

**Question: Percentage increase in the number of food stamp applications here in California.**

The latest U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) study dated October 2005 estimates that approximately 50 percent of the people who are eligible for the Food Stamp Program (FSP) are actually receiving Food Stamp benefits in California. In response CDSS has carried out or implemented a number of FSP information/outreach and program access improvement efforts. FSP applications and caseload had been increasing before the recent food price increases and economic slowdown. These factors make it very difficult to measure the direct impact of the economy on caseload growth. We have noted that the rate of increase in applications and caseload began to accelerate in July 2007.

In looking at the quarterly application data, we see a gradual increase in the total number of applications beginning in the October-December 2006 quarter. Quarterly applications have steadily increased from 273,969 from that quarter to 335,330 in the most recent period, through February 2008. What is also interesting in comparing quarterly application data is that for the first time we have not seen the cyclical decrease that usually occurs in the October-December period. (October-December 2007 data shows an increase in applications).

Looking at FSP caseload data, California has seen a steady rise in Food Stamp households over the past several years. Most of this increase has occurred over the past 13 months, with the caseload increasing 10 percent from February 2007 to February of 2008 (from 811,451 households to the most recent number of 892,149 households).

CDSS had undertaken steps to increase awareness about the FSP and improve the access of eligible individuals and families to these benefits well before the recent rise in food prices and the economic crisis. CDSS has pursued policy changes to simplify and streamline the application process and the administration of the Food Stamp Program.

Processing additional applications will require that we continue to look for ways to streamline our processes. Program simplification and operational efficiency is an ongoing goal of CDSS and is reflected in a number of program changes that were made before the food crisis and economic downturn, including:

- The Food Stamp Simplification Option was implemented November 1, 2006, and allowed for: the alignment of the resource and income exclusions with the CalWORKs program; the treatment of child support payments as excludable income instead of a deduction; and the requirement to use of the Standard Utility Allowance.

- Waiver of face-to-face the interview, at recertification for Quarterly Reporting (QR) households, and at both intake and recertification for the elderly and the disabled. Implementation is scheduled for July, 2008. This allows county welfare workers to conduct the federally required annual recertification interview via the telephone and make the process more convenient and with rising gas prices, less costly for the recipient.
- Five counties-- San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sacramento, Santa Clara and Tuolumne--have implemented the optional Food Stamp Restaurant Meals Program for homeless, elderly, and disabled Food Stamp recipients. This program allows for the use of the EBT card to purchase prepared meals. This program increases access for the poorest folks who otherwise may have difficulty using their food stamp benefits.

In addition to the program simplification, numerous outreach activities are in progress to improve access and to reach those who are impacted by the recent downturn in the economy.

Over the past year (since 2007), the Department has included a network of health centers in our FSP outreach activities. CDSS is working with the Central Valley Health Network, a consortium of Health Centers in participating in the Food Stamp Outreach Project. The Central Valley Health Network works actively with WIC and Medi-Cal to integrate food stamp outreach into already existing activities. Currently, CVHN is operating in Merced and San Bernardino Counties.

Since 2006 CDSS has been working with San Francisco County and the C-IV computer consortium (Merced, Riverside, San Bernardino and Stanislaus Counties) to develop an online food application process. The C-IV's online system, C4 Yourself, has been operational since October 2007. San Francisco County's system is currently in the planning and development phase.

Since 2007 a partnership with the US Department Agriculture – Western Region Office of the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) and four counties (Los Angeles, San Diego, Fresno, and Tulare counties) has been forged to develop a Food Stamp Program for Working Families Strategic Plan. This plan utilizes a partnership with these counties, local community based organizations along with CDSS and FNS to increase public awareness of the FSP and encourage eligible low-income working families to access FSP benefits.

FNS has also provided funding assistance for local media campaigns in these areas and has launched a second round of media spots via local radio and television stations beginning May 1<sup>st</sup> and running through June 30, 2008.

CDSS is considering several mitigation strategies to streamline the application process which may alleviate some of the strain on counties. These include waiving the face-to-face interview requirement for working households at initial application and expanding the existing policy of waiving the face-to-face interview requirement for elderly and disabled households.

Additionally we have a number of application and case processing simplification or streamlining projects underway or under consideration.

We are streamlining and simplifying the eligibility determination process for youths timing out of the foster care homes and seeking a waiver approval from USDA, FNS on pending the application two months prior to these youths turning 18 years old.

We are looking at expanding the federal Categorical Eligibility option to simplify the application process.

We are working with the California Welfare Directors Association on a “Food Stamp Symposium” that will explore ways to improve program access and streamline the application and case maintenance process. We will be inviting other states to share their best practices with us. We will also seek ideas from advocates and others involved in the provision of services to low-income people.