

KANSAS FOOD ASSISTANCE PROMOTION CAMPAIGN

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INTRODUCTION

The Kansas Nutrition Network (KNN), a program of K-State Research and Extension, is a statewide collaboration of public and private agencies that provide nutrition assistance and/or nutrition or physical activity education. KNN received a \$10,000 three-year grant (October 2000 through September 2003) from the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund in Kansas to conduct Food Assistance Program promotion campaigns in two selected communities. Social and Rehabilitation Services (SRS) operates the Food Assistance Program in Kansas. One community was chosen because a well-established SRS Advisory Committee had conducted a needs assessment of that community showing a drop in food assistance participation as well as an increase in free and reduced price school lunch participation during 1993–1999. The second community was selected during the second year of the project and was directed by an active committee of its local Community Action Program that was working on children and family issues.

FORMATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

The target audience for both communities was families with children. The Program's goals were to have eligible individuals complete an application for food assistance, mail or take it to the Food Assistance Office, and complete the process of applying for food assistance. Formative research was conducted to understand the target audience's needs and perceptions of the Food Assistance Program. Seven focus groups were conducted in the first community: one with food assistance participants, three with those eligible for food assistance but not enrolled, two with service agency staff (such as food pantry and WIC), and one with food assistance staff. The second community used the

results from the focus groups to develop a survey instrument for collecting quantitative data among a small sample to verify concerns expressed by the focus group participants. Surveys were distributed to clients at social service agencies serving the target audience. Clients were asked to complete them in the waiting room or as part of an intake interview process. A total of 149 surveys were completed.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Three significant themes emerged from the focus groups: 1) People did not know how to apply for food assistance; 2) People did not know about recent changes in the Food Assistance Program (e.g., many did not know that owning vehicles no longer disqualified them for food assistance or that the application form had been shortened from 10 to 4 pages); and 3) Both food assistance participants and non-participants perceived that food assistance staff were "rude." Many reported that their child's Head Start teacher or the staff at the food bank were more "friendly." Complaints about food assistance staff were inconsistent with information collected from the interviewed staff who expressed great concern for the clients they assist. Staff members talked about "my families" and "my people" and viewed their role as "helpers" for people in great need. When asked where they received nutrition information, both food assistance participants' and non-participants' most frequent response was "WIC displays."

Of the 149 completed surveys, 75% (112) of the respondents suggested that people do not use the Food Assistance Program because they do not think that they are eligible. Unlike the focus group findings, the survey results indicated that this group preferred to

have nutrition information mailed to them.

MARKETING PLAN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The SRS Advisory Committee in the first community used the results from the formative research to develop a marketing plan. The biggest barriers to be addressed were the perception of a cumbersome process with long forms and the perceived unfriendly attitude of the SRS staff. The SRS Advisory Committee decided to reposition the Food Assistance Program as "new" and "easier," a task facilitated by the recent change in the Program's name from "food stamps" to "food assistance" and the simplification of eligibility requirements.

The issue of "rudeness" was addressed in several ways. First, to avoid having food assistance applications denied, potential applicants were given a list of the documentation required at the time of the application (e.g. social security number, proof of income, proof of bank accounts, etc.). Because the target audience perceived staff at other service agencies as being friendlier, applications were distributed through these outlets. Training was provided to the staff at these agencies to enable them to help applicants complete the new forms and answer questions about the application process.

In response to research findings in the first community that the target audience trusted nutrition information received from WIC displays, WIC was selected as the primary site for the campaign information. The SRS Advisory Committee developed three creative concepts for the WIC displays: 1) an informational message on how to apply; 2) a promise that the program is new and easier to use; and 3) a promise that food assistance workers "will help you

get the benefits you qualify for" and a list of information applicants need to provide.

In order to pretest the "look" of the displays with the potential target audience, three small posters were developed and placed at the WIC office for one day. People were asked to "vote for their favorite poster." The poster that was preferred by the SRS Advisory Committee received no votes. One poster received two votes and the third poster, which was developed into the displays, received 198 votes. The displays were designed to fit on tri-fold display boards. Eight display boards were purchased for WIC, Head Start, food pantries, the Food Assistance Office, and several other service providers in the community. Each agency used the display boards three times throughout the first year for approximately one month each time. The first display was used as part of a "back to school" theme, the second display was used prior to the winter holidays, and the third display was used at the end of the school year. Approximately 50 other agencies were identified as providing services to the target audience, including physicians' offices, health clinics, and churches. These organizations were mailed a small poster reinforcing the messages contained on the display boards, and the cover letter encouraged them to place the poster in a prominent location in their office to help promote food assistance benefits. The displays and posters were available from fall 2002 through spring 2003.

In the second community the Advisory Committee decided to emphasize recent changes in food assistance eligibility requirements, e.g., vehicle ownership no longer precluded eligibility. As the survey results indicated that applicants in this community preferred to

receive nutrition information by mail, the local school district agreed to provide a small flyer about the program to 3,000 families of school-age children in February 2003.

EVALUATION

Both process and outcome evaluations were completed for the campaign conducted in the first community. A convenience sample of 25 WIC participants was interviewed at the WIC clinic. Of those interviewed, six (24%) recalled seeing one or more of the displays. One person was prompted to apply for food assistance as a result of seeing the display and four people encouraged others to apply. A survey was mailed to those agencies that received display boards and a separate survey was mailed to agencies that received posters. Seventeen agencies reported they had displayed the posters or displays and of those, four reported that clients made comments or asked questions about them.

During the period March 2002 through August 2003 approximately 213 additional households in these two communities participated in the Food Assistance Program above the statewide average increase in food assistance. These additional households received approximately \$411,516 per year in food assistance benefits, based on average household benefit figures. This represents a significant impact on food security and the nutritional well-being of those households and demonstrates the effectiveness of a low-cost campaign.

In order to make the displays useful for other communities, they have been slightly modified to include a statewide toll-free telephone number of the Food Assistance Office. Additional display boards have been purchased and made available to other communities that

Choose to do a Food Assistance Program promotional campaign. For copies or more information about the program, please contact Karen Fitzgerald, e-mail kfitzger@ksu.edu or visit the Website at www.kansasnutritionnetwork.org.

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