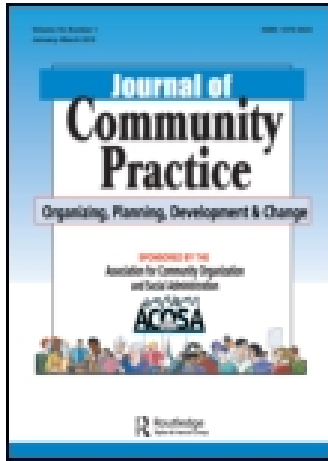


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Reaching the Hard to Reach: Lessons Learned from a Statewide Outreach Initiative

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*Despite high levels of need, many federal assistance programs are underutilized, with differential participation rates among demographic subpopulations. Outreach efforts seek to address challenges facing potentially eligible program recipients. This article examines a statewide initiative to address barriers to participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), focusing on the elderly and people with disabilities, eligible immigrants, and low-income working households. We describe a dynamic approach that relies on community partnerships and utilizes media messaging, information dissemination, and direct client assistance to reach our target populations. The data illustrate how continuous evaluation allows for systematic adaptation of strategies, highlighting lessons learned for future outreach efforts.*¹

KEYWORDS *Community-based outreach, program evaluation, access to benefits*

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program¹) is the first line of defense against hunger for millions of households in the United States. Administered by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service, SNAP is a federal entitlement program, meaning that everyone who is determined to be eligible

¹ The name of the Food Stamp Program was officially changed as a result of the 2008 Farm Bill to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Work reported on here began with the Food Stamp Program and transitioned to SNAP. For purposes of consistency, the program will be referred to as SNAP.

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will receive SNAP benefits (Food & Nutrition Service, 2011a). In 2011, SNAP participation reached an all-time high, serving over 45,000,000 people and providing more than 70 billion dollars in benefits (Cunnyngham, 2011). Despite record-high levels of participation, in large part due to the recent recession, SNAP continues to be underutilized; it is estimated that 72% of eligible individuals are currently participating in SNAP (Leftin, Eslami, & Strayer, 2011). Rates of participation, however, vary by certain demographic characteristics; relatively high percentages (greater than 90%) of eligible children, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families recipients, and households with incomes below 50% of the federal poverty level receive SNAP benefits. In contrast, participation among other groups (e.g., eligible elderly, individuals with disabilities, immigrant and non-English speaking households, and low-income working households) is substantially lower (around 40%; Leftin et al., 2011). Additionally, participation rates vary across states, from 100% in Maine to as low as 53% in California (Cunnyngham, 2011).

For many years, the USDA has partnered with state and municipal governments to support outreach efforts with the goal of increasing participation in SNAP among all eligible nonparticipants. Currently, SNAP outreach projects operate in 40 states (31 with formally approved plans, nine with informal plans) and although each state's plan varies somewhat, most share a common goal. Their primary objective is to increase participation in SNAP. A second, equally important objective is to ensure that particular subpopulations of the potentially eligible pool are adequately served (Brandon, Plotnick, & Stockman, 1994), including those that are difficult to reach, are reluctant to participate, or face unique barriers making access more difficult (i.e., the elderly, individuals with disabilities, low-income working households, immigrants and non-English speakers; Leftin et al., 2011).

These outreach efforts are intended to address the major barriers to SNAP participation for potentially eligible individuals: lack of knowledge about the program, belief that the household is not eligible, and the stigma of having to accept assistance (Food Research and Action Center [FRAC], 2008). Additionally, eligibility determination for SNAP is known to be cumbersome. For example, SNAP eligibility is determined by household income, household composition, and resources, with many households needing to meet both a gross income test and a net income test (postdeductions). Such requirements vary by age and disability status, in addition to requiring extensive documentation and an in-office interview. Although recent policy changes have allowed states to implement options that simplify some of these requirements (e.g., allowing phone interviews in lieu of face-to-face interviews; Dean, Pawling, & Rosenbaum, 2008), being determined eligible for SNAP continues to be a challenge for many eligible applicants.

This article describes a statewide SNAP outreach initiative that is both comprehensive and targeted, a project that has evolved appreciably over the years. Its activities and the means by which those activities are conducted

have expanded dynamically in response to demand, as well as in response to ongoing evaluation efforts. Through continuous formative evaluation, we are able to delineate the process by which targeted populations are reached, to consider the effectiveness of specific outreach strategies, and to use the data collected to inform and modify practice over time (Patton, 2008). Over the past several years, statewide participation in SNAP has increased by over 100% (Food & Nutrition Service, 2012a). The focus of this article, however, is not on changes in SNAP participation rates. Rather, it is an examination of the outreach program itself: its activities, the populations it serves, and how it functions (Posavac, 2010). We describe the evolution of specific outreach strategies to address salient barriers to SNAP participation and measure their performance in terms of scope, output, and outcomes. Further, we share lessons learned from our experiences and evaluative efforts. To conduct an effective and informative evaluation of a particular program, it is essential to have a clear understanding of the theoretical framework from which the program was designed (Chen & Rossi, 1989). This framework serves as a common guide for planning, implementing, and evaluating the program's efforts (Posavac, 2010). In the following, we begin by describing the historical and the theoretical background of the Rhode Island SNAP Outreach Project.

RHODE ISLAND SNAP OUTREACH PROJECT

Rhode Island (RI) submitted its first state outreach plan to the USDA for approval in 2001. Since then, the RI Department of Human Services (DHS) has annually contracted with faculty at the state's university to conduct the outreach project. The project is funded through a combination of state and federal funds (i.e., the USDA reimburses up to 50% of approved outreach activities conducted in the state).

The SNAP Outreach Project was originally staffed by the Principal Investigator (PI) and one full-time staff member. Currently, the SNAP outreach project includes, in addition to the PI, two full-time staff members, two graduate student research assistants, and approximately 15 undergraduate students. At the time the outreach project began, SNAP participation was low (averaging 60%) relative to eligibility (Food & Nutrition Service, 2012b), there was widespread misinformation (and mythology) about program eligibility, and there were no outreach sites in the community where potential clients might get assistance in applying for SNAP. Applying for SNAP was perceived to be an onerous process: Interested individuals were required to travel to DHS offices and wait in long lines, frequently becoming discouraged before completing an application. Studies from other states' outreach programs show that such administrative hassles are another widespread cause of nonparticipation in SNAP (e.g., Allin & Beebout, 1989; FRAC, 2008).

Thus, the goal of the RI SNAP Outreach Project was, and continues to be, to increase participation in SNAP by addressing the particular

challenges facing potential SNAP clients. In keeping with national guidelines about underserved populations (FRAC, 2008), our target populations include seniors and people with disabilities, eligible immigrants (who in RI are predominantly Spanish-speaking), and low-income working households. Our outreach model consists of an array of interconnected strategies that seek to mitigate or eliminate barriers to participation by (a) raising awareness of and decreasing stigma surrounding the SNAP program, (b) disseminating information about SNAP eligibility and application processes via trainings and print material, and (c) providing direct client assistance to potentially eligible individuals through direct, one-on-one outreach activities and a toll-free hotline. Each of these efforts is described in detail below. Inherent in each of these strategies is the recognition of the importance of building community partnerships. Collaboration is an essential element of effective and efficient programs in the 21st century (United States General Accounting Office, 2004). Collaborating with communities allows us to build upon inherent community strengths (Maton, Schellenback, Leadbeater, & Solarz, 2004), which in turn helps potentially eligible clients to overcome the challenges they face in obtaining SNAP benefits. All outreach activities are extensively documented. These data provide the basis for the evaluation presented here.

Raising Awareness and Decreasing Stigma about SNAP

When the SNAP Outreach Project began in 2001, the initial outreach strategies were designed to address the most salient barriers to participation in SNAP at the time: the lack of awareness of SNAP and the associated stigma of participating in SNAP (FRAC, 2008). Based on national models using media outreach as an efficient and cost-effective method (Food & Nutrition Service, 2011b), our first outreach strategy, designed to raise awareness about SNAP, was *media messaging*. Targeted, well-executed media messaging, including radio and television, has been shown to be effective in reaching large audiences, as well as in affecting attitudes and behaviors (Noar, 2006). For the SNAP Outreach Project, media messaging has two main goals: (a) to connect with the general public to increase overall awareness about SNAP and present the program in a positive light and (b) to connect with those most in need—the hard-to-reach, yet potentially eligible, populations.

To achieve these media messaging goals, we craft broad messages that vary by theme and target population. For example, a message recorded by a senior citizen discusses the specific struggle of balancing the cost of medications with the cost of food. Another message by a noted pediatrician speaks to the nutrition-related health concerns and the importance of healthy eating for young children. Other messages, recorded by well-known community leaders (e.g., the mayor of the capital city, US Senators and Representatives), address the increased needs of constituents and the economic benefits to increasing SNAP participation for the entire community.

In this way, media messaging helps to establish credibility of the SNAP program across the entire population and decrease the stigma associated with participation. Additionally, the outlets through which the messages are broadcast are carefully selected to reach the target populations. For instance, advertisements are aired on radio and television stations whose target audiences include low-income working households (e.g., lite-rock station), the elderly (e.g., *The Lawrence Welk Show*), and Spanish-speaking households (e.g., the Spanish language television network, Telemundo). Radio messages are aired four times per year for several weeks at a time. To cultivate a personal connection with the listener, these messages are adapted in response to timely themes (e.g., the state of the economy, program policy changes, seasonal changes) or to individual situations (e.g., the needs of the elderly; the challenges of low-income working parents with young children).

Media messaging efforts have expanded from the first year, which entailed one simple billboard advertisement (“Check out the buying power of Food Stamps!”). These efforts now include regularly scheduled paid advertising on television, radio advertisements that run periodically throughout the year, newspaper inserts as well as special interest stories, and displays on the public transit system. On an occasional basis, we have also advertised in local Department of Motor Vehicles offices and low-cost movie theatres.

Getting the Word Out: Disseminating Information About SNAP

Despite the broad reach of media messaging, there are obvious limitations to the use of media to educate the public. In addition to cost, messages have to be brief and concise. The amount of information that can be conveyed in 60 second sound bites is, by definition, limited. Further, it is difficult to construct a single message that successfully connects with a wide range of individuals whose interactions with the broader community may vary enormously (Hunter & Riger, 1986). Thus, given the widespread absence of easily accessible and accurate information about SNAP in the community, our second strategy focused on developing ways to disseminate specific information about SNAP to our target populations, specifically through trainings and print material.

Training. The initial goal of the trainings was to increase awareness of the SNAP’s positive benefits among social service staff members who had direct contact with potentially eligible clients. Thus, we sought to provide them with the tools needed to help their clients access SNAP benefits (Taylor-Powell, 2006). Starting with a training protocol developed by the state’s DHS, we capitalized on existing relationships and created new alliances to build a network of community partners among the social service agencies in the state (Maton et al., 2004). We quickly found that the state-designed trainings, although well-received, were too complicated to be useful. After several attempts at simplifying the training protocol, posttraining evaluations

and follow-up phone calls indicated that, although attendees appreciated the training and left with positive views of SNAP, they rarely utilized the screening and application tools on which they were trained.

To address these concerns while also maintaining the objective of increasing awareness about SNAP eligibility, we needed to adjust our expectations along with our training protocols. It was critically important to adapt the type and level of training to meet the needs of specific client populations and agencies. For example, we developed a number of different types of community-based trainings that continue to evolve and vary by the degree to which agency staff members have contact with potentially eligible clients. Community education trainings are targeted at agencies (e.g., pantries or soup kitchens), the staff of which interact frequently with our target populations but who are not engaged in one-on-one case management. Community outreach trainings are more proscriptive and target social service agencies where staff members work directly with clients and often have information related to an individual's household income. A third type of training involves presentations to potentially eligible individuals, followed by direct client assistance. This type of training evolved through visits to senior centers and senior housing sites in conjunction with the state SNAP Nutrition Education program. SNAP nutrition-ed staff members delivered a presentation to senior citizens about healthy eating on a limited budget, which was followed by a brief explanation of SNAP by the outreach coordinator. After the formal presentation, those interested in applying for SNAP were assisted individually. In addition to senior citizens, this type of training has been successfully utilized with groups of soon-to-be released incarcerated individuals through an arrangement with the state's Probation and Parole Office, as well as with AmeriCorps volunteers and child care providers. Over time, the focus of all of the different trainings has shifted from explicit attention to the details of SNAP eligibility toward an emphasis on the positive benefits of SNAP participation and the help available to potentially eligible individuals through the outreach project. This approach has increased the agencies' receptiveness to our messages, and ultimately allowed us to expand our reach.

Figure 1 illustrates the trajectory of trainings over time—the number of trainings, the agencies represented at the trainings, and the number of attendees. In general, the total number of trainings annually has remained fairly consistent, but the number of individuals participating in trainings increased markedly in 2009 and then declined somewhat. Overall, since 2006, approximately 1,000 agencies and more than 6,000 individuals have been reached through the various training opportunities. The majority of trainings are either agency based (e.g., a Community Action Program) or programmatic (e.g., WIC staff). In 2009, we implemented a new training model, offering the same training in five different geographical locations throughout the state within a 2-month window. This series allowed us to train a large number

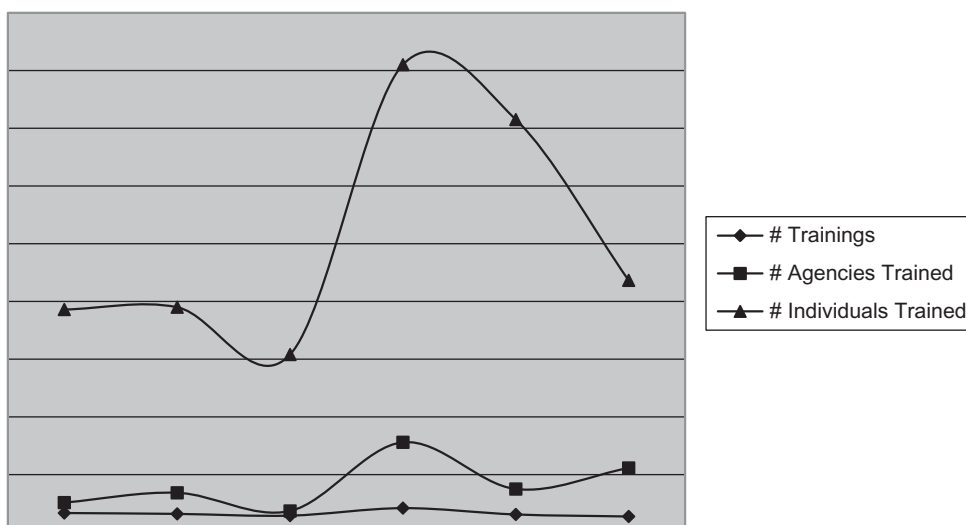


FIGURE 1 Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Outreach Project training events, number of agencies participating, and number of individuals trained, between 2005 and 2011.

of individuals in a relatively short period of time to address a number of federal and state policy and programmatic changes affecting SNAP within the previous year. As a result of the success of this statewide training series, defined by widespread attendance and our ability to reach large numbers of agencies in a single training, this model was used again with similar success in 2011.

Print material. As noted, when the project began, there was a dearth of information available to interested community members and potential clients. For example, an individual calling DHS to inquire about SNAP would be mailed an application, but without additional information to facilitate the process. Furthermore, SNAP applications were not available at community agencies, and there were no specific outreach materials that might help an individual learn about the program and decide whether to apply. Finally, our trainings indicated that widespread stigma and misinformation about SNAP continued to permeate the community, among both social service agency staff and our target populations.

To address these concerns, we developed print materials, aiming to disseminate information using simple, straightforward language that was easy to use and did not require extensive training. First, we compiled a list of myths commonly heard from service providers, clients, and advocates (see Table 1). We then developed separate myth and fact sheets for each of our target populations, based on the particular myth. Second, we replaced the state DHS' multiple-paged screening tool with a one-page screening tool containing six questions. We replaced the complicated mathematical calculations with simple yes/no questions (e.g., Is anyone in your household elderly

TABLE 1 Common Myths and Corresponding Facts About Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Common Myth	Corresponding Fact
The Food Stamp Program is a welfare program.	The Food Stamp program is not a welfare program; it is a nutrition assistance program. The goal of the program is to increase a household's ability to buy more nutritious foods from neighborhood food stores.
Owning a car makes me ineligible for food stamp benefits.	Not true! As of October 6, 2003, one car for each adult in the household (up to 2 adults) will no longer be considered when your DHS worker determines if you are eligible for the Food Stamp Program.
If I have money in my savings account, I have to spend it before I can get food stamps.	Not true! A household is allowed up to a total of \$2,000 in "countable" resources and up to \$3,000 if at least one member of the household is age 60 or older, or disabled.
By accepting Food Stamps, I am taking money away from someone who needs it more.	The Food Stamp Program is an entitlement program. That means that anyone who applies and is found eligible for the program will receive benefits. There are enough benefits for all of those who are eligible.
I will only receive \$10 a month in food stamp benefits.	Fiscal year 2000 statistic showed elderly people who live alone received an average of \$44 per month and elderly people not living alone received an average benefit of \$116 per month.
I am not eligible for food stamps because I do not have an address.	Being homeless does not mean that you must go hungry. You do not need a fixed address to be eligible for food stamps.

Note. The listed myths regarding SNAP were reported by social service staff, advocates, and clients. The corresponding facts about SNAP are based on US Department of Agriculture and Rhode Island Department of Human Services policy regulations.

[60 or older] or disabled? Does your household have \$2000 or less in bank accounts, stocks, bonds, etc.? Does your household pay for childcare?). Upon completing the questions, individuals were encouraged to apply (or not) based on the number of affirmative responses. Over time, we have developed a variety of screening tools, using a minimal number of simple yes/no questions and targeted to specific audiences. For example, a screening tool for seniors includes only a net income guideline, because seniors do not need to meet a gross income test. On the other hand, immigrant households require a more nuanced set of questions about length of residency and immigration status. The trade-off between fewer questions and misclassification is of utmost importance so we try to err on the side of encouraging those who might be eligible to apply, with the caveat that they may not be eligible.

Collaboration with community partners is a key strategy to efficiently disseminate information to the target populations (Maton et al., 2004). Similar to our media messaging efforts, we prudently selected the outlets through which we distribute information based on the match between our message and their target populations. For example, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) provides home energy assistance to residents at

or below 60% of RI median income, via Community Action Programs (CAP) throughout the state. CAP agencies typically send mailings to their potentially eligible clients each fall in anticipation of the distribution of LIHEAP funding. Since 2005, the CAP mailings have included a SNAP Outreach flyer highlighting income guideline similarities between SNAP recipients and LIHEAP recipients. Between 2006 and 2010, approximately 30,000 SNAP flyers were disseminated annually in LIHEAP mailings, with this number increasing to 75,000 in 2011 due to more CAP agencies partnering with the outreach project. This flyer generates numerous calls requesting information about SNAP. Similarly, RI's Department of Education distributes letters to each student's household regarding eligibility criteria for free and reduced-priced meals at the start of each academic year. These letters now include a statement about potential SNAP eligibility for households that are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals and ways to obtain additional information. In 2011, the RI Department of Education distributed letters that included SNAP information to 30,000 households.

Other opportunities for disseminating information to large numbers of individuals include collaborations with state agencies, school districts, cities and towns, and the food bank network of pantries and soup kitchens. For example, the SNAP Outreach project has successfully partnered with the DHS to conduct a targeted mailing to all low-income households receiving child care subsidies and the Department of Labor & Training to conduct a one-time mailing to 20,000 recipients of unemployment insurance. Additionally, we have also collaborated with cities and towns during back-to-school events and food pantries during their holiday basket distributions.

Direct Client Assistance with SNAP

After several years of utilizing the two main outreach strategies (i.e., media messaging and information dissemination), and despite expanding community contacts and having support from the state government, we continued to confront barriers preventing eligible individuals from completing SNAP applications. Getting SNAP applications into the hands of potentially eligible clients was only half the challenge and many clients were simply unable to complete the application on their own. Indeed, much of the outreach literature emphasizes the importance of face-to-face contact to overcome resistance to participating in programs like SNAP and of directly assisting persons in obtaining services (Leviton & Schuh, 1991). In response to this need, we expanded our outreach project to include a direct, one-on-one outreach component and a toll-free hotline. The direct outreach component allows us to provide direct client assistance throughout the community, and the hotline provides potential SNAP recipients easy access to information without having to travel to a community site.

Direct outreach. Direct outreach entails trained outreach staff working in the community with low-income individuals, screening them for potential SNAP eligibility, providing information, and helping them to fill out applications. In its first year (2006), direct outreach included two undergraduate students who visited three different food pantries where we had well-developed relationships and were likely to find potentially eligible clients. The students visited the same sites for several hours at a time, multiple times per week to test our new approach of speaking with potential clients directly about SNAP. Both the pantry staff members and clients had to be convinced of the merit of the effort. Over several months, we piloted a variety of new direct outreach strategies and, from there, developed a statewide direct outreach plan.

Since then, we have significantly expanded direct outreach efforts in terms of the number of student outreach workers, number of sites visited, and types of venues where we conduct direct outreach. Undergraduate students are hired, trained, and assigned to community sites throughout the state. Initially, we had to contact agencies, orient them to the outreach project, and frequently persuade them of the value of SNAP participation for their clients. Currently, we work with hundreds of community sites, some of which we visit regularly (weekly, monthly, annually) for direct outreach and many others who request such services on a one-time basis. In fact, given the high demand and the staffing limitations, we frequently have to schedule direct outreach to agencies several weeks or even months in advance. Additionally, in the past 2 years, we have accepted limited referrals for in-home client assistance from reliable providers (e.g., Visiting Nurses Service).

The majority of direct outreach (76%) is conducted at five general types of sites: faith-based pantries/soup kitchen/meal sites, collectively referred to as the Emergency Food Network (21%); public housing (19%); community social service agencies (10%); senior centers/apartments or community centers (10%); and community events (16%). The remaining outreach sites are distributed among shelters/halfway houses, health centers, WIC centers, farmers' markets, organizations frequented by people with disabilities, state/federal agencies, retail food markets, laundromats, and a variety of other settings. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, direct outreach efforts reach the greatest number of individuals at faith-based pantries/soup kitchen/meal sites (51%), community social service agencies (9%), and community events (7%).

The nature of direct outreach work varies tremendously by site. Outreach at a food pantry often involves *working the line*, where outreach workers talk to individuals as they wait for their food. Outreach at a WIC clinic may be more formal, with outreach workers at a designated location to receive referrals by the WIC clinic staff. Outreach workers generally approach as many people at a site as possible, asking if they are interested in hearing

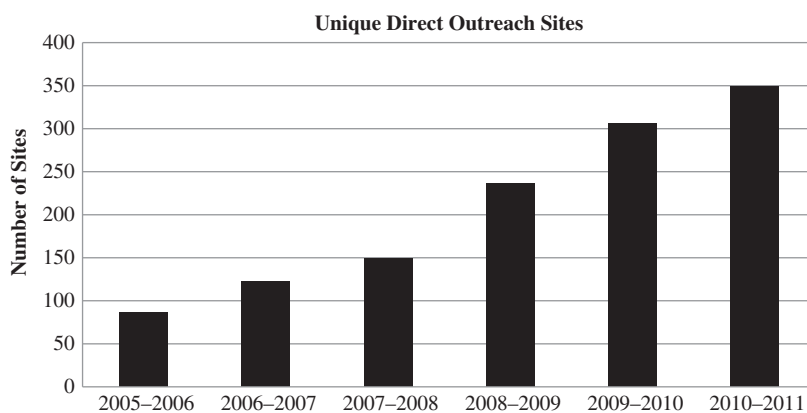


FIGURE 2 Number of unique direct outreach community sites visited by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Outreach Project outreach workers, between 2005 and 2011.

about SNAP or whether they are familiar with SNAP. Interested individuals are then provided with additional information, and in most cases, they are screened for eligibility. When the basic information gathered indicates that the individual is potentially eligible, they are offered the opportunity to complete an application with the assistance of the outreach worker. It is important to note that outreach workers are not able to determine eligibility, which is the sole purview of state government. Instead, outreach workers are trained to screen clients through a series of questions and make an informed decision about their potential eligibility. All interested applicants are assisted with applications if they so choose, independent of the screening result.

As direct outreach efforts have increased, participation in SNAP through hands-on application assistance has also increased. The number of unique direct outreach sites reached has increased each year since the project began, resulting in increases in the cumulative number of outreach visits as well as the number of people reached (see Figure 2). Between 2006 and 2011, outreach workers screened close to 15,000 individuals for SNAP eligibility. Of these, about 80% (roughly 12,000) were determined potentially eligible. This rate of eligibility has remained generally consistent year to year, with a trend toward increased eligibility in recent years. Of those who screen potentially eligible, the vast majority (93%) choose to complete an application at the outreach site.

Completing an application, however, is not the equivalent of receiving benefits. Two additional requirements, providing adequate documentation and completing the interview with the DHS, pose challenges to many applicants. Upon completing an application, outreach workers review a *what happens next* flyer with the applicant to explain what the client can expect after the application has been submitted. Additionally, outreach workers

make calls to clients to further support the application process.² Follow-up calls initially took place 4 to 6 weeks after the application was submitted to find out whether the application had been approved. We discovered that many clients reported that they had been denied as a result of having missed their interview and/or failing to submit adequate documentation. We have since moved up the timing of the follow-up phone call, with the goal of providing reminders about the additional requirements before the applicant has been denied. At present, applicants are called between 2 and 3 weeks after submitting their application, to ensure that the applicant is informed of and prepared for their interview. Specifically, we ask whether they have received an interview appointment from DHS, whether they went to the interview (or are prepared to go), and whether they were able to submit the proper documentation. At this point, if they have not completed these requirements, outreach staff members can encourage them to do so or provide them with additional assistance they might need (e.g., guiding client through rescheduling missed interviews or providing assistance in how to secure necessary documentation). Unfortunately, we are only able to reach about 63% of the applicants for whom we have contact information, with many individuals not picking up their phones, having disconnected phones, or having provided incorrect information.

Similar to the media messaging and training protocols that are adapted to the appropriate audience, direct outreach strategies are also tailored to meet the needs of our target populations. For example, when working with senior populations, attendance at outreach events increases when the SNAP presentation includes an activity. We developed SNAP Bingo, using SNAP facts on each square, which allows us to share information about SNAP in a fun, nonthreatening environment, and still reach a target population that might not self-identify as needing help. Similarly, efforts to reach the low-income working families have been successful through partnerships with agencies providing child care or job training to low-wage workers (e.g., health care providers participating in certified nursing assistant training). To target our immigrant populations, we have partnered directly with faith-based organizations, attending church services and fellowship groups to provide direct client assistance with SNAP.

Within these targeted populations, we also have demonstrated success. For instance, of the screens conducted at direct outreach sites between January 2009 and September 2011, 75% were from identified target populations. Of these, 23% were elderly, 25% were low-income working individuals/families, 18% were individuals with disabilities, and 9% were immigrant and/or non-English speakers. This demographic breakdown has been relatively consistent over the years for which data were collected.

² Only those applicants who provide contact information and a signed release for follow-up are contacted.

In addition to screenings and application completion, direct outreach workers also help individuals with a number of other SNAP-related issues. Since 2008, close to 1,500 individuals have been helped with changes in benefit amounts, including changes in benefit amounts, recertification questions, or other concerns about their current application.

Hotline. A toll-free information hotline was launched in 2007 as a second form of direct client assistance. The hotline number serves as a central number for all information related to SNAP. The hotline provides individuals an opportunity to ask questions, be screened for potential eligibility, request an application, or resolve a problem, especially when they are unable to get to a state office or a community outreach site. A companion Web site includes basic facts about SNAP, contact information, and outreach materials that can be downloaded and reproduced.

Between 2007 and 2011, the SNAP Outreach Hotline received 10,586 calls, with 87% of callers receiving a response. The majority (58%) of callers are seeking general information about SNAP, as well as specific information about their eligibility for SNAP benefits. Others inquire about an already-submitted application (10%), request general information (e.g., food resources, pantry locations) (9%), or inquire about recertification requirements (1%). In general, the type of calls received and the reasons for calls have remained fairly consistent over the years.

Calls to the hotline are generally handled by outreach workers and returned within 24 hrs. One day per week, the line is fully staffed and calls are answered in vivo. Individuals calling about eligibility are screened and applications are mailed to potential clients on the same day. Between 2007 and 2011, outreach workers screened about 5,500 callers for SNAP eligibility over the phone. Of these, 78% were determined potentially eligible. This rate of caller eligibility has remained generally consistent year to year. More recently, we began tracking the demographics of screened callers. Of the screens conducted since April 2009, 78% of callers were among our target populations: elderly (29%), low-income working individuals/households (25%), individuals with disabilities (14%), and immigrant or non-English speakers (10%). This demographic breakdown is relatively consistent over the 3 years for which there are data, and mirrors the demographic breakdown of the direct client assistance conducted in the community.

Unlike direct client assistance in the community, once applications are mailed to callers, there is very little information available to know whether or not the applications have been completed or submitted. In an attempt to follow up with callers, approximately 6 weeks after the initial hotline call, individuals are mailed a postage-paid postcard asking about the outcome and whether any additional assistance is needed. About 20% of postcards are returned, with approximately half of those requesting additional assistance, and the other half reporting currently receiving SNAP benefits.

EVALUATION OF THE SNAP OUTREACH PROJECT

One fundamental component of the outreach program has been the ongoing evaluation of our effectiveness. To have useful information to guide decision making, we need to continuously ask critical questions about our strategies and their usefulness. Evaluation was integrated into our outreach project's design from its inception, which has helped to ensure the collection of essential data throughout the life of the program. Doing so allows us to be cost-effective and builds quality assurance procedures into daily functioning (Taylor-Powell, 2006).

Over time, we have expanded and systematized our data collection and evaluation efforts to more fully capture the scope of our work. This involves outreach workers keeping detailed logs of their activities in the community (e.g., people observed, people spoken to, screenings conducted, percent eligible, applications assisted, applications completed), as well as all hotline calls (e.g., purpose of call, caller demographics, eligibility screening, eligibility determination likelihood, outcome of call, source from which caller obtained the hotline number).

All direct outreach, hotline, and follow-up data reported are thoroughly checked to ensure fidelity and entered into a large database by graduate research assistants. Weekly staff meetings with outreach workers seek to troubleshoot breakdowns in the flow of information and provide an opportunity for ongoing feedback and training. Graduate students generate reports for weekly administrative meetings to consistently monitor the effectiveness of the direct client assistance efforts. These data provide continuous opportunities to fine-tune our strategies.

In particular, the SNAP Outreach hotline serves as a key indicator of effectiveness for all outreach strategies. For instance, the data show a direct positive relationship between the presentation of SNAP Outreach radio advertisements and the overall number of hotline calls received. For example, in 2008–2009, radio advertisements were aired in February, March, June, and July. In that year, the total numbers of hotline calls per month were notably higher in those months with the radio advertisements (and those immediately following), than in months without radio advertisements (see Figure 3).

Additionally, callers are asked about the source from which they obtained the hotline phone number. These data have allowed us to document positive relationships between the materials we disseminate (e.g., flyers), media messaging (e.g., mass transit billboards, newspaper coverage, television appearances), and call volume. For instance, SNAP inserts are distributed within LIHEAP mailings during the months when heating assistance is most needed, generally starting in October. Figure 4 illustrates a consistent pattern over a 4-year span of the number of LIHEAP-referred hotline calls peaking during the months of high distribution (e.g., late fall) and then gradually declining over the following months.

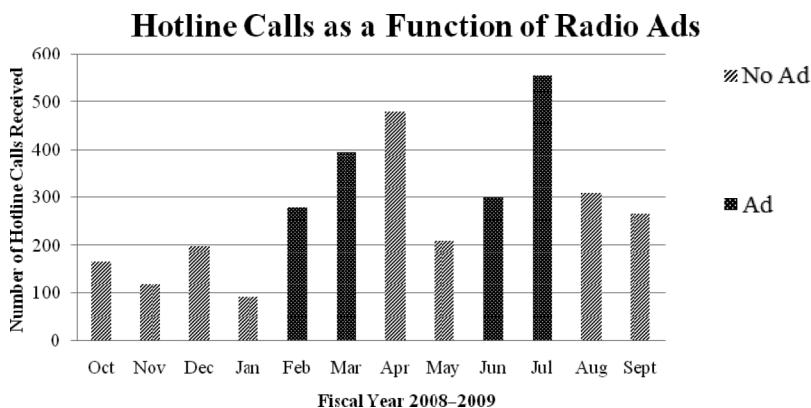


FIGURE 3 Number of monthly calls received on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Outreach Project Hotline, comparing months with and months without SNAP Outreach Project radio advertisements, between 2008 and 2009.

LIHEAP-Referred Hotline Calls

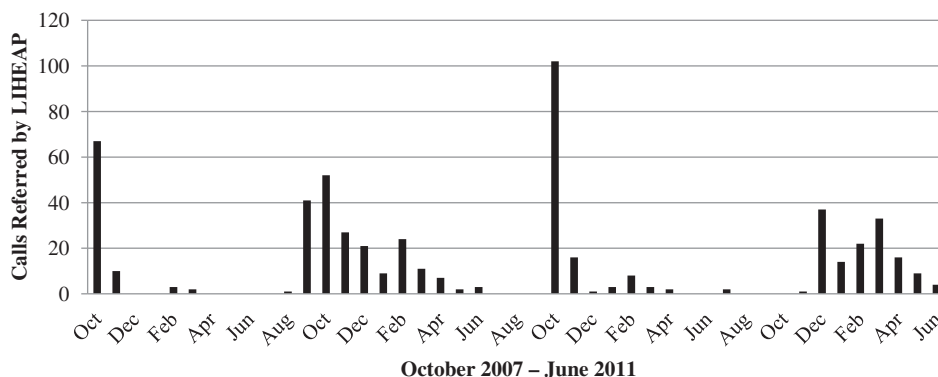


FIGURE 4 Number of calls received on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Outreach Hotline, by month, referencing the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) mailing, between 2007 and 2011.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this evaluation has been to examine a number of strategies that seek to promote participation in SNAP and to evaluate their effectiveness in reaching target populations. Our efforts have included increasing awareness and decreasing stigma around SNAP through broad-based media messaging, disseminating accurate, useful information through trainings and print materials, and directly assisting clients through community engagement and hotline operation. In doing so, we have effectively increased access to both information and resources for a large number of potential SNAP clients, the majority of whom fall into our target populations.

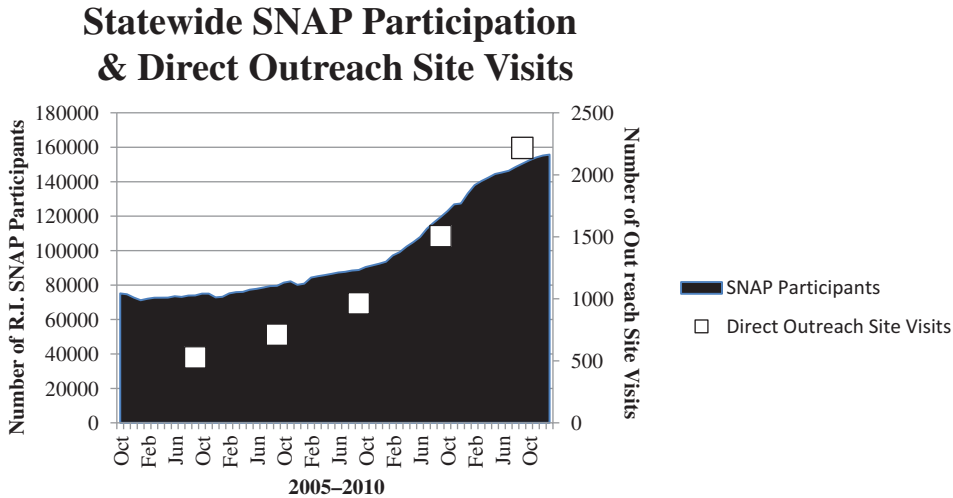


FIGURE 5 Number of statewide participants in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), compared with the number of individual direct outreach site visits conducted by the SNAP Outreach Project, between 2005 and 2010 (color figure available online).

In addition, although not specific to the goal, participation in SNAP in RI over the last several years has increased by over 100%. Although we cannot tie participation directly to our outreach strategies, Figure 5 illustrates that the increase in availability of direct client assistance in the community has increased proportionately to the increase in statewide participation.

Importantly, we have demonstrated success in developing a number of strategies to reach our target populations, such as SNAP Bingo for senior citizens and call-in hours on Spanish-speaking radio and television shows. Additionally, the importance of building partnerships cannot be overlooked. At present, we have over 2,000 individuals from more than 500 agencies who receive materials as a result of their participation in trainings or direct outreach events. Interestingly, despite overall growth in most of the project's indicators, data on the trainings show a somewhat different pattern, with participation peaking in 2009. Although we have no empirical data to directly account for this trend, we attribute this spike to two events. At the state level, a large number of policy changes were implemented in 2009 that modified SNAP eligibility significantly so that demand for training was unusually high. Additionally, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 resulted in increased funding and subsequent expanded staffing in many social service agencies. The convergence of these two factors likely increased overall demand for training and with the loss of ARRA money, as well as fewer policy changes, training levels declined. In support of this interpretation is the fact that, in general, the number of trainings offered has

remained fairly consistent, but the number of individuals participating has shown the most flux.

Critical to our success has been our ability to support a dynamic and fluid process that is able to continuously respond to changes in the environment. One feature of the outreach project that contributes to our flexibility is our reliance on undergraduate students as direct outreach workers. As noted earlier, all direct outreach, including community site visits, home visits, hotline calls, and follow-up phone calls, is conducted by undergraduate students. Outreach workers are hired on a part-time basis, which has proven to be particularly effective for both students and community sites. For example, a core group of ten students, with variable class schedules and anywhere from 5 to 20 hrs a week available to work, provides a great fit for the vast majority of outreach sites that are open and serving clients on a limited or variable schedule (e.g., all but the largest pantries are open only 1 day a week or a few hours on a couple of days). Furthermore, although social service agencies may be open full time, their food distributions often are scheduled at particular times. In this way, the use of part-time employees is particularly well-suited to outreach, as student schedules can be matched to hours of operation. Additionally, many sites that we visit (e.g., soup kitchens) operate during hours that do not typically fall in a standard work day but can be very convenient for student workers.

As much as working with students may be an asset, it can also be a limitation. Course schedules change every semester, sometimes during the semester. Undergraduates have schedules that require modification for exams, projects, theater productions, and so forth, all of which can, and should, take precedence over their work schedules. Similarly, community sites are often at the whim of outside forces. Given their frequent reliance on volunteers, factors such as illness, severe weather, and lack of funding all contribute to a degree of uncertainty when planning outreach. Furthermore, reaching our target populations requires building trusting relationships, which sometimes are difficult and time-consuming. For example, in working with seniors, some states have used a senior-to-senior model whereby seniors receiving SNAP conduct outreach with other seniors with good success. However, we have not yet been able to build that program in our state. Finally, reaching low-income working households continues to be the most challenging and hard to reach of all target populations. Unlike other target populations, like seniors who frequently live in close proximity or our immigrant community who may share a common language, the low-income working households are extremely diverse and dispersed throughout the community. Nonetheless, as our network of community partners grows, we will continue to seek opportunities to connect with our hard-to-reach populations.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that there are particular challenges to working with state and federal programs. The role of outreach is situated

between advocates and state administrators, and at times, it can be challenging to balance competing needs. For example, despite the demonstrated need for the SNAP Outreach Project, as determined by the numbers of individuals we have assisted and continue to assist each year, our efforts are oftentimes perceived as counterproductive to state workers managing ever-increasing caseloads. The natural tension between increased participation and increased workload requires constant communication and cooperation.

Although the work presented here is state-specific, these strategies could be replicated in a number of different venues, including municipal or regional levels where a statewide initiative may be unrealistic. The importance of building community partnerships, adapting to changing needs and various populations, and constantly assessing and revising strategies provides a model that could be utilized in other contexts. Additionally, the multitiered approach, from media messaging for targeting large populations to direct client assistance for one-on-one help, is crucial to the success of these efforts. Keeping these strategies in mind has simultaneously allowed us to be successful and reminds us that we will need to continue to adapt to changes in the economic and political landscape.

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