

Chapter VII

Discussants' Suggestions for Changes in Policy and Program Operations

In addition to asking focus group discussants for suggestions of ways to improve outreach methods and thereby increase the number of seniors participating in the FSP, HSR also asked them what changes they would suggest be made to the FSP to make it more accessible to seniors while better meeting their needs.

A. State and Local Program Operations

Discussants suggested a number of ways the FSP could improve access and participation of seniors. These included changes in the application and recertification process, and changes to the delivery of food stamp benefits.

1. Changes to the Application Form

Many discussants reported that the existing application form was lengthy and burdensome for seniors to complete. They said reducing the number of questions, especially those that do not pertain to senior applicants, or creating a separate form for seniors would make it easier to complete.

"Simplify it. That way you don't have to go to a lot of trouble filling out forms. Then they send you to this agency and fill out the forms for this agency, and then they send you to another agency. You fill out some more forms.. oh boy!" (Seattle nonparticipant)

"There should be a short form. They've started getting short forms for other programs but not one for Food Stamps." (Seattle CBO)

"I think I'd recommend revising the application so that it would be only one page long for seniors." (Seattle food stamp worker)

Additionally, some discussants suggested increasing the print size of the applications to make it easier for seniors to read.

"Recently, we've been getting applications from the QMB Medicaid Program and they're in larger print. That might help." (Seattle food stamp worker)

A few food stamp workers also suggested including a question on the application asking whether or not seniors were interested in a telephone interview to make it easier for food stamp workers to identify applicants in need of a telephone interview.

"I wish the application had something on it where it would say that you could ask for a telephone interview...So I wish it would say, 'If you are over the age of sixty-five or if you are disabled, ask for a phone interview.' " (Seattle food stamp worker)

2. Improvements to the Food Stamp Office Environment

Suggestions were put forth by many discussants to improve the environment of the food stamp office. Representatives from a couple of CBOs and food stamp offices suggested incorporating training for workers to better understand the needs of elderly applicants and to improve overall customer service.

"How about if we do a little training on elderly sensitivity and maybe train our workers to be a little more sensitive toward the elderly as to what their needs are." (Pasco food stamp worker)

Several other discussants suggested changing the physical characteristics of the food stamp office. A couple of seniors suggested creating a separate senior section at the food stamp office away from the families with children, and even food stamp workers acknowledged that the front office as it is currently designed can be intimidating to seniors.

"The ones that belong to the welfare...go there. Keep them separate. Don't put them all together like they do down here. This building down here is crowded upteen miles wide." (Seattle nonparticipant)

"We could soften our area out there. You walk in and you've got to come through a counter, but if we soften the area where the person could walk up to a counter where this person is sitting, that person would be able to sit down and talk to them rather than me standing behind a counter this high." (Tacoma food stamp worker)

3. Outstationing Eligibility Workers at Community Sites

Many seniors, food stamp workers, and representatives from CBOs working with seniors suggested moving the application process away from the food stamp offices to other sites in the community that are viewed by seniors as non-threatening, non-institutional settings. Sending food stamp workers to these sites, including senior centers, CBOs, and senior housing complexes, to process food stamp applications and conduct eligibility interviews allows the seniors to remain in places where they are already comfortable and increases their likelihood of participating.

"I've got a neat place to go and apply for food stamps. At the senior center here we have the legal clinic that's free that you can make an appointment to go talk to an attorney about things. One day a week right now they have a specialist in supplemental health insurance for seniors because that's a program that's hard to get started and everything. If the Food Stamp Program would go to the senior centers, have a day where they could go in and apply for food stamps...It's not so embarrassing if you're going in there with a bunch of other seniors to do the same thing, like it can be at other places. It can be set up very easily at all the different senior centers, even." (Seattle nonparticipant)

"I was in Colorado and I was actually outstationed at the Social Security office to do disabled and elderly applications for food stamps....and it works very well. And, in fact I was in Denver and we were also outstationed in hospitals and other community centers throughout the city so that people did have quicker and less complication of a front desk or lobby situation. We went in one-on-one to a person, got an application, set up an interview possibly that very minute." (Tacoma food stamp worker)

"I find that the embarrassment is one part of it, but the biggest thing is the inconvenience ... about the translation and the transportation to get to our office...Instead of having the elderly come to us, we should go to them." (Tacoma food stamp worker)

"And they would be among their peers in the other outreach areas rather than to come here in between crying babies and running children and storming and stamping adults and that kind of thing." (Tacoma food stamp worker)

A few food stamp workers did express concern that if workers were outstationed at other community sites, it would be important to have workers at the off-site locations who understand the eligibility and benefit rules.

"Outstationing and outreach is really a good way to go. I have to say, though, our senior outreach worker, because she's not a financial worker, sends up a lot of applications that are not eligible.... If she was a financial worker, they wouldn't have wasted their time or they get ten dollars and they're very disappointed." (Tacoma food stamp worker)

A few English-speaking nonparticipants suggested moving the FSP application process completely out of DSHS offices.

“I think food stamps should move to its own program and I know that they’d be able to take care of helping people with their applications. The caseworkers at DSHS have so many rules and regulations for all things that they have to keep track of that they just aren’t able to be exact on following up on the questionnaires for food stamps.” (Seattle nonparticipant)

“I honestly believe that if the Food Stamp Program was not handled through DSHS, if it was a separate organization that did nothing but worry about the food stamps and if somebody went to DSHS and they qualified, then DSHS could get them their food stamp approval. But, I think the Federal government ought to have the food stamps completely separate from DSHS.” (Seattle nonparticipant)

4. Coordination with the SSI Application Process

In FY 2000, Washington State received approval from FNS to implement a demonstration project for the Washington State Combined Application Project (WASHCAP). The demonstration project, not yet implemented, will test a method for SSI applicants who meet food stamp eligibility criteria to have their eligibility and benefit amounts for food stamps determined automatically when they apply for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) at the Social Security Administration office. That information will be electronically transferred to DSHS, so that individuals applying for SSI will be able to have their food stamp eligibility and benefits determined automatically without having to fill out additional paperwork or make a separate visit to the welfare office.

Moderators asked seniors and representatives from CBOs what they thought about automatic enrollment for food stamps through SSI. Overall, the response was very positive.

“I would like it if I applied for something at Social Security if they can tell or know by my income at that time that I’m eligible and they would send me the forms or simplify it... Couldn’t it automatically come in the mail to me that hey, now you are eligible for this, or this is what you might get? But now I gotta leave that agency (Social Security) and go to another one and stand in line, go in this big room, and cry my heart out to even see if I’m eligible. It doesn’t make sense.” (Seattle nonparticipant)

“I think it would be a small step in the right direction. I think obviously that if we did something like that, if it flourished and worked as it’s supposed to, which it sounds like it probably would, but then it could be moved beyond SSI to Social Security and then go from there.” (Tacoma CBO)

Many senior discussants would welcome the simpler application process and eliminated visits to the Food Stamp office. A couple of nonparticipants believed it would be a more private and easier process.

Under the WASHCAP demonstration, seniors would have a standardized food stamp benefit amount. This could mean reduced benefits for some seniors compared to what they would get if they applied at the food stamp office and could benefit from all the detailed deductions available. When participating seniors were asked about the combined process in the context of a lower benefit level, seniors expressed that the convenience of the process was worth the trade-off.

“I think that’s still better than telling us to come to the same place back and forth, back and forth.” (Tacoma participant, translated from Korean)

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve been completely broke. At one point I was homeless with five children and pregnant. I wish I could have had \$5.00 to buy something because I had to go to the stores and ask for the food they were going to throw away. I won’t die of hunger if they give me only \$5.00 when I need it.” (Yakima participant, translated from Spanish)

While this suggestion was met with generally positive reactions, some food stamp workers expressed concern about how much information SSI workers would have about the FSP to answer applicant questions and who would be responsible for follow-up with clients.

5. Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) System

With the recent transition from food stamp coupons to EBT, many seniors participating in the FSP have struggled to learn the new system. Focus group discussants provided recommendations that included more support and education about the new system to familiarize seniors with the changes. Many program participants expressed confusion regarding the EBT system, especially with regards to keeping track of PINs and account balances. One food stamp worker suggested that seniors should be educated at the grocery store. Having someone accompany seniors while they figure out the system for the first time provides an opportunity to further educate them about the system. Another discussant suggested having a video at the time of application to demonstrate the process. Finally, another discussant suggested demonstrating the process during Hispanic television programs frequently viewed by seniors.

Focus group discussants also explained how the introduction of the EBT system has restricted seniors' access to congregate meal sites and home-delivered meals. When coupons were still being used by the program, seniors would apply their benefits for use at congregate meal sites and for home-delivered meals. Now, however, the EBT cards require meal programs to have special systems in place to accept the cards as payment, and many sites have been unable to fund these changes in their payment systems. Although payment is not required at congregate meal sites, many seniors felt proud that they were contributing instead of receiving a free hand-out. The stamps also gave providers partial reimbursement for meals and constituted a part of their organization's income stream. Without the use of paper coupons at these sites, many seniors have opted not to utilize the meal services and many providers have lost a part of the income they depended upon to support their meal programs. CBO representatives in Seattle suggested either giving seniors the option of paper food stamp coupons or simplifying the cards so that more congregate meal sites and home-delivered meal programs could still accept food stamps as donations.

"Simplify using those cards in more places if they're going to insist on having this system, if they really won't give an option in paper, which I still would support as my first option." (Seattle CBO)

6. The Recertification Process

As noted in an earlier chapter, seniors often find the recertification process burdensome and redundant. As the majority of seniors have fixed incomes and expenses, frequent recertifications require seniors to report much of the same information and provide many of the same verification documents that were provided at the time of initial application. Many discussants suggested lengthening the certification period for seniors so they would not have to reapply every three or six months.

"I think that the certification should be put out as far as we can. Because generally among our elderly, their income doesn't change." (Pasco food stamp worker)

"The paperwork is too complicated for a person who works. I wish the whole process was done once a year, not every six months. I think that is just too complicated." (Tacoma participant, translated from Korean)

Additionally, a couple of discussants from the CBO group in Seattle expressed a desire for the recertification process to be more accommodating for seniors. When seniors receive recertification letters or packets in the mail, often the information is confusing. Few understand the process or know where to turn for help. As mentioned in previous sections, seniors respond better to one-on-one contact and more personalized treatment.

"I think it is really distressing to feel like you are doing what you are supposed to be doing and then the computer-generated letters...are really alienating. It just makes the whole program a little less user-friendly."(Seattle CBO)

"If you've seen those letters, they're written very much... 'You are going to be cut off on this date.' And so it's like you've already done something wrong by the time you get that letter..." (Seattle CBO)

B. Federal Program Rules

Focus group discussants also provided suggestions for ways to change the rules for determining FSP eligibility and benefit levels. These topics are discussed below.

1. Increasing Food Stamp Benefit Levels and Cashing Out Food Stamps

Since the Food Stamp Act of 1977, there has been a minimum benefit level amount in the Food Stamp Program that provides any eligible applicant with a guarantee of at least \$10 of benefits. During the focus groups, many discussants expressed a need to increase this minimum benefit to keep up with current food prices. Seniors and those who work with them feel that the current \$10 minimum level of food stamp benefits available to seniors provides minimal support and, as described in Chapter III, many seniors often consider the low benefit level not worth the cost of the application process.

"With the way prices are going today, I think we should start the program, like say right now there are a lot of us getting \$10. At least start the program at \$25." (Seattle participant)

"I think they should give one person at least maybe \$125 worth of food stamps. Or maybe \$150 worth for one person." (Seattle participant)

"If the minimum was worth something, people would come in and take time...to apply." (Tacoma food stamp worker)

"I think one way the Federal government could simplify the rules is that once you reach a certain age and you are on a fixed income, you automatically get something more than \$10." (Pasco food stamp worker)

A few CBO discussants expressed that seniors should be eligible for a greater benefit amount compared to other program participants at the same income level. As seniors are often less mobile, many tend to prefer prepared foods over preparing meals from scratch, which leads to a higher food bill.

"One of the big issues for seniors, no matter what their income level, is getting people to eat because it becomes too much trouble to eat. And one of the ways that it's not too much trouble to eat is if you can go to the freezer and take something out and put it in the microwave and have it ready to eat in, you know, ten minutes and it tastes good. But that's more expensive food." (Central Washington CBO)

A few participants expressed a desire to combine food stamp benefits with SSI benefits to receive one lump sum of cash.

"I want them to add it to SSI. I think it will be more comfortable when it comes to administrative procedures as well. And then for us too I think it is easier too." (Tacoma participant, translated from Korean)

"Why don't they just give us everything in cash. Administratively it will be easier and good for us, too." (Tacoma participant, translated from Korean)

2. Changes to Benefit and Eligibility Determination Rules

Several suggestions were put forth to change the food stamp eligibility and benefit determination rules for seniors. Other suggestions were based on simplifying the eligibility process and verification requirements in ways that would particularly benefit seniors. The recommendations included:

- Providing a standard shelter deduction for everyone paying their own shelter costs (including rent and utilities);

“Another thing that would be helpful to the elderly clientele and to all clientele is if they just said, ‘We don’t care if you are paying \$50 or \$500 for rent, here’s what the standard deduction is for everybody.’”(Pasco food stamp worker)

- Allowing seniors to own higher valued vehicles; and

“In America you can not live without a car...if you pay \$1000 or more then you get a better car that doesn’t break down often so it is more convenient. But, if the car is cheap than it is going to break down all the time and that will cost a lot of money.” (Tacoma participant, translated from Korean)

- Raising the upper limit on resources a senior can own.

“It is a very low resource limit. \$3000 for someone who is 65-70 doesn’t go very far, but it disqualifies them from food stamps.” (Seattle CBO)

3. Other Suggestions

Focus group discussants also provided other interesting suggestions. These included:

- Both participants and nonparticipants expressed a desire to have greater flexibility with their benefits. This would allow them to purchase items separate from food with their benefits or deli/prepared foods.

“I think you should be able to buy health benefits with the food stamps, such as your soap, toilet paper, dental supplies. I think you should be able to buy that with the food stamps. What good is it going to do you to get help when you need a roll of toilet paper in your house, or a bar of soap? You gotta clean up what you mess up.” (Seattle nonparticipant)

- One non-participant suggested that he and his peers would be more likely to apply for food stamps if potentially eligible seniors could apply for food stamps whenever they have to go to the Social Security office to apply for benefits or report any changes, not just when they apply for SSI.

“At the time when one applies at the Social Security Office for SSI or for some other form of assistance, at that time a form should be included for food stamps. It should be a one time, one stop effort for seniors. Not two separate applications.” (Seattle nonparticipant)

- Focus group discussants proposed better coordination between Federal and State governmental agencies as a way to alleviate some of the seniors’ burden. By sharing information, seniors do not have to provide the same information to multiple agencies.

“I would like to see more coordination with the various social service agencies because I think with our cooperation we can certainly make it run more efficient as far as getting people on food stamps and through the process.” (Tacoma CBO)

- As the WIC program is often viewed as a consumer-friendly program, several discussants in the Seattle CBO group supported the creation of a senior WIC-like program where participants would receive vouchers for food along with nutritional assessments, nutrition education and referrals to other programs.

“There could be a nutritionist they see every three to six months for an assessment and we would know a lot more about the nutritional status of our seniors... And, referrals, like the WIC program gives referrals. They would have the face-to-face interview, be assessed, and get referred to other things they need. That would be wonderful for seniors.” (Seattle CBO)

Overall, focus group discussants provided some useful and creative insights that can be used to strengthen participation in the FSP. These recommendations address various aspects of

the FSP and include changes to program operations, the physical environment of the food stamp office, the administration of benefits, and the recertification process.