



FRESNO METRO MINISTRY

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## Excerpts and Summary of the 51<sup>th</sup> Community Hunger and Nutrition Forum

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Trinity Lutheran Church, Fresno

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USDA, Community Food Project

MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

California Food Policy Advocates

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Vitamin Settlement Cases Consumer Settlement Fund to improve the health and nutrition of California consumers.

### FOCUS: Ending Hunger Report and Recommendations

US Congressional Hunger Center Fellows, Laura Tatum and Dennis Barrett

*A Collaborative Project of Fresno Metro Ministry, Community Food Bank,*

*Foodlink, Tulare County, and the USDA Western Regional Office*

Summary compiled by Carey Berend and Edie Jessup

**Edie Jessup, Fresno Metro Ministry Hunger & Nutrition Project** welcomed participants to the 51<sup>st</sup> Hunger and Nutrition Forum. (The Packet was reviewed and participants introduced themselves.)

I'd like to introduce **Laura Tatum and Dennis Barrett, US Congressional Hunger Fellows**, who have been here working on a project in Fresno and Tulare Counties since September 2004. They will be writing a report called **Ending Hunger in Fresno & Tulare Counties**. They will be returning at the beginning of February to the Congressional Hunger Center in Washington DC, and will be working with our local legislators on issues that they have found, and recommendations that they have for the Central Valley. **We have a great opportunity today to hear about their project, about where they're headed with their recommendations, and also to give them some last minute input from us about what some of the issues are that are really important to you, and then to take a look at where we go from here.** Now that we have the recommendations, how are we going to work toward ending hunger here in the Valley? We have really enjoyed the work that you've done and we're looking forward to hearing what it is you have seen and your involvement here.

Laura Tatum and Dennis Barrett, US Congressional Hunger Center Fellows, have been working with an innovative collaborative between Fresno Metro Ministry, the Community Food Bank (Fresno), the Tulare County Foodlink Foodbank, and the USDA, Western Regional Office. Fresno/Tulare are 2 of only 24 Hunger Fellow placements this year. They have facilitated a strong, new working relationship between these entities, all working to assure Fresno and Tulare County residents have access to healthy food through full utilization of the Food Stamp Nutrition Program.

**Laura Tatum, US Congressional Hunger Center Fellow:** Good afternoon, everyone. We thought we would start out with a short quiz about the Food Stamp Program. We would like to go through these and have someone volunteer their answer for each one if people would be willing.

#### **The FOOD STAMP QUIZ**

**QUESTION 1. True or False: Full participation in the Food Stamp Program would bring an additional \$39 million in federal funds to the economy of Fresno County annually.**

**Jeff Garner, Catholic Charities:** I think that is true.

**Laura Tatum:** It is true except that it's actually even more than that. Thirty-nine million dollars is the statistic for Tulare County, and **the correct statistic for Fresno County is \$88 million additional funds would come into the economy of Fresno County if all eligible for the Food Stamp Nutrition Program were enrolled .**

**Dennis Barrett, US Congressional Hunger Center Fellow:**

**QUESTION 2: California Food Policy Advocates estimates that \_\_\_\_\_ percentage of food stamp recipients have earned income. That's either A) 28%, B) 36%, C) 47%, or D) 53%.**

**Laurie:** Well, I guessed, but I said 53%.

**Dennis Barrett:** That was a good guess. You're correct. **More than half of food stamps recipients according to the latest numbers from California Food Policy Advocates are actually in working households.** So, that's one of the big myths that we've been trying to debunk during our time here: that it's not just for unemployed folks who are eligible for Food Stamps. The Food Stamp Nutrition Program is really meant to assure that working families are able to put enough food on their tables.

**Laura Tatum: QUESTION 3: Recent USDA data indicates that California's food stamp participation rate is A) 46%, B) 54%, C) 65%, or D) 77%. Would anyone like to take a stab at that one?**

**Ray Ensher, Health Care for All:** I put 46%. Did I get one right?

**Laura Tatum: The correct answer according to this USDA data is 54%,** but you were close. *California ranks one of the lowest states in the entire nation in food stamp participation, and according to some studies it's actually the lowest participation rate. Just over half of the people who qualify to receive food stamps are receiving them.*

**Dennis Barrett:** We've done a lot of outreach over the past couple of months and we've heard a variety of different reasons why people don't want to apply for food stamps.

**Question #4: Which of the following is not a reason given to us for why people did not want to apply for food stamps? A) "Food stamps are public charge and might hurt my citizenship status"; B) "I have a job so I won't qualify for food stamps"; C) "My children will be taken away from me if I apply"; or D) "My son will be drafted to fight in Iraq if I apply for food stamps".**

**Participant comment:** I think 'D'.

**Dennis Barrett:** My son will be drafted? No. Believe it or not, someone actually did tell us that they didn't want to apply for food stamps because they thought their son was going to be drafted to fight in Iraq. It's really sad when there are people that actually really do believe this and are afraid of applying. Any other guesses on that one?

**Participant comment:** None of the above?

**Dennis Barrett:** Actually, C, "My children will be taken away from me if I apply" –is the one we haven't heard as a reason for not applying for Food Stamps. "Food stamps are public charge and might hurt my citizenship status" is the most common myth, particularly among the Hispanic community and the recent immigrant community. **Food stamps are not public charge.** Public charge, is something that can hurt someone's application for citizenship status. A lot of cash welfare programs are technically public charge, but the **Food Stamp Program is not welfare. It's not public charge.** It's actually a nutrition program.

**Participant comment:** The reason why many people don't apply for food stamps is because they feel that if you do apply for food stamps they will not be eligible for citizenship.

**Dennis Barrett:** Exactly. That's the biggest reason we came across in our outreach efforts. **"I have a job so I won't qualify for food stamps" is also one of the things we heard several times.** We were down in Tulare County doing food stamp outreach and I asked a woman if she was interested in applying and she said, "Well, I have a job so I wouldn't qualify." I told her that she might qualify and showed her the income guidelines and she laughed at them for her family of three. I figured that she made a lot more money than what the guideline was. I asked if she made more money and she said, "No, I don't make anywhere near that amount of money." So, **I think it surprises a lot of people that they do qualify. One of the things we've been trying to focus on is that it's good parenting to get food stamps if you do in fact qualify because it puts more money in the pockets of mothers and fathers to buy more nutritious food for their children.**

**Participant comment:** I had an eight-hour job for the school district. I've gone from eight to six hours. I knew that during those two months (summer) when you weren't working you could apply. Then when I actually dropped down to six hours I could have gotten food stamps for I don't know how long, but it's kind of like you don't realize it. It's not that it's an embarrassment because we pay into the system. I guess the system is totally changed and we just need to know more information.

**Dennis Barrett:** There are a lot of folks who are seasonal workers, particularly in the Central Valley where the economy is so agriculture based. There are so many workers that only work X amount of months out of the year. Oftentimes those families can apply and could be receiving food stamps for four or five calendar months, but because they don't qualify during those other months oftentimes they don't realize that they would qualify during those down times, so seasonal employment is another issue.

That last comment, "My son will be drafted to fight in Iraq if I apply for food stamps", was for us the most shocking thing that we had heard. In these communities in which we're trying to do outreach, they're very much built on trust. A rumor can spread like wildfire, and **oftentimes rumors are more trusted in some of these immigrant communities in particular than what the government says**, so it's important to make sure to get the truth out there.

**Edie Jessup:** On that issue, was the concern that just because they would be registered in a program that was a government program that they thought that information was going to be used in another government program? Do you think that that is the foundation of that belief?

**Laura Tatum:** I spoke with her (the woman who gave that reason for not applying for food stamps) and I think it was sort of a public charge type myth. **I think she thought that if she were to receive food stamps then her son might have to go to Iraq as sort of a payback** or something like that.

**Dennis Barrett:** Thank you for taking our quiz. We're just going to now go over our project and the work that we've been doing for the past couple of months and give you both a narrative, and preliminary recommendations.

**There were three main project goals** that we were taking to work to **increase food stamp participation here in the valley.** The first part of that approach was the **media.** For those of us in the advocacy and nonprofit sector, this is kind of our advertising. Nonprofits don't have the big money that major corporations do to get their information out there all the time. **I think the media is the best tool that we have as advocates to try and get the message out about a variety of different issues, certainly about food stamps.**

#### **MEDIA OUTREACH**

We took a two-level approach to our media outreach. **One, we were trying to directly influence and get in direct contact with those folks that qualify for food stamps but don't realize that they qualify. We did this particularly by working with ethnic media.** Laura has done

several interviews. She's actually got an interview tonight on Spanish television. We've also done some programs through the Spanish news programs as well as some print media also. We've also done work in some of the more major, mainstream publications. We realize that the Hispanic population is probably the largest untapped resource we have in terms of trying to maximize our food stamp participation. So that was one level, of our outreach.

**The second level was trying to change public opinion about the Food Stamp program.**

A year ago I would have laughed at you if you told me I was going to be standing up here talking about food stamps. I had no idea about the program, but I think for a lot of people that don't know much about the program they just know there's a negative connotation. We have been writing op-eds (Opinion/Editorials) and doing some articles in some of the more **mainstream media, the Fresno Bee in particular**. One of the issues we've been trying to keep pounding away at is **the issue of the economic benefit of food stamps to local businesses. Thirty-nine million dollars in Tulare County is a lot of money. Eighty-eight million dollars here in Fresno is a tremendous amount of money, so we have been trying to show that food stamps not only benefit the empty stomachs but they also benefit the empty pockets and the hungry economy of this area.**

**One of our biggest successes was that we were contacted by Devin Nunes, the US Congressman from Tulare and Fresno. His chief of staff contacted us and he said he had been reading a lot of things in the papers about the benefits of the Food Stamp Program and he wanted to meet with us and see what he could do.** We were able to meet with him about a month back and talk about the work we'd been doing, and about what the Congressman and his staff could do to try and further improve our efforts. I think that was one of our crowning achievements for our media outreach.

In terms of the more direct approach, in trying to work with those groups that qualify but aren't signed up for Food Stamps right now, we had **two resolutions passed, one in Fresno County and one in Tulare County. The Board of Supervisors passed each resolution and declared each county a Food-Stamp-Friendly County and showed the benefits of the program, both economic and health-wise, to each of the counties.** The Tulare resolution passed in November. The Fresno resolution passed in December.

On November 9<sup>th</sup> when Tulare's resolution passed, the Spanish-language news station came out and did a quick interview with one of my coworkers at Food Link for the 6 o'clock news. We were actually going away from the 10<sup>th</sup> through the 13<sup>th</sup>, Wednesday through Sunday, for a retreat for our Hunger Fellows program. As I was packing my bags that night on Tuesday I got a call from one of my coworkers who was working late. She said that the interview must have run on the Spanish-language news station, because the Foodlink Tulare County had gotten about 15 calls in the past 10 minutes about food stamps. I went to D.C. all excited and they were asking about best practices and I said, "Well, use the media. It's great. It got us 15 phone calls for this one 2 to 3 minute segment on a news station. I came back on Monday morning – looking back I'm surprised that they didn't kick me – but I said to one of my coworkers, "It's great that we got 15 phone calls," and they said, "*Dennis, we didn't get 15. We got between 200 and 300 phone calls between Tuesday night and Friday from people wanting to know if they could get food stamps.*" **There are a lot of people that say the information is out there. Well, it's not. It's not getting to the right people; and it was very encouraging to reach folks eligible for Food Stamps through the media. We've also had articles in some of the local newspapers that have also yielded literally hundreds of phone calls through each of the two food banks and each of the two county welfare departments.** Now Laura will talk more about the nuts and bolts of our media approach.

**MEDIA RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**Laura Tatum:** For other people who are interested in doing a similar type of project, the first thing that we would recommend about media is that people look up the **Berkeley Media Studies Group, which has a website. They provide a lot of great information on how to use the media for social change.**

I'll give you some of their recommendations. **In order to get media coverage stories should be local. It's good if they involve conflict or controversy. It's good to piggyback on national stories and to focus on both the problem and the solution.** We found it's very helpful to have a

**media plan and to have a list of essential messages so that you don't forget any when you are speaking with the media and you make sure that you remember to discuss all of the things that you want to discuss. The media is so useful because you can reach everyone including elected officials, policy makers, the public, and you can also reach other nonprofits that might be interested in the work that you're doing and it might fit in with what they're doing.**

A couple of cautionary tales are that **it's important to avoid "publishing in just anyone's back yard."** We've only had two pieces that we wrote that were not actually printed. One was written for San Jose and one for Sacramento for the newspapers there. We found that the local piece is really important. **If you try to publish, for example, in the San Francisco Chronicle then it's important that you contact the San Francisco Food Bank first to make sure that they don't have something that they're trying to print about hunger because the press may not be willing to print both things in a period of time and they might choose one or the other.**

Another important thing is to make sure that **when you give out a phone number that you know what the broadcast coverage area is for the media outlet.** For example, if you're giving out a phone number to a TV station then you have to make sure that you say "This is the *Fresno County* phone number, and then provide phone numbers for other counties to the media that might be served by that same radio or TV station.

Lastly about the media, **it's important to find clients who would be interested in speaking to the media.** We lost one opportunity to do a TV news piece because there wasn't a food stamp recipient who was available to speak to the media and talk about their story and how the Food Stamps Program has benefitted them. It is sometimes hard to find a client who is willing to speak with the media, who has had a positive experience, and wants to share their information and how the Food Stamp Program has affected their family.

Those are some of the recommendations that we'll be including in the report. We'll be expanding on that list, but those are some of them that we'll be including for people who are interested in doing similar projects and how to go about it.

Next, Dennis is going to talk about the outreach trainings. Please do feel free to interject at any time, we're very excited to hear about your feedback.

**Steve Rodriguez, Fresno County Employment and Temporary Assistance (E&TA):**

**I just want to say the announcement of the phone numbers was very effective. We can attest to that. Laura and Dennis did a great job in getting the information out there. I want to share a little information about how effective it was. We got over 300 phone calls in Fresno County from as far away as Orange County asking how they could apply for food stamps over the phone. We had to explain it to them, but we had calls from Fresno County, Madera County, Tulare County. That's why Laura was talking about making sure that you had the right phone numbers for the right coverage. That is part of the piece that we overlooked, but it was very effective.**

**Laura Tatum:** I found that even if you provide a phone number and you say that this is just for Fresno County, **if people see a phone number on the screen that's what they're going to call no matter where they're calling from, so it's just important to provide the phone number and a list of phone numbers for each county.**

#### **TRAINING COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATIONS TO ENROLL ELIGIBLE PEOPLE IN THE FOOD STAMP NUTRITION PROGRAM.**

**Dennis Barrett:** The second component of our project was training local community-based organizations to do outreach in their respective communities.

We learned early on by just going around and interviewing some of the different organizations that work with the communities that we had targeted, that the two of us going door-to-door would probably scare a lot of people if we were knocking on people's door and saying, "Would you like to apply for food stamps?" **We realized that the communities that we're trying to reach, as I mentioned earlier, are really based on trust. They don't necessarily trust the government as**

**much as they trust their neighbors. The folks are often times close, and sometimes closed communities. So we worked to train and empower the different community-based organizations in these two counties by using each of the food banks, Community Food Bank here in Fresno and Food Link for Tulare and Visalia, as a middle man. Both counties were very gracious and came in and donated their time for training. In Tulare we had about six training sessions from an hour to an hour-and-a-half on a Friday morning. In Tulare county we trained about 50 or 60 folks from all different organizations. Some people were from food pantries, some people were from groups like Proteus, which does a lot of outreach with farm workers, and there were also groups working with healthcare issues, Medicaid, Medi-Cal. Over time we realized that it was more effective to train folks who were already doing outreach. Some of the groups that we trained that didn't necessarily have outreach as part of their job didn't really give us the results that we were looking for, but we've gotten tremendous results from a lot of the outreach groups that on a daily basis are working with eligible communities. All we had to do was give them this hour-and-a-half training session and they've been able to go out into the community and say, "Maybe you qualify for food stamps." There's a pretty simple four-question pamphlet that we go through with them and based on that folks would sign people up for possible clients, offer food stamps. They would give the applications to us (at the Foodbanks). We recorded the information of the different folks who applied and then passed it on to the county. The counties have been great about getting back to us on who has been approved, who has been denied, and why.**

One of the things we've seen is that there have been **a lot of folks who have not been showing up for their meetings with the County E&TA workers. So, that's the next hurdle for that part of our project, trying to figure out how to get these people out to the required meeting with the eligibility worker to complete the Food Stamp Application.** In the three-and-a-half or four months that we've been doing this we've also been doing a lot of re-evaluating and refining. I think there are a lot of folks that might have been very cynical or skeptical and might have thought that folks aren't going to want to go out and train people. One story was that I was told by the county in October that they were going to be going through an intensive training course in late October and throughout November and that I could have one more training on Friday. This was Monday, so I said okay. On Tuesday I hit the phones and said, "Alright, this Friday," and I had a list of 25 people that had showed interest. By Wednesday afternoon after calling for two days straight I had about two confirmations. The county called and said, "How many people are coming?" and I said, "I think six," so they said, "Okay. That's fine. That's enough for us." At the same point I was kind of sweating it out. I called more on Thursday and wasn't getting anything. On Thursday I was counting the people in the office because I figured the folks from the county wouldn't recognize them and I'd pulled them back and have them get trained, but sure enough, the county folks came at 8:30 for the 9 o'clock training and they said, "So how many people are coming?" and I said, "Seven," and they said, "Oh, great. Okay." I was kind of sitting there saying my rosaries to myself that we'd get some folks coming in and sure enough by 9 o'clock there were 15 people there, which was a real shot in the arm for me, really inspiring. **There were a lot of folks who had shown up and they said, "Two years ago I really could have used food stamps. I'm sure I qualified but I didn't know about the program. I'm okay now, but I know that my neighbors are in a very similar situation."** It was very touching for me to see the generosity in so many folks that were really willing to help their neighbor, just a very selfless kind of act. **We had three or four people that didn't even speak any English. They were just there, so we were able to have someone sit down and translate for them.** If you put this opportunity out there, there really is a tremendous presence in the community and a tremendous desire to be able to help different community members, particularly among those people who themselves went through hard times. That's my parting story on the **effectiveness of the food stamp application trainings in the community** that we've had so far.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOOD STAMP ENROLLMENT TRAINING**

**Laura Tatum:** The first thing that we learned in doing the Food Stamp Application Trainings with Community Based Organizations is **how to put on a training. We learned that it's very important to establish and explain a clear protocol such as who the applications will be delivered to at the**

county, **when** they'll be delivered, and those sorts of issues. It's also important to **follow up soon after the training** with the attendees to make sure that it's going okay and to make sure that everything is clear. We also learned **what materials that are important to have at the trainings**. It's helpful to have **outreach logs to provide to the organizations, and it's also helpful to provide labels for the attendees so that they can write down their name and the name of their organization on the application when it's turned in to the County**. That way, if there is any problem with the application then the county can easily contact the person who helped fill it out.

Secondly, **we learned which community organizations work best for food stamp outreach**. As Dennis mentioned, it's **most successful to train paid employees or committed longterm volunteers who are already working to provider services to low-income people who are likely to be eligible**. **Sanctuary Transitional Living Center**, for example, serves homeless young adults who have aged out of the foster care system, and they're likely to be eligible for food stamps. Since they're already case managing, it worked out very well to train them in the food stamp application procedure and then they can do the first four-page short application and get the ball rolling for their clients.

**We found that it's most effective to train people who provide outreach services on a regular basis because then potential applicants for the Food Stamp Program can expect that someone will be there (at Catholic Charities, for example), and expect that that person will be able to help them with the application and therefore they can bring necessary documents and be prepared**. If they hear about it one week and they're not interested in applying that day then they always have the option of coming back.

In regards to emergency food distribution sites such as through the food bank, for example, **the reason that we're working out of food banks is because we thought that it would be very helpful to have trained volunteers at emergency food distribution sites to help out with the food stamp application because studies show that a lot of people who are receiving emergency food aren't necessarily receiving food stamps but could be eligible**. *While we do still believe that that is a very important thing to do, it actually turns out that we've been most successful in training people who already do case managing working at community-based organizations because at a lot of emergency food sites the volunteers there are so busy simply handing out the food that it's difficult at times for the volunteers to have the time to speak with people and talk to them about food stamps and help them fill out the application*. We certainly think that it's very important that **all emergency food distribution sites have posters up to advertise the Food Stamp Program and to have information available**. Some certainly are able to do application assistance, but so far the application assistance has been most promising at organizations that are already doing case managing.

Now Dennis is going to talk a little bit about the Food Stamp taskforces and how they've gone.

### **LOCAL FOOD STAMP TASK FORCES**

**Dennis Barrett:** In many respects these groups, **the Food Stamp Taskforce in Tulare County and the Food Stamp Advocates Group here in Fresno County, are going to continue the work that's been going on**.

In the case of Tulare County we were able to start the taskforce down there. We came in about four months ago and said, "What's a good, catchy name for a group that will get people in here?" and I guess "taskforce" worked well enough because we had enough people show up for the first meeting. **Here in Fresno County and also in Tulare County these groups are going to see through the work that's been going on and carry on the work that's been going on over the past couple months, particularly with the media and with the different trainings. The taskforces are very valuable in terms of giving different insight onto the issues**. When we came to the Central Valley I had never been to California before, and Laura is from Northern California but had never been to the Central Valley before. **One of the big things we realized is we needed other people's input and experiences and other people's thoughts on different issues if we were going to be most effective, and I think the food stamp taskforces really embody that**.

Speaking from my experiences working in Tulare County, which is a very similar group to the group that's here in Fresno County, *we have one woman that works specifically with elderly clientele and she was able to tell us that particularly in the senior citizens she works with, a lot of them are hesitant to apply for food stamps because they're afraid that they're going to be stealing food out of the mouths of young children who also qualify and that maybe there's not enough money in the program.* Well, no, Food Stamps is an entitlement program. Everyone gets it. People shouldn't be afraid to apply because it's their right to have access to it. These are **some of the myths that we've been able to come across that we wouldn't otherwise know about had we not had someone working specifically on senior issues, someone working specifically on immigrant issues, and working together with the Food Stamp Task Force.** The more eclectic the group, the better it is, because we're able to talk about different perspectives on the food stamp issue and different kinds of plans that we have for trying to improve outreach. We've had a lot of people say, "Yeah, that's a great idea," or "That is a good idea but if you want to reach this particular community you might also want to address this other issue," so we've been able to get a lot of different perspectives, which has been very valuable for our work and has really helped food stamp outreach and enrollment a tremendous amount.

One of the other things that's very important is to **make sure that you bring in as many different parts of the community as possible under one umbrella.** One of the things we've learned over these past couple months, and we've tried to impart this knowledge to the community, is that the **issue of food stamps is a community issue. It's in the best interest of businesses. It's in the best interest of the healthcare industry because it provides more funding for healthier, more nutritious food. It's an issue that affects all members of the community, and from that perspective I think it's also important, then, to have all different sectors of the community involved in these taskforces.** Down in Tulare we had a member of the Chamber of Commerce come one week and they sat down and liked what we had to say. They **asked us to write an op-ed for them for their Chamber of Commerce newsletter, which we were able to write, showing the benefits of food stamps from an economic perspective.** We've had government officials. We've certainly had advocates. We've had a wide variety of different folks come to these monthly meetings.

**Sarah Candalaria, UCCE:** I wondered if there was any kind of document or summary that you had in your experiences that summarized the different areas. Do you have a fact sheet that summarizes the benefits to the community of food stamps in the different areas?

**Laura Tatum:** I think one of the best sources of information that you have in your packet already would be the **Fresno County Board of Supervisor's Resolution, and that has a great deal of information about the economic benefit of food stamps and also how they improve the general health situation for people who are receiving them. It improves their access to nutritious food, reduces obesity, and improves the ability of children to learn in school if they arrive better fed. It improves efficiency in the workplace for adults who actually have something in their stomachs.** The proclamation from Fresno has a lot of that information in it and it does list some of the sources. If you go to their website they can provide more information. If you'd like any supplemental information just come talk to us and we can certainly get that to you.

**Dennis Barrett:** One other thing with the taskforce is meeting times. **We meet once a month and the Advocates Group here in Fresno also meets once a month,** so it's not an overkill on meetings but at the same time it **enables us to get together once every four weeks and assess what issues need to be worked on together to expand food stamp participation.**

#### **FOOD STAMP TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Laura Tatum:** In terms of **what we learned doing the food stamp taskforces,** first of all, it was very helpful that **we could attend the meeting of the Fresno taskforce, which is a really impressive group. It's been going on for four years and so it was really helpful to be able to attend that meeting before actually starting a similar taskforce in Tulare County.**

One of the first things that we learned that was very **important with the food stamp taskforces is simply how to get people to come to a meeting and keep coming. I think one of the beset ways to do that is to make sure that everyone feels involved and feels like they have a vested interest in the group. One of the best ways to do that is to make sure that everyone speaks in the group and that's one reason why we want to have a question and answer session after this.** I think just **having everyone introduce themselves at the beginning** gets people talking and shows that you really care about who's there and who's involved. I think that to **increase the sense of ownership that people have in the group it's good to choose projects as a group and to assign individual responsibilities** so that, again, people have a sense that they're showing up every month to actually get something done and that they **feel very connected to the work that's going on.** I think it's **good to establish and then periodically re-evaluate the group mission and the goals of the group** in order to make sure that it's something that everyone in the group is comfortable with and to **discuss maybe who else should be at the table** who isn't there already because people will have ideas on other people who might be able to come. For example, we're **hoping that some of you will be able to attend the Food Stamp Advocates meeting this Thursday at 1:30 at Metro.**

Another good way to encourage people to come to a meeting is to entice people with **topics of interest** to them. Edie, for example, knows of certain topics that are of interest to certain people. That's very helpful to encourage more people to come. Some other things that we learned are just **basic meeting etiquette. Evaluations are really helpful. If you encourage the attendees of a meeting to evaluate the meeting then it shows them that you respect their time and their opinions.** Another thing that I learned that was really interesting to me is **that it can be very hard for direct service providers to attend meetings such as the Food Stamp Advocates Group. There can be that tension between providing direct services and advocacy.** That can be addressed by making sure that the meeting is at as **convenient a time and place as possible, but that's kind of a continuing issue.** Maybe we can designate, for example, in the Food Stamp Advocates Group, that **certain people in the group will communicate once a month with other people who are doing outreach but are not able to attend and then that way their voices can be heard within the Food Stamp Advocates Group** even if they can't actually attend the meeting.

For me personally it's really peaked my **interest in social research because I think if you communicate with the direct service providers it can help bridge the gap between the people who are providing services and have a really good ideas of what's going on on the ground and people who are making the decisions like policy makers** because a lot of times they may not have access to that information. Dennis is now going to go into the recommendations that we have.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM IN CALIFORNIA**

**Dennis Barrett:** After four months we did come up with a couple of recommendations. **One of the first things we saw that could really work to increase the food stamp participation rates in both counties is the issue of waiving the face-to-face interview and trying to work on having more phone interviews.** It's in process here in Fresno, which is great. It's also in process over in Tulare County. **At the same time, while the policy interpreters at the top are showing support of it, it doesn't always trickle down to the folks who are doing the initial eligibility work. So, that's one of the things we're going to try and work on: being sure that that policy is interpreted and implemented. The policy should be the same at the top as it is at the case worker levels.**

In terms of a lot of people missing their interviews, having the option of waiving that **face-to-face interview and having the phone interview might have solved that problem.** That is in process in both counties, and that's definitely a step in the right direction.

One of the other things we realized is that **California needs a food stamp hotline. It's a full-time job to be poor in America today with all the phone numbers and all the paperwork and all the different things you have to go through.** It's unbelievable. I don't think you can really appreciate it until you've actually gone through it. **We've been given posters by the USDA, which administers the Food Stamp Program. They're great posters. You can see them right here. They tell us, "Yeah, these are great, but don't use the phone number." One of the things we've**

***struggled with is trying to get the right phone numbers.*** We've also done some cold calling where we've called to see what kind of response we'd get at counties, and sometimes we don't get an answer or we don't get an answer that meets with our expectations. *We even had one person call one of the neighboring counties in the valley and there was no button to press for food stamps. I think Laura spoke with a woman and said, "There's no button for food stamps," and the woman said, "Oh, well, you would just press the welfare button," and so Laura said, "Well, food stamps aren't a welfare program," and the woman who was on the other end of the phone in the government office said, "They're not?"*

These are some of the challenges you have to deal with on a regular basis. I think **a simple streamlined food stamp hotline would really do a tremendous amount of good and it would really simplify it for all parties involved.** Even in Tulare County the county has given us personal-size cards that have the address and telephone number of all the food stamp offices in the county, and there are five different offices. It's been a great tool for us, **but at the same time if there was one single telephone number that could be given out throughout the state it would be so much more effective** and so much more useful in general.

Also, **a website would have great potential with the food stamp taskforces from the different regions.** I think when you have two neighboring counties that are still working and haven't been in contact yet you're certainly not able to get the best practices from different sides of the country that could, I think, come together and really be very valuable for counties and different hunger advocates throughout the country.

One of the other things we looked was possibly **restructuring the Food Stamp 4-page application for the purpose of immigration and clarification of who is applying for food stamps.** Undocumented immigrants can apply for food stamps for their children if their children are citizens. *However, there is a tremendous amount of fear about going in to a government office if you're an undocumented immigrant and being found out that you're undocumented, and there's a concern over being immediately deported. Some of the applications don't have a preliminary question as to whether or not you are applying for food stamps for yourself or for your eligible children.*

**Laura Tatum:** Just to add something about that, it's been a bit confusing because **we do want to publicize the fact that undocumented immigrants who have children who are citizens can apply for food stamps for their children, and it's important that they receive those benefits that they're entitled to.** However, we don't want people to walk into a situation where they might say that they're undocumented and there could be consequences with that. I spoke with someone at **NILC (National Immigration Law Center)** and they had a lot of information for immigrants. They said that when an undocumented immigrant fills out the application they should fill out the information that asks for a social security number and they can leave that part blank and then ideally they would say, *"Oh, I'm not applying for benefits for myself."* So they **provide the social security number for their children**, which shows that their children are legal, eligible applicants. And then for themselves they **don't** provide a social security number (which could mean that they are undocumented or it could mean that they don't have a social security number for any number of other reasons). If all of the applications were to ask exactly who in the household is applying for benefits then that would preempt some of the questioning about documentation by county workers. *With some applications you have to list all the people living in the household that is applying for food stamps, so at this point on some of the applications they don't ask who exactly is applying for benefits for themselves.* If that question were included then I believe it would **preclude some questioning that might get into the immigration status and could be problematic for undocumented immigrants.**

#### **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**Participant question: (What are the biggest barriers to food stamp enrollment? Is it that rule that all Food Stamp Applicants must be fingerprinted?)**

**Laura Tatum:** Being fingerprinted is almost universally despised and it really makes it much more difficult for people who are interested in applying, because it's really frightening that you would have to be fingerprinted. That and the fact that the people who are receiving SSI in the State of California are not eligible to receive food stamps are two enormous barriers to food stamps access that we've found.

**Rev. Walt Parry, Fresno Metro Ministry:** Since eligibility is dependent upon the number of people in the home and the income, if you're asking only for the ones for whom they are applying for Food Stamps, then would they include only that number in the family of a household or generally you still would have to record the total number in the household? How would you handle that kind of conflict?

**Laura Tatum:** The way it works now is that applicants are required to list everyone in the household. You do apply for food stamps as a household, and so you're required to list all of those people on a chart. If there were another column that asked, "Is this person seeking benefits for themselves?" then you could check off who is seeking benefits. The way that I believe it works, and there are several people over here who will be able to correct me if I'm wrong, is that if, for example, you have a family of four and you have two undocumented parents and two children who are citizens and the parents would be applying and seeking benefits for their children, then what happens is food stamp eligibility is determined on a variety of factors including income and number of people in the household and so they would count the income of the parents, but the amount of benefits is based on the number of people in the household and so you wouldn't receive the amount of benefits that you would be entitled to as a family of four. You would receive the amount of benefits that you would be entitled to as a family of two because it's only two people in the household who are actually eligible. Is that correct?

**Employment and Temporary Assistance:** If benefits for a family of four was \$130 worth of food stamps, you would cut that down based on only two receiving the benefits, so I'm simplifying it, but they might only receive half of the \$130 for those two people.

**Rev. Walt Parry:** On the family of four you would still list everyone in the household but then check which of them are applying for food stamps, and they would be the only ones to list a social security number for. Is that correct?

**Laura Tatum:** Yes. That way, if I understand correctly, there wouldn't be any further questions about the people who are not applying for benefits for themselves. **Another thing I wanted to mention about the food stamp hotline is that some states already do have the food stamp hotline. That would really help with the media work. In a public service announcement that's short or on a poster you often don't have time to list the appropriate number to call for food stamps in a variety of counties, so if we could simply list the California Food Stamp Hotline. A person would answer that number then they could give them the proper number based on their county.** That would really help for the media because then you could just give out that one phone number and you wouldn't have to worry about what the coverage area is. Oftentimes you simply just don't have enough time to list a variety of county phone numbers, and so that would be really helpful.

**Ray Ensher:** How are you handling the new refugee Hmongs in this area and how are you signing them up? Is any program signing up at the federal food distribution centers, at local churches? I recall one time at our church that they'd bring some people in and they took them into a private room and told them about food stamps and how to sign up for it. I'm a citizen here. I'm trying to be informed. **How complicated is it signing up for food stamps?**

**Dennis Barrett:** What we've been able to do with the outreach training is to simplify it to some degree. **Part A of the Food Stamp Application is a four-page application.** It takes five minutes to

go through and we train people, but in reality I think most people, particularly the folks that already do outreach, don't really even need to be trained. They fill out paperwork that's much more complicated than that. That gets the ball rolling. **Then it goes into the county's Employment and Temporary Assistance Office (Food Stamps office), basically, and the Part B food stamp application process is about 9-13 pages.** I've gone through the process myself. I decided not to make a lot of money this year but rather qualify for food stamps, so back in September I went in and interviewed. It was a fairly straightforward process. **I think one of the important things to recognize is that there is a tremendous value that people don't automatically see in paperwork like a birth certificate, a social security card. They are worth their weight in gold in terms of especially applying for certain benefits, so it's important to get those together. We have from the USDA different kinds of envelopes that we can give out to folks. They give us the four-page application and we can give them the envelope that says on it what materials you need to bring.** I went in and applied, and one day I had a meeting set up. Then I went back and didn't really have to wait very long and probably had an interview with a woman that lasted maybe 25 minutes, maybe a half hour, that wasn't bad at all. **I think the challenge comes when there are long waits at certain periods. One of the other challenges is the hours of different offices. We said that 53% of folks that are receiving food stamps right now are working or have some kind of earned income. With their work hours oftentimes it's difficult for them to be able to make it into an office, which makes the telephone all the more valuable.**

**Laura Tatum:** We had a couple people come to our first training session that worked specifically with Hmong refugees and she was going to be carrying application assistance to that community. We haven't yet, but we're hoping to do some Hmong radio also to get more information out that way.

**For the first trainings that we had at Community Food Bank we did invite all of our network members including everyone who does the pantry program and the commodity programs and we actually only had one person come who does a commodity distribution.** So again, as we were saying, the **greatest response has actually come from nonprofit organizations that do case managing already and are already working on outreach.** I think it's an excellent opportunity to provide food stamps application assistance at the commodity distribution sites and the other distribution sites. It's just a bit more difficult because sometimes you have volunteers that are so busy with everything they're already doing and may not have time to sit down with someone and fill out the application. There are **several ways around that. For example, if there are people who are interested in being trained in food stamp application assistance then they can go out to the different TFAP sites and commodity sites and actually perform the application assistance.** What I've found is that the different *commodity distribution sites are almost always perfectly willing to have people come in and do the application assistance.* They may already have people there who are doing outreach about dental insurance or various other things, and so that's fine with them. They just may not have the time to do it themselves. **If anyone here or if anyone knows anyone who would be willing to volunteer their time to help out by doing outreach at these sites then that's a great way to do it.** I think that it's just a matter of time as Community Food Bank gets the word out that that's something that we're hoping to do and we have more representatives from the different distribution sites to come to our trainings. **We have a training scheduled for next Tuesday at 1 p.m., so all are welcome. The more the better.**

**Fresno County E&TA:** As far as the refugees coming in, you probably saw an article in the paper today of some services being provided through a nonprofit organization to help some of the refugees assimilate into society here, just simple things like children learning to ride a bike. We do also have some contracts with some organizations such as Center For New Americans where they are providing supportive services to the new refugee arrivals. They are giving them orientations in their own languages on what services are available such as cash aid, food stamps, and Medi-Cal. We're getting them enrolled in any of the benefits that they qualify for. Right up front we're giving them as soon as possible the Medi-Cal benefits because they have to go to the Health Department and get

screened when they come over, so that's a priority. **We're also giving them orientation through the contract organizations for the food stamps and for cash aide if they qualify.**

**Patty Minami, UCCE:** I wonder if you have utilized the *Nutrition On The Go* Truck in Tulare County.

**Dennis Barrett:** I called a lot of the pantries, and a lot of the church pantries and such in Tulare County came in and were trained, and then I called them two months later and most of them said the people that they were dealing with already had food stamps or that there was no interest, so that was the general feedback I got from that. ***Nutrition On The Go was the perfect vehicle for the process. We've gotten a tremendous amount of applications through that.*** One of the things I was trying to stress down in Tulare was that people needed either to be directly involved in outreach or they needed some kind of effective vehicle for it. We've already set them up at two or three different *Nutrition On The Go* sites and it's expanding. **There are plans for three or four more *Nutrition On The Go* sites to have food stamp outreach, so we certainly have been very well aware of the effect that it has.**

**Patty Minami:** Were you able to do a comparison of those *Nutrition On The Go* sites and other CBOs, other organizations and the kind of results that they had in actually getting people enrolled?

**Dennis Barrett:** After our first two rounds with *Nutrition On The Go* 30 to 40 applications were taken. With the rest of the CBOs it was about four. *Nutrition On The Go* was tremendously effective. I think the other CBOs generally were more focused on just getting food to people because it's a very busy process at the pantries and oftentimes they told us that many of their folks are already signed up. So *Nutrition On The Go* was our most effective vehicle.

**Participant comment:** I realize you focused mostly on getting people signed up for food stamps initially. I wonder about attrition from it and the complexity of keeping the benefits coming. Isn't there a process that people have to keep going through?

**Dennis Barrett:** It's called quarterly reporting. Once every three months clientele get paperwork sent to them by the county that they have to fill out and return about their current income. It's actually better because **prior to that it was monthly reporting, which was even more stressful, I would say, for most people. It can be tougher on the county because there's less funding given the fact that the state sees it as less work to do when in fact it's not always, but from the client perspective it's easier.**

From our perspective, **our focus has been on just increasing that participation rate so we haven't really dealt that much with attrition. That's one of those issues that the food stamp taskforces could really do a great job on in the coming months and years to really try to look at that issue and study that more in depth.**

**Laura Tatum:** We are running out of time here and we really want to open this up for ideas. Basically, the US Congressional Hunger Center fellowship program that we're doing requires that all the fellows write an *Ending Hunger* report at the end of the project. **We are hoping this report will be useful to other people who are carrying out similar outreach projects in the future and also will provide some good background information about hunger and nutrition in the Central Valley area.** We recognize that we've only been here for five months. We were beginning a totally new project in Tulare County. There has already been a great deal of food stamp outreach going on in Fresno County with the Food Stamp Advocates Group and other groups. We've only been here for five months so it was a totally new project and a new community for us, so we are quite certain that you all have a lot of ideas that we didn't think of. **We're hoping that people might be willing to share other ideas that you have for food stamp outreach, other avenues that could be explored, and also anything else regarding hunger and nutrition that could be included in the**

**report that we're writing that you think is important as background information or just to include in the report.** So we'd like to open it up for thoughts on those issues.

**Felicia Green, Big Brothers/Big Sisters:** I know that you had been talking about doing different sites. **If you are not a food stamp outreach site already and you possibly want to become a site just for families to fill out applications, what is the process? Do you have to contact the local food bank?**

**Laura Tatum:** The process at this point is that **we have a training scheduled for next Tuesday at 1 p.m. at the food bank. If you or anyone from your organization is available to come to that, please do.** It would be wonderful. The more people that come the better. If you weren't able to come to that, **we're hoping to keep a running list of people who are interested in being trained and then just schedule trainings on a regular basis either possibly at Community Food Bank or at Fresno Metro Ministry.** Edie is pointing out the flier that's in your packet that mentions the training schedule for next Tuesday. After the training that's it. It's quick. **It's only a four-page application, and so it's really quite simple to learn the rules.** The training just takes an hour.

**Patti Miniemi:** **How are you going to determine in your report that you were a success here in the valley? Is it by the people you've signed up? How do you determine that what you have done has been effective? You're going to have to have this in your report.**

**Dennis Barrett:** Four months ago one of the news stations came in to cover our story, and we looked at the news that night wondering what they said about us. The news reporter started out by saying, "Some people don't believe hunger is a problem in America, but in fact hunger exists here in Fresno and Tulare Counties. But don't worry. Two congressional hunger fellows from Washington D.C. are here to combat the problem." If we weren't already lost as it was, it was a little bit intimidating to hear that. I was almost ready for them to have us dressed up in Superman uniforms ready to go out and feed everyone. It's a long process, but I think **the successes that we can take from it are certainly that we've created a sustainable taskforce in Tulare County and we've been able to work with Edie on the taskforce here in Fresno County.** In addition, **our biggest media successes would be the fact that we had 200 to 300 people call about one news clip and the county had hundreds of phone calls about a different radio piece. Those are successes because I think it's proving to us that our message is getting out to the masses. At the same point, all the trainings that we've had, the folks that we've trained, the applications that we've taken in, and the fact that we had Devin Nunes' chief of staff contact us showed us that we were kicking up enough dust in the area, that we did get people's attention.** Not that we necessarily created an immediate change, so to speak, or a large-scale immediate change, but **I'd like to think that we've left a framework so that change can take place.**

**Joe Herzog, Physical Educator:** I'm just curious to know if you were able to involve the school districts in identifying participants and making contact with people who would be eligible for the program.

**Laura Tatum:** That is an excellent point. **We have had a limited amount of time and I think that the schools would be an amazing vehicle for outreach, particularly parent conferences at the beginning of the year, mailings, monthly meetings of the school. All those would be excellent opportunities to do food stamp outreach.** That's one of those things that we simply haven't had the time to do and **we're hoping that the Food Stamp Advocates Group and the Food Stamp Taskforce in Tulare will be able to take that on.**

**There is just so much left that could be done.** It's going to be hard to leave because there are so many media outlets. **I contacted the Farm Bureau and they're interested in an op ed.** There are so many people that we've contacted that are interested and so **many media outlets have told us, "This is great. Thank you for bringing us this information."** They want to provide that

service to their readers. So many **grocery stores would probably be willing to work together on food stamp outreach because, of course, it directly increases their sales if more people who shop there have more money to spend there.** I think that a lot of local grocery stores would be perfectly willing to put up posters if not do more events beyond that. We've had a limited amount of time, but we're certainly hoping that those kinds of things will continue. I think the schools are a gold mine, but we just haven't gotten to it.

**Patty Minami:** I was returning to your effort to involve CBOs. I'm wondering whether you do have a summary of the applications that were submitted and how many of those were actually successfully through the process and receiving benefits. The reason I ask is that for CBOs who are engaged in their primary work that may be different from helping promote food stamps, they have to feel that it's worth the time that it takes. They may be very willing to do it, but they want to see the results that show that it's worth their staff time. That's an issue that you would probably have to address up front to assure them that it's productive.

**Dennis Barrett:** The counties are reporting the numbers back to us. In Tulare County we've had a lot more people than we would have liked get denied for one reason or another. More often than not, it's the fact that they're just not showing up for the meetings with the County eligibility workers to complete their application. We really only have one major update that we got back in mid December to work from that we got all this information on. We're waiting for the latest one from the average that we've done through late November through December and January to see our latest efforts. We started from ground zero here, so it's a **process that's being constantly refined.** We've taken in 70 or 80 applications. I think our success rate is probably 30% or 40%. We have a lot of people that aren't showing up for meetings, which is bothersome, and that's what we're working with the county right now on improving. I think it's important to recognize that while our numbers are lower than we want them to be right now, **we started from scratch,** so it's a process that's constantly being refined and perfected over time. It's my first experience working directly with this kind of tracking, so hopefully we can increase that percentage.

**Laura Tatum:** We just would like to close by saying that **increased food stamp participation benefits the whole community and we believe that food stamp outreach can really be a community-wide effort.** We're hoping that everyone who is here today can think for a second about one thing that they can do to work towards increasing the food stamp participation rate in our community. That could be simply picking up one of the posters that we have here and putting it up somewhere, it could be coming to the Food Stamp Advocates meeting that's going to be at Fresno Metro Ministry at 1:30 on Thursday, it could be attending the training that's scheduled for next Tuesday at Community Food Bank at 1 p.m. to learn how to fill out the application and do application assistance with your clients, or if anyone has any other ideas that's great. I think that everyone can do something even if it's simply taking a poster. That doesn't take that much time. **We'd really appreciate your help, and I think it's really a very important way to improve not only the nutrition status and decrease hunger here in Fresno but also improve our local economy and improve health and all of these extra benefits that come along with that.**

**Dennis Barrett:** And thank you all for coming out today.

**Edie Jessup:** Next month our Hunger and Nutrition forum will be on Wednesday the 9<sup>th</sup>, the second Wednesday.

Thank you very much, Dennis and Laura, for sharing your work with us as US Congressional Hunger Center Fellows. We look forward to your report, and your work in Washington DC with our Congressional Delegation on Ending Hunger in the Central Valley.