

CHAPTER VIII

Key Policy and Programmatic Options

The previous chapters discussed factors that influence FSP participation among seniors, and the many suggestions of focus group discussants for increasing food stamp participation among both English-speaking and non-English-speaking seniors. This chapter will highlight the key Federal policy, outreach, and program operations options that follow most directly from those findings. Section A presents three options for Federal policy changes that would directly address the mostly commonly cited barriers to participation by seniors. Section B presents suggested approaches to reaching out to eligible low-income seniors to encourage them to apply and encourage their completion of the application process. Section C focuses on improvements to State and local FSP operations. These options were developed during a full-day strategic planning session in Washington State that was facilitated by the HSR study director in October 2001. They build upon the focus group findings on the factors affecting seniors' completion of the application or recertification process and suggested program improvements raised by focus group discussants.

A. Options for Changes to Federal Program Rules

1. Increase the Minimum Food Stamp Benefit Level

As discussed in Chapter II, eligible nonparticipant seniors in the focus groups expressed great concern about the \$10 minimum benefit level for food stamps. Though this is not the amount of food stamps that most elderly households receive, because of the income they receive from other sources, such as SSI or Social Security, approximately one in four elderly households on the FSP receive only \$10 in food stamps each month (Castner and Rosso, 2000). During the focus groups with eligible nonparticipants, seniors said that although they believed they needed food assistance, the administrative difficulties involved in applying for food stamps were not worth the small amount of benefits they thought they could receive. Input from CBO representatives

during the focus groups also confirmed that the small dollar amount many elderly are eligible to receive is a major deterrent to FSP participation for all seniors, whether they are eligible for only the minimum or a higher level of food stamps.

In response to this concern, the most common suggestion to promote FSP participation among seniors was to increase the minimum food stamp benefit level, which has not been increased from \$10 since it was put in place in 1977.

2. Allow Seniors to Apply for Food Stamps Where they Apply for Other Programs

Among the major factors dissuading low-income seniors from pursuing food stamps are stigma and pride. The belief that receiving food stamps marks an individual as a welfare recipient who is dependent on the government, combined with the discomfort many seniors expressed with the welfare office setting and the application process they experienced there, lead to a suggestion to move the food stamp application process for seniors to non-welfare agency sites. In this regard, it is significant to note that English-speaking seniors in the focus groups said they did feel comfortable with seeking benefits from the Social Security Administration or health insurance benefits.

As a solution to these problems, and given their perception of Social Security as a more user-friendly system, several English-speaking seniors, both participants and nonparticipants, suggested that seniors be able to initiate and complete the food stamp application process at the local Social Security office (whether they are receiving SSI or only Social Security). CBO representatives also suggested coordinated and automatic applications for food stamps when seniors apply for Medicaid at non-welfare office sites.

3. Administer the FSP for Seniors as a WIC-like Nutrition and Health Program

When discussing the value of the FSP, it was apparent that seniors are quite interested in nutrition and view the FSP as a mechanism to purchase more healthy foods. An interesting suggestion that arose in the focus group with CBO representatives in Seattle was to create a new model for the way food stamps are provided to eligible seniors. Noting the need for additional nutrition education for the senior population in this country and the resistance seniors have to going to welfare offices to apply for food stamps, several discussants suggested creating a

nutrition and health program for seniors, similar to the WIC program for mothers and young children. A WIC-like approach would allow participants to apply for food stamps, receive education about how to use their benefits, and obtain nutritional assessments, nutrition education, and referrals to other health and social services.

B. Options for Food Stamp Program Outreach

Suggested options for Food Stamp Program outreach efforts to encourage participation by seniors included one-on-one outreach combined with informational sessions in small group settings and individualized enrollment assistance. Seniors felt that these settings should be in locations where they or other seniors like them congregate, such as senior housing, senior centers, ethnic cultural centers, health centers, libraries, cafeterias and churches. It was also suggested that the most effective one-on-one outreach could be done by community-based organizations with whom seniors are already affiliated, and by other seniors who are participating in the FSP.

Print media was also a frequently suggested outreach method, particularly local publications that target seniors or particular ethnic groups or neighborhoods. Some discussants also suggested including information about the FSP in personalized mailings from Social Security or utility companies.

Culturally appropriate materials were also identified as critical to the success of any food stamp outreach effort. The Spanish-speaking and Korean-speaking groups (both seniors and those who work with them) recommended placing advertising in these and other languages in ethnic newspapers and on ethnically-oriented media programs.

However, effective outreach to ethnic minorities and to seniors in general must go beyond advertising and public information. For example, The Korean Women's Association (KWA) was described as particularly effective in promoting FSP participation among seniors since the agency provides not only public information campaigns but also intensive one-on-one client enrollment assistance. The outreach staff help individuals with all stages of the food stamp application process, including sitting down with them to fill out the detailed questions on the application form, educating them about the eligibility interview process and what they need to

bring there, and helping seniors obtain follow-up verification documents if needed. This model of client enrollment assistance may be a particularly useful model for other community organizations around the State, serving both English and non-English-speaking populations.

C. Options for Improvements to State and Local FSP Operations

On October 4, 2001, at an intensive one-day strategy session, 21 representatives from DSHS' Divisions of Employment and Assistance Programs and Home and Community Services, local community organizations providing food stamp outreach to seniors, a statewide anti-hunger organization, and the regional office on Aging and Disability Services came together to discuss the findings of these focus groups and craft an action plan to improve access and participation in the FSP for seniors in Washington State. (A copy of the participant list is in Appendix F.)

Over the course of this session, the group suggested 42 potential program improvements. Each of these options responded to the specific findings outlined in Chapters II through VI of the draft focus group report. However, to develop a practical action plan leading to significant changes that could be implemented in a relatively short timeframe, the group prioritized and narrowed down their initial proposals. The group's final priority options are outlined below and organized by their common objectives. Each of the eight objectives addresses an aspect of program operations that was frequently raised as a concern during the focus group discussions.

Objective 1: To make the food stamp application form easier for seniors to use and understand by both English and non-English speaking seniors.

Action Steps:

- Finalizing DSHS' draft shortened and simplified food stamp application form. (See Appendix E for a copy of the pending revised form.)
- Expanding use of online food stamp applications so that more community groups working with low-income seniors can help them complete a food stamp application and submit it electronically to the individual's local food stamp office. (Note: this could be encouraged through training across the State with staff from Senior and Disability Services and other local organizations helping seniors to access public benefits.)

- Improving the efficiency of the online application for local food stamp office staff by interfacing the online application with the State eligibility computer system. (At this time, local offices receive a hard copy of the online application for clients in their target area. The caseworkers must then re-enter the information into ACES, the State eligibility computer system.)

Objective 2: To expand public awareness about and participation in Washington's Combined Application Program (WASHCAP) for SSI and food stamps.

Background:

As noted earlier in the report, under a demonstration project authorized by the Food and Nutrition Service of USDA, in winter 2001 Washington State is launching a multi-year program to simplify and coordinate the food stamp application process with the Social Security Administration for SSI recipients. For this demonstration, eligible individuals will be unemployed SSI recipients who live alone or buy and fix their food apart from the other people they live with. These seniors will be able to apply for food stamps and SSI in one combined eligibility interview at the Social Security office and will have a standard benefit amount provided to them. If they choose to participate in the program, they will never have to go to a DSHS office or fill out the food stamp application form. (Note: SSI recipients with high shelter and/or medical costs will be advised that they could receive a higher benefit level if they applied for the regular program through the more lengthy and detailed application process at their local food stamp office.)

Action Step:

- Providing more information and training to local organizations working with seniors as the new WASHCAP program is being implemented so that they can better inform seniors about the option and answer their questions and concerns.

Objective 3: To improve the front office environment for seniors.

Action Step:

- Providing additional and expanded training of receptionists to ensure that they are not dissuading eligible people from applying, with a special focus on the needs of and barriers to participation for seniors.

Objective 4: To improve the food stamp eligibility interview process for seniors.

Action Steps:

- Promoting the option of telephone interviews for seniors who have hardships traveling to the food stamp office (Note: this could be facilitated by revising the food stamp application form to include a box on the *front page* of the form allowing applicants with hardships to request a telephone interview.)
- Recognizing that memory problems and other factors increase the risk that seniors will miss their eligibility interview appointment, the State should ask local staff to make reminder calls to senior food stamp applicants prior to their scheduled interview.
- Producing an educational video describing the steps in the food stamp application process, including the information they will be asked to provide and the rationale for the interview questions. (Note: this video could be distributed to community organizations conducting food stamp outreach and referrals and to all local food stamp offices for display in the waiting area.)
- Improving staff training and written information for applicants about what verification should be required for different types of households.
- Expanding use of the excess medical deduction for seniors eligible for this deduction. (Note: this could be accomplished through trainings and guidance to local food stamp office staff and community organizations providing food stamp outreach as well as Federal policy changes that could simplify the deduction by standardizing it and thus reducing the amount of verification documentation required.)

Objective 5: To improve program participation among eligible refugees and immigrants.

Action Step:

- Developing updated written educational materials that address the rules for sponsored immigrants and food stamps and the fact that receipt of food stamps does not threaten an immigrant's ability to become a permanent resident in the future. (Note: Some existing materials may be able to be obtained from Immigration and Naturalization Service.)

Objective 6: To provide improved translation and interpretation services for potential food stamp applicants and those that do apply.

Action Steps:

- Requiring local food stamp offices to post signs and instructions (e.g., where clients need to go or whom they have to see to begin the process) in multiple languages.
- Requiring local food stamp offices to designate reception windows and up-front reception staff available all day for non-English-speaking clients.
- Creating a statewide 800 number system where non-English-speaking individuals interested in applying for food stamps can dial into to get information about the FSP or the application process once they have applied. (Note: This could potentially be expanded for conducting telephone eligibility interviews.)
- Working with community-based groups to properly translate the new shortened application into other languages.

Objective 7: To improve seniors' utilization of the EBT benefits.

Action Steps:

- Training seniors on how they may obtain balance information on their EBT food stamp accounts and distribute such materials to food stamp outreach contractors, and workers in Home and Community Services. (Note: this training could be done in collaboration with the retail stores where seniors purchase their food.)
- Eliminating the current State policy which freezes food stamp benefits if they are not used for three consecutive months. (Note: In Fall 2001, the State issued draft revised regulations allowing food stamp participants to maintain their food stamp benefits on the EBT card for one full year and removing the freeze on benefits after three months of nonuse.)
- Designing a method acceptable to both seniors and senior meal program providers for seniors to more easily use EBT food stamps to make donations for meals at congregate meal sites and for home-delivered meals.

Objective 8: To reduce the burden of the re-certification process for elderly

households.

Background:

In accordance with Federal law, DSHS allows local food stamp offices to certify seniors for 24-month time periods. However, in the three communities where the focus groups were conducted, the local practice appears to be to provide 3-month certifications for most food stamp households, including elderly food stamp households. These short certification periods are the result of State and local concern for reducing food stamp error rates. The need for frequent recertifications deters seniors from maintaining their involvement with the FSP.

Action Step:

- Lengthening the typical food stamp certification period for elderly households to 24 months. (Note: To accomplish this the State agency could encourage local offices to change the way they recertify seniors through written guidance, training, and modifications to the automated eligibility system. The State could educate potentially eligible seniors and current participants about this change through direct mailings and other targeted outreach efforts. In addition, improving staff training about what verification should be required for different types of households, as suggested under objective 4 above, could also reduce the amount of documents seniors have to obtain and deliver to the food stamp office at each re-certification.)

D. Conclusion

The above suggestions to increase FSP participation were developed in response to concerns raised by low-income seniors and those who work with them in three communities in Washington State. Nevertheless, the issues they raise likely resonate as factors influencing seniors' FSP participation nationwide.

These suggestions clearly merit the attention of a variety of audiences, including Federal policymakers, State officials, program administrators, and national, State, and community advocates who are interested in improving access to the FSP for seniors. It is suggested that this report and its findings can spur similar applied policy research to examine the direct experiences of FSP participants and eligible nonparticipants and to identify and respond to the aspects of FSP program operations that can be improved at the State and local level.