

Volume 8, Issue 20, February 2011

**Improving Food Stamp Use In Maryland***How Maryland Can Become a National Model***Executive Summary**

Maryland's use of food stamps is 42nd in the nation. Over 150,000 Marylanders are eligible for food stamps, but do not receive them. To ensure that more eligible families benefit from food stamps, Maryland can enhance its outreach efforts and make it easier to apply and remain eligible for food stamps. By implementing best practices from other states, Maryland can become a national model.

**Background**

Four out of every ten eligible Marylanders are not receiving food stamps. Maryland ranks 42nd in the nation for food stamp utilization<sup>1</sup>. Gov. Martin O'Malley has made improving food stamp utilization a priority of his administration and has formed the Partnership to End Childhood Hunger to identify and implement solutions<sup>2</sup>. This issue brief examines practices used by other states to improve food stamp use. It also considers practices used within Maryland for other benefits that might be used to improve food stamp utilization.

**Best Practices***Outreach*

Lack of knowledge is a primary reason for not enrolling in the food stamps program. Over half of non-participants are not aware they are eligible<sup>3</sup>. Partnerships with public schools can help educate eligible families. Some Illinois school staff use an Internet screening tool to generate applications for food stamps and other programs. The Illinois Hunger Coalition also did multi-media outreach to families, including automated calls about food stamp outreach events, flyers in student backpacks and information

<sup>1</sup> See Advocates for Children and Youth, *Maryland Continues to Lag Behind in Food Stamp Use* (Mar. 2009). Since 2006, food stamp participation in Maryland has increased by one of the highest percentages in the country. However, the unemployment rate has also increased by one of the highest percentages. Bureau of Labor Statistics, comparing Feb. 2008 to Feb. 2009. Thus, the increased number of Marylanders receiving food stamps likely reflects the severe economic situation in the State rather than improved utilization. Indeed, in a worsening economy, the number of eligible but not enrolled people can increase, even as the number of participants increases and utilization remains flat.

<sup>2</sup> Advocates for Children and Youth is part of the Partnership

<sup>3</sup> Abt Associates, *Food Stamp Program Access Study: Final Report* (Nov. 2004).

attached to report cards. In Florida, some schools include information about food stamps on applications for Free and Reduced-priced Meals. In Kansas, local grocery stores place information about food stamps in weekly advertising circulars<sup>4</sup>.

Maryland can also learn from State efforts to increase enrollment for other benefits. For example, Maryland recently expanded outreach for children's health insurance. On state income tax forms, parents are asked whether their children have health insurance; if they answer no and they appear to be income-eligible for Medicaid or the Maryland Children's Health Program, they receive a letter<sup>5</sup>. Through effective outreach efforts, the Maryland CASH campaign has achieved significant use of the federal Earned Income Tax Credit<sup>6</sup>.

*Enrollment and Eligibility*

Many eligible families do not apply for food stamps because they are discouraged by the application process. An applicant must complete a detailed form, provide numerous documents verifying information, go into a local social services office for a face-to-face interview and wait up to 30 days to find out if they will receive benefits. Offices are often open only during traditional work hours, making it difficult for working families to apply.

The situation has worsened because of the economy, with many more applicants and fewer caseworkers. The Department of Human Resources has lost many workers in the part of the agency handling applications for food stamps and other benefits. Waiting lines are longer, recertifying families can take months, and documentation is sometimes lost<sup>7</sup>.

Moreover, families need to go through this process for each of the many different benefits they need, e.g. food stamps, health insurance and energy assistance. To its credit, Maryland now has a common application form for some programs, and applicants can also use the Service Access and Information Link (SAIL)

<sup>4</sup> National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, *Improving Access to Benefits for Low-Income Families* (Aug. 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Pursuant to the Kids First Act, HB 1391, passed in 2008.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://mdcash.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> Editorial, *The Baltimore Sun* (Mar. 4, 2009).



system to pre-screen their eligibility and fill out online application forms<sup>8</sup>. However, families still have to go to each relevant office to complete their applications. The offices can be far apart and have different hours, and there can be different paperwork requirements for each benefit. The process is so complex that a privately-funded program, EarnBenefits Online, operates in eight sites in Baltimore City with trained counselors assisting families to complete initial applications for almost 30 programs<sup>9</sup>.

States can get federal waivers so that applicants can be interviewed over the phone. Maryland has asked for this waiver but not yet received it<sup>10</sup>.

### *Retention*

Every six to 12 months, food stamp participants in Maryland must complete another face-to-face interview and document any changes from their initial application. Many families are unable to complete the necessary steps for recertification. Because of higher worker caseloads, many recertifications are taking months to process, and some families lose benefits as a result.

Maryland has received a federal waiver to allow recertification by phone. Only Harford County is taking advantage of this waiver.

Other states like Pennsylvania and Florida have successfully established Internet-based recertification and benefited from lower administrative costs and reduced workloads for caseworkers. Washington, D.C., which has one of the highest utilization rates in the country, has a 12-month recertification period<sup>11</sup>.

### **Recommendations**

In order to increase the percentage of eligible families receiving food stamps in Maryland, the State can:

1. Establish food stamp utilization as an accountability indicator for the Department of Human Resources.
2. Identify a point person in the Governor's Office to lead interagency efforts to increase utilization of all benefits for which families are eligible.

<sup>8</sup> The State now allows applicants to submit their signatures electronically; previously, they had to fax or mail it in or deliver it by hand.

<sup>9</sup> <http://baltimore.earnbenefits.org/page.php?pageID=405>.

<sup>10</sup> The Department of Human Resources says that applicants can be interviewed by phone if a "hardship" prevents an office visit. However, it is unclear whether anyone is able to reach a caseworker to pursue this option. Applicants can also submit their verifying documentation by mail. Again, it is not known the extent to which applicants actually do this.

<sup>11</sup> See D.C. Hunger Solutions: [www.dchunger.org](http://www.dchunger.org).

3. Develop a formal U.S. Department of Agriculture outreach plan and expand outreach efforts through partnerships with grocery stores and local schools and Public Service Announcements by the Governor and others. To the extent permissible, this can include a common application process for both Free and Reduced-priced Meals and food stamps.

4. Link with effective outreach efforts for other benefits, like the Maryland CASH campaign for the federal Earned Income Tax Credit.

5. Use state income tax forms to determine potential eligibility for not only health insurance, but also food stamps and other services.

6. Secure a federal waiver so that families can complete application interviews for food stamps by phone, and implement statewide the existing waiver of face-to-face interviews for recertification.

7. Allow more families to remain eligible for 12 months or longer. This will reduce recertification problems and reduce worker overload.

8. Allow applicants to complete and fully submit their applications for food stamps and all other benefits for which they are eligible at one location.

9. Expand community-based benefits counseling programs, like the EarnBenefits program, using state dollars to secure federal matching funds.

10. Ensure that there are enough caseworkers to handle applications and recertifications.

11. Survey recent enrollees, applicants who do complete the process and enrollees who drop out.

There are funding opportunities to implement these strategies. Maryland will receive over \$2 million for food stamp administration as part of the federal stimulus package<sup>12</sup>. In addition, the State, local governments and non-profit organizations can apply for outreach grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to support best practices implementation. This year's grants focus on simplifying application and eligibility systems and improving access to benefits for eligible households<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act State Administrative Funding Charts* (Mar. 6, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> See [www.fns.usda.gov/cga/PressReleases/2009/PR-0056.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/PressReleases/2009/PR-0056.htm).