



## 12 Outreach Activities

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Given today's difficult economy, food stamp outreach is more important than ever. The headlines of every newspaper tell the story of food pantries running low on food and people being laid off. The number of eligible people receiving food stamps has reached record levels, but almost one-third of eligible people are still not participating. Increasing participation is good for individuals and families who are struggling, but is also important for the economy. SNAP/Food Stamps provide a much-needed economic stimulus. Food stamp dollars go right into local economies and, because of the "multiplier effect," every federal dollar in food stamps creates \$1.84 in economic activity.

Following are a list of outreach activities that can be tailored to fit your organization and your community. For an additional list of possible partners, see FRAC's Guide to Food Stamp Outreach Collaborations, posted at <http://www.frac.org/pdf/fspguide06/fspguide06.pdf>

### 1. Host a Site Visit

Inviting local, state and/or federal officials to visit a local food bank, SNAP/Food Stamp office or community center is an excellent way to attract media attention and spread the word about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. A site visit puts a human face on the problems of rising food prices and the slowing economy, allows elected officials to see first-hand how important the program is to so many people, and encourages them to speak out and reach out to their constituents.

A step-by-step planning check-list, advice for inviting an elected official to a site visit, and template materials on getting media to the event can be found in Chapter 5 of "Feeding America's Families," a resource guide previously created by The Hatcher Group and the Food Research and Action Center. Download the guide at: [http://www.thehatchergroup.com/doc/Food\\_Stamp\\_Outreach\\_08.06.pdf](http://www.thehatchergroup.com/doc/Food_Stamp_Outreach_08.06.pdf)

### 2. Issue a Press Release

By releasing frequent (but not overly frequent) press releases on new SNAP/Food Stamp participation data, specific hunger statistics in your state, food price inflation rates, new reports or other SNAP/Food Stamp information, your organization will become familiar to reporters as a place to go to when they're covering hunger-related stories.

Be sure to keep press releases free of jargon and make your message clear. The headline should include a new finding or information that will grab the reporters' attention and the lead paragraph should quickly summarize the findings and encourage the media to read on further.

Media list: It's important to have a solid, up-to-date media list. Include print reporters who cover social issues, hunger, education, health, agriculture, and the economy from daily and weekly newspapers. It's also helpful to include editorial page editors and opinion page editors. For television and radio, be sure to include assignment editors in addition to key reporters. If you don't have access to a media directory, conduct an online search of media outlets in your area to find out which reporters have recently written about food stamps, hunger, the farm bill, or food prices, or the economic crisis. You

might use a Lexis-Nexis scan or other search engine tool or search the Web sites of individual newspapers.

Once you've e-mailed out the press release, be sure to conduct follow-up calls with the reporters. Since reporters receive so many press releases each day, your call can help move your e-mail from unopened and unread to opened and read – and possibly to becoming a future news story.

### **3. Write an Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor**

Opinion-editorials, which are found across from the editorial page in most papers, are a perfect way to express a viewpoint and bring a story to life. The first paragraph should include a story or example that is local to your community. Write about a local family and the impact that food stamps had on their life, focus on someone who took the Food Stamp Challenge, or emphasize the economy in your community by writing about a family struggling to make ends meet. Once you've grabbed the reader, you can move on to statistics on food stamp participation, the economic benefits for increasing participation, how people can apply, and other facts about food stamps in your community. We've included a template op-ed that can serve as a starting point for your organization.

Information about placing an op-ed can usually be found on the newspaper's Web site, which also will include guidelines about required op-ed length (it typically ranges from 500-700 words). If you haven't received a response in a few days, contact the opinion-page editor to make sure they've received it and to find out if a decision has been made. If the paper turns your piece down, have other newspapers' names ready as an option and continue to submit it. Since the majority of newspapers require exclusivity, the op-ed should be submitted to each paper one at a time.

Letters to the editor are much shorter in length and are responses to articles that have already run in the paper, or to major events. Submission guidelines also can be found on the Web, or by calling the paper. These are often easier to get placed and also can be effective.

### **4. Conduct an Editorial Board Meeting**

It's important for your organization to conduct periodic meetings with your newspaper's editorial board. These are the people who make the decisions and write the pieces that are on the editorial page, which can set the tone for the paper.

It is best to request a meeting with the editorial board by writing. You can send an email to the editorial page editor requesting a meeting, explaining your organization, the issues you're concerned about and why these issues should be important to the newspaper and the community. If you don't hear back within a few days, be sure to call and follow up.

Next, determine who will be attending the meeting. In most cases you will have your organization's executive director and your organization's SNAP/Food Stamps policy expert. Most meetings are fairly short in length, so prepare a set of messages ahead of time and determine your "ask." For example, do you want them to write about the recent changes to the SNAP/ Food Stamp Program, or about how the food stamp caseloads are increasing but people are still in need, or steps that the governor should take to help the program? It is often helpful to bring a one-pager or other brief materials that can be left behind. Be sure to follow up the meeting with thank you notes and any additional information that was requested during the meeting.

## 5. Newsletter and Web Site Information

Newsletters and your organization's Web site are excellent places to include information about the importance of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the need for community members and partner organizations to conduct outreach activities. You could include a checklist of ideas for other organizations or individuals to do, such as some of the ideas listed in this document. Include addresses and phone numbers for local SNAP offices and food banks, as well as tips on how individuals can find out if they're eligible and how to apply.

It's also important for elected officials to include information about nutrition assistance programs on their Web sites and in their newsletters. Contact your local, state and federal officials and ask them to post resources about SNAP for their constituents, providing them with draft language. Similarly, reach out to other organizations (such as faith-based groups, senior citizen-serving agencies, and child care centers) and ask them to carry information about SNAP in their newsletters and on their Web sites.

## 6. Take the Food Stamp Challenge

Participating in the "SNAP/Food Stamp Challenge" is an excellent way to draw media and public attention to the issues of hunger and the need for greater food stamp participation in your community. Governors, members of Congress, local elected officials, advocates, and community leaders have taken the challenge in the past couple of years, many gaining significant media attention.

Taking the Challenge involves living for a week on the average food stamp budget of \$4 a day. The goals of the Challenge are to raise the visibility of the SNAP/Food Stamp Program and to highlight the need for expanded food stamp benefits. While the new Farm Bill did include some important improvements to the program, benefits still fall well short of what families need for a healthy diet.

Two resources for you to draw on for Challenges:

1. A blog was started when Members of Congress launched their Food Stamp Challenge in 2007 and includes personal accounts by Members and media coverage of their experiences. Read the blog at: <http://foodstampchallenge.typepad.com>
2. A handbook by The Hatcher Group and FRAC offers background on the Challenge and sample forms for those interested in taking the Challenge alone or in groups. You can find the handbook at: [http://www.thehatchergroup.com/doc/FSC\\_Toolkit.pdf](http://www.thehatchergroup.com/doc/FSC_Toolkit.pdf)

## 7. Start a Blog

A blog is an excellent way to publicize your organization's work, to raise awareness about hunger and SNAP/Food Stamps in your community, and to engage the public. There are free blog sites that provide easy-to-follow steps to start your blog. Two options are [www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com) and [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com).

Develop a theme for your blog, such as the Food Stamp Challenge, new data and findings on the SNAP/Food Stamp Program, or make it a resource on the recent program changes due to the Farm Bill.

## **8. Host an Event at a Farmers' Market or Grocery Store**

People who are eligible but not participating in the SNAP/Food Stamp Program often are unsure how to apply or unaware they may be eligible for SNAP/Food Stamp benefits. Providing information about SNAP/Food Stamps in a familiar venue can help increase participation.

Work with your local grocery store to host a cooking demonstration or a healthy food booth. Flyers and application information can be given to those who visit the booth. Many farmers' markets have begun accepting EBT cards and can be an excellent setting to reach community members with information about SNAP/Food Stamp benefits.

For examples of outreach conducted at retail grocers and farmers' markets, go to:

[http://www.frac.org/html/news/fsp\\_guide2006.html](http://www.frac.org/html/news/fsp_guide2006.html) and  
<http://www.frac.org/pdf/fspguide06/02Retailer.pdf> and  
<http://www.frac.org/pdf/fspguide06/11Farmers.pdf>

## **9. Post Flyers at Child Care Centers, Senior Centers, Food Banks and Throughout the Community**

While posting flyers often is an obvious outreach activity, it is often overlooked. Flyers that can be made in a number of language are especially effective. They should include details about what the SNAP/Food Stamp Program is, who is eligible, and how to apply – ideally with a local phone number and address of where to go. These should be produced in a variety of languages if possible.

Think creatively about locations throughout your community to best reach low-income people in need. Some ideas include grocery stores, food banks, laundromats, community centers and child care centers. Inside this toolkit you'll find links to a USDA flyer in English and Spanish for your use, as well as some samples we and other advocates have developed. Be sure to check with your state and local food stamp agency to make sure your outreach leaflets are consistent with local practice.

For materials about the Food Stamp Program in 34 languages, go to:

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/translations.htm>

## **10. Prescreen for SNAP/Food Stamp Benefits**

A prescreening tool allows the user, either an advocate or a potential applicant, to answer a set of questions to determine if a person is likely eligible for benefits. Learning of the amount of benefits that one is likely to receive increases the chances that the person will follow through in applying for the benefit.

For example, seniors can determine whether they are eligible for food stamps by visiting [www.aarp.org/quicklink](http://www.aarp.org/quicklink) and filling out a questionnaire on public benefit programs. Users can find food stamp applications for each state by entering their Zip Code. The site will provide updated food stamp applications starting Oct. 1.

Advertise the availability of prescreening tools, such as the national tool on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's web site at [http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/applicant\\_recipients/apply.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/applicant_recipients/apply.htm).

For more background, go to the relevant section of FRAC's Guide to Food Stamp Outreach Collaborations, posted at <http://www.frac.org/pdf/fspguide06/14Online.pdf>

## **11. Publicize Hotlines**

Publicize telephone help lines that give people information about SNAP/Food Stamp eligibility and how to apply. USDA's national hotline (1-800-221-5689) connects callers with a live operator who mails out information packets on SNAP/Food Stamps. Many organizations have implemented help lines statewide and/or locally.

For more background, go to the relevant section of FRAC's Guide to Food Stamp Outreach Collaborations, posted at <http://www.frac.org/pdf/fspguide06/13Helplines.pdf>

## **12. Public Service Announcements**

Public service announcements on radio and television can be an effective way to reach a large audience. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has created a number of PSA's that can be used free of charge.

Radio PSA's can be found here: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/radio/default.htm>

Television PSA's can be found here: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/psas.htm>

If your organization has the resources, you can tape your own versions. Contact the Public Service Director at your local radio or television stations, explain the need for outreach and encourage them to play your PSA or USDA's. Required format may vary, but most stations prefer to be able to download the files online, as the USDA has done with their PSA's.