

Hunger Pangs:

Oregon Food Stamp Program Fails to Deliver

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Executive Summary

Tim Riddle works part-time but doesn't earn enough to live on. Tim and his six-year-old son, Chris, live at a homeless shelter in Medford, Oregon. As money grew short in late January, Tim realized he would not be able to provide enough food for his son and went to the welfare office to apply for food stamps. Despite federal requirements to do so, Tim was not screened for emergency food stamps and was told he needed to wait a month for help.

*“There’s nothing scarier for a father than not knowing
where his child’s next meal is coming from.”*

— Tim Riddle

Unfortunately, stories like Tim Riddle’s are all too common in Oregon. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Oregon tops the list of states with the highest percentage of people experiencing hunger.¹ The USDA estimates that more than one-eighth of Oregon households are “food insecure,” meaning that these households do not always have assured access to enough food to fully meet their basic needs. About half of these households experience painful feelings of hunger.² According to the Oregon Center on Public Policy, some 400,000 Oregonians are going hungry or facing such economic hardship that they may go hungry if the state’s economy weakens.

The food stamp program is Oregon’s largest and most important program in the fight against hunger, particularly for children. About 40 percent of food stamp recipients in Oregon are children.³ Benefits are modest. In Oregon, the average per person benefit is \$70 per month, but food stamps can mean the difference between hunger and a healthy diet for families. In an average month, about 100,000 households receive food stamps in Oregon.⁴

Despite the benefits food stamps offer families, participation in Oregon’s food stamp program is declining. Since 1996, participation has plummeted by 20 percent.⁵ Yet, Oregon’s food bank network reported a 16 percent increase in demand for emergency food boxes between 1998 and 1999.⁶ Additionally, data from the USDA indicate that the number of hungry people in Oregon may be at a three-year-high.⁷ USDA data find that the number of food insecure households in Oregon has increased from 146,591 in 1996 to 194,594 in 1998, an increase of eight percent in just three years.⁸

The purpose of this study is to identify policies and practices that delay or impede applicants from obtaining food stamps. It examines Oregon’s process for enrolling families onto the food stamp program by analyzing the experiences of 25 food stamp applicants. This report outlines seven barriers that obstruct applicants during the application process, including some that appear to be in violation of federal and state law. Oregon’s Adult and Family Services (AFS) Division, which administers the food stamp program, has the power to eliminate all the barriers identified in this report.

Barriers to accessing food stamps in Oregon

- AFS does not provide families in crisis with immediate service as required by law.
- AFS' interview process is inflexible and inconsistent.
- AFS provides inadequate services for Non-English speakers.
- Applicants must doggedly pursue and repeatedly contact AFS to obtain food stamps.
- AFS uses a long and confusing application.
- AFS provides inadequate and discourteous service.
- AFS offices are difficult to contact, particularly hindering working applicants from applying.

Some key findings of the report

- Only 46 percent of applicants were instructed to complete the emergency services screening tool used by AFS. If AFS does not use its emergency services screening tool, applicants in crisis situations are left with no ability to purchase food.
- At some offices, applicants must arrive between 7:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. to sign-up for interviews. If interview slots are taken, applicants must return the next day; requests for appointments are generally denied. Applicants with morning obligations are shutout of the process.
- Applicants waited an average of 6.5 days for their AFS interview. Applicants request food stamps because they need food. Making them wait a week to have their required interview unnecessarily elongates the time they must wait for food.
- Non-English speakers waited four times longer than English speakers to receive applications in their languages. Applicants should not receive substandard service simply because they do not speak English.
- Forty-four percent of applicants rated the understandability of the AFS application as “difficult to understand” or “very difficult to understand.” A confusing application can discourage applicants from applying for the program.
- Several applicants contacted the office more than six times during the application period. Making applicants repeatedly contact the office is an inefficient way to provide services.

Solutions:*Simplify and accelerate the application process*

- Encourage applicants to file application forms on the same day of initial contact.
- Inform applicants about their right to file an incomplete application to begin the process.
- Streamline the interview process so that clients wait no more than 2 days for an interview.
- Simplify the 16-page application.
- Provide applicants with a clear list of documentation required.
- Provide all clients with the option of a specific interview time.
- Inform eligible applicants of their right to a home or phone interview.
- Provide translators in a timely manner to all applicants who speak limited English.
- Do not use translators who are not fully fluent in both English and another language.
- Train front desk staff to fully explain the food stamp process and engage with clients.
- Provide more out-stationed AFS workers to enroll applicants in their neighborhoods.

- Provide evening office hours for working clients.
- Improve phone system so clients can access the information they need.
- Provide clients with sufficient information so that they do not have to repeatedly contact the office.
- Allow applicants to apply at the AFS office closest to their home or work.

Provide expedited services for applicants in crisis

- Inform clients about how the expedited food service process works.
- Train staff on how to identify clients needing expedited service.
- Develop and use a satisfactory screening tool to identify people in need of emergency assistance.

Treat applicants with dignity and respect

- Train all workers in basic customer service skills.
- Hire an independent research group to survey clients about the treatment they receive.
- Provide clients with the required information about the grievance and appeal procedures.
- Use directional signs in the office.
- Inform applicants about other programs available to them.

Develop an effective outreach program to educate potential applicants

- Maintain a statewide toll-free food stamp hotline for applicants.
- Develop outreach campaigns that include neighborhood-based educational activities.

Introduction

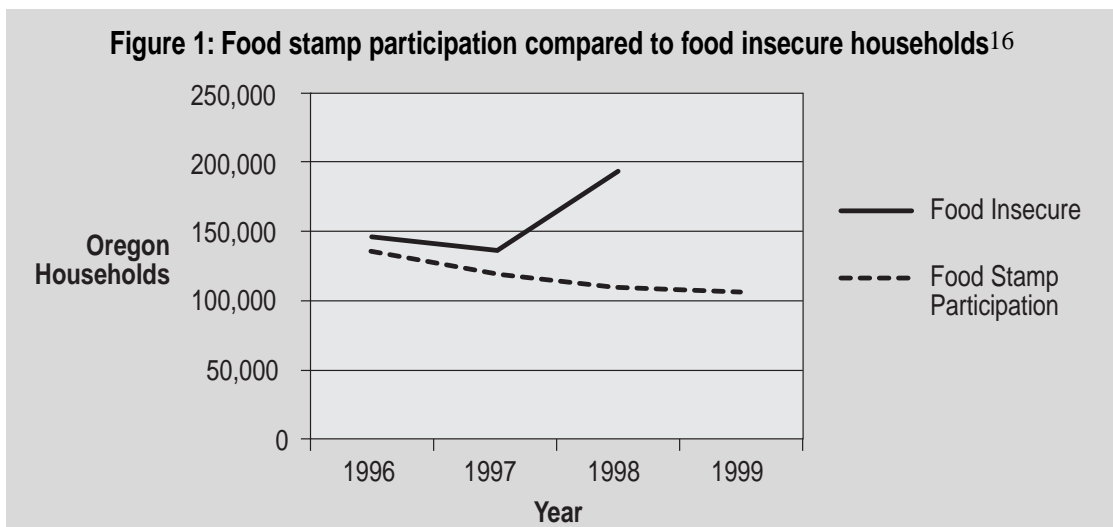
Over the past year, members of Oregon Action have described alarming problems when applying for food stamps. Many applicants experienced long delays at the Adult and Family Services (AFS) Division offices where food stamps are processed. Others reported that they felt discouraged and mistreated by AFS workers. Some detailed incidents at AFS offices that appeared to be in violation of food stamp law. Many Oregon Action members felt that AFS offices were more focused on creating barriers to the food stamp program than helping them enroll.

The food stamp program is Oregon's largest and most important program in the fight against hunger, particularly for children. About 40 percent of food stamp recipients in Oregon are children.⁹ Benefits are modest. In Oregon, the average per person benefit is \$70 per month, but food stamps can mean the difference between hunger and a healthy diet for families.¹⁰ In an average month, about 100,000 households receive food stamps in Oregon.¹¹

Despite the benefits food stamps offer families, participation in Oregon's food stamp program is declining. Since 1996, participation has plummeted by 20 percent.¹² Yet, Oregon's food bank network reported a 16 percent increase in demand for emergency food boxes between 1998 and 1999.¹³ Additionally, data from the USDA indicate that the number of hungry people in Oregon may be at a three-year-high.¹⁴ USDA data find that the number of food insecure households in Oregon has increased from 146,591 in 1996 to 194,594 in 1998, an increase of eight percent in just three years.¹⁵

Because the decline in food stamp participation is occurring at the same time that Oregon's hunger rates are increasing, it is very unlikely that people are leaving food stamps because they are enjoying the benefits of the expanding economy and finding high wage employment. The explanation that food stamp participation is declining because Oregonians no longer need food stamps is inadequate.

To understand why the food stamp program is under-utilized, Oregon Action and the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations interviewed 25 food stamps applicants about their experiences when applying for food stamps. We examined the enrollment policies and practices at seven AFS local branch offices in Portland and Medford, Oregon in order to identify policies and practices that hinder applicants from applying for food stamps.



Key Findings

This report found the following barriers at Adult and Family Services offices in Medford and Portland. These barriers unnecessarily delay and impede applicants during the food stamp application process.

- Barrier 1** *AFS does not provide families in crisis with immediate service as required by law.*
Fifty-six percent of applicants were not instructed to complete the emergency screening tool used by AFS. Some homeless applicants were not provided expedited services. Other applicants determined eligible for expedited service waited two or more weeks to get food stamps.
- Barrier 2** *AFS interview process is inflexible and inconsistent.*
AFS provided only a quarter of applicants with specific interview times; others attended during first come, first serve interview sessions. Interview times during first come, first serve sessions fill early and applicants must return each day to take another number.
- Barrier 3** *AFS provides inadequate services for limited English speakers.*
Limited English speaking applicants waited four times longer than English speakers to obtain applications in their language. AFS does not always provide adequate translator service.
- Barrier 4** *Applicants must doggedly pursue and repeatedly contact AFS to obtain food stamps.*
To get help, applicants repeatedly contacted AFS offices, often without success. AFS phone systems are deficient and applicants were generally unable to contact workers. Many applicants reported that when they did leave messages, workers did not return their calls.
- Barrier 5** *AFS uses a long and confusing application.*
AFS requires applicants to complete a 16-page, cumbersome general public assistance application form. The application does not specify which documents are required for food stamps. Applicants often have to make several trips to the office to provide the necessary documentation.
- Barrier 6** *AFS provides inadequate and discourteous service.*
AFS does not provide applicants with basic, required information about the enrollment process, including appeal and grievance procedures. Applicants reported that caseworkers made inappropriate comments about their looks, lifestyle, and life choices.
- Barrier 7** *AFS offices are difficult to contact, hindering working applicants from applying.*
AFS offices open for client services at 8:00 a.m. and close at 5:00 p.m., making it impossible for a day shift working applicant to apply. At some office, applicants must arrive between 7:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. to sign-up for an interview.¹⁷ No enrollment hotline phone number is maintained.

Rob's Story

Rob Deroock is homeless and requested a food stamp application from the Albina AFS office in Portland. He was not told to complete the first two pages immediately or asked about his current situation. Rob was told to return for an intake period that conflicted with his job search activities. His request for an alternative time was denied. He was not considered for expedited service despite the fact that he was homeless and had no income. Additionally, his caseworker did not inform him of other programs he might be eligible for.



Helen's Story

Helen Brown is a certified nurse's assistant whose license recently expired. Brown is not currently working and has no income. She went to the Albina AFS office in Portland during the last week of January 2000 and was given an application. The receptionist did not tell her to complete and return the first two pages immediately or that she needed to return for an interview at a later date. Helen has vision problems and could not read the application. Eventually she got help from her sister. When she turned in her application, Helen was told to return any day next week between 8:00 and 9:00 in the morning. The receptionist did not review Helen's application when she turned it in. On February 22, more than three weeks after requesting an application, Helen returned to the office a third time for an interview. Helen was told that she qualified for expedited food stamps.



Tim's Story

Tim Riddle is a single father of one who lives at a homeless shelter in Medford, Oregon. He and his son have been living off of food baskets and Tim recently decided to apply for food stamps instead. Riddle struggled with a drug and alcohol problem for years but now works part-time for a drug recovery counseling program called On-Track. Riddle lives over two miles away from the Adult and Family Services office and does not own a car. No public transportation is available. Riddle walked to the AFS Biddle office in Medford on January 24 to obtain emergency food stamp assistance. Riddle was given a short two page form and was told he needed to return for an interview with the completed form at 8:00 a.m. on February 3. This time was not convenient for Riddle because it interfered with his ability to get his son ready for school and he also had to walk the two miles to the office. He was not provided with an alternative time.

At his interview, Riddle was given a second, longer application for food stamps and told that he needed to bring in the required documentation for a second interview next week. Riddle went to his third interview and was told that he would need to wait 30 days from that date to get food stamps.

Barrier 1: AFS does not provide families in crisis with immediate service as required by law.

Findings:

- Only 46 percent of applicants were instructed to complete the expedited service-screening tool used by AFS.¹⁸
- Only 12 percent of applicants were asked about their current situation or need for emergency assistance by front desk workers.
- Of the three homeless applicants, only one was determined eligible for expedited service. The other two homeless families waited three to four weeks for their food stamp benefits.
- Only one applicant was told that she could provide income verification in ways other than a written document.

The general lack of urgency and sluggishness evident in AFS branch offices particularly harms those with emergency food needs. Expedited processing means local offices must provide food stamps to qualified individuals within seven days rather than the standard 30 days and is a critical component of the food stamp program. Expedited service reduces the time applicants in crisis must wait for their food stamps. Eligible applicants have almost no income or assets and are at serious risk of not being able to access food. When AFS does not screen families for expedited service, eligible families must unnecessarily endure additional days without food.

AFS' inadequate expedited food stamp process may violate federal law.

Under federal law, every applicant must be screened for expedited service. The USDA requires all states to design application procedures that identify households eligible for expedited food stamp processing at the time assistance is requested.¹⁹ None of the offices in Medford or Oregon consistently screened applicants for expedited service eligibility. Two homeless families that should have been immediately identified as potentially eligible for expedited service were required to go through the standard process, including providing all required verification. Federal law requires that families eligible for expedited service need only initially provide proof of identity and residency. Income and other verification can occur later.²⁰ In a separate study, the USDA identified serious problems with AFS' expedited food stamp process and required AFS to take corrective action but applicants continue to experience problems.²¹

“I made it clear that I was in an emergency situation but nothing was done.”

— Name withheld,
Broadway AFS office
in Portland

“They told me I had to wait seven days before I could turn in my application and have my interview. I'm a diabetic and need food now.”

— Barby Campbell,
Biddle AFS office
in Medford

“I told them I needed emergency assistance. The front desk person told me to come back almost three weeks later for an appointment.”

— Name withheld,
West Main AFS
office in Medford

Samantha's Story



Samantha Wattenburg is the mother of an infant son and an older, disabled son. She lives in Northeast Portland with her boyfriend who is in military training.

"I knew I wouldn't qualify for a cash grant, but my son's SSI benefits weren't enough to live for my family to live on. I thought we might be able to get food stamps. I went to the office that was within walking distance of my house in December to apply.

"They gave me a packet and I filled it out and took it to the lady at the front desk. The lady told me that I needed to go to the Broadway office. I didn't have a car at the time so I had to take two buses. It took me more than 35 minutes to get there.

"At the Broadway office, I had to fill out a new application form for them. I noticed a sign that I said that I have the right to return my application on the same day that I receive it. I asked the front desk lady about it. She didn't think that that was still a right because they change the rules all the time. She said she would ask her supervisor. She agreed to accept my application, but told me I had to come back and see a screener at 7:30 a.m. any day of the week except on Thursday.

"The front desk lady told me that they saw people on a first-come, first-serve basis. I told her that my son gets on the school bus at 7:40 and then I have to take the bus so I needed to get an appointment. She asked if I was working and I told her no. She said if I wasn't working then I would just have to get there as early as I could because only people that were working get appointments. I went into the office on Tuesday and Wednesday, but all the slots had already been filled by the time I got there.

"One of the front desk people had seen me there and knew I was trying hard so she asked where I lived and offered to pick me up on Friday. She told me that she could get fired for doing this, so I shouldn't say anything. I explained to her that I was truly grateful. Friday morning she picked up my two children and me and I did get seen that day. My son had to miss half a day of school, but I would rather have him miss a half-day than go hungry.

"During my interview, the screener told me that I needed to get military orders showing my boyfriend was not in the home. I came back a second time on Friday with a paper that had a phone number and a statement that he was to leave on a specific day. My screener told me I would hear if I got food stamps or not in a couple weeks. I learned about three weeks after my interview that I was eligible and I got benefits the following month.

"It took me five visits to the AFS office to get help and about four hours of sitting in the office. If I didn't qualify I would be pretty upset, but even though I did get the food stamps, I don't think it should be this hard."

Barrier 2: AFS interview process is inflexible and inconsistent.

Findings:

- Seventy-five percent of the employed applicants who requested alternative interview times because of job conflicts were denied.
- All of the unemployed applicants who requested alternative interview times because of educational, training or job search conflicts, child care problems, or transportation problems were denied an alternative interview time.
- Only one applicant was provided with the option of a home or telephone interview.
- Applicants waited an average of 6.5 days before they were interviewed by AFS.
- Twenty percent of applicants waited ten days or more for their required interview.
- Eight percent of applicants were provided with an application but not told that they needed to return for an interview.
- Applicants who were told to return for an interview during a general intake time waited an average of 70 minutes before their interview began. One applicant waited two hours and 20 minutes.
- On average, interviews lasted 40 minutes, but some were as short as 15 minutes and others took over 90 minutes.

The AFS prolonged interview process ignores the serious needs of food stamp applicants by making them wait unnecessarily for food. Some AFS offices make clients return only during a specified two-hour period for their interviews. If the interview slots fill up for that day, applicants are sent home and required to return another day. For applicants who are working, time spent at the welfare office means missing pay and endangering the financial stability of their families. For applicants who are in training or who are searching for work, long waits at AFS offices interferes with their ability to become self-sufficient.

AFS' interview process may violate state law and federal directives.

In its December 1998 review of three Portland area AFS offices, the USDA found that the first come, first system could hinder applicants and suggested several corrective actions.²² The AFS practice of denying applicants' requests for alternative interview times and not offering applicants off-site or telephone interview options contradicts the AFS goal of helping people obtain and maintain employment. Not providing clients with the option of non-office interviews also violates AFS policy.²³

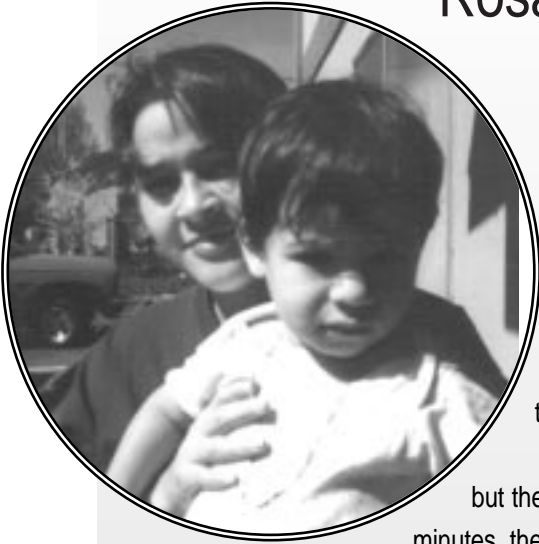
“I had to take time off work for my 2:00 p.m. appointment but wasn't seen until 2:40. I missed more work. For people on food stamps, every hour of work counts.”

— Sarah Anderson,
SE Powell AFS
office in Portland

“My kids missed breakfast and the first two hours of school because the only time they gave me for an interview was in the early morning.”

— Dannette Gill,
Albina AFS office
in Portland

Rosa's Story



Rosa Rodriguez recently left her husband, taking her three-year-old son Oscar with her. Rosa is temporarily living with friends and she has no money or assets. Rosa has never applied for public assistance programs in the past and speaks no English.

Rodriguez went to apply for food stamps at the office nearest to her home, St. John AFS office in Portland. When she arrived at the office, there were no directional signs in English or Spanish and Rosa sat down with Oscar in the waiting room. Rosa was the only client in the office.

Two workers were at the front desk that was less than five feet away but they did not ask Rosa why she was there or if she needed help. After 20 minutes, the interviewer for this study intervened and told Rosa to go to the desk and ask for help. At the desk, neither worker could understand Spanish. The study interviewer again intervened and explained to the workers that Rosa wanted to apply for food stamps. A worker provided Rosa with an application, in English, to complete. The AFS worker told Rosa, through the study interviewer, that she would need to wait for three hours to turn in her application to a Spanish-speaking worker. Rosa protested and the worker told her to go to the Albina office.

At the Albina office, Rosa was provided with a Spanish speaking worker within 10 minutes. She was given a new application in Spanish. However, when Rosa requested help in completing the application, she was denied and told that no one at the office could help her.

Barrier 3: AFS provides inadequate services for limited English speakers

Findings:

- Limited English speakers waited four times longer than English speakers to receive applications.
- An AFS worker with limited Spanish interviewed a speaker of Spanish. The worker was not able to understand that the applicant was in a crisis situation.
- A speaker of an African dialect had to locate and bring his own translator to the AFS office to obtain services.

Applicants who do not speak English deserve the same level of service as applicants who speak English. Limited English speakers who applied for food stamps at AFS offices had to wait significantly longer for help simply because they spoke another language. Limited English applicants were generally more fearful about applying for food stamps than English speakers. The additional barriers they faced at every level of the food stamp application process discouraged them further.

AFS' deficient services for limited English speakers may violate federal laws.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects limited English speakers rights to access public assistance services and requires offices to meet the needs of limited English speakers in a timely manner. Local offices must provide a translator who is proficient in English and the applicant's language to aid a limited English speaker.²⁴ The St. John's AFS office in Portland was unable to provide a Spanish translator, the West Main AFS office in Medford provided an inadequate Spanish translator, and the Albina AFS office in Portland required an Oromo speaker to locate his own translator. Federal law also requires states to have application forms and other materials available in languages that people speak in the community.²⁵ Client notices and applications in other languages were not available at all offices, nor were there signs about how to obtain non-English materials.

"I talked with their Spanish speaking worker when I got my application. I tried to explain that I needed food stamps right away, but she was not a native Spanish speaker and seemed to not understand me."

— Gloria Cruz Rodas, West Main AFS office in Medford

[Gloria went to the office on 2/8/2000.

She was given an interview for 2/23/00 where it was determined she needed expedited service.

She should have received her food stamps by 2/15.]

"It's frustrating that it takes so long and that you have to sit there and wait while you are hungry."

— Name withheld Oromo speaker, Albina AFS office in Portland



Lourdes' Story

Lourdes Aguirre is a married mother of two children. Her husband works fulltime at a minimum wage job. She lives in Northeast Portland and speaks limited English.

"I went and picked up an application at the NE Broadway AFS office and turned in part of it that day. They gave me an appointment and told me to come back in two days.

"I returned to the office on my appointment day and waited two hours. I inquired about why I hadn't been called and they told me that my worker wasn't in the office that day. They told me my worker was the only one who could interview me in Spanish. They said that another worker could see me, but they didn't have a translator. There was one worker who was bilingual, but she said her stomach hurt and didn't want to translate for me.

"They gave me another appointment for next Tuesday of the following week. When I got home, I realized that I wouldn't be able to make that appointment because it was very early in the morning and I have to take my children to school and then get a ride to the welfare office.

"I tried calling many times to change my appointment. I kept getting the answering machine and I could never talk to a real person. I asked a friend who spoke English to call for me but she could never get a person either.

"I went down to the office for my appointment as soon as I could. Oregon Action offered to give me a ride, but I still couldn't get there on time because I had to take my kids to school. When I got there, they said they didn't have enough workers that day and I would have to come back. They sent everyone in the waiting room home. They told me to return next Monday at 7:00 a.m.

"I told the worker that I couldn't come that early. My husband goes to work at 5:00 a.m. and can't help get the kids to school. The woman said they couldn't make exceptions for me or they would have to make exceptions for everyone. She told me to get a family member or a friend to take care of the kids in the morning. I told her that was a luxury that I just didn't have in my life right now. She finally agreed to let me come into the office next Wednesday at 10:00 a.m. This will be my fourth trip to the office in over two weeks of time."

Barrier 4: Applicants must doggedly pursue and repeatedly contact AFS to obtain food stamps.

Findings:

- Applicants contacted the office an average of three times during the application period.
- Several applicants contacted the office more than six times during the application period.

It is critical that food stamp applicants file their application as soon as they receive it. Thirty days after an application is filed, food stamp offices must deliver food stamps to eligible households. For families in a crisis situation, food stamp offices must deliver food stamps to eligible families in seven days. In addition, food stamp benefits are pro-rated from the date of application. If applicants are not told to file their applications immediately, applicants' food stamps are delayed and the amount of benefits received is smaller.

AFS offices require that applicants visit the office at least twice, unnecessarily extending the food stamp enrollment process. In Oregon, applicants must first obtain a food stamp application and then return to the AFS office at a later date for the required interview. However, many applicants had to repeatedly contact the office for information or clarification about their situation. Often, applicants had to make additional contacts with the office because they did not understand which documents to provide. More often, applicants contacted the office because they had received no response from AFS. These repeated contacts, especially when an in-person contact was made, significantly extended the food stamp enrollment process.

AFS' practices may violate federal law.

The USDA requires states to encourage applicants to file an application form on the same day the household first contacts the office seeking assistance.²⁶ The USDA notes that it is important that applicants be informed that they do not need to complete the entire application in order to file it on the same day of initial contact.²⁷ In addition, USDA officials have noted that procedures requiring food stamp applicants to return a second day create barriers to participation.²⁸

"It took me five calls to figure out which office I needed to go to."

— Michael Kelly,
Albina AFS office
in Portland

"My husband and four children are homeless and have no money. AFS made us wait so long to get food stamps. It was horrible. I kept telling them I was in an emergency situation. I was down there every other day for three weeks and I called every day. I left messages, but no one ever returned my calls. They just kept putting me off. I kept telling them my kids were hungry, but they did nothing. After we got our food stamps, they told me my they accidentally mailed my file to Roseburg.

[Roseburg is four hours South of Portland.] I was afraid they were going to cut me off completely because I was going to miss an appointment in Roseburg. After more calls, they finally mailed my file back to the Portland office."

— Audrey Spivey,
Metro AFS office
in Portland



Sean's Story

Sean Weathers, his wife and one-year-old son live in Northwest Portland, about six blocks from the Albina AFS office. Sean has worked in the past at the Post Office but decided he should get his GED so he could make more money. Sean and his family walked to the Albina office to apply for food stamps. Once they arrived, an AFS worker told them that they had to go to the Broadway office. Sean's family's only transportation is their tandem bicycle and the Broadway office is a 30-minute ride away from their home.

Sean completed and returned their food stamp application to the Broadway office. During the interview, his worker told him that the food stamp program was not meant for them and really could not give them the kind of help they needed. She suggested that he go back to the Post Office and give up his interest in a GED. His worker told him that he had six weeks to finish his GED because the AFS office was not going to support his education. She also told him that his family should move out of their home for a cheaper apartment.

Barrier 5: AFS uses an unnecessarily long and confusing application.

Findings:

- Forty-four percent of applicants rated the understandability of the 16-page AFS application as “difficult to understand” or “very difficult to understand.”
- AFS uses a combined application to gather eligibility information for all assistance programs. However, 87 percent of applicants were not told about other programs available to them.
- Only 30 percent of households with uninsured children were told about the Children’s Health Insurance Program or Medicaid.
- Ninety-two percent of applicants were not offered any assistance in obtaining necessary verification.
- Sixty-eight percent of applicants did not understand that parts of the application were not applicable to food stamps.

If applicants are intimidated by the length of the application form, they may not apply for the food stamps that they need. Households applying for food stamps often get their first sense of the program when they see the application form. A long and complicated application form that uses confusing language and requires applicants to produce a long list of documents may discourage prospective applicants. Using a short application that provides a brief list of the required verification documents would reduce the amount time applicants spend on the application and sends a positive message about the availability of food stamps.

AFS’ application may violate state and federal law.

The USDA has urged all states to simplify their application forms because it believes a simpler application will eliminate many of the barriers keeping families from food stamps.²⁹ Certainly if AFS is not going to use the information collected by the combined application to inform applicants of other programs, the long application serves only to lengthen the food stamps process. In addition, the application does not appear to meet USDA requirements in a number of ways, including providing appropriate lists and descriptions of documents required. The application also does not list required information about the agency’s obligation to help applicants locate documents.³⁰ The large number of applicants who reported difficulty understanding the application also indicates that the application does not meet Oregon state law requiring applications to be in plain language.³¹

“I had to ride my bike back and forth from my home and to the office three times to get them all the documents they wanted. I lost a day’s pay because I missed a full day at work.”

— Name withheld,
West Main AFS
office in Medford

“I told them I had no money and couldn’t pay my rent or my Oregon Health Plan bills. They told me that this was where you come for food stamps not for other stuff and that I should borrow money from a friend.”

— Michael Kelly,
Albina AFS office in
Portland



Tamika's Story

Tamika Johnson [not her real name] lives in Medford, Oregon with her four children. She left the Jobs Plus Program in December 1999 and took a fulltime job at Goodwill for \$10.25 an hour. The Jobs Plus Program is a component of Oregon's welfare-to-work initiative. In the JOBS Plus Program, people on welfare, food stamps and unemployment insurance are placed in positions with public and private businesses. They receive paychecks from their employers, who are reimbursed by the state.

"I called my worker to tell her that I wanted to leave the Jobs Plus Program and was going to take a job at Goodwill. She told me that my food stamps would be fine and that she would write me a letter. Goodwill told me not to worry either.

"I never got a letter and then my food stamps stopped. I didn't understand why I wasn't getting any food stamps. I called and talked to the AFS office and was told that I had been given a new worker. My new worker said he would look into it and get back to me. Two weeks later I hadn't heard anything and I called again.

"They told me to come down and apply for food stamps again. I came down on February 9th and told them I had been going to the food bank every week to make ends meet for my kids. I told them I needed emergency assistance. The front desk person told me to come back almost three weeks later on Feb. 22 for an appointment.

"I am a single mom and get no child support. My kids are hungry. I don't care about myself but I am upset about my children. Luckily, they at least get lunch at school. I have no money and wrote a \$32 check for my electric bill. When that bounces next week, I won't have food or electricity."

Barrier 6: AFS provides inadequate and discourteous service to applicants.

Findings:

- Forty-four percent of participants felt they were not treated respectfully.
- Only 20 percent of the applicants were told or saw information about the grievance procedure.
- About a third of applicants reported that they did not understand where to apply for food stamps because the directional signs were unclear.
- Applicants rated the helpfulness of the front desk staff on a scale of one to four, with one being the best rating. Applicants gave the front desk staff an average rating of three or “not very helpful.”
- Eighty-eight percent of applicants were not asked if they had questions about the process.
- Eighty percent of applicants were not given a telephone number or another way to obtain help.
- Most AFS offices did not post USDA-required information about the food stamp process.

Applicants who don’t understand the food stamp enrollment process and are not provided with a way to access help are more likely to be discouraged and miss out on vital food stamp benefits. Applicants who are not told about their right to file their application on the same day an application is obtained unnecessarily elongates the time applicants must wait for food stamp benefits to begin.³² Unfairly denied applicants may never get the food stamps they deserve if they do not understand how to appeal a decision. Applicants who are treated rudely are much more likely to give up before they finish the application process.

AFS’ inadequate service may violate federal and state law.

Oregon state law requires AFS to provide information about the grievance procedure to applicants.³³ In addition, federal law requires states to post signs explaining the application process and the right to file an application on the day of initial contact.³⁴ A 1999 AFS study of Portland offices found that the lack of good directional signs cannot be a barrier to enrollment, but applicants continue to report problems.³⁵

“I told my caseworker that I couldn’t get a job right now because of my injury. She told me that she was “hurting all the time too” but managed.”

— Dannette Gill,
Albina AFS office
in Portland

“During my interview my worker was very distracted and kept gossiping with another worker about the people on welfare. Then they both looked at me for a minute but my worker said, ‘Don’t worry, she doesn’t know who we are talking about.’ Then she told me that I stunk of cigarettes.”

— Bobbie (last name withheld), Albina AFS office in Portland

“The front desk people waited an hour before they started calling numbers. They were talking on the phone with friends. I know everything they did the night before.”

— Name withheld,
Albina AFS office
in Portland

One of AFS' primary goals is to help people in need get and keep jobs. However, none of the eight AFS offices reviewed in this report allowed applicants to apply during evening hours. In addition, many AFS offices acutely restrict the hours applicants can submit applications, causing hardship for applicants with morning obligations. Under this system, clients take numbers or sign-in and wait to be interviewed. Sometimes, applicants must return on later days because all the interview slots are taken.

AFS BRANCH HOURS OF OPERATION AND IN-TAKE SCHEDULE

Office	Hours of operation	Hours applications are accepted and interviews are scheduled
Metro, Portland	8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.	7:30 a.m. to 8:45 a.m. every day except Wednesday
St. John, Portland	7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.	7:00 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. every day except Wednesday
Albina, Portland	7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.	8:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. every day except Tuesday and Thursday
NE Broadway, Portland	7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.	7:00 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. (later if interview times do not fill)
SE Powell, Portland	7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.	8:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. by appointment only
Ashland, Medford	7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.	7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.
Cardley, Medford	8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.	8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. by appointment only
West Main, Medford	8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.	8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. by appointment only

AFS BRANCH OFFICES FAIL TO PROVIDE REQUIRED INFORMATION

Federal and state law requires AFS to post information in each office explaining the food stamp application process, an applicant's right to file an application on the day of initial contact, and the grievance system.

Office	A sign explaining the food stamp process?	A sign posted explaining applicants' right to file applications on initial contact?	Grievance procedure posted?
Metro, Portland	NO	NO	NO
St. John, Portland	NO	NO	YES
Albina, Portland	NO	NO	NO
NE Broadway, Portland	NO	YES	YES
SE Powell, Portland	NO	YES	YES
Ashland, Medford	YES	NO	YES
Cardley, Medford	NO	NO	YES
West Main, Medford	NO	NO	YES

Information for both charts was collected when researchers visited offices in March and looked for specific written material. Offices with the required material in obscure locations (like under other material or posted outside restrooms instead of in the waiting room area) were coded as having the information available.

Barrier 7: AFS offices are difficult to contact, particularly hindering working applicants from applying.

Findings:

- At some offices, applicants are told they can only submit application and sign-up for interviews between 7:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m.
- No offices are open during evening hours for day-shift workers.
- No statewide, toll-free informational number is maintained.
- Applicants who used the voice mail system reported difficulty and frustration.
- None of the applicants who went to the wrong office were provided with the phone numbers, and in some cases addresses, of the correct office.
- No AFS workers offered to forward applicants' completed applications when they were submitted to the wrong office.

Day-shift workers lose pay when applying for food stamps, causing more financial instability for their families. None of the eight offices reviewed in this report offered evening hours for working clients to apply for food stamps. Some offices are also closed for lunch, making it impossible for applicants working the day-shift to apply without missing work. Applicants who can't get help become frustrated and may give up before completing the food stamp application process. Applicants who arrive at the wrong office and are not assisted are unnecessarily required to spend more time in the application process.

AFS' failure to adopt user-friendly practices may violate state and federal law.

The USDA requires AFS offices that receive application forms from outside of their service area to mail the application form to the correct office on the same day that the application form is submitted.³⁶ AFS' policy manual requires branch office workers to assist applicants who come to the wrong branch.³⁷ This did not occur when applicants went to the wrong offices with completed applications. Additionally, after its review in December 1998, the USDA instructed Portland branches to remain open in the evenings at least one evening per month, when possible.³⁸

"I went to the St. John's AFS office on February 11th to request a food stamp application. When I got there, they just handed me the application and didn't tell me anything. I took it back to St. John's a few days later. The caseworker at St. Johns told me that I needed to go to the SDS office because that's where I get my disability benefits. When I got to the SDS office they told me they couldn't use the application I filled out for St. John's. They gave me another 16-page application to complete."

— Keith Jackson,
SDS office in
Portland

Conclusion

This report demonstrates that serious barriers in Oregon's food stamp program impede applicants from accessing food stamps. These barriers include an unnecessarily lengthy application process, inadequate customer service for clients, and an inconsistent expedited service process. Adult and Families Services appears to treat clients' requests for food stamps as inconsequential and without urgency. These barriers are particularly disturbing in a state with a growing percentage of hungry people and a declining percentage of people using food stamps.

Some of the barriers identified in this report appear to violate state and federal law. Others are simply bad policies. AFS should immediately develop an action plan that includes participation from community groups. The action plan should include, at a minimum, the following:

Simplify and accelerate the application process

- Encourage applicants to file application forms on the same day of initial contact.
- Inform applicants about their right to file an incomplete application to begin the process.
- Streamline the interview process so that clients wait no more than 2 days for an interview.
- Simplify the 16-page application.
- Provide applicants with a clear list of documentation required.
- Provide all clients with the option of a specific interview time.
- Inform eligible applicants of their right to a home or phone interview.
- Provide translators in a timely manner to all applicants who speak limited English.
- Do not use translators who are not fully fluent in both English and another language.
- Train front desk staff to fully explain the food stamp process and engage with clients.
- Provide more out-stationed AFS workers to enroll applicants in their neighborhoods.
- Provide evening office hours for working clients.
- Improve phone system so clients can access the information they need.
- Provide clients with sufficient information so that they do not have to repeatedly contact the office.
- Allow applicants to apply at the AFS office closest to their home or work.

Provide expedited services for applicants in crisis

- Inform clients about how the expedited food service process works.
- Train staff on how to identify clients needing expedited service.
- Develop and use a satisfactory screening tool to identify people in need of emergency assistance.

Treat applicants with dignity and respect

- Train all workers in basic customer service skills.
- Hire an independent research group to survey clients about the treatment they receive.
- Provide clients with the required information about the grievance and appeal procedures.
- Use directional signs in the office.
- Inform applicants about other programs available to them.

Develop an effective outreach program to educate potential applicants

- Maintain a statewide toll-free food stamp hotline for applicants.
- Develop outreach campaigns that include neighborhood-based educational activities.

Research Methods

Hunger Pains: Oregon food stamp program fails to deliver is based on data collected during February and March of 2000 by Oregon Action and the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations. The objective of this study is to identify policies and practices that delay or impede applicants from obtaining food stamps in Oregon.

Data were gathered from 25 food stamp applicants identified by Oregon Action. Ten of the study participants were white, ten were black, and five were Hispanic. Five participants spoke limited or no English. Forty percent of the study participants were working and 70 percent of the applicants had children. Applicants applied at three offices in Medford and four offices in Portland. Researcher intervention in the application process was limited to providing rides to AFS offices. In one case, a bilingual researcher intervened to help a Spanish-speaking applicant when no Spanish-speaking AFS workers were available to help.

Applicants were interviewed twice in accordance with the protocol developed for this project. The first interview occurred after the applicant obtained an application. The second interview occurred after the required interview at AFS. In addition, researchers looked for posted and written information at each AFS office visited by an applicant. Some applicants requested that their names be withheld from the report.

Endnotes

- 1 Mark Nord, Kyle Jemison, Gary Bickel, Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Hunger, by State, 1996-1998, Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1999, p. 3.
- 2 Ibid. The USDA classifies a household as hungry if the food intake for the adults in the household has been reduced to an extent that it implies that adults have repeatedly experienced the physical sensation of hunger. Household Food Security in the United State in 1995: Summary Report of the Food Security Measurement Project, USDA, September 1997, p. v.
- 3 Michael Leachman, Oregon Center for Public Policy, telephone conversation, April 3, 2000.
- 4 Food Research and Action Council, Oregon Food Profile 1999. www.frac.org.
- 5 United State General Accounting Office, Food Stamp Program: Various Factors Have Led to Decline in Participation, July 1999, p. 33. Because of eligibility restrictions created by welfare reform in 1996, the number of able-bodied adults with no children has declined by 46 percent. Leachman, April 3, 2000.
- 6 Michael Leachman, HowMany Hungry Oregonians? Measuring Food Insecurity and Hunger, Oregon Center for Public Policy, November, 1999, p. 1.
- 7 Nord, Prevalence of Food Insecurity, p. 17. These data were calculated using Oregon Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements of September 1996, April 1997, and August 1998. Annual prevalence of estimates of food insecurity and hunger for states have significant margins of error because of the limited number of households surveyed in each state.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Leachman, telephone conversation, April 3, 2000.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Food Research and Action Council, Oregon Food Profile 1999. www.frac.org.
- 12 United States General Accounting Office, Food Stamp Program: Various Factors Have Led to Decline in Participation, July 1999, p. 33. Because of eligibility restrictions created by welfare reform in 1996, the number of able-bodied adults with no children has declined by 46 percent. Leachman, April 3, 2000.
- 13 Michael Leachman, HowMany Hungry Oregonians? Measuring Food Insecurity and Hunger, Oregon Center for Public Policy, November, 1999, p. 1.
- 14 Nord, Prevalence of Food Insecurity, p. 17. These data were calculated using Oregon Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements of September 1996, April 1997, and August 1998. Annual prevalence of estimates of food insecurity and hunger for states have significant margins of error because of the limited number of households surveyed in each state.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Food insecure data from Nord, Prevalence of Food Insecurity, p. 17. These data were calculated by the USDA using Oregon Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements of September 1996, April 1997, and August 1998. Annual prevalence of estimates of food insecurity and hunger for states have significant margins of error because of the limited number of households surveyed in each state. Food stamp participation data for July 1996-1999 from Oregon public assistance data charts, www.afs.hr.state.or.us/papage.html, p. 36.
- 17 Many offices tell applicants to arrive an hour before AFS offices open for client services because interviews are scheduled on a first come, first serve basis.
- 18 The first two pages of the application is the tool AFS uses to screen people for expedited service.
- 19 7 CFR 273.2
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Letter from Dennis Stewart, Western Regional Director, Food Stamp Program, to Jim Neely, Deputy Administrator, Adult and Family Services Division, received January 14, 1999 re: Portland area AFS branch office review.
- 22 Stewart, letter received by AFS January 14, 1999.
- 23 The AFS Family Services Manual directs local offices to provide applicants with the option of home or telephone interviews if the adult family member is elderly, disabled, faces transportation problems, or other hardships exist. These hardships can include illness, bad weather, conflicting work hours, or other reasons.
- 24 7 CFR 272.4(b)(3).
- 25 7 CFR 272.4(b)(2),(3).
- 26 7 CFR 273(c)(2)(i).
- 27 65 Federal Register 10864.
- 28 United State General Accounting Office, Food Stamp Program: Various Factors Have Led to Decline in Participation, July 1999, p. 14.
- 29 Letter from Dan Glickman, U.S. Department of Agriculture, to all state Governors, dated July 12, 1999, re: the Clinton Food Stamp Initiative.
- 30 For requirements see 7 CFR 273.2.
- 31 ORS 411.967 requires all written material published by AFS for potential or current public assistance clients to be written in plain, understandable language and gives specific instructions about how AFS must comply with these standards.
- 32 7 CFR 273.2.
- 33 ORS 411.977.
- 34 7 CFR 273.2.
- 35 Adult and Family Services District 2, "Shopper Study," 1999.
- 36 7 CFR 273.2(c).
- 37 AFS Family Services Manual, Food Stamp Program, Section B, p. 9.
- 38 Stewart, letter received by AFS January 14, 1999.