An Assessment of the Sustainability of Food Stamp Outreach Projects

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Introduction

Over recent years the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has awarded multiple grants to community and faith-based organizations (CFBO) and public entities to reach out to people who are eligible but not participating in the Food Stamp Program (FSP). Grant amounts ranged from $100,000 to $350,000 and extended from one to two years. While grant proposals routinely address the question of whether and how projects will be sustained beyond the grant period, no follow-up information about the extent to which these projects have been sustained has been available to date. This report documents the extent to which CFBOs and the public entities that received food stamp outreach grants in 2001 and 2002 sustained their outreach projects up to three years beyond the funding period, challenges faced in sustaining their projects, and the factors contributing to their sustainability.

Project Summary

The projects were intended to:

- Develop and test ways to help inform potentially eligible individuals and families about the benefits that may be available to them under the FSP.
- Identify and document barriers that may prevent potentially eligible households from applying for benefits.
- Use new technologies and improved service delivery methods to reach potential participants and improve service for existing recipients.
- Develop community partnerships to reach a larger number of people and to help institutionalize resources beyond the grant period.

A diverse set of grantees was selected to represent a variety of approaches and targeted populations across the country. In summary:

- Grants were awarded to organizations in a variety of urban and rural locations.
- Projects generally sought to improve FSP access for the elderly, immigrants, the working poor, and other hard-to-reach groups, separately or in combination.
- Projects adopted a number of different strategies for outreach, including the use of technologies at various levels of complexity, targeted advertising campaigns through conventional media, new Internet web sites, and computer-based tools to pre-screen for food stamp eligibility.

The grantees represented a wide range of organizations. Some were organizations that dealt strictly with food or hunger-related issues. About 25 percent were food banks or established anti-hunger organizations. Others were advocates for the elderly, low-income children and families, or health and human services groups targeting specific minority and immigrant populations.

Some organizations had previous outreach experience specifically with the FSP; others had conducted outreach for social services like Medicaid or the State Children's Health Insurance Program. A few sites had no previous experience with outreach.

Projects focused on rural areas, larger metropolitan areas, or broader State populations. Target populations also varied across grantees -- focusing on broad groups of low-income individuals or more specific groups, such as seniors, Hispanics, and/or low-income working parents.

The grantees organized their projects in different ways, using various approaches to outreach. Evaluations results were reported in Office of Analysis, Nutrition, and Evaluation (2004) and Zedlewski et al. (2005), and are available on-line at www.fns.usda.gov/oane.

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Findings

Most of the grantees are continuing operations but on a smaller scale. Of the 32 grantees contacted, 28 participated in this follow-up study. Twenty-two of 28 grantees (79 percent) continued their outreach project in some form beyond the funding period. About one-third (nine of 28 grantees) of the projects are operating on a significantly smaller scale than they were during the grant period. To accommodate their reduced budget, the majority scaled back staff and the range of services offered. One grantee reported that his organization is committed to the goal of reaching eligible non-participants with or without funding, so they have successfully kept their part-time outreach worker on staff.

Of the 28 respondents, seven (25 percent) reported that their organizations have maintained the project at the same level of service after the grant award expired. These grantees successfully won a few small grants, primarily from foundations. They have maintained their initial partnerships and have established new ones since the grant ended. One grantee proudly reported that they are actually doing more because they have expanded their pool of partners.

Six of the 28 (21 percent) respondents almost fully sustained their project. These grantees scaled back their projects but not extensively. One grantee reported that they aggressively pursued funding from multiple sources in order to maintain their project to the extent that they did. The intended next step is to seek participation in their State's optional outreach plan. This organization scaled back from two full-time outreach coordinators to one coordinator. In order to maintain the food stamp outreach project, they folded it into other outreach projects for which they received funding. Additionally, they staffed the project with work study and service learning students.

Other grantees reported that instead of offering multiple services that include food stamp education and application assistance, they have scaled back to information dissemination and prescreening. The latter activities are more readily incorporated into other services activities that the organization provides.

Three grantees (11 percent of the respondents) sustained services at a minimal level, ceasing all outreach activities but maintaining their web site. One grantee reported that their web site allows for online application completion and submission to the Department of Social Services. Another grantee mentioned that during the grant period they had staff members who were dedicated to conducting training and education sessions about the FSP during which they would offer training on how to use the web site. They no longer have staff to carry out those duties so they are limited to the web site only.

Few grantees discontinued all food stamp outreach activities. Approximately one-fifth (six of 28 respondents) of the grantees did not sustain their project. In contrast, although many grantees have not maintained the level of staffing and services they had during the award period, they are still conducting some food stamp outreach activities. Since the grantees routinely interface with populations that qualify for food stamp benefits and other assistance, staff has incorporated food stamp outreach activities into their work with these individuals. Some grantees who trained staff from other community-based organizations and volunteers to conduct food stamp outreach have stayed in contact with these partners, making it more feasible to support their partners' food stamp outreach. Others built interactive web sites that allow potential program participants to conduct their own prescreening and to apply for benefits online. These web sites remain in place for use long after the grant period ended. The limitation is that resources are no longer available to market the web site to other service providers or to train service providers on how to use the site.

The count of grantees by degree of project sustainability is summarized below.

Extent of Sustainability Among Outreach Grantees

Sustainability Level	Frequency
Fully	7 (25.0%)
Almost fully	6 (21.4%)
Minimally	9 (32.1%)
Not sustained	6 (21.4%)
Total grantees responding	28

All grantees faced situations that challenged their ability to continue project operations. The primary challenge was time-limited funding. Several grantees noted that it is difficult to integrate stand-alone grants into an organization's funding structure. Some, however, managed to "stretch" ongoing funds, while others acquired small grants, typically from foundations, to help sustain the program.

Other grantees reported that showcasing success increased the likelihood of project support beyond the grant period. Effective collaboration with local FSP offices also contributes to sustainability. Some grantees noted that such collaboration was not attained – usually when local FSP offices faced competing workload demands.

Another challenge faced by the grantees was staff turnover, particularly in the partner agencies. As these partners changed staff, sometimes even within the grant period, incoming staff members often had less interest in the project.

Grantees that fully or almost fully sustained their project share a set of characteristics that include:

- long-standing service in their community,
- strong partnerships with other CFBOs,
- a good working relationship with the local and State FSP office, and
- strategic fund development.

These organizations are often well-known and trusted by both individuals and other organizations in their communities because of their permanence and consistency in meeting the needs of the community members. Strong partnerships are required for any organization to become established and entrenched in a community, which in turn helps the grantees maintain their projects beyond the funding period. A project is at significant risk of failure if the local or State FSP office is not working cooperatively with the grantee. These cooperative relationships help to make the projects more visible and provide continuity between the services the projects offer and those of the FSP offices. The projects that sought funding from a variety of sources and that began to seek funding prior to grant expiration were most likely to sustain their projects. This often requires acuity in timing and knowledge of diverse funding sources.

Recommendations to Grantees

- Start looking for funding sources such as foundations and local governments well before the grant award expires. It is more costly to restore the project than to maintain it.
- Contact the State agency with the goal to become a provider of outreach funded by FSP administrative funds at State option. This would provide reimbursement of 50 percent of project costs using FSP administrative funds.
- Build strong partnerships with supporters in the community. Take the time to build relationships that will continue beyond the funding period. Select your partners carefully; consider who the more effective partners are and what will motivate them to stay the course. Some characteristics of better partners to approach are those that are offering ongoing social services to the community, those that have partnerships with other CFBOs and those that have been in the community for an extended period of time.
- Involve as many partners as possible at the highest levels in each organization and promote their ownership of the project.
- Allot sufficient time to build strong partnerships. Involve partners from the beginning of the project to ensure buy-in.

- Build the capacity of your partnering CFBOs so that they can conduct food stamp outreach on their own.
- Develop a close working relationship with the local and State FSP offices.
- Couple other related support services with food stamp outreach as this will make the project more attractive to funders.
- Build an evaluation component from the onset or design of the project so that data will be available to substantiate the need for project services and/or the capability of the project to meet those needs.

Grantee Recommendations to USDA

- Allow grantees to combine other outreach activities with food stamp outreach activities as the diversity makes it easier to acquire funding to sustain the projects.
- Consider meeting with grantees and States at the end of each grant period to show the States that food stamp outreach is a priority for USDA and to encourage the States to continue supporting food stamp outreach.

Method

A customized interview guide with a combination of open- and closed-ended questions was used to gather the information needed for this analysis. A total of 28 grantees, 88 percent of those that were funded, were interviewed via telephone in small groups of two or three. To expedite the interview, the grantees often received the interview guide by e-mail before the actual interview so that they could peruse the questions ahead of time. No two interviews were identical as the discussions were often directed by the responses given by the interviewees. The four grantees that did not participate in the interview could not be contacted or did not respond to the request to participate.

Conclusion

The importance of sustaining these projects is reflected in the noteworthy efforts that grantees have made to sustain their projects. Most found some means to continue project operations; few completely ceased operations. Most grantees faced challenges to sustaining their food stamp outreach services but took several steps to avert or resolve them. Future grantees can profit from the lessons learned to support the sustainability of new projects.

Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by Rosemarie Downer, Office of Analysis, Nutrition, and Evaluation, Food and Nutrition Service.

References

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