

8. Workplace-Based Outreach

Households with earned income have some of the lowest participation rates in the Food Stamp Program, yet often need the benefits to make ends meet. Outreach conducted through the workplace has several positive features. It is a logical way for state and local agencies and community-based groups to reach low-income workers; it can help employers retain employees; it can buttress workers' resources when a plant closes or mass layoffs occur; and it can enhance private sector support for the Food Stamp Program.

In the wake of the 1996 welfare law, a number of companies that hired and trained people transitioning from welfare participated in roundtables and conferences convened by the Welfare to Work Partnership.¹ The U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Center on Workforce Development (CWD) also led discussions that provided information about helping entry-level workers secure supports while they are attempting to move up the career ladder.²

In 2002, a CWD Internet Chambercast and subsequent CWD publication offered insights on what employers need to learn about workers' situations and what community-based organizations need to remember when approaching employers to partner on outreach and other social services efforts.³ Steve Wing of CVS Corporation reported, "We have good managers that know how to run our stores...but they don't know how to provide employment supports. They're not sure how to work with transportation issues. They may not know all about child care. Local agencies do know, and they can help."⁴ Similarly, Fred Kramer of Marriott International, Inc. explained, "Our successful retention rates are due in large part to our partnerships with community-based organizations that provide the support services that an individual needs."⁵ CWP concluded, "Research demonstrates that families with access to transitional employment services—such as child care, health insurance, and help with expenses—are less likely to return to the welfare rolls. Community-based organizations provide support services that can help workers transitioning off of welfare solve problems concerning child care and transportation and help them access rent subsidies and food stamps, supports that can stretch entry-level salaries and keep employees self-sufficient."⁶

CWD panelists offered pointers on how to broker partnerships between local chambers of commerce and community-based groups. Either the chamber head, a local group that knows chamber leaders, or an intermediary such as a mayor can initiate the collaboration just by

¹ The Welfare to Work Partnership has been succeeded by Business Interface, Inc., a nonprofit placement and consulting firm that works on job opportunities for welfare recipients. Its Web site is www.businessinterfaceinc.com

² See also information on USDA FNS presentations on food stamps as a work support at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Annual Workforce Development Leadership Course in "Food Stamp Program: Steps Have Been Taken to Increase Participation of Working Families, But Better Tracking of Efforts Is Needed, GAO Report 04-346, fn 28 (March 2004), www.gao.gov/new.items/d04346.pdf

³ See "Welfare to Work: An Economic Boost," U.S. Chamber of Commerce Center for Workforce Preparation (CWP), html version posted at <http://64.233.187.104/search?q=cache:lCJD5DG-eYgJ:www.uschamber.com/NR/rdonlyres/e542i5otwk3hztgefs4yth7dki2ntvwykvhrpvzcn5dven5coxo57mnzly4g4jo3gnoe6rgvdg7dbpp7ruoepk2e/welfare150dpi.pdf+welfare+to+work+economic+boost+orlando&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=1>; and Internet Chambercast hosted by CWP, 4/17/02, www.uschamber.com/cwp/tools/chambercast/2002.htm#4.17.02

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

“picking up the phone or jotting an invitation” to suggest a small group chat informally.⁷ Marriott’s Kramer underscored, however, the community-based organization must be a “viable business partner” and able to explain “what it is bringing to the table that will interest an employer in its services.”⁸

More recently, Corporate Voices for Working Families has produced materials to help engage and guide organizations interested in building bridges between outreach campaigns and the corporate sector. A “2006 Employer Guide to Promoting Tax Credits and Federal Benefits” is available on its Web site. The Center on Law and Social Policy (CLASP)’s new report on employer-based work support campaigns suggests that employers who are already engaged on EITC benefit outreach may be receptive to requests that they add information about food stamps and other benefits.⁹ Food retailers have partnered on outreach not only to their local customers, but to their employees. Pathmark, for example, has collaborated with anti-hunger advocates to provide food stamp information to employees through paychecks. [See section on *Retailer-Based outreach*.]

Similarly, local unions also can get information to low-wage workers. In New York City local unions such as DC37 and 1199 partner with community-based organizations to provide EITC tax preparation and food stamp information to low-wage union members.

Efforts to involve employers in food stamp outreach were featured in two of the 2004 outreach grants USDA awarded. In one, the Alamo Area Development Corporation (AADC) in Texas distributed information about food stamps through partnerships with employers, offered prescreening to potential applicants, and educated employers’ human resource staff. In the other, Jewish Vocational Services (JVS) in Massachusetts targeted one-on-one assistance to new employees at existing workplace partners, while at the same time, used customized approaches to cultivate new employer partners. To help sustain outreach beyond the grant period, JVS developed a food stamp education module to train human resources staffers and to use in workplace education classes.

In addition to support those with jobs, food stamp outreach can help buttress the economic loss for those displaced by plant closings or other mass layoff situations. Some food stamp offices provide “rapid response teams” to get laid off workers connected with benefits.

In short, the ways that employers can assist outreach efforts are varied. Employers can insert information about food stamps into employee pay envelopes and on employee pay stubs. Human

⁷ See suggestion for Orlando Chamber of Commerce’s Jacob Stuart that chamber officials call community groups in “Welfare to Work: An Economic Boost,” U.S. Chamber of Commerce Center for Workforce Preparation (CWP), html version posted at <http://64.233.187.104/search?q=cache:ICJD5DG-eYgJ:www.uschamber.com/NR/rdonlyres/e542i5otwk3hztgefs4yth7dki2ntvwykvhrpvzcn5dven5coxo57mnzly4g4jo3gnoe6rgvvg7dbpp7ruoepk2e/welfare150dpi.pdf+welfare+to+work+economic+boost+orlando&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=1>

⁸ See “Welfare to Work: An Economic Boost,” U.S. Chamber of Commerce Center for Workforce Preparation (CWP), html version posted at <http://64.233.187.104/search?q=cache:ICJD5DG-eYgJ:www.uschamber.com/NR/rdonlyres/e542i5otwk3hztgefs4yth7dki2ntvwykvhrpvzcn5dven5coxo57mnzly4g4jo3gnoe6rgvvg7dbpp7ruoepk2e/welfare150dpi.pdf+welfare+to+work+economic+boost+orlando&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=1>

⁹ “Getting Connected: Employer Engagement in Work Supports,” by Abbey Frank, Mark Greenberg, and Robert Zdenek, Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), May 2006, www.clasp.org/publications/employerworksupports.pdf

resources departments can offer new hires information about and/or applications for food stamps, EITC, health, and other benefits. Employers can host local food stamp agency or community-based group staff to take applications and process or prescreen applications for its workers. In some cases, employers, such as retailers, can play food stamp PSAs over their audio systems before stores open to customers but while employees are at work. When an employer closes a plant, food stamp agency “rapid response teams” and outreach can help connect job losers to benefits. Employers can help fund food stamp outreach efforts, including by putting up funds for the state to draw down a federal match and support food stamp information campaigns through radio and newspaper ads. Individual employers can seek wider business community involve through the local chamber of commerce. Conversely, where the local chamber takes the lead, it can host seminars to interest its members in participating in food stamp outreach.

Key Lessons

- Reach out and build new partnerships with local and regional employers of low-wage workers.
- Make “the business case” for food stamp outreach, including by explaining the boost the benefits give the local economy and the positive impact on employee retention rates.
- Continue to work with current collaborating employers to reach new employees on an ongoing basis.
- Encourage employers to provide food stamp information on employee pay stubs/envelopes.
- Educate the staff of private sector and public sector human resources departments about the benefits of the Food Stamp Program and how to assist employees who may be eligible for food stamp benefits.
- Reach out to local unions to work with them to provide food stamp information to their low-wage members.
- Reach out to employers and unions in the event of plant closings or other mass layoff situations and partner with local food stamp agency “rapid response teams.”
- Urge employers and business leaders to speak out about the importance of the Food Stamp Program and contribute resources to efforts to remove stigma about it.

Resources

- Corporate Voices for Working Families, <http://cvworkingfamilies.org/issues/issues.shtml>
- Center for Workplace Development, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, “Welfare to Work: An Economic Boost,” <http://64.233.187.104/search?q=cache:lCJD5DG-eYgJ:www.uschamber.com/NR/rdonlyres/e542i5otwk3hztgefs4yth7dki2ntvwykvhrpvzcn5dven5coxo57mznly4g4jo3gnoe6rgvdg7dbpp7ruoepk2e/welfare150dpi.pdf+welfare+to+work+economic+boost+orlando&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=1>; and Internet Chambercast, April 17, 2002, www.uschamber.com/cwp/tools/chambercast/2002.htm#4.17.02
- GAO, “Food Stamp Program: Steps Have Been Taken to Increase Participation of Working Families, But Better Tracking of Efforts Is Needed, GAO Report 04-346 (March 2004), www.gao.gov/new.items/d04346.pdf
- FNS 2004 Food Stamp Outreach Grantees, posted at www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/grants/2004/summary.htm
- Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), “Getting Connected: Employer Engagement in Work Supports,” by Abbey Frank, Mark Greenberg, and Robert Zdenek, May 2006, posted at www.clasp.org/publications/employerworksupports.pdf