirements for some individuals. States should make use of these discretionary waiver opportunities.

Individuals and families that have been excluded from the program, despite their need, will continue to struggle to obtain food. Immigrants, Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents, people with drug felony convictions, many students, and people on strike should not be confronted with an additional barrier as they attempt to exit poverty. Individuals who have been convicted of a drug felony, who have served their time, should not be excluded from help as they work towards staying sober. Students who are making an effort to improve their lives by furthering their education should not be forced to forgo adequate nutrition. People on strike who may be fighting for more humane conditions at work should not be forced to go hungry in the process. The Food Stamp Program should be a safety net to help people move forward. Individuals in these ineligible groups are hurt by these restrictive rules, and the Food Stamp Program's purpose is diminished.



Maria Martinez* — Idaho

My husband and I have five children ages nine months to nine years. Only my husband works, and he is employed seasonally at temporary places. Last month he made \$1,170, but his monthly income varies, and he could make more or less than that. We are really struggling because we don't have enough money to buy sufficient food for our family. Oftentimes this forces us, and sometimes our children, to eat less or skip meals. Participating in the food program at ICAN has helped us a great deal, but it is not enough. I want to feel secure that my family will be full at every meal, every day.

We were informed about the Food Stamp Program through the Department of Health and Welfare. Unfortunately, an INS employee told us that we were not able to apply for food stamps because our immigration status could be harmed. Right now my eldest son and I are in the process of legalizing our U.S. status and I do not want an application for food stamps to get in the way. However, my family is hungry and I do not feel that my children are getting the proper nutrition they need. They are young and need fresh fruits and vegetables to grow up healthy.

Right now I do not know what I am going to do. I am grateful for the food program at ICAN, but my family is still going hungry. We are in need of more assistance, but I just cannot see a way for us to get help from the government because of our immigration status.

* Name withheld by request.

Conclusion

Low-income families in the West today struggle to stretch inadequate budgets to cover the rising costs of housing, utilities, and food. Too many families are forced to make the impossible choice to go hungry. Community-based solutions like food banks are important but cannot solve the hunger crisis alone. We know that hunger causes children and adults irreparable harm. Experience has shown that the best tool to combat this crisis is the Food Stamp Program. The Food Stamp Program has been weakened by state and federal changes to the program in recent years. These changes have created barriers that keep eligible families out of the program. The eroding value of the benefit level also weakens the program.

States can take measures to eliminate barriers to food stamp enrollment and ensure that all eligible families participate in the program. States can simplify the application process by simplifying the forms used, reduce the number and type of documents required, and provide caseworker support to families as they attempt to complete the process. States can expand office hours and provide more accessible locations to make it easier for working people to meet with caseworkers. States can institute an automatic transitional benefit for families leaving welfare for work to ensure that families earning low-wages continue to have access to sufficient food.

The federal government must support the states to make these reforms possible. Many of the barriers states have created in recent years have been attempts to prevent incurring penalties under the current Federal Quality Control system. This system could be changed to allow states more flexibility. The federal government can restore eligibility to classes of recipients cut in the 1996 reforms, including legal immigrants and some adults. Finally, the federal government can raise benefit levels to meet current food costs and household expenses. Strengthening the Food Stamp Program will help ensure that no family is hungry in America.

Appendix A

Methodology

In May 2001, NWFCO developed a 15-minute survey aimed at measuring the food needs and challenges of low-income families (defined as those in families earning less than 150% of the federal poverty line) in the West, specifically Texas, California, Montana, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. The survey was distributed to NWFCO's affiliate organizations in the four northwestern states — Montana People's Action, Idaho Community Action Network, Washington Citizens Action, and Oregon Action — and to a variety of community organizations in Texas and California listed in the acknowledgements section. Overall, 650 surveys were completed by these organizations, with each state contributing over 100 surveys each.

The survey measured a variety of factors determining food security among households, individuals, and families. It included questions about food security, the ability to provide affordable and balanced meals, access to transportation, cooking facilities, and questions related to the amount of time available for cooking. A separate section in the survey asked a series of detailed questions about experiences with the federal Food Stamp Program. Demographic questions were also included, measure household size, net income, utilities (current and one year ago), employment status, race, language, and immigration status.

A copy of the survey is available upon request.

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About the organizations releasing this report

The Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO) is a regional federation of five statewide, community-based social and economic justice organizations located in the states of Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington: **Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN)**, **Montana People's Action (MPA)**, **Oregon Action (OA)**, **Washington Citizen Action (WCA)** and **Coalition of Montanans Concerned with Disabilities (CMCD)**. Collectively, these organizations engage in community organizing and coalition building in 14 rural and major metropolitan areas, including the Northwest's largest cities (Seattle and Portland) and the largest cities in Montana and Idaho.

Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN) serves as a powerful, consolidated voice for Idaho's poor, with chapters and membership clusters in six Idaho communities, including the state's three largest cities and numerous rural towns. Through ICAN, low-income Idaho families have a voice in the decisions that impact their lives. In addition to its direct action work, ICAN runs a statewide, volunteer-driven food program that helps low-income families supplement their monthly budgets. ICAN's community organizing model integrates the provision of food with training, leadership development, and action on issues.

Montana People's Action (MPA) is a statewide economic justice organization with over 6,000 member families in Billings, Bozeman, and Missoula. For almost two decades, MPA has been the primary voice for low- and working-income Montanans around the issues of housing, access to credit and banking services, access to health care, economic development policy, and income security.

Oregon Action (OA) is a statewide, non-partisan network of people and organizations dedicated to economic justice for all through individual and group empowerment. Oregon Action was founded in 1997 to build on the history and values of Oregon Faire Share, which for 20 years organized low- and moderate-income people to win consumer and community reforms.

Washington Citizen Action (WCA) is a social and economic justice organization with over 50,000 individual members statewide. In addition to its dynamic grassroots membership, WCA also includes permanent coalition partners from other community organizations, labor, senior, religious, and people of color organizations. WCA has both a legislative and non-legislative issue agenda that focuses on increasing access to health care and living wage jobs.

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