

CHAPTER II

Seniors' Overall Perceptions of the Food Stamp Program

This chapter includes a discussion of the perceptions of the Food Stamp Program (FSP) by both eligible seniors who are aware of the program but not participating, as well as those who currently receive food stamps. Because eligible nonparticipants generally had more negative views of the FSP, the research also sought to understand where these low-income seniors would obtain food assistance and how they assess these alternative sources of help. Some information as to how community-based organizations and food stamp office staff believe seniors view the program is also included here, though the primary emphasis of this chapter is on the perceptions of seniors themselves.

A. Perceived Benefits of Food Stamp Program Participation

Focus group discussants were asked to describe the benefits of getting food stamps. Participants were asked their views of the program's benefits for themselves, while nonparticipants were asked about their perceptions of the benefits of the program for low-income seniors like them. Despite concerns expressed regarding the difficulties and barriers associated with enrolling and staying on the program (discussed in subsequent chapters of this report), most focus group discussants viewed the FSP as a critical form of food assistance for themselves and other low-income seniors.

When asked to describe the benefits of the FSP to themselves and others like them, seniors in the focus groups provided a range of responses. However, most of the views expressed can be grouped into the following five broad categories of benefits:

- Food stamps are an important and positive source of food assistance;
- Food stamps allow seniors to buy healthful foods they like;
- Food stamps promote independence for seniors;
- Food stamps provide needed economic assistance; and
- Food stamps are viewed as a health promotion program.

1. Food Stamps are a Positive and Important Source of Food Assistance

When asked to describe what the benefits of the FSP are, the most common response was that food stamps allow participants to buy the food they need and want and would not otherwise have access to. Several seniors who participated in the program made it very clear that they depend on food stamps to meet their basic food needs.

“We are basically depending on food stamps for all our food because we are not able to work.” (Tacoma participant, translated from Korean)

“If you go in the kitchen and look for just a biscuit and there isn’t any there, what are you going to think about? Your food stamps.” (Seattle participant)

“It allows you to buy some food when you ain’t got none.” (Seattle participant)

“Food stamps keeps the wolf away from the door.” (Seattle participant)

Non-participants who had been on the program in the past as seniors said that when they were on the program, the benefits provided assistance that they really appreciated and that was critical to meeting their basic food needs. One nonparticipant said that if he could get on food stamps he knew the benefit levels were likely low but they could provide a few weeks of needed food assistance.

"(Food stamps) allow you to buy basic foods that you need just to live everyday. That's about all there is in it, but to me that was great." (Seattle non-participant)

"It's giving you better food for survival." (Tacoma non-participant, translated from Korean)

"I would be able to have food for a few weeks if I could get food stamps." (Seattle non-participant)

Focus group discussants were asked their overall opinions, good and bad, about the FSP. The Korean- and Spanish-speaking seniors, participants and nonparticipants, were so pleased and grateful that they and other immigrants can receive this type of food assistance in America. Their comments were so positive that they almost seemed confused by the question asking them what they did not like about the program.

"If I were to live in Korea right now the senior citizens get free tickets to subways, but that's about it. Now that I am in America you get food stamps and you get Medicare. All I just want to say is that I am thankful and while I live in America I will just abide by the American rules and regulations." (Tacoma participant, translated from Korean)

"I was grateful for America. I was amazed that America provided such a program." (Tacoma participant, translated from Korean)

"No, there shouldn't be any bad things (about getting food stamps). Think about it... Why would it be bad to get help you need buying food?" (Tacoma nonparticipant, translated from Korean)

"I saw it as a very good program for everybody because one was able to buy without using cash. It was an excellent thing. I would like to meet the person who created the program. They don't discriminate at all." (Yakima participant, translated from Spanish)

2. Food Stamps Allow Seniors to Buy Healthful Foods They Like

In addition to providing assistance with the basic food needs of their household, many participants and nonparticipants saw food stamps as a way to buy healthful foods that they could not otherwise afford.

"(If I got food stamps) I would buy more fruits and vegetables.... I don't know the last time I ate a slice of lettuce because at \$1.39 a head.... And the cost of apples sometimes just gets outrageous. Just fruits would help me." (Seattle nonparticipant)

"It gives me money to go and buy meat. The things that I normally wouldn't get at the food bank." (Seattle participant)

"When they started giving us the stamps I was able to buy fruit and different things. Things like watermelon." (Yakima participant, translated from Spanish)

The ability to use food stamps in small, ethnically oriented food stores was also cited by non-English-speaking seniors and those who work with them as an advantage of the FSP over emergency food distribution programs for immigrant seniors who tend to maintain their traditional ethnic diets when they come to this country.

"Food stamps allows the diversity of Americans to buy what they need for their own ethnic choices...At their own ethnic stores." (Tacoma CBO)

3. Food Stamps Promote Independence for Seniors

Korean-speaking and Spanish-speaking discussants pointed out that using food stamps reduced dependency on their families, who are also on limited incomes, and provided them with personal choice over the food they buy and prepare.

"I can buy the things that I want to eat. I do the shopping for myself and I like that I can take care of myself." (Tacoma participant, translated from Korean)

"I was a bit hesitant in the beginning because I wasn't sure if I was eligible. But then also my children had a difficult time living (financially) plus my eating styles are very different from theirs, for meals and food. So I wanted to cook something that goes with my appetite and that's why I applied.... But now with food stamps I can use it to buy and prepare foods that meet my own health needs. So I am very grateful." (Tacoma participant, translated from Korean)

4. Food Stamps Provide Needed Economic Assistance

Across all groups the main reason why eligible seniors said they applied for or would need food stamps is financial need. For those no longer working, often there was a point after they retired that they were able to support themselves. But, due to a personal illness or the death or illness of a spouse, they were no longer able to afford the basic necessities.

Some of the seniors specifically said that getting food stamps could or already does allow them to use their income to pay for other necessities, such as rising out-of-pocket medical expenses, housing costs, and utility bills.

"If you pay the bills first then you don't have any left to buy food. (With food stamps) you can pay the bills and use the stamps for food." (Yakima nonparticipant, translated from Spanish)

"For the people who don't make money, food stamps are the only source of daily life assistance. So that is why it is good." (Tacoma participant, translated from Korean)

"Its getting to where we seniors either buy food or medicines. We can't do both." (Seattle nonparticipant)

"I benefited from it in the sense that I had more money to buy food and with the money I had left over I paid the rent and bills. I was able to provide other things that my children and their families need, such as recreation. We were able to do things together as a family." (Yakima participant, translated from Spanish)

5. Food Stamps are Viewed as Promoting Good Health

Many seniors talked about the importance of eating the right foods for their health, particularly those with high blood pressure and diabetes. Some nonparticipants strongly felt the need to eat healthy foods, but felt unable to eat the proper foods due to financial constraints. Some said that their doctors had recommended they eat more healthy foods, such as fruits, vegetables, and certain types of fish, but found that they could not afford these foods.

"You eat what you have. It's been three months since the doctor put me on a special diet. Vegetables, chicken, fish, milk, fruit, but the vegetables are so expensive that one can't buy them. You have to eat what you have. Rice, beans, whatever." (Yakima nonparticipant, translated from Spanish)

Interestingly, several nonparticipants and participants viewed the FSP not just as an income supplement program or a way to buy more expensive foods, but as a program designed to promote healthy eating and good health.

"Nutrition is one of the good things I see about getting stamps. The person is going to be able to feed himself, be healthy and have energy to find a job." (Pasco nonparticipant, translated from Spanish)

"I believe it is a public health program for low-income people." (Tacoma participant, translated from Korean)

B. Negative Perceptions of the Food Stamp Program

When seniors (both nonparticipants and participants), representatives from community-based organizations, and the food stamp staff were asked about the negative perceptions among seniors about the FSP, four issues were raised in multiple groups.

- The expectation of low benefits compared to the difficulties of applying for food stamps;
- The complexity of the program's eligibility rules and misinformation about who the program currently serves or is designed to serve;
- The belief among working seniors that the program's rules unfairly penalized them; and
- The belief that seniors are not getting their fair share of the food assistance.

1. Low Benefit Levels Compared to the Difficulties of Applying

Discussants in all of the focus groups assumed that most, if not all, seniors can only get \$10 in food stamps, the minimum benefit level. While this is true for a large portion of the elderly who receive cash assistance in the form of Supplemental Security Income and Social Security, it is not true for the average elderly food stamp household. Nevertheless, many eligible seniors not on the program said they were sure they would not get more than \$10, though they were clearly confused by the program's complex eligibility and benefit determination rules (as discussed below). Contrasted with the large amount of time and paperwork required to complete the application process, the low benefits they expect make some nonparticipating seniors take a very negative view of the program. Nonparticipants reflected this perception when asked to discuss the program overall and why they did not apply.

"By the time you catch a cab or bus to get up there to see about it, well then you have spent \$10. Then what do you get? You get \$10 worth of food stamps. That's a loaf of bread, a gallon of milk, and a dozen or a dozen and a half eggs." (Seattle nonparticipant)

"I would go through the trouble if I thought I would get enough to really help me. But I wouldn't go down there and even sign up for \$10. It's not even worth it." (Seattle nonparticipant)

"Why bother for \$10? I think it is too complicated and too cumbersome to go through all that paperwork." (Tacoma nonparticipant, translated from Korean)

"You send all this foreign aid to repressed countries, and yet our own people who have worked and slaved and lived here, you give them \$10 a month and you tell them that's what they deserve." (Seattle nonparticipant)

Most caseworkers and representatives from CBO's in Seattle confirmed that the relatively low minimum benefit level is a major deterrent to seniors' FSP participation.

"Sometimes they only get \$10 and they have to come in and they have to give all this verification and they say it's not worth the time." (Seattle CBO)

"As far as what I have heard from people as to why they have not or do not apply for food stamps, the amount that they expect to receive is so small for the amount of trouble that it takes to apply." (Seattle CBO)

"It's almost disgracing for someone who's maybe worked fifty or sixty years and who paid their taxes and who knows they are supporting a program like this, to be so stringently means tested for ten dollars (a month)." (Seattle CBO)

2. Complexity and Misunderstanding of the Program Eligibility Rules

Several English-speaking discussants that were eligible but not participating in the FSP talked about the complexity of its eligibility rules as their primary conception of the program.

"I never ask for anything unless I need it. And I hate to ask for something and be turned down. I hear people at the welfare office say you're not eligible for this and that. I don't even know how it works. But I've needed it a lot of times. I just did without because I didn't know." (Seattle non-participant)

In the non-English-speaking groups of eligible nonparticipants, several seniors thought the program is only for people on welfare, families with children, or the disabled.

"I have no income. I have no job, nothing. I thought it (food stamps) was only for the people who get welfare. I only get the medical benefits." (Tacoma nonparticipant, translated from Korean)

"All I know is that if a person is disabled or has a lot of children and insufficient money to support them then I thought they would qualify." (Tacoma nonparticipant, translated from Korean)

"I thought they don't give you anything without a child." (Yakima nonparticipant, translated from Spanish)

3. The Program Does Not Adequately Serve Working Seniors

In the two focus groups with Korean-speaking seniors participating in the FSP, several were currently employed. Three of these individuals expressed specific concerns about the fairness of the income and assets tests for determining food stamp eligibility.

"For a person who works, sometimes you work 80 hours a month, sometimes 92 (depending on the number of weeks in a month), sometimes even less. Just because you make a little more money in one month they say no food stamps. Everything gets disconnected. So this month I am trying to work less." (Tacoma participant, translated from Korean)

"You know, in America you need a car...So, with some money I have to purchase the car. But if you purchase the car, that will make you ineligible." (Tacoma participant, translated from Korean)

4. Seniors Are Not Getting Their Fair Share of Food Assistance

Several nonparticipants in all three subgroups (English-speaking, Korean-speaking and Spanish-speaking seniors) voiced a concern that seniors only get a small amount of benefits or have a harder time getting food stamps or food assistance than younger people who are on welfare or who are recent immigrants.

"I have seen many couples, even with very few children, get welfare and a lot of stamps. The women say they don't have a husband even when they do and he's working." (Pasco nonparticipant, translated from Spanish)

"Food stamps are supported by the people who are working hard and paying their taxes. If it only goes to needy people it will be good. But when I see some of these people (at the grocery store) they are young people who are healthy, energetic, still using these stamps I wonder why stamps are given to those healthy people and not more seniors." (Tacoma nonparticipant, translated from Korean)

"Sometimes I work until my bones shatter and I can't afford anything and then I see some people who are taking all these benefits so I feel the government is being unfair." (Tacoma nonparticipant, translated from Korean)

"Someone arriving from another country has more opportunities than a legal immigrant who already lives here. They can get a doctor, medicines, transportation and money for food; they get help for the electricity, the phone, and rent." (Pasco nonparticipant, translated from Spanish)

C. Other Sources of Food Assistance and Their Perceived Strengths and Weaknesses for Seniors

Low-income seniors not participating in the FSP were asked to prioritize where they would go for food assistance when in need and in particular how they perceived food banks and the local commodity distribution program as sources of food assistance.

While there was overlap in the responses across the three ethnic groups (English-speaking, Korean-speaking and Spanish-speaking groups), there were some clear differences between responses from the English- and Spanish-speaking seniors compared to the Korean-speaking seniors. Hence, their responses are presented separately below.

1. English- and Spanish-speaking Seniors

The English-speaking and Spanish-speaking seniors who were food stamp eligible but not participating in the program most often reported that they could find emergency food sources when in need. They most often go to a food bank or a senior center for a hot meal when they run out of money for food. A few of the seniors in these groups also cited neighbors as a source for emergency food assistance. Several of these seniors pointed out that they would not go to their family, because they are not living close by or because they did not want to impose on their families who had their own children to take care of.

"I go to the food bank because it seems to be my best outlet when you are just absolutely down to nothing." (Seattle nonparticipant)

"The food bank helps senior citizens a lot. We've been there and have gotten very good things." (Pasco nonparticipant, translated from Spanish)

"Sometimes before the end of the month I don't have enough money to eat on at all. If you're a senior and check in and you get to know the people at the front desk (of the senior center), when you say you don't have enough money to eat on today you can get the tickets for the noon lunch. So it's keeping me fed all month long." (Seattle nonparticipant)

"It's pretty hard to be without food in our building. Because something maybe you get from the food bank or commodities program and don't like, your neighbor likes and you trade food back and forth." (Seattle nonparticipant)

"I turn most to my neighbors when I need help." (Yakima nonparticipant, translated from Spanish)

While the food bank and commodity distribution programs were cited as important sources of food assistance by many discussants in the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking focus groups, English-speaking discussants expressed some problems with the selection of food items and the large packaging sizes of commodities distributed.

"I put food banks first (as the place I would go for food assistance) but they don't give you enough. They only give you, say, just for a week or so, but what's a person supposed to do the next 2-3 weeks, go hungry? And that's where my situation is because I pay my bills on the 3rd, get them all paid off, and then I barely have, say, \$25-30." (Seattle nonparticipant)

"Yesterday was commodity distribution day and all I got was about 10 pounds of pasta... Now, what am I going to do with all that pasta?" (Seattle nonparticipant)

(The commodity program) "sometimes gives you some big huge box or can of one item, for a family of ten, but I have to leave it. I live alone and can't use it." (Seattle nonparticipant)

2. Korean-speaking Seniors

Though several Korean-speaking nonparticipants said they went to the senior center once a week for a hot meal, when asked where they would go first when in need of food assistance, they most often said they would turn to family members. In contrast to the seniors in the English- and Spanish-speaking nonparticipant groups, several of the Korean-speaking seniors said that they would not turn to friends for food assistance because they did not have close friends in this country with whom they would want to openly share their personal difficulties. A few of the Korean-speaking nonparticipants said that food banks would be one of the last places they would turn. Representatives from Korean-American community organizations said that low-income Koreans don't turn to food banks or the commodity distribution program because the foods available there do not conform to their traditional Korean dietary needs.

"The first place for me will be my family. Then after my family, I will go to church, then the food bank." (Tacoma nonparticipant, translated from Korean)

"My family is number one because family is the one that is the closest by." (Tacoma nonparticipant, translated from Korean)

"With your family, you have no difficulties to communicate." (Tacoma nonparticipant, translated from Korean)

"I don't have that many friends in America. If I do have friends then I wouldn't share the difficulties I face with my friends." (Tacoma nonparticipant, translated from Korean)

"When you have money, then friends are there. But when you are in urgent problem I don't think friends are that needed." (Tacoma nonparticipant, translated from Korean)

Another frequent source of food assistance help for nonparticipant seniors was the Korean Women's Association (KWA), a community organization whose mission is to provide help to the Korean community and that also conducts FSP outreach. There are individuals at the KWA that the seniors seem to have a comfort level with in sharing personal information or asking for help. The KWA also offers a special meal site once a week for the Korean elderly community.

"The first place I would go would be the Korean Women's Association because of the language barrier and all that... When you go to KWA and you explain the circumstance that you are in, tell them that I don't have food, then they will refer me to something." (Tacoma nonparticipant, translated from Korean)

Regardless of where they receive their food benefits, seniors across the three ethnic groups had similar positive and negative perceptions of the FSP. The next chapter explores the roots of some of these perceptions further by explaining how members of the focus groups received information about the FSP and its benefits and the barriers they perceive to applying for food stamps.