Family Support: Food

CONTEXT

In one of the country’s wealthiest counties, people are still not having enough to eat every day. In February 1998, Santa Clara County Services Agency completed a total of 1,100 surveys of discontinued Food Stamp recipients and found that more than half (64%) did not have enough food to eat. However, very few used community food programs due largely to lack of information about their availability. According to the Employment Support Initiative (ESI) report, the three language groups heavily affected by Food Stamp cuts included Cambodian, Spanish and Vietnamese.

Legal immigrants arriving after August 22, 1996 face limited access to food stamps, and are often unsure of eligibility because of recent changes in the program and concern that participation will affect immigration status. Although INS clarified that participation in the Food Stamp Program will not affect immigration status, according to California Food Policy Advocates many people are still unsure and fearful of any government programs.

The Agriculture Research, Extension and Education Reform Act of 1998 (Public Law 105-185) restored federal funding for Food Stamp benefits to many legal immigrant populations effective November 1, 1998. The law restored Food Stamps to immigrants who were lawfully in the country as of August 22, 1996 and who are under the age of 18 or who were disabled, blind, or 65 or older on August 22, 1996. The California Food Assistance Program (CFAP) had already restored benefits to children, disabled, and elderly legal immigrants effective September 1, 1997 through a state-funded program. CFAP will be modified to cover non-elderly adult legal immigrants who would otherwise be eligible for federal Food Stamps.

In May 1997, Santa Clara County’s Employment Support Initiative (ESI) formed the Food Safety Net Subcommittee. This subcommittee was formed to specifically address the impact of the discontinuance of Food Stamps for immigrants as well as build a safety net for individuals transitioning from welfare to work. As Food Stamp eligibility was reinstated for many immigrants, the focus of the committee expanded to address the food needs of the county’s low-income population overall, including the undocumented. Santa Clara County has invested nearly a million dollars to improve food access for the poor and immigrants, including a survey of the food needs of immigrants and the purchase of ethnic-specific food.

The Safety Net Food Subcommittee is comprised of representatives from community-based organizations and the faith community, with lead agencies including United Way, Second Harvest Food Bank, and the Social Services Agency. The work of the Food Subcommittee has successfully brought about many changes and improvements, for example in gathering information, coordinating existing resources, expanding food resources, printing multilingual guides to food programs, and increasing public awareness of hunger in Santa Clara County.
FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1: There is limited community outreach and education to immigrants regarding available food and nutrition services.

Based on the Food Safety Net Report of October 1999, 48% of respondents reported they were unaware of programs that were available. Another 21% did not think they were eligible to use food programs.

Best practices and service gaps analysis identified by the Employment Support Initiative - Food Safety Net Subcommittee found that while a majority of agencies distribute flyers and rely heavily on word of mouth to get participants in their programs, many others do not conduct any form of outreach activities. Several agencies have been unable to conduct or plan outreach efforts due to lack of staffing and a limited volunteer pool.

Silicon Valley Children's Report Card 2000 formulated a policy recommendation to increase outreach and education efforts to link former welfare recipients to support services, such as quality childcare, Medi-Cal and food stamps.

In the random sample survey conducted for the Summit on Immigrant Needs, 10.9% of immigrants from Mexico, 20.5% from Vietnam, and 16.7% from the Philippines reported that they need assistance with food. Additionally, 17.6% from Mexico and 7.2% from Vietnam said that they do not have enough food to eat every day of the month, compared to 2.4% of U.S. born.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% of Respondents</th>
<th>% of U.S. born</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In August 2000 Services, Immigrant Rights and Education Network (SIREN) generated a report entitled Immigrant Family Access to Food Stamps in Santa Clara County. According to the report, 35% of immigrants stated that they did not know what the program eligibility requirements were, or where to apply. Almost one-half (47%) stated that this lack of information would deter them from applying. However, 66% of the respondents were familiar with the Women Infants and Children (WIC) Program. The majority of respondents who knew about these two programs stated they learned about the programs either through word of mouth or visible outreach.

The SIREN study also found that 16% of respondents were unsure about how the use of food stamps might affect their immigration status and 30% identified lack of information about public charge as a deterrent to enrolling in food stamps. Public charge is the requirement that new immigrants to the U.S. demonstrate at the time of entry that they are “not likely to become a public charge”, i.e., a burden on the state. In a survey conducted by the National Immigration Law Center (NILC) of key immigrant-serving organizations, 83% of the respondents stated that “not enough outreach and information is getting to immigrant communities”.

SIREN survey respondents made many statements. One said: “I am afraid to use the programs because I have heard from a lot of people that it might affect my immigration status.” Another commented: “I don’t know of the Food Stamp program, but I don’t use them because maybe I’ll be required to repay them in the future.”

**WHAT ELDERLY MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS SAY ABOUT FOOD**

“And then there is food, that is so expensive. With food, we eat only as much as our income allows.”

“Many people need the Brown Bag program and they don’t have it because they are afraid. They are afraid to speak. They are afraid to ask for help, because they don’t have papers. They say, ‘No I don’t have papers, so they are not going to help me’.”

“[The undocumented] fear going to centers where they have Brown Bag programs, even here [at the East Side Senior Center]. Because of the lack of papers they believe they will not get any assistance. Because they ask for an ID and a social security card everywhere, even for the Brown Bag.”

“One time I asked about the Brown Bag and the papers I filled out required a social security number. Even after filling out the application, the applicant had to see if he qualified.”
Recommendations for Finding 1:

- Link organizations serving small ethnic communities and newly arrived immigrants with food service providers.
- Expand print and radio media including translations in various languages. Research other non-conventional methods of public outreach, especially to some targeted immigrant groups.
- Investigate the feasibility of expanding the languages offered with the 1-800-Need Food? hotline.
- Publicize the language capacities and the locations of food providers.
- Develop outreach materials that are sensitive and address the impact on immigration status of undocumented individuals in relation to public charge and finger imaging.
- Coordinate efforts with all school districts in Santa Clara County about available food services for children and families.

Finding 2: There is a need to evaluate, modify and improve how federal food programs are administered.

Based on findings from the Food Safety Net Report (October 1999), 48% of the respondents reported that they did not use the Food Stamp Program because they did not think they were eligible.

According to the America’s Second Harvest - The Red Tape Divide Report (2000) a 1992 USDA review of the Food Stamp application process found the following factors most likely to lead to not completing the food stamp process:

1. Time and "hassles" involved
2. Length of the process or particular cumbersome aspects of the process
3. Problems getting to the food stamp office
4. Confusion about the process
5. Long waits at the office, and
6. "Unobtainable" documents required to verify the household circumstances

Food Stamp applications issued by states for federal assistance average 12 pages long, but may be up to 30 pages or more. The average application process takes five hours of client time to complete and often includes multiple trips to the local welfare office. The average allotment is $71 per person, per month.

In the random sample survey completed in 2000 for the Summit on Immigrant Needs, immigrants echoed the need for better access. Of those who responded to a question asking immigrants what would make it easier for them to use food programs, 47.5% of immigrants reported that having a shorter application would make it easier. An equal number of respondents indicated that information in the immigrants’ primary language
would make it easier, and the next most important factor to access food was having food distribution sites closer to home.

![Bar chart showing responses to the question: What would make it easier for immigrants to use food programs?](chart)

In 1999, Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman sent a letter to the nation's Governors urging them to simplify the food stamp application forms.

Governor Grey Davis signed bill SB2013 that requires the State Department of Social Services, in conjunction with affected stakeholder groups to develop and implement a simplified and shorter application for non-assistance Food Stamp cases.

According to School's Out…Who Ate? California Food Service Program 2000 Report (Sept. 2000) the Summer Food Service Program remains the most underutilized of all federal child nutrition programs. In California, only 9% of the children enrolled in free and reduced-price lunch programs during the school year participated in this program. In Santa Clara County there has been a decrease the last two years in the number of sites offering this program.

According to the California Food Policy Advocates, in the summer of 2000 there were four Summer Food Service Program sponsors serving nineteen sites.

**Recommendations for Finding 2:**

- Make the Food Stamp application simpler and shorter.
- Modify the proof of documentation and asset dollar eligibility with emphasis on the value of automobiles.
• Increase the income eligibility guidelines for Food Stamps to be consistent with WIC and school lunch programs.
• Continue advocacy support for legislation that expands and simplifies nutrition program for immigrants.
• Streamline the paperwork and administration requirements for sponsoring organizations for the Summer Feeding Program.
• Support the ongoing efforts of food organizations, California Food Policy Advocates, and school districts in their effort to expand under-utilized food programs such as the Summer Feeding and After School Snack Programs.
• Support the initiation of an annual meeting with school district food service managers to inform and develop target goals for new and expanded school food service programs.
• Outpost Department of Social Services staff to take applications for Food Stamps and other public benefits to food distribution sites. Coordinate this with other food agencies because a family/individual who is eligible for Food Stamps is likely eligible for other programs.
• Redefine and publicize outreach materials for food programs as nutrition, rather than welfare, to reduce the stigma associated with participation in programs.
• Encourage school and county officials to automatically certify children who receive Food Stamps and CalWORKs for free meals in schools.

Finding 3: There are not enough culturally sensitive services for immigrants seeking food in Santa Clara County.

Best practices that were formulated by the Employment Support Initiative Food Safety Net Subcommittee identified that many food providers are unable to meet the multilingual needs of Santa Clara County’s large immigrant population. Registration form, signs, and flyers are not always in a wide range of languages. There are a limited number of bilingual volunteers and staff at distribution sites.

According to the Summit Random Sample (refer to graph above), of those who answered the question: “what would make it easier for you to use food programs?” 37.5% of immigrants said more ethnic foods and 47.5% said having more information/services in their own language.

Recommendations for Finding 3:

• Institute regular cultural training programs on various nationalities for food service providers.
• Educate food providers as to the cultural food preferences of immigrant communities. Ultimately expand the mix of food offered and allow client choice when making food selections.
• As a best practice, encourage agencies to have more multi-lingual staff and volunteers.
• Continue support of the Food Bank purchases of culturally appropriate food as well as expansion of that culturally appropriate food to include foods consumed by new immigrant groups in Santa Clara County.
• As a best practice, recruit additional agencies from ethnic communities in the decision-making process, i.e. steering committee and community coalitions.

Finding 4: Expand access of food and nutrition services to individuals with special needs.

According to the Employment Support Initiative Food Safety Net Subcommittee, delivering food to people is a service that provides isolated families and disabled individuals with needed social contact. Beyond providing food, agencies that provide home visits serve an additional purpose of linking participants with other needed resources. Food delivery also eliminates transportation barriers, common to many participants. Due to limited resources, safety considerations, and the cost for delivering food, this practice is not widely practiced.

The Second Harvest Food Bank's Food Connection Program reports that only a small number of pantries and organizations deliver to individuals unable to attend on-site distributions. More nutrition services are available to the elderly populations.

Recommendations for Finding 4:

• Evaluate existing home delivery services available for non-seniors to assess food.
• Design and implement an improved system to respond to individuals with special dietary requirements such as liquid nutritional supplements.
• Design a system to provide free bus tokens to provider agencies to be given to individuals with limited transportation.
• Investigate the option of using the services of Outreach & Escort Inc. for individuals seeking food.
• Recognize that different families and individuals have varied needs. Encourage food programs to allow participants to select food items that they prefer. Additionally, take into consideration dietary restrictions such as allergies and diabetes.

Additional Recommendations

• Permanently extend the California Food Assistance Program (CFAP) to assist hungry immigrants. Food is not a temporary need.
• Repeal the fingerprint-imaging program for Food Stamps, which tends to make legal immigrants feel like criminals and deters mixed-status immigrant families from applying for Food Stamps.