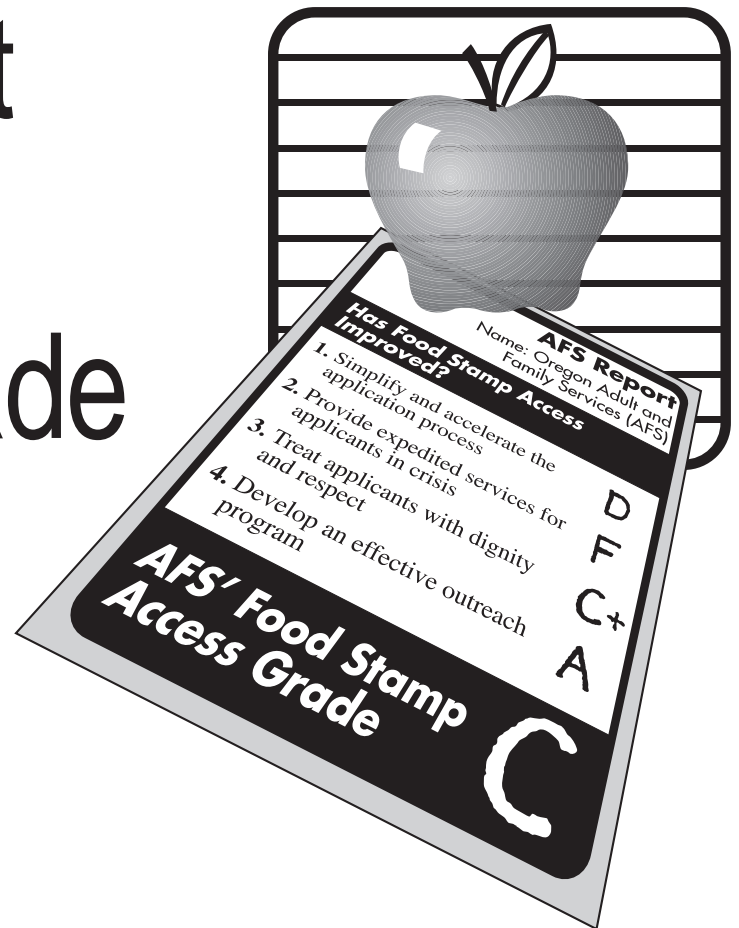


Still Not Making the Grade

AFS gets a 'C' from families seeking food stamp benefits



Northwest
Federation of
Community
Organizations



Oregon Action
April 2001

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AFS gets a 'C' from families seeking
food stamp benefits

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Overview

One year ago, Oregon Action, a statewide low-income community organization, assessed Oregon's food stamp program and discovered a program that discourages families from seeking desperately needed food stamp assistance. Oregon Action documented their findings in a report titled *Hunger Pangs: Oregon Food Stamp Program Fails to Deliver*,¹ in which the experiences of 25 food stamp applicants were summarized. The report examined the enrollment policies and practices at seven Adult and Family Services (AFS) local branch offices where families apply for food stamps in Portland and Medford in order to identify policies and practices that hinder applicants from applying for food stamps.

Hunger Pangs exposed a food stamp program rife with unnecessary barriers and red tape. Families seeking food stamp assistance were thwarted by confusing and lengthy application processes, inconsistent and inflexible interview procedures, inadequate services for non-English speaking families, and apparent violations of food stamp laws. For example, families were routinely denied access to emergency food stamps, a federally-required service for families in crisis. To make matters worse, families often endured disrespectful treatment from AFS workers. *Hunger Pangs* recommended specific solutions to improve food stamp access for Oregon's low-income families. They were:

- 1. Simplify and accelerate the application process**
- 2. Provide expedited services for applicants in crisis as required by federal law**
- 3. Treat applicants with dignity and respect**
- 4. Develop an effective outreach program to educate potential applicants**

Hunger Pangs was released at a time when Oregon was the hungriest state in the union.² According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), more than one in eight Oregon households were "food insecure" in 1998, meaning these households do not always have enough food to fully meet their basic needs. About half these households experienced painful feelings of hunger.³ Despite thousands of families going hungry, participation in Oregon's food stamp program had plummeted 20 percent since 1996. Clearly something needed to be done.

Following the release of *Hunger Pangs*, Oregon Action leaders met with representatives from AFS to review the report's findings and to implement a plan to eliminate the barriers and red tape. Oregon Action secured a commitment from AFS to increase enrollment by 5 percent within six months, and to benchmark success at 80 percent enrollment of eligible Oregonians, or approximately 140,000 additional enrollees.⁶ Oregon's food stamp enrollment has increased 14.6 percent from June

The food stamp program is Oregon's largest and most important program in the fight against hunger, particularly for children. About 40 percent of food stamp recipients in Oregon are children.⁴ Food stamp benefits are modest: in Oregon, the average per person benefit is \$70 a month. Yet food stamps can mean the difference between hunger and a healthy diet for families. In an average month, about 100,000 Oregon households receive food stamps.⁵

There are an estimated 140,000 Oregonians currently eligible for food stamps who are not enrolled in the program.

2000 to January 2001.⁷ AFS is to be lauded for its efforts, yet total enrollment in Oregon's food stamp program still falls short by AFS' own standards. As of January 2001, 213,000 people are on Oregon's food stamp program.⁸ This means that 40 percent of Oregon families who are eligible for food stamps are not receiving much needed assistance.

This report, *Still Not Making the Grade*, goes back to the basics and asks, "Have AFS' efforts over the past year improved access to food stamps?" To discover the answer to this question, Oregon Action tracked the experiences of 25 newly identified families as they sought to enroll in the food stamp program, and Oregon Action staff and volunteers sat in AFS offices and observed how clients were treated. In addition, *Still Not Making the Grade* reviews the 43-point AFS commitment letter and the specific recommendations Oregon Action outlined in its previous report.

The result is a report card evaluating how well AFS is implementing standards Oregon Action perceives as key to the success of the Oregon food stamp program. Each standard is assessed through quantitative data and through observations and interviews with participating families. AFS received an "A" if the steps they have taken have been fully implemented, or if over 90 percent of families reported favorable experiences. A "B" represents good effort on AFS' part, but there is room for improvement, as reflected by 80 percent of families having positive experiences. A "C" grade indicates that AFS has work to do, as three in ten families have negative experiences. A "D" means that AFS has not made any quantitative improvements to specific standards, and an "F" means that AFS has failed six out of ten times to deliver on a necessary service.

"Hunger Pangs," Oregon Action's eye-opening report, "very much got your attention," [program manager for food stamps Michele] Wallace says. "You sort of heard the murmurings. But this was like a loud roar."⁹

AFS Report

Name:

**Oregon Adult and Family
Services (AFS)**

Subject:

**Improving Access to Food
Stamp Program**

Reporting Period:

April 2000 – March 2001

Has Food Stamp Access Improved?

1. Simplify and accelerate the application process
2. Provide expedited services for applicants in crisis
3. Treat applicants with dignity and respect
4. Develop an effective outreach program

D

F

C+

A

**AFS' Food Stamp
Access Grade**

C

Solution #1: Simplify and accelerate the application process

Grade: D

When Oregon Action looked at the food stamp program one year ago, they discovered a system that hindered eligible families' ability to access assistance. The application was 16 pages long; families had to repeatedly contact the AFS office for assistance; clients were herded into general intake times rather than given specific appointments. All of these practices sent the message that AFS didn't care about families, and created unnecessary delays and impediments to families' efforts to enroll in food stamps. *Hunger Pangs* identified specific action steps AFS should take to simplify and accelerate the application process.

"I used to be on food stamps, and even though they'd be helpful now, I don't want to put up with the hassle of trying to get food stamps again," food stamp applicant at local AFS office.

1. Encourage clients to file application forms on the same day of contact

Thirty days after an application is filed, food stamp offices must deliver food stamps to eligible families, and benefits are pro-rated from the date of application. Failure to encourage same-day filing means applicants' food stamps are delayed and the amount of benefits received is smaller. Failing to encourage applicants to file an application on the same day the household contacts the food stamp office is also a violation of federal regulations.¹⁰

- *Only 25 percent of families were told to file the application same day.*

2. Streamline the interview process so that clients wait no more than two days for an interview

In the case of food stamps, unnecessary delays and red tape have immediate, painful implications for families because it delays their ability to obtain food.

- *Two-thirds of applicants waited two days or more to receive their required face-to-face interview with an AFS worker.*

3. Simplify the 16-page application

Oregon Action's *Hunger Pangs* identified that 44 percent of applicants rated the 16-page form "difficult to understand" or "very difficult to understand." AFS agreed to test pilot a two-page application

form for statewide distribution in January 2001. Then, AFS pushed back the deadline to April 2001. Now, AFS officials say the two-page application will not be used until June 1, 2001.

Every time a family confronts the 16-page form, there is less likelihood that a family will successfully complete the application process, and less likelihood that food will be available for a family when they need it most.

- *AFS has failed to use a simplified application statewide.*

4. Provide applicants with a clear list of documentation required

Confusing documentation requirements can force a family to contact AFS several times just to get information that should be readily available. To insure that applicants know what is expected from them, federal regulations require that a notice that informs the household of the verification requirements be provided to applicants. This notice must be in clear and simple language, provide examples of the types of acceptable documents, and explain the period of time the verification documents must cover.¹¹ With this information, applicants are forced to seek out the required information on their own, delaying their food stamp benefits and prolonging their hunger.

- *AFS failed 50 percent of the time to supply applicants with basic information on required verification documents.*

5. Provide all clients with a specific interview time

Many AFS offices only offer general intake times for clients to have an interview with a caseworker. Some AFS offices make clients come in only during a specified two-hour period each day. If the time slots are filled up, the client must return another day. Providing applicants with specific interview times allows clients to coordinate work schedules, childcare, and schooling to ensure they get the assistance they need.

The new November 21, 2000 USDA food stamp regulations require states to "...schedule an interview for all applicant households who are not interviewed on the day they submit their applications."¹² AFS' practices are not in compliance with this rule.

In addition, the new federal regulations also allow states to offer a "telephone interview on a case-by-case basis because of household hardship situations as determined by the State agency."¹³ AFS

"I watched as one woman asked if she could make an appointment for her food stamp interview and was told by the front desk that they used to do appointments, but it's a waste of time because some people don't show up. She added that the state won't let them do appointments!"
Oregon Action observer.

should use this new flexibility and offer telephone interviews to people who cannot attend a face-to-face interview.

- *Only one in four clients were given an option to schedule an appointment.*
- *40 percent of applicants reported the intake time offered to them was inconvenient due to work (50 percent of respondents) or school (43 percent of respondents).*

"During a general intake period, food stamp applicants were told to be at the office between 8:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m., and by 8:05 a.m. all the interview slots for the day were filled," Oregon Action observer.

6. Provide translators in a timely manner for non-English speakers, and do not use translators who are not fluent

Applicants who do not speak English deserve the same level of service as applicants who speak English. Limited English speakers often have to wait significantly longer for help simply because they speak another language. Federal regulations require that state agencies provide bilingual services.¹⁴

- *"Non-English speakers still face barriers to accessing services," says Adan Ramirez, a Spanish-speaking Oregon Action observer. "Many AFS offices don't have people who can adequately translate for clients, applications in other languages aren't readily available, and people who haven't mastered English can still count on getting less-than-equal treatment."*

"Extended hours fliers should be multilingual," Oregon Food Bank Community Observer.

7. Train front desk workers to fully explain the food stamp process and to engage with clients

The front desk personnel are often the "face" of the AFS. First impressions are lasting, and it's important that clients' first interactions represent the intent of AFS: to assist applicants in their efforts to receive food stamp coverage.

- *AFS workers explained the application process to only 35 percent of applicants.*
- *Eight in ten applicants were **not** asked if they had any questions.*

"The front desk person explained the application process in detail — they didn't use to do that!" Oregon Action observer.

"A case worker came out [to the AFS waiting room] and told a couple they just needed to fill out an application. They had tons of questions for her. The case worker was polite but very abbreviated, trying to cut it short, leaving the couple to push to get their questions answered, and having to do it in the public waiting room," Oregon Action observer.

8. Provide applicants with sufficient information so they don't have to repeatedly contact the AFS office

Most AFS offices still require applicants to visit the office at least twice, once to obtain an application, and a second time at a later date for an intake period or a scheduled interview. However, it's common for applicants to have to repeatedly contact the office for information and clarification about their application.

- *On average, applicants had to contact the AFS office four times during the application period, an **increase** from an average of three contacts as reported one year ago.*
- *Some applicants had to contact the AFS office nine or more times during the enrollment process.*

"I saw a woman with her child show up for an appointment and be told her caseworker was out that day and she would have to reschedule. There had been no attempt to call her ahead of time so she wouldn't be inconvenienced," Oregon Action observer.

9. Improve phone system so clients can access the information they need

Applicants who don't understand the food stamp enrollment process need a way to access information and assistance, or they may feel discouraged sticking with a process that relies on forms, documentation, and mass intakes as a way to assist applicants.

- *Of those applicants who called AFS with questions, over 50 percent were unable to get the information they needed, and only 25 percent were able to talk with the right person to get information they needed.*

"Matthew and his wife are 18 years old with a baby, and they were told they need to go to another office to apply for food stamps," Oregon Action observer.

10. Allow applicants to apply at the AFS office closest to their home or work

Allowing applicants to apply for food stamps in offices closest to their home or work is a common sense policy to enable families to conveniently apply for food stamps.

- *Nearly one in five applicants were unable to apply at the food stamp office of their choice.*

"Jim went to the branch office in his own neighborhood, but was told that as a senior citizen, he would have to go to a different office to apply for food stamps. He called this new office only to be referred to a third office," Oregon Action observer.

Solution #2: Provide expedited services for applicants in crisis as required by federal law

Grade: F

The lack of urgency present at AFS offices particularly harms families with emergency food needs. Federal regulations require states to design procedures that identify households who are eligible for expedited food stamp service. Families eligible for expedited food stamp service receive their benefits within seven days rather than 30 days.

1. Inform clients how the expedited food service process works

Families eligible for expedited service have almost no income or assets and are at serious risk of not being able to access food. They are hungry and poor, and have little hope for assistance outside of AFS.

- *Only 25 percent of applicants were asked if they were in a crisis situation or if they needed immediate help buying food.*
- *Less than 20 percent of applicants were told about the expedited food stamps process.*

“The caseworker did not screen this applicant for expedited services, did not ask if the applicant had any questions, or explain anything to them,” Oregon Action observer.

2. Develop and use a satisfactory tool to identify people in need of emergency services

When AFS developed its new application form (not yet in use statewide), it improved the expedited service section of the application. The new section requesting expedited services information is labeled as such so that families know why they are providing the information. While this tool is an important improvement, it is only in use in two counties thus far and AFS continues to miss its target dates to use the tool statewide. In addition, the tool could be improved in the following ways:

- *The tool should be clear that the financial information requested is only for members of the applicant’s household.*
- *The tool should provide a specific time period for the requested financial information. For example, “**This month**, does your household have enough cash resources to cover your rent and utility payment?”*
- *The tool should ask families if they are homeless.*

Solution #3: Treat applicants with dignity and respect

Grade: C+

AFS workers are the public face of the state's commitment to the fight against hunger. Applicants who feel shabbily treated are more likely to develop negative feelings about the food stamp program and the state. *Hunger Pangs* revealed an inadequate and discourteous system of treatment towards families seeking food stamps. Indeed, 44 percent of applicants at the time felt they were not treated respectfully. Two of the solutions cited in *Hunger Pangs* recommended that AFS train all workers in basic customer service, and hire an independent research group to survey clients about the treatment they received. This report, *Not Yet Making the Grade*, evaluates the state's progress from the perspective of the families who are seeking assistance everyday in their local AFS office.

1. Provide clients with the required information about the grievance and appeal procedures

Applicants who are wrongly denied food stamp assistance may never get the food stamps they deserve if they do not understand how to appeal a decision.

- *During the first visit to the AFS office, only 17 percent of applicants were given an explanation of the grievance and appeal procedures.*
- *During the interview with an AFS worker, more than half of applicants were not told about the grievance and appeal procedures — this is an improvement from one year ago, when only 20 percent of applicants received information.*

2. Treat applicants with dignity and respect

People talk. Families who are treated poorly in an AFS office will tell their family and friends, and overall enrollment in the food stamp program can become depressed. AFS' efforts to increase its customer service to food stamp applicants really shines in this section. While some applicants continued to report disrespectful treatment from workers at particular offices, overall applicants rated the treatment they received from AFS workers significantly better than one year ago. Families reported feeling well treated by AFS workers, which is important for the success of the overall program. However, there continues to be particular offices where applicants consistently reported disrespectful treatment.

- *88 percent of applicants found the front desk courteous and helpful.*

"The front desk was much more helpful and orderly than the last time I was in,"
Oregon Action observer.

- 88 percent rated the treatment they received during their interview “excellent” (half of respondents) or “adequate” (40 percent of respondents).
- Of the categories of “respectfulness,” “patience,” and “helpfulness,” only “helpfulness” received ratings of “poor” or “very poor” by 20 percent of respondents. The other categories primarily received “excellent” and “good.”

3. Inform applicants about other programs available to them

Local AFS offices are not just for food stamps - they are also responsible for helping families access other state assistance programs. A family seeking food stamps is likely to benefit from other programs, such as the Oregon Health Plan, gasoline vouchers, discounts for telephone installation and service, and employment, housing and utility assistance.

- *Less than three in ten applicants were told of other programs during their first visit to the AFS office, and just over half of applicants were informed of other programs during the AFS interview.*
- *Of those who were told of other programs, the majority was told of the Oregon Health Plan, and other commonly mentioned programs were cash assistance, employment assistance, and child care.*

4. Use directional signs in the office

Directional signs are a simple way to communicate to a family that they are welcome in the AFS office, and that workers are there to assist them in their request for food stamps. Unclear signs, or a lack of signage, create unnecessary confusion on the part of applicants seeking assistance.

- *Half the applicants rated the signs as “somewhat unclear.”*

“I talked with one family who is living in a motel with no cooking facility except a microwave. They're on food stamps, and are trying to get help with housing. They have no money for the next two weeks. They could really use some help beyond food stamps,” Oregon Action observer.

“Signs were unclear and confusing. There were lots of little signs everywhere, but the only one that really stood out is the one that tells people “Take a number and have a seat.” This is confusing for applicants, because some were just there to pick up an application and they would take a number and wait for up to an hour. Applicants shouldn't sit and wait an hour just to get an application — especially when they have to come back and wait a second day for an interview,” Oregon Action observer.

Solution #4: Develop an effective outreach program to educate potential applicants

Grade: A

At the time *Hunger Pangs* was written, Oregon was the hungriest state in the union.¹⁵ Participation in the Oregon food stamp program had plummeted 20 percent in four years' time.¹⁶ A key solution highlighted in *Hunger Pangs* was for the state to develop an extensive, statewide and neighborhood-based outreach program marketing the availability of food stamp assistance. Oregon Action joined a group of other community-based organizations to meet with AFS on a monthly basis to track the development of an effective outreach program. The joint effort of food stamp advocates and the state is paying off: enrollment has increased by almost 15 percent since the release of *Hunger Pangs*.¹⁷ The state recently received the Dan Glickman Pyramid of Excellence Award for its increased outreach efforts, a national award given by the USDA.

1. Maintain a statewide toll-free food stamp hotline for applicants

A toll-free telephone number is a convenient way to encourage families to initiate the food stamp enrollment process. Keeping the call toll-free allows applicants who cannot afford long distance service to call.

- *AFS established an 800 number, and has printed materials (including brochures and magnets) advertising the number for families seeking assistance.*

2. Develop outreach campaigns that include neighborhood-based educational activities

Localized outreach efforts take advantage of existing channels of communication, and increase the likelihood that families will get the information they need through sources familiar to them.

- *AFS has implemented several neighborhood-based outreach efforts, including sending flyers home with school-aged children, and out-stationing AFS workers in community settings outside of the AFS office.*

Conclusion

Oregon Action broke new ground in advocating for low- and moderate-income families when they produced their assessment of Oregon's food stamp program, *Hunger Pangs: Oregon Food Stamp Program Fails to Deliver* in April 2000. The outcome of that report was a series of meetings with Adult and Family Services (AFS), the state organization responsible for administering the state's food stamp program, and Oregon Action leaders. Following these discussions, AFS committed to improving access to food stamps for the state's hungriest citizens.

The state has done an admirable job, in that there has been an almost 15 percent increase in food stamp enrollment since June 2000. Yet there is much work to be done. There is an estimated 140,000 people eligible for food stamps who are not yet on the program — which translates to 40 percent of the total number of eligible people.

In this report, *Still Not Making the Grade*, Oregon Action members revisit local AFS offices to see if the state's efforts have translated into a better experience for Oregon families. The report finds the state has made some progress (especially in the arena of outreach), but has a ways to go in simplifying and accelerating the application process and treating applicants with dignity and respect. Most egregiously, the report finds that the state continues to fail at providing all applicants the opportunity to qualify for expedited services. Expedited services are emergency food stamp assistance for applicants in crisis. AFS still routinely fails to screen applicants for this important, and federally mandated, service.

Oregon Action intends to continue its conversation with AFS to press for needed improvements to the food stamp program. Oregon Action believes that a more accessible food stamp program will benefit Oregon families who need help.

Endnotes

- 1 *Hunger Pangs* is available on the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations website at www.nwfc.org.
- 2 Mark Nord, Kyle Jemison, Gary Bickel, "Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Hunger, by State, 1996-1998, Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service," U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1999, p. 3.
- 3 Ibid. The USDA classifies a household as hungry if the food intake for the adults in the household has been reduced to an extent that it implies that adults have repeatedly experienced the physical sensation of hunger. Household Food Security in the United States: Summary Report of the Food Security Measurement Project, USDA, September 1997, p. v.
- 4 Michael Leachman, Oregon Center for Public Policy, telephone conversation, April 3, 2000.
- 5 Food Research and Action Council, Oregon Food Profile 1999, www.frac.org.
- 6 Leachman, Oregon Center for Public Policy, telephone conversation, April 2, 2001.
- 7 Oregon Adult and Family Services webpage: <http://www.afs.hr.state.or.us/>.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 "A postscript on red tape" *The Oregonian* editorial, December 19, 2000.
- 10 7 CFR 273.2(c)
- 11 7 CFR 273.2(c)
- 12 7 CFR 273.2(e)
- 13 7 CFR 273.2(e)
- 14 7 CFR 272.4(b)
- 15 Nord, Jemison, Bickel.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Oregon Adult and Family Services webpage: <http://www.afs.hr.state.or.us/>.

About the Organizations Releasing this Report

Oregon Action is a statewide, non-partisan network of people and organizations dedicated to economic justice for all through individual and group empowerment. Oregon Action was founded in 1997 to build on the history and values of Oregon Faire Share, which for 20 years organized low and moderate income people to win consumer and community reforms.

The Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO) is a regional federation of five statewide, community-based social and economic justice organizations located in the states of Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington: Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN), Montana People's Action (MPA), Oregon Action (OA), Washington Citizen Action (WCA), and Coalition of Montanans Concerned with Disabilities (CMCD). Collectively, these organizations engage in community organizing and coalition building in 14 rural and major metropolitan areas, including the Northwest's largest cities (Seattle and Portland), and the largest cities in Montana and Idaho.

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