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Corbis

Do Local Food Stamp Offices Improve Access for the Working Poor?

might affect households' decisions to apply for food stamps or continue participating. According to the survey, staff attitudes toward the working poor are generally positive and many practices had been adopted to encourage participation in the program. In offices serving most of the national caseload, none of the interviewed

supervisors or caseworkers agreed with the statement, "the Food Stamp Program encourages dependency." Staff were nearly unanimous in the opinion that eligible households leaving cash welfare for employment should be encouraged to apply for food stamps.

Local offices were also generally accessible. Sixty percent of the national caseload were served by offices near public transportation, and free parking was available at almost all offices. Persistent waiting lines were a problem in offices serving 14 percent of the caseload but never a problem in smaller offices with fewer than 2,000 clients. Many offices operated outside of normal office hours (before 8 a.m., after 5 p.m., or on Saturdays). For example, offices serving 51 percent of the caseload accepted applications during extended hours, and offices serving 43 percent of the caseload

conducted eligibility interviews during extended hours.

Some practices hindered the working poor's willingness to seek out food stamps. For example, at the time of the survey, local offices were more likely to assign short certification periods (3 months or less) to households with earnings, requiring them to re-apply for food stamps more often than nonworking households. In addition, offices serving about half of the caseload required that employers complete a form to verify income. The survey found that the working poor were less likely than the elderly, the disabled, immigrants, or the homeless to be targeted with public education campaigns, to receive transportation assistance, and to be allowed to apply by telephone. *W*

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This finding is drawn from . . .

Food Stamp Program Access Study: Local Office Policies and Practices by Vivian Gabor, Brooke Layne Hardison, Christopher Botsko, and Susan Bartlett, ERS project representative: Margaret Andrews, E-FAN-03-013-1, prepared for USDA/ERS by Health Systems Research, Inc., and Abt Associates Inc., December 2003, available at: www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan03013/efan03013-1/

In 2003, USDA's Food Stamp Program (FSP) provided assistance to an average of 9.2 million low-income households per month. In about a quarter of these households, at least one member was working at a job, though their low earnings still left them eligible for FSP benefits. Even so, nearly half of working households eligible to participate did not. The reasons for not participating vary—lack of knowledge about the program, low benefits, fear of being stigmatized, inaccessible offices, and burdensome requirements, to name a few.

Food stamp benefits are federally funded, with uniform national requirements for eligibility and benefits. However, State and local social services offices administering the program exercise substantial latitude in how they deliver services.

ERS sponsored the first nationally representative survey of local food stamp offices in June 2000 to document the operational practices used by local offices that