

FOOD SECURITY UPDATE

Food Stamp Participation and Access

From the desk of Kadi Row
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Number of food stamp recipients continues to grow

The number of food stamp recipients continues to grow here and across the county. Between December 1998 and December 2003, monthly participation increased by 73% in Wisconsin. This was among the largest increase of all states. And it hasn't slowed down....during the last year of that growth, participation increased by 12%. County by county breakdowns of the number of food stamp recipients annually can be viewed on the Wisconsin Food Security Project website: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/cfs/>

The increase follows dramatic declines in participation seen in the last half of the '90's. The increase can be attributed to both the decline in the economy (increased need) and improved efforts in outreach and access.

Food stamp participation among eligibles remains low

Despite growing numbers of people on food stamps in Wisconsin, food stamp participation among those eligible remains quite low. Using the most current data available (2002), USDA/FNS reports that Wisconsin has a participant access rate (PAR) of 59%, which is 2 percentage points above the national average. The PAR is a measure of the extent to which low-income people are participating in the Food Stamp Program. This means that approximately 40% of Wisconsinites who are actually eligible for the program are not participating. PAR's across the country range from a high of 98% in Oregon to a low of 38% in California.

Why?

There are a number of reasons why eligible individuals don't participate. A newly released report, based on a large "Food Stamp Program Access Study," shares findings of a survey of eligible nonparticipants and their reasons for not applying (<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan03013/efan03013-2/>).

This report states that eligible nonparticipants are fairly likely to be food insecure -- 45% of those surveyed experienced food insecurity, and 25% experienced hunger. And while most (96%) of the eligible nonparticipants surveyed knew of the existence of the food stamp program, there was a general lack of awareness about their eligibility -- less than half of them thought they were eligible. Most (69%) did say they would apply for food stamps if they were sure they were eligible. Of those who said they would still not apply (even if sure they were eligible) almost all cited a desire for personal independence as the main reason, and a good number (61%) said the application/process/requirements were an impediment.

Implications for WNEP

Given the increase in the number of people participating and eligible for food stamps, the number of people in our target educational audience for WNEP also increases.

We know from the Food Stamp Program Access Study that eligible households not participating in food stamps had fairly high levels of food insecurity – further demonstrating the need for our work in helping low income families stretch their food dollars.

Examining the research about barriers to access for eligible nonparticipants can provide ideas for actions. Because half of eligible nonparticipants believe incorrectly they are not eligible, they do not apply. Providing information about how to contact the food stamp office is a first step – for the time being, the only way to know for sure if you're eligible is to apply. Simple messages provided during education with learners can provide this information. The USDA has attractive outreach materials available for free (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/info.htm>).

And most promising is the work being done by our state food stamp office to improve access (see:

<https://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/apps/flrc/flconnection/food.cfm?issueid=620#4071>).

Through this project, we will soon be able to direct potential applicants to an on-line pre-screening tool which promises to provide a relatively easy way for them to determine if it's worth pursuing a full application.