



United States General Accounting Office  
Washington, DC 20548

Resources, Community, and  
Economic Development Division

B-285702

June 28, 2000

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley, Chairman  
Special Committee on Aging  
United States Senate

The Honorable John B. Breaux, Ranking Member  
Special Committee on Aging  
United States Senate

Subject: Food Stamp Program: Data on Assistance for the Elderly

In your letter of May 22, 2000, you asked us to prepare background information on the Food Stamp Program, which is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service. Specifically, you requested information on (1) state activities to increase older Americans' participation and (2) the number of elderly food stamp participants in each state. Enclosures I and II provide this information.

Enclosure I contains information on states' activities to encourage elderly participation in the Food Stamp Program. Table 1 provides the information we collected in our April 2000 telephone survey of state food stamp directors on whether the states have tried, during the last 3 years, activities suggested in the Food and Nutrition Service's *The Nutrition Safety Net—Help for the Elderly and Disabled: A Primer for Enhancing the Nutrition Safety Net for the Elderly and Disabled* (referred to as the access guide). Table 2 describes innovative state outreach activities mentioned in response to our telephone survey, as well as a source to contact for information in those states.

In enclosure II, table 3 presents information, by state, on the number and percentage of older Americans' households receiving food stamps in fiscal year 1998—the most recent year for which complete data are available. It also presents, by state, the average benefits received by elderly households.

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We discussed a draft of this report with Food and Nutrition Service officials; because much of the information in the report was taken from our survey of food stamp directors in the 51 states (including the District of Columbia), they had no comments.

As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from the date of this letter. At that time we will send a copy of this report to the Honorable Dan Glickman, Secretary of Agriculture and the Honorable Donna E. Shalala, Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. We will also make copies available to others upon request.

Please contact me at (202) 512-5138 or Robert Summers at (404) 679-1839 if you or your staff have any questions about the information presented in this report.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert Robertson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R".

Robert E. Robertson, Associate Director  
Food and Agriculture Issues

Enclosures - 2

**Telephone Survey Results of Efforts to Implement Access Guide Activities**

**Table I: Food and Nutrition Service’s Suggestions in the Access Guide for Increasing Older Americans’ Participation, and the Number of States That Reported Trying These Activities, April 2000**

Suggestion	Number of states trying this activity in last 3 years
Encourage staff to provide timely, courteous and dignified service.	49
Promote the use of authorized representatives who can apply for food stamps or purchase food on behalf of the elderly.	40
Provide training on the use of electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards.	37
Provide training on how the medical deduction works for the elderly.	35
Work with companies and community organizations to promote elderly participation in the Food Stamp Program.	34
Encourage workers to spend extra time with the elderly, such as making speeches at senior centers.	33
Distribute flyers to locations where the elderly are likely to go, such as grocery stores.	29
Target nutrition education programs to the elderly.	27
Promote the use of medical deductions for elderly applicants for the Food Stamp Program.	28
Place food stamp workers in locations that serve the elderly, such as hospitals, community centers, and congregate feeding sites.	25
Lengthen the certification period to 24 months for the elderly.	23
Follow up on non-users of EBT cards to find out if they need help accessing their benefits.	23
Design materials that advertise the Food Stamp Program as nutrition assistance rather than “welfare.”	22
Train workers to be more personal with the elderly, such as giving them the worker’s business card.	22
Design promotional materials on food stamps that are targeted to the elderly.	21
Work with staff at the Social Security Administration (SSA) to increase elderly participation in the Food Stamp Program.	19
Promote the use of collateral contacts, such as neighbors, to reduce the documentation required for food stamp applications.	17
Give staff special training to assist elderly applicants.	16
Set up a separate unit that focuses on the needs of elderly participants.	16
Waive face-to-face interviews for all food stamp applicants over 60 years of age.	14
Promote the use of scheduled home visits to reduce the documentation required for food stamp applications.	12
Promote the minimum benefit of \$10 a month as an annual value of \$120.	10
Give qualified elderly households 6 months rather than 3 months to use electronic benefits.	8
Create special forms for the elderly, such as large type versions.	7
Waive some or all fraud prevention procedures for elderly applicants. For example, waive fingerprinting for the elderly.	6
Emphasize to elderly persons that many will be eligible for more than the minimum benefit of \$10 a month.	5
Locate food stamp staff at Social Security Administration offices who accept applications from the elderly, even if they are not applying for Supplemental Security Income.	4

Note: The access guide, entitled The Nutrition Safety Net—Help for the Elderly and Disabled: A Primer for Enhancing the Nutrition Safety Net for the Elderly and Disabled, was published in Spring 2000 and contains these suggestions for increasing older Americans’ participation in the Food Stamp Program.

Source: States’ responses to GAO’s telephone questionnaire about suggestions from the Food and Nutrition Service’s (FNS) access guide.

# Enclosure I

**Table 2: State Practices Targeted to the Elderly**

State and contact information for agency	Activities
Arkansas Carol Tabron Arkansas Department of Human Services (501) 682-8287	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 24-month certification for elderly households</li> <li>• Telephone interviews instead of face-to-face interviews are encouraged, as appropriate</li> </ul>
Maine Judy Williams, Director Bureau of Family Independence (207) 287-3106	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 24-month certification period for the elderly with low-risk factors—income solely from Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security and no other household members</li> <li>• A shortened Medicaid/Food Stamp Program application specifically for the elderly</li> </ul>
Nevada Myla Florence, Administrator Dept. of Human Resources, Welfare Division (775) 687-4128	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elderly apply for food stamps at a senior services center in Las Vegas (Clark County), where about 70 percent of the state's elderly population lives</li> <li>• Coffee and snacks available for visiting clients to make the experience of applying for benefits as pleasant as possible</li> </ul>
New Hampshire Richard A. Chevrefils, Assistant Commissioner, Dept. of Human Services (603) 271-4326	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food Stamp Program is represented at elderly-oriented activities</li> <li>• Applications and brochures delivered to homebound elderly through Meals-on-Wheels and Hospice</li> <li>• Advertisements for the Food Stamp Program included in a newsletter distributed in New England</li> </ul>
Oregon Sandie Hoback, Administrator, Adult and Family Services Division, Dept. of Human Services (503) 945-5607	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separate staffing unit for the elderly and disabled to assess the need for food stamps and other services</li> <li>• Focus on working with community organizations to increase awareness of the Food Stamp Program</li> </ul>
Rhode Island Christine Ferguson, Director Dept. of Human Services (401) 462-2121	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food Stamp Program staff give presentations and take applications at apartment buildings with large numbers of elderly residents</li> <li>• An elderly advisory committee, which includes elderly persons and advocates for the elderly, is included in outreach planning</li> </ul>
South Carolina Laurel Addy Policy and Planning Division Dept. of Social Services (803) 898-9449	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SSI households receive standard food stamp allotment without completing food stamp application or going to food stamp office</li> </ul>
South Dakota Judy Toelle, Program Administrator Department of Social Services (605) 773-3493	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides EBT point-of-service machines at all meal sites so clients can use their food stamp benefits for meals</li> <li>• Makes routine home visits to elderly because many do not have transportation</li> <li>• Targets outreach efforts to elderly recipients who do not regularly access their EBT benefits</li> </ul>
Vermont Eileen Elliott, Commissioner, Department of Social Welfare (802) 241-2853	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SSI households, or households where all members are age 65 or older, receive cash benefits via direct deposit</li> <li>• Community-based outreach, including one-on-one application assistance</li> </ul>
Wisconsin Rick Zynda, Director Office of Food Stamps and Medical Assistance (608) 266-9812	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food stamp staff stationed in the community</li> </ul>

Source: Compiled from (1) responses to the question in the GAO survey: “Has your state tried any other ideas that you would recommend to other states to improve elderly participation in the Food Stamp Program?” and (2) the exemplary practices section of the FNS document: *The Nutrition Safety Net—Help for the Elderly and Disabled: A Primer for Enhancing the Nutrition Safety Net for the Elderly and Disabled*.

**Information on Elderly Participation in the Food Stamp Program and the Monthly Average Benefit**

**Table 3: Distribution of Elderly Food Stamp Households and Benefits by State, Fiscal Year 1998**

<b>State</b>	<b>Number of elderly households (in thousands)</b>	<b>Percent of food stamp households with elderly members</b>	<b>Average food stamp benefit</b>
<b>Total<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>1,500</b>	<b>18.2</b>	<b>\$59</b>
Alabama	37	21.9	59
Alaska	1	8.8	143
Arizona	13	11.8	87
Arkansas	25	24.9	46
California	30	3.4	123
Colorado	16	19.1	40
Connecticut	15	16.4	42
Delaware	2	11.6	60
District of Columbia	6	15.0	93
Florida	120	27.9	62
Georgia	58	22.5	65
Hawaii	10	19.0	136
Idaho	4	16.0	37
Illinois	71	18.1	61
Indiana	23	18.1	48
Iowa	11	19.4	30
Kansas	11	20.5	41
Kentucky	29	17.7	45
Louisiana	40	19.7	70
Maine	16	28.4	54
Maryland	18	13.2	71
Massachusetts	18	13.3	47
Michigan	44	13.5	61
Minnesota	17	17.4	40
Mississippi	39	30.2	51
Missouri	34	19.6	42
Montana	4	17.4	73
Nebraska	7	18.7	34
Nevada	7	22.0	52
New Hampshire	3	19.1	41
New Jersey	40	21.5	77
New Mexico	10	15.2	59
New York	147	19.4	79
North Carolina	60	26.8	48
North Dakota	3	21.2	52
Ohio	74	22.2	42
Oklahoma	28	23.2	41
Oregon	21	18.5	43
Pennsylvania	76	19.0	47
Rhode Island	5	15.0	40
South Carolina	31	22.7	54
South Dakota	3	15.4	56
Tennessee	62	26.8	47
Texas	103	17.2	67
Utah	4	12.8	57
Vermont	5	21.2	34
Virginia	41	24.1	51

## Enclosure II

State	Number of elderly households (in thousands)	Percent of food stamp households with elderly members	Average food stamp benefit
Washington	18	11.5	49
West Virginia	22	20.0	53
Wisconsin	15	19.7	33
Wyoming	1	12.5	55

<sup>a</sup> Due to rounding, the sum of individual categories may not match the table total.

Source: "Characteristics of Food Stamp Households, Fiscal Year 1998," Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. for USDA's Food and Nutrition Service; and FNS Fiscal Year 1998 Food Stamp Quality Control database. This database contains detailed demographic, economic, and food stamp eligibility information for a nationally representative sample of 47,145 food stamp units—persons in a household who together are certified for, and receiving, food stamps. The national sample is stratified by month and by the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. FNS weights the file so that the data replicate, by state, the monthly number of Food Stamp Program units as reflected in the program operations data.

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