

**County of Los Angeles
Chief Executive Office
Service Integration Branch**



**The Common Characteristics and Best Practices of the Top
Performing CBOs/FBOs Providing Food Stamp Application
Assistance in the County of Los Angeles**

Research and Evaluation Services

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The Policy Context and the Purpose of this Report

The Food Stamp Program and the Food Stamp Outreach Partnership Project

The Food Stamp Program provides low-income families and individuals with federally subsidized nutrition assistance. The size of the Food Stamp benefit for which recipients are eligible changes from one year to the next but is generally pegged to income and family size.¹ In addition to income requirements, individuals are only eligible for Food Stamps if they are not on Supplemental Security Income/State Supplementary Payment (SSI/SSP), and if their assets do not exceed a house, an automobile, \$3,000 in the bank for households containing elderly or disabled members, and \$2,000 in the bank for all other households. Food Stamp benefits are available to recipients through Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards. These EBT cards can be used at supermarkets and neighborhood stores for the purchase of food. In the cases of elderly, disabled and homeless recipients, Food Stamps can also be used in conjunction with the Restaurant Meals Program at participating restaurants.

The Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) has implemented the Food Stamp Outreach Partnership Project in an effort to raise the number of persons receiving Food Stamp benefits in the County of Los Angeles. Through this project, the Department is partnering with Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) to provide assistance to applicants in completing and submitting their applications for the program. While applicants continue to be free to apply for Food Stamp benefits directly through DPSS, the assistance of trained staff at the partnering CBOs and FBOs gives applicants the option of applying for Food Stamps with organizations that are familiar with the communities they serve, and which offer the applicants a more comfortable environment in which to apply for benefits, one that can provide them with more personalized attention, including hands-on assistance in completing applications and in the collection of verification documents, as well the convenience of access to assistance during weekends and evenings.

DPSS currently has Food Stamp Application Assistance contracts with 19 CBOs and FBOs. These organizations have been selected through a Request for Statement of Qualifications (RFSQ) first released in March 2007.² Among the most important qualifications stipulated in the RFSQ, an organization must have significant interaction with low-income families, individuals, children, or parents of children who represent the target population for Food Stamps. The organizations must also function on a not-for-profit basis and must have operated in Los Angeles County for the past three years as either Parent-Teacher Associations, CBOs providing health and human services, or FBOs such as churches, temples, synagogues or mosques.

¹ As of this writing, the monthly Food Stamp benefit for a household of one is \$155.

² Since the Food Stamp Application Assistance contracts were executed in FY 2007-08, 25 different CBOs and FBOs have provided application assistance in their communities during at least one year.

Each CBO and FBO selected to provide services through the Food Stamp Outreach Partnership Project receives training from DPSS on the Food Stamp Application Assistance process, including Civil Rights procedures and other requirements. Additionally, each selected CBO and FBO is paired with a local DPSS District office, where they submit completed applications on behalf of their clients. Designated Eligibility Workers (EWs) at the District Offices handle each application and notify applicants as to their eligibility for Food Stamps via an official Notice of Action (NOA). More recently, DPSS has allowed the CBOs and FBOs to contact applicants directly if the EW designated to their case discovers documentation missing or an incomplete application. The CBOs and FBOs receive a payment of \$40 per approved application until the ceiling defined by their maximum contract amount is reached. However, the Department has discretion to transfer contract funds from CBOs and FBOs that do not reach the contract ceiling to those that exhaust their allocation.

Identifying the Common Characteristics and Best Practices of the Top Performing CBOs and FBOs

The purpose of this report is to provide DPSS with information that can be used to boost both the number of applications submitted by the partnering CBOs and FBOs, and the approval rates on applications submitted. During October 2010, the Chief Executive Office's (CEO) Research and Evaluation Services unit (RES) conducted interviews with staff and management at three CBOs and one FBO. According to data compiled by DPSS, these four organizations have performed especially well over the life of their Food Stamp Application Assistance contracts with the Department. The strong performance of these four organizations can be observed not only in their above-average approval rates, but also in the comparatively high volume of Food Stamp applications they submit, as well as in the percentage of their maximum contract amount they exhaust each year. The objective of the interviews was to identify what these four organizations do and what they have in common – their shared characteristics and 'best practices' – that contribute to their success. These characteristics and practices were then translated into recommendations for potential requirements to be stipulated both in future contracts negotiated between DPSS and the partnering CBOs and FBOs, and in the organizational characteristics the Department might look for in selecting appropriate organizations to participate in the Food Stamp Outreach Partnership Project in the future.

This report is exploratory and descriptive in nature.. Due to both limited resources and the urgency of completing the report in time for a new round of contract negotiations with CBOs and FBOs providing Food Stamp Application Assistance, the analysis does not compare the top performing organizations with those that are either average or below-average. Rather, this report should be viewed as a resource that offers a profile of the four organizations achieving the best results in submitting applications and gaining eligibility for the clients they have assisted. However, an attempt has been made to augment the reliability of the analysis by only highlighting characteristics and best practices shared by all four of the top performing CBOs and FBOs. These

characteristics and practices inform the policy recommendations given at the conclusion of this report.

The Performance of the Organizations Providing Services under the Food Stamp Outreach Partnership Project

Between Fiscal year (FY) 2007-08 and FY 2009-10, 25 different CBOs and FBOs have provided Application Assistance Services under the Food Stamp Partnership Project. While 20 organizations provided these services during both FY 2007-08 and FY 2008-09, the number dropped to 19 during FY 2009-10. Over the course of these three FYs, 25 different CBOs and FBOs have participated in the application assistance program during at least one year.

As can be seen in Table 1, one encouraging sign is that the total number of applications submitted by all the CBOs and FBOs providing application assistance has increased significantly over these three years, climbing from 896 to 1,267 between FY 2007-08 and FY 2008-09, an increase of 41 percent, and climbing again from 1,267 to 1,645 between FY 2008-09 and FY 2009-10, an increase of 30 percent.³ The percentage of the aggregate total contract amount expended has also improved significantly in all three years, from 15.3 percent in FY 2007-08, to 30 percent in 2008-09, to 40 percent in FY 2009-10. Likewise, the overall percentage of approved applications has improved over these three years, increasing from 50 percent to 63 percent between FY 2007-08 and FY 2008-09, and less dramatically, from 63 percent to 67 percent between FY 2008-09 and FY 2009-10.

Contractual relationships with some of the CBOs and FBOs that have not performed well have been terminated. Nevertheless, a significant gap separates the top performing organizations from the rest, especially in terms of applications submitted and the percentage of total contract amount expended. Table 2 shows that the median number of applications submitted in FY 2008-09 was 54. However, the top four organizations submitted between 217 and 273 applications, while the next best organization submitted 113. Additionally, while the median percentage of expenditure of total contract amount was 28 percent, the top four organizations expended between 82 percent and 123 percent of their total contract amounts.⁴ The median approval rate during FY 2009-10 was 60 percent. It is interesting to note that five of the nine CBOs and FBOs with approval rates above the median in FY 2009-10 expended less than half of their total contract amounts. This indicates that these organizations are comparatively successful on behalf of the clients they work with but do not submit many applications overall.

³ Please note that during the first Fiscal Year for which DPSS has data, FY 2007-08, not all CBOs and FBOs provided application assistance for the full 12 months. The observed improvement in the number of applications submitted between FY 2007-08 and FY 2008-09 is therefore slightly inflated.

⁴ An expenditure of greater than 100 percent of total contract amount is achieved through a transfer of contract funds from an organization that does not exhaust its total contract allocation. Such a transfer must be approved by the Director of DPSS.

Table 1: Performance of Partners Providing Food Stamp Application Assistance, FY 2007-08 – FY 2009-10

Account Name	FY 07-08				FY 08-09				FY 09-10			
	Number of Apps Submitted	Number of Apps Approved	Max. Contract Amount	Total Expend.	Number of Apps Submitted	Number of Apps Approved	Max. Contract Amount	Total Expend.	Number of Apps Submitted	Number of Apps Approved	Max. Contract Amount	Total Expend. as of May 31, 2010
Antelope Valley DV Council - (7003)	1	1	\$1,080	\$40	0	0	\$1,080	\$0				
Asian-Pacific He Venture Inc. - (7004)	113	80	\$2,880	\$3,200	253	174	\$6,330	\$6,960	266	194	\$6,330	\$7,760
Asian-Amer DA Prgm Inc. - (7005)	126	67	\$5,680	\$2,680	153	121	\$9,400	\$4,880	217	192	\$9,400	\$7,680
Cambodian Assoc. of America – (7006)	20	13	\$3,520	\$520	8	4	\$3,600	\$160				
Chicano Svc Action Ctr Inc. – (7007)	84	31	\$7,080	\$1,240	133	83	\$7,800	\$3,320	273	163	\$7,800	\$6,520
Child & Fam. Guidance Ctr – (7008)	48	25	\$2,880	\$1,000	49	38	\$3,920	\$1,520	84	69	\$3,920	\$2,760
Community Enhancement Svc – (7009)	148	69	\$1,810	\$2,760	81	47	\$9,400	\$1,880	113	69	\$9,400	\$2,760
Downtown Women's ctr - (7010)	51	22	\$14,200	\$880								
Guidance Comm Develop Ctr. - (7011)	8	4	\$1,760	\$160	1	0	\$2,880	\$0	0	0	\$2,880	\$0
Harbor Interfaith Svcs Inc. - (7012)	162	71	\$2,880	\$2,840	260	154	\$7,080	\$6,160	262	162	\$7,080	\$6,480
Healthcare Resources Inc. - (7013)	61	15	\$5,680	\$600	28	14	\$5,880	\$560	54	41	\$5,880	\$1,640
Korean Amer. Fam. Svc Ctr. - (7014)	25	18	\$5,880	\$720	27	22	\$5,880	\$880	17	16	\$5,880	\$640
New Image Emer. Shelter Inc. - (7015)	0	0	\$10,600	\$0								
Office of Samoan Affairs of CA - (7016)	0	0	\$3,520	\$0	35	20	\$2,200	\$800	36	15	\$2,200	\$600
Robert F. Kennedy Insitit. - (7017)	0	0	\$4,280	\$0	35	21	\$3,580	\$840	43	30	\$3,580	\$1,200
Santa Anita Family Svc – (7018)	7	5	\$14,200	\$200	11	5	\$2,880	\$200	65	22	\$2,880	\$880
Tarzana Treatment Ctr. Inc. - (7019)	26	16	\$4,120	\$640	19	9	\$5,880	\$360	23	11	\$5,880	\$440
The Children's Clinic – (7020)	9	9	\$1,040	\$360								
Watts Labor Comm. Action - (7021)	0	0	\$14,200	\$0								
Winos of Retune – (7022)	7	2	\$9,920	\$80	8	4	\$5,300	\$160	0	0	\$5,300	\$0
Shalom Ctr for T.R.E.E. of Life - (8001)					30	22	\$6,140	\$880	5	2	\$6,140	\$80
Immanuel House of Hope – (8002)					116	56	\$6,600	\$2,240	86	66	\$6,600	\$2,640
Korean Health Edu & Info – (8003)					19	14	\$7,320	\$560	70	44	\$7,320	\$1,760
New Horizons Family Ctr - (8004)					1	1	\$6,640	\$40	0	0	\$6,640	\$0
Mt. Sinai Missionary Baptist Chrch (9001)									31	11	\$4,800	\$440
Total	896	448	\$117,210	\$17,920	1267	809	\$109,790	\$32,960	1,645	1,107	\$109,910	\$44,280
* Exceeded Allocated Amount by \$630 (Approved by Mr. Browning)			15.3%				30.0%				40.3%	

Source: Data compiled by Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services

Table 2: Median Applications Submitted, Expenditure of Total Contract Amount, and Approval Rate, FY 2007-08 – FY 2009-10

Fiscal Year	FY 2007-08	FY 2008-09	FY 2009-10
Median Applications Submitted	22.5	29	54
Median Expenditure of Total Contract Amount	11.5%	25.8%	28%
Median Approval Rate	44.5%	58.5%	60%

Source: Data collected by Los Angeles County Department of Public Social

Table 3: Number of CBO/FBO Food Stamp Denials and Their Reasons, June 2009 through July 2010

Denial Reason	Denial Description	Number of Denials
Failed Provide Verification	Applicant failed to provide necessary documentation/verification to process their Food Stamp application.	254
Excess Income	Applicant's income exceeds Food Stamp income limit.	51
Income Verification	Applicant has income (earned or unearned) but failed to provide verification.	47
Student Status	Applicant is an ineligible student (not working minimum of 20 hours per week).	34
Resources Verification	Applicant has resources such as bank accounts, personal property, real property but failed to provide verification.	33
SSI/SSP Recipient	Applicant is receiving SSI/SSP	30
Missed Interview	Applicant did not stay in the district office to be interviewed after filling an application.	22
Excess Resources	Applicant's resources (liquid assets) exceed Food Stamp resource limit.	22
Client's Request	Applicant requested their case be denied.	19
Sponsorship Verification	Applicant is sponsored alien but failed to provide documents such as ID, income, resources for deeming purposes and/or sponsor failed to disclose	15
Residency	Applicant is not a Los Angeles County resident	6
Citizenship/ Alienage	Applicant not eligible due to their immigration status/undocumented	5
Household Composition	Applicant is not eligible to participate in the Food Stamp program	0
Rent/Mortgage	Applicant failed to provide rent/mortgage statement verification	0
ABAWD	Able-Bodied Adult Without Dependents (Food Stamp participants aged 18 through 49; and with no dependent; and not otherwise exempt.	0
Total		538

Source: Data collected by Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services.

Table 3 provides data collected by DPSS on denied Food Stamp applications submitted by CBOs and FBOs over the period from June 2009 through July 2010. The five most common reasons for denial over this period were: (i) failure to provide necessary documentation/verification (47 percent); (ii) income in excess of food stamp income limit (9.5 percent); (iii) failure to provide income verification (8.7 percent); (iv) ineligibility due to applicant being a student not working a minimum of 20 hours per week (6.3 percent); and (v) failure to provide verification of resources such as a bank accounts, personal property, or real property (6.1 percent).

The Four CBOs Yielding the Best Performance in Providing Food Stamp Application Assistance⁵

The four CBOs yielding the best performance in providing Food Stamp Application Assistance between FY 2007-08 and FY 2009-10 are as follows:

The Chicana Services Action Center. The Chicana Services Action Center (CSAC), located in East Los Angeles, significantly increased the number of Food Stamp applications it submitted over the three years for which DPSS has data, from 84 applications in FY 2007-08, to 133 in FY 2008-09, to 273 in FY 2009-2010. Additionally, CSAC improved upon the percentage of its maximum contract amount expended during these three years, and between FY 2007-2008 and FY 2009-2010 CSAC's approval rate increased from 43 percent to 60 percent.

Harbor Interfaith Services: Harbor Interfaith Services, located in San Pedro, increased the number of Food Stamp applications it submitted on behalf of its clients dramatically between FY 2007-08 and FY 2008-09, from 162 to 260, and then increased submissions slightly to 262 in FY 2009-10. The organization has also come close in all three of these years to exhausting its maximum contract amount and has improved its approval rate on submitted applications between FY 2007-08 and FY 2009-10 from 44 percent to 62 percent.

Asian-American Drug Abuse Program: The Asian-American Drug Abuse Program (AADAP), located in Gardena, boosted the number of Food Stamp applications it submitted on behalf of clients from 126 in FY 2007-08, to 153 in FY 2008-09, to 273 in FY 2009-10. AADAP has also improved upon the percentage of its maximum contract amount expended during each of these three years and has increased its approval rate from 53 percent in FY 2007-08 to 88.5 percent in FY 2009-10.

Asian-Pacific Health Care Venture: The Asian Pacific Health Care Venture, located in Los Feliz, has increased the number of applications submitted on behalf of its clients from 113 in FY 2007-08, to 253 in FY 2008-09, to 266 in FY 2009-10. Most impressively, the organization has spent more than its maximum contract amount in all

⁵ The four top performing organizations providing Food Stamp Application Assistance consist of three CBOs and one FBO. For purposes of clarity, these four organizations are henceforth all referred to as CBOs.

three of these years. In FY 2007-08, the organization expended \$3,200 against a maximum contract amount of \$2,880; in FY 2008-09, the organization expended \$6,960 against a maximum contract amount of \$6,330; and in FY 2009-10 the organization expended \$7,760 against a maximum contract amount of \$6,330. Additionally, the organization's approval rate remained impressively high and climbed slightly from 71 percent to 73 percent between FY 2007-08 and FY 2009-10.

The Common Characteristics and Best Practices Shared by the Four Best Performing CBOs

CEO's RES unit conducted focus group and one-on-one interviews with staff and management at CSAC, Harbor Interfaith Services, AADAP and the Asian-Pacific Health Care Venture during October 2010. These interviews revealed five common characteristics and practices that have contributed to the success these organizations have enjoyed in providing Food Stamp Application Assistance to their clients. The characteristics and practices are discussed in the analysis that follows, and they form the basis for the recommendations offered in the conclusion of this report.

Long-Term Community Presence

One striking and important characteristic shared by the four CBOs interviewed for this report is the long-term presence each has had in its respective community. CSAC has been providing social service assistance and advocacy, primarily to Latinas and their families in East Los Angeles, for 38 years; Harbor Interfaith Services has been working to provide relief and support to poor individuals and families in the South Bay for 35 years; AADAP has been helping the Vietnamese and Cambodian communities in the South Bay for 38 years; and the Asian Pacific Health Care Venture has been providing support and advocacy to disadvantaged populations throughout Los Angeles County for 28 years.

This well-established community presence is fundamental to the success each organization has had in attracting potential applicants for Food Stamps and in helping clients to gain eligibility for the program at comparatively high rates. It is particularly important to note that the other keys to success identified in this report – rigorous outreach efforts, the provision of multiple services to clients, responsive customer service, and solid working relationships with DPSS – all enhance and/or are enhanced by the community presence the four CBOs have cultivated and developed over several decades.

For those CBOs whose constituencies consist primarily of a relatively specific ethnic and/or national niche, such as AADAP their long standing presence in their communities makes them intimately familiar with the cultures within which their clients live. This familiarity, in turn, provides significant advantages as the organizations attempt to recruit potential Food Stamp recipients. As a program director at AADAP noted,

I look for employees who speak the language and who are from the community. They need to know the needs of the community. For the client when they walk in, they see that familiar face and it really relieves a lot of pressure...In our constituency, word of mouth gets around really fast. You have to know your community, you have to know where they go shop, where they go eat, where they buy their clothes...We know that [our] particular population goes to a particular video store to rent their videos because they have Cambodian and Vietnamese videos. I give credit to my staff who are from the community. They speak the language, they know the culture. So there is that level of comfort going in. [The clients are] not just talking to this person who does not understand a thing [they're] saying.

A worker at CSAC added that her CBO's enduring roots in East Los Angeles have conferred a beacon-type status on the organization that helps with recruitment of recipients and enables the organization to build trust with potential applicants. CSAC's enduring presence in East Los Angeles also clearly gives its staff a sense of belonging to an organization that has a stake in the welfare of the community, and this translates into commitment and responsiveness to the individuals and families they serve:

I think that they [potential Food Stamp applicants] feel the warmth, because we truly care. We care about our clients. They walk in and sometimes it is not even for Food Stamps. They get all types of letters, and they feel comfortable to come in here. You'd be surprised of the things they bring us. They come in and ask us for assistance. I tell them, 'if you receive any letter and you need help, you can call me. We are here at the Center and we can assist you.'

Rigorous Outreach Efforts

The roots the CBOs have in their communities and the resultant cultural familiarity they have with their constituents enables them to make rigorous and sustained outreach efforts that spread information about the Food Stamp program and help attract potential applicants. The outreach efforts take place on multiple fronts, and their effectiveness on each of these fronts is enhanced by the participation of the organizations in community networks consisting of non-profit organizations, advocacy groups, government entities, and faith based organizations. As a program director at AADAP explains,

Any successful program needs good outreach. We target a lot of ethnic enclaves, like the restaurants and the supermarkets where this particular community would shop at, and any other agencies that are not under Food Stamp contract, where the community goes. Anytime our staff are out at a community fair, a health fair, we make sure we bring our flyers to pass out...If you don't advertise to the community, no one knows that you're here. So we do very extensive outreach to the community, and we are very specific about where we do the outreach.

The mention of 'advertising' here should be understood generically as a reference to the spread of information publicly, as opposed to paid advertising, because only one of the CBOs interviewed for this report makes significant use of paid advertising as a means of disseminating information about Food Stamps. Instead, these organizations post flyers in the stores, restaurants and offices frequented by their target populations, and in some

cases outreach workers travel to these sites to speak with potential applicants in person and even go door-to-door in certain neighborhoods to spread information about the Food Stamp program. “When they have Career Day in schools, we go and we provide information,” a worker at CSAC explained. “We do a presentation about our services and, of course, we include the Food Stamp program. Also, at churches. We have a few churches that are within our community that will identify some families who are going through hard times, where both parents have lost their jobs, and they don’t have money to pay their bills or buy food, so some of the staff will go to the actual site and fill out the application at the location with the appointment already set up.”

A program director at Harbor Interfaith Services echoed the importance of faith based organizations to her CBO’s outreach efforts. “We are hugely supported by the faith community through donations and referrals. They say ‘we have this family here, they are part of our parish, and they are in a homeless situation.’ They send them over to Harbor Interfaith and we take it from there.” She added the following:

We do outreach a lot. We partner up a lot with local churches and local Community Based Organizations. We also partner up with WICs (Women, Infants and Children), food pantries, unemployment offices. Wherever I see a place where I can leave my flyers at, that’s where my flyers are. I’ve gone to laundromats and libraries, places of access that people will have the information available to them.

The flyers and informational material each of these CBOs provide to prospective Food Stamp recipients are offered in multiple languages depending on the communities they serve, and they summarize the eligibility requirements and necessary documentation in formats that are non-threatening and easy to understand.

The deployment and effectiveness of certain outreach strategies rely on the specific characteristics of the communities the CBOs serve. The Asian Pacific Health Care Venture, for example, serves a fairly wide array of national and ethnic groupings in varied communities, and the organization has specific outreach workers for each one of these groupings, each of whom has personal and in-depth familiarity with the culture to which they are outreaching. As a program supervisor at the CBO explains,

Our outreach workers go out to the community, and everybody has a different strategy of outreaching. Not all outreach workers work the same way. They have different styles, different skills based on their experience. Our goal is to have the outreach worker do the outreach in their own comfortable way. So that means outreaching door-to-door, business-to-business, or set up a group or presentation, whatever works for them, that’s the way we like them to outreach. As supervisors, we see their outcomes by the numbers they report to us, their outreach sign-in sheets...We are different ethnicities, so everybody outreaches to their own community.

The program supervisor added that,

We also go to events like the Chinese New Year, and some Vietnamese events that they have, probably once or twice a year. We start handing out flyers and handing out whatever we have to promote our services. So usually based on the event and ethnicity,

the appropriate outreach worker goes. We attend six or eight events during the year.

The participation of all four CBOs in community networks, and their attendance at events such as job fairs and health fairs, enhances the effectiveness of their outreach efforts and their attempts to spread information about the Food Stamp program through their communities. A program director at Asian Pacific Health Care Venture said, “We have a sub-contract with Chinatown Health Service, and Health I, and we are a referral service also. They refer us to low-income families. We [also] work with a lot of schools, even high schools. We work with health centers, and Marshall High School. They send parents automatically to us.” A program director at ADAAP added the following about his CBO’s involvement in community networks:

ADAAP is part of APCOM. It is a collaborative of about 30 Asian/Pacific Islander community organizations...We are involved in different community networks. We go to different network meetings with the purpose of trying to spread our services. That’s why a lot of these agencies get together. Our network meeting could be about substance abuse, but every participant in the collaborative is spreading their programs around. ADAAP is involved with a lot of different community agencies, a lot of different collaborative organizations in the community, to make sure we connect.

Offering Clients Multiple Services

In addition to Food Stamp application assistance, all four CBOs interviewed for this report offer numerous other forms of relief and social services support to disadvantaged individuals and families. A program director at Harbor Interfaith Services alluded to the importance of this when she said that, “all our programs are taking a holistic approach to addressing the issues [faced by] the homeless and working poor.” This ‘holistic approach’ is, in fact, one taken by all four CBOs interviewed for this study and is another key to the successful results they have yielded in identifying appropriate candidates for the Food Stamp program and helping to gain eligibility for them. AADAP, for example, is a substance abuse program that treats the problem, at least in part, by addressing some of its root causes in the areas of health and economic well being. To this end, and along with the Food Stamp Application Assistance the organization offers to the Cambodian and Vietnamese communities in the South Bay, AADAP additionally offers citizenship and English classes, translation services, legal support, job placement assistance, housing services, and health care referrals. Similarly, the Asian Pacific Health Care Venture offers health workshops and provides application and documentation assistance to individuals and families seeking eligibility for Medi-Cal and housing benefits through HUD. Harbor Interfaith Services provides multiple forms of support and assistance to homeless families and individuals, primarily in the South Bay, including a food pantry, a Medi-Cal Outreach program, emergency and transitional housing services, rental assistance, and eviction prevention. CSAC provides homeless and poor women in East Los Angeles with employment and education support through its Work Source Center, as well as advocacy and assistance for those who wish to apply for government programs, and emergency domestic violence shelter.

The provision of multiple services and forms of support to their clients dovetails with each CBOs outreach efforts, thereby increasing the flow of appropriate Food Stamp applicants to each organization. As a program director at the Asian-American Health Care Venture explained,

All [our] outreach workers work on different projects, not just Food Stamps. Like Tina, for example. She works on the hepatitis workshop. Outreach can be for enrolment or Public Health insurance. Mary Lynn works for the mammogram project, plus Food Stamps. So every event that we have, it is not that we are only promoting health insurance or Food Stamps. We promote all services. We have the clinic side to attract new patients, and we screen them to see if they qualify for public health insurance or Food Stamps.

A staff member at Harbor Interfaith Services added that, “there are a large number of clients who go to our agency for other services and then apply for Food Stamps. Or vice versa; they come in for Food Stamps and then have other needs for services that are available.” Similarly, a program director at AADAP noted that,

A lot of [our clients] come in for other services. We’ve had a wide range of, ‘can you help me translate this document?’ It has nothing to do with Food Stamps. To someone who got in an accident and wants some legal advice, and just came and talked to us, even though we have no lawyers, we refer them somewhere else, obviously. The people know where to come to because of the language barrier. We’ve had people ask for citizenship classes, English classes, or substance abuse issues with their kids. We make referrals for them. So a lot of people don’t come in for Food Stamps, then we tell them about Food Stamp services, then they will apply. Or the other way around. They come in for Food Stamps and they need help with other things.

A worker at CSAC made remarks that point to how the organizational reputation that flows from an enduring community presence combines with the provision of multiple services to bolster the effectiveness of the successful CBOs in identifying and gaining eligibility for appropriate candidates for the Food Stamp program:

I’ve noticed something. Since a lot of our [Food Stamp] applicants already attend services here, a lot of them we already know. So I think this makes it easier for them. A lot of us do groups or give classes, so they already know us. So I think this makes them feel at ease, and I think that they have already established that relationship with the staff here, so they feel comfortable asking questions.

Professionalism, Expertise and Responsive Customer Service

The four CBOs interviewed for this report are highly professionalized organizations structured around a clear ‘chain of command’ between supervisors and staff. This chain of command helps ensure that the assistance provided to Food Stamp applicants follows the correct procedures. However, each organization gives its staff enough flexibility to handle the varied circumstances different types of applicants present. Additionally, staff at each CBO are well trained in food stamp eligibility requirements and the documentation needed to submit applications for the program, and they seek to

provide responsive customer service that makes the application process as uncomplicated as possible for their clients. “All the staff here are trained to do Food Stamp applications,” a program director at AADAP explained. “So it’s not one dedicated staff [member]. Everyone is trained here, and we always have at least one staff person in the office at all times to make sure we pick up any walk-in appointments. There’s never a gap in services because someone is on vacation or someone is out sick.” This insistence on always having coverage to handle new and returning applicants is indicative of the excellent customer service provided by all four CBOs. This customer service, offered in a caring and humane manner by professional staff with expertise in applying for Food Stamps, undoubtedly accounts for much of the effectiveness the CBOs have in helping their clients to make Food Stamp applications and gain eligibility for their program.

All four CBOs have after-hours telephone voice mail that provides clients with general information about the services provided and, more importantly, afford clients the opportunity to leave messages so that staff can return calls with more personalized information. When asked whether her organization tries to return all phone messages on the following business day, a program director at CSAC said the following:

We don’t try, we make sure! We have a follow-up. It’s not just a phone call. If we don’t get a hold of them we leave a message. We follow up, ‘this is our second call, third, fourth call,’ until we get a hold of them and find out if they are still interested or if they have received assistance through DPSS. We talk to them to make sure they received assistance.

Personalized assistance is a common theme cutting across all the interviews conducted for this report and is an integral part of the customer service each CBO strives to provide. A program director at AADAP said that,

Clients really appreciate the fact that this is a one-on-one environment. It’s quiet. [They] don’t have to stand in line, or get yelled at because [they] forgot documents. They are allowed to bring their kids in here, and we have coloring books for their kids. We try to do whatever we [can] to make it convenient, and make it comfortable for these participants when they apply. To me it is about customer service.

The AADAP program director added the following:

Because we work with a community that is very low income, there is no transportation. So my staff has gone out to people’s homes or where they work, and they tell them, ‘we need these documents if you want your application approved. We will meet you here or there.’ We meet them and go get the document. And we submit everything.

Personnel at more than one of the CBOs described what they see as a stigma often attached to the receipt of public assistance, which can act as a barrier for a potential Food Stamp recipient weighing whether or not to apply for the program. A big part of the personal touch the CBOs bring to their Food Stamps application work is making applicants feel comfortable and removing the shame or fear some might have about participating in the program. An outreach worker at the Asian Pacific Health Care

Venture noted that, “We make sure that [our staff is] able to take care of the clients in a place that is not exposed to so many people, so there is the privacy and the confidentiality. First we assure them that everything is confidential, and when I notice some hesitation I say, ‘there is no stigma here. I am not here to make things difficult for you. I am your friend. I am here to help you.’ After breaking the ice, I can see that people are comfortable.” A staff member at CSAC spoke in greater detail about how her organization’s personalized and proactive orientation towards clients helps overcome barriers:

As soon as [clients] walk into our center, we acknowledge them. Sometimes they look a little lost, when it is a new participant coming in. We ask them what services they need, and sometimes they say, ‘I just lost my job.’ They give us the whole story. We tell them about the services we have. I show them the Food Stamps flyer. I explain to them what it is. When they tell me, ‘oh my husband doesn’t want to ask about any assistance from the government,’ I say, ‘it is a very good program.’ We also [tell them] that if they want to become a U.S. citizen or resident it does not jeopardize their status. I tell them to talk to their husband or wife, maybe they can have them reconsider, and maybe change their minds. I take down their number, and if a day went by and they haven’t called, we call them and say, ‘we wanted to know if you spoke to your wife or husband, and we wanted to know if you want to apply.’ Then we go from there.’

A staff member at Harbor Interfaith Services described the similarly open and accepting approach she takes with prospective Food Stamp applicants:

When the clients come in, I let them know what the program is. I let them know that Food Stamps is just food. They don’t have to pay it back. I try to make them comfortable. I treat them the way that I would like to be treated, if I was in that situation. I let them know that if they have any questions they can ask me whatever they like. If I don’t know the answer, I will try to search the answer for them. Where I am at is a comfortable setting, where they can come in and ask me questions. I have created an environment where it is like an open-door policy.

While the personalized approach the CBOs take to customer service creates caring environments in which clients feel comfortable obtaining information and asking questions about the Food Stamp program, the most important impact this approach has is seen in the actual hands-on assistance these organizations provide to their clients in completing and submitting applications. One of the most daunting parts of the application process for applicants is collecting the necessary documentation. When asked about what his organization does to facilitate the collection of necessary documentation in support of Food Stamp applications, a program director at AADAP explained that,

We provide a checklist [to clients]. I’ve developed my own checklist. I know DPSS has one, but I developed one. When we get a call on the phone, when someone is interested, I read out what is on the checklist that they need to bring. If it is a walk-in appointment, we go through the list of things that they need to bring. We gather whatever information we can, and from there we say what additional documents they need, that are not necessarily required but that they may want to see.

Similarly, a program director at the Asian-Pacific Health Care Venture explained that, “at the very outset, when we outreach, the flyer we use tells about the Food Stamp Program. It says who qualifies, who might be eligible, the family size and the income bracket. On the flip side there is a list of documentations. So when they see the flyer they know what to bring.”

However, even when applicants have information in advance on documents they will need to complete their applications for the Food Stamp program, they do not typically bring all these materials with them at once to the CBO assisting them. One critical practice carried out by all four CBOs is the offer to hold applications on file while their clients collect the necessary verification materials. “We keep the application, and we tell [the clients] once they have all the documentation, ‘just come back and we will continue the application,’” a program supervisor at the Asian-Pacific Health Care Venture explained. “It takes a week, or two weeks, and then they come back with all their documentation. We just continue where we left off.” Holding the application in this manner helps prevent documents from being lost and makes it possible for staff at the CBOs to work with clients through the steps involved in obtaining the materials needed to complete the application. A program director at AADAP added the following:

We will start filling out the paperwork, and we will realize that a client brought in the wrong document or is still missing a document. We will start the application, and we will hold on to it in our drawers. We have a drawer specifically for Food Stamp files. We will wait until they bring it in. The majority of the time, the participants will bring in [the missing documents] within the same day or in the same week. It is usually not a big issue if they are missing a document because we know that they will bring it in. They really want this approved. Things are not held off because they are missing a document. We will not say that we will not do the paperwork. We will start on it and go from there so they don't have to sit for another however long they need to sit to get the application complete.

The actual filling out of the application for Food Stamps can also be overwhelming for clients and can discourage them from seeing the application through to completion. Each CBO interviewed for this report discussed the steps they take to make completion of the application as easy and uncomplicated as possible for the applicants with whom they work, and the common theme running through their remarks is the importance of providing one-on-one assistance in ways that remove as much burden from the clients as possible. Some staff members even talked about approaching the application process as a friendly interview in which they pose the application questions to clients in a more personalized way and then fill out the application on the clients' behalf. A program director at the Asian-Pacific Health Care Venture explained the application assistance they provide to clients as follows:

I think that one thing that we do to make it less overwhelming is that they [the clients] do not have to fill out the application themselves. We do it, but when we ask a question we explain what it is and what it is for. Some people do not know how to read that well, therefore they are afraid of filling it out themselves, so that is one of the reasons they do not want to apply, because they think that they have to fill it out themselves...[Our clients] don't have to do anything. They don't have to read anything. We explain to

them, form by form, what it is.

A program director at AADAP described a similar approach to working with clients on their applications:

Anytime a participant walks in to fill out something, I will sit there and read it with them. I will read the question out, and to some degree write it in for them. That really helps, especially with the community that we are working with. Because some of them cannot read or write, but they can speak, and they know how to articulate what they are trying to tell you. My staff don't just give them the application to fill out. We sit there, and if they have any questions we will try to answer them then and there, to the best of our ability. The only thing that they have to fill out is we tell them, 'write your name and your address. If they're comfortable with filling out everything on their own, that's fine, too. I think the applicants appreciate it when they see the stack of paperwork. We tell them, 'don't worry, I will help you fill everything out.' I tell them, 'you just tell me the names of your kids, if I need to know how to spell them, you can spell them for me. The social security number, whatever else they are asking for, we will write it in for you. That makes it very convenient.'

A staff member at CSAC also stressed the importance of explaining the application questions to clients and making sure the questions are understood:

Usually they [the clients] feel more comfortable here because we answer each question they ask to make sure they understand...They might say, 'I don't understand that.' I right away explain it to that person again until she understands it. I wait to make sure she understands the question.

Along with the one-on-one assistance the four CBOs offer to their clients in completing applications for the Food Stamp program, an important part of their personalized approach to customer service is following up on applications and keeping track of their status once they've been submitted. "Every two weeks I go to the worker in District 10," a staff member at Asian-Pacific Health Care Venture said. "I give them the social security and the name, and I find out if the application was processed or denied. I always follow up after two weeks from submitting the application." A program director at AADAP talked about the importance of follow up in terms of remaining open and helpful to Food Stamp applicants after their applications have been submitted:

Another reason we are so successful is that we do all the follow-up, too. We don't just submit the application, 'okay, you're done.' My staff are trained to say, 'if you have any questions, or if you don't get the form from DPSS, the quarterly report, or a letter, don't hesitate to call us. Don't hesitate to come back to the office and if we have to translate it for you, we will translate it for you.' That's not what we get paid to do, that's not in our contract, obviously. But when you make the extra effort with the community that we work with, it is about building trust and building this relationship. When you do that, people keep coming back and keep making referrals, because you are providing a good service.

Upon completion of applications for the Food Stamp program, the CBOs submit them to DPSS on behalf of their clients. A staff member at Harbor Interfaith Services said that,

“Once we are done with the application, we make sure that everything is in order. I turn it in with the transmittal, and then I personally take it to DPSS where I have the DPSS worker who I turn it in to get it signed and I am on my way.” Remarks such as these leave the impression that once the personnel at the CBOs are ready to submit Food Stamp applications to DPSS for processing – having by then applied their expertise to assist clients in collecting the necessary documentation and completing the applications – the likelihood that the applicants will gain eligibility has increased significantly.

Cultivating Solid Working Relationships with DPSS

All four CBOs have cultivated cordial and supportive working relationships with DPSS, and these relationships enhance the customer service the organizations offer their clients. At the same time, comments made by the managers and staff interviewed for this report indicate that the DPSS personnel at the District level working with each CBO make efforts to be flexible and enabling, and they see themselves as working with the CBOs to achieve the common goal of gaining Food Stamp eligibility for the applicants. As is to be expected at the outset of a successful collaboration between separate organizations, the initial phases of the relationships between the CBOs and DPSS entailed a process of mutual familiarization, which has been especially critical for the CBOs due to the necessity of learning how the Food Stamp application procedures work. As a staff member at Harbor Interfaith Services explained,

I have a [DPSS] worker assigned to the applications that I turn in. At the beginning it was a learning experience, asking a lot of questions, ‘what is it that you need?’ We do have a good professional relationship now. For example, ‘this client is going through this and that. What do you think is the documentation they would need?’ So by asking a lot of questions, I was able to find out [about required] documentation.’ If that situation happens again, I will know what the client would need. So I do have a good relationship with a worker who handles all the applications.

Remarks made by staff at CSAC show that the same personal touch the organization brings to its relationships with clients also enhances its relationships with DPSS, creating a collegiality that then circles back to the benefit of the client seeking to apply for Food Stamps and gain eligibility for the program:

CSAC Staff Member A: “I know [a worker in the DPSS District Office], and I have been talking to her on behalf of some of our participants. She is really helpful with us. She is always helping us with any questions that we might have. Anything that we don’t understand, we call her. We make sure that we are doing the correct thing for the participant. I know her because I met her before on one occasion I went over to DPSS. She told me, ‘any questions, go ahead and call me.’”

CSAC Staff Member B: “That’s also very important for the agencies to have, like a direct contact. Not just someone to talk to over the phone. They get to meet that person [and to know] who they are working with...Our initial contact with them [is important]. ‘This is who we are, this is what we are doing.’ We go over and above what we are supposed to be doing. It is not just fill out the application and good luck if you get it, if you qualify.

We follow up.”

A program director at AADAP also talked about the importance and helpfulness of his organization’s relationship with their DPSS monitor, as well as the staff working under the monitor:

[They help] us with any questions that we have about a participant, whatever the scenario. I feel comfortable calling [them] and saying, ‘hey, we have a participant, and this is the scenario. Do they qualify, or what documents do they need?’ And they’ll answer right away...[They] actually take our applications and look over them, whether they are complete or not. [They] let us know if there are any documents missing. My staff work directly with [them], to make sure that these applications get approved.

Additionally, the AADAP program director discussed a policy adjustment DPSS has made which now allows the CBO to contact their client directly if the department discovers that their applications are missing needed documentation. This makes it possible to overcome language barriers and provides continuity for the clients, who can resolve the incompleteness of their applications with the CBO staff members who helped them initially and with whom they are most comfortable:

When we do submit the application, we worked out with our District office where if we are missing any paperwork they’ll allow us to contact the client and actually get the paperwork from the client. In the past, we were missing this document...it [was something] needed to complete the case, so they [would] try and contact the participant, and that didn’t work because of the language issue. But they decided that we contact the participants and get the missing paperwork from them.

Policy Recommendations

The interviews conducted for this report sought to identify the characteristics and practices contributing to the success that four CBOs have had in helping their clients make applications and gain eligibility for the Food Stamp program. Taken together, the interviews create a profile of effective and successful participation in the Food Stamp Outreach Partnership Project. A number of policy recommendations follow from this profile in terms of requirements DPSS might consider writing into future contracts with all CBOs and FBOs conducting Food Stamp Application Assistance.

Recommendations Based on a Qualitative Profile of the Successful CBOs

- 1.a In order to be successful in gaining Food Stamp eligibility for clients, a CBO must first be able to attract a significant number of appropriate applicants and interest them in the program. The data that DPSS has collected indicates that the four organizations examined for this report accounted for 62 percent of the Food Stamp applications submitted by the 19 CBOs and FBOs participating in the Food Stamp Outreach Partnership Project in FY 2009-10. Moreover, 14 of these 19 CBOs and FBOs exhausted less than half their total contract amount in FY 2009-10, including five of nine organizations yielding approval rates

above the median rate of 60 percent. These numbers suggest that most CBOs are not attracting sufficient numbers of applicants.

CBOs and FBOs will have a heightened likelihood of attracting individuals and families to the Food Stamp program if they have developed a presence in their communities and built solid reputations for helping their clients. It is reasonable to expect that potential applicants will be less likely to seek assistance from organizations they have never heard of or that have little visibility in their communities. Three of the four CBOs interviewed for this study have been active in their communities for almost four decades, and the fourth CBO has been active in its community for almost three decades. Among the minimum qualifications stipulated in the RFSQ DPSS released for the Food Stamp Outreach Partnership Project is that each partner must have operated in Los Angeles County for the past three years as either a Parent-Teacher Association, a CBO providing health and human services, or an FBO such as a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple. Therefore:

Recommendation: DPSS might consider raising the required number of years a CBO must have operated prior to participating in the partnership project from three to six years.

- 1.b In some regions of Los Angeles County, it may not be possible to find CBOs and FBOs that have six years of experience providing services to their communities. In such cases, DPSS might consider asking secondary questions that would help in choosing the most effective contractors. For example, some of the interviewed personnel discussed the importance of familiarity with the languages, cultures and consumption habits of their main constituencies. This kind of familiarity helps organizations establish trusting bonds with clients which, in turn, make the clients more receptive to the possibility of applying for the Food Stamp program. Therefore:

Recommendation: In regions of the County where it is not possible to contract with CBOs and FBOs that have six years experience providing services in their communities, DPSS may consider requiring that contractors hire employees who are from the communities in which they work and are familiar with the predispositions and preferences of the individuals and families living in these communities.

In other words, in the absence of CBOs and FBOs with at least six years experience working in their communities, DPSS may wish to ask potential contractors how they select their staff and to contract with organizations whose employees have the greatest likelihood of understanding the constituencies in question.

- 2 Rigorous outreach is an essential contributor to the success enjoyed by the four analyzed CBOs. These CBOs each undertake their outreach efforts on numerous

fronts, catering to their target populations by not only posting informational flyers about the Food Stamp Program in the restaurants, stores and offices frequented by their constituents, but also by attending health fairs, job fairs and other events where potential applicants for the Food Stamp Program are likely to convene. Additionally, all four CBOs play active roles in community networks consisting of faith based organizations, government entities, advocacy groups, and non-profit organizations. Participation in these networks increases awareness of the Food Stamp program and, in so doing, enhances outreach efforts. However, the only outreach requirement listed in the Statement of Work provided with the RFSQ for the Food Stamp Application Assistance Program is that organizations are expected to be responsible for “conducting individual or group sessions to educate applicants in the Food Stamp Program and application process, such as during church events or community meetings.”

Recommendation: DPSS might therefore consider making more sustained and rigorous outreach a requirement for the CBOs and FBOs with which it contracts for the Food Stamp Application Assistance Program.

One way to accomplish this might be to require all partners to submit an outreach plan providing details for how they will attract new applicants and raise awareness of the Food Stamp program in their communities. This written outreach plan could stipulate the number of fairs and events the organization would attend each month, as well as the locations where fliers would be posted and where staff would be on hand to provide information to prospective Food Stamp applicants. For those organizations already participating in the application assistance program, DPSS might ask partners to submit the outreach plan as part of contract renewal negotiations. For new organizations wishing to participate in the program, the Department might request that the outreach plan be submitted as part of the qualifications documentation they provide in response to the RFSQ. *Additionally, since participation in community networks is an important factor contributing to the effectiveness of the four CBOs examined for this report, DPSS might consider requiring CBOs and FBOs to make participation in these networks part of their outreach plans.*

- 3 One program director interviewed for this study characterized her organization’s methods of serving disadvantaged populations as a ‘holistic approach,’ by which she meant that Food Stamp application support is just one aspect of a multi-pronged approach that also includes provision of services and support in the areas of health, housing, economic well-being, and self-sufficiency. This approach is in fact shared by all four CBOs analyzed for this report. In practical terms, the holistic approach entails the provision of multiple services to clients, which thereby increases the number of potential applicants gaining exposure to the Food Stamp Program. Therefore:

Recommendation: In evaluating whether particular CBOs and FBOs are appropriately equipped to conduct Food Stamp Application Assistance, DPSS might consider the full range of services the organizations provide in their respective communities. More specifically, the department might consider contracting exclusively with organizations that provide multiple services to disadvantaged populations. This would help ensure that the CBOs and FBOs are able to maximize the number of potential applicants gaining exposure to the Food Stamp Program, and would also mean that the partnering organizations have sufficient experience in working with the kinds of individuals and families who typically apply for Food Stamps.

One of the minimum qualifications listed in the 2007 RFSQ for the Food Stamp Outreach Partnership Project is that each partner must have “significant interaction with low-income families, individuals, children, or parents of children who represent the target population for the Food Stamp Program.” In connection with the above recommendation, DPSS might consider adding specificity to this requirement. For example, “significant interaction with low-income families...” might be replaced with language such as “demonstrable experience in providing the County’s low-income population with assistance in applying for health and human services programs such as CalWORKs, General Relief, unemployment benefits, SSI, and Medi-Cal.”

- 4 The responsive and personalized customer service that the four interviewed CBOs provide for their clients can be distilled into a set of more specific conditions and practices, each of which appears to contribute to their effectiveness in conducting Food Stamp Application Assistance. DPSS might consider requiring that the CBOs and FBOs with which it contracts in the future meet some or all of these characteristics and/or customer service practices:

4.a Professionalism: Both management and staff at the four CBOs interviewed for this report are educated and well trained in the eligibility requirements for multiple programs for low-income individuals and families. They take their jobs seriously, and the work they conduct on behalf of their clients is structured within a well defined chain of command that helps ensure accountability and proper adherence to process. *DPSS may wish to evaluate all the CBOs and FBOs with which it contracts for the Food Stamp Application Assistance Program, and might consider contracting exclusively with organizations that meet the level of professionalism shown by the four CBOs examined in this report. Additionally, the Department might consider evaluating the training it provides to all partners participating in the application assistance program to ensure the quality and thoroughness of the information provided.*

4.b Continuous Coverage: The seriousness the four interviewed CBOs bring to their Food Stamp Application Assistance work is seen in the requirement each places on itself to always have staff available in their offices during work hours to assist new and returning Food Stamp applicants. This insistence on

continuous coverage means that multiple staff members must be trained in Food Stamp eligibility requirements and applications. Continuous coverage ensures that applicants are never turned away in the event of illness or anything else that might take a staff member away from the office, and it helps safeguard against clients becoming discouraged in the absence of staff to help them.

- 4.c Returning Telephone Calls:** All four CBOs utilize after-hours voice mail systems. These systems are used to provide clients with general information about services offered, but their most critical function is that they enable clients to leave messages for staff. Staff at each interviewed CBO indicated that they return messages left for them on the following business day. *DPSS might consider making utilization of voice mail a contractual requirement of all the CBOs and FBOs with which it contracts. Moreover, and if possible, the department may wish to require that all CBOs respond to messages left regarding the Food Stamp Program within one business day.*
- 4.d Maintaining Confidentiality:** All four CBOs discussed the importance of making clients feel comfortable when they appear at the offices, as well as the practices they have implemented to ensure that clients do not feel judged or ashamed to be applying for Food Stamps. Building trust and creating a comfort level with clients ensures that they will be forthcoming and supply staff at the CBOs and FBOs with accurate information. To this end, *staff at all four interviewed CBOs work with clients in spaces that are not exposed to others so that the clients can be certain that their privacy and confidentiality is protected. DPSS might consider making this practice a procedural requirement for its partners in their work with Food Stamp applicants.*
- 4.e Assistance in Gathering Verification Materials:** Staff and management at the four CBOs interviewed for this study indicated that gathering documentation is an aspect of the Food Stamp application process that many clients find especially difficult. The Statement of Work provided with the 2007 RFSQ lists “assisting applicants with the collection of supporting documentation” as one of the requirements under the Scope of Work. However, DPSS might consider making this requirement more specific, either with language in future contracts, or via the training the Department provides to partners participating in the Food Stamp Application Assistance Program. The interviews conducted for this report revealed some steps that could help partners be more effective in working with their clients to gather required documents. One such step is to *clearly indicate the required documents on all flyers and informational material about the Food Stamp program so that clients have the option of gathering at least some of them in advance of working with staff at the CBOs and FBOs.* A second step is to *create a checklist of the needed documents that can be used by both clients and staff at the CBOs and FBOs.* For clients these checklists would act as a ‘to do’ list of the materials they need to gather, and for staff at the CBOs and FBOs, the checklists provide a way to thoroughly review the

needed documents with clients, as well as a means of tracking the progress of document collection. The third and most important step is to *hold the Food Stamp application on file for clients while they collect verification materials*, which helps prevent documents from being lost and enables staff to more easily work with clients and track the progress of the application. However, in holding applications, it is also important for the CBOs and FBOs to encourage applicants to complete their applications expeditiously so that their families can begin receiving the needed benefits as quickly as possible.

4.f ***Personalized Assistance in Completing Applications:*** In the Statement of Work for the Food Stamp Outreach Partnership Project, DPSS requires partnering CBOs and FBOs to work with applicants in the following ways:

- Answer questions pertaining to the Food Stamp Program and application process;
- Review and explain the types of documentation to be submitted with the Food Stamp application;
- Assist applicants with the collection of supporting documents;
- Assist applicants in properly completing applications.

DPSS therefore already requires that the partnering CBOs and FBOs work fairly closely with applicants. However, since the interviews conducted for this report suggest that personalized and responsive attention to applicants is an integral factor contributing to the success of the four examined CBOs, the importance of this approach to customer service should be underscored. The interviews with the four CBOs revealed that these organizations work with their clients in a personalized way so as to make the process of applying for Food Stamps as uncomplicated as possible. Staffs at the CBOs provide clients with one-on-one assistance, explaining the application questions, addressing concerns, and, where necessary, filling out applications for clients in an effort to ensure that things are done correctly and that the clients have provided all the necessary information. *DPSS might consider further emphasizing the importance of this kind of personalized, hands-on approach to working with applicants in the training the Department provides to CBOs and FBOs participating in the application assistance program.*

4.g ***Following Up on Submitted Applications:*** All four interviewed CBOs *follow up with DPSS on behalf of their clients after Food Stamp applications have been completed and submitted.* This practice, which enables staff at the CBOs to track the progress of applications and to inform clients if verification documents are missing or if additional information is needed in order to gain eligibility, is particularly important in light of DPSS data showing that 254 of the 548 denials (65 percent) on Food Stamp applications submitted by CBOs and

FBOs from June 2009 to July 2010 occurred due to failure to provide some form of necessary documentation.⁶ If DPSS were to require the partnering CBOs and FBOs to follow up on submitted applications after a certain defined period of time, and if the Department continues to allow the partners to contact clients when applications are found to be missing necessary supporting documentation, then denials based on missing documents will likely be reduced.

- 5 The cultivation of supportive working relationships with DPSS – and especially with the monitoring staff working at the district level – has helped the four interviewed CBOs to gain Food Stamp eligibility for greater numbers of their clients. Staffs at the CBOs are free to contact their assigned DPSS monitors to have questions answered about eligibility requirements and verification materials, as well as to follow up on behalf of clients to check on the status of submitted Food Stamp applications. A program director at one CBO mentioned in particular that processing work has become more effective now that DPSS allows his organization to contact clients directly if the Department discovers that documentation is missing or that applications are otherwise incomplete. Therefore:

Recommendation: DPSS might consider requiring regular weekly or bi-weekly contact between the partners and their assigned district-level monitoring staff as part of the work to be carried out under the Food Stamp Application Assistance contracts.

This weekly contact would be in addition to the performance evaluation meetings between partners and their contract monitors, which are listed as a requirement in the Statement of Work for the Food Stamp Outreach Partnership Project. The evaluation meetings are intended to provide DPSS and the partnering CBOs and FBOs with reviews of partner performance under their contracts with the Department. By contrast, the recommended weekly or bi-weekly contact between the partners and their assigned district-level monitors could occur via either conference call or in-person meetings and would be for the purpose of addressing issues that emerge in conjunction with specific Food Stamp applications the partners have submitted on behalf of their clients. The contact could also help DPSS communicate changes in rules, regulations and procedures to the partners. This contact would not preclude the more informal interactions with DPSS that the four CBOs interviewed for this report said they find helpful.

⁶ This percentage was calculated by adding together all the denials based on missing verification in DPSS' data on the number of CBO/FBO Food Stamp Denials and their reasons from June 2009 through July 2010 (see Table 3). The sum was divided by the total number of denials to arrive at the percentage.

Conclusion

The recommendations given above are offered for the purpose of helping DPSS and its partnering CBOs and FBOs to boost Food Stamp utilization in the County of Los Angeles. Accomplishing this objective will not only require a number of partners to improve their approval rates but will also require most of them to attract more applicants. All four CBOs interviewed for this report place substantial emphasis on outreach, and the results of their efforts in this area are observed in data showing that together they accounted for more than three-fifths of the Food Stamp applications submitted by CBOs and FBOs during FY 2009-10.

Food Stamp utilization in the County will also be more likely to increase if DPSS selects highly professionalized partners with well established presence in their communities and proven track records of providing multiple services to low-income families and individuals. This may not always be possible, but it can be useful as a general guideline in considering the types of organizations that are most appropriate for the Food Stamp Outreach Partnership Project. Additionally, the training DPSS provides to partners should stress the importance of personalized, hands-on customer service, and the Department might consider requiring partners to follow-up on submitted applications after an appropriately defined period of time, and might also consider requiring regular contact between the partners and their assigned departmental monitors at the district level for the purpose of reviewing any problems that emerge in connection with specific Food Stamp applications.

Finally, along with analysis of quantitative performance data, DPSS might consider conducting additional interviews with both partners and their district-level monitors some time after implementation of some or all of the recommendations offered in this report. These interviews could provide DPSS with information to assess the impact of the steps taken to enhance the Food Stamp Outreach Partnership Project.