

## Food Stamp Outreach

Why should afterschool programs care about food stamp outreach?

A growing body of research demonstrates a strong connection between good nutrition and academic achievement. California's publicly funded afterschool programs are targeted at low-income schools, where more families have a tough time making ends meet and being able to afford enough of the right kinds of food for their families. When kids don't get enough to eat or don't get a nutritionally balanced diet, their academic achievement suffers.<sup>1</sup>

On top of that, there is a link between poverty and obesity. Healthier diets are beyond the reach of many people because they cost more. On a per calorie basis, diets composed of whole grains, fish, fresh vegetables and fruits are more expensive than refined grains, added sugars and added fats. Attempting to reduce food spending tends to drive families toward more refined grains, added sugars and added fats that are more affordable. These energy-dense foods not only provide more calories per unit weight, but can provide more empty calories per unit cost. These include French fries, soft drinks, candy, cookies, deep-fried meats and other fatty, sugary and salty items. Past studies indicate that energy-dense foods may fail to trigger physiological satiety mechanisms—internal signals that enough food has been consumed. And failed signals lead to overeating and overweight.<sup>2</sup>

Access to healthier diets can be sharply limited in low-income neighborhoods simply because there are more fast food restaurants, fewer grocery stores and farmers markets. Add to that the often unsafe neighborhoods in low-income areas that don't offer safe walking and play places. This puts low-income kids at a higher risk of developing the diseases and medical conditions associated with overweight and obesity—type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease (including high cholesterol levels and high blood pressure), asthma, liver disease, joint problems, sleep apnea—as well as depression and anxiety.<sup>3</sup> And overweight and obese children and adolescents are more likely to become overweight and obese adults who face the increased risk for all of the medical problems above plus coronary heart disease, strokes, certain types of cancer, kidney disease, and arthritis.<sup>4</sup>

The *Developing Exemplary Practices in Nutrition, Physical Activity and Food Security in Afterschool Programs* guide that CCS developed in consultation with an expert Stakeholder Advisory Group and ten outstanding afterschool programs includes a chapter on food security practices. *Food Security* means that a family has access at all times to sufficient food for an active, healthy life. Families who are food secure do not need to worry about where their next meal is coming from. And doing food stamp outreach is one of the ways that afterschool programs can help promote food security for the families they serve.

We at CCS have found that food stamp outreach, as an integral part of food security efforts by our Nutrition Education Leadership Learning Community (NELLC) afterschool

programs, is an important way to help families purchase more nutritious food. And yet it was initially one of the more challenging areas for the NELLCs. This is due to several factors:

- Food security was an unfamiliar concept, and one that many programs viewed as outside of their purview.
- Programs are unfamiliar with the Food Stamp Program and its requirements.
- Programs are concerned about the sensitivity of approaching families regarding their potential eligibility.
- Programs tend to focus on their 3-6 p.m. programming and interactions with parents regarding their children's progress and general health matters. Going the next step is often viewed as difficult.

It is often easier to focus on adding fruits and vegetables to program snacks and through enrichment activities such as gardening and cooking; to encourage participation in school lunch and school breakfast programs; and to make sure that afterschool snacks are healthy.

But as soon as they understood the impact of the obesity crisis on their students (and their families), the relationship between poverty and obesity, and the real hunger that many of their children faced on a daily basis, NELLC programs wanted to help increase the purchasing power of families. Through increasing their families' awareness of the Food Stamp Program and their potential eligibility, NELLC programs are making a real impact on their ability to afford more nutritious foods.

Food stamp benefits are 100 percent federally funded. But in California only 53 percent of eligible families (as of 2005) are taking advantage of this program that would allow them to increase their ability to purchase food and to afford healthier foods. That puts us third from the bottom in state participation rates! And although food stamp participation rates have been increasing, we still have a long ways to go. At the California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA) Web site (<http://www.cfpa.net>), you can click on your county to view your county's nutrition profile that includes what percentage of people in your county are eligible for food stamps but not receiving them.

Below we share information from three of our NELLC programs on different approaches they have taken to increasing awareness of the Food Stamp Program. Following that is additional information to help your program assist families to access these benefits.

### ***CalSERVES Napa County Office of Education***

One of the first things CalSERVES did was to allow time for their staff, many of whom were part-time and, therefore, low income, to apply for food stamps themselves. This

gave them an increased understanding of the process and requirements, and the credibility to speak to families. This also helped their own families access additional resources to help them eat healthier and to be better role models for the students they serve.

When a staff member notices that a family could use some assistance with food security, they use the system in place at their school site. There are Community Action Partnership family advocates at each of their sites, and the afterschool staff meets with them to discuss the need he/she has noticed. The Community Action staff then connects with the families and offers resources, including food stamp applications.

CalSERVES has also made food stamp outreach a regular part of their highly successful Cesar Chavez Health Fair that involves over 70 health care organizations that provide health screenings, services and vital information to families. This annual health fair encourages and provides information on healthy eating and active living to over 2,000 Sonoma County residents. And the Food Stamp Program information can be shared in a non-threatening, non-judgmental way. The local food bank, Redwood Empire Food Bank, participates in the fair and provides Food Stamp Program information to CalSERVES and other community families.

In addition, CalSERVES makes sharing information with families about community resources, including food stamps, the food bank, and community gardens, a regular part of their family nights. Again, in the context of general information sharing, they have found a way to provide important information to families in way that is comfortable for program staff. They also provide help to families by offering the Back Pack program, again through the local food bank. This year, they increased from 48 to 72 the number of families that can be served with food that can be taken home each weekend.

### ***Mt. Diablo CARES Contra Costa County***

Mt. Diablo CARES has jumped into addressing food security, understanding that many of their children go home to households that cannot put enough food, let alone healthy food, on the table. Their garden program has opened up additional food sources for children. Their partnership with the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano Counties has generated almost 137 tons of additional produce for their afterschool participants, their staff and the community in just under two years! And when special circumstances are identified, the staff quickly takes action to make sure that they are addressed!

As part of their strategy to improve the food security of their participants, Debra Mason, one of the co-leaders of Mt. Diablo CARES and a recreation specialist with Ambrose Park and Recreation Department, enrolled in Food Stamp Outreach training provided by the Contra Costa County Department of Social Services and the food bank as the first step in helping the program do food stamp intake for parents two to three times a year. Last year all site coordinators took the same training. The original plan was to provide color-coded Food Stamp Program applications to families so that they could track the

success of their outreach efforts. Although the staff felt they could handle the applications, they were concerned that families might be intimidated by the rest of process. The County Food Stamp Office was willing to come out to do intake on-site if the program can assure them that they have 10-15 families needing assistance. The plan now is to have the County come to an afterschool-sponsored family night.

### ***YMCA of Santa Clara Valley***

As part of the NELLC, the YMCA realized that the Food Stamp Program represented an important resource to their families. Not only could it help them be able to afford to eat healthier, but it was a good resource for family nutrition information. The local county food stamp office did not have enough materials to hand out to families at all of the YMCA's sites, so one of the afterschool specialists went to the Internet for help. At <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/default.htm>, she selected the following food stamp outreach and nutrition materials:

- Loving Your Family, Feeding their Future (Spanish Brochure, FNS 380S)
- Loving Your Family, Feeding their Future (Spanish Guidebook, FNS 381S)
- Loving Your Family. Comidas Para Su Familia! Faciles, Saborosas, y Saludables! (Spanish Handouts, FNS 383S)
- Loving Your Family, Feeding their Future (English Guidebook, FNS 381E)
- Loving Your Family. Ways to Eat Smart and Move more (English Handouts, FNS 382E)
- Loving Your Family. What Counts as One Cup of Fruit? (English Handouts, FNS 384E)
- Questions and Answers about the FSP (Spanish Brochure, FNS 313S)
- 10 Steps to Help Fill Your Grocery Bag (English Insert, FSPO1)

She found that the materials were useful and informative for families. The brochures, handouts and guidebooks were available free of cost in quantities sufficient to meet their needs. The Web site also has posters and downloadable materials. Posting posters, however, requires support from the school site since the space is theirs. Within two months of ordering, the materials were received.

The YMCA makes the materials available in a plastic brochure holder near the sign-out binders at the program sites. This has generated a lot of interest by parents in the program. They empty the brochure holders! In addition, the program makes them available at family nights and will make them available at health fairs.

Because the YMCA was not a "certified" outreach agency, they were told by the County Department of Social Services that they would not be able to help families fill out applications (nor were they eligible for training because of this). Instead, the YMCA instructs its staff to have families contact their local food stamp office or the Second Harvest Food Bank (an outreach agency) to get questions answered and to apply for benefits. In Santa Clara County, the 211 number lists county resources, including the Food Stamp Program office.

The afterschool staff at the YMCA sites are very positive about the food stamp outreach efforts by the afterschool program. They recognize that parents need resources to help their families eat better. And being able to do something to help makes the staff feel powerful.

One issue that they have identified is that often afterschool program sites do not have space or a designated area for food stamp outreach brochures to be stored or presented to families. The YMCA is planning to purchase rolling racks or carts to help address the problem of where to locate the materials for sharing with families, and to easily put them away after the program is over.

### **Where can you get information about food stamp outreach?**

Both at regional trainings conducted around the state this past year and through community connections summits in Los Angeles and Visalia, the Center for Collaborative Solutions (CCS) has worked with the California Association of Food Banks (CAFB) and the California County Welfare Directors Association Food Stamp Committee to identify organizations and county social services departments that are doing food stamp outreach and are willing to work with afterschool programs. Not all food banks and not all county food stamp offices are actively involved in food stamp outreach. However, many are and are eager to connect in an organized way with afterschool programs. If there is not a food stamp outreach organization in your county, you can contact your local county department of social services food stamp office to find out how best to help your families apply.

In addition, California has a statewide, toll-free Food Stamp Information Line and statewide call center that allow callers anywhere in California to receive application assistance from live operators. This toll-free line is supported by the California Department of Social Services, the *Network for a Healthy California*, the Public Health Institute, the California Association of Food Banks (CFAB) and other partner agencies. That number is 1-877-847-FOOD. For more information about the Food Stamp Information Line, you can contact CFAB at [foodstamps@cafoodbanks.org](mailto:foodstamps@cafoodbanks.org).

And for families that have access to the Internet, <http://myfoodstamps.org> and <http://www.misalimentos.org> provide a pre-screening tool and information about food stamp eligibility, outreach strategies, food insecurity trends and how you can help. Afterschool programs can use this resource and encourage families to access this important resource.

The California Department of Social Services has a comprehensive food stamp Web site at <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/foodstamps/default.htm>. This site has applications that can be downloaded in five languages, a pre-screening tool, contact information for all 58 county social services departments, frequently asked questions and answers, and more!

To find out if your local food bank is involved in food stamp outreach, afterschool programs can go to the California Association of Food Banks Web site (<http://www.cafb.org>) and click on *Find a Food Bank*. Complete contact information for all CAFB members is available.

Also, information on food stamp outreach organizations (organized by county) can be found at the Cancer Prevention and Nutrition Section *Network for a Healthy California* Web site (<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/CPNS>). Simply click on *Food Stamp Outreach* and then at the bottom of the page click on *Partners*.

Food banks often offer, in addition to food stamp outreach, access to fresh fruits and vegetables through food industry surpluses and innovative Farm to Family programs. To find out if your local food bank does this, simply contact them using the CAFB Web site above.

The resources are there to help you. We hope that you take that next step to help the families your afterschool program serves to access Food Stamp Program nutrition assistance.

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<sup>1</sup> *Student Wellness: A Healthy Food and Physical Activity Policy Resource Guide*. Developed by California Project LEAN in collaboration with the California School Boards Association.  
<http://www.Californiaprojectlean.org/resourcelibrary>

<sup>2</sup> University of Washington (2004, January 5). Researcher Links Rising Tide of Obesity to Food Prices. *Science Daily*. Retrieved November 2, 2007, from  
<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2004/01/040105071229.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Web site. Child Overweight Consequences.  
<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/childhood/consequences.htm>. (accessed 10/27/2008)

<sup>4</sup> *F as in Fat: 2008, How Obesity Policies are Failing in America*. Trust for America's Health. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Pp. 26-27.  
<http://www.healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2008/obesity2008report.pdf>.