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Food Stamps: Available But Not Easily Accessible: A Study Conducted for Project Bread

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The John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs



Food Stamps: Available But Not Easily Accessible

A Study Conducted for Project Bread

By: Michelle Kahan, Elaine Werby, and Jennifer Raymond

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July 2002

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By: Michelle Kahan, Elaine Werby, and Jennifer Raymond

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Introduction

Concerned with growing hunger among Massachusetts families eligible for Food Stamps, and the paradoxical decline in the number of program enrollees, Project Bread asked the Center for Social Policy at the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs, University of Massachusetts Boston (CSP) to study the process of securing and sustaining Food Stamp Benefits.

Concurrent with the planning process for the study, the Massachusetts legislature, in an override of the Governor's veto in early December 2001, included language in the FY 2002 budget designed to expand access to the program. Among other requirements, the language requires the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), the state agency administering Food Stamps, to:

- extend office hours;
- simplify the Food Stamp application;
- out-station workers at community and human service organizations;
- provide categorical eligibility to families at 200% of the federal poverty level; and
- elect the federal option to automatically continue three months of Food Stamp benefits for families whose TAFDC benefits are ending.

These requirements added new areas of inquiry to the study: the potential expansion of both physical and programmatic access to the program for Massachusetts families. In fact, in the state legislature's Conference Committee budget for FY 2003, released mid-July 2002, these provisions are reiterated, as DTA is directed to increase access to Food Stamps by simplifying the application, making forms and notices more readable, extending office hours, and out-stationing workers. With these new requirements, the study, carried out in collaboration with Project Bread, addressed the following research questions:

1. Are there barriers to accessing the Food Stamp program?
 - If so, what are those barriers?
 - Why do some eligible applicants choose not to apply?
2. Are there barriers to maintaining Food Stamp benefits?
 - If so, what are those barriers?
 - How do Food Stamp applicants experience the process of maintaining benefits?
3. Is the Food Stamp program complying with the new regulations around extended hours, streamlined application forms, and out-stationing services?

These questions are particularly critical in the current environment. According to a June 2002 study of 1999 Food Stamp participation rates, the proportion of eligible Massachusetts residents who actually participate in the Food Stamp program is among the lowest in the nation¹. Across the country, about 57% of eligible people receive Food Stamps; Massachusetts' rate is 43 percent. While nationwide participation fell by 17 percentage points between September 1994 and September 1999, Massachusetts rate fell by an astounding 26 points, again among the highest decreases across the country.

¹ Schirm, A., Castner, L. (2002). Reaching Those in Need: State Food Stamp Participation Rates in 1999. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for the USDA Food and Nutrition Service: Washington, D.C.

After describing the study methodology as well as general background on the Food Stamp application process, this report presents the findings of our research. First major findings are highlighted, and then detail is provided across a number of areas of inquiry. Finally, the appendix includes survey and interview instruments used for the study.

Methodology

The study was carried out in two phases. Phase one was completed between January and March 2002, phase two between April and June 2002.

Phase One

Working collaboratively, CSP and Project Bread designed this phase of the study to focus on the first research question: access to the Food Stamp program. As such, we examined the experience of callers to the agency's Food Source Hotline. Individuals from across the state call this hotline in search of food resources. When appropriate, program staff screen callers for Food Stamp eligibility. Those who appear to meet eligibility guidelines are then mailed an application.

In fact, Project Bread recently examined the number and eligibility rates of callers. In January 2002, the Hotline received 2,287 calls for assistance with Food Stamps, a 20% increase from the previous year. Almost two-thirds of those callers (1,462) were screened for Food Stamp eligibility, and 1,075 (74%) were determined to be eligible. This proportion represents a substantial increase from the previous year when just 58% were found eligible.

For this study, we focused on callers from November 2001 through January 15, 2002 who were screened as eligible for Food Stamps and mailed an application. From this universe of 758 callers, a sample of 400 were randomly selected for telephone interviews.

The interview protocol (see appendix) was developed by CSP, with assistance from Project Bread. Food Source Hotline staff conducted the follow-up calls. CSP conducted a training program for Project Bread staff, and the protocol was piloted in early January. Both the training program and the pilot provided valuable information that informed the final version of the interview protocol. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish; translation services were available for other languages. This first round of telephone interviews was conducted in February 2002 and produced a total of 249 completed interviews for a 62% response rate.

This phase of the study was designed in two parts. Callers were to be called once to determine whether they had applied for Food Stamps, and if so, their experience of that process. Those who applied were also asked for information as to the disposition of the case. However, it was assumed that some respondents would not yet have heard whether or not they were eligible to receive Food Stamps. The second call was structured so as to garner this information. In practice, most of the respondents who applied for Food Stamps had already learned of their eligibility status. As such, only nine interviewees required a second call; eight individuals were reached. All interview data were entered and analyzed by CSP.

Phase Two

For this part of the study, CSP conducted exit interviews with individuals who visited DTA offices in four areas: Dorchester, Lowell, New Bedford, and Salem, Massachusetts. Project Bread selected these sites as representing a range of geographic and regional communities, as well as offices that show low, medium, and high ratios of approved applications. CSP then surveyed individuals whose visits to these offices concerned the Food Stamp program.

The interview protocol (see appendix) focused on the first two research questions: access to the program, and barriers to maintaining the benefit. It requested general information such as household composition, transportation, and language, as well as respondents' views of the value of potential policy changes such as extended office hours from all interviewees. Additionally, specific questions about respondents' experiences were targeted toward each type of visitor: information requests, Food Stamp applicants, Food Stamp recipients completing the periodic re-certification process, and cash benefit and Food Stamp applicants. Since each of the selected communities has substantial linguistic minority residents, interviews were conducted in Khmer, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese, as well as English. At the conclusion of each survey, interviewees were given a \$10 voucher from a local grocery store.

Respondents in this phase were limited to those willing to participate and to the hours and days interviewers visited the four sites. Therefore, their responses may be suggestive but not representative of either the total Food Stamp applicant and recipient population at each office, nor of the total population of applicants and recipients across the state. At some offices and on some days, more people were eligible to complete the survey (e.g. at the office for a purpose related to Food Stamps) and interested in participating. In Salem, particularly, there appeared to be proportionally fewer office visits regarding this benefit, and of those potential respondents, a smaller proportion interested in completing the interview. Additionally, CSP encountered some difficulties in carrying out the methodology for this phase. These included unexpected delays in securing the protocol translations, the loss of a critical interviewer, and the time required to recruit a replacement. Finally, a particularly rainy spring necessitated recurrent postponements in the interviewing schedule, resulting in the Khmer bilingual interviewer being unable to meet the revised timeline for Lowell. However, only one interview was not conducted due to this language unavailability. Despite these difficulties 91 interviews were successfully completed by mid-June 2002.

Finally, in phase two, we also studied the third research question: DTA compliance with the new regulations. CSP called each of the four offices multiple times to determine the hours and locations at which Food Stamp applications could be completed.

Background: The Food Stamp Application Process

Massachusetts Food Stamp applicants must apply to the DTA office which covers the city or town of their residence. Application forms may be obtained in person or, upon request, mailed. Most candidates apply in person, meeting with a DTA worker to complete a computerized application process. Documentation of a variety of items relative to the applicant's status must be submitted with the application. Items for which proof must be provided by most applicants include the following:

- *Identity* – driver's license or birth certificate.

- *Residence* – rent receipt or lease agreement; for homeowners, proof of mortgage, taxes and insurance.
- *Utility Bills* – current gas, electric, and telephone bills (must be dated not more than four weeks prior to the day of application submission).
- *Social Security Numbers* – social security cards or documentation from SSA office for all eligible household members, including children.
- *Earned Income* – pay stubs showing income before taxes for the past four weeks, or an employer's letter containing such information.
- *Bank Accounts* – most recent checking account statement, updated savings passbook.

If applicable, proof of the following is also required:

- *Childcare expenses* – canceled check or money order paid to childcare provider, or written statement from provider.
- *Unearned income* – most recent copy of social security award letter; records of unemployment, worker's compensation, pension, child support, and/or alimony payments for the past four weeks.
- *Immigration Status* – registration card or proof that the INS is aware that the applicant is living in the U.S.
- *Medical Expenses* – for applicants 60 years of age or older, or receiving disability benefits, proof of medical expenses.
- *Rental Income* – copy of lease agreement or statement from tenant showing amount of rent paid.
- *Self-Employment* – most recent federal tax return.

Gathering this documentation requires applicants to be organized and have a great deal of information on hand; otherwise the process of applying can be delayed. For example, if an applicant does not have a copy of her most recent electricity bill, she must expend time and resources to secure a copy from the appropriate company. Clearly the applicant must consider that the potential benefit is worth this effort.

The application itself is 8 pages long. The number of questions and their level of detail may appear unnecessary to some applicants and influence their perception of the process. Additional costs incurred in the application process may include travel time, transportation costs, childcare expenses, and actual time spent in the DTA office completing the application. Many potential applicants report having to make difficult choices between work obligations and applying for this benefit.

Currently, offices are primarily open during business hours, thus making it difficult for people who work at that time to apply in person. With the exception of elderly and disabled individuals, applicants must visit their local DTA office to be interviewed by a caseworker. This process can be particularly difficult for non-English speakers, due to the shortage of bilingual caseworkers. Failure to have all necessary verification can result in several trips to the DTA office. Finally, for some applicants, receiving a public benefit, such as Food Stamps, is seen as stigmatizing, particularly when it comes from the 'welfare office'.

What We Learned

Altogether we gathered data from 340 individuals, 185 who were seeking information about Food Stamps, 135 applicants, and 20 current recipients. As detailed below, more than two-thirds of the respondents were families with children and one in five was a single adult. As such, it is important to remember that **most of the people we spoke with were heads of household struggling to feed their children.**

One in ten households reported having one or two seniors in their household. A slightly higher proportion reported that between one and four household members were disabled.

Respondent Characteristics

Type	Frequency	Percent	Specific Populations	Frequency	Percent
Families with Children	238	70%	1 or More Seniors in Household	35	10%
Single Adults	72	21%	1 or More Disabled in Household	45	13%
Families without Children	30	9%			
Total	340	100%			

Respondents reported many challenges to accessing Food Stamps.

- A startling proportion (61%) of the eligible applicants we surveyed chose not to apply, in many cases due to lack of available time and/or the hassle involved.
- For those who did choose to apply, just under half (47%) described the application process as 'a little hard' (36%) or 'very hard' (11%).
- Just under one-third of applicants and current recipients who met with a caseworker (32%) did not feel they were treated with full respect, describing the interaction as 'somewhat respectful' (23%) or 'not respectful' (9%).
- More than half of these applicants and recipients (55%) had to wait to speak with a caseworker. More than two in five of those (42%) waited for one or more hours (31% one-two hours; 11% two or more).
- Just under half (42%) were not able to complete the application on the day of the interview.
- The process is even more difficult for non-English speaking recipients and applicants, almost all of whom were families with children (86%). In most cases these respondents were not helped in their primary language, having to make do with little English or provide their own interpreter.
- In many cases, non-English speakers also had to make additional visits to the office. These respondents were almost four times as likely to come to DTA for information prior to completing the application.

- The experience of the process of securing benefits is highly dependent upon the attitude and behavior of individual staff members. Respondents' perceptions varied considerably, depending upon whom they met with and which office they visited.
- Out-stationing is important. More than half of office visitors (59%) stated that being able to apply at another location in the neighborhood would make a difference for them.

Food Stamps are a critical resource for hungry families.

- When asked about the importance of receiving Food Stamps for themselves and their families, almost all office visitors (87%) stated that getting Food Stamps is extremely important.
- Most of those who did complete the application (83%) were found eligible for Food Stamps.

Phase One

(N=249)

As indicated above, Project Bread staff spoke with 249 respondents who had called the Food Source Hotline, been screened as eligible for Food Stamps, and were mailed an application. Almost all (92%) of these respondents reported having received the application in the mail. Respondents reported living in 77 Massachusetts cities and towns. Eight or more respondents were from each of the following areas: Boston, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn, Quincy, Springfield, and Worcester. Most of the interviews (94%) were conducted in English; 11 respondents were interviewed in Spanish, and one each in Cape Verdean, Portuguese, and Russian.

As detailed below, about two-thirds of the respondents were families with children and a quarter were single adults. Just over one in ten households reported having one or two seniors in their household. A similar proportion reported that between one and four household members were disabled.

Respondent Characteristics

Type	Frequency	Percent	Specific Populations	Frequency	Percent
Families with Children	167	67%	1 or More Seniors in Household	27	11%
Single Adults	68	27%	1 or More Disabled in Household	28	11%
Families without Children	14	6%			
Total	249	100%			

Respondents who did not Apply for Food Stamps

(N=152)

Almost two-thirds (61%) of callers who had been screened as eligible for Food Stamps indicated that they did not apply, citing the following reasons:

Reasons Did Not Apply

Reason	% Responding (categories not exclusive)
No Time	29%
Other	28%
Financial Change	22%
Not Worth the Hassle	22%
Illness/Disability/Elder	18%
Transportation	10%
Too Little Value	7%
Language	4%
Childcare	2%
Office Hours	1%

As the reason categories were not exclusive, more than two in five (42%) respondents gave time and/or hassle as the reason for not applying. A similar proportion (41%) indicated that time and/or illness was the reason they were not able to complete the application process. One-quarter stated that they did not apply due to hassle and/or value, saying in effect that the amount of the benefit is not worth going through the application process.

Almost a third of the respondents indicated time as the reason they decided not to apply for Food Stamps. Time has different meanings for different people. It is not clear whether, in providing this reason, respondents were referring to the difficulty of making time to go to the DTA office to apply; the time required to assemble all of the necessary documentation; or other time issues. Of those who indicated other reasons, several needed to get the application, others were in the process of securing verification materials, and some stated that the application process was too intimidating and complicated.

It can be assumed that the fifth who reported a change in their financial situation as the reason for not applying experienced an increase in their income. Many of these respondents stated that they had found a job since calling the hotline. At the same time a similar number of respondents (more than a quarter) said that the process was 'too much of a hassle', indicating that despite needing this assistance, actually applying for the benefit required too much of them.

Another reason for not applying that was mentioned often was illness, disability, or the elderly status of the applicant. These factors can make it difficult for potential applicants to get to the DTA office, as well as to gather the necessary documentation. More than one of those who reported transportation as the reason for not applying came from each of the following communities: Boston, Brockton, and Lynn.

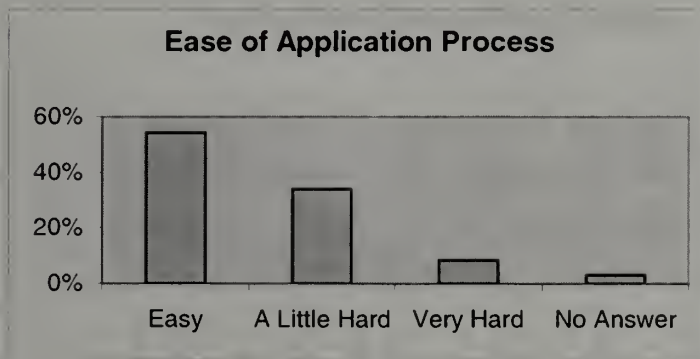
The lack of value of the benefit was also indicated a number of times. Several of these respondents reported being eligible for just \$7-10 worth of Food Stamps. Language difficulty, childcare, and office hours appeared to be less of a problem than had been anticipated.

Of those respondents who had not applied for whatever reason, more than two-thirds (70%) said they still planned to apply, most preparing to do so in the next couple of weeks. Just over one in ten (11%) said they did not know when they would apply.

Of the other third (30%) who indicated that they do not plan to apply, the two most frequently stated reasons were 'improved financial situation' and 'not worth it'. It is not clear whether the respondents indicating this latter comment were referring to the application process or the value of the benefit itself. In either case, it is disturbing to learn that some eligible applicants are not receiving this benefit, particularly given the fact that, initially, these same individuals were sufficiently in need of food to call the Food Source Hotline.

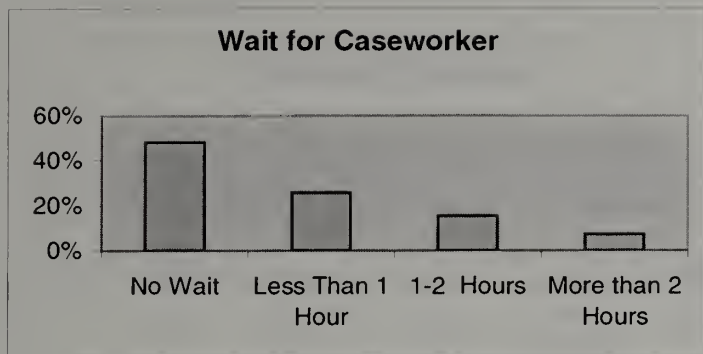
Respondents who Applied for Food Stamps
(N=89²)

Despite the lengthy application form, more than half of those who did proceed to apply for Food Stamps (54%) found the application process easy, while just over a third (34%) found it 'a little hard'. As shown below, less than one in ten (9%) indicated that it was 'very hard'. More than two-thirds (67%) described their interaction with the caseworker as 'respectful'; just under one-fifth (19%) said it was 'somewhat respectful'. Another one in ten (10%) said the worker was 'not respectful'.



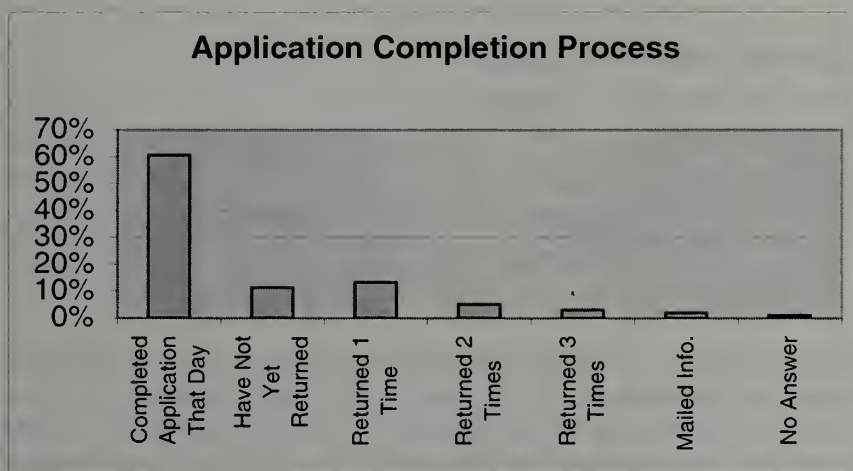
As depicted on the next page, a little more than half (52%) had to wait to see a caseworker. One-quarter (26%) indicated having to wait less than one hour. Another quarter (23%) indicated waiting one or more hours.

² An additional 8 respondents mailed their Food Stamp application.



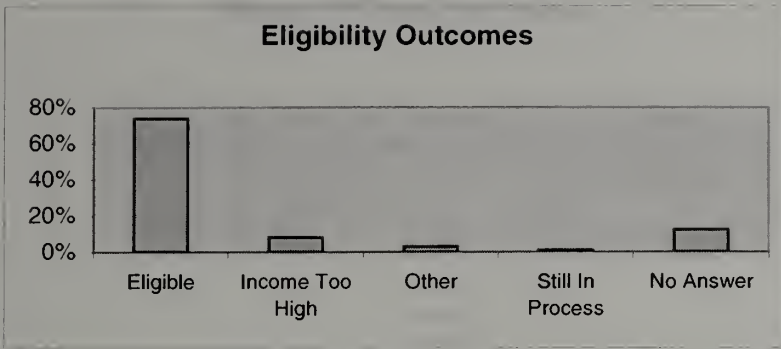
Slightly less than two-thirds (63%) said the application process itself took less than one hour; it took one or more hours for the remaining 37 percent. About three in five (61%) completed their application on the day they went to the DTA office. The remaining 39% had to return, mostly (31%) to gather additional verification materials. Other reasons for not completing the process included being discouraged from applying (5%), a case in which the applicant left because she felt the caseworker was talking down to them, another in which there was a mistake on the application, and one application that was lost by the caseworker.

Of those who did not complete the application that day, a quarter (24%) later returned to complete the process. As shown below, just over one in ten of these (13%) were able to finish the process with one additional visit to DTA; however about 8% reported a total of three or more visits. Another 2% reported mailing the additional information.



As of the time of the survey, almost a quarter of these respondents (22%) had completed the process; another 8% had yet to finish the application. Almost all of these (6%) planned to go back soon to finish the application. Two percent do not plan to do so, citing a rude caseworker or the hassle as their reasons for not returning.

Of those who had completed the application process by the time of the first or second survey, almost all (98%) had heard from DTA. Just under two-thirds (63%) of these received the information within two weeks. Of those who received the notification, about three-quarters (74%) were found eligible. As depicted on the next page, for those who were found ineligible, the most frequent reason cited (8%) was being over-income.



Phase Two Results

(N=91)

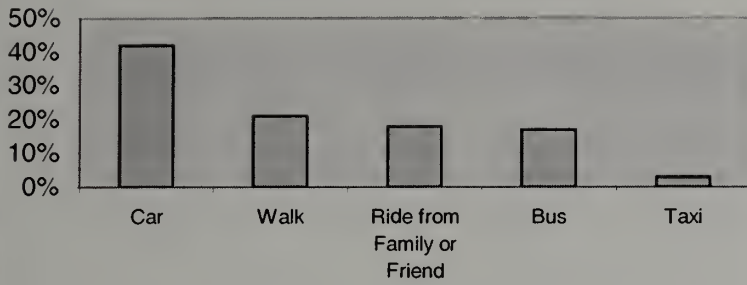
One-third of the interviews were conducted at the Grove Hall DTA office in Dorchester (33%); one-fourth in Salem (26%); just under one-fourth in Lowell (23%); and less than one-fifth at the New Bedford office (18%). More than three-quarters (78%) of respondents were families with children, 18% were single adults, and 4% were families without children. As shown below, just under one in ten (9%) of those interviewed included a senior in their household. Nearly one-fifth (19%) stated that at least one member of their household receives disability income through SSI or SSDI.

Respondent Characteristics

Type	Frequency	Percent	Specific Populations	Frequency	Percent
Families with Children	71	78%	1 or More Seniors in Household	8	9%
Single Adults	16	4%	1 or More Disabled in Household	17	19%
Families without Children	4	18%			
Total	91	100%			

As detailed on the next page, more than half of the respondents traveled by car (42% their own and 18% received a ride); 21% walked, 17% took public transportation, and 3% took a taxi. Most of those interviewed cited less than one hour of travel time (80%); almost all of the remaining respondents (19%) traveled between one and two hours to reach the office.

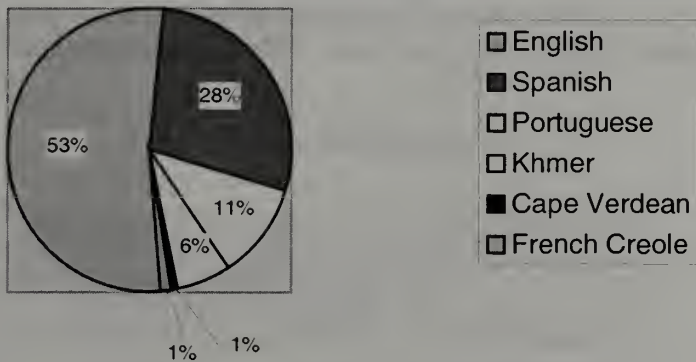
Means of Transportation



Slightly less than half (43%) stated that they needed to make some arrangements in order to visit the DTA office at that time. A little less than half of these (40%) had to make child care arrangements. Of these, nearly two-thirds (63%) had to pay for it. More than one-third of those making arrangements (37%) took time off from work, the vast majority of which was unpaid (82%).

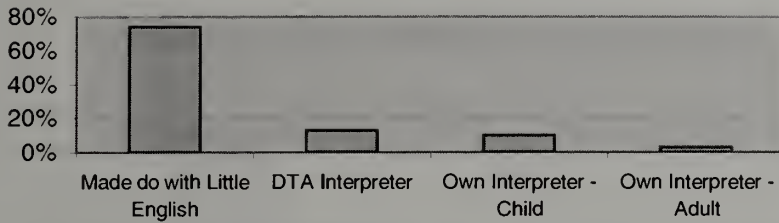
English was not the primary language for just under half (46%) of the respondents, with Spanish being the first language for slightly more than half of this group. Respondents reported a variety of primary languages as shown below.

Primary Language



More than two-thirds of those whose primary language was not English (69%) stated that their business was not conducted in that language. As depicted below, just under three-fourths of those (74%) “made do” with little English, while the remaining responses were split between using DTA interpreters (13%) and their own adult (3%) or child (10%) translators.

Method of Translation when Business was not Conducted in Primary Language

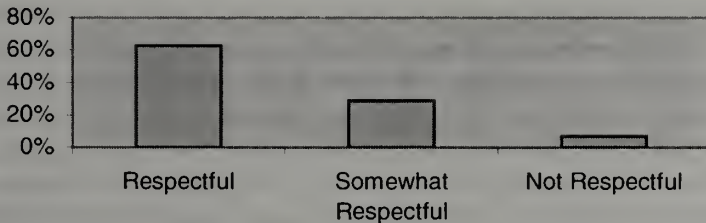


One-third (36%) of those interviewed came to DTA seeking information. The remaining two-thirds were divided evenly across three groups: those applying for Food Stamps (21%), current recipients re-certifying (22%), and those applying for both cash and Food Stamps (21%).

Almost two-thirds (62%) of those applying or re-certifying had to wait to see a caseworker. Just under one-third (32%) of those seeking information waited. Most (68% of applicants and recipients, and 73% of information seekers) waited less than an hour. However, just under one-third (32%) of applicants and recipients, and more than one-quarter of information seekers (27%) waited one or more hours before being served.

As detailed below, slightly less than two-thirds of recipients and applicants (63%) described their interaction with the caseworker as respectful. Just under another third (29%) said the caseworker was somewhat respectful, and 7% described them as not respectful. (These proportions were higher for those seeking information, many of whom spoke with a receptionist rather than a caseworker; 82% said they were treated respectfully.)

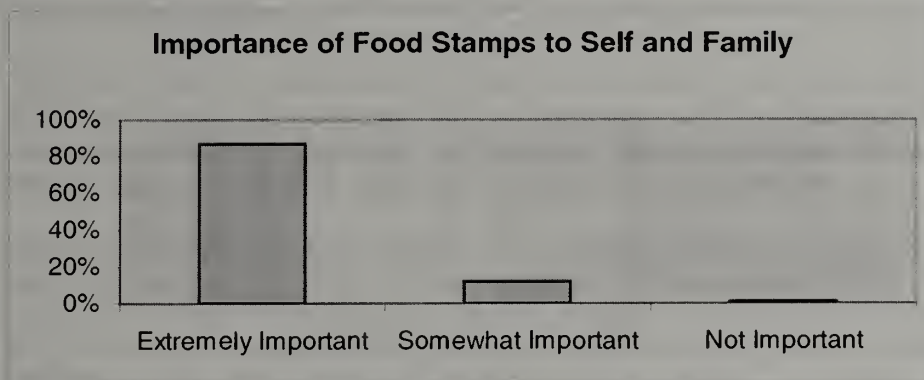
Treatment by Caseworker



In many cases, Food Stamp applicants returned to DTA multiple times to complete the request process. Almost three in five applicants (58%) reported not completing the process on the day of the interview. Most of these needed to return with additional documentation. Overall, applicants reported visiting DTA from one to five or more times, for an average of two visits. The total amount of time spent completing the application across these visits ranged from less than one hour to more than five, for an average of 2.1 hours.

As shown on the next page, when asked about the importance of receiving Food Stamps for themselves and their families, **nearly nine in ten (87%) stated that getting Food Stamps is extremely important.** Nearly three in five (59%) stated that being able to apply at another

location in the neighborhood would make a difference for them. Of these, most (73%) cited easier access as the reason. Some (16%), particularly those interviewed at the Salem office, spoke of the difficulty of traveling from locations such as Gloucester, Ipswich, and Lynn.



One-third (33%) said different office hours would make a difference for them. Of these, most (80%) cited the need for evening and weekend hours for people who are employed. Respondents recommended that the application process be made more efficient (44%) and that DTA staff be more professional, helpful, and/or respectful (26%). Additional comments were based on respondents' unique experience with the process itself as well as their interaction with the caseworker/receptionist. Comments on the application process ranged from "easy" to "too much paperwork", while views of interaction with caseworker ranged from "respectful" or "fine, helpful staff" to "rude" and "poor treatment by receptionists and supervisors."

Visit Types

We spoke with people who came to the various DTA offices for four primary reasons: seeking information (n=33), applying for Food Stamps (n=19), re-certifying or reporting changes as current beneficiaries (n=20), and applying for both cash benefits and Food Stamps (n= 19).

More than half of those who came seeking information (56%) were interested in eligibility; others came looking for general Food Stamp information (22%) or to pick up an application (22%). Less than two-thirds (61%) actually received the information they came for. One-quarter were assisted by a receptionist, the remainder met with a caseworker. More than four in five (83%) found out they were eligible to apply, and most were told to return with documentation in order to complete the application process. All stated that they would return to complete the application process, most planned to do so within the next two weeks.

Respondents seeking information were somewhat more likely to recommend that the application process be made more efficient than the overall sample (57% as compared to 44% of the larger group). They were also more likely to cite the importance of alternative hours (53% as compared to 33% of the larger group).

Respondents applying for Food Stamps were more likely to need to make special arrangements in order to get to the DTA office (58% as compared to 43% of the larger group). For most of the applicants (58%) this was not their first visit to apply for Food Stamps this year. More than half of these (55%) were re-applying, and the remainder were providing documentation to complete an outstanding application. Just over half (53%) described the application process as 'a little hard' or 'very hard'. Most (74%) received DTA's verification checklist describing the required

documents; almost all of those who did not receive it (80%) already had the necessary information. Almost three-quarters of those who completed the application (71%) were told that they would get Food Stamps. One person was provided emergency Food Stamps. Those who did not complete the process needed to provide additional documentation; just over half (53%) plan to return to do so.

This group rated the importance of getting Food Stamps even higher than the larger sample (95% said it was extremely important, as compared to 87% of the overall group). Applicants were less likely to be members of families with children (63% as compared to 78% of the larger sample) and more likely to describe themselves as single adults.

Most respondents currently receiving Food Stamps came in to re-certify (65%); others were reporting changes (10%) or providing additional documentation (30%). Most (55%) reported coming in quarterly to maintain this benefit; however, just under one-third (30%) said they come to DTA monthly or weekly. Most completed their business in the one appointment (68%); the remainder needed to return with additional documentation. All of these planned to return soon. Most of these respondents (77%) were told that they were still eligible to receive Food Stamps; one had hit her time limit and another was told of ineligibility due to lack of US citizenship.

When asked for their recommendations, these respondents were more likely to say that the staff should be more professional and respectful (40% as compared to 26% of the larger group) and less likely to request a more efficient process (33% as compared to 44% of the overall sample).

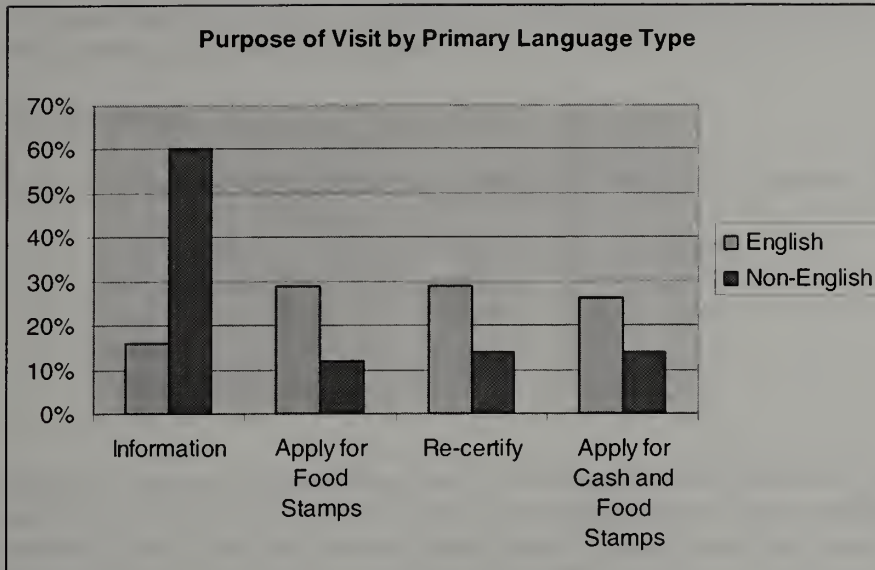
Respondents applying for both cash benefits and Food Stamps were the most likely to cite a longer commute to the office (32% said it took one to two hours, as compared to 20% of the larger sample). Just over one-third (37%) were denied cash assistance; more than half of these (57%) then went on to complete the Food Stamp application. Most of those who were told whether they would receive the benefit, would get it (83%). One was provided emergency Food Stamps. Those who did not finish the application process needed to return with verifying data. Most (90%) planned to do so within the next week.

Similar to other applicants, this group rated the importance of getting Food Stamps even higher than the larger sample (95% said it was extremely important, as compared to 87% of the overall group).

Linguistic Minorities

While the linguistic minority respondents (N=42) were similar to the total respondent population in many variables, some differences were apparent. In contrast to the total population, a greater percentage of those in this group who had to make arrangements in order to get to the office received paid time off to do so (27% as compared to 18% of the overall sample). All of those who had to arrange for childcare paid for it (100% as compared to 63% of the larger group).

Another difference between these two groups relates to the purpose of the visit. As shown on the next page, more than half (60%) of the linguistic minority group came to DTA for information, almost quadruple the proportion of the English-speaking group (16%). Accordingly, smaller proportions came to apply (12% for Food Stamps and 14% for cash benefits and Food Stamps) or re-certify (14%).



For those applying or re-certifying, waits were more likely for non-English speakers (78% waited as compared to 57% of their English-speaking counterparts). These proportions, were however, reversed for those seeking information, where linguistic minorities were somewhat less likely to wait (30% as compared to 38% of English speakers). Wait lengths were similar for both populations.

For those applying or re-certifying, English speakers were more likely to describe their interaction with the caseworker as respectful (68% as compared to 45% of linguistic minorities). (Again, these comparisons are reversed for those seeking information, many of whom spoke with a receptionist rather than a caseworker; almost all of the non-English speakers, 92%, said they were treated respectfully, as compared to 63% of the English speakers.)

Linguistic minority respondents were substantially less likely to complete their application on the day of the interview (none did so, as compared to 56% of the English speakers). Non-English speakers reported slightly more total visits to DTA, an average of 2.3 as compared to 2 for the English speakers. However, the total amount of time spent completing the application across these visits was somewhat higher for English speakers (2.2 hours on average) than for linguistic minority respondents (an average of 1.8 hours)

These interviewees were less likely to state that an alternative location would make a difference for them (49% as compared to 59% of the overall sample). With few linguistic minority respondents involved in the food stamp administrative processes, it is not surprising that when asked for their recommendations for making the process work, they had fewer suggestions than the total population, though more than half of those who did respond (51%, as compared to 44% of the larger group) advocated for a more efficient process. However, when given the opportunity to make additional comments, more opinions were expressed. Comments generally were similar to those expressed by the total population, though several related to their unique experience, such as indicating a need for more bilingual staff in the offices.

In terms of family composition, a higher percentage of the linguistic minority respondents identified themselves as families with children (86% as compared to 78% of the overall sample)

and, accordingly, had fewer senior (2% v. 9% of the larger group), and disabled (14% v. 19% of the overall group) family members.

Office Location

As detailed below, the number of respondents from each of the four DTA offices was small.

<u>DTA Office</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Dorchester (Grove Hall)	30	33%
Salem	24	26%
Lowell	21	23%
New Bedford	16	18%
Total	91	100%

Among those we surveyed, however, some trends were apparent. Respondents in Grove Hall were more likely to take a bus or train to the office (30%) than in other areas, while those in New Bedford were more likely to walk (38%) and in Salem one-third got a ride. New Bedford residents had the shortest commute to the office (less than an hour for 94%).

Salem respondents were most likely to need to make special arrangements in order to get to the office (58%); in most cases these arrangement involved childcare (50%), most of which was free (71%). Of those Boston residents who needed to make arrangements, most took time off (71%), all of which was unpaid. All of the Grove Hall and New Bedford respondents who required childcare had to pay for it.

The distribution of languages across offices was as expected: mostly English (79%) and some Spanish speakers in Salem (21%); English (60%), Spanish (30%), and Portuguese (10%) speakers in Dorchester; a majority of Portuguese speakers (44%), along with Spanish (31%), English (19%), and Cape Verdean (6%) in New Bedford; English (43%), Spanish (29%), Cambodian (24%), and French Creole (5%) in Lowell. The absence of Vietnamese speakers in Grove Hall was surprising.

Most of the respondents in Dorchester and New Bedford came to DTA for general information about Food Stamps (43% and 56% respectively), while those in Salem were more likely to be applying for cash benefits and Food Stamps (33%).

For those applying or re-certifying, waits were most likely at the New Bedford office (75%), and least likely in Salem (45%). None of those seeking information had to wait in Lowell, while 60% of these individuals waited in Salem. For those applying or re-certifying, waits were shortest in Salem and New Bedford, where no one waited longer than an hour; and longest in Lowell where half of those who waited did so for an hour or more. For those seeking information, waits were longest at Grove Hall, where two in five waited for an hour or more before being served.

For those applying or re-certifying, Salem respondents were most likely to describe their interaction with the caseworker as respectful (75%); New Bedford and Lowell respondents were least likely to do so (50% said they were either treated somewhat respectfully or not respectfully in both communities). (These analyses vary for those seeking information, many of whom spoke with a receptionist rather than a caseworker; all New Bedford and Lowell respondents in this category said they were treated respectfully; two in five Salem information seekers were either treated somewhat respectfully or not respectfully.)

There were some differences in applicants' assessment of the process. More than half (57%) of those applying at Grove Hall described the process as 'easy', as compared to 47% of the larger group. All of the applicants we spoke with at the New Bedford office described the process as 'a little hard' or 'very hard'.

Respondents from New Bedford were the least likely to complete their application on the day of the interview (none did so, as compared to 57% of those in both Salem and Grove Hall). Applicants in Lowell reported the highest average number of total visits to DTA, 2.7; Salem had the lowest number, 1.5 visits. The total amount of time spent completing the application across these visits ranged from an average of 1.8 hours in New Bedford, to 2.4 hours in Lowell.

When asked about the importance of an alternative location, much higher proportions of Lowell (86%) and Salem (79%) respondents indicated that it would make a difference (as compared to 47% from Grove Hall and 8% from New Bedford). When asked for more detail, Lowell (78%) and Salem (74%) respondents were most likely to cite easier access as the issue. Those who reported that alternative hours would make a difference were most likely from Grove Hall (47%) and Salem (42%).

Respondents from Salem (50%) and Grove Hall (33%) were the most likely to make additional general comments. In Salem, a preponderance of these comments (67%) were negative (citing rude caseworkers, etc.), and 25% were positive (fine, easy process, etc.). These proportions were flipped in Grove Hall, where 40% made positive comments and 30% offered negative remarks.

When asked for their recommendations about the procedures involved in applying for and maintaining this benefit, Grove Hall and Salem respondents were more likely to suggest that the process be made more efficient (52% and 46% respectively, as compared to 35% of Lowell respondents and 33% from New Bedford). Lowell and Grove Hall residents were also more likely to say that staff should be more professional and respectful (29% and 28% respectively, as compared to 23% from Salem and 17% from New Bedford).

In terms of family composition, a higher proportion of New Bedford respondents reported being families with children (94% as compared to 78% overall). More of the single adults were from Salem (25% as compared to 18% overall). Salem respondents were also a bit more likely to report seniors in the household (13% as compared to 9% overall); and more Lowell residents had disabled family members (29% as compared to 19% in the entire sample).

Office Hours and Out-Stationing

At the time of the study (spring 2002), none of the four offices offered evening or weekend hours. The Dorchester, Lowell, and Salem offices were open in the early mornings (7:00 AM in Salem and Lowell; 7:30 AM in Dorchester). The New Bedford office officially opened at 9:00 AM; however appointments were available as early as 7:15 AM. All four offices closed at 5:00 PM.

Out-stationing has clearly not yet begun. None of the four communities offered any alternative location for completing the process. On the North Shore, applications can be picked up and dropped off at the Gloucester DTA office, but appointments are available only in Salem.

Recommendations

Clearly, Food Stamps are an extremely important benefit for hungry families in Massachusetts and elsewhere. Families that cannot or choose not to access this benefit due to the inherent difficulties in the process are families in which children are hungry or poorly nourished. Barriers to Food Stamp access serve as obstacles to child nutrition. In an effort to overcome these impediments, we offer the following recommendations.

Given these findings, as well as Massachusetts' startlingly low Food Stamp participation rate³, **leadership is needed to improve the process of accessing this critical benefit.** In establishing the Food Stamp program, the federal government recognized the importance of investing in adequate nutrition. Attention must be paid to the fact that families are not taking advantage of this benefit; the program is clearly not working the way that it should in Massachusetts. Leadership should demonstrate the public commitment to this vital program by providing a new model of customer service. This model would entail the following systems level changes.

- A new, **improved public image.** Marketing materials should be developed to inform the general public of the importance of this critical benefit. Attractive posters should be available in community centers, at places of work, on billboards, etc. The public perception of the program could be vastly improved, thus decreasing the shame inherent in requesting a benefit such as Food Stamps.
- Widespread **outreach** directed to potential applicants, targeted to linguistic minorities as well as English speakers.
- **Welcoming offices and staff.** The physical environments should be user friendly. Receptionists should understand that their role also is critical as the initial point of contact for all visitors to the office. Respect and courtesy should be hallmarks of this position. Additionally, receptionists are often a major source of information for applicants and recipients and therefore need to be knowledgeable about agency policies.
- An **overhauled process of applying** and maintaining this benefit. Application forms should be simple and available at a wide variety of locations, including neighborhood health centers, community action agencies, childcare centers, and the Internet. They should also be written in multiple languages and require a minimum level of back-up documentation. Applicants should be able to complete them quickly, and submit them via mail, the Internet, or by dropping them off in person. DTA staff should follow up with any questions via telephone. Office visits should be rare.
- **Staff training** emphasizing an administrative commitment to ensuring that all eligible citizens of the Commonwealth receive Food Stamp benefits. Staff should be rewarded for enrolling eligible individuals. Professionalism should be a goal of all training. Caseworkers should understand and view their role as 'enablers', requiring empathy, respect for difference, and the willingness and patience to work with a varied population.

³ Schirm, Castner. Reaching Those in Need: State Food Stamp Participation Rates in 1999. (See Note #1.)

They should be familiar with the process itself, all its regulations, and opportunities for and limits of flexibility.

- Increased **multilingual, multicultural staff capacity**. Dealing with an official, bureaucratic agency can be intimidating for any applicant, but for non-English speaking individuals the experience becomes even more formidable. With the Commonwealth's changing demographics, availability of multilingual, multicultural staff in all DTA offices is critical to reaching and serving new, non-English speaking populations. Food Stamp applicants and beneficiaries should not have to rely on the translation services of family members, children, or friends. Nor should their visits to the office be dependent on the specific day that a bilingual staff member is available.

Finally, the just released Conference Committee budget for FY03, while directing DTA to increase access to Food Stamps, contains two provisions that seriously jeopardize the well being of Massachusetts families. First, the budget provides funding for Food Stamps for legal immigrants for only two months of the current fiscal year. The legislature's plan to eliminate the program at the end of November 2003 is unacceptable. No state resident, adult or child, should be without adequate nutrition.

Second, the budget eliminates Project Bread's Food Stamp outreach program. This program has assisted thousands of Massachusetts families searching for food security. The statewide Food Source Hotline offers callers information on local food resources, as well as Food Stamp eligibility screening and application assistance. In the past year alone, this hotline assisted 29,000 callers. The program also provides one-on-one application assistance to families across the state. As we know, the application process is complex; many families require help in order to complete all the required paperwork. Both the hotline and application assistance services are essential in assuring that hungry families receive the benefits to which they are entitled and that they require in order to feed their children.

As we have reported here, Food Stamps are available but not accessible. Families require support and direct assistance in order to attain this critical benefit.

Appendices

Phase One Protocol: Follow-up Call – Initial Call

Phase One Protocol: Follow-up Call – Second Call

Phase Two Interview Protocol

Phase One Protocol: Follow-up Call – Initial Call

May I speak with _____? Hello, my name is _____ and I'm calling from Project Bread. Several weeks ago, you called our FoodSource Hotline to inquire about Food Stamps, and we mailed you an application. I'd just like to ask you a few questions about what has happened since you got the application. Is now a good time? (If "Yes", continue with survey. If "No", ask when would be a good time to call back.)

Before we begin, I want to let you know that my call is part of a study about the process of obtaining Food Stamps. Your part in this study is confidential and your participation is voluntary. Your name will not be used, and whether or not you choose to participate will not affect any service from Project Bread. Is that okay?

Participant Identifier: _____ Language Other than English: _____

- 1. Did you receive the application for Food Stamps in the mail? Yes No
- 2. Did you go to the DTA office to apply for Food Stamps? Yes No Mailed

If "Yes" or "Mailed" → Go to next page
If "No" → Ask all questions in Box below

If "No", could you tell me why not? (Check as many responses as stated and use prompts as needed.)

<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation	<input type="checkbox"/> Financial Circumstances Changed
<input type="checkbox"/> Illness/Disability/Elder	<input type="checkbox"/> No Time
<input type="checkbox"/> Language	<input type="checkbox"/> Office Hours
<input type="checkbox"/> Hassle	<input type="checkbox"/> Childcare
<input type="checkbox"/> Value	<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____

Do you plan to apply in the future? Yes No

If "Yes", when?

If "No", could you tell me why you decided not to apply?

(End survey and thank them)

3. If "Yes", which office did you go to?

4. *When was that?*
5. *How did you find the application process?*
 Easy A Little Hard Very Hard No Answer
6. *How would you describe your interaction with the Caseworker?*
 Respectful Somewhat Respectful Not Respectful No Answer
7. *Did you have to wait to speak with a caseworker?* Yes No
 If "Yes", how long? Less than 1 Hour 1-2 Hours More than 2 Hours
8. *How long did the application process take?*
 Less than 1 Hour 1-2 Hours More than 2 Hours
9. *Did you complete the application process that day?* Yes No

If "Yes" → Go to next page
If "No" → Ask relevant questions in Box below

If "No", could you tell me why not? (Use prompts as needed)

<input type="checkbox"/> Needed Verifying Information	<input type="checkbox"/> Discouraged from Applying*
<input type="checkbox"/> Not Enough Time	<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____

Did you return to complete the process? Yes No
 If "No", (End survey and thank them)

If "Yes", how many times did you go back?

Have you now completed the process? Yes No Not Sure
 If "Yes" or "Not Sure", Go to next page

If "No", do you plan to return? Yes No

If "Yes", when?

If "No" could you tell me why you decided not to return?
 (End survey and thank them)

10. Have you heard from DTA telling you whether or not you're going to get Food Stamps?

Yes

No

If "Yes" → Ask relevant questions in Box below

If "No" → Go to question below Box

If "Yes", approximately how soon after you completed the application did you get the letter?

Less than 2 Weeks

2-4 Weeks

More than 4 Weeks

Were you found eligible?

Yes

No

If "Yes", (End survey and thank them)

If "No", what was the reason given?*

(End survey and thank them)

If "No" → Can we call you again in a few weeks to find out what has happened? Yes No

End Survey

Thank you very much for participating in this survey. We really appreciate your time.

*Feel free to offer resources and/or clarifying information to callers who have been turned away or found ineligible.

Phase One Protocol: Follow-up Call – Second Call

May I speak with _____? Hello, my name is _____ and I'm calling from Project Bread's FoodSource Hotline. You called awhile ago for a Food Stamps application. When we spoke a few weeks ago, I asked if we could call you back one more time. Thanks for allowing us to do that. I'd like to ask just a few questions about what has happened since we last spoke. Is now a good time?

Before we begin, I want to remind you that my call is part of a study about the process of obtaining Food Stamps. Your part in this study is confidential and your participation is voluntary. Your name will not be used, and whether or not you choose to participate will not affect any service from Project Bread.

Participant Identifier: _____

1. *Since we last talked, have you heard from DTA telling you whether or not you're going to get Food Stamps?* Yes No

If "Yes" → Ask relevant questions in Box below
If "No" → Go to question below Box

<p>If "Yes", were you found eligible? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If "Yes", (End survey and thank them)</p> <p>If "No", what was the reason given?*</p> <p>(End survey and thank them)</p>
--

If "No" → have you contacted DTA to check the status of your application? Yes No

End Survey

Thank you very much for participating in this survey. We really appreciate your time.

*Feel free to offer resources and/or clarifying information to callers who have been found ineligible.

Section II: Eligibility/Information Inquiry

8. What information were you looking for?

- Eligibility General Information about Food Stamps Pick up Application
 Other: _____

9. Did you get it? Yes No

10. Who assisted you?

- Caseworker Receptionist Other: _____

11. Did you have to wait to speak with that person? Yes No

If "Yes", how long? Less than 1 Hour 1-2 Hours More than 2 Hours

12. How would you describe your interaction with that person?

- Respectful Somewhat respectful Not respectful No answer

(If came for any other reason than eligibility, go to Section VI)

13. If seeking eligibility information, did you find out if you were eligible to apply for Food Stamps?

- Yes No

13a. If yes, were you eligible to apply? Yes No

13b. If no, what was the reason given?

13c. If yes, what were you told you had to do next in order to get Food Stamps?

- Fill out application Return with paperwork Other: _____

13d. So, will you return to complete the process? Yes No

If yes, when?

If no, could you tell me why not?

13e. If didn't find out about eligibility, what happened?

GO TO SECTION VI

Section III: Food Stamp Applicants

14. Was this your first visit to the DTA office to apply for Food Stamps this year? Yes No
- 14a. If no, why did you come back?
 Provide verifying info Finish completing application Re-apply Other: _____
15. Did you have to wait to speak with a caseworker? Yes No Didn't see Caseworker
- 15a. If "Yes", how long? Less than 1 Hour 1-2 Hours More than 2 Hours
- 15b. If didn't see caseworker, why not?
16. How have you found the application process?
 Easy A little hard Very hard No answer
17. How would you describe your interaction with the caseworker today?
 Respectful Somewhat respectful Not respectful No answer
18. How many times have you been here to complete this application? 1 2 3 4 5 or more
19. In total (including previous visits), how much time have you spent at the DTA office completing this application for Food Stamps so far?
 Less than 1 hour 1-2 hours 2-3 hours 3-4 hours 4-5 hours More than 5
20. Have you received the verification checklist? Yes No
- 20a. If no, why not?
 Had all the necessary info already Don't know Other: _____
21. Did you complete the application process today? Yes No (If no go to 21f)
- 21a. If yes, were you told whether you're going to get Food Stamps? Yes No
(if no, go to section VI)
- 21b. If yes, are you going to get them? Yes No
- 21c. If yes, when were you told you would begin receiving them?
- 21d. If immediately (or within 7 days), do you know why?
 Emergency/expedited Food Stamps Other: _____
 Had all necessary information with them
- 21e. If not eligible, what was the reason given?
- 21f. If no, could you tell me why not?
 Needed verifying information Not enough time Discouraged from applying
 Other: _____
- 21g. If verifying info, were you told what you need to do to complete the process?
 Identifying info Housing info Job info.
 Other financial info. Other: _____

(Continue on next page)

21h. What will it take for you to get what you need?
(Prompts: Where do you need to go?; How long do you think it will take?; Do you foresee any obstacles to getting the information?)

21i. So, will you return to complete the process?

Yes

No

If yes, when?

If no, could you tell me why not?

GO TO SECTION VI

Section IV: Re-certification/Report Changes

22. What was the purpose of your visit today?

Re-certification Report Changes Obtain ID Other: _____

23. How frequently do you come in to deal with Food Stamps?

Weekly Monthly Quarterly Annually

24. Did you have to wait to speak with a caseworker? Yes No Didn't see Caseworker

24a. If "Yes", how long? Less than 1 Hour 1-2 Hours More than 2 Hours

24b. If didn't see caseworker, why not?

25. How would you describe your interaction with the caseworker?

Respectful Somewhat respectful Not respectful No answer

26. Did you complete your business here today? Yes No

26a. If no, were you told what you need to do to complete the process?

Identifying info Housing info Job info.
 Other financial info. Other: _____

26b. What will it take for you to get what you need?

(Prompts: Where do you need to go?; How long do you think it will take?; Do you foresee any obstacles to getting the information?)

26c. So, will you return to complete the process? Yes No

If yes, when?

If no, could you tell me why not?

27. Were you told whether you are still eligible for Food Stamps? Yes No

27a. If yes, are you still eligible? Yes No

27b. If no longer eligible, what was the reason given?

28. When do you next need to come back?

29. For what purpose?

Re-certification Report Changes Obtain ID Other: _____

30. What will it take for you to come back then?

(Prompts: Where do you need to go?; How long do you think it will take?; Do you foresee any obstacles to getting the information?)

GO TO SECTION VI

Section V: Cash and Food Stamp Applicants

31. Were you denied cash assistance today? Yes No

31a. If yes, did you then complete an application for Food Stamps? Yes No
(If yes, return to Section III)

32. Did you complete the Food Stamp application process today along with your cash request? Yes No

32a. If yes, were you told whether you're going to get Food Stamps? Yes No
(if no, go to section VI)

32b. If yes, are you going to get Food Stamps? Yes No (if no, go to 32f)

32c. If yes, when were you told you would begin receiving Food Stamps?

32d. If immediately (or within 7 days), do you know why?
Emergency/expedited Food Stamps Other: _____
Had all necessary information with them

32e. If not eligible, what was the reason given?

32f. If you were told that you're not going to get Food Stamps, could you tell me why not?
Needed verifying information Not enough time Discouraged from applying
Other: _____

32g. If verifying info, were you told what you need to do to complete the process?
Identifying info Housing info Job info.
Other financial info. Other: _____

32h. What will it take for you to get what you need?
(Prompts: Where do you need to go?; How long do you think it will take?; Do you foresee any obstacles to getting the information?)

32i. So, will you return to complete the Food Stamp application process? Yes No

If yes, when?

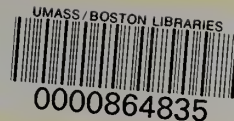
If no, could you tell me why not?

GO TO SECTION VI

Section VI: Final Questions for ALL Respondents

33. Would you say that getting food stamps is:
Extremely important for you and your family Somewhat Important Not Important
34. What would you recommend to make the process for getting Food Stamps work for you?
35. If there were some other place in your neighborhood (not a welfare office) where you could apply for Food Stamps would that make a difference for you? Yes No
- 35a. If yes, how so?
36. If there were different office hours to do your Food Stamp business would that make a difference for you? Yes No
- 36a. If yes, how so?
37. Is there anything else you would like to tell us, about Food Stamps generally or your visit here today?
38. Finally, we have a couple of quick questions about your family. Would you describe your household as:
Family with children Family without children Single Adult
39. Is there a senior (over 60 years of age) in your household? Yes No
40. Is any member of your household receiving disability income through SSI or SSDI? Yes No

END INTERVIEW WITH THANKS FOR TIME SPENT AND GIFT IN APPRECIATION



Edmund Beard, Director
Sandra Blanchette, Assistant Director

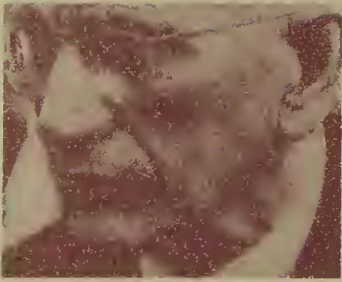
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