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A Unique Food Assistance Program Serves American Indians

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Food assistance programs contribute to the improvement of the nutritional and economic well-being of low-income Americans. Through general assistance programs, such as the Food Stamp Program, and programs designed to meet the needs of specific target groups, USDA is working to improve diets on Indian reservations by making available more nutritious foods and nutrition education. Although such programs have helped to improve dietary levels of low-income American Indian households, there are persistent indications that hunger, malnutrition, diet-related diseases, and other conditions symptomatic of chronic poverty remain prevalent on many reservations.

In 1977, Congress established the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) to provide supplemental food to low-income households living on or near rural American Indian reservations as an acceptable alternative to Food Stamp Program benefits. Because of the remote and geographically dispersed locations of many

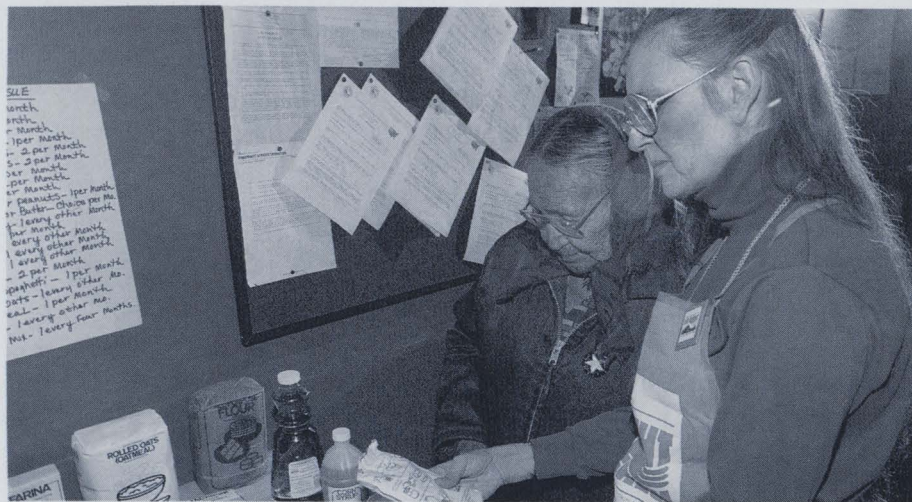
reservations and other Indian lands, many otherwise eligible American Indian families have been unable to participate in the Food Stamp Program, because access to food stamp offices and grocery stores has been difficult.

This article reports some information from a 1988 study commissioned by USDA's Food and Consumer Service (FCS) to assess the operation of the FDPIR and to identify the socioeconomic charac-

teristics of the program's clientele. The results of this study (published in 1990) provide the primary source of data and specific information used in this article.

For Some, an Alternative to Food Stamps

The FDPIR is unique among USDA's federally subsidized food assistance programs. The vast majority of local FDPIR programs are



The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations works to improve diets on American Indian lands by making available more nutritious foods and nutrition education. In fiscal 1993, the program served about 116,000 people each month through 6 State agencies and over 80 tribal organizations on over 200 reservations.

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administered not by a Federal, State, or local government agency but instead by federally recognized tribes through their tribal councils or other American Indian governmental bodies (called Indian Tribal Organizations, or ITO's). The ITO's enter into contractual agreements between the Federal Government and the American Indian tribe to work cooperatively to provide supplemental foods to needy households on or near the reservation. The initial establishment of a program is based on the need and demand for such assistance by the individual tribe.

To participate in the FDPIR, all households must meet income criteria and either reside on an American Indian reservation, or include a tribal member and reside in specific areas near the reservation. In

Oklahoma, however, there are no reservation lands by which to define program coverage, so program eligibility is determined by tribal membership within a particular service area.

The income guidelines are based on the Food Stamp Program net monthly income limits, increased by the food stamp standard deduction.

Individuals or households may not participate in both the FDPIR and the Food Stamp Program in the same month. The FDPIR differs from the Food Stamp Program in that the amount of food each household receives is determined solely by the number of members it contains, and not the household's level of income. The monthly food package, valued at between \$30 and \$35 for each person in the household in

1993, consists of canned and packaged commodities, such as canned meats, canned and dried fruit and vegetables, canned juices, dairy products, grains, and cereals.

USDA pays for the full cost of this food, using some surplus commodities from Government farm price-support programs, as well as foods purchased in the open market with annual appropriations specifically for the program. Although the program was not intended to be the sole source of food for participating households, the FDPIR food package is designed to provide balanced levels of most nutrients and food energy.

Since the mid-1980's, monthly participation in FDPIR has slowly and steadily declined from a high of nearly 150,000 to about 116,000 in 1993 (table 1). Much of this de-

Table 1

The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations

Fiscal year	Local programs	Participation*	Costs
	Number	Thousands	Million dollars
1977	44	81.90	18.87
1978	46	89.77	13.03
1979	45	97.38	21.30
1980	72	74.83	22.03
1981	86	87.95	30.53
1982	83	91.00	39.07
1983	88	98.86	48.15
1984	101	114.18	53.38
1985	104	138.50	62.94
1986	106	144.95	60.76
1987	107	145.68	63.25
1988	108	136.71	61.47
1989	109	141.12	67.68
1990	109	138.93	66.35
1991	109	129.87	64.63
1992	108	120.12	61.99
1993	108	115.80	61.97

Note: *Participation and cost data include both the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) and the Needy Family Program in the Marshall Islands. In fiscal 1993, average monthly participation in the Marshall Islands was 3,978 people.

cline likely stems from FDPIR participants opting to switch to the Food Stamp Program, which has become more accessible to reservations.

The Food Stamp Program offers households greater flexibility and variety in the choice of foods. But for many FDPIR households, these advantages may be offset by the real or perceived difficulty of applying for and using food stamps, as well as any stigma which may be associated with spending the stamps.

In addition to programs targeted to meeting the needs of those on or near reservations, American Indians, as citizens of the United States, may qualify for any and all public-welfare assistance that the Government offers. Low-income American Indians can seek assistance from such programs as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or Medicaid, which are available to all needy persons. Other programs offered by USDA are also available, such as the School Lunch Program and the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Participation in WIC and

the School Lunch Program does not exclude American Indians from participation in FDPIR.

Most Are Small Local Programs

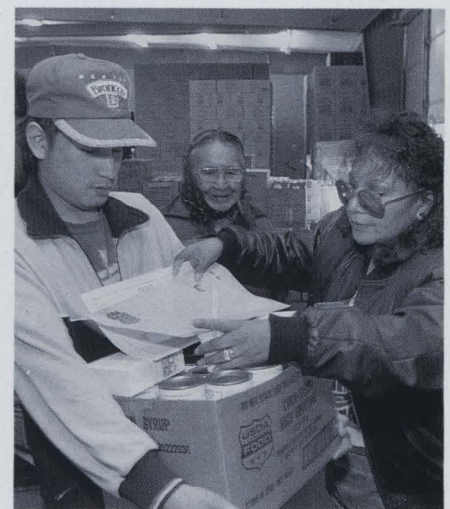
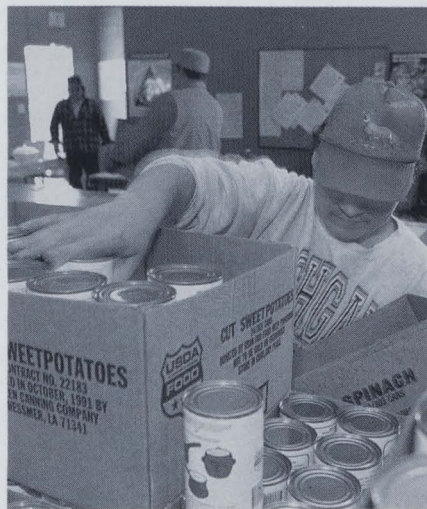
In fiscal 1993, the FDPIR served approximately 116,000 people each month through 6 State agencies and 88 tribal organizations on over 200 reservations. Food valued at approximately \$50 million was distributed through FDPIR. In addition, food valued at \$1.4 million was donated to USDA without charge to FDPIR from Section 32 surplus removal and Section 416 price-support activities. Administrative funding for States and territories totaled approximately \$18 million.

Local programs participating in FDPIR vary considerably in size and, therefore, in costs of administration. Many of the FDPIR programs are relatively small, in terms of costs of operation, the number of staff administering them, and the number of persons being served. Nearly half of the 108 programs serve an average of 250 or fewer households per month. The small-

est programs have annual budgets under \$10,000 and serve fewer than 50 people. However, 50 local programs provide commodities to between 250 and 1,200 households each month. The largest program, run by the Navajo Nation, has a budget of \$8.5 million and serves over 16,000 people each month. The five largest programs, which serve over 1,200 households monthly, together account for over one-third of all participants in FDPIR.

The local program administrators (ITO's) must contribute resources to meet 25 percent of the administrative costs of the local programs, unless there is "compelling justification that this matching requirement cannot be met." Program history indicates that this requirement is more of a guideline than a strict requirement, although some ITO's match in excess of the 25 percent. To date, no penalties have been imposed for not meeting the 25-percent matching requirement.

A number of FDPIR programs involve more than one reservation or tribe. In fact, the 108 programs served 217 reservations and other American Indian land areas. There



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are a number of local programs in which several ITO's are cooperating to administer a program, typically through a service-delivery organization that coordinates other welfare services in addition to food assistance. In other instances, one tribe may agree to extend its service area to include a nearby reservation. For example, one of the larger programs may provide warehousing and transportation services to one or more smaller neighboring tribes that lack such facilities.

Addressing the Widespread Need

Low-income Indians share many of the same problems facing other rural Americans with few financial resources, such as declining job opportunities and limited access to health and other welfare services.

However, at the time of the 1988 study, FCS estimated that 32.7 percent of all American Indians living on reservations received food stamps and an additional 17.3 percent received monthly food commodities through the FDPIR. That translates into at least half of all American Indians receiving food assistance in any given month. In comparison, about 10 percent of all Americans receive some form of household food assistance. More recent surveys conducted by the General Accounting Office and the Bureau of Indian Affairs have indicated that economic conditions on Indian reservations have not materially improved since that time.

Most FDPIR participants come from small households. The average participating household contained 3.2 members in 1988, compared with the national average for all low-income families of 3.7 people. About 40 percent of all FDPIR households consisted of one or two members.

About half of the FDPIR households included children, and most of these were couples with children. Female-headed households, which make up 47 percent of all low-income families nationwide, constituted only 8.5 percent of the FDPIR caseload. However, many of the female-headed Indian households opted to participate in the Food Stamp Program instead, since it is more convenient for those mothers who also receive AFDC because the two programs often coexist at local welfare agencies.

A substantial proportion of FDPIR households—over 33 percent—include elderly members (age 60 years or more). This prevalence, especially of elderly living alone, presents both a concern and a challenge to program administrators not only relating to the delivery of food assistance, but to other services as well. The elderly accounted for over 60 percent of the one-person households in the program. Half of the FDPIR households with an elderly member also included non-elderly members. About 33 percent of all elderly households were persons living alone and the remainder of elderly households consisted of two or more elderly persons living together.

Like most low-income households, FDPIR recipients have a low educational achievement level: adults averaged 10 years of schooling, with less than 10 percent formally educated or trained beyond high school. This situation clearly reflects the nexus between education and economic well-being, particularly since young American Indians must leave the reservation to seek educational and employment opportunities elsewhere.

Although over 35 percent of all FDPIR households reported earnings from wages or self-employment, compared with 20 percent of all Food Stamp households, the economic status of FDPIR participants

remains significantly lower than that of other low-income populations. The impoverishment of FDPIR households is reflected in their level of assets as well as their income. More than three-fourths of the FDPIR households indicated they had no cash on hand and could claim no financial assets of any kind.

Providing food assistance only addresses one facet of the multidimensional socioeconomic distress that is facing many American Indians. Many factors affect the quality of life of American Indians residing on reservations, including the availability of the basic necessities of life, access to health and medical services, and opportunities for employment and education. A variety of programs are attempting to address these needs. The Indian Health Service, for instance, provides medical care and hospitalization services on a number of reservations. Federal programs administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other agencies have been initiated to provide assistance such as job training, public housing, and agricultural development.

FDPIR, with a somewhat declining number of clientele, will in all likelihood remain as an operative food assistance program for some years to come. Together with food stamps and other food assistance programs that are made available, FDPIR will continue to contribute to helping meet the special food assistance needs of American Indians on reservations.

References

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