

Evaluation of the USDA Elderly Nutrition Demonstrations

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Abstract

Historically, low-income seniors ages 60 and older who qualify for Food Stamp Program (FSP) benefits participate at low rates because they feel it is not worth the effort to apply. To identify effective strategies for raising participation among this population, USDA designed three models, each using different techniques to reduce the barriers that seniors face in FSP participation. The techniques involve reducing the time and effort of applying for benefits, aiding seniors in navigating the application process, and giving seniors the option of receiving commodity packages instead of getting benefits through electronic benefits transfer cards. The models were tested as county demonstrations in six States between 2002 and 2004. This report presents the findings of the in-depth process analysis component of an evaluation of the demonstrations. Each of the demonstrations was examined individually for overall design and implementation.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Policymakers have long been concerned that low-income elderly individuals who are eligible for food stamp benefits tend not to participate in the Food Stamp Program (FSP). Historically, fewer than one out of every three eligible elderly individuals participates in the program, and these rates have only fallen in recent years (Cunningham 2004). Such low participation rates generate concerns about the ability of low-income senior citizens to maintain a healthy diet.

In response to these concerns, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) funded the Elderly Nutrition Demonstrations—six projects aimed at testing ways to increase FSP participation among eligible elderly individuals. The demonstrations were designed to reduce the barriers to FSP participation that the elderly face by simplifying the application process, increasing eligible elderly individuals' understanding of the program, assisting elderly individuals with the application process, and/or providing food stamp benefits as commodities rather than as traditional program benefits.

USDA also funded an evaluation of these demonstrations to assess their ability to increase participation among eligible elderly individuals. The evaluation examined the types of seniors that were attracted to the FSP under the demonstrations, what factors seniors liked and disliked about the demonstrations, and which demonstrations were the most cost-effective. The evaluation also included an in-depth process analysis to provide insight into how the demonstrations were implemented, to develop an understanding of the context for the impact evaluation, and to identify the individual challenges and successes of each demonstration.

This report presents the findings of the process analysis component of the evaluation. We examine each of the demonstrations individually, discussing the overall design and implementation. The findings in this report, which are summarized in Cody and Ohls (2005), are intended for federal, state and local policy makers that may be interested in exploring these policy alternatives in the future.

The remainder of this chapter provides the context for understanding demonstration goals and evaluation objectives. The first describes the three demonstration models and

section the second section the six grantees that implemented these models. The subsequent chapters in this report discuss the six demonstrations individually.

DEMONSTRATION MODELS

In 2001, USDA issued a request for grant proposals from state FSP agencies to operate a pilot project under the Elderly Nutrition Demonstrations. The objective of the demonstration was to test the feasibility and effectiveness of alternative approaches to making the FSP more accessible to eligible elderly individuals. The demonstration grants were awarded on a competitive basis, and the pilot projects were required to adopt one of the three demonstration models developed by USDA: (1) the simplified eligibility model, (2) the application assistance model, and (3) the commodity alternative benefit model. Each model represented one approach to reducing FSP application burden, increasing awareness about program availability and benefits, and/or reducing the stigma associated with participation. With regard to the second objective, each model included an outreach component to raise awareness of the demonstration procedures in particular and of the FSP in general in the elderly community.

Simplified Eligibility

The simplified eligibility model was designed to reduce the burden associated with applying for food stamps by simplifying the process of determining eligibility. Under federal rules, households that contain at least one person age 60 years or older are eligible for food stamps if everyone in the household receives Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or if their combined incomes and assets meet the following two rules:

1. ***The household's gross monthly income less certain deductions (i.e., its net income) is below 100 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.*** Deductions include a standard deduction of \$134 (in most states) for each household; a deduction for monthly medical expenses above \$35; a deduction for shelter costs in excess of 50 percent of net income after applying the other deductions; as well as deductions for earnings, dependent care expenses, and child support payments.
2. ***The sum of the household's countable assets is below \$3,000.*** Countable assets include cash on hand, checking and savings account balances, stocks and bonds, and most retirement accounts. Also, a portion of the value of some vehicles is counted toward assets, as is the equity value of certain recreational property.

For all households that meet the eligibility criteria, benefits are computed as a function of the number of persons in the household, the household's net income, and the maximum

benefit levels.¹ Households applying for food stamps must provide adequate documentation to verify the information used to assess eligibility and calculate benefits. For example, they must provide documentation to verify earnings, medical expenses, and asset holdings. Households must also participate in an eligibility interview with program staff.

The intent of the simplified eligibility model was to reduce the time and effort required of seniors to apply for food stamps. In particular, USDA intended this model to minimize the burden associated with documenting income and expenses. Demonstrations were encouraged to change the way that income and benefits are normally computed during the eligibility process in part to reduce the need for verifying documentation. These changes also were intended to reduce the need for personal and intrusive questions during eligibility interviews. The simplified rules applied only to those food stamp households in which all individuals are age 60 or older.

Application Assistance

The application assistance model sought to reduce the burden of applying for food stamps by giving seniors one-on-one aid in navigating the application process. Under this demonstration model, eligibility rules remained unchanged, but elderly applicants were paired with application assistance workers who helped them assemble documents needed to apply for food stamps, explain the application, and often complete the forms on their behalf. USDA gave the states flexibility to determine where this assistance took place—either in clients' homes or in more public spaces.

USDA encouraged states designing application assistance demonstrations to develop extensive outreach activities to inform potential clients about the FSP in general and about the application assistance services. States also were encouraged to incorporate features such as prescreening potential applicants for eligibility and benefit amounts, reducing the burden of the eligibility interview, building on existing programs, and using technology to make the application easier to access and complete.

Commodity Alternative Benefit

The commodity alternative model was designed to replace the electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card with a monthly commodities package. Federally run commodity

¹The maximum benefit level is tied to the cost of purchasing a nutritionally adequate low-cost diet as measured by USDA's Thrifty Food Plan. The benefit is calculated by subtracting 30 percent of the household's counted net income—the amount that the household is thought to be able to spend on food from its income—from the maximum benefit level for the household size. Currently, the maximum benefit level for a one-person household is \$130. Eligible one- and two-person households are guaranteed a minimum monthly food stamp benefit of \$10, while households of three or more have no minimum benefit.

distribution efforts have been used since Depression-era programs in which surplus commodities were redistributed to the needy. While traditional FSP benefits are generally believed to be more effective in providing flexible nutrition assistance to a large population, several current federal commodity distribution programs provide food directly to needy individuals. The commodity alternative benefit model was designed in part to test whether commodity packages would be more appealing to seniors than traditional food stamp benefits.

Under the demonstration guidelines, USDA required the contents of the commodities packages to be designed to meet the needs of the elderly. States were encouraged to develop a variety of packages for different target populations (for example, for diabetics or for specific ethnic groups). States were given flexibility in designing procedures for distributing the packages; commodities could be delivered to participants' homes, or participants could pick up packages at local distribution centers. USDA established that the cost to the demonstration of each commodity package (including shipping and storage costs) could not exceed the average benefit for which elderly FSP households in the demonstration site were eligible. The cost of the packages was to be the same for all participants, regardless of the benefit amount for which they were eligible.

Only households in which all members were elderly (known as "pure elderly" households) were allowed to participate in the commodity demonstrations. During the application process, these households were informed of what their FSP benefit would be before they chose between traditional benefits and demonstration benefits. Additionally, pure elderly households already participating in the FSP when the demonstration started were given the option to enroll. With some restrictions, households that selected commodities could switch to traditional benefits after the demonstration began.

SIX GRANTEES

In 2001, USDA encouraged states to apply for demonstration grants to implement one of these three models. States had flexibility in designing their demonstrations, as long as they stayed within the basic framework of a specific demonstration model and did not combine components of different models. Six states were selected to implement a demonstration. One state, Florida, implemented a simplified eligibility demonstration; three states, Arizona, Maine, and Michigan, implemented application assistance demonstrations; and two states, Connecticut and North Carolina, implemented commodity alternative benefit demonstrations. In each state, the demonstrations were implemented in a limited geographic area—typically one or two counties, or in the case of Connecticut, ten towns in the Hartford region.

The demonstrations were funded for two years. Because implementation time varied by demonstration, so did the start dates (Table I.1). Four demonstrations that still had funds after two years were extended by up to 11 months.

Table I.1: Months of Operation for The Elderly Nutrition Demonstrations

Demonstration State	Start Date	End Date
Simplified Eligibility Model Florida	February, 2002	December, 2003
Application Assistance Model Arizona	September, 2002	April, 2005 ^a
Maine	February, 2002	February, 2004 ^a
Michigan	November, 2002	January, 2005 ^a
Commodity Alternative Benefit Model Connecticut	November, 2002	October, 2004
North Carolina	November, 2002	September, 2005 ^a

^aDemonstration period extended beyond two years.

CHAPTER II

FLORIDA'S SIMPLIFIED ELIGIBILITY PROGRAM

The Florida Department of Children and Family Services (DCF) was the only grantee that selected a simplified eligibility model to increase elderly participation in the FSP for the elderly nutrition demonstration. Under the initiative, elderly residents from Leon and Gadsden Counties did not need to provide documentation for assets, earned income, and expenses. In addition, in-person eligibility interviews were waived for first-time applicants and those seniors who recertified for food stamps during the demonstration. DCF also instituted a consistent, year-long recertification period and a shorter application; however the short application was independent of the demonstration. While not technically part of the demonstration, a helpline operated by the community partner for low-income residents was advertised to program participants.

OPERATIONAL DETAILS

Mechanics of Services

The simplified eligibility program was available through the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) in Leon and Gadsden Counties. Seniors applying for food stamps in Leon County had to apply at the local office in Tallahassee, whereas all clients in Gadsden County were served by the Quincy office. Program officials made several modifications to FSP procedures, with the ultimate goal of making the food stamp application and recertification easier for seniors. Florida Impact, the community partner, operated a telephone helpline through which seniors could obtain information on the simplified eligibility program.

FSP Characteristics in the Absence of the Demonstration. DCF caseworkers¹ handle applicants for multiple social service programs, though offices are divided into adult units (60 years and older) and family units (under 60 years). Many applicants pick up a joint

¹ In Florida, DCF caseworkers are known as eligibility specialists.

application—known in Florida as a Request for Assistance—from the county office, but they also can request an application by mail or print one out electronically. The document is two pages long, including instructions and special notifications. The typeface is quite small and difficult to read.

Once DCF receives an application, a clerk makes an appointment for an eligibility interview, which is known locally as a “management review.” Walk-in applicants cannot be seen by a caseworker that same day. Seniors bring to the appointment their documentation of income, vehicle ownership, and assets. The latter is not required if the applicants receive Supplemental Security Income. To receive the relevant deductions, clients must provide documentation of expenses such as rent or utilities. Caseworkers either determine eligibility during that session or provide the senior with a list of the additional documentation that is needed. Seniors have 10 business days to submit the required paperwork by mail, fax, or in person.

During the in-person management review, the caseworker compares income and expenses over the past several months to assess the reasonableness of the information on the FSP application. If the caseworker rates the review as “good,” then the senior receives a certification period of one year. If expenses exceed income, the senior must participate in a management review after three months, and if it is satisfactory they then receive a six-month certification period. All recertifying clients automatically receive a form in the mail from the state office in Tallahassee to complete and return to DCF.²

On average, seniors make two trips to the local DCF office when applying for food stamps, or three or more trips if they must return with supplemental documentation. Staff in Leon County estimate that they spend one hour on the typical management review, and another 30 minutes to process paperwork prior to the demonstration. Gadsden caseworkers estimate that they spend between 60 and 75 minutes from start to finish.

Changes in FSP Policies and Procedures. Program officials made several changes to regular FSP procedures to make applying for food stamps easier for program participants, including that:

- Seniors did not have to submit documentation of income (e.g., earnings records, Social Security amounts, Supplementary Security Income amounts, and bank statements), deductions (e.g., medical bills, proof of shelter expense), and assets (e.g., ownership of vehicles). Applicants still were required to provide proof of citizenship. DCF verified the applicant’s Social Security Number, along with some income amounts (such as Social Security and Supplemental Security Income) using existing databases.

² During the second year of the demonstration, DCF instituted a toll-free statewide call center that allowed all FSP clients to call in and report changes in household income, expenses, or contact information in between recertification periods.

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- DCF waived the management review to determine eligibility, though caseworkers contacted applicants by telephone or mail if any relevant information was missing from the application or if clarification was needed.
 - All participating seniors received a year-long recertification period, as opposed to three or six months. Face-to-face interviews for recertifying seniors were waived; if necessary, information was clarified by telephone.
 - Clerks sent clients a letter acknowledging receipt of application. The application was then forwarded for eligibility determination to a caseworker, who flagged the client in the database. Applicants received a letter indicating the eligibility decision and benefit amount.
 - To facilitate the simplified eligibility demonstration, State officials developed a short, one-page application that only recorded data applicable to the elderly population.³ The one-page application was more user friendly, with larger typeface and bigger spaces for entering information. As was the case before the demonstration, applications could be obtained in person, by mail or fax, through a proxy. Again, demonstration clients could not apply for public assistance electronically.

Under the simplified eligibility system, caseworkers spent significantly less time processing each application. In Leon County, staff took 15 to 20 minutes on average to review, code, and enter an application in the DCF database. Staff at the Gadsden office reported that processing took 25 minutes or less.

Supplemental Services. Before the demonstration went into effect, Florida Impact sponsored a telephone helpline through which clients of all ages in Florida could access information and assistance in applying for food stamps. To supplement the call center, Florida Impact developed pre-screening software to indicate potential FSP eligibility. Caseworkers reported that, in informal crosschecks against the actual eligibility determinations, Florida Impact's software was 97 percent accurate. The helpline proved to be such a reliable resource that inexperienced DCF caseworkers often referred applicants to it for information about the FSP and to be prescreened.

Under the simplified eligibility program, outreach materials provided the telephone number to interested participants, encouraging them to call the helpline to get more information on the demonstration. When a call came in about the program, Florida Impact staff mailed the senior a packet that included the one-page application, a flyer describing the

³ Because the application was part of the application assistance model and not the simplified eligibility model, the state also used the shorter form in two comparison counties (Alachua and Jackson counties) but it did not change the eligibility rules in those counties.

simplified eligibility program, and a self-addressed envelope for either the Gadsden or Leon office.

Major Stakeholders and Roles

Within the Health and Human Services division, the Florida DCF served as the grantee for the elderly nutrition demonstration. It enlisted the involvement of the program's community partner, Florida Impact, to take responsibility for outreach efforts. Florida Impact is a statewide partnership of faith-based groups, community-based organizations, and service providers that advocates on behalf of low-income populations in the Florida Legislature. A handful of local non-profit agencies assisted Florida Impact with community outreach.

State officials from DCF took responsibility for planning and development, as well as overseeing operations and making policy decisions. The Economic Self-Sufficiency (ESS) Program Administrator, an Operations Review Specialist, and a Government Operations Consultant prepared the grant and conceptualized the program's design, with feedback from Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). In addition, the ESS Program Administrator elicited feedback from the county DCF administrators which the core planning group took into account. State officials developed and administered the training for local county staff and were responsible for preparing quarterly reports.

With the exception of outreach, local DCF offices operated the simplified eligibility program on a day-to-day basis. Five eligibility specialists handled demonstrations in Leon County. In Gadsden County, one senior eligibility specialist initially managed the cases for all participants but by year two, demonstration cases rotated between two specialists, due to an increase in the number of applications and staff changes within the office. The specialists continued to manage non-demonstration and non-FSP caseloads (for example, Medicaid). Two county administrators ensured that their staff followed appropriate procedures, while the district administrator oversaw operations in both counties and served as a liaison between the county offices and state officials in Tallahassee.

Florida Impact, under a contract with DCF, led outreach and publicity efforts, which were conducted by a part-time program coordinator. Its executive director spent 10 percent of her time contributing to quarterly reports and serving as the liaison with DCF. A few community-based organizations assisted with promoting the simplified eligibility program, including the Gadsden County Senior Citizens Center, America's Second Harvest, and Meals on Wheels.

Means of Communication and Related Issues

Staff faced moderate communication and program management challenges. Interview data suggest that some stakeholders—particularly caseworkers—at times felt that they were not kept informed about the demonstration's activities. Despite some communication from DCF prior to the start of the demonstration, local office staff felt that they were kept 'out of

the loop.’ Better efforts to communicate with local offices and attain their buy-in might have helped to increase their initial enthusiasm for the initiative.

Florida Impact did take steps to update the county staff. The program coordinator visited the local offices each month to notify them of upcoming outreach events, pass on any relevant information, and determine if they had any questions or concerns. These visits generally were informal, so it is possible that the supervisors and caseworkers were sometimes too busy to talk with the coordinator. It also may be that the local supervisors did not always pass on the information to their front-line workers.

Importantly, as the demonstration neared its end, some caseworkers reported not knowing when the demonstration was scheduled to end or how the transition would take effect. It was clear that they were surprised to learn that the simplified eligibility program was only a pilot. Other staff recalled receiving a letter from Florida Impact describing the end of the demonstration, as well as receiving a visit from the Florida Impact representative. (Some of them simply may have forgotten or might have been unable to attend that meeting.) However, it is telling that such a communiqué concerning a policy change came from an outside organization instead of from the agency’s headquarters, or at the very least the district and county supervisors.

Training

At the outset of the program, three state officials—the same group who developed the demonstration—conducted trainings for program administrators, caseworkers from both the adult and family units, and interview clerks from each participating DCF site. They held a total of six sessions at two sites in Leon County, and two sessions at the site in Gadsden County (two hours each). Approximately 150 staff attended the training, which covered an overview of the elderly nutrition demonstration and the new procedures for the simplified eligibility pilot. New staff received the same training as part of their pre-service training.

Florida Impact was not actively involved in the DCF training. Still, the organization ensured that its telephone helpline operators understood how to ‘screen out’ any FSP elderly clients who, after seeing a newspaper article or hearing a public service announcement, called to receive further information about the demonstration. Since the public service announcement did not specifically mention food stamps, sometimes current FSP clients called the hotline. In those situations, staff were instructed how to tell these seniors that they already had a “food card.”

Outreach Strategies

By its design, the fundamental characteristics of the simplified eligibility program were fairly straightforward, but educating the elderly population that DCF was making it easier for them to apply for food stamps became a critical component of the demonstration. Up until that point, DCF had not actively sponsored any outreach efforts for the elderly.

Core Themes and Target Audiences. In developing its outreach strategies, Florida Impact decided to employ buzzwords that stressed nutrition as opposed to “public assistance” or “food stamps.” From its past experience with needy populations, phrases that emphasized good health and healthy eating were believed to generate more interest. Furthermore, it incorporated “seniors” and “60+ years of age” instead of “elderly” because these expressions were believed to lend more dignity and respect to older age groups.

According to the Florida Impact program coordinator, community presentations initially were one of the most effective means of attracting seniors to the FSP, rather than posters or information cards. Traditional publicity methods might spark interest, but it was the one-on-one discussions that encouraged seniors to apply for food stamps. Delivering presentations to caregivers in particular (i.e, relatives, friends, or people responsible for the well-being of seniors) was crucial because generally these are the people who the elderly trust the most.

Public Education Activities. Florida Impact used a wide range of outreach methods throughout the demonstration, including dissemination of written materials (available in English and Spanish), a poster campaign on public busses in the Tallahassee metropolitan area, public service announcements, press events, and group presentations. Figure II.1 provides a detailed overview of these and other efforts (including those that took place in Alachua and Jackson counties).⁴ Some highlights from the public education campaign included:

- Florida Impact arranged press coverage for a promotional event at a senior apartment building in June 2002. The DCF Secretary explained the simplified eligibility program to about 10 residents, and the segment appeared on two news channels in both counties.
- The DCF Secretary taped a television public service announcement (PSA) that ran for a total of 12 weeks during three periods in 2003. In the segment, the Secretary described the demonstration and emphasized good nutrition instead of food stamps or public assistance, using phrases like “food card” and “food benefits.” The PSA also included footage of a senior using an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card. Because the local television stations reach multiple counties and even cross the state line in some instances, the PSA was not aired exclusively in the demonstration counties. Individuals who viewed the PSA could call the helpline (run by Florida Impact), where they were pre-screened for FSP benefits. If they lived in Leon or Gadsden counties, they could request

⁴ FNS instructed the grantee that these comparison sites should not receive any information cards or posters, but agreed to allow the DCF offices to use the simplified application—though not to follow the simplified eligibility rules. This took effect by July 1, 2002. However, the program coordinator continued to conduct group presentations on the FSP and set up tables at special events in these comparison counties.

the one-page FSP application; if they lived in other counties, they were referred to their local DCF office for further assistance.

- Promotional information cards were forwarded to Meals on Wheels (MOW) to be included in hot meal deliveries (every quarter in Leon County, less frequently in Gadsden due to fewer MOW participants).
- America's Second Harvest of the Big Bend (serving 14 counties) received information cards every other month to be distributed through its Brown Bags for the Elderly program at local senior centers and churches in Gadsden and Leon Counties.
- Florida Impact arranged for the Tallahassee transit system (TalTran) to display posters on its citywide bus routes for six months.
- The program coordinator routinely extended offers to deliver presentations about the demonstration. Several organizations invited Florida Impact to speak, either to providers, caregivers, or seniors themselves. These included Aging with Dignity (an advocacy group), senior housing complexes, the Leon County Extension Office, local area agencies on aging, the Capitol Coalition for the Aging, senior centers, the Emergency Care Help Organization, the Coalition for the Homeless, the Department of Neighborhood and Community Services, and representatives from various service providers and agencies on Community Service Day.
- Topics covered at presentations focused on the benefits of EBT cards and good nutrition for the elderly. However, they also stressed the value of food stamps, even for seniors qualifying only for the minimum benefit level. Program staff stressed that this translated into an extra \$120 a year. They also shared sample shopping orders that totaled \$10 or less (i.e., staples and easy-to-prepare dishes).

Stakeholders reported that high-profile publicity events tended to generate a wave of interest from applicants. For example, after Florida Impact sponsored a press conference in conjunction with the DCF undersecretary on World Food Day, the telephones 'rang off the hook' and the local county offices were forced to shut down the phone system for one day. In addition, a higher-than-usual volume of calls occurred after the airing of the first television PSA in the spring of 2003, requiring additional staff and volunteers at Florida Impact's call center. A supervisor from the Gadsden office reported that the PSA generated 100 applications during the first month that it aired, and approximately 75 percent of the seniors were eligible for food stamps. The program coordinator also remarked that the PSA was an effective way to reach seniors who lived in the rural regions, and seniors liked the idea of calling from the privacy of their own homes.

While Florida Impact implemented the public education campaign, DCF staff reminded those seniors up for recertification about the simplified eligibility program during their phone interviews. County offices also mailed letters in the fall of 2002 to elderly FSP clients

who were due to be recertified in the near future, describing the demonstration and explaining how the pilot would streamline the process.

Over the course of the demonstration, program staff distributed 14,180 applications, 14,426 information cards, and 268 posters through the mail or at presentations.⁵ Much of this material was mailed or was provided in person at dozens of community organizations that serve the elderly, which are listed in Table II.1.

Perceived Effectiveness of Outreach. Program officials did not include a tracking mechanism to determine how elderly applicants learned about the demonstration. To get a better sense of the demonstration's visibility in the communities, evaluators interviewed 11 service providers for the elderly to discover if they saw evidence of the program. Overall, the larger providers were aware of the demonstration, whereas the smaller affiliates of America's Second Harvest's Brown Bags for the Elderly program were not. For example, volunteers from three churches did not know about the pilot. Frequently, the grocery bags were reported to have contained various informational brochures, so it is possible that they packed the bags without reviewing the materials. In contrast, service providers who had been in their positions for several years and were active in their communities were very familiar with the demonstration and thought that Florida Impact effectively promoted the program among the elderly population and those who cared and advocated for them.

Staff Turnover

Considerable staff turnover in DCF offices across Florida coincided with the demonstration's implementation. Florida Impact reported that turnover at the Jennings Street service center in Leon County, where elderly cases are handled, was particularly high. To help introduce new caseworkers and supervisors to the simplified eligibility program, the program coordinator converted the slides from the training into note cards with bullet points highlighting the core rules and procedures of the demonstration. In contrast, staff turnover at the Gadsden County office in Quincy affected the family unit, but the adult unit remained fairly stable.

Major Operational Changes During the Demonstration

Program staff implemented few operational changes throughout the simplified eligibility pilot. Florida Impact redirected its emphasis on various outreach strategies, such as shifting from radio public service announcements and newspaper articles to more reliance on community presentations and word-of-mouth. It then focused on the television PSA during the second year. As the end of the demonstration approached, the central DCF office in Tallahassee mailed letters to all FSP elderly clients to remind them that the agency would revert to the previous recertification rules, effective January 1, 2004.

⁵ From the October to December 2003 quarterly report submitted by the Florida Department of Children and Families to the USDA Food and Nutrition Service.

Table II.1: Organizations and Service Providers That Received Outreach Materials, March 2002 to December 2003

Gadsden County	Leon County
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aging and Adult Services • American Association of Retired Persons • Apalachicola Center for Mental Health • Big Bend Workforce • Capital Area Community Action Agency, Inc. • Carver Heights Senior Citizens Center • Catholic Social Services • Center for Independent Living of North Florida • Churches (several) • Continuum Personal Care Management • Food pantries (several) • Foster Grandparent Program • Gadsden Association Rehabilitation Center • Gadsden Community Hospital • Gadsden County Extension Office • Gadsden County Health Department • Gadsden County Public Library • Gadsden County Senior Citizens Council (AAA) • Gadsden County Senior Center • Green Thumb, Inc. (employment services) • HealthSouth Rehab Center • Helping Hands Foundation of Havana • Kiwanis Club • Meals on Wheels • NHC Healthcare • North Florida Panhandle Migrant Workers • Senior Companion Program • Shepherd's Hand Resource Center • Telephone Counseling and Referral Service • VISTA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aging With Dignity (AAA) • Alliance for Aging Help Line • American Association of Retired Persons • America's Second Harvest of the Big Bend • American Red Cross • Bethel Towers • Big Bend Hospice • Big Bend Workforce • Capital Area Community Action Agency, Inc. • Casa Calderon Apartments • Catholic Social Services • Center for Independent Living of North Florida • Chaires Community Center • Continuum Personal Care Management • Dept. of Neighborhood and Community Services • Easter Seals Rehabilitation Center • Emergency Care Help Organization • Food pantries (several) • Foster Grandparent Program • Georgia Belle Apartments • Home Helpers (in-home companion care) • Home Instead Senior Care • The Homeless Shelter • Lake Ella Senior Living Facility • Leon County Extension Office • Leon County Health Department • Leon County Public Library • Leon County Senior Citizens Council (AAA) • Lincoln Neighborhood Center • Mabry Village Apartments • Meals on Wheels • Miccosukee Hill Apartments • Publix Supermarkets (11) • Salvation Army • Senior Companion Program • Simon Scott Senior Center • Smith-William's Service Center • Tallahassee Coalition for the Homeless • Tallahassee Community Hospital • Tallahassee Housing Authority • Tallahassee Memorial Health Care • Tallahassee Senior Center • Tallahassee Senior Coalition on Aging • VISTA

Source: 2002 and 2003 quarterly reports submitted by the Florida Department of Children and Families to the USDA Food and Nutrition Service.

DESIGNING THE DEMONSTRATION

Program Design

The designers of the simplified eligibility program in Florida hoped to increase enrollment of seniors in the FSP. This was viewed as particularly important, since Florida has one of the largest elderly populations in the United States. By making the process as simple as possible and eliminating the requirement to come to the DCF office, program officials hoped that the demonstration would eliminate some of the burden and stigma that seniors often associate with applying for food stamp benefits. The simplified rules applied only to those food stamp households in which all individuals are age 60 or older.

Who Was Involved and How It Unfolded. Florida Impact, a non-profit organization that lobbies members of the Florida Legislature on behalf of low-income populations, served as a community partner for the demonstration. DCF selected this group because it had collaborated on past projects with the agency and was familiar with its programs and operations. Moreover, according to state officials, Florida Impact had earned a reputation of being cooperative and service-oriented toward its clients.

After confirming the support and participation of Florida Impact, state and district level officials from DCF designed the demonstration model, with input from FNS. They spent approximately four months developing policies, procedures, and training materials, which included submitting a waiver request to USDA. They then created a draft version of a simplified application with a larger typeface.

DCF staff presented the scope of the program to supervisors in the local offices relatively late in the process (local office staff were not involved in earlier planning stages). Local supervisors suggested that it be limited to seniors applying for food stamps and not other programs (for example, Medicaid) since these applicants would still need to supply income and expenses documentation for non-FSP benefits. Despite this suggestion, the state still included all income-eligible seniors in the demonstration. Caseworkers reviewed the intake form and suggested that program planners remove unnecessary data fields for the elderly on the application (for example, age of children in household), which they did.

Once the state finalized its contract with Florida Impact, the organization developed outreach materials and Power Point presentations, and had the information cards and posters translated into Spanish. It also began developing text to be used for a radio public service announcements and newspaper advertisements. Finally, state officials trained local DCF staff one week before operations began.

Changes to the Design in Hindsight

After the simplified eligibility program was finished, DCF officials indicated that if they were to replicate it in other parts of Florida or continue its operation in Leon and Gadsden Counties, some adjustments would likely make the demonstration more effective. To begin with, program officials could create an official name for the pilot. In many cases, stakeholders and publicity materials avoided associating “food stamps” with the

demonstration because they worried that some seniors would refuse to apply. As a result, seniors did not know exactly what they were applying for and were confused when they called the local DCF office for more information. The lack of an official name might also explain why some community advocates and service providers seemed to be unfamiliar with the program.

In addition, since public education was a core component, officials thought it would have been useful to try and assess which outreach technique(s) were most effective at informing seniors about the simplified eligibility program. DCF easily could have added a question on the application (for example, *How did you hear about this program?*) and tracked this data, passing on the results to Florida Impact each quarter so that staff could adjust outreach efforts as necessary.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Limited transportation is one factor that may influence elderly participation rates in the FSP. Quincy, which is the town where seniors must apply for DCF social services in Gadsden County, does not have a public transportation system. The only option for residents is a private van service that charges \$5 to \$10 per one-way trip. Stakeholders have heard anecdotal accounts from seniors in both counties who pay friends or relatives \$10 or \$15 to drive them to the local county office to apply for food stamps or to recertify for benefits. Because the demonstration waived all face-to-face management reviews, seniors who encounter transportation barriers might find applying to the FSP under the simplified eligibility program particularly appealing.

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES THAT AROSE

The grantee encountered some challenges in implementing the elderly nutrition demonstration. In particular, communication gaps led to some frustration among local office staff. Also, county workers originally were concerned about how precise the benefit amounts would be if they were based on clients' self reporting, but ultimately this did not prove to be a concern. Likewise, while any senior applying for multiple DCF programs would still need to go through the trouble of supplying caseworkers with paperwork documenting their assets and expenses, this scenario only pertained to a small portion of demonstration clients. Each of these issues is discussed below.

Communication Gaps

Evidence suggests that communication among stakeholders was a problem, despite some efforts to share updated information with everyone. For example, local front-line staff did not know anything about the demonstration until the state received the grant, and some of them were surprised to learn during MPR's second site visit that the program was ending in December 2003. Indeed, some officials speculated that the PSA aired by the demonstration helped to raise awareness about the simplified rules among caseworkers. In addition, local DCF staff reported that they felt disconnected from Florida Impact's

outreach efforts. While this organization was the agency's sole community partner, caseworkers did not have a strong sense of their specific contributions.

However, Florida Impact staff noted in its quarterly reports that it regularly met with supervisors from each participating DCF service site to give updates on outreach activities and determine if staff needed additional application packets, information cards, and posters. The organization also mailed a letter to local staff explaining when the simplified eligibility program would end, but only some staff could recall this in a group interview.

Accuracy of Benefits Data

Initially, local DCF staff expressed reservations about the simplified eligibility model because applicants would not need to provide verification documentation. Caseworkers used existing internal databases to confirm their reported Social Security number, Social Security incomes, and Supplemental Security incomes. On the other hand, staff had to rely on the information provided by seniors regarding their assets and expenses. This raised staff concerns about possibly miscalculating benefit amounts if they could not double check the data given by the seniors. But by the end of the demonstration, DCF staff appeared no longer concerned that this added layer of quality control was waived for the pilot. Caseworkers anecdotally reported that the income data provided on applications matched the amounts recorded in the agency's databases, and reported rents generally coincided with market averages. Moreover, staff believed that the elderly were not likely to misrepresent their household assets and expenses.

Limiting Benefits of Demonstration to FSP-only Applicants

Any income-eligible senior could apply for food stamps using the modified rules under the demonstration. However, if seniors applied for other assistance programs at the same time, such as Medicaid or Supplemental Security Income, they still had to follow routine procedures for those programs. Since applicants would need to provide verification documentation and attend in-person interviews, the overall process of applying for social service programs was not simplified for this subgroup. Still, DCF thinks that only a small percentage of seniors submitted joint applications. Most of them were already enrolled in benefit programs like Social Security.

SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

Florida's demonstration model resulted in two successful outcomes. The streamlining of the FSP application rules helped ease the workload of DCF staff by decreasing the amount of time that caseworkers need to spend on each applicant. The program also appealed to seniors since it made applying for food stamps less burdensome.

Reduced Workload for Caseworkers

One notable outcome of the simplified eligibility program is that caseworkers spent less time reviewing paperwork for new applicants and recertifications. Before operations began,

staff from Leon County spent 90 minutes on average processing an application, while the Gadsden caseworkers spent 75 minutes. When the waivers went into effect, time spent on each case dropped substantially—15 to 20 minutes per application in Leon and 25 minutes in Gadsden. Staff dedicated these time savings to other duties, such as processing non-FSP cases. Upon learning that the demonstration would end in December 2003, several workers expressed concern that their workloads would increase.

Addressed Common Barriers to FSP

Many stakeholders noted that the fundamental structure of the simplified eligibility program directly addressed some common barriers often associated with the elderly in applying to the FSP. Specifically, the demonstration's procedures eliminated much of the paperwork burden and the requirement of traveling to the DCF office for an in-person management review (potentially multiple trips) and for recertification interviews. By avoiding the need to see their caseworkers in person, seniors saved time and transportation costs, and could apply for food stamps from the privacy of their homes.

Figure II.1: Timeline of Outreach Activities for the Florida Simplified Eligibility Demonstration

Written materials	2002												2003											
	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	
Application packets	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*			*	*	*	*	*	*	
Information cards	*	*	*	*	*																	*		
Posters	*	*	*	*	*																			
Transit system ads																								
Multi media																								
Radio PSA			*	*	*																			
Television PSA																								
News articles			*	*	*																			
TV news coverage																								
Press release																								
Networking																								
Presentations and meetings				**				*																
Public events			**																					

Source: 2002 and 2003 quarterly reports submitted by the Florida Department of Children and Families to the USDA Food and Nutrition Services.

*Alachua and Jackson Counties as well. ** Alachua County only.

CHAPTER III

ARIZONA'S FOOD ASSISTANCE AND NUTRITION FOR SENIORS (FANS)

The Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) was one of three grantees that selected an application assistance model to increase elderly participation in the FSP for the elderly nutrition demonstration. Two divisions within DES—the Family Assistance Administration (FAA) and the Aging and Adult Administration (A&A)—designed and implemented the demonstration, known locally as the Food Assistance and Nutrition for Seniors program (FANS). The Arizona Nutrition Network served as the community partner, providing program support and the initiative's nutrition education components. Core services featured peer application assistants (seniors) who prescreened other interested seniors for potential food stamp eligibility and helped them complete the FSP application. FANS application assistants typically met with clients in public locations such as senior centers, food banks, and libraries. Program staff also informed seniors about other social service benefits and resources for which they might be eligible.

OPERATIONAL DETAILS

Mechanics of Services

The FANS demonstration provided one-on-one assistance to elderly FSP applicants. The demonstration was implemented in Pinal and Yavapai Counties, with five local DES offices participating. In the absence of the demonstration, seniors in Arizona can apply to several benefit programs with a single application, and homebound seniors can request a home visit from a caseworker if necessary. Arizona requires that all enrollees be photographed for their EBT card and finger imaged. Under the demonstration, seniors waived out of the eligibility interview and, starting in 2003, they eventually could receive 'an exemption for good cause' from finger imaging. Services available through the demonstration included prescreening and application assistance, helping to collect and submit relevant paperwork, and informing seniors about additional resources.

FSP Characteristics in the Absence of the Demonstration. Arizona uses a combined FAA application which clients apply for food stamps, general assistance, cash assistance, and the state health insurance program. To facilitate completing the form for those who apply for some but not all programs, each field is labeled with a letter corresponding to the relevant program. Applicants need to fill out only those fields that pertain to the program to which they are applying (e.g., *If you want to apply for food stamps, answer all questions identified with the letter “F”*). Applications indicate that language interpreters and staff are available to help seniors fill out the paperwork if needed.

Seniors can obtain an application at the local DES office or request one by mail or fax; they then submit it via proxy, mail, fax, or in person. Caseworkers¹ review the application and call the senior to schedule an appointment, or send a written notice if they cannot be reached by phone. (Same-day eligibility interviews are possible in Arizona, but most applicants must schedule a future visit; in Pinal County, for example, some clients may wait up to three weeks for an interview). If determined eligible for food stamps, seniors are photographed for an EBT card, select and activate a password, and are finger imaged.² Staff estimate that once DES receives an application, the eligibility determination process can take 1 to 15 days, depending on the accuracy and completeness of the submitted documentation.

In the event of a medical condition and/or a severe transportation barrier, seniors can designate a proxy to conduct the interview at the local DES office on their behalf, or request a home visit. Home visits require that homebound applicants have an operating phone line to activate the portable finger-imaging equipment. Alternatively, the senior can choose a proxy to register his or her fingerprints instead; the proxy then is issued an EBT card to purchase groceries on behalf of the client. It is unclear to what extent seniors know about these services or take advantage of them.

The certification period is set by the caseworker at the local office, and all adults must be finger imaged every 12 months as well. DES offers the same flexibility with recertification interviews as it does for first-time applicants. If clients' household characteristics change during the interim period, they must submit a two-page Change Report to the agency, completing information only in the area that the change occurred.

Changes in FSP Policies and Procedures. Several changes went into effect during the FANS demonstration. First, seniors who applied to the FSP did not have to undergo an eligibility interview. Caseworkers determined eligibility solely by reviewing submitted paperwork and clarifying any items through follow-up telephone calls.

¹ In Arizona, caseworkers are known as public service evaluators.

² In January 1998, Arizona implemented a finger-imaging policy to minimize fraud cases. The automated system obtains, transmits, and matches finger images of the right and left index fingers for anyone applying for food stamps or TANF benefits.

Second, in the initial months of the demonstration, seniors had to go to the local DES office to be finger imaged and to activate their passwords and EBT cards. However, due to the recommendation of FANS Project staff and others, an ‘exemption for good cause’ for the finger imaging was obtained for FANS seniors (as well as others) in 2003. Additionally, seniors in the FANS program were exempted from the EBT card photograph. This policy granted DES staff the discretion to waive the requirement that elderly applicants travel to the office. In these cases, a supervisor activated an EBT card and mailed it to the client’s home in a sealed envelope.

To further simplify procedures for seniors, FANS assistants hand-delivered applications to the local DES office on the same day or the next business day. FANS applications were identified with labels so that DES staff knew to flag them in the agency’s database as demonstration clients. With few exceptions (see below), there was usually no further contact between the FANS application assistants and the clients once the paperwork was submitted. Thereafter, caseworkers worked directly with the clients to resolve any issues and request further information.

Most application assistants helped clients who needed to recertify—reminding them of the deadline, helping seniors fill out the forms if needed, and collecting and submitting the paperwork. In addition, a select number of application assistants helped DES caseworkers in the Cottonwood office (Yavapai County) with non-FANS recertification cases, although this was a unique arrangement. The caseworker that most frequently worked with FANS applications sometimes asked certain assistants to call non-FANS elderly clients and review the procedures for recertification with them. From time to time, these application assistants also followed up with first-time FANS applicants (for example, requesting a savings account statement). With walk-in clients, the front desk clerk often determined whether an application assistant was available to help them apply for food stamps.

FANS Service Delivery. The way in which demonstration services unfolded across the two counties varied from region to region. For example, some application assistants chose to work in teams, with one assistant interacting with the client while the other collected and photocopied relevant paperwork. Other FANS staff preferred to work independently. The duration of assistance sessions also fluctuated, depending on factors such as the number of assistants helping the senior, whether the food stamp application was partially completed ahead of time, and whether there was a photocopier on site.³ Still, the overall scope of service delivery remained consistent across sites. Indeed, the project coordinator developed a checklist to help ensure that program staff covered all steps during sessions.

³ Once program staff became familiar with procedures, each session took one hour on average if assistants were working in a team, and if the client was prescreened in advance and brought the appropriate documentation. An average session took one and a half to two hours if the assistant worked alone.

Application assistants delivered services to seniors at a range of outreach sites in public locations across Pinal and Yavapai counties. Senior centers and food assistance organizations were common places where the elderly could access FANS services; other sites included churches, libraries, health departments, and a fire house. For a few towns in Yavapai County, service delivery occasionally took place at the local DES office. Some sites offered private spaces that afforded client confidentiality, such as a conference room or office. At other locations, however, application assistants had to improvise, sometimes setting up a table at one end of a large common area. Table III.1 presents the number of different types of FANS sites that were used over the course of the demonstration.

Table III.1: Types of Fans Outreach Sites in Pinal and Yavapai Counties December 2002 to July 2004

	Pinal County	Yavapai County
Towns targeted for FANS sites	Apache Junction, Casa Grande, Coolidge, Eloy, Florence, Kearny, Mammoth	Clarkdale, Cottonwood, Prescott, Prescott Valley
December 2002 Assistance Sites	5 senior centers, 4 county health departments (Food Plus ^a sites), 1 library	7 senior centers, 2 Food Plus sites, 1 library, 1 community center, 1 food bank
July 2004 Assistance Sites	9 senior centers, 6 county health departments, 1 food pantry (as of Feb. 2004, 3 senior centers and 1 Food Plus site were no longer active)	10 senior centers, 5 Food Plus sites, 4 senior housing complexes, 3 community centers, 3 food banks/pantries, 2 churches, 1 fire station, 1 library, 1 American Legion, 1 Salvation Army (as of Feb. 2004, all sites were active except for 1 food pantry)

Source: Data collected and provided by the Arizona Department of Economic Security.

^a Food Plus is the state name for the federal Commodity Supplemental Foods Program.

At many sites, FANS staff sought to create a regular presence to promote the demonstration as a known resource in the community. For example, application assistants might go to a specific food bank from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. every first and third Wednesday. In general, scheduled times ranged from four to seven and a half hours, one to three times each month.

Between 5 and 10 percent of FANS clients received services through home visits. Application assistants mentioned this option whenever seniors spoke to program staff about requesting more information or scheduling an interview slot. However, it is unclear whether all FANS assistants consistently offered this service to interested seniors. Several program staff remarked that home visits were an excellent mechanism to address the stigma barrier and reach homebound elderly. For safety reasons, application assistants tended to work in

teams during home visits, and the project coordinator often waited outside in the immediate area so that staff would feel more secure and comfortable.

If a senior expressed interest in FANS at a community outreach event or by calling program staff, an application assistant scheduled a session and informed the client about which types of documentation to bring to the appointment (for example, Social Security disbursements). If there was time, a FANS assistant also prescreened the senior for potential food stamp eligibility—if for example, an individual approached an assistant after a community presentation. Otherwise, they prescreened at the appointment.

While FANS program staff did not determine benefit eligibility, prescreening provided an estimation of an elder's assets and expenses. This prescreening helped eliminate applications where income far exceeded the cutoff limit, thus saving caseworkers the time of processing these applications. Application assistants entered information into a laptop using software similar to the pre-authorization screening software used by DES. Primary fields included the number of household members, earned and unearned income, liquid resources, shelter expenses, and medical expenses. The software ran a calculation, and quickly indicated if the client was likely to be eligible or ineligible. In some cases, even when seniors appeared to not meet the eligibility criteria, FANS staff invited them to apply for food stamps and informed them of other resources not restricted by, especially food assistance. Otherwise, the assistant scheduled a separate appointment to complete an application so that seniors had time to collect appropriate documentation.

During the FANS interview, application assistants completed the entire FSP application for the client, or completed the remaining fields if the client had already begun the application, such as those obtained in advance of an outreach event. FANS assistants went through the application and asked seniors all questions verbatim. Assistants then photocopied the senior's documentation, either using a copier available on site, using a copier at a nearby store or library, or taking the paperwork to the DES office. In cases where the applicant did not bring all required documentation, the FANS assistant completed an Information Request Form that listed which items clients needed to send to DES, explaining that they had 10 business days to submit the documentation. Program staff then reviewed the (1) Application Assistant Guide to verify information such as evidence of past food stamp fraud and supplemental income/expenses, (2) the Medical Assistance Guide to capture all medical expenses, and (3) the DES Change Report, submitted to a caseworker within 10 business days to report changes in household income, expenses, address, household members, or resource and child support payments.

All seniors were asked to sign an information release form to be used in the event that the caseworker needed to request additional information. After the interview was completed, FANS assistants told them about other social services for which they might be eligible, such as alternative food assistance programs like Food Plus. Staff generally did not help seniors complete these forms. Application assistants then discussed accessing EBT benefits and the purpose of Arizona's finger-imaging system. In the first months of the demonstration, seniors had to go to DES to get photographed for an EBT card and to be finger imaged but the finger-imaging requirement was subsequently waived. Finally, staff

distributed (1) a handbook describing DES' programs, (2) a brochure explaining the EBT system, (3) fingerprint imaging information, (4) a recipe book for creating affordable, healthy meals, and (5) other nutrition education materials.

Major Stakeholders and Roles

Arizona's Department of Economic Security (DES) had the primary role in the demonstration, serving as the grantee, providing direct oversight of the application assistants, and conducting public outreach. Program officials from the Family Assistance Administration (FAA) and the Aging and Adult Administration (A&A) took the lead in preparing the USDA grant application. Key policy experts and specialists offered feedback on the demonstration's design and training manual. Representatives from the state training office delivered the training to application assistants. The Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP)—a subdivision of the A&A—provided the initial pool of application assistants. SCSEP administrators screened job applicants and monitored activities on a quarterly basis, such as reviewing timesheets and exploring how participants were progressing.⁴ At the local level, DES managers signed the FANS assistants' timesheets, and caseworkers were available to address any questions or concerns of program staff.

The project coordinator, who was a full-time FAA employee with the Division of Benefits and Medical Eligibility, oversaw the day-to-day operations of the demonstration full time. Since she was based out of the central DES office in Phoenix, she traveled regularly to provide technical assistance and deliver refresher trainings to program staff in Pinal and Yavapai Counties. The coordinator also was in charge of outreach efforts and gave informal updates to the local Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) on the demonstration's progress. The application assistants interacted directly with clients and helped the project coordinator with publicity and outreach efforts.

The Arizona Nutrition Network served as the primary community partner for the demonstration. A state nutritionist with the A&A who was a member of the network supported the project coordinator with outreach and with other tasks as needed. Finally, two local AAAs supplied letters of support for the grant application, suggested and helped confirm FANS sites, and advised program staff on which communities they should concentrate service efforts.

Management Structure and Lines of Authority

As the grantee, DES retained responsibility and decision-making authority on policy issues for the elderly nutrition demonstration. The project coordinator was a full-time agency employee, and members of the planning committee also were DES staff.

⁴ Approximately a year after demonstration operations began, the American Association for Retired Persons assumed responsibility from the National Council of Aging for administering SCSEP in Pinal County.

Means of Communication and Related Issues

Communication among core program staff and stakeholders was effective sometimes and less so at other times. State officials reported that they worked well together during the planning phase, meeting regularly to share ideas and collaborate on program design. The project coordinator spoke to the local AAAs from each county well in advance of the project's implementation to discuss the demonstration's structure. Staff believed that this early communication helped to develop a strong relationship between the application assistants and local senior centers that served as FANS sites. The coordinator also provided the AAAs with regular updates, at first every month and then quarterly, to keep them informed of FANS activities and progress.

Furthermore, certain application assistants worked well with caseworkers to coordinate FANS applications. For example, two assistants in the Cottonwood office in Yavapai County prepared notes to accompany the FSP applications. These notes described assumptions that the assistants made when filling out the paperwork and highlighted specific questions for the caseworkers. There also seemed to be particularly good communication between DES and FANS staff at another office in Yavapai County.

At the same time, communication between FANS workers and program staff in other local DES offices was sometimes challenging. Poor relations probably derived from several issues. Some FANS assistants did not think that they got enough support from caseworkers, although they acknowledged that DES staff were overworked and stressed from burdensome caseloads. Usually there was one designated liaison at each DES office to handle issues surrounding the demonstration, but during hectic times assistants had to work with whomever was available. It also seems that certain local offices did a better job than others of passing on relevant information about program policies to application assistants.

In addition, local office staff felt that they were not included as part of the planning phase, despite several meetings with demonstration staff. Several local office representatives indicated that they were informed by state officials a week or so beforehand to expect FANS assistants to shadow caseworkers. DES staff felt unprepared and did not receive any guidance on how to train and monitor application assistants. While the project coordinator indicated she made efforts to keep office managers aware of the demonstration during the design phase, it was clear that this information was not well known by many staff in several offices.

Training

A trainer from the DES central office designed and led the initial training for application assistants. The three-day training took place in Phoenix the summer before implementation began; six assistants attended. The training covered program rules and procedures, protocols for dealing with clients, and lessons on using technology (prescreening software and finger-imaging devices). Any application assistants that were hired after operations began were trained by the project coordinator, who reported that she trained nine assistants over the course of the demonstration. In addition, the state nutritionist delivered a two-hour session on strategies to promote healthy eating among the elderly. She discussed

dietary guidelines, food safety, food borne illnesses, and a recipe book for affordable, nutritious meals.

To supplement the three-day training and to become familiar with the FSP's structure, FANS assistants informally observed DES caseworkers process applications. (Program planners intended for this shadowing to last 20 to 40 hours, but often it only lasted for a few hours.) In addition, the project coordinator accompanied FANS assistants for their first field assignment, both for their first application assistance session at a FANS site and their first home visit. She was available for technical assistance at any time, either in person or, more frequently, by cell phone. Approximately half a dozen intermittent refresher trainings were scheduled to reemphasize important elements of the FANS process, such as reviewing financial and non-financial verification paperwork.

Outreach Strategies

Publicity and community outreach were important components of the FANS program, especially because the service area covered two relatively large, rural counties. Program staff utilized various strategies to educate seniors about the program, including posters, community presentations, and referrals from local organizations.

Core Themes and Target Audiences. To combat the stigma that many seniors associate with the FSP, staff stressed nutrition education and maximizing one's food budget, instead of referring to food stamps, public assistance, or DES. The project coordinator emphasized that participating in the demonstration would help the local economy by getting seniors to patronize local grocery stores. She also tried to debunk FSP myths (for example, that enrolling in the program would cause seniors to lose their state-sponsored prescription drug coverage).

For the first several months of the demonstration, FANS staff concentrated outreach in areas with higher population densities. However, outreach in the outlying parts of the counties was very limited or even non-existent. Many residents were geographically isolated, and there were not many public spaces or service providers—government or non-profit—through which staff could reach potential clients, such as by displaying publicity materials or organizing a group presentation. As the demonstration progressed, outreach was expanded to the more rural areas (although outreach efforts in Pinal County always lagged behind activities in Yavapai County). By March 2003, program staff had covered all regions in Yavapai to some degree, whereas there were still some parts of Pinal that needed coverage.

Networking. Program staff 'tabled' (set up a table to pass out materials and talk to interested seniors about FANS) at different community events over the two-year period. They frequently used a colorful display from the Arizona Nutrition Network to attract interest and downplay the public assistance component. Application assistants also distributed sign-up sheets at various FANS sites—usually senior centers and Food Plus sites—to reach potential clients and encourage them to apply for food assistance benefits. They described the demonstration's services and also prescreened for potential FSP

eligibility if anyone expressed interest. Otherwise, seniors scheduled appointments with DES staff.

In addition, the project coordinator delivered a number of community presentations. The Central Office Trainer developed a FANS Project Power Point presentation that the project coordinator used with groups; she also spoke one-on-one with community representatives. Occasionally, the state nutritionist accompanied her and spoke about good nutrition, such as the importance of fresh produce in seniors' diets. By July 2003, the coordinator had delivered 31 talks in Pinal County and 27 talks in Yavapai County at such diverse venues as senior fairs, hunger council meetings, county human services meetings, county advisory meetings, hospitals, senior centers, health fairs, churches, child care conferences, senior housing complexes, Senior Companions/Foster Grandparents, and the Council for Senior Citizens.

Community Collaborations. FANS worked with several local organizations to help educate seniors about the demonstration, although according to the project coordinator, FANS staff recruited more seniors from Food Plus distribution sites and food banks than from senior centers and other locations. Examples of collaborations included:

- Catholic Social Services in Yavapai County was an official FANS site; their staff talked to clients about the program and informed them when application assistants were next scheduled to be on site.
- A handful of senior centers that hosted FANS staff were fairly active in the demonstration. At one senior center in Yavapai County, the director approached seniors to see if they would be interested in getting food assistance, concentrating first on her Title V recipients (i.e., SCSEP participants) and then on those who participated in the congregate meals program and Meals on Wheels.
- Another senior center director in Yavapai collected the name and phone number of any senior who expressed interest in receiving information on a day when an application assistant was not on site. She immediately called the FANS assistant with the information, who then contacted the senior to set up an appointment.
- Staff from the Central Arizona Food Bank and Food Plus sites actively referred clients to FANS staff, who came during regularly scheduled times each month.
- Program staff partnered with the Community Action Human Resources Association (CAHRA) beginning in March 2003. Application assistants joined CAHRA at senior centers and housing complexes in Pinal County during their review interviews for utility assistance.

To reach homebound clients, at least one application assistant from Pinal County accompanied the Meals on Wheels driver on delivery routes to say a few sentences to seniors

about the demonstration and pass out flyers. Due to liability concerns, program staff in Yavapai instead asked the Meals on Wheels driver to distribute flyers and notify seniors that a FANS assistant would call to see if they were interested in receiving more information.

Written Materials. To advertise the demonstration, application assistants hung posters in various locations that the elderly were likely to frequent, such as senior centers, grocery stores, post offices, libraries, Food Plus distribution sites, and farmer's markets. Posters displayed the cell phone number of the application assistant(s) who served that community; some listed the times and locations of the regularly scheduled peer assistance sessions, and indicated that home visits were available. The project coordinator also developed information packets that she mailed to several local organizations, in which she offered to come and speak to the service providers or their clients.

Additionally, the project coordinator arranged several targeted mailings. In 2003, FANS flyers were placed into Meals on Wheels packages in both counties, distributed to home health aides in Coolidge (Pinal County), and inserted into water bills in Yavapai County. The program concentrated on the faith-based community, sending information packets to churches and faith-based groups in both counties within the first several months of the year. The coordinator again distributed materials in the summer of 2003, but only to churches that also participated in the Food Share program.

Multi Media. A brief description of FANS appeared in the community calendars of local newspapers throughout the demonstration. Short articles appeared in senior center newsletters, the Community Housing Authority's newsletters, and church bulletins. Furthermore, write-ups appeared in the Pinal County Network News, an information-sharing resource for non-profit service providers and advocacy groups. In the summer of 2003, the central DES office in Phoenix developed and distributed a press release to 17 local newspapers across the service area.

The demonstration also received exposure on cable television. One station in Camp Verde (Yavapai County) ran two segments on the program, first in January 2003 and again later that year. A featured story was broadcast statewide through the Arizona Nutrition Network during the spring of 2003. Finally, an application assistant from the Cottonwood/Camp Verde area (Yavapai County) appeared on a cable show with a state Food Plus official to talk about various food assistance programs available for seniors.

Perceived Impact of Outreach. Because participation rates in Pinal County consistently lagged behind Yavapai County, evaluators wanted to explore if outreach activities were visible in both regions. Early on, stakeholders agreed that publicity was stronger in Yavapai County. Staff in Pinal County never extended publicity into the outlying service areas of that county. There was also little to no outreach in the towns of Kearny and Mammoth because application assistant positions were never filled there for very long. However, program staff consistently pursued outreach in Yavapai County from the beginning and throughout the demonstration.

Despite outreach efforts by project staff to community-based organizations (CBOs), when evaluators contacted CBOs in both counties, it seemed that word of the

demonstration was not reaching many organizations, especially in Pinal County.⁵ Three Pinal County CBOs and one in Yavapai County had never heard of FANS, while two other groups (one in each county) vaguely recalled being contacted by program staff the previous year. A food pantry coordinator in Chino Valley (Yavapai County) was surprised that she had not heard of FANS since she had been actively involved with Food Plus for years. Only one organization in Yavapai had seen flyers in the community; this also was the only organization in this small sample that did cross referrals to the program. Five representatives expressed an interest in partnering with the initiative; the other one did not because, according to the director, all elderly residents at that senior housing complex were already familiar with the FSP.

Staffing Turnover and Shortages

The project coordinator struggled with turnover and vacancies among FANS assistants, particularly in Pinal County. Each county had five funded application assistant slots. During the course of the demonstration, she hired eight assistants who either left the program or did not start. Some positions were filled and were then vacated due to such causes as death or serious illness. Some application assistants left for other reasons, including (1) moving out of state, (2) wanting to spend more time with family, (3) too much stress and responsibility along with another part-time job, (4) not a good fit with their skills and personality, and (5) termination for using a state cell phone for personal calls.

Slots in the Kearny/Mammoth area of Pinal County were never filled for any significant amount of time. The coordinator filled two positions in June 2003, but one of the workers quit by July. As a solution, two application assistants from Yavapai County incorporated the region covered by that worker into their outreach schedules and traveled there once or twice a month. Finally, one application assistant in Yavapai County resigned in July 2004 to pursue another professional opportunity. Because there were only six months left in the demonstration and the remaining FANS assistant for that DES office was experienced, the project coordinator agreed to allow her to handle that region alone without searching for a replacement.

Soon after the demonstration started, DES began to experience staff shortages when caseworkers—who traditionally handled food stamp and TANF applicants—assumed responsibility for county medical services without any new added staff to counterbalance the rise in cases. An early 2002 state report indicated that it took 16.9 caseworkers in Yavapai County to manage the monthly caseloads, but by November there were only 8 caseworkers. Pinal County staff reported a similar trend. A state hiring freeze exacerbated this shift in case management. It was lifted in July 2003, but supervisors reported needing several months to catch up on back-logged FSP applications.

⁵ Interviews were conducted with organizations identified by America's Second Harvest affiliates in Arizona; phone interviews took place in February 2004.

Major Operational Changes During the Demonstration

A handful of changes took place in the overall scope of the demonstration, many of which involved dropping a service or strategy from the design initially envisioned, due to implementation obstacles. Specifically, staff did not use portable finger-imaging and EBT equipment, prepare applications electronically, set up satellite stations, or show an EBT video during peer assistance sessions. On the other hand, during the second year, program staff did conduct a special series of community presentations to promote the \$60 per month in average food stamp benefits for which FANS clients qualified.

Limited Use of Technical Equipment. The planning committee intended application assistants to carry portable EBT and finger-imaging equipment with them so that they could process EBT cards and fingerprints on site. This approach would have saved a trip to DES for those seniors who did not qualify for a home visit from a caseworker. However, the project coordinator abandoned this arrangement for several reasons. To begin with, the equipment was too heavy and cumbersome to carry. Second, some FANS sites did not have a direct fax or phone line to use with the equipment. Finally, some assistants struggled with technology during the EBT training and would likely have had trouble operating the equipment. Instead, through recommendations from the FANS project and others, DES/FAA finger-imaging policy changed to allow ‘exemption for good cause’ from the state for those seniors for whom traveling to DES proved too burdensome. In these cases, the local supervisor activated and mailed an EBT card to the client at home.

Elimination of Plan to Electronically Prepare Applications. Program officials originally wanted FANS assistants to fill out food stamp applications electronically on laptops, print out the applications, and submit them to the local DES office. However, staff found carrying the printers to various sites to be cumbersome and had technical difficulties downloading the applications, so it seemed easier to limit the laptops to prescreening for potential FSP benefit eligibility.

Satellite Offices. Initially, program planners wanted application assistants to set up computer stations and phone lines at each site. Such an arrangement would have enabled them to communicate directly with DES with questions and to send applications electronically or by fax. Essentially, this would have created satellite DES stations. However, demand for FANS services was never high enough to justify setting up a quasi-permanent site. Instead, staff used their cell phones to contact a caseworker if needed.

EBT Video. The project coordinator intended for application assistants to show the video that explained EBT cards at FANS sites, but a confidential space to screen the video usually was not available.

Targeted Community Presentations. At the suggestion of the FNS project officer, the coordinator and state nutritionist delivered a series of 20 specialized joint presentations throughout the summer of 2003 to emphasize that demonstration clients were receiving an average of \$60 in food stamp benefits. Moreover, they also addressed food safety issues and attempted to dispel myths associated with the FSP. Staff distributed a DES brochure listing community and state resources, and the Arizona Nutrition Network donated insulated lunch

bags that seniors could use to transport cold snacks and medications. Application assistants accompanied them to conduct prescreening, although very few seniors took advantage of this service. (The coordinator thought that attendees were too embarrassed to apply in front of their peers.) On average, 25 to 30 participants attended each presentation, which usually took place at senior centers.

DESIGNING THE DEMONSTRATION

Program Design

The primary goals of the FANS program were to (1) provide FSP information in public spaces frequented by seniors, (2) provide prescreening and application assistance in non-traditional locations, and (3) promote healthy habits using nutrition education materials. With input from community organizations and service providers, the Arizona DES aimed to implement a program that would encourage seniors to apply for food stamps. All stakeholders involved in the design considered peer assistance in non-traditional locations to be a strength of the demonstration.

Who Was Involved and How It Unfolded. DES selected Pinal and Yavapai counties as pilot sites due to their (1) low elderly FSP participation rates, (2) sizable number of senior residents, many of whom lived in rural areas, and (3) proximity to Maricopa County, where the central DES office and project coordinator were located.

Within DES, representatives from FAA and A&A formed a planning committee to develop a work plan and spearhead program development. Members included the project coordinator, an A&A staff nutritionist, two SCSEP managers,⁶ and a DES program specialist who also was a former food stamp manager. The nutritionist and former food stamp case manager from FAA gave input and suggestions for the design. The nutritionist advocated using SCSEP participants to serve as application assistants and in incorporating nutrition education into the demonstration's mission. The former case manager reviewed procedures to ensure that they would be compatible with local DES offices.

Representatives from the Arizona Nutrition Network—of which the state nutritionist was a member—wrote letters of support and reviewed the grant to ensure that it appropriately highlighted a nutritional component. The Association of Arizona Food Banks also wrote letters of support, as did the local AAAs. The project coordinator also asked AAA directors to suggest outreach sites (for example, senior centers and libraries) and geographic areas in which initial outreach efforts should be concentrated. After consulting with the planning committee, the coordinator confirmed the first FANS sites. The DES/FAA trainer developed the training curriculum and manual. Public Service Evaluators from Pinal County role-played the sessions to test the effectiveness of the exercises.

⁶ At that time, SCSEP was under the National Council of Aging in Pinal County and under the Department of Labor in Yavapai County.

Changes to the Design in Hindsight

Different outreach activities might have helped bolster FSP participation rates in certain areas. Having more bilingual application assistants in Pinal County⁷ to reach the Spanish-speaking population might have encouraged more seniors to apply for food stamps, particularly since approximately 20 percent of residents speak Spanish (one bilingual assistant worked for FANS for one year of the demonstration). One senior center director suggested that program staff should have utilized certain outreach strategies earlier on, such as proactively advertising the option of application assistance from staff during home visits to Meal on Wheels clients in both counties. Staff also could have distributed materials to all SCSEP workers within the service area; this would have helped them spread the word about the demonstration and they could have applied to the program themselves. Since many FANS staff described the stigma that seniors often feel towards public assistance, providing a box into which they could place their name and phone number instead of having to use an openly-visible signup sheet, might have created a more comfortable way to seek help.

Furthermore, the project coordinator discovered that the effectiveness of different application assistants varied considerably. It might have been useful to institute a quality control process for new applicants and have a probation period to determine whether an individual was appropriate for delivering FANS services. A written job description with a subsequent performance review would have helped inform this process.⁸

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Unique Community Characteristics

The most striking regional characteristic that could have affected elderly enrollment in the FSP during the FANS demonstration was the substantial size of this primarily rural service area. Pinal County covers 5,371 square miles and Yavapai County extends over 8,125 miles. The Phoenix-based project coordinator, who oversaw all application assistants and outreach, estimated that she drove approximately 1,500 miles every two weeks.

An illustration of the vast distances faced by seniors living in outlying towns offers insight into the particular challenges with which program staff dealt. The nearest DES office from Black Canyon City is located 50 miles away; this translates to a 100-mile round trip for seniors. Many residents either could not get someone to drive them to an appointment with a caseworker or could not afford the gas to drive that far. Some communities were

⁷ The project coordinator had difficulty finding appropriate candidates for positions in Pinal County, regardless of their language abilities.

⁸ SCSEP uses a 90-day review process in which a program administrator speaks to the manager in charge (in this case, the FANS project coordinator) to get a sense of how things are progressing. However, this is an informal process that does not rely on clearly-defined outcomes to measure work performance.

unincorporated and had minimal to no public services and spaces, such as senior centers and libraries. Consequently, it was difficult for FANS assistants to reach these residents. Public transportation did not exist except in larger towns, and even those routes and hours of operations were limited. While it is true that DES offered home visits for those applicants who could demonstrate a considerable transportation challenge, it is unclear to what extent seniors knew about the availability of this service.

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES THAT AROSE

The FANS demonstration encountered several complications. First, the project coordinator could not fill two of the vacancies in Pinal County, reducing the program's reach to seniors in that county. Also, some program staff seemed to be less motivated than others and less suited to delivering services to seniors. In addition, the vast number of square miles that FANS covered made staff management and outreach to the elderly population, especially those who lived in more rurally-isolated areas, challenging. Finally, program staff reported logistical problems, including delays with the equipment and inadequate privacy for some application assistance sessions.

Hiring and Retaining Staff

The project coordinator struggled with hiring and retaining application assistants, especially in Pinal County. In fact, implementation in both counties was delayed by three months because it took longer to fill some positions. Even after the demonstration began, staff shortages affected service capacity and enrollment rates in Pinal remained lower than in Yavapai County.

Evaluators spoke to an AAA director and two senior center directors to get their perspectives on why it was difficult to fill vacant positions. They suggested that some seniors (1) worried that they would lose some or all of their public assistance benefits if they worked, (2) were anxious about using computers, and (3) were apprehensive about SCSEP jobs with such responsibilities as dealing with paperwork and interacting with clients. While these theories are interesting, they do not shed light as to why it was particularly difficult to find qualified application assistants in Pinal County.

Skill Levels of FANS Application Assistants

DES caseworkers were divided in their views of the FANS assistants' skill levels. When local offices initially learned of the demonstration, they had doubts about the reliability and capabilities of senior SCSEP workers to accurately process food stamp applications. They acknowledged that program staff seemed to receive a good introduction to the FSP and praised the three-day training. However, they maintained that there were too many policy and procedural details to remember from such a brief training session, particularly for an age group traditionally prone to retention difficulties and possibly less comfortable using computers. New DES caseworkers undergo six weeks of on-the-job training, along with careful oversight by supervisors for several months.

Initially, the denial rate for FANS applications was high (45 percent). After prescreening equipment arrived in late November 2002, the approval rates improved. Still, caseworkers reported that applications often contained errors and/or lacked certain required paperwork.⁹ Some of them thought that the demonstration generated more work when they could have spent more time addressing their own backlogged cases. For example, one caseworker from Pinal County said she would always redo the FANS applications because she believed that was more efficient than trying to fix the original applications.¹⁰

It seems that certain personalities might be better suited for the tasks of an application assistant. For example, an extrovert may be more willing to try innovative ways to conduct outreach and publicity. It also became clear that at least one FANS assistant made little attempt to conduct outreach. This application assistant elected to remain at the DES office once a week to do general clerical tasks unrelated to the demonstration, did not put in much effort at creating a presence at other community locations, and disliked driving.

At the same time, some FANS assistants implemented the program well and had good relations with DES. Two assistants at one office in Yavapai County demonstrated that they worked well with clients, submitted appropriate, accurate paperwork, and regularly tried to raise the level of FSP awareness among the elderly. Their performance prompted a caseworker to give them extra case management responsibilities, such as following up with FANS clients once they submitted an application and processing recertifications for non-FANS clients. Similarly, two other assistants cultivated good working relationships with caseworkers, responding quickly to constructive criticism from DES staff and mastering the FANS protocol. These examples demonstrate how effectively procedures could unfold with appropriate staff.

Since SCSEP was run through different local non-profit organizations in Yavapai and Pinal counties, MPR evaluation staff interviewed representatives of both organizations to identify relevant differences. The interviews were inconclusive. No obvious relevant differences were identified, but since the interviews took place after the hiring was done, a full assessment was not possible.

Managing a Large Service Area

Given the vast distances from the central office in Phoenix to various parts of Pinal and Yavapai counties, it was difficult for the project coordinator to provide extensive oversight of her staff, as well as for them to drive the extent that was needed to effectively create a

⁹ It is uncertain if missing documentation was due to the fact that clients still needed to submit it, or if FANS assistants neglected to request it.

¹⁰ Researchers do not think that the number of FANS applications were overly burdensome. Caseworkers who mentioned high error rates also had very few demonstration applicants coming in. In addition, they saved time by not having to do eligibility interviews for FANS applicants.

regular presence in large rural areas. Program staff also reported difficulty conducting outreach in outlying parts of the counties, particularly in unincorporated areas or when seniors were homebound or did not own phones.¹¹ Moreover, because the coordinator could not directly manage assistants on a day-to-day basis, she arranged for local DES managers to sign their time sheets. Some managers were uncomfortable about approving the recorded hours since application assistants spent a considerable amount of time off site.

Using Electronic Equipment

Program staff encountered several problems with laptops, finger-imaging machines, and EBT equipment. First, the laptops were not delivered until four months after the demonstration began, and a refresher course was needed. Application assistants did not incorporate prescreening into help sessions during these four months because it was too difficult and time consuming for many assistants to do calculations by hand. Consequently, DES caseworkers denied a sizeable proportion of FANS applicants who were income ineligible.

Second, by December 2003 the finger-imaging equipment was available only to a few application assistants. The project coordinator eventually decided not to use the equipment due to an insufficient number of machines and because they were heavy and cumbersome for staff to transport. Instead, she obtained an exemption for good cause so that FANS participants did not need to have their fingerprints collected for DES files.

Privacy for Application Assistance Sessions

Some application assistants observed that the places available for application assistance sessions did not offer an environment that was conducive to confidential conversations. Staff at some FANS sites sensed that seniors were sometimes uncomfortable applying for food stamps and sharing personal information in front of friends and acquaintances. Moreover, they speculated that some seniors did not even bother applying through FANS due to this lack of privacy.

Impacts on FSP Participation Rates in Pinal County

While the FANS demonstration resulted in a relatively large net impact on elderly FSP participation rates as compared with the three comparison counties, enrollment was much lower in Pinal County than in Yavapai County. In fact, participation rates in Pinal County were slightly lower (31.6 percent) than trends in the comparison counties (34.0 percent). Table III.2 compares the number of seniors applying for food stamps through the demonstration in both counties.

¹¹ Unlike in Maine, FANS assistants did not do door-to-door canvassing, a strategy that would have been quite difficult in these rural communities.

Table III.2: Number of Applications Submitted Through Fans September 2002 to March 2004

	Sept to Dec 2002	Jan to Mar 2003	Apr to Jun 2003	Jul to Sep 2003	Oct to Dec 2003	Jan to Mar 2004	Total
Yavapai County							
Total applications	145	87	56	94	81	116	579
Pinal County							
Total applications	40	20	14	23	21	18	136

Source: 2002-2004 quarterly reports submitted by the Arizona Department of Economic Security to the USDA Food and Nutrition Service.

There was an increase in outreach efforts in Pinal County, particularly after the first several months, but these activities did not bring enrollment closer to the number of applicants in Yavapai County. One DES manager even blocked off a regular time slot on Fridays, during which time caseworkers would only process FANS applications. However, the demand for staff time was not evident and she eliminated the time slot. During the second MPR site visit, one caseworker in Pinal recalled only a few FANS applications coming through her office in the previous month.

Evaluators speculated that some variation in participation rates between the counties was due to staffing issues in Pinal County. Demonstration procedures were more or less the same in both areas, but vacant positions and somewhat less motivated staff may help explain the divergent rates.

SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

Despite several challenges, the FANS demonstration generated several successful outcomes. Application assistants assumed much of the burden for seniors in applying to the FSP and helped link them to other community resources. The initiative also eliminated the eligibility interview for applicants, which saved caseworkers time and enabled seniors to receive food stamp benefits sooner.

Navigating Paperwork and Peer Support

Many stakeholders liked the peer application assistance model. In their opinion, working with peer assistants appealed to seniors who felt stigmatized or intimidated about going to the local DES office and applying for food stamps. Moreover, seniors were grateful

that ‘someone like them’ handled the paperwork in a non-threatening and supportive environment. One service provider applauded the demonstration, remarking that “the agency [DES] came to the people.” In a customer service survey administered by DES to clients from July 2002 to September 2003, the vast majority of respondents (25 out of 26 total) reported that application assistants patiently explained procedures, answered their questions, and demonstrated courtesy and respect. Seniors also indicated a preference for working with a FANS assistant rather than a caseworker and praised the program overall.

Higher FSP Benefits

As was the case in Maine, there seems to be anecdotal evidence that application assistants helped seniors to better document their household expenses. Capturing all costs (for example, medical visits and prescriptions) as accurately as possible potentially enabled more seniors to qualify for the FSP and receive higher benefit levels.

FANS Saved Time for DES Caseworkers

Under the demonstration’s protocols, eligibility interviews were waived for seniors who applied through FANS, saving caseworkers an estimated average of 10 to 15 minutes per applicant (estimated savings in some Yavapai County offices were higher). For example, in one office, application assistants were able to follow up on those applying through the demonstration, and sometimes handled non-FANS clients who needed to be recertified. Given staff shortages and higher caseloads throughout the agency, caseworkers said they appreciated that application assistants helped alleviate their case burden. DES staff from another Yavapai office reported that FANS applications were usually ready to be entered into the database, or simply needed to be placed on hold until outstanding verification paperwork arrived. Follow-up calls to clarify information or ask for additional paperwork were the exception rather than the rule at this office.

Faster Access Than Non-FANS Clients

Because the implementation of the elderly nutrition demonstration coincided with a state hiring freeze and higher caseloads, FANS applicants seemed to enroll in the FSP faster and received benefits sooner than if they had applied on their own—most likely because they did not have to wait for the next available eligibility interview appointment. In certain regions, caseworkers estimated that, with the exception of expedited cases, non-demonstration applicants waited three weeks to two months for their food stamp benefits to be activated.

CHAPTER IV

MAINE'S FOOD ASSISTANCE CONNECTING ELIGIBLE SENIORS (FACES)

The Maine Department of Human Services (DHS)¹ was one of three grantees that selected an application assistance model for the FSP elderly nutrition demonstration. Partnering with a non-profit community action agency and a state university, DHS designed an initiative known locally as the Food Assistance Connecting Eligible Seniors program (FACES). Application assistants guided senior clients through the process of applying for food stamps, usually in the privacy of their homes. (One advantage of the program was that the assistants also were seniors and thus were in the clients' peer group.) By filling out food stamp applications, gathering the necessary paperwork that DHS caseworkers needed to determine eligibility, and submitting the documentation, FACES application assistants also helped seniors apply for other social service benefits for which they were possibly eligible, such as the state's Medicare buy-in program or utility assistance. In this way, the FACES program explicitly tried to encourage FSP participation by informally linking the program with other assistance programs.

OPERATIONAL DETAILS

Mechanics of Services

FSP services in Waldo County are characterized by the rural nature of the county. One DHS office in the adjacent county serves a four-county area. That office is located 30 miles from Belfast, Waldo's county seat, and up to 75 miles from the outlying rural areas of Waldo County. Under the demonstration, FACES staff provided application assistance, gathering and submitting relevant paperwork, linking seniors with additional resources, and

¹ Since the project ended, the Maine Department of Human Services has merged with another department and is now known as the Maine Department of Health and Human Services.

performing follow-up activities. Application assistants sometimes helped caseworkers with coordinating recertifications and issuing new EBT cards.

FSP Characteristics in the Absence of the Demonstration. During the past few years, Maine has attempted to simplify procedures for applying to the FSP. Since July 2001, specialized caseworkers have assumed responsibility for handling food stamps, Medicare/Medicaid, and TANF to streamline the application process for those seeking multiple benefits. DHS also designed a shorter food stamp application with larger print and waived the face-to-face eligibility interview for seniors.

Food stamp applications are available at the DHS office, as well as at hospitals, doctor's offices, and local Area Agency on Aging (AAA) offices. Clients also can request applications by telephone. Seniors typically submit applications by mail, through a proxy representative, or in person. After the initial processing of the application, caseworkers call the client to notify them of any outstanding paperwork (e.g., prescription receipts) and schedule an eligibility interview. Staff use DHS databases to confirm Social Security and Supplemental Security income, and most interviews last 10 to 15 minutes. About one-fifth of all enrollees apply on a walk-in basis, frequently meeting with a caseworker that same day.

To reduce the burden for seniors, Maine's recertification process is simplified. Elderly households with stable earned income must recertify once every 12 months. The period is once every 24 months if they have no earned income. Clients answer a series of questions either in writing or during a telephone interview with a caseworker, and then sign and return a form to the Rockland office.

Changes in FSP Policies and Procedures. The demonstration resulted in several changes to food stamp policies and procedures, but none that created a significant amount of additional work for DHS staff. Instead, FACES shifted many responsibilities associated with these incoming clients away from the caseworkers.

Application assistants took the lead in preparing FSP applications and collecting necessary paperwork during individualized sessions. Importantly, they also informed seniors about various community-based resources and benefits for which they might be eligible. First-time eligibility interviews were waived, and questions or concerns from the Rockland office frequently were resolved by FACES staff rather than by caseworkers contacting the seniors directly. Benefits were retroactive to the date that clients signed the application, as opposed to when the application arrived at DHS. This policy ensured that clients were not penalized for using application assistants as opposed to submitting the application in person, and it gained two to three days of benefits for individuals who would have mailed their applications had they not worked with the application assistants.

In addition, program staff began helping caseworkers with recertification about a year after operations began. Every six months, DHS forwarded a list of FACES clients whose recertification dates were approaching. Application assistants then called these seniors to remind them to sign and return the recertification form when it arrived in the mail from DHS. If a caseworker encountered a senior who had not mailed back the signed form—perhaps because they were confused by the paperwork—they occasionally asked an

application assistant to contact the client, arrange for a home visit to collect the form, and mail it to DHS.

When the state transitioned to an EBT system instead of traditional food stamps, clients' accounts would be deactivated if they did not use their EBT card for three consecutive months. Instead of closing such cases, DHS enlisted FACES staff to call these seniors and try to resolve any problems. For example, some EBT cards did not seem to be working properly, so for these cases, an application assistant reordered a new card and accompanied the senior when they used it for the first time.

FACES Service Delivery. In keeping with the underlying philosophy of facilitating the application process in the application assistance model, FACES staff delivered services wherever it was most convenient for clients. The easier that they made it to apply for food stamps, the more likely the elderly would do so. Application assistants typically worked with seniors in their homes, which offered optimal privacy. Sessions also took place in public spaces such as local senior centers. One assistant even reviewed paperwork with a client in his car.

Most sessions were comprised of two phases: the initial visit, and any follow-up activities. The initial home visit lasted approximately one to two and a half hours. Before services could be implemented, the application assistant had to obtain the person's trust. Staff wore jackets with the program's logo to give their task legitimacy, introduced themselves as someone from "Seniors Helping Seniors" to stress that they had come to help, and engaged the client in general conversation, allowing them to guide the discussion. Once the client seemed comfortable, application assistants determined if the applicants wanted to receive food assistance. The term "food stamps" was rarely mentioned, as it could trigger the stigma that the elderly often associate with the welfare system.

If the client expressed interest, the assistant began to record information on the FSP application, constantly stressing the program's confidentiality policy. FACES staff did an informal prescreening to see if the client was likely to be eligible for food stamps. (However, only DHS can determine eligibility.) The senior provided any pertinent documentation such as utility bills and Social Security payment receipts. Next, the application assistant asked if the senior was interested in learning about other benefits. She could either fill out any relevant applications and submit them for the client, or leave blank applications at the home. Benefits might be from DHS (e.g., the state prescription drug program) or from a community-based organization (e.g., the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program).²

² Programs to which seniors could be referred included Medicaid, Medicare buy-in, Maine Care (pharmaceutical program), the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, Meals on Wheels, Farm Share, transportation assistance, Health Watch (medical alert program), the Telephone Lifeline Program (phone bill subsidy), hearing benefits, The Right Information and Direction (or TRIAD, a safety, crime prevention, and victim assistance initiative for seniors), emergency energy assistance, and food pantries.

The FACES program coordinator designed a checklist that assistants used throughout the visit to ensure that nothing was overlooked. A copy, which also included the names and contact information for the FACES office and other benefits programs, was left with the clients.

The second wave of service delivery occurred after the home visit. If needed, application assistants collected any outstanding paperwork that caseworkers needed to determine benefit levels. For example, they might gather copies of receipts or bills from pharmacies, doctor's offices, or the water company. While this could entail a few hours of tracking down information, it was a critical step. Not only did it eliminate the burden to clients of obtaining this paperwork, but accurately documenting all expenses—particularly medical expenses—could, in some cases, significantly increase a person's food stamp benefit amount. Staff photocopied these materials at the FACES office and returned the original documents either in person or by mail. The program coordinator carefully reviewed each application for accuracy and resolved any issues with the application assistant or with the client by telephone. She then faxed the application to the Rockland DHS office and mailed the hard copy with supporting documentation.

Application assistants performed follow-up service activities as well. In some instances, they delivered fresh produce donated from the Farm Share program, ran errands such as picking up a prescription, or ensured that seniors could access emergency food assistance until their FSP benefits became activated. During the first year, FACES staff commonly called or visited each senior at least once each month, often developing a strong rapport with their clients.

Major Stakeholders and Roles

Three primary entities played important roles throughout the demonstration: the Maine Department of Human Services (DHS), the Waldo County Committee for Social Action (WCCSA), and the Institute for Public Sector Innovation at the Muskie School for Public Service at the University of Southern Maine. All three organizations provided expertise and guidance in the program's design, and the WCCSA delivered direct services to participating seniors.

Representatives from two divisions within DHS, the Bureau of Family Independence (BFI) and the Bureau of Elder and Adult Services (BEAS), conceptualized the overall structure of the FACES program. To supply peer application assistants, state officials turned to the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) within BEAS. This national program offers income-qualifying seniors the opportunity to secure part-time employment and learn new job skills. Caseworkers with the DHS Rockland office coordinated the receipt and processing of applications with FACES staff.

The WCCSA housed the demonstration's core program staff. A full-time coordinator oversaw the day-to-day operations of the FACES program and took ultimate responsibility for quality control. She mentored and supervised the application assistants, provided ongoing technical assistance, and reviewed all case files before submitting them to DHS.

The program coordinator was also in charge of outreach and community education and sometimes delivered fresh produce to new clients from Farm Share. Three part-time application assistants interacted most directly with clients. They helped seniors apply for food stamps and conducted follow-up activities, linked clients to other social service programs and community resources, and contributed to outreach efforts.

Staff from the Muskie School of Public Service in Portland were primarily involved during the planning phase of the demonstration, especially with writing the grant and designing and delivering the initial training for FACES staff. Still, the university continued to play an important advisory role throughout implementation. During the second year, it developed and maintained the FACES website, and delivered a follow-up training.

Management Structure and Lines of Authority

Stakeholders from the primary organizations served on an advisory board that has convened every month since Maine received the USDA grants. Members included the state food stamp director (DHS), the food stamp supervisor in Rockland, the BEAS manager of community programs, the SCSEP manager, the WCCSA transportation director, a manager from the Muskie School, and the FACES program coordinator once she was hired. The group initially met to design the demonstration, and continued to meet to discuss procedural and policy issues, address concerns, and offer guidance to FACES staff. While members arrived at decisions by consensus, the central DHS office in Augusta had ultimate authority over any policy or procedure that affected the FSP. Caseworkers continued to determine eligibility for all food stamp applicants, including FACES clients.

Organizationally, FACES fell under the umbrella of the WCCSA. While the agency's executive director officially supervised the program coordinator, the transportation director served as her de facto supervisor, as he was a member of the advisory board. The transportation director provided space and office supplies to program staff, and also acted as the liaison between FACES and the WCCSA's executive director and board of directors.

Means of Communication and Related Issues

Program officials maintained strong communication throughout the demonstration, which helped facilitate cooperation between FACES and the local DHS office. Scheduling monthly meetings of the advisory board ensured that stakeholders addressed issues and concerns as soon as possible. Both the program coordinator and local supervisor from Rockland served as board members, which enabled those in charge of operations for regular and demonstration FSP applicants to remain in regular contact. The coordinator also made a point of bringing her staff to Rockland to meet the caseworkers. While caseworkers initially were concerned that application assistants would try to determine eligibility, they realized soon after the demonstration began that DHS would retain complete authority over eligibility determination.

For the most part, relations between FACES and the local DHS office ran smoothly, although there was disagreement over who would be best to follow up with clients if a

problem emerged with their applications. Sometimes a caseworker called a FACES worker to obtain additional information or clarification from a senior. In other instances a caseworker preferred contacting the senior directly to save an extra step. For example, a phone call could resolve a discrepancy in household income more quickly than explaining the issue to an application assistant and waiting for her to call back with the information. (At least one caseworker—out of approximately 30—always contacted her clients who enrolled through FACES.) In contrast, the program coordinator insisted that FACES serve as the primary liaison with clients participating in the demonstration. Many seniors refused to deal directly with DHS because they felt more comfortable working with an application assistant. They also preferred to work with one familiar person instead of the Rockland office where cases could transfer between caseworkers, causing confusion as to who was calling them to ask questions.

Furthermore, the two offices criticized each other's productivity and efficiency. A handful of caseworkers reported that FACES staff submitted extraneous paperwork, and applications sometimes contained errors. When pressed, however, they indicated that only a small percentage of applications needed to be revised. Caseworkers also mentioned that FACES staff encouraged seniors to reapply after they had already been found ineligible for food stamps. Yet program staff said they only helped clients reapply if there had been a change in personal circumstances (e.g., if a spouse had died or medical expenses had increased). FACES staff reported that frequently they had difficulty reaching a caseworker when they had a question, and complained that the time it took to process applications increased during the second year.

Training

Many stakeholders agreed that training would be an important ingredient for the demonstration's success. Initial comprehensive training laid a solid foundation for the application assistants, which was complemented by weekly staff meetings, a refresher course, and additional specialized trainings.

Initial Training. The Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine, one of the key community partners, designed and delivered a four-day session for application assistants. It based the comprehensive curriculum handbook (139 pages) on the handbook used to train new DHS caseworkers (also developed by the Muskie School). Topics included the goals of the demonstration, demographic data on Waldo County, an overview of USDA and the FSP, food stamp facts and myths, outreach strategies, EBT cards, confidentiality, and other benefits and community resources available to the elderly. The instructor stressed to the application assistants that they would not determine eligibility for food stamps and should never promise that applicants would qualify or offer an estimated benefit dollar amount. Participants received a field guide listing important points to remember that they could use while delivering services.

Weekly Staff Meetings. Since the initial training covered a lot of material, the program coordinator soon understood that regular reinforcement of the application assistance steps and FSP policies would be essential. Consequently, staff met every Tuesday

morning for three hours. Serving as a mentor for the assistants, the coordinator encouraged them to ask questions, listened to problems that emerged when working with clients, and helped them devise strategies and solutions for resolving issues. The coordinator also routinely reminded staff about certain details, such as the different types of verification paperwork needed. These technical assistance sessions helped the FACES workers build confidence and develop communication skills and professionalism, and imparted basic case management skills, such as getting a general sense of household income and expenses by quickly reviewing a bank statement.

Additional Training. The Muskie School sponsored refresher training in April 2003 that focused on the new EBT system in Maine. This session included hands-on practice with mock point-of-sale (POS) equipment.

The program coordinator also arranged for staff to attend several supplemental training sessions led by community groups. By the second year, application assistants had (1) become certified as Medicare educators, (2) attended a session on the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act as well as one-day sessions at the university's cooperative extension program on topics such as nutrition and diabetes, (3) received training on Alzheimer's disease and the state's new prescription program, (4) attended a county health expo in the fall of 2003 so that they could learn about new community health programs and services to which they could refer FACES clients, and (5) listened to invited guest speakers, such as a food pantry director, talk about topics related to food assistance and the elderly.

In addition, application assistants had the opportunity to engage in activities that would give them new skills they could use after the demonstration ended. With the advisory board's support, after the first year the coordinator set aside one hour each week during which staff could focus on professional development goals. One example included assisting the coordinator with administrative tasks related to FACES so as to learn computer and clerical skills. Some staff elected to spend more time each week on professional development, and also took free enrichment courses at a university branch campus.

Outreach Strategies

To educate potentially eligible seniors about FACES, staff launched a multi-faceted outreach strategy. They initially relied on making cold-call home visits; this was supplemented by written materials, community collaborations, mass media, and networking. Before the demonstration, FSP outreach consisted of a few community-sponsored initiatives. For example, in January 2002 the local AAA ran a public education campaign conveying the message that using food stamps would not make seniors ineligible for Meals on Wheels. The local DHS office had conducted only limited FSP outreach in the previous several years.

Core Themes and Target Audiences. Program staff emphasized three main outreach themes. First, they introduced the demonstration as "Seniors Helping Seniors." The message was easy to comprehend and capitalized on the notion that the elderly were more comfortable dealing with peers as opposed to government workers. Second, they

underscored the importance of being able to “Stretch Your Food Dollars” by participating in the demonstration. They mentioned food stamps as little as possible due to the stigma that the elderly often attach to DHS and public assistance. Third, they spoke about how good nutrition contributes to good health.

In determining how to prioritize which groups FACES would try to reach, staff initially cold-called several hundred seniors who received Social Security and Supplemental Security income but not food stamps, since they would be very likely to be income eligible. Then, the program coordinator began obtaining voter lists from town clerks in the county; this continued throughout the demonstration.³ While some residents would not qualify, these lists provided the most current data by home address and age group. Using this information, application assistants embarked on what many stakeholders likened to a grassroots political campaign, going door-to-door and speaking to seniors one at a time. Once staff targeted these two groups, word-of-mouth became a critical means of attracting interested seniors. The program coordinator estimated that 60 percent of clients came through referrals and 40 percent through canvassing. Referrals became more common during year two as more and more people heard about the program’s services.

Networking. While application assistants reached out to seniors by going door-to-door, the program coordinator frequently met with relevant individuals and organizations that could help spread the word about FACES. Before the demonstration began, she identified potential partners in the community to meet with to promote nutrition education among seniors, including the Maine Nutrition Network, the university’s cooperative extension program, the Salvation Army, Farm Share, the local AAA, sheriff’s offices, and food pantries. Many of these groups, including permanent program staff at the WCCSA, routinely referred seniors to FACES.

The coordinator also spoke to several local legislators so that they would appreciate the importance of the FSP for the low-income elderly population. In addition, she and the application assistants delivered several presentations about FACES, represented the program at community events, and tabled at a range of public sites (e.g., festivals, senior centers, grocery stores). Finally, the program coordinator participated in the Senior Community Coalition, a group of local AAA directors who began convening in 2003 to discuss how best to improve services for seniors.

Community Collaborations. The FACES program teamed up with community groups to promote the demonstration, which helped give it validity and underscored the importance of food assistance benefits for the elderly and those stakeholders concerned with the needs of low-income seniors. Several local partnerships grew out of these networking efforts with non-profits, schools, and service providers:

³ The coordinator contacted 21 out of 26 town offices in Waldo County within the first 12 months.

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- Farmers participating in the Farm Share⁴ program delivered fresh produce to the FACES office on a regular basis, which staff then brought to clients' homes. The produce served as an important food resource until food stamp benefits became activated; it was especially important for diabetic clients. Application assistants also referred their clients to Farm Share directly so that they could contact a local farmer to receive \$100 of fresh produce, or get information about where in the community they could receive produce from a food bank or meal site.
 - FACES and the Young Men's Christian Association co-sponsored a Thanksgiving dinner for all seniors in the community. The YMCA also provided produce to demonstration clients during the growing season.
 - A local middle school selected FACES as its volunteer service project. Students were matched with seniors (clients participating in the demonstration) for regular activities and outings. By the spring of 2003, the program coordinator had matched nine pairs of students and seniors.
 - Another local middle school donated excess produce to FACES from its greenhouse and garden project that supplements the school lunch program.
 - The Maine Nutrition Network helped publicize the FACES program. In exchange, the program coordinator organized focus groups of the elderly on Senior Nutrition Day to collect information on how seniors in Waldo County learn about good nutrition, their eating habits, barriers to accessing fresh produce, etc. The two organizations also co-hosted a workshop on nutrition education and physical activity for seniors.

Written Materials. During the planning phase, the Muskie School of Public Service designed brochures, posters, and flyers that featured the FACES catch phrase "Seniors Helping Seniors." Application assistants distributed these materials to sites that the elderly frequent, such as senior housing complexes, grocery stores, pharmacies, local businesses, medical clinics, town clerk's offices, and food pantries.

Multi Media. To complement the other outreach strategies, the program coordinator attempted to maximize exposure for FACES through the local media markets. She designed a press release and disseminated it to local newspapers within the first phase of operations. Articles then appeared in county newspapers throughout the demonstration. The Muskie

⁴ Senior Farm Share is funded by the USDA Food and Nutrition Services Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. Eligible seniors (those at or below 185 percent of the poverty level) can contract with a local farmer to receive \$100 in fresh produce from farm surpluses each month. Seniors also can obtain fresh produce from local food banks and area agency on aging meal sites.

School produced a public service announcement that was featured during a local television news segment and also ran on television over the initial months. The school also designed and maintained the FACES website (<http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/faces>). The site contained an electronic version of the food stamp application, the PSA video, downloadable publicity materials and training curricula, FSP benefit guidelines, and links to other organizations and service providers for the elderly.

Staffing Turnover and Shortages

There was no turnover of core program staff, although absences became more frequent among the application assistants during the second year, due to illness or injury. One assistant suffered from a chronic, non-fatal illness that caused her to be out of the office for a few months. Another assistant broke her wrist and took a two-week leave. The disruption in services was minimized because the program coordinator filled in as much as possible.

Routine turnover at the Rockland DHS office—mostly from retirements—were minimal. Nevertheless, due to a stagnant economy, there was a statewide increase in agency program enrollments that coincided with a statewide hiring freeze; this combination placed a strain on caseworkers' workloads. In fact, it seems likely that their frustrations may have had more to do with staff shortages and the hiring freeze than with FACES, particularly during year two. During this period, FACES staff reported that it was more difficult to reach caseworkers and get responses to questions. At the same time, DHS staff may have been less patient with occasional errors found in FACES applications and extraneous documentation at a time when they were overwhelmed with higher caseloads.

Major Operational Changes During the Demonstration

A handful of changes took place during the demonstration to improve the quality of FACES services. These changes included instituting the prescreening of applications, scheduling weekly staff meetings, reducing the degree of followup with each individual client, and shifting outreach strategies. In addition, Maine transitioned from a paper-based to an EBT food stamp system.

Prescreening Food Stamp Applicants. Initially, FACES staff did not prescreen interested seniors and the approval rate from DHS was relatively low (approximately 55 percent). Consequently, the program coordinator and the Rockland supervisor developed broad guidelines for application assistants to use when collecting preliminary documentation. For example, they might inform seniors that they would be unlikely to qualify for food stamps if they had \$5,000 in a savings account. Importantly, assistants did not discourage seniors from applying if they preferred to proceed, although this rarely occurred. Once program staff implemented this step, the approval rate increased to about 80 percent within four months.

Weekly Follow-up Training. Soon after the demonstration began, the coordinator detected multiple errors when she reviewed food stamp applications before forwarding them to DHS. She concluded that it would be important to add weekly staff meetings to

incorporate regular reminders and technical assistance into the schedule so that FACES workers could learn and retain appropriate skills.

Reduced follow-up with clients. Originally, application assistants spent a fair amount of time conducting follow-up activities for new clients. While they usually needed two to four total home visits to ensure that a complete application was submitted, and that clients had sufficient alternative food resources, they sometimes would stop by to touch base with seniors to see how they were doing. Developing a good rapport with their clients and incorporating such a personal touch in their service delivery was a wonderful way to reach out to the elderly, particularly in a region where many residents keep to themselves. At the same time, the program coordinator recognized that as caseloads increased, time spent with clients already enrolled in the FSP translated into less time for delivering services and doing outreach to new clients.

As a result, the coordinator encouraged her staff to limit the number of follow-up visits, recognizing that they would still need two to four sessions. To help offset this reduction in follow up, she created a phone tree. Once FSP applications were submitted, the coordinator placed seniors on a six-week call-back list that assistants tracked with a telephone log. If seniors voiced any problems or issues, such as a request for more fresh produce from Farm Share, application assistants would respond. After six weeks, seniors officially rotated off the phone tree, though they could always call the FACES office with questions or concerns.

To supplement the phone tree, in May 2003 the coordinator enlisted a peer volunteer (also a FACES client) to maintain an additional, ongoing phone tree from her home. This mechanism essentially served as a social outlet similar to the house calls that application assistants previously had made. Seniors placed on the phone tree were identified by staff as those with medical conditions, who were shut-ins, or who felt particularly alone or insecure. The coordinator called targeted seniors from the volunteer's home to determine if they wanted someone to call and periodically check on them. If they expressed interest, the coordinator immediately introduced the volunteer over the telephone so that a certain level of trust could begin to develop. The volunteer made 10-minute calls once a week, although she called a few of the seniors who were most in need two or three times a week. She then called the coordinator each week to report on the previous week's telephone sessions to make sure that no issues had emerged. If FACES staff needed information from clients, the volunteer could intercede on their behalf (e.g., if the senior needed to be reminded to submit a recertification form). Her caseload was approximately 10 seniors at any one time.

Shift in Outreach Strategies. Cold-calling was the primary means of reaching out to potential clients when FACES began. However, staff later started using door-to-door canvassing and referrals instead, since these were better ways to establish trust with the elderly. A senior generally was more likely to consider FACES if an application assistant introduced herself in person or the senior was referred to the program through a trusted source. In addition, to save money, the FACES program discontinued using the PSA after the first few months because the program coordinator emerged as such an effective public relations spokesperson for the demonstration.

Statewide Transition to EBT Cards. Maine switched from a paper-based food stamp system to an EBT system, effective June 2003. At that time, it was one of three states that still utilized paper stamps. Once the EBT system became active, application assistants incorporated this into their service delivery, explaining how the cards worked and accompanying seniors the first time that they purchased items with the card if help seemed needed, although this occurred rarely.

DESIGNING THE DEMONSTRATION

Program Design

The primary goal of FACES was to increase enrollment of the elderly population in the FSP and retain seniors in the program once they enrolled through the use of community education, outreach, and a one-on-one peer assistance model. Multiple partners contributed to designing the demonstration, yielding a program that in the end required few structural changes.

Who Was Involved and How It Unfolded. Maine's state DHS office, the grantee for this demonstration, selected Waldo County as the pilot site because it (1) was small and rural, (2) had a sizeable low-income elderly population coupled with low elderly FSP participation levels, and (3) was a convenient location for monthly advisory meetings for members from Portland and Augusta, the state capitol. The manager of community programs with BEAS coordinated initial program development with BFI and the Institute for Public Sector Innovation at the Muskie School of Public Service.

The state agency had specific reasons for working with each of its partners. DHS decided to involve the SCSEP within BEAS because the demonstration would offer an employment and training opportunity for low-income seniors as well as a built-in pool of job candidates from which to choose. The WCCSA was chosen as a partner because it had a history of collaborating with the SCSEP and a solid reputation as a community action agency since 1965. Finally, DHS approached the University of Southern Maine due to its proven experience with writing and obtaining grants, substantive content knowledge through the Maine Nutrition Network, and experience in training new DHS caseworkers. Researchers from Muskie wrote most of the grant, with input from DHS and the WCCSA.

Key stakeholders formed an advisory board to begin strategizing about program design and implementation components. After they hired a program coordinator (who became a board member) the group developed protocols for interfacing with elderly clients and DHS staff in Rockland, processing FACES applications, and outlining roles and responsibilities of program staff. In consultation with the advisory board, the coordinator then formulated an outreach plan that involved: contacting service providers for the elderly; designing a press release and PSA; and distributing brochures, posters, and flyers. The Muskie School also updated a training curriculum designed to be appropriate for FACES staff.

Changes to the Design in Hindsight

The FACES program might have benefited from a few modifications to its design. Stakeholders were unanimous that using the SCSEP to fill the application assistant position was central to the program's success, as elderly clients were more willing to trust people of their own age. However, many stakeholders felt that minor changes could be made. To help minimize challenges associated with older workers, such as missed work due to health problems and knowledge retention issues, program officials might consider hiring at least one 'younger' application assistant closer to 55 than 65 years old. While all application assistants performed relatively well overall, some advisory board members thought that a three-month probation period and a performance review would have helped ensure that these individuals were best suited for their positions.

Furthermore, in the judgment of the MPR evaluation staff, it might have been useful for the Rockland DHS office to have designated one or two caseworkers to act as point persons and handle all incoming demonstration clients. Such an approach would have helped streamline procedures and minimize communication problems between caseworkers and FACES staff.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Geography was a possible factor that could have influenced the program's implementation and elderly participation levels in the FSP. Waldo County covers a relatively large service area—737 square miles. Most residents lived anywhere from 30 to 75 miles from the Rockland DHS office. These distances were not necessarily a transportation barrier for FSP enrollment, since seniors could have submitted applications by mail and DHS could have administered eligibility interviews by telephone. Nevertheless, some clients indicated to program staff that transportation was a general barrier to applying for food stamps. Perhaps some clients preferred to apply in person and/or direct questions to their caseworker in person. Another potential distance factor was exposure to any community-based publicity efforts for the FSP. This was likely to be higher the closer someone lived to Rockland or a larger town.

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES THAT AROSE

Many challenges that the demonstration encountered could be reasonably expected of any new initiative. Program officials struggled with issues surrounding staffing and communication between FACES and the local DHS office.

Information Retention among Application Assistants

While the peer assistance model was an excellent foundation for this demonstration, it involved a significant amount of the program coordinator's time to ensure that application assistants retained details about FACES policies and procedures. Ongoing technical assistance sessions in weekly staff meetings, mentoring, and methodical reviews of each application were not a part of the original program design. However, this degree of quality control and oversight was critical, particularly since application assistants frequently had difficulties remembering basic FSP information. Moreover, they worked at a slower pace. The coordinator observed, however, that with her guidance, the staff became more effective at outreach and problem solving as the demonstration progressed.

Staff Absences

Understandably, application assistants took some leave time while working for FACES. Seniors participating in the SCSEP earn vacation time and can be expected to take a number of sick days. Yet the assistants also took longer absences due to extended illnesses and injuries. One worker missed a month during the first year for an operation. Another application assistant was out of the office sporadically over several weeks and then took sick leave; she expended approximately three months in leave time. During the second year, one assistant was absent for health reasons for several weeks, and another lost two weeks due to a broken wrist. The coordinator had ultimate responsibility for filling in when staff were absent, which translated into a somewhat reduced level of community outreach. Fortunately, some of this time was during the winter months, when service delivery declined due to inclement weather. However, there was not a formal part-time or temporary staff person to provide back-up FACES service delivery if needed.

Communication Issues Between FACES and DHS

From the perspective of the FACES staff, it was sometimes difficult for them and the demonstration clients to reach caseworkers in Rockland, particularly during the second year when staffing shortages were noticeably acute within the agency. From the perspective of DHS, caseworkers noted that applications contained errors—albeit infrequent and minor ones—and were accompanied by superfluous documentation, such as receipts for car insurance payments. Both groups disagreed over who should ultimately be responsible for directly contacting FACES clients to resolve issues with their FSP accounts. The fact that site visitors did not hear about communication challenges during the first site visit suggests that the hiring freeze and higher caseloads during year two might explain these tensions. Assigning one or two caseworkers to all FACES clients might have mitigated these circumstances.

SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

FACES yielded multiple successes. The application assistance model helped seniors apply for food stamps in a more user-friendly environment. The demonstration linked

seniors with various benefits and resources apart from food stamps. Furthermore, all stakeholders commented on the high quality staff who implemented the program.

Navigating Paperwork

Accessing food stamps became a more user-friendly process under this demonstration. An unwillingness to deal with the paperwork associated with applying for food stamps historically has been a barrier to participation among the elderly. Seniors anecdotally reported that application assistants were friendly, patiently explained procedures and answered their questions, and took care of various details such as photocopying verification documentation, as well as completing and submitting applications. Even caseworkers conceded that many FACES clients probably would not have applied for food stamps on their own because they refused to deal directly with government workers.

Linking Clients to Multiple Benefits and Services

While not an original intention of the advisory board, stakeholders cited helping seniors access other social services as an important byproduct of the demonstration. Many of them referred to the application assistants as “lifelines for seniors.” As caseworkers acknowledged, FACES workers could deliver more comprehensive services because they met with clients one-on-one in their homes. The coordinator shared anecdotal illustrations of households that captured hundreds of dollars in benefits and resources. In addition to food stamps, the programs that FACES clients enrolled in most frequently included TRIAD, the state’s Medicare buy-in program, and LIHEAP. Other programs were Farm Share, and the state’s prescription drug benefit program.

Effective FACES Staff

Any well-crafted program is unlikely to flourish without capable staff to implement it. FACES had such a staff and in particular the strong leadership demonstrated by a dedicated, full-time program coordinator. She provided ample support and technical assistance to the application assistants. The weekly staff meetings, her careful reviews of all food stamp applications, and constant mentoring from the coordinator enabled assistants to deliver high-quality services to seniors. According to members of the advisory board, if the coordinator had not been such a hands-on supervisor or had worked only part time, it is quite possible that the application assistants might have forgotten procedural details, given incorrect information to clients, or generated higher error rates on FACES applications.

The program coordinator spoke highly of her staff, noting their compassion and commitment to helping seniors. She also praised members of the advisory board who met regularly and always offered ideas, feedback, and resources whenever possible. The coordinator observed that FACES would not have had much chance of success without such a supportive committee.

In addition, the coordinator employed an interesting strategy to make seniors as comfortable as possible when staff conducted outreach. As a long-time resident of Waldo

County, she personally knew many residents. Whenever possible, the coordinator assigned workers to certain households based on personalities (e.g., introverted versus extroverted). According to staff, this approach was a critical component in the demonstration's success, since matching personalities facilitated gaining the seniors' trust when they were first approached.

CHAPTER V

MICHIGAN'S COORDINATED ACCESS TO FOOD FOR THE ELDERLY (MICAFAE)

Elder Law of Michigan, Inc., a non-profit organization that provides legal counseling services for low-income seniors, implemented one of the three USDA application assistance demonstrations. The organization partnered with the Michigan Office of Services to the Aging (OSA) and the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA) to develop the demonstration, known locally as Michigan's Coordinated Access to Food for the Elderly, or MiCAFE. Trained program staff and application assistants, many of whom were seniors themselves, helped clients apply to the FSP using a web-based application system that included nutrition and health assessments. Assistants also helped support seniors once they qualified for food stamps if they encountered questions or concerns about their benefits. Elder Law operated a call center that application assistants used as needed for technical assistance on FSP rules.

OPERATIONAL DETAILS

Mechanics of Services

Located in the City of Flint, the McCree FIA office is one of three FIA offices which serve Genesee County, and was the selected pilot site for the demonstration in Michigan. The agency advertised translation services and application assistance by caseworkers for clients who needed help in accessing benefits. Under demonstration procedures, FIA waived the in-person eligibility interview for first-time senior applicants, eliminating the need for a trip to the local office. Services made available to MiCAFE clients by program staff included assistance in using an on-line application, collecting and submitting relevant paperwork, informing seniors about additional resources, and facilitating any necessary followup with caseworkers. The call center operated by Elder Law provided technical assistance to application assistants.

FSP Characteristics in the Absence of the Demonstration. FIA uses a 15-page combined application for all assistance programs, which includes rules and notices. To apply

for food stamps (or “food assistance” as it is referred to in Michigan), seniors request an application by mail, phone, proxy, or in person. Officially, caseworkers¹ can help applicants of all ages fill out the paperwork if help is needed, though it is unclear to what extent the elderly seek their assistance. A notice explaining that help is available for filling out the application appears on the first page in English, Spanish, and Arabic. The agency also provides translation services as needed. Seniors often go to the FIA office in person and complete an application in the waiting room, which makes it easy to ask a clerk or caseworker for help. Those applicants who choose to see a caseworker that day may wait for one to two hours if staff are particularly busy. Walk-in applications are accepted weekdays between 7:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m.

Seniors submit completed applications to the local FIA office in person, by mail, or by proxy. (Supplemental Security Income recipients also can submit a food assistance application to a clerk at this office, who will forward it to FIA.) Food assistance staff then schedule an in-person interview to determine eligibility. However, caseworkers conduct this interview over the phone or during a home visit if the client faces a substantial barrier to traveling to the FIA office (e.g., transportation or poor health).

The period of recertification depends upon an individual’s circumstances. If a food stamp recipient is a senior and/or disabled, and also receives Supplemental Security Income or Retirement Survivor’s Disability Insurance as their sole source of income, they only need to recertify every 24 months. However, those with unearned income or countable earnings must recertify every 12 or 6 months, respectively.

MiCAFE Service Delivery. For the MiCAFE demonstration, the application assistants helped seniors at a variety of service sites and in places that afforded privacy and confidentiality, such as offices or computer labs. As of July 2004, there were 22 MiCAFE sites, including 14 sites in Flint (the Valley Area Agency on Aging, Mount Tabor Baptist Church, the Spanish Speaking Information Center, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program office at the Zimmerman Center,² three clinics run by Hamilton Community Health Network, the Hispanic Technology Center, the Flint Housing Commission, two housing developments, and three senior centers) and eight sites throughout the county (six senior centers and two senior residential complexes).

Providing application assistance involved three fundamental steps: general intake, completing the on-line application, and referrals to other nutrition and social services. Interested seniors could make an appointment through the senior center. Available hours

¹ FIA divides caseworkers into two groups—family independence specialists and eligibility specialists. Family independence specialists handle all types of cases, whereas eligibility specialists focus on Medicaid/FSP-only cases and other non-cash assistance cases.

² The Zimmerman Center is a multi-purpose community center for Flint Community Schools.

and scheduling strategies varied from site to site. Some assistants only scheduled appointments, some provided assistance during certain times of the week, and some provided services whenever the sites (e.g., senior centers, churches) normally operated. After seniors made an appointment, the center sent them a reminder with the list of things to bring for verification.

Once intake was completed, the assistant then printed the application out for the senior to sign, photocopied the verification documentation (e.g., Social Security statement), and forwarded the application packet to the McCree office, either by mail or hand delivery. If the applicant did not bring the necessary documentation to the session, the application assistant gave the senior a personalized verification checklist listing the items that needed to be sent to the FIA office within 10 business days. Otherwise, the caseworker rendered the application invalid (unless there were extenuating circumstances, such as when a third party would not provide the documentation despite client requests), and the client was told to resubmit a new application. (Seniors could simply re-sign the original application and resubmit it within 30 days of the initial submission to FIA.) However, most seniors brought all documentation to their appointment with MiCAFE staff. Completing the electronic application usually took between 20 and 70 minutes, depending on the technical aptitude of the assistant, the speed of the Internet connection, the complexity of the applicant household, and the extent of informal conversations between the application assistant and client.

Lastly, the MiCAFE assistant—using some information collected during intake as a starting point—explored whether there were other nutrition and social services besides food stamps for which the senior might be eligible. The computer system included a section that screened seniors for congregate and home-delivered meal programs. Depending on the answers to these questions, the computer automatically displayed a list of nearby congregate meal sites, home-delivered meal programs, service providers who do assessments for nutritional counseling, and other resources. Application assistants printed out the contact information based on geographic location and the needs of the clients, who then took responsibility for contacting the service provider if they chose. In addition, program staff prepared information folders for each MiCAFE participant that contained (1) a description of Michigan's public benefits rules and regulations, (2) an explanation of how to use the EBT card, and (3) a list of emergency food providers. Clients also had an opportunity to learn about using their Bridge Cards at various points-of-sale terminals through the EBT Training and Education Project (see training section).

Changes in FSP Policies and Procedures. To lessen the burden of applying for food assistance, demonstration participants were not required to travel to the FIA office for an in-person eligibility interview. If follow-up information was needed from the clients, caseworkers conducted the questioning over the phone, during which time they informed the senior of any supplemental documentation that was needed or determined if the client wanted to enroll in a program that was not checked off on the application form (for example, Medicaid). If seniors seemed confused, caseworkers encouraged them to contact their MiCAFE application assistant, who could help them resolve the particular issue, sometimes by conferring with the FIA office.

Staff estimated that the waiver for in-person interviews saved them approximately 30 minutes per client. Less than half of all MiCAFE applications required some degree of follow-up by the caseworker, but it was usually resolved with a quick telephone call. The most common reason for an incomplete application was that the client still needed to collect paperwork outlined on the MiCAFE verification checklist.

Demonstration participants who came up for recertification had to have a face-to-face interview with a caseworker because the waiver applied to new applications and not to recertifications. However, according to state law, if a client declared a hardship (for example, disability or illness), a client could complete a telephone interview in place of the face-to-face interview. (In-person interviews were still required for those clients with earned income.) This hardship waiver applied to the majority of the MiCAFE population.

Call Center. Elder Law operated a toll-free call center that served as a support tool for application assistants who had questions about the food stamp application or encountered technical problems when helping seniors complete an on-line application. Call center staff also could call the FIA caseworkers if a senior had not heard a decision about eligibility determination or had a problem with the application. Any questions about FIA policies were forwarded to the McCree office, although this rarely occurred.

Elder Law developed protocols for call center staff to use in addressing a variety of inquiries from clients and application assistants, along with an on-line version of the user support manual. Application assistants could refer to the manual as they delivered services, which proved to be a useful on-site technical assistance resource. In addition, program staff established a database to track all incoming calls. The program manager from Elder Law routinely reviewed all logged calls to ensure that application assistants were receiving accurate information. On average, topics fell into the following categories: technical questions about the application (20 percent), questions about the content of the food stamp application (10 percent), and “other,” such as confirming receipt of the application at the McCree office or questions about food assistance benefits (15 percent). The remaining 55 percent of the calls were from the general public.

In designing the MiCAFE system, software developers installed a quality control mechanism to help ensure that applications were being completed as accurately as possible. Program staff from Elder Law automatically received an e-mail message whenever an application assistant made an error (for example, entering an invalid birth date). At the same time, the assistant was prompted on the screen to contact the call center for technical help. Frequently, however, the application assistants were familiar enough with the system to correct the error independently. Still, the program manager or call center staff followed up on all error messages to make sure that the situation was resolved appropriately.

Nutritional Assessments. In addition to FSP application services, the application assistants conducted nutritional assessments of elderly clients. During intake, seniors completed an on-line nutrition assessment, and provided information on social services that they currently received (application assistants entered answers onto a computer for the clients). The Nutrition Risk Assessment contained 16 questions; sample questions included: *Does the client eat fewer than two meals per day? Does the client have tooth or mouth problems that make it*

hard to eat? Does the client experience nausea and/or vomiting? Answers to these questions created a Personalized Nutrition Screen Report that was automatically generated through the MiCAFE system. The Chronic Illness Inventory asked clients if they took medications for chronic illnesses, as well as whether they were diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, dementia, kidney disease, Lou Gehrig's disease, mental illness, multiple sclerosis, or Parkinson's disease. Results from this assessment enabled Elder Law to better understand their clients. Staff provided clients with educational materials related to the chronic illnesses listed on their assessments. Program staff estimated that intake lasted about 20 minutes.

Major Stakeholders and Roles

Several public and private groups played important roles in the planning, development, and implementation of the MiCAFE program, including the Michigan Office of Services to the Aging (OSA), the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA), Elder Law of Michigan, Nordic Technologies, Inc., senior centers and other community-based organizations, and an advisory board. Table 5.1 outlines the contributions that stakeholders made to the demonstration.

While the Michigan OSA took the lead in writing the grant proposal and coordinated much of the program's development, Elder Law implemented the MiCAFE program on a day-to-day basis, including providing training, delivering direct services to seniors, conducting the public education campaign, and acting as a liaison between application assistants and FIA. Two part-time Elder Law staff members administered the call center, though by year two one of these workers became a full-time call center operator while the other transitioned into an administrative role for all Elder Law initiatives. FIA caseworkers processed MiCAFE applications in a manner similar to how they processed other food stamp applications, and the agency's district manager was consulted in the early planning stages. Otherwise, FIA played a secondary role in the demonstration.

OSA recruited the initial group of senior centers to become MiCAFE sites, while Elder Law recruited subsequent groups of senior centers to become MiCAFE sites with OSA's guidance, though other types of sites (for example, a senior housing complex) joined the network throughout the demonstration. Slightly fewer than half of all individuals who served as application assistants were volunteers, and several were senior center directors. Most volunteers were over 60 years old, while paid staff (for example, senior center directors) usually were over 50 years old.

To guide the program's development, Elder Law invited several organizations to participate on the MiCAFE advisory board. Rather than hold regular meetings, Elder Law decided it would be more efficient to ask members to convene as needed throughout the planning process. The board consisted of more than a dozen representatives from such diverse groups as senior centers, health departments, university cooperative extension, food assistance programs, and a representative from a pharmacy association.

Table 5.1: Roles and Responsibilities of Key Stakeholders in the Micafe Demonstration

Stakeholder	Primary role(s)
Michigan OSA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conceptualized and wrote USDA grant proposal • Facilitated operations through interagency agreement with FIA • Identified initial participating senior centers • Maintained application system and provided technical support as needed • Distributed funding and served as resource to Elder Law as needed • Delivered computer training
Elder Law of Michigan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helped conceptualize and write grant proposal • Identified subsequent participating senior centers • Managed day-to-day operations, provided training, supervised application assistants, operated and staffed call center, handled outreach, prepared budget reports and quarterly reports, and assisted in development of on-line application • Responded to assistants' inquiries
Michigan FIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtained waiver from USDA • Served as fiscal agent; not involved in direct operations • State office gave input during design phase • Local caseworkers processed MiCAFE applications and answered questions from program staff as needed
Nordic Technologies, Inc. ³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed on-line application software with direction from Elder Law
Senior centers and community-based organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Served as MiCAFE application assistance sites
Advisory board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided feedback based on specific area of expertise

³ During the first quarter of 2004, the original contract between OSA and Nordic Technologies, Inc. ended. OSA established a new contract with the Michigan Department of Information Technology (DIT). The department assumed responsibility for maintaining the on-line system. Nordic Technologies still provides technical support through contracts with OSA and Elder Law.

Management Structure and Lines of Authority

While Elder Law collaborated with OSA in writing the grant, the Michigan FIA retained ultimate responsibility for the demonstration's outcomes. FIA also retained sole authority for eligibility and benefit determination. The MiCAFE program manager at Elder Law, who managed the application assistants and call center staff, was supervised by the organization's executive director. Elder Law also sent reports on the demonstration's outcomes and issues to OSA and FIA. The advisory board offered input and guidance but did not make binding decisions.

Means of Communication and Related Issues

Communication among program staff was facilitated through the call center. Application assistants could access the operators if they had questions, and Nordic Technologies, Inc. designed an electronic message center to facilitate communication between Elder Law staff and application assistants. Application assistants could check for messages from the program manager or call center operators when logging into the on-line system. Through the center, the program manager sent "Reminders of the Month,"⁴ demonstration updates, and information on new resources for seniors.

Program staff found it somewhat challenging to coordinate with approximately 130 FIA caseworkers in processing the MiCAFE applications. Consequently, at the project director's suggestion, the agency assigned four caseworkers to handle all MiCAFE clients and serve as the contact persons if Elder Law program staff had questions or concerns. (This issue is described in more detail in a subsequent section, "Problems and Issues.")

Training

The demonstration included training components for staff and clients. Elder Law designed and conducted training for application assistants and call center operators, and also provided an updated training manual several months into the demonstration. In addition, staff developed the EBT Education and Training Project to help seniors learn about and become comfortable with accessing food benefits electronically.

Training for Application Assistants. The program manager—with input from state FIA officials in Lansing—developed a three-part training for MiCAFE application assistants. The senior center directors recruited volunteers to be application assistants, looking for people who had good social skills, were comfortable working with the elderly population, and had some computer experience.

First, staff attended one of three full-day sessions that gave an overview of the demonstration, the FSP and food assistance benefits, and the general eligibility process. The program manager discussed how application assistance would integrate into the current

⁴ These reminders drew upon tips developed for the staff training.

services available at senior centers. (Program officials initially envisioned MiCAFE assistance taking place only at senior centers.) Participants learned about interviewing skills and how to send an application to the local FIA office. The manager stressed that other staff at the MiCAFE sites (for example, church secretaries) who were not providing application assistance should be made aware of the demonstration so that they would know to whom they should refer seniors who called to ask about MiCAFE.

Second, Elder Law and a representative from OSA delivered a half-day training on the web-based application at Nordic Technologies' computer lab. Participants learned about security issues and how to use the on-line system, and they had the opportunity to complete an entire application. Trainees signed confidentiality agreements and left the session with their user names and passwords.

To complete the basic training, the program manager and a call center operator observed and assisted application assistants with their first clients. These seniors agreed ahead of time to be part of a 'live' training session, which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes to allow for periodic technical assistance. Several months into the demonstration and as a followup to the initial training, Elder Law produced a new training manual for all staff; this included screen shots of the on-line system and answers to commonly asked questions that had emerged from call center staff.

For new staff and application assistants who joined the MiCAFE network after the demonstration began, the program manager conducted a training session. By July 2004, Elder Law had trained 88 application assistants, with 79 active MiCAFE assistants (30 senior center staff and 49 volunteers).

Training for Clients. With a private grant from the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, program staff designed the EBT Education and Training Project to teach seniors about using their Bridge Cards to access food benefits in a way that accommodated different learning styles. All MiCAFE sites had a range of teaching tools, including (1) educational flip charts that explained the EBT system in user-friendly language and graphics, (2) written materials inserted in each senior's folder, (3) sample EBT cards, (4) model point-of-sale (POS) equipment, and (5) a video. The video, which was close-captioned and also available on DVD, showed a senior using her Bridge Card in a supermarket and gave step-by-step instructions for accessing EBT benefits at a variety of POS locations. Elder Law wanted to have POS terminals that actually recalculated balances on the sample Bridge Cards, but costs were prohibitive. Instead, the flip charts helped simulate a transaction.

In addition, seniors could access a page on Elder Law's website: "Comfort in Using the Michigan Bridge Card." The page explained EBT benefits, gave a picture and description of a Bridge Card, and listed answers to commonly-asked questions, such as *How do I spend benefits?* and *What items can be purchased with my Bridge Card?*

Outreach Strategies

To inform potentially eligible seniors about MiCAFE, Elder Law used a blend of written materials, mass media, networking, and community collaborations. Outreach efforts

remained fairly consistent throughout the demonstration, though staff focused on political activities during the spring of 2003. Prior to the demonstration, FIA had not sponsored any targeted outreach to increase elderly enrollment in the FSP.

Core Themes and Target Audiences. Program staff consciously decided not to launch an intensive outreach campaign during the first few months to avoid overwhelming the application assistants with new clients. To generate interest slowly, Elder Law mailed postcards to seniors enrolled in a farmer's market program and in the state's prescription drug coverage program before MiCAFE began. Staff selected these subgroups since they were likely to be eligible for food stamps. As is customary with FIA, demonstration staff did not refer to the FSP as "food stamps" but instead spoke about "food assistance."

Written Materials. Elder Law distributed brochures, postcards, and/or posters to a variety of organizations throughout Genesee County, including senior centers, food banks, community centers, churches, pharmacies, soup kitchens, grocery stores, WIC clinics, county health department, and the American Red Cross. Staff distributed brochures or postcards to Meals on Wheels and Michigan's Elder Prescription Insurance Coverage (EPIC) participants as well. Materials in Spanish were included when appropriate, and a modified version of the poster incorporated a description of a MiCAFE help session so that seniors would know what to expect. During the second year, a mass mailing went out to 700 churches across the county.

Multi Media. Elder Law incorporated newspapers, newsletters, television, and radio into its promotional efforts. It also added a link about the demonstration to its website: <http://www.elderslaw.org/micafe>.

Elder Law disseminated press releases to the eight county newspapers and the program manager was interviewed for a feature story in the *Flint Journal*. Soon after, the Elder Law executive director and a senior center director talked about MiCAFE on a local television news program. Subsequent articles appeared in several newspapers, which, according to staff, seemed to generate an increased volume of inquiries to the call center. Notices appeared in monthly senior center newsletters and church bulletins. Moreover, a 60-second radio public service announcement ran 25 times over six weeks during the summer of 2003 on an AM station that targets seniors.

Throughout the demonstration, Elder Law sent out press releases to announce when new MiCAFE sites opened. One such press release led to a television news segment for the afternoon and evening broadcasts highlighting the Mount Tabor Baptist Church (downtown Flint) with the minister and an Elder Law intern who worked there as the application assistant. They also appeared on a radio talk show to describe the benefits of MiCAFE and encourage potentially eligible seniors to apply.

Networking. Program staff engaged in a series of presentations, tabling at community events, and attending meetings with elected officials to help spread the word about the demonstration. A sample of these activities is outlined below:

- Staff met with five state representatives; two state senators; three county legislators; the staff of two U.S. senators, a U.S. Representative, and the lieutenant governor to talk about MiCAFE and distribute information packets.
- MiCAFE hosted a booth at an annual hunger conference sponsored by the Food Bank Council of Michigan and spoke with several service providers; they also hosted a booth on Senior Power Day in Flint, an event that attracts about 1,500 seniors from three counties.
- A Spanish-speaking volunteer sponsored an information table at a local Mexican festival.
- Mount Tabor Baptist Church, which serves as a polling place, set up a display with brochures on Election Day.
- The program manager gave presentations to Flint city officials and the United Way; an application assistant made several presentations at senior housing developments, reaching approximately 125 total seniors.
- In 2004, Elder Law testified before the state appropriations committee to talk about the demonstration.

Community Collaborations. The most formal collaborations for the demonstration involved the various senior centers, community and faith-based organizations, and senior housing complexes that served as MiCAFE sites. Elder Law collaborated with 22 demonstration sites over the course of the demonstration, including some sites that were added along the way.⁵ For example, after two senior centers that hosted application assistants closed in downtown Flint soon after operations began, Elder Law approached the Valley Area Agency on Aging to see if it would be willing to provide application assistance at its downtown facility. Prior to this, the program manager had asked the agency to promote MiCAFE through its congregate meal program and Medicare/Medicaid Assistance Program, which it continued to do throughout the demonstration.

Elder Law also explored different avenues for educating the elderly about MiCAFE through community partners. Staff from the Genesee County Community Action Resource Department informed its clients that application assistance was available at some of its congregate meal sites. The agency also inserted brochures into its home-delivered meals. Elder Law invited volunteers from the Tax Assistance Program (TAP) to senior centers to help seniors apply to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and for property tax credits. While on site, volunteers referred interested seniors to MiCAFE.

⁵ Twenty entities sponsored MiCAFE sites, but 1 offered 3 locations, for a total of 22 sites. These figures do not include sites in the expansion counties.

Likewise, application assistants referred clients to TAP as part of their routine service delivery.

To help seniors physically access demonstration services, Elder Law worked with the Genesee County Michigan Transit Authority. The “Your Ride” program agreed to transport seniors to and from MiCAFE appointments free of charge. Officials also agreed to display MiCAFE posters inside public buses.

Staffing Turnover and Shortages

Staff restructuring and turnover statewide helped contribute to higher caseloads for the local FIA office. The agency decided to restructure its offices in September 2002 to reduce caseworker burden. In Genesee County, the office created two teams of caseworkers, the family unit and the adult unit, the latter of which concentrated on elderly cases. However, this transition coincided with a decline in the state employee workforce. A budget deficit prompted the governor to authorize early retirement packages, with a total of 1,270 workers taking the offer. The state filled only one in four of these vacant positions. While the McCree office lost only 8 out of 94 caseworkers—some offices lost a greater portion of its caseworkers—remaining staff struggled with concurrently rising caseloads, most likely due to poor local economic conditions.

Due to a decrease in its workforce and an increase in caseloads, FIA officials eventually concluded that the experimental management system had failed. Caseworkers were overwhelmed and found it more difficult to meet the 30-day deadline for processing food stamp applications. At one point, the McCree office was completing 85 percent of all FSP applications within 30 days, though they achieved a 94 percent completion rate for MiCAFE applicants. The FIA district manager in Genesee County also reported that a high incidence of sick leave contributed to overwhelming caseloads. In February 2003, the agency reverted to dividing its caseworker staff into family independence specialists and eligibility specialists, which resulted in more manageable caseloads.

According to respondents, there was not a significant level of turnover among core demonstration staff. However, one state official at the central FIA office in Lansing who played an important role in planning and designing the demonstration accepted the early retirement package. There did not seem to be much turnover of senior center directors, aside from the change in MiCAFE sites described in the next section. Turnover among application assistants was not burdensome.

Major Operational Changes During the Demonstration

Staff instituted a number of changes to enhance service delivery and program management. The MiCAFE network expanded to include many non-senior center sites, partially to account for the loss of sites in downtown Flint. To streamline application procedures, stakeholders developed a policy for recertification cases, designated four caseworkers to handle all demonstration cases, and added a heading to MiCAFE applications to distinguish them from regular applications.

Adding New MiCAFE Sites. Program staff worked throughout the demonstration period to identify additional MiCAFE sites. Because two initial demonstration sites closed right after the demonstration started, the demonstration effectively began with only seven MiCAFE sites.⁶ By the 21st month of the demonstration, there were a total of 22 MiCAFE sites. However, as discussed in Section D, the lack of demonstration sites in key portions of Genesee County posed a significant challenge to the demonstration.

Additional MiCAFE sites that were added after the start of the demonstration included the Valley Area Agency on Aging, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program at the Zimmerman Senior Center and the Mount Tabor Baptist Church, all serving downtown Flint. The Baptist church afforded an opportunity to serve elderly African Americans. As the hub of the Latino community, the Spanish Speaking Information Center (SSIC) resembles a senior center in structure but is located in a social service agency. It actively referred clients to local nutrition and social services and resources, and provided five trained MiCAFE volunteers. In the spring of 2004, seven other service providers in Flint became demonstration sites, along with one senior center located outside of the Flint metropolitan area. Braidwood Manor was another addition to the MiCAFE network in a nearby town.⁷

Processing Recertification Cases. Several months after operations began, Elder Law worked with FIA to develop protocols to help seniors who were up for recertification; this service had not been developed for the grant proposal. The McCree office produced a monthly report indicating those seniors whose times to recertify were past due, current, or one month in the future. Program staff mailed these clients recertification packets that included (1) the end date of food stamp benefits, (2) a FIA application, (3) a verification checklist of required documentation and the due date when these items needed to be submitted to FIA, and (4) a letter reminding seniors where they could go to get assistance with recertifying. If they chose to access services through MiCAFE—and they were already demonstration clients—the MiCAFE on-line system could generate a second application without overriding the original application, so only the fields that needed to be changed (for example, assets) were blank. This saved clients some time in filling out paperwork.

⁶ Two of the original MiCAFE sites, which were city-run senior centers located in downtown Flint, were closed shortly after the demonstration started. The city's decision to close the sites was made for budgetary reasons. Eventually, one of the centers reopened and became a MiCAFE site.

⁷ Braidwood Manor is a senior housing complex where apartment staff traditionally have helped residents apply for state benefit programs. This site initially had some exceptions to its demonstration procedures. When it first joined the demonstration, only elderly Braidwood Manor residents who did not receive any FIA-administered public benefits (for example, Medicaid) could apply for food stamp benefits as demonstration clients. To reduce internal confusion, FIA requested that residents who received other FIA-administered public benefits apply to the FSP through the FIA office in McCree. After a few months, arrangements were made to allow all residents to apply for food stamps through MiCAFE, regardless of whether they were receiving other benefits.

The recertification packet also included information about a pre-assigned telephone interview, and instructions on how to call the McCree office and set up an in-person or telephone interview. (As stated earlier, seniors up for recertification still had to have an eligibility interview with a caseworker in person, but a telephone interview could be conducted in cases of hardship.) If seniors missed their interviews or did not call their caseworker by a certain date, FIA sent them missed-appointment letters granting them a 20-day grace period. If they missed this deadline, their benefit accounts expired and they had to reapply as if they were new FSP applicants.

Reassigned Demonstration Caseloads. In October 2003, at the project manager's suggestion, the McCree office selected four caseworkers to handle all MiCAFE applications. Instead of the clerk assigning a demonstration client to one of 80 or 90 caseworkers, a much smaller group of staff specialized in MiCAFE applications. This enabled them to become familiar with the program's procedures and facilitated communication with the application assistants and program staff from Elder Law.

Differentiating MiCAFE Applications. Early on, Elder Law added a MiCAFE heading to its applications so that the FIA office could easily identify them in comparison to regular food stamp applications. Caseworkers often confused the two versions because they looked very similar, and sometimes inadvertently requested that MiCAFE clients travel to the office for a face-to-face interview, a requirement that was waived for the demonstration.

DESIGNING THE DEMONSTRATION

Program Design

The goals of MiCAFE were to (1) help seniors apply for food assistance benefits, (2) direct clients to existing nutrition services in the community, (3) improve their understanding of the benefits derived from a healthy diet, and (4) increase their comfort levels in using Bridge Cards. Elder Law also was interested in developing and testing new technological solutions for serving in-need populations.

Who Was Involved and How It Unfolded. Representatives from Elder Law of Michigan, the Michigan Office of Services to the Aging (OSA), the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA), and Nordic Technologies, Inc. comprised the core project management team. As the state considered which community organization(s) to partner with, Elder Law emerged as a logical choice, since it had experience operating call centers for legal services and had collaborated with OSA in the past. Due to its strong relationships with the local area agencies on aging, senior centers, and other elderly service providers, OSA was positioned to galvanize support for MiCAFE, particularly in encouraging senior centers to serve as application assistance sites.

OSA conceptualized the fundamental structure of the demonstration and wrote most of the proposal, with input from Elder Law and the FIA district manager. It presented the demonstration to FIA as an expansion of Senior Project FRESH and the Michigan Emergency Pharmaceutical Program for Seniors (MEPPS). Senior Project FRESH is an

initiative in which farmers markets make available fresh produce to low-income, nutritionally at-risk consumers; participants receive \$20 coupons to buy produce at local markets. MEPPS is an emergency voucher program for prescription drugs. FIA agreed to become the overall contract manager. Core stakeholders convened an advisory group to discuss their roles in the MiCAFE program. They divided into three subcommittees: technology, marketing, and training; these met throughout the planning process to guide program development.

During the grant writing process, Elder Law and OSA delivered an overview of the demonstration to senior center directors who were participating in Senior Project FRESH and asked them to write letters of support. Senior Project FRESH sites were a good fit for the demonstration because the sites already were familiar with using an on-line application for Project FRESH. Elder Law assessed each senior center through on-site visits to ensure that they had a private office, computer, printer, and Internet access for one-on-one sessions. The organization also described the qualities that application assistants should possess and asked senior center directors to identify potential assistants from their centers.

Elder Law worked with State FIA officials to design an on-line food stamp application and to ensure that it would cover the necessary data fields, was legally appropriate, and met federal FSP regulations. Under an OSA contract with Nordic Technologies, Elder Law and Nordic Technologies, Inc. developed the software. The project management team tested the application over several months prior to MiCAFE's start date, which involved a substantial amount of time and effort. Based on feedback from the Genesee County FIA, Nordic Technologies revised the web-based application to enable seniors to apply for multiple FIA-administered benefit programs as they could with the regular paper-version public assistance application.⁸ The company also modified the software to automatically skip unnecessary questions once the senior applicant selected the program(s) they wanted to apply for, as well as to ensure that data entry would not be tainted by application assistants who might develop their own skip patterns.

In the final stages of program development, Elder Law established a toll-free number for the call center and obtained electronic pagers for its staff, including the program manager and the call center operators. With input from FIA, the program manager developed the training curriculum and materials, and designed the press release and press packets.

Changes to the Design in Hindsight

Almost one year into the demonstration, FIA supervisors made a change so that all MiCAFE applications were handled by a small group of caseworkers. When this change occurred, the caseworkers identified some inconsistencies in the way that demonstration participants were tracked. In some cases, MiCAFE clients were not recorded as such, while

⁸ These programs include cash assistance, medical assistance, food assistance benefits, state emergency relief, and child development and care.

other clients were identified as MiCAFE applicants but in fact had not applied through the demonstration. Elder Law staff eventually added a “MiCAFE” header to the demonstration application to distinguish it from regular food assistance applications.

FIA requested that program officials develop a policy enabling caseworkers to more easily contact a client’s MiCAFE application assistant if the client required additional assistance during the verification process. As a result, all application assistants were asked to sign the MiCAFE application so FIA caseworkers could determine which assistant had helped the applicant. The call center continued to act as the liaison between applicants, sites, application assistants and FIA. Using the MiCAFE database, the call center staff could determine which site and which application assistant processed each application. In many cases, FIA caseworkers communicated via email with the call center to communicate issues, and the call center took the necessary steps to resolve the matter.

Program staff observed that in hindsight, they would have incorporated senior housing complexes as MiCAFE sites earlier in the demonstration. Reaching the elderly through faith-based groups afforded a built-in level of trust with its members, and reaching seniors through senior centers allowed volunteers to tap into an age-appropriate audience. However, housing developments (a total of four) were also valuable service sites, particularly since many elderly spend a lot of time at home. As one program official described it, using housing complexes as MiCAFE sites would allow “services to come to the home.” If the county were to continue the demonstration, at some point that official would be interested in exploring a collaboration with the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Transportation was a key factor that influenced the program’s implementation and elderly participation levels in the FSP. State officials selected Genesee County for the elderly nutrition demonstration due to its sizeable low-income elderly population and the challenges that seniors face in accessing the McCree FIA office. A significant portion of the county is rural, and all non-demonstration applicants must travel to Flint to participate in a face-to-face interview with a caseworker. According to stakeholders, not only are some seniors afraid to go into downtown Flint because of crime, but the distance also can be an obstacle. Taking the four outlying rural towns into account, the average roundtrip drive into Flint is 40 miles, or about 50 minutes of driving time.

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES THAT AROSE

Program staff encountered several challenges in implementing the MiCAFE program, including the closing of two application assistance sites, disjointed service delivery at certain sites, staff shortages within FIA and the McCree office, communication challenges between caseworkers and program staff, and times issues in developing an on-line application.

Closing of Downtown Sites

The principal challenge faced by the MiCAFE demonstration was the limited reach of the demonstration within the city of Flint, where much of the county's low income elderly population resides. As a result of a municipal budget deficit, the City of Flint was forced to shut down two downtown senior centers that had also been selected as MiCAFE sites soon after the demonstration began. One of these sites—the Hasselbring Senior Center—provided a host of services and potentially could have exposed a large number of seniors to the MiCAFE program. These closings substantially essentially eliminated the demonstration's presence in the downtown area.

The Valley Area Agency on Aging (VAAA) offered to serve as a demonstration site in January 2003. While this facility provided the demonstration with access to the downtown population, the facility was less accessible than some of the senior centers. The VAA was not easily accessible to seniors with transportation limitations, and those entering the building were required to go through potentially-intimidating security procedures. Other sites serving downtown flint were added later in June 2003 (the Spanish Speaking Information Center), July 2003 (the Zimmerman Center), and October 2003 (the Mount Tabor Baptist Church). The Hasselbring Senior Center reopened in March 2004, but the number of services provided by the center was scaled back.

In short, the demonstration, which effectively started with only 7 MiCAFE sites, was using 22 sites by the end of the 21 month evaluation period. Nevertheless, the demonstration's effectiveness might have been different if all 22 MiCAFE sites had all been operating from the start.⁹

Staff Turnover and Shortages at FIA

FIA staff reported that, due to a depressed economy, caseloads had started to increase before the demonstration began. As discussed earlier, early retirements and subsequent staff shortages placed pressure on local caseworkers in terms of handling these increasing caseloads. Moreover, the demonstration faced a loss of institutional knowledge when a few key state officials who were closely involved in the development of the MiCAFE program took early retirement. Elder Law reported that communication with state FIA officials remained challenging due to this turnover. While they were supportive of the program, it took a while for their replacements to become familiar with the demonstration's rules and procedures. At the local FIA office, the supervisor eventually assigned four specific caseworkers to handle demonstration clients, as opposed to applications going to any one of 86 caseworkers; this helped mitigate the effects of the staff shortages and minimize the impact on processing MiCAFE applications.

⁹ Seven sites were added three months before the evaluation period ended.

Developing an Electronic Food Stamp Application

Originally, Nordic Technologies intended to create a ‘static’ application that did not change in response to what information was entered in the application. However, along with Elder Law and OSA, they decided to develop a ‘dynamic’ application so that the system could determine which application questions were relevant given, earlier responses. As a result, it took longer than expected to develop the more complex software programming.

SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

MiCAFE yielded several program successes. Application assistants helped seniors navigate the paperwork and assisted them in the process of entering information into a web-based application system. This made the experience of applying for food stamps easier and less intimidating. Elder Law staff, who have earned a reputation of being helpful and approachable, also made seniors aware of other nutrition and social services and resources that they could choose to access. Additionally, the modified application procedures under MiCAFE saved time for both caseworkers and clients.

Usability of On-line Application

Many stakeholders praised the user-friendly technical environment of the on-line food stamp application. Most application assistants found the application easy to navigate and to complete. In fact, the district manager for the McCree office hoped that the MiCAFE software could eventually replace what she perceived to be the agency’s outdated, cumbersome computer system.

Simplifying the Application Process

According to the program’s design, application assistants were able to help seniors apply for food assistance, explaining which documentation was needed for caseworkers and making themselves available as ‘ambassadors’ if clients became confused in dealing with the local FIA office (e.g., if they did not understand a letter from a caseworker). Application assistants entered all information into the MiCAFE electronic application, which further simplified the process for the elderly population and made applying for food stamps less intimidating. The EBT Education and Training Program provided elderly clients with practical information simulations and gave them the opportunity to become familiar with accessing benefits with a Bridge Card before using it for the first time.

Linking Clients to Multiple Benefits and Services

Application assistants sought ways to link elderly clients to other nutrition and social services and community resources through the nutritional and health assessments that were filled out on the computer during the one-on-one sessions. Staff provided seniors with a list

of service providers that they could contact directly for additional assistance, such as LIHEAP.¹⁰

Effective Program Staff

Various stakeholders reported that demonstration staff from Elder Law were committed to the goals of MiCAFE, and were consistently responsive, helpful, and accommodating to program participants. In addition, the call center provided a great deal of support to application assistants if they had questions while ‘in the field,’ and assistants had a user support manual to address commonly asked questions. The program manager also reviewed the call center phone logs to ensure that operators were providing accurate information to MiCAFE assistants. These added layers of quality assurance and support helped ensure that seniors received correct information and that applications were completed appropriately.

Program officials also reported that using volunteers as application assistants worked well for the demonstration. Volunteers were committed and wanted to dedicate their time to helping low-income seniors access food assistance. At least 50 percent of the application assistants participated throughout the entire demonstration period. However, it is important to remember that matching well-intentioned individuals who also have the necessary skills to work with MiCAFE clients is an important ingredient for an effective, efficient program.

MiCAFE Saved Time for Clients and Caseworkers

Waiving the in-person eligibility interview for first-time applicants saved time both for seniors and for FIA caseworkers. Caseworkers reported that eligibility interviews normally lasted an average of 30 minutes. If clients who dropped off their applications wanted to see a caseworker that same day, staff estimated that clients could wait up to two hours on a busy day.

In addition, FIA staff reported that MiCAFE applications tended to be accurate and complete, which saved caseworkers time if they did not have to conduct a lot of follow-up communication with seniors to collect additional verification documentation, or if they did not need to redo portions of the application. They also observed that the demonstration did not create a burden on their caseloads, nor did it significantly alter their job responsibilities.

¹⁰ Service providers from MiCAFE sites reported that while some seniors who had never accessed services at the sites (for example, a senior center) before the demonstration and did not return once they successfully applied to the FSP, they remained optimistic that these clients would return at some point in the future and take advantage of their services.

CHAPTER VI

CONNECTICUT'S 'THE FOOD CONNECTION'

The Connecticut Department of Social Services (DSS) was one of two grantees that selected an alternative commodity benefit model to increase elderly participation in the FSP for the elderly nutrition demonstration. The program was known locally as The Food Connection. DSS contracted with the Community Renewal Team, Inc. (CRT), the state agency's partner for this initiative, to implement service delivery. Instead of EBT benefits, seniors could elect to receive bimonthly food packages that were available in three commodity combinations—regular, Latino, and items geared towards Meals on Wheels participants. Packages were distributed at various community sites, most commonly senior centers, housing complexes, and churches.

OPERATIONAL DETAILS

Mechanics of Services

The Food Connection was offered in 10 municipalities in the Hartford region. Regional DSS offices in Hartford, Manchester, and New Britain served residents in this area. Their primary responsibility in the demonstration was to assist with outreach by informing new applicants and recertifying seniors about the commodity benefit option. They also coordinated case management procedures with CRT, the program's service provider and community partner. Participating seniors chose among three types of food packages, which were delivered to distribution sites twice a month. Program staff administered nutritional assessments to monitor clients' nutritional intake.

FSP Characteristics in the Absence of the Demonstration. In most DSS regional offices, staff handle all social service programs, which include 16 service categories. The agency uses a common application. In larger offices, tasks are divided according to intake

workers—who conduct eligibility interviews—and case maintenance workers—who determine benefit levels and conduct ongoing monthly case maintenance.¹ In smaller offices, staff assumed the responsibilities of both intake and case maintenance workers.²

Intake procedures are relatively consistent across the state. Most seniors request applications by telephone. Food stamp applications are submitted to regional offices in person, by a designated representative, or through the mail. Upon arrival, a clerk assigns the application to an intake worker either alphabetically or through a rotation system. Once caseworkers receive all necessary documentation such as bank statements and medical bills, they can verify certain information using DSS databases, assuming that the applicant already receives other public benefits. Other information, such as Social Security benefits and Unemployment Compensation benefits, can be verified through electronic interfaces with the agencies that administer those programs. Staff obtain any outstanding information from clients either in person or by telephone, since the face-to-face interview is waived for the elderly.

Procedures for recertification also impose a minimal burden on seniors. Pure elderly households without earned income must recertify every 24 months, while pure elderly households with earned income must recertify every 12 months. Halfway between certification periods, the central DSS office in Hartford automatically distributes letters to clients requesting that they notify their caseworkers as soon as possible if their household incomes and/or expenses have changed. Recertification forms are 10 pages long and include fields for other DSS programs as well, which are left blank if clients need only to recertify for food stamps. Like initial applications, paperwork can be submitted in person, by a designated representative, or by mail. Caseworkers follow up by telephone if necessary.

Four months before the demonstration began, DSS implemented new statewide procedures designed to make applying to the FSP easier for seniors. Officials created a food stamp-only application with larger, easier-to-read type face (7 pages) in addition to the joint application (20 pages). This document facilitates the application process for those already enrolled in other programs. However, staff noted that since most seniors become linked to the FSP when enrolling in Medicare or Medicaid, only a small percentage of them take advantage of the shorter application.

Changes in FSP Policies and Procedures. Caseworkers in the Hartford, Manchester, and New Britain DSS offices were assigned the responsibility of informing new applicants and non-demonstration clients who came up for recertification about the commodity benefit option. Caseworkers were supposed to include a brochure in the application packet that they mailed to potential clients, and then describe the program during the eligibility interview.

¹ Except where a distinction must be made for clarification purposes, this profile refers to both intake workers and eligibility specialists as caseworkers.

² For the demonstration, this included the New Britain office only.

In the early months of the demonstration, staff identified potential Food Connection participants from among existing FSP participants by identifying those residing in the demonstration area. They sent ongoing FSP clients a letter reminding them about the commodity benefit option; the letter also included their calculated EBT benefit amount. In addition, the letter explained that unless seniors contacted their caseworkers to indicate a preference for The Food Connection, they would automatically receive an EBT card.

Caseworkers also had to coordinate with CRT on overall case management for clients participating in the demonstration. This case management is described in the next section.

Food Connection Case Management. Managing Food Connection cases—both clients who enrolled and those who chose to switch back to regular food stamps—required contributions from caseworkers and program staff at CRT. If seniors opted for commodities, the DSS caseworker flagged them in the database. The DSS Central Office forwarded electronic files to CRT, indicating which FSP clients were enrolled in the CRT each month (including new enrollees and ongoing CRT enrollees). Files that included participants whose applications were approved during the month were sent daily to CRT.

Each month, CRT staff compared the electronic file with their current list to identify new demonstration clients as well as those who dropped out. The assistant nutrition director reviewed the list and flagged seniors enrolled in CRT's Meals on Wheels program, who received a special commodity package. She then assigned them a pick-up site based on their home addresses, selecting which households would receive the Latino package based on surnames and neighborhoods of residence.³ The outreach coordinator was notified of any new clients. She sent them a welcome letter that described the weight of food packages, reminded them that CRT could not deliver packages to their homes (unless they were a qualifying CRT Meals on Wheels client), and provided a calendar of food distribution times and locations, along with contact information for Food Connection program staff.

To incorporate new clients into the delivery schedule, a clerk entered relevant data into a spreadsheet that included (1) names, (2) assigned distribution sites, (3) date of enrollment/drop out, (4) type of package, and (5) confirmation of pickup. Staff printed out updated daily lists from the spreadsheet and forwarded them to the warehouse worker the week before delivery. The worker then knew exactly how many and which types of packages to prepare, and could also track which clients picked up their commodities.

If seniors wanted to terminate commodity benefits, they simply called their caseworker, who in turn modified their status in the DSS database (and subsequently the list sent to CRT). However, different procedures came into play if clients failed to pick up packages. CRT sent letters to seniors who forgot once, or more commonly the outreach coordinator called to remind them of the next scheduled pickup time and place. (Program staff estimated that approximately one-third of all demonstration clients failed to come to their appointed distribution site at least once in a given month.) Seniors were given a few days to

³ These seniors could choose a different type of commodity package at the first pickup.

make arrangements for a special pickup, or else they could receive four food bags on the next scheduled distribution day.

If seniors missed two or more pickups, CRT notified the appropriate DSS regional office. Caseworkers in turn contacted the clients to determine if they wanted to remain in the Food Connection or switch back to EBT benefits. If they had difficulty reaching the clients, occasionally a case was passed to a DSS social worker who continued to try to get in touch with the senior. Social workers also could deliver retroactive packages if the client dropped out of the demonstration, which happened a handful of times.

Characteristics of the Commodity Packages. Seniors who enrolled in The Food Connection could choose among three types of packages: regular, Latino, and Meals on Wheels. Clients could only switch once between types and had to accept all food items. The Latino package was geared to the cooking and eating habits of Spanish speakers (for example, more rice and beans). The Meals on Wheels option was intended to supplement the hot meals received by clients by providing breakfast items and healthy snacks (for example, cereal and wheat crackers). Each commodity option had four ‘food baskets,’ with two distributed every two weeks. CRT rotated the food items based on need (certain items were consumed more frequently than others) and weight (different combinations of quantities and food types were arranged to facilitate the transporting of packages).

The cost of the food packages to the Food Connection program was \$43 (\$46 in the second year), which included the cost of the food, shipping, and storage. The comparable price of the package contents at a local Hartford grocery store was between \$60 and \$70 (Cody and Ohls, 2005). All food items were non-perishable except for butter and cheese.

Commodity Storage and Procurement. The Food Connection required a great deal of effort in preparing the storage facilities and obtaining the commodities before food distribution could take place. Program staff needed to ensure that they had adequate space and equipment for storing and assembling food items. Fortunately, CRT had extensive experience in food distribution through its other social service programs. Commodities were stored and assembled at CRT’s central warehouse.⁴ Despite this infrastructure capacity, staff had to make modifications to the space. They ordered two industrial-sized refrigerators for perishable items (butter and cheese), and installed a locked security fence to section off The Food Connection’s operations from the rest of the warehouse’s second floor. Four CRT staff members spent several hours rearranging this section of the warehouse to accommodate food storage and assembly, including arranging tables in long rows where items were stored by food type.

In addition to preparing the warehouse, CRT nutritionists spent considerable time designing the food baskets and obtaining approval from USDA. CRT worked closely with

⁴ CRT also operated a food pantry out of the warehouse. Staff initially intended to use this space until they learned from USDA that they would need to order commodities in bulk by the truckload. Consequently, a larger space was allocated for the demonstration.

USDA to design food baskets that included items from all four food groups, fell within caloric thresholds, and aimed to meet certain dietary restrictions for seniors with health problems. Once the food baskets were approved, CRT ordered the first bulk commodity shipment. Using a USDA agency requisition form, each order was placed three months in advance, and typically one order lasted approximately six months. CRT was somewhat limited in the kind of commodities that they could offer demonstration clients, in large part because they could not predict which food items or brands would be available when ordering the shipment from USDA.

After the food orders arrived, demonstration staff assembled the items into canvas bags for distribution, usually preparing bags one or two days in advance. On a distribution day, staff used lists of client counts for pick-up sites assigned to that day and transported the bags into the delivery van using a loading dock.

Food Distribution. Clients received two food packages per month. Each “package” was contained in two sturdy, canvas bags (and each time clients picked up a package, they returned the empty bags from the previous package). Distribution occurred at 16 sites, most commonly senior centers but also churches, community centers, and apartment complexes. The delivery person helped load packages into cars if needed. Most sites had parking.

Seniors picked up packages on assigned weekdays between mid-morning and early afternoon, although clients could arrange for a proxy to pick up packages as long as they notified CRT in advance. Each distribution day, the driver typically went to two sites. For example, he might go to one site from approximately 10:15 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. and the other from 11:15 to Noon. Often the driver distributed packages from the back of the van and left at the center any packages that clients did not pick up during the distribution time. The driver then returned later in the day to take back to the warehouse any packages that still had not been picked up. Figure 6.1 presents an example of the commodity distribution schedule.

Program staff used a different approach for the small portion of Food Connection participants that participated in CRT’s Meals on Wheels program. For these clients, CRT delivered the food packages along with their hot meals. The warehouse worker delivered these food bags to locations where volunteers normally picked up meals for delivery, where they were stored in coolers until the time of delivery. CRT marked the Meals on Wheels packages with red dots so that volunteers could easily identify which clients should also get food bags.

Nutritional Assessments. In conceptualizing the grant, CRT wanted to include nutritional assessments to better meet the nutritional needs of the elderly. CRT nutritionists designed and distributed short surveys on eating habits, special dietary considerations, and health concerns to new demonstration participants. Seniors filled out surveys on a voluntary basis when they picked up their first food packages. Whenever possible, CRT used the information to accommodate certain dietary restrictions (for example, including low sodium food items for those with high blood pressure). Program staff intended to track and administer the assessments on a regular basis, hoping to explore whether the Food Connection improved nutritional intake for the elderly.

Figure 6.1: Food Distribution Schedule for the Food Connection February 2003

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
3 BLOOMFIELD Bloomfield Interfaith 10:30 a.m. to Noon	4 ENFIELD Enfield Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD Salvation Army Senior Center 10:15 a.m. to Noon	5 HARTFORD North Arsenal Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD South Green (Smith Towers) 10:30 a.m. to Noon	6 EAST WINDSOR East Windsor Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD Hispanic Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon	7 WINDSOR LOCKS Windsor Locks Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD Parkville Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon
10 OPEN	11 NEW BRITAIN New Britain Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon	12 Closed in Observance of Lincoln's Birthday	13 HARTFORD Barry Square Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon MANCHESTER Westhill Gardens 10:30 a.m. to Noon STAFFORD Stafford Community Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon	14 WINDSOR L.P. Wilson Community Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon SOUTH WINDSOR South Windsor Community Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon BLOOMFIELD Bloomfield Interfaith 10:30 a.m. to Noon
17 Closed in Observance of Presidents' Day	18 ENFIELD Enfield Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD Salvation Army Senior Center 10:15 a.m. to Noon	19 HARTFORD South Green (Smith Towers) 10:15 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD North Arsenal Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon	20 EAST WINDSOR East Windsor Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD Hispanic Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon	21 WINDSOR LOCKS Windsor Locks Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD Parkville Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon
24 OPEN	25 NEW BRITAIN New Britain Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon	26 HARTFORD Barry Square Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon	27 MANCHESTER Westhill Gardens 10:30 a.m. to Noon STAFFORD Stafford Community Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon	28 WINDSOR L.P. Wilson Community Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon SOUTH WINDSOR South Windsor Community Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon

Source: Community Renewal Team, Inc.

Major Stakeholders and Roles

DSS and CRT were the main partners in the Food Connection. As the grantee, DSS oversaw the demonstration from a broader policy perspective, with three regional offices processing applications of participating seniors. The state agency contracted with CRT to deliver services and implement food distribution.

The project director, a staff member at DSS headquarters in Hartford, acted as the liaison between CRT and the regional offices. Upon receiving the grant, she outlined detailed procedures for local DSS supervisors and managers. The management teams ensured that their staff carried out policies and procedures according to the demonstration's design, and served as conduits of information between the project director and caseworkers. The director also trained caseworkers as to their roles and responsibilities, which included (1) assisting with outreach by discussing the commodities benefit option with all new applicants and seniors up for recertification, and (2) coordinating with CRT to track new clients and those not picking up their food bags.

CRT assumed complete control of day-to-day operations. Staff nutritionists designed the commodity packages with input from USDA, as well as the nutritional surveys. The organization was responsible for ordering and storing commodities, and assembling and delivering food packages. A driver, who also delivered food for the organization's food pantry, handled most of these activities. In addition, CRT hired a full-time outreach coordinator exclusively for the demonstration to oversee day-to-day operational details. She was the main contact person at CRT if clients or DSS staff had questions. In addition, she coordinated the number and types of packages delivered to each site, and was in charge of public education efforts. CRT volunteers also delivered packages to at-home demonstration clients who participated in the agency's Meals on Wheels program.

Management Structure and Lines of Authority

The project director convened quarterly coordination meetings attended by supervisory staff from the regional DSS offices and program staff from CRT. This provided stakeholders an opportunity to share information, make decisions about demonstration procedures, and brainstorm solutions for problems that emerged. For example, at one such meeting, program officials decided how to address the situation of clients neglecting to pick up food bags twice in a row. Participants generally arrived at decisions at the quarterly meetings by consensus. Still, the director and her supervisor, the state food stamp director, maintained final decision-making authority and responsibility for the grant.

CRT made decisions about various day-to-day operations with official approval from the state DSS office. Within the organization itself, the outreach coordinator and driver reported to the director and assistant director of nutrition. It seems that decision-making was top down (i.e., the director and assistant director of nutrition made all decisions) rather than collaborative in nature.

Means of Communication and Related Issues

To maintain communication, the project director relied on quarterly coordination meetings for DSS management and CRT program staff and minutes of those meetings to remind supervisors about key Food Connection policies and procedures, as well as on informal, sporadic e-mail notifications highlighting changes or clarifications. Despite this, there was a general breakdown in communication, particularly among local office staff. The project director learned—often in roundabout ways—that caseworkers were either misinterpreting or disregarding information from their training, or from circulated memos or e-mails from their supervisors. For example:

- At least one caseworker told seniors that there was a waiting list for The Food Connection; there was never a waiting list.
- Some caseworkers presented the commodity benefit option only to those applicants who would qualify for less than the value of the food packages (\$43 or \$46) in EBT benefits; there was no such rule.
- DSS staff frequently did not take the initiative to bring up the demonstration during the eligibility interview, instead relying solely on brochures inserted into application packets for their outreach efforts.
- One caseworker mentioned The Food Connection only when seniors complained about receiving just \$10 in food stamps.
- CRT reported that sometimes DSS assured clients that commodity packages could be delivered to their homes.

Relations between regional DSS offices and CRT were strained at times, possibly due to caseworkers not following outlined procedures for the demonstration, as well as to initial logistical oversights. Due to confusion surrounding the first month's distribution schedule and procedures, seniors flooded the regional offices with questions about where and when to pick up food. This issue was resolved after the first month or so, but it did not set the stage for cooperation between the two staffs. The two groups had different impressions on how difficult it was to contact each other by phone. Caseworkers heard anecdotal accounts of seniors who could not reach CRT program staff, though some of this may be explained by the fact that seniors are less comfortable leaving voice mail messages and/or do not own phones or answering machines.⁵

During the second year, CRT program staff eventually abandoned the policy of coordinating efforts with the regional offices whenever Food Connection clients failed to

⁵ During the first four or five months of operations, the outreach coordinator was difficult to reach because she was busy helping the CRT driver with food distribution.

pick up consecutive packages. The nutritionists concluded that it was easier to have the outreach coordinator contact the seniors to determine what obstacles may have prevented them from getting their food bags and then simply deliver any retroactive packages.⁶

Problems with regional office staff likely stemmed from the excessive caseload sizes and staff shortages in the regional offices. Statewide layoffs and regional office closings led to increased caseloads and stress for remaining caseworkers (discussed later). As caseworkers explained to the research team, they felt too overburdened to spend the time needed to adequately promote the Food Connection.

It is unclear whether any additional efforts from the central Hartford office would have improved implementation at the regional offices. The project director had intended to design a monthly electronic newsletter for supervisors and managers to update staff on relevant information, but decided against it because she did not want to overburden DSS workers who were already under intense stress due to the state budget crisis. But since she was already informing management of procedural changes and reminders, an additional communiqué would not have been likely to make a significant difference. Even with the quarterly coordinator meetings and departmental newsletters, there was no guarantee that supervisors passed the information on to front-line staff and monitored operations to ensure that the demonstration was being implemented effectively at DSS.

Training

The project director conducted training for regional DSS staff, including management and caseworkers, before the demonstration began. (The same training was repeated once after DSS was restructured). Depending on the size of local staff, she held two or three 45-minute sessions at each regional office. Social workers, who had a peripheral role in the demonstration, were invited but did not attend.

During the training, the director covered (1) the goals of the demonstration, (2) benefits that seniors would receive by choosing the commodity benefit option, (3) eligibility rules, (4) food distribution logistics, (5) new data fields in the DSS database for tracking Food Connection clients, and (6) information to share with clients for outreach purposes. Importantly, she stressed that caseworkers should not sway seniors' decisions and should inform *all* FSP applicants about the commodity benefit option, regardless of their EBT benefit amount. Participants received samples of materials that CRT sends to each new client, including a welcome letter, a description of the regular food package, and a nutritional assessment survey. In addition, the director gave each attendee a handbook version of the Power Point presentation to use as a quick desk reference tool when speaking with clients.

The director did not think that a follow-up training was necessary because everyone seemed to grasp the material. CRT did not hold a formal training for its program staff. The

⁶ They also mentioned that it was too difficult to include the clients' names and DSS identification numbers on the lists sent to the regional offices.

only representative from CRT who attended the DSS training was the supervisor of the person in charge of delivering food packages, although she was hardly involved in the demonstration.

Outreach Strategies

Program officials envisioned a two-pronged approach for reaching seniors. Intake workers at the regional offices would inform new applicants and seniors up for recertification about the demonstration, while an outreach coordinator would focus on public education efforts. Initially, caseworkers served as the primary vehicle for publicizing the demonstration because the outreach coordinator needed to assist with food distribution until operations stabilized. DSS distributed a handful of mass mailings to current elderly FSP clients, notifying them of the upcoming demonstration, as well as to food assistance organizations. Caseworkers, however, did not consistently promote The Food Connection with new senior applicants and those up for recertification. The outreach coordinator from CRT launched an active public education campaign by distributing written materials and making community presentations, yet the impact from her efforts seemed to be limited. Stakeholders generated ideas for community collaborations as a means to help spread the word about the demonstration, but nothing ever came to fruition.

Before The Food Connection, DSS did not conduct any FSP outreach and applications were available only at regional offices. A few community initiatives focused on this issue. End Hunger Connecticut!, a hunger advocacy member organization, received a USDA grant in 2000 to launch a two-year initiative to increase elderly FSP participation rates. Activities included prescreening for food stamp eligibility, application assistance, and a telephone helpline. In addition, the non-profit organization Connecticut Association for Human Services delivered presentations at senior centers and housing complexes to educate seniors about the FSP. It published a 63-page guide on available food resources entitled *How to Get Food in Connecticut*.

Core Themes and Target Audiences. When describing The Food Connection to potential food stamp applicants, CRT and DSS staff usually focused on the higher net gain in benefits that many seniors could expect from commodities, as opposed to an EBT card. A common tactic used by caseworkers was to ask seniors who qualified only for the minimum food stamp benefit level, “How many groceries can you buy for \$10?” CRT also emphasized the variety of food items that clients would receive and their choice among three package types.

Within the first few months of operations, DSS distributed a special mailing to current FSP clients announcing the alternative commodity benefit option; this mailing included a sign-up form that seniors could fill out and return. This first mailing was sent to approximately 3,600 seniors.

The CRT outreach campaign, which focused on public presentations, began around the fifth month of the demonstration. Despite these efforts, DSS staff remarked that during the second site visit that they rarely received telephone calls, walk-ins, or applications due to

community outreach. This could have been explained by the fact that many staff did not appear to raise awareness of the demonstration with seniors, nor did it seem that DSS staff routinely tracked how applicants heard about The Food Connection.

Not surprisingly, CRT initially focused its outreach on its Meals on Wheels and congregate meal clients. These individuals were familiar already with the agencies' services, and program staff believed they would be eligible for the FSP. Afterwards, the outreach coordinator focused on all seniors in the 10 participating towns, though in the beginning, she concentrated her efforts in the Manchester region, due to low enrollment through the demonstration.

Written Materials. DSS and CRT used written materials to promote the demonstration to potential clients. The community agency designed the flyers, brochures, posters, and food package descriptions.

The central DSS office sent Food Connection brochures to food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, and transitional shelters to encourage service providers to refer clients. Caseworkers inserted flyers into the regular application package (materials would not fit into recertification packages), and the central office in Hartford included a brochure in the recertification packets. During the second year of operations, the regional office in Manchester mailed brochures to about 400 FSP households that received less than \$46 in food stamp benefits.

CRT's outreach coordinator periodically hung posters in groceries, pharmacies, and churches, along with atypical locations like laundromats and pawn shops. She also placed flyers on meal trays in all of CRT's senior cafés (i.e., congregate meal sites) and inserted flyers into the hot meal packages for those Meals on Wheels clients served by CRT. According to the nutrition director, the outreach coordinator distributed posters and brochures to all food banks, pantries, and soup kitchens at least three times. To encourage using the commodities in creative, affordable ways, the coordinator designed a cookbook containing various recipes that drew upon the items in the Food Connection packages. The cookbook also included cooking and food storage tips.

Community Presentations. According to the project director and program staff, the outreach coordinator delivered multiple community presentations on a fairly regular basis. Within the first few months of outreach activities, the coordinator conducted presentations at approximately 75 percent of the distribution sites. For example, she gave 54 talks on The Food Connection from January to March 2003. Most sessions took place at senior cafés, but others were at senior housing complexes, churches, community fairs, food pantries, and social service agencies. She always brought samples of the food packages with her, which was an effective method of generating interest among the elderly. Another creative approach was to bake cookies for participants solely with ingredients from the food bags.

Multi Media. CRT relied on multi media techniques to a limited degree. Program staff at the management level—not the outreach coordinator—originally rejected using radio, television, or newspapers to publicize The Food Connection. They reasoned that these media also would reach audiences in the comparison sites, due to the close proximity

of municipalities in this part of the state. However, the assistant nutrition director appeared twice on a local AM radio show to talk about the demonstration. Even though the segments generated some phone inquiries from seniors who did not reside in the pilot sites, staff concluded that possible confusion would outweigh the benefit of reaching more potential applicants.

Community Collaborations. The demonstration had minimal collaborative partnerships, aside from organizations like senior centers and apartment buildings that served as food distribution sites. Their roles were limited to providing space for food pickup, which often took place in their parking lots.

To some degree, program staff attempted to cultivate relationships with community partners but met with little success. From the early days of the demonstration, the project director intended to explore enlisting faith-based groups and other local organizations to deliver commodities on a volunteer basis to seniors who had a demonstrated mobility barrier (for example, a disability or medical condition). This probably would have primarily captured seniors who did not qualify for home delivery through the demonstration because they already received Meals on Wheels services through a non-CRT contractor. When stakeholders discussed this issue at a quarterly coordination meeting, DSS supervisors expressed concerns about using volunteers to deliver foods to non-CRT Meals on Wheels clients. DSS staff worried that they would have no recourse if volunteers were to steal the food packages; if packages were stolen, how would they handle replacement benefits? They also discouraged using high school students because of timing conflicts during the day. Those collaborations that were explored were not fruitful.

The project director did make some headway with the Capitol Conference of Churches, which made a ‘soft’ commitment in the second year, but could only deliver food packages in 1 out of 10 pilot towns. In addition, CRT met with representatives from End Hunger Connecticut! and the Connecticut Association of Human Services to discuss ways that they could contribute to outreach efforts, but nothing came of these meetings.

Staffing Turnover and Shortages

Regional DSS offices grappled with staff shortages resulting primarily from the state budget crisis. In January 2003, less than three months after the demonstration began, the governor’s office projected a \$1 billion deficit for fiscal year 2004.⁷ During that same month, four regional DSS offices were closed. Caseloads from four municipalities transferred to New Britain, and those from four other municipalities transferred to Hartford. Additional staff were not assigned to these sites to manage cases. In fact, office consolidation was accompanied by turnover due to reductions in force (RIF) and early retirement packages.

⁷ The state comptroller announced on April 1, 2004 that the projected budget deficit was actually \$71.4 million.

According to the project director and regional supervisors, higher caseloads and turnover contributed to high stress levels and low morale among front-line workers. At one point during the demonstration, approximately 26 percent of all DSS cases were taking more than 30 days to process. High error rates led to FNS sanctioning the agency.

The project director with the central DSS office and the program staff from CRT remained in their positions throughout the demonstration.

Major Operational Changes During the Demonstration

Program staff instituted several changes, mostly to facilitate food distribution. At the suggestion of FNS, the program staff also modified their policy for dealing with seniors who fail to pick up their packages. In addition, CRT had to scale back some services it initially had planned, due to logistical complications and client demand.

Facilitated Distribution Procedures. CRT took various steps to simplify the food distribution process. Even before operations began, the nutrition staff decided not to use the site managers from its congregate meal sites to oversee food delivery and manage the paperwork (i.e., keeping track of who picked up packages and doing counts of leftovers). They were concerned that involving so many additional people would unnecessarily complicate procedures. It seemed easier to let the driver oversee the paperwork, with the assistant nutrition director's supervision. Other measures taken within the first few months included:

- CRT reduced the number of distribution sites from 21 to 16 (two in New Britain and three in Hartford) because very few clients frequented some sites. This helped simplify the delivery route. In determining which sites to eliminate, CRT ensured that those affected seniors would not have to travel farther to pick up food bags.
- The driver began inserting butter and cheese into food bags when seniors arrived at the distribution site, instead of in advance. This method saved the driver time if he had to take these items out of the food bags and replace them in the refrigerators upon returning to the warehouse. Other changes in assembly procedures cut the per-bag assembly time from 10 minutes to 5 minutes.
- Seniors originally could select the sites where they would pick up their Food Connection packages. However, after program staff recognized that it would be too difficult for them to ensure that the correct number of packages arrived at a given location, they began assigning clients to sites based on home address.
- CRT incorporated holidays into the delivery schedule and created monthly calendars to remind seniors of the dates, times, and locations for food distribution. Staff inserted updated calendars into food bags during each delivery.

Missed Packages. Program staff altered the policy for handling demonstration clients who failed to pick up their food bags several times in a row, either in person or through a proxy. The first policy dictated that after CRT identified which seniors missed multiple packages, a DSS caseworker tried to contact the senior by telephone to determine if he or she wanted to remain in The Food Connection. If staff could not reach them after a few attempts, the case was passed to a social worker who would continue trying to reach the senior by telephone or, if necessary, with a home visit. A DSS social worker also delivered retroactive packages, which occurred fewer than a dozen times overall. The outreach coordinator began calling seniors the day of their scheduled pickup to remind them, which seemed to help the situation.

During the second year, FNS suggested that that DSS automatically switch any senior participating in The Food Connection to EBT benefits who missed three consecutive pickups. CRT staff were supposed to forward monthly lists of such clients to the regional offices, and social workers would deliver retroactive packages so that seniors would not lose any food stamp benefits.

Choice in Commodity Items. CRT originally envisioned granting Food Connection clients the option of indicating preferences for certain food items—essentially giving a food order. For example, seniors might inform CRT that they would like to receive peaches, peanut butter, and wheat bread some time in the next month. However, due to the unpredictability of which commodities were available from the USDA at a given time, and to the fact that USDA orders must be placed months in advance, the organization instead allowed seniors to choose among three package types. In hindsight, program staff acknowledged that this was a blessing in disguise because such wide-ranging choices would have been difficult to coordinate and manage.

Changes in Outreach. After the first year, the outreach coordinator shifted her strategy and began to conduct more one-on-one sessions with interested seniors in locations such as senior centers and grocery stores, as opposed to group presentations. (There is at least anecdotal evidence that some of these one-on-one sessions included application assistance.)

Nutritional Consultant. CRT decided against hiring a nutritional consultant to conduct cooking presentations for seniors at congregate meal sites. While these events would have incorporated a nutrition education element into the demonstration, program staff concluded that seniors did not tend to remain at senior centers to socialize once they picked up their food packages. Likewise, they would be unlikely to stay for cooking demonstrations.

DESIGNING THE DEMONSTRATION

Program Design

The principal goal of The Food Connection was to increase elderly FSP participation rates by offering an alternative commodity benefit option, which might address some traditional barriers that seniors face in applying for food stamps (for example, minimum

benefit amounts not outweighing burden of applying to the FSP). Moreover, program officials hoped to improve the nutritional status of demonstration participants. The state worked with a community action agency—the demonstration’s service provider—during the planning stage. Even though the agency had years of experience in nutrition-related service delivery, some changes to the demonstration’s design might have contributed to a more effective program.

Who Was Involved and How It Unfolded. The initial plan for the demonstration design began with the central DSS office in Hartford. The state food stamp program director chose the commodity model to use as the basis for its application. The rationale for this choice was that the FS Director did not want to run two separate FS programs for the elderly.

After devising a basic framework for the demonstration, the agency needed to contract with an outside service provider to manage food distribution. The state selected the Community Renewal Team, Inc. (CRT), a community action agency that has operated several social service programs since 1963, including Meals on Wheels, congregate meal sites, and quarterly nutrition education classes. The primary reasons why DSS chose CRT were its infrastructure capacity and years of experience with large-scale food distribution.

Both groups wrote portions of the grant application, and the project director oversaw and advised CRT as it designed service delivery specifications. To avoid a burdensome procurement process, the agency reached an agreement to order commodities directly from the federal government instead of the Connecticut Department of Agricultural Services. Staff nutritionists then developed the content of the commodities packages, with feedback from the USDA. They also created a name and logo for the demonstration, as well as publicity materials. Program staff rearranged CRT’s warehouse to accommodate food storage and the process of assembling bags, which included installing a fence for security purposes and ordering two refrigerators for the perishable items. Meanwhile, the project director also designed and delivered training to the regional offices on their new roles for The Food Connection.

Changes to the Design in Hindsight

If DSS were to expand The Food Connection to other parts of the state, program officials might consider measures that could facilitate the program’s implementation and improve its effectiveness. With regard to publicity and outreach, program officials could have priced out the contents of the packages and used this as a selling point. Evaluators performed a cost comparison using average per item pricing.⁸ They discovered that if seniors were to go to a grocery store, they could expect to pay between \$60 and \$70 for the

⁸ Price information was collected on February 18, 2004 at the main grocery store in the Hartford area.

same items. Pricing data could be included on publicity materials, as well as being shared by caseworkers when speaking with applicants during their interviews.

Another outreach strategy would have been to photograph the three commodity packages and distribute prints to all front-line DSS staff. This would have made it easier for caseworkers to promote the program and to answer questions about package contents.

To help improve food distribution in an expanded program, officials might want to place more effort up front—ideally before operations begin—to enlist potential volunteers who could deliver food packages to those clients for whom traveling to the pick-up sites poses a significant burden. The project director speculated that having a plan in place for at least a small pool of home delivery volunteers should have been a requirement in the RFP process that contractors would need to address when applying for the grant.

Finally, CRT staff who played a direct role in The Food Connection should have attended the initial training for staff at the participating DSS regional offices. Allowing the two groups to meet may have helped build better working relations and communication practices. These sessions also would have provided an opportunity for the outreach coordinator to bring samples of the food packages and possibly would have motivated DSS staff about the commodities benefit option.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

A limited public transportation system and a low concentration of grocery store chains were two factors that could have influenced The Food Connection's implementation and elderly participation levels in the FSP. The public bus system in the Hartford area makes it difficult for residents to get around the city. The system requires that all bus lines travel into a central hub station downtown to transfer to different lines. Based on this configuration, a person who needs to go a few miles might end up traveling several miles, depending on the necessary routes. If a senior did not have a car or a relative or neighbor on whom they could rely, then reaching a Food Connection distribution site via public transportation might have been perceived as more trouble than any perceived benefit from the commodities alternative.

Moreover, up until a year or so after the demonstration began, Hartford residents could only shop for groceries at small mom and pop establishments or mini-marts that traditionally charge higher prices. A large grocery store opened recently on the outskirts of Hartford (in fact, it was only a couple of miles away from West Hartford), but it cannot conveniently serve the entire metropolitan area. Given these limited options for grocery shopping, some seniors might now find the commodity benefit option more appealing than purchasing fewer items at higher prices with EBT cards.

CHALLENGES

Program staff faced multiple challenges in implementing The Food Connection. Several issues suggest that groups interested in replicating the commodity benefit option should think through the logistics of food distribution very carefully. Challenges included

the complexities involved in food distribution, less than enthusiastic support from the regional DSS offices and upper-level program staff within CRT, and difficulty in meeting taste and dietary preferences.

Complexity of Food Distribution

Stakeholders repeatedly emphasized how complex food distribution was throughout the demonstration. Program staff mitigated some problems by modifying procedures along the way, such as making changes to the distribution schedule to account for holidays and assigning each client to one pick-up site according to their home addresses. Still, even after streamlining operations, multiple challenges remained that complicated the commodity distribution system. Examples of delivery problems included:

- Transporting the food packages was burdensome for some clients, especially if they did not have friends or relatives who could (1) drive them to the pick-up site, or (2) receive packages as a proxy.
- Food distribution was complex and labor-intensive. Staff operated out of a central warehouse and made two or three deliveries on most weekdays—except on holidays or in severe winter weather. The driver loaded and unloaded packages several times each day, including missed packages. Finally, the driver tracked all paperwork while in the field.
- Conditions in CRT’s warehouse were not ideal for receiving and assembling commodities. The pavement in front of the delivery bay was sloped away from the building, making it very difficult to load and unload deliveries onto the van. In addition, the warehouse was neither heated nor air conditioned, yet staff spent a lot of time considerable amounts of time in the warehouse assembling commodities.
- The actual weight of the packages (20 to 30 pounds each) far exceeded the advertised weight (15 to 20 pounds each), which was a common complaint from seniors.
- Clients found the pick-up times (10 a.m. to 1 p.m. twice a month) to be too narrow and inflexible. Only one or two sites allowed seniors to come until 5 p.m. or make special arrangements with on-site staff (for example, a senior center director).
- Seniors who received letters from the initial promotional efforts from CRT did not know where to send the sign-up forms; no address was included. These forms also did not include a space for the applicant’s name or identification number, which made processing the paperwork more difficult for DSS staff.
- The first few months of food delivery were problematic. CRT did not take holidays into account when developing the distribution schedule; clients were

initially allowed to choose their pick-up site but some still did not know where to go; and at some sites the seniors did not know where to pick up food due to a lack of signage, or were turned away by on-site staff who did not know anything about the demonstration.

- Only Meals on Wheels (MOW) clients who received services from CRT qualified to have Food Connection packages delivered with their hot meals. Other MOW clients were responsible for making alternative arrangements for obtaining food packages.

Initial delivery glitches delayed the publicity and public education campaign for several months because the outreach coordinator had to help the driver with assembling and delivering food packages until distribution procedures stabilized.

Minimal Support from Stakeholders

Another significant challenge was an almost indifferent attitude from many stakeholders involved in the demonstration. To the research team, it was clear that two key groups—many DSS caseworkers and some CRT staff—had not bought into the demonstration.

After meeting with caseworkers, it was clear to the research team that many caseworkers viewed their role in the demonstration as additional work that would have little value to their clients. As a result, many did the bare minimum to promote the demonstration and some did even less. Caseworkers told the research team that they did not have the time to promote the demonstration, and their expectation seemed to be that clients would not like it anyway.

Moreover, it was clear that caseworkers did not have a full understanding of the eligibility rules for participating in the Food Connection. As a result, many were not implementing the demonstration appropriately. At least a few of them shared inaccurate information (for example, that a waiting list was in effect for the demonstration when in fact there was no waiting list) or used inconsistent procedures (for example, only telling seniors who qualified for less than \$43 or \$46 in food stamps about the commodity benefit option). Additionally, two regional offices did not reorder brochures when staff ran out during the second year, even though this would have only required filling out some paperwork. Apparently, some staff would have benefited from more hands-on oversight and monitoring from supervisors, which seemed to be fairly minimal.

A key context for understanding the attitudes of caseworkers is the stressful period of statewide layoffs and office closures, which resulted in substantial increases in worker caseloads. These changes coincided with the start of the demonstration. Thus, within the larger DSS system serving the Hartford region, the details of the relatively small Food Connection program were clearly lost in the stress of working in a crisis mode.

Low expectations also seemed to compromise the efforts of CRT. CRT management told the research team that, given their experience in running large-scale food distribution programs, they never expected the Food Connection to work. They did not believe that

elderly individuals would prefer the packages, given the difficulties with distribution, and they assumed that USDA was funding the commodity demonstration simply to demonstrate that the commodity program would not work. This left the research team questioning whether the outcomes in Connecticut reflected a self-fulfilling prophecy. Anecdotal evidence exists that senior CRT staff limited their efforts within the demonstration. While more junior staff at CRT were much more enthusiastic, their ideas were on occasion reined in by senior staff. Moreover, given the multiple logistical problems that arose, the research team was left to wonder whether more creative solutions to those problems would have been found if the senior CRT staff had expectations of success.

Outreach

Another key challenge was the lack of apparent impact of one-on-one outreach. CRT hired an outreach coordinator to promote the program. The coordinator made presentations about the program to groups of seniors in the demonstration towns. By her account, many seniors expressed interest in the program and told her they would apply. However, often these seniors never did participate in the Food Connection. One explanation is that the seniors never followed through with their intent to apply, or that they were simply being nice when they indicated they would apply. Another explanation is that seniors started the application process but became frustrated and discouraged and never fully enrolled. Still another reason may be that caseworkers never offered these clients the option for the Food Connection, and because the clients did not know they should ask (or were afraid to ask), they ended up enrolled in the traditional FSP program.

Taste and Dietary Preferences

While The Food Connection offered seniors an alternative to traditional food stamps, stakeholders spoke about the difficulty in satisfying clients' tastes and dietary needs. Some advocacy groups criticized the high sodium content in the food packages and the lack of fresh produce. Similarly, caseworkers recounted situations in which clients complained about the unsuitability of many commodities for diabetics. DSS staff speculated that more seniors would have been interested in the demonstration if (1) they could have selected the commodities, like a food order, and/or (2) frozen meat or poultry had been included in the food packages. Some caseworkers and at least one community advocate worried that seniors equated The Food Connection with a food pantry model, serving as a mechanism for the federal government to offload agricultural surpluses on the elderly.

Indeed, the results of the survey of elderly FSP clients in Hartford provide some support for this conclusion. The survey, conducted as part of the evaluation, asked FSP clients not participating in the Food Connection why they did not participate. The most common response was that they could get the type of food they wanted only if they picked it out themselves. It should be noted, however, that individuals participating in the demonstration generally were satisfied with the content of their packages.

CHAPTER VII

NORTH CAROLINA'S COMMODITY ALTERNATIVE BENEFIT PROGRAM

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services was one of two grantees that selected an alternative commodity benefit model to increase elderly participation in the FSP for the elderly nutrition demonstration. The state agency relied on the local Department of Social Services (DSS) and two community service providers to implement the initiative, which was known locally as the Commodity Alternative Benefit (CAB) program. Instead of EBT food stamp benefits, seniors could choose a monthly food package distributed from a central warehouse. In addition to canned items, cold storage facilities enabled the program to offer butter, cheese, and frozen meat and poultry to clients.

OPERATIONAL DETAILS

Mechanics of Services

Alamance County, which was selected as the demonstration site for the CAB program, is served by the local DSS office in Burlington, the largest city in the county. DSS has simplified procedures for seniors who apply for food stamps. Eligibility interviews usually can be scheduled the same day for walk-in applicants, and caseworkers use alternative procedures for elderly residents who face barriers in traveling to the Burlington office. Few changes were made to FSP procedures as a result of the demonstration. DSS staff collaborate with two community partners for the demonstration—the Alamance County Community Services Agency (ACCSA) and the Vocational Trades of Alamance (VTA).

FSP Characteristics in the Absence of the Demonstration. North Carolina uses a two-page food stamp application for all age groups. This application can be downloaded from the agency's website. Most applicants in Alamance County, including seniors, apply in person at the local DSS office in Burlington. Caseworkers frequently conduct the face-to-face eligibility interviews that same day, with a waiting time of 30 to 45 minutes. During the half-hour eligibility interview, caseworkers verify income, assets, rent or mortgage payments,

utilities, and medical expenses. If additional verification paperwork is needed, staff compile a list of items and instruct applicants to submit the documentation by mail, fax, or in person.

Applicants also can request a food stamp application by phone and submit it to DSS by mail. If seniors encounter any barriers that prevent them from traveling to the Burlington office (for example, having a medical condition or not having transportation), caseworkers can use their discretion in employing an alternative solution. Two options consist of (1) conducting a home visit to do the interview in person or (2) waiving the face-to-face interview and conducting it by telephone. Given the general time constraints of staff, caseworkers prefer the latter option, since it entails less time away from the office. Recertification cases, which take place annually, still require a face-to-face interview. Seniors who face significant access barriers can receive a home visit to recertify.

Changes in FSP Policies and Procedures. Overall, procedures for processing food stamp applications underwent minimal changes. Caseworkers offered the commodity benefit option only to new applicants and recertifying seniors who qualified for less than \$70 in food stamp benefits.¹ Some staff also tried to informally screen out seniors who would not have been viable candidates by asking questions about their cooking habits. For example, they determined whether the person primarily ate frozen meals or prepares home-cooked meals. Furthermore, DSS staff in Burlington also coordinated case management with community service providers, as described in the next section.

CAB Case Management. The local DSS office worked with ACCSA and VTA to ensure that the appropriate clients either registered for commodities or transferred to EBT benefits if necessary. The close proximity of ACCSA to the Burlington office helped facilitate the sharing of critical information. Moreover, within the first year of operations, one caseworker was assigned to serve as the primary contact for demonstration program staff and handle all CAB clients.

If a senior selected the commodities option, a caseworker flagged him or her in the DSS database and forwarded the contact information to ACCSA. Caseworkers distributed lists of new enrollees at least once a week, with ACCSA receiving a master list once a month. The agency compared names of new clients with the most current master list to verify who had dropped out of the program. The ACCSA program manager called the new enrollees to welcome them to the program and explain the food distribution progress. While home delivery was an option, it was not explicitly offered to clients. However, if clients indicated that they could not participate because of transportation, ACCSA made home deliveries.

The program manager also called those seniors who no longer were enrolled in the FSP because they had failed to meet the recertification deadline. Many CAB participants did not recertify, since they assumed that they were exempt from this requirement. Consequently, the program manager emphasized to clients that they still had to recertify for food stamps

¹ Seventy dollars was the average amount that seniors would spend if they were to purchase the food items contained in the commodity packages at a local grocery store.

and encouraged them to call their caseworker for an interview in order to continue receiving commodities.²

If seniors wanted to transfer to EBT benefits, they either informed their caseworkers directly or notified ACCSA, who in turn ensured that DSS received the information. Caseworkers reclassified those participants in the agency's database who had left the demonstration, and activated their EBT cards for the following month.

Contents of the Commodity Packages. Seniors received one of two food package types each month. Packages varied slightly in terms of items and/or quantities (for example, two versus three cans of pears, and one can of tuna versus no tuna). Each monthly delivery consisted of six bags; the larger number of bags reduced the weight per bag, and this helped make carrying the food deliveries easier for the elderly. Five bags contained canned foods, and one bag contained butter, cheese, and frozen meat and poultry. Together, the six bags weighed between 72 and 75 pounds. It would have cost about \$70 to purchase all of the contents in either of these packages at the local supermarket (Cody and Ohls, 2005).

Commodity Storage and Procurement. Like the demonstration in Connecticut, the CAB model in North Carolina required a lot of preparation before food distribution could begin. First, the ACCSA worked with USDA to approve food baskets that met the dietary requirements of the food pyramid.³ Then, it purchased equipment for VTA to store the commodities. The organization had a warehouse facility with certain equipment, including storage racks and tow motors, but still needed to purchase a freezer, refrigerators, a back-up generator, and a van. It should be noted that even with ample capacity, VTA did not have enough storage space when the first commodity shipment arrived, as it mistakenly included twice the amount of food that was ordered. Staff were not prepared to store the additional refrigerated and frozen items. Fortunately, VTA was able to secure the cooperation of the local school district, which allowed the organization to temporarily store the spillover inventory in its facilities. Having such a back-up contingency plan was critical, especially since the commodity packages included perishable items.

With the necessary equipment ordered, VTA established a system for receiving, sorting, storing, and assembling food at its warehouse, and also placed the first commodity order with USDA. It initially received a half truckload of commodities from USDA every other

² From time to time the program manager conducted a home visit to explain the recertification process if seniors were particularly confused, reasoning that face-to-face conversations more effectively conveyed information than telephone conversations.

³ The first commodity package that was designed by a local food bank—the initial community partner that would have been in charge of commodity acquisition and distribution but dropped out before the demonstration began—was based on prior client preferences and contained a high proportion of meat and cheese. USDA rejected this first food package because it lacked nutritional balance. Consequently, program planners modified the commodity package under VTA to include poultry and meat, as well as additional types of food items to achieve more variety from the four food groups.

month, with orders being placed two months in advance. VTA became somewhat frustrated because they could only purchase a half truckload of food at a time, which meant that only certain foods could be ordered in a given month. Furthermore, sometimes specific items were not available from USDA when the order was placed. Thus, considerable planning was involved in terms of which types of foods to order in advance so that VTA could have them in stock for future distribution. During the second year, VTA started to order full truckloads of food every other month to be more efficient and able to order a wider variety of food items at any one time.

Commodity deliveries arrived during the first two weeks of each month, which is why program staff decided to schedule food distribution for week three. VTA workers⁴ unloaded the food, separated it into commodity groups (for example, fruits, vegetables), and placed items on storage shelves in the warehouse, with newer items on the top shelves. Perishable foods were placed into refrigerators and freezers. Packages (five bags for each elderly participant) were assembled in advance of pickup using items from the bottom storage shelves first; frozen and refrigerated items were put into the sixth bag on the day of pickup or delivery. Processing each delivery was a time-consuming task. It took 15 VTA workers approximately four days to unload the truck, sort the items, and assemble food bags with non-perishable items. Nevertheless, because VTA had a large number of workers overall, it always had several workers on hand to assist with receiving, storing, and assembling the commodities, as well as distributing them.

Food Distribution. Using a single distribution pick-up site model, CAB participants (or their designated representatives) picked up their commodity packages every third Tuesday and Wednesday at VTA's warehouse in downtown Burlington. At their first pickup after enrollment, seniors received an identification card and a schedule of distribution dates for the calendar year. Individuals drove up to the receiving dock, where VTA workers loaded the food (contained in several grocery bags) into vehicles. Staff could accommodate about 13 cars per hour. The weight of food bags was not an issue since seniors usually had a friend or relative assisting them.⁵ If seniors missed a pickup, they could either come to the warehouse the following day or make arrangements with VTA to come on a non-designated food distribution day. The program manager called those households that did not contact the organization by the end of the month to coordinate a pickup. Over time, the manager recognized which clients would benefit from a reminder call.

⁴ VTA is a nonprofit rehabilitation agency that gives employment opportunities and services to mentally- and physically-challenged adults. VTA staff who handled food packages were called "VTA clients." To avoid confusion when referring to food stamp clients, this profile identifies VTA clients as "workers."

⁵ Program staff estimated that approximately 30 percent of commodity pickups were received by the client alone, 30 percent by the client accompanied by a friend or relative, and 40 percent by a designated representative of the client.

Home delivery was available to those clients who could not easily access the warehouse. While program staff did not advertise this service, they were liberal in approving home delivery if a senior inquired about it, or if staff easily detected a barrier such as physical immobility. ACCSA estimated that approximately one-third of all demonstration clients took advantage of this home-delivery service. Common delivery locations tended to be in more rural and remote areas, as well as senior housing complexes. A van was equipped with a portable cooler to safely transport frozen food items. At each stop, six bags were placed in a plastic container, and the driver brought the containers into the home and put the food away at the senior's request. In the rare event that a client was not home, a neighbor met the driver or staff returned at a later time.

As was the case with processing USDA commodity deliveries at the warehouse, home delivery runs were time consuming. The van held enough food bags for 24 seniors, which meant that completing an entire delivery cycle took two full days. Staff also called home-delivery households in advance to notify them of the date and general time-frame for package delivery.

Major Stakeholders and Roles

Four primary stakeholders from the public and non-profit sectors were involved in the demonstration. These included the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) at the state level, the Alamance County Division of Social Services (DSS), the Alamance County Community Services Agency (ACCSA), and Vocational Trades of Alamance (VTA).⁶

Representatives from the DHHS office in Raleigh decided to apply for the USDA grant and spearheaded preparing the application. The agency contributed to the decision-making process in the planning phase and broadly oversaw the demonstration. Staff from DSS in Alamance County gave input on the grant application and the demonstration's design. While DSS did not officially receive and disperse grant dollars through its office, it served as the main intermediary between the state agency and the community partners. FSP managers provided guidance to ACCSA as needed and delivered training to the subcontractors on food stamp policies. DSS caseworkers assisted ACCSA with outreach and collaborated with them on case management.

Two local organizations were responsible for service provision and public education efforts. A community action program with past experience in collaborating with the county, ACCSA runs congregate meal sites and an emergency food pantry. The agency administered the demonstration, which included coordinating case management efforts with DSS, leading outreach efforts, and preparing quarterly reports for DHHS. Specifically, the program manager conducted community-based outreach (for example, presentations at senior

⁶ ACCSA and VTA replaced the Loaves & Fishes Christian Food Ministry, the original subcontractor for the grant. This transition is addressed in subsequent sections.

centers), handled administrative duties, and interfaced with clients to ensure a seamless enrollment process.

The VTA subcontracted with area businesses to perform light assembly, packaging, sorting and inspection work. The VTA has an expansive 87,000 square foot facility that can accommodate multiple “jobs” simultaneously. For instance, during one visit by the research team, VTA workers in one section of the facility were packaging kits for making quilts, and workers in another section were packaging medical products, while a handful of other workers helped load commodity packages into seniors’ cars during pickup. This organization played a central role in the demonstration. VTA workers unloaded USDA commodity trucks, sorted and stored food, assembled commodity packages, and loaded packages into seniors’ cars. The cost of these VTA services amounted to \$5 per commodity package. Because VTA was the pickup location, community members directly associated it with the CAB program.

Management Structure and Lines of Authority

The core decision-making team consisted of representatives from DHHS, DSS in Alamance County, and ACCSA, although the state office in Raleigh had ultimate authority over the program. The director of the ACCSA oversaw two staff members who worked full-time on the day-to-day operations, one of whom worked on-site at VTA to facilitate communication and cooperation between the two community-based organizations. County food stamp staff retained control over FSP policies and procedures. (North Carolina’s FSP is county-based, so many policy decisions are made at the local level.)

Means of Communication and Related Issues

Overall, relations between the various stakeholders and with CAB participants were quite positive. ACCSA communicates frequently with the local food stamp office, which was conveniently located one block away. The two groups had worked together in the past on other initiatives, which helped establish a good working relationship and allowed them to more easily coordinate activities for the demonstration. In September 2003, a DSS supervisor assigned one caseworker to handle demonstration clients and streamline procedures. ACCSA and VTA communicated regularly as well, most notably due to one ACCSA employee who worked part-time for the demonstration on site at VTA’s headquarters.

In addition, program staff strove to maintain good communication with seniors. ACCSA staff telephoned all new clients to welcome them personally to the demonstration, explain the rules and procedures for obtaining commodities, and determine if home delivery was necessary. These personal touches helped promote smooth operations and minimize confusion for seniors.

Training

Program officials arranged for training to prepare stakeholders for the commodities benefit option. First, Second Harvest food bank staff delivered a session on food handling, safety, and distribution to the two primary staff members from ACCSA. They also relayed relevant information to the VTA workers who handle the commodity packages.

In addition, ACCSA met with front-line workers and their supervisors at the county office in Burlington. Staff gave an overview of the CAB program, while caseworkers talked about food stamp policies and procedures, as well as how they would transfer current FSP clients who chose the commodity benefit option. To gain a better understanding of DSS procedures, the ACCSA program manager spent several hours a few weeks before the demonstration began observing caseworkers process food stamp applications.

Outreach Strategies

ACCSA conducted outreach efforts to the community using a variety of methods. It also relied on caseworkers to inform new FSP applicants and those seniors up for recertification about the commodity benefit option. Before the demonstration, DSS had not conducted much FSP outreach, and applications were available only at the county office in Burlington.⁷

Core Themes and Methods. Based on outreach conducted within the first several months using community presentations and media venues, the program manager from ACCSA concluded that in-person contact was the most effective means of informing seniors about and generating their interest in the demonstration. This was primarily because staff could immediately answer questions and address concerns that seniors may have had. For example, during the first MPR site visit, evaluators learned that two community presentations to groups of 25 attendees resulted in about a dozen seniors applying to the CAB program. Presentations also generated dozens of phone inquiries to DSS and ACCSA each month.

In contrast, program officials did not find multi media to be particularly effective. Some seniors who lived in the more rural, remote regions of Alamance County did not subscribe to the local newspaper. Moreover, not all seniors subscribed to cable television, which was how the public service announcements were broadcast. Thus, after an initial wave of television segments, newspaper articles, and dissemination of brochures throughout the county during the first several months, staff relied on community presentations as the primary means of public education.

⁷ ACCSA stopped promoting the CAB program in the summer of 2004. Because the demonstration was due to end in the fall of 2004, staff did not want to encourage seniors to join a program that was to end several months later. Clients who inquired on their own, however, were still able to enroll.

Written Materials. ACCSA designed the demonstration's brochures and posters. Even before operations officially began, ACCSA staff distributed materials to all senior centers and public housing agencies in Alamance County, as well as to the local DSS office. In addition, DSS mailed letters to 373 food stamp clients to notify them about the commodity benefit option. During the course of the demonstration, ACCSA also sent materials to churches, senior housing sites, community-based organizations, medical clinics and hospitals, Meals on Wheels service providers, food pantries, pharmacies, and fast food restaurants. In April 2003, VTA inserted copies of a cookbook entitled *Recipe Tips for Healthy, Thrifty Meals* into the food packages to help seniors make best use of their commodities.

Community Networking. As previously discussed, making local presentations at sites that the elderly were likely to frequent was the preferred outreach method for the demonstration. The ACCSA program manager routinely visited places such as churches (where food pantries are often located), senior centers, and apartment complexes. While there were no data to create a causal link between outreach method and enrollment in the CAB program, staff observed that the presentations did generate food stamp applications. For example, they reported that five presentations during the first quarter of the demonstration generated 45 FSP applicants.⁸

Aside from presentations, program staff established a presence in the community through other sponsored events. Staff hosted an information booth at a county-wide festival, and disseminated brochures and accepted food stamp applications at the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program's annual sign-up, which rotates to different public intake sites during a two-week period.

Multi Media. Program staff concentrated on publicizing the CAB program to the media in its earlier stages. Before operations began, ACCSA sent a press release to the local newspaper and cable television station, while DSS contacted media outlets in the county to announce the commodity benefit option. Articles featuring the commodity benefit option appeared in the newspaper every three months, and caseworkers reported that telephone inquiries to DSS increased within the first few days after an article was published. In addition, for the first several months, program staff arranged for television coverage of seniors picking up commodities at VTA's warehouse, and the Burlington office recorded a 30-second video describing the commodity program for a cable television show called *At Your Service*.

Community Collaborations. ACCSA took steps to cultivate other means of reaching seniors through creative partnerships but met with little success. Program staff worked hard to set up agreements with local restaurants and fast food chains to use a tray liner advertising the CAB program. By the summer of 2003, ACCSA had produced thousands of liners and four eating establishments were using them. However, by the second year, the advertising campaign had only taken hold in a few businesses due to limitations placed on local

⁸ From the October to December 2002 quarterly report submitted by the Alamance County Department of Social Services to the USDA Food and Nutrition Service.

franchises by corporate headquarters. ACCSA noted that few seniors seemed to inquire about the demonstration as a result of the tray liners.

Staffing Turnover and Related Issues

The most significant staffing change occurred when the original contracted service provider, the Loaves & Fishes Christian Food Ministry, severed its contract with DHHS in the summer of 2002. Originally, this non-profit organization intended to oversee the demonstration at the local level and take responsibility for food storage and distribution. Loaves & Fishes withdrew from the grant due to conflicts over the timeliness of reimbursements and federal reporting requirements. Eventually, ACCSA assumed the overseeing role and contracted with VTA to manage food operations.

Moderate staff shortages, not turnover, were an initial concern at the local county DSS office. During the first site visit, 3 out of 13 caseworker slots were vacant, and caseloads were rising. At that time, front-line staff did not then perceive the demonstration to be a burden, especially since over the first several months the program manager from ACCSA helped prepare food stamp applications for some seniors, which were error free. Early on, the Burlington office expressed some reservations about its capacity to handle additional FSP applications resulting from the CAB program, considering that it was short three caseworkers. However, this never became an issue. The DSS supervisor estimated that between 400 and 500 would be the maximum number of CAB clients that the office could manage and still meet its 30-day case processing deadline. The highest number of demonstration participants in a given month was less than 300.

A full-time ACCSA staff member resigned in March 2004. As a critical player in the commodities benefit option, this person's absence could have caused a significant disruption if it had occurred earlier. Yet since operations had been smoothly running for almost a year and a half, other program staff divided his duties for the remainder of the demonstration.

Major Operational Changes During the Demonstration

Few changes occurred in the CAB program, although program staff implemented a few modifications to facilitate procedures. ACCSA also abandoned its plan to consult a nutritionist. The most significant alteration, however, involved eliminating application assistance that the program manager provided to seniors.

Termination of Application Assistance. The most notable change during the demonstration involved the provision of application assistance beyond its scope. Within the first few months, the program manager from ACCSA began helping some seniors complete the food stamp application after delivering public talks about the commodity benefit option. He frequently made arrangements to bring food stamp applications to seniors' homes, helped them fill out the paperwork, collected the necessary documentation, and submitted the packets to DSS. In other cases, he met with seniors at senior center or church halls. The manager adopted this practice because he worried that many elderly would fall through the cracks and choose not to follow through and apply because they felt overwhelmed and

confused by the paperwork. However, upon learning about this practice in 2003, FNS asked him to stop delivering any service that resembled the application assistance model so that the commodity model could be compared with the application assistance model without overlap. DSS staff and the ACCSA director estimated that 15 to 20 percent of the first 213 CAB clients received some help in applying for food stamps.

Facilitated Case Management Procedures. After about 10 months of operations, the supervisor in the Burlington office decided to assign one caseworker to manage all FSP applicants (or current enrollees) who selected the commodity benefit option. Representatives from the community partners found it easier to coordinate efforts and communicate with one person at DSS instead of 13 front-line staff members.

Nutritional Consultant. During the planning phase, ACCSA had planned to hire a nutritionist to examine the commodity packages and offer suggestions that would be appropriate for senior clients with diabetes. In the end, staff did not think that this was necessary because few changes were ever made to the packages.

DESIGNING THE DEMONSTRATION

Program Design

The principal goal of North Carolina's CAB program was to increase elderly participation rates in the FSP by offering food packages as a substitute for EBT benefits. Program officials hoped that monthly commodity baskets worth \$70 in groceries would interest those seniors who would have qualified only for the minimum benefit level, or perhaps a bit higher.

Who Was Involved and How It Unfolded. State officials from the DHHS office in Raleigh selected Alamance County as the site of the demonstration because (1) the local DSS office had garnered the support of an experienced local food bank that could easily apply as the food distributor (Loaves & Fishes), (2) state officials were interested in testing the program in a rural location, and (3) DSS had ongoing experience operating the Commodity Supplemental Food Program.

State officials from the Economic Independence Division within DHHS obtained letters of support and prepared the grant application, with input from the DSS office in Alamance County. The county staff took the lead on designing a commodities model, with feedback from DHHS, modified its database to track demonstration clients, and developed outreach materials. DSS then invited the Loaves & Fishes Christian Food Ministry to join the grant as the food distributor.

To prepare for food storage and distribution and ensure that its facilities and infrastructure could accommodate the CAB program, staff ordered office equipment and equipment needed for food storage (for example, a freezer), installed shelving in its warehouse, and constructed a loading ramp. Representatives from Loaves & Fishes

consulted a nutritionist to develop the contents for three packages, also basing the contents on customer demand from its food bank (specifically, a lot of meat and cheese).

Although these preparations proceeded smoothly, Loaves & Fishes decided to withdraw from the contract in April 2002, shortly before the demonstration was originally slated to begin. It offered two reasons for severing ties with the grantee. First, it believed the local DSS office did not reimburse the organization in a timely manner for expenses incurred. Second, it did not agree with the state's decision to switch from a purchase-of-service contract to a financial services contract, which would have required more auditing responsibilities from the subcontractor. In the end, Loaves & Fishes concluded that the whole process was too frustrating and costly to continue, despite having received its first payment in early April. Other stakeholders attributed these frustrations to Loaves & Fishes' lack of experience working under contract to a government entity.

County officials immediately took steps to replace the subcontractor. It turned to ACCSA, with whom it had worked previously and who had substantial experience delivering services to the elderly, such as running congregate meal sites. The agency obtained approval from its board of directors and collaborated closely with DSS to prepare and resubmit a revised proposal to FNS within six weeks. It revised two of the three original packages designed by Loaves & Fishes to meet USDA's criteria that the commodity option must constitute a nutritionally balanced food basket.

Through its community connections, ACCSA identified and hired the VTA to handle food distribution. VTA is a non-profit community rehabilitation program providing vocational evaluation, adult developmental vocational programming, work adjustment training, sheltered employment, and job placement services to persons with disabilities. VTA appealed to the other partners because it already had a spacious warehouse that could easily accommodate short-term spikes in demand for commodities. Moreover, the program has a large pool of clients to draw upon for assembling and loading food packages. Importantly, it had experience with government contracts.

Over the next few months, before a revised start date of November 2002, the three local partners made final implementation preparations. Core program staff from DSS, ACCSA, and VTA collaborated to develop protocols for case management and home delivery. ACCSA ordered the commodities and purchased commercial-grade refrigerators and freezers, home delivery coolers, and a van. The agency also designed an identification card for seniors, as well as signs to post at the central warehouse to facilitate food distribution and pickup. As official operations were getting underway, ACCSA installed and tested an emergency generator to avoid food spoilage.

Changes to the Design in Hindsight

Food distribution ran relatively smoothly throughout the demonstration and did not require any modifications. However, a few changes regarding publicity and education might have made service delivery more effective overall.

First, program officials could have developed a more targeted outreach strategy in the outlying rural areas of Alamance County. During the planning phase, DSS and ACCSA selected a handful of locations that essentially would have served as satellite distribution sites. Seniors could drive to these sites to pick up food packages at a given time and day each month, just as clients did at the warehouse in Burlington. However, staff decided not to activate these sites until they could identify a minimum number of interested clients in a particular geographic area. For example, it would not have been cost-effective to establish a satellite distribution point for five participants. Reaching potential clients in remote areas is more challenging since there are fewer, if any, public spaces where people congregate, such as community centers. In the end, they concluded that there was no need for an outreach post. At the same time, they never launched a publicity campaign that could have determined whether this was the case.

Second, staff could have incorporated more nutrition education into the CAB program. ACCSA had intended to place more emphasis on nutrition education. Specifically, they wanted to teach seniors how commodities could meet any special dietary needs (for example, diabetes or heart disease). For example, a nutrition consultant could have compiled a pamphlet with tips for food preparation, such as rinsing canned fruits to remove excess sugar. However, this component was never fully developed. Some responses from the customer satisfaction survey suggest that seniors would have benefited from such guidance.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

The fact that Alamance County is rural was an important factor that influenced implementation of the CAB program. The rural nature of the county also could help explain the high levels of enrollment in the CAB program. The DSS office in Burlington serves the entire county, which covers 169 square miles. Public transportation does not serve the region, though a lack of transportation was not cited as a prevalent barrier for the elderly by stakeholders.

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES THAT AROSE

While implementation of the CAB program unfolded relatively smoothly, it encountered a handful of important challenges, some of which could have had serious consequences if stakeholders had not found ready solutions. Program staff struggled with reaching seniors in the outskirts of the county, some clients did not think that commodities adequately met their dietary needs, and there was not adequate freezer space for both the second commodity shipment and surplus food left over from the initial shipment.

Reaching Potential Clients in Remote Areas

Program staff initially intended to open drop-off sites to serve seniors scattered around the outskirts of Alamance County, but they never could identify a minimum threshold demand for commodities or find a large enough concentration of seniors to justify opening a second food distribution site. Perhaps a solution would have included investing additional resources in rural outreach strategies and a more extensive home delivery system.

Dietary Preferences

DSS caseworkers and ACCSA staff heard some evidence that clients were concerned that the food packages did not meet their nutritional needs. Anecdotally, this was the case for seniors who had medical conditions such as high blood pressure or diabetes. One caseworker reported that about one-third of seniors participating in the demonstration worried that the food items were not appropriate for their specialized diets. Other seniors would have liked to receive the frozen meat and poultry in smaller portions. (The quantities were too large to defrost and prepare for a single-person household.) However, surveys conducted by MPR and by ACCSA did not identify significant dissatisfaction with the package contents.

Underestimated Freezer Space

In making preparations for food storage, staff from ACCSA was unsure about the amount of space that it would need to accommodate frozen items. The first order contained an unexpected double order of frozen meat, and the organization did not have a formal contingency plan. The Alamance-Burlington school district quickly agreed to provide supplementary freezer space for the program's commodities as long as it was needed. ACCSA used the school's freezer space for overflow twice during the demonstration before purchasing two additional freezers.

SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

North Carolina's commodity benefit option generated several successful outcomes. First, despite having to select a new subcontractor, other community partners quickly pulled together and implemented an effective food distribution system. Second, the food packages afforded some applicants with a higher value of food stamp benefits than they would have received under the regular program.

Effective Food Distribution Process

Service delivery procedures ran very smoothly throughout the demonstration. VTA was well-suited for its role since it had much of the necessary facilities and equipment in place (for example, tow motors and storage racks). With the exception of freezer space, the large VTA warehouse could easily accommodate the constantly fluctuating amount of commodities that needed to be stored and the space needed to assemble commodity packages.

In addition, ACCSA and VTA cooperated to provide a client-friendly service environment. The warehouse in Burlington was a convenient, central location for many elderly residents, albeit not for those who lived several miles from the main town. Staff could arrange for home delivery for any senior who expressed or demonstrated a need.

Seniors Appreciate Commodities as Compared to EBT Benefits

The commodity benefit option met the needs of some seniors better than traditional food stamps. CAB participants anecdotally reported to program staff that they found the frozen meat and poultry, as well as the fruit, to be particularly appealing. Others mentioned that the demonstration enabled them to try certain food items that they would not have purchased on their own. According to a customer satisfaction survey administered by ACCSA to 233 participants during the first six months, more than 99 percent were pleased with the services. Only one respondent took issue with the commodities, contending that the items did not fit a diabetic's diet.

The demonstration could be particularly appealing to those seniors who qualified only for the minimal food stamp benefit level. Some of them may not have been willing to go through the hassle of applying for only \$10 or \$20 on an EBT card, but conversely found that \$70 of food was worth the effort of dealing with the paperwork. Some seniors anecdotally told program staff or their caseworkers that the larger amounts of food that they received through the CAB program allowed them to have more disposable income to use for other purchases, such as prescription drugs.

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