



Confronting Barriers

Stories of Oregon Food Stamp Applicants

Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO)
Oregon Action (OA)

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Stories were collected by:

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Overview

Many Oregon residents have lost access to public programs because of recent deep budget cuts, including major cuts to public health care programs. The Food Stamp Program is increasingly

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important as many Oregon families face difficult times and increased medical costs. Food stamps can mean the difference between hunger and a healthy diet. Unfortunately a recent survey by Oregon Action found Oregon families often face barriers when applying for food stamps. Long wait times, multiple return trips, and difficulty obtaining information can mean missed work and delays obtaining urgently needed food stamps. And these barriers may result in qualified individuals and families being unable to complete the application process.

In this report, several food stamp applicants describe their experiences and the barriers they faced when applying for food stamps. This report also includes some initial survey results.



Kate Aborn

This was my first time filing for unemployment and food stamps, and my experience was terrible. In February 2004, I went to the office three times, and each time I was there for two and a half hours, and then told that appointments were full and that I needed to return. To this day, I still don't have food stamps.

The first day I got to the food stamp office just before 8 a.m. The doors open at 8 a.m. However, at 9:30 a.m., one of the workers came out to say, “I'm sorry, we have too many appointments, you have to come back tomorrow.” The workers also seemed to hate their jobs and were in a bad mood.

I went back at 7:30 a.m. a few days later, with my application filled out.

There was a line, but the same thing happened. All the appointments filled up and we were told to come back later. This happened yet again, and I was fed up. This was taking up too much time, and I gave up. Even the application itself is way too long.

It's not right that people should wait so long and still get turned away. It was very cold in the mornings and people — several with little kids — waited a long time before the office even opened its doors. One morning I saw a woman with a small infant who also needed food stamps, and she was waiting outside when it was 37 degrees out.

Unless I get to the food stamp office at 6:30 a.m., I won't be able to get an appointment. I have to drop my son off in Vancouver at 7 a.m., so I can't get to the office any earlier than 7:30-7:45 a.m. My church collected an offering for me. If I didn't have the church, I'd have to go back.



Lorry Baker

My name is Lorry Baker and I am 23. I am the mother of two children: a three-year-old son and a five-year-old daughter. I've been receiving help from government programs off and on since 1996. I've moved around a lot — never lived in the same house for more than two years. Now I live in The Dalles, in a trailer for \$550 a month plus utilities. I've held various retail jobs in the community but was recently fired and now I have no way of paying my rent without help. I have a hereditary gum condition that requires medical attention, but I lost my dental coverage when I lost my job.

I recently earned my GED and am interested in the Electronics and Engineering program at Colombia Gorge Community College. With that degree I could get a job at places like Intel, or the Army Corps of Engineers. Food stamps have helped me achieve my successes so far. They are especially useful when expenses are high, like when my kids had medical problems requiring dental work and deafness testing. Food stamps prevent me from having to spend my time searching for my family's next meal so I can work and earn my degrees.

The importance of food stamps

Oregon has a history of hunger: between 1998 and 2000 Oregon had the highest rate of food insecurity with hunger in the nation,¹ and Oregon ranked second in food insecurity with hunger from 2000-2002.²

Recent budget cuts resulted in thousands of Oregonians losing health care benefits. In January 2003, 8,750 people lost benefits when Oregon's medically needy program was terminated.³ Between January 2003 and October 2003, enrollment in Oregon Health Plan Standard decreased by nearly 50,000 — a 51 percent decrease.⁴ This dramatic drop in enrollment resulted from budget cuts that changed premiums, cost-sharing and benefits. In addition to these cuts, a further 50,000 people are likely to lose OHP coverage due to cuts after the failure of Measure 30.⁵

“Food stamps are particularly useful when expenses are high — like when my kids had medical problems.”

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Recently uninsured families face increased medical costs and tighter budgets. Food stamps can be particularly crucial for families who would otherwise have to choose between medical care and food. For families on a tight budget, a small food stamp benefit can make a huge difference. During these difficult times, food stamps provide an increasingly important source of food for many Oregon families.

Unfortunately some Oregon residents are having trouble accessing the food stamps they need.

Barriers to access

This section and the following stories discuss some of the barriers to food stamp access found in Oregon Action's survey.⁶

Long lines and multiple visits

- 33 percent of respondents waited 15 minutes or longer to receive an application; 18 percent waited 30 minutes or longer; several waited over an hour.
- 64 percent of respondents waited 15 minutes or longer for their interview to start; 39 percent waited 30 minutes or longer; 24 percent waited over an hour.



Jessica Marquez

My name is Jessica Marquez. I am 22 years old and I work full time in addition to being a full-time student at Portland Community College. After this year, I will transfer to Portland State University and eventually receive my degree in psychology. I am hoping to continue in school and get a doctoral degree, which will expand my opportunities. Eventually I would like to work counseling troubled teens.

When I applied for food stamps two years ago, I got them with no hassle. Then my pay increased by 25 cents an hour, I lost access to food stamps and the Oregon Health Plan. This year I saw flyers around my school explaining the requirements for food stamps and I decided to apply again. I called the central office to see

where I should go. The person answering the phone asked how much I made and then told me that I made too much I would probably only get \$10 and so it wasn't worth it for me to apply. I decided \$10 wasn't worth the hassle in the Department of Human Services (DHS) office.

A few months later, when I discovered I was pregnant, I decided to apply for food stamps. I went into the Broadway office but had no idea what to do. I took a number and waited. After a while I noticed some applications, so I filled out the first page as it said in the instructions. When I finally got to the front of the line, I had to fill out the rest of the application in front of the receptionist. I felt rushed because there were so many people behind me in line. Once I turned in the application the receptionist told me to come back anytime for intake and gave me a list of things to bring with me.

It took me a while to find all my pay stubs. When I went back to the office with my boyfriend, I took a number and waited for an hour before finally talking to someone. She told me that I needed to come in at 7 a.m. for intake or they couldn't see me. I went back at 7 a.m. the next day and had to wait till 8:30 a.m. for an appointment. My boyfriend couldn't be with me that day and, at first, the food stamps worker didn't want to process my food stamp application without him there. He eventually relented but my application was "pending" until my boyfriend could come in and answer some questions. Then I had to go in again to get the actual card.

In total, I made six visits and one phone call to the food stamp office. I now receive \$149 in food stamps each month. But worst of all, my food stamp eligibility hasn't changed from when I first called the central office and the receptionist told me I would only get \$10. The receptionist clearly didn't have enough information to determine eligibility over the phone. I could have been getting help all this time.



Yolanda Garza

My name is Yolanda Garza. I was receiving food assistance in 1996 after my first daughter was born. I started attending college later that year. After Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) started, my caseworker told me that work came before school. I was a full-time student taking 12 credit hours at Clark College but I had to quit and get a job at a temp agency.

The job I got only paid \$7.93 an hour, but when I reported this to my caseworker she said I was no longer eligible for TANF or food stamps. I also lost my subsidized housing. I was only employed for three weeks before the temp service decided it didn't need me.

Now I live in Oregon and have been trying to get food stamps. I am living with a friend, and don't have a home of my own for my two daughters. When I first went in to the food stamp office I had to take a number and wait for a few hours. I was eventually allowed to turn in my application and told to come back between 7 and 8:30 a.m. on Monday. When I finally got my appointment they told me they needed some proof of employment mailed from my old jobs. I had to wait for days for the print out to arrive. I finally got all my paperwork in yesterday.

I am homeless, don't have work, and need help feeding my two children, yet my application won't be processed with expedited services. Now I'm just waiting.

- 72 percent of respondents had to make two or more visits to the food stamp office to complete the application process; 23 percent had to make three or more visits; several applicants made five or more visits.
- 48 percent made one or more phone calls to complete the application process; 18 percent made two or more phone calls.

Lack of information

- 36 percent of respondents who used the phone system were not able to get the information they needed through the phone system.
- 73 percent of respondents were not asked if they were in a crisis situation.
- 75 percent of respondents did not receive information about the expedited food stamp process.
- 75 percent of respondents reported that the grievance process was not explained to them.
- 82 percent of respondents were not told they could receive an application by mail.

Long waiting times and the multiple visits often required to complete the application process create serious barriers for applicants. Long amounts of time spent applying for food stamps can result in missed work and lost pay, as well as child care difficulties. Large numbers of trips to the food stamp



Elaine Ludwig

I was homeless for over three years, until I moved in with a friend in exchange for cleaning their home. I have diabetes and it has set into my legs, which makes it difficult to move around a lot, but it's not bad enough for the state to help me. I was a seamstress, but with diabetes I can no longer work with machinery. To get food I had to turn to food stamps. Recently I got a letter telling me that I needed to be re-certified for food stamps. I called the Department of Human Services (DHS) to ask if I could re-certify over the phone, and the office that I have to go to said no. They told me that I needed to go into the office to make an appointment. I sent my daughter-in-law to this office to make an appointment for me and they told her that no appointments are made at all, everything was done on a first come, first serve basis.

Because of this I had to walk to the bus stop, ride the bus for about 45 minutes, and get off the bus and walk about six blocks to get to the office. By the time I got to the office I was exhausted and in severe pain. The office would not tell me when I would be seen even though I explained the pain I was in. They didn't pay any attention to me and I had to wait for an hour and a half. Finally, I saw a caseworker who didn't want to know anything except whether or not my situation had changed. They were not concerned about my situation or well-being. I felt like a number, not a person.

office create an insurmountable barrier for people with health problems or limited mobility. All of these difficulties can discourage people from completing the application process.

The surveyed food stamp applicants often had difficulty obtaining important information. Some respondents had difficulties finding information over the phone. Others were not informed about expedited access to food stamps, or were not asked if they were in a crisis situation. Expedited access to food stamps reduces the time applicants in crisis must wait for food stamps. When families are not screened for expedited service, eligible families must unnecessarily endure additional days without food. Lack of information further complicates the difficult application process.



Jessica Huston

My name is Jessica Huston. I am 16 years old and nine months pregnant. I don't have an income and am currently living with my aunt. When I tried to get food stamps for myself and my child, the receptionist in the food stamp office told me that, because of my past history with drugs, I was "too irresponsible" to get food stamps. When I discovered I was pregnant, I was responsible enough to put myself through rehab and now I want to attend Pathfinder's — a school for teen mothers. I think I am responsible enough to get food stamps and I need them so I can live at my sister's place which is close to Pathfinder's. But I never got to explain this to a caseworker; despite sitting in the designated "teen-parent" office for two hours, I never got past the receptionist. Food stamps would help me get a new start but I haven't been given a chance.

Endnotes

- 1 Ashley Sullivan and Eunyong Choi, "Hunger and Food Insecurity in the 50 States: 1998-2000," Center on Hunger and Poverty, Brandeis University, August 2002.
- 2 Mark Nord et al., "Household Food Security in the United States, 2002," Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Program, United States Department of Agriculture, 2002.
- 3 Oregon Health Research and Evaluation Collaborative, "Research Brief: Implications for Research Results Presented at the October 2003 OHREC Public Meeting," October, 2003.
- 4 John McConnell and Neil Wallace, "Impact of Premium Changes in the Oregon Health Plan," Office for Oregon Health Policy and Research, February, 2004.
- 5 James Maher, "Human Services Looks to Cut Insurance," *The Oregonian*, March 20, 2004.
- 6 60 applicants responded to survey questions at 10 different food stamp offices during the summer of 2003, using methods similar to those described in "Hunger Pangs: Oregon Food Stamp Program Fails to Deliver," by Carson Strege-Flora, Oregon Action and the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations, April 2000.

About the organizations releasing this report



Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO) is a regional federation of four 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), and Washington Citizen Action (WCA). 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 Oregon. 1265 South Main Street Suite #305, Seattle, WA 98144, Voice: (206) 568-5400, Fax: (206) 568-5444, Web: <http://www.nwfco.org>.



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