

# **“Lessons Learned” from the Portable Electronic Enrollment Project – Food Stamp Program January 1 - December 31, 2007**

*Community Partners’ PEEP-FSP project supported the addition of Food Stamps screening, education, and enrollment assistance to the activities of three rural community health centers already using portable laptop computers and wireless Internet connections to access Massachusetts’ web-based benefits application system (Virtual Gateway) to help clients in need of health coverage. The following “Lessons Learned” section is taken from the PEEP-FSP Final Progress Report submitted to the US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service on March 31, 2008.*

## **Target population**

- Adding Food Stamps education and screening to health access outreach with low-income current and potential community health center patients is good strategy for introducing eligible people to the program. Outreach workers did observe that quite a few were already beneficiaries, or had been in the past and had not had a good experience with the program. The outreach workers developed strategies to overcome resistance (see “Best Practices” section of PEEP-FSP [http://www.compartners.org/pdf/programs/peep-fsp\\_eval.pdf](http://www.compartners.org/pdf/programs/peep-fsp_eval.pdf))
- The press of health center-related responsibilities sometimes made it difficult for outreach workers to spend as much time on the Food Stamps component as they would have liked.

## **Use of mobile technology**

- The combination of the Virtual Gateway web-based application system and the mobility afforded by laptops and internet connection proved extremely valuable – especially in providing services to the neediest individuals. People who were ill or disabled, without transportation or child care – or in one case severely depressed – were sometimes able to receive benefits within a few days without leaving their homes.
- Both outreach and application initiation can be done in a community setting. The computer screen provides visual display possibilities. If an application is appropriate, it can be initiated using the back of the computer screen as a privacy shield.
- The flexibility of laptops can save time and energy for applicants and outreach workers by reducing the number of necessary visits.

## **Scheduled pro-active follow-up**

- Contacting people whose applications are in process at 15 days and 40 after submission is an excellent way to catch situations that might otherwise result in an incomplete application or an unnecessary denial. University of Massachusetts Nutrition Education Project (UMass-NEP) liaison staff were able to effectively remind people who

thought they would have to start the process over that they had 60 days to send their documentation in; explain that the EBT card wouldn't have benefits on it until their application process was completed; and refer more complicated problems to local DTA staff for solution. This kind of friendly intervention may help account for an application approval rate 6.7% higher than the statewide average during the grant implementation period.

## **Other observations**

- Close contact with state and regional/local Food Stamps staff was enormously helpful to the PEEP-FSP program. The state Food Stamp Outreach office was extremely supportive from the inception of the PEEP/FSP project, from consulting on project design to digging into their data base to find application results. They were also instrumental in the design and implementation of the UMass-NEP liaison/follow-up component. The willingness of staff members in regional and local Transitional Assistance Offices to meet and talk with project partners and outreach workers led to the development of relationships that made the program work better for everyone.
- People who were originally negative were more likely to consider applying for Food Stamps when they learned that they could apply online, and that it was possible to waive the face-to-face interview in some circumstances.
- Using the Food Stamps benefits calculator on the Project Bread web site at [www.gettingfoodstamps.org](http://www.gettingfoodstamps.org) was very helpful in demonstrating to the potential applicant what range of benefits they might be able to expect.
- To establish trust and overcome reluctance, one outreach worker shows applicants his own expired Food Stamp card from a time he needed and received help from the program.
- Another outreach worker doesn't refer directly to the Food Stamp program by name. Because his screenings begin with health programs, he can say – "Oh, and you also qualify for more services from the state. You can get a card like an ATM card so you can purchase food supplies."
- NEP follow-up revealed that many applicants were confused when they received their EBT card, not realizing what it was or not knowing that their eligibility hadn't yet been determined and the card wouldn't work. Outreach workers are now showing applicants pictures of the EBT card so they will recognize it when it arrives, and explaining how and when to use it.
- Providing copies of required documents is a challenge for many applicants. It is very helpful when an outreach worker can offer to help fax anything the DTA needs; but sometimes such an offer can add to the stress in an overworked office.
- Applicants often have difficulty reaching their local DTA office by phone with their questions and concerns, or even to set up a time for their interview. The follow-up calls by UMass NEP staff uncovered some cases; they responded by writing down the questions and concerns and faxing them to the DTA office.