

FoodShare Wisconsin

(Formerly Food Stamps)

Overview

FoodShare Wisconsin helps low-income individuals and families buy food they need for good health. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers Food Stamps at the federal level through the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). The Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS) supervises the state's FoodShare Program (FSP). County/tribal human or social service agencies administer FoodShare locally and accept applications and determine eligibility for benefits.

Eligibility

FoodShare participants are people of all ages who are employed but have low incomes (below 200% FPL), are living on small or fixed incomes, have lost their jobs, or are disabled with low incomes. U.S. citizens and certain citizens of other countries residing legally and permanently in the U.S. may qualify for benefits. People affected by natural disasters may also be eligible.

FoodShare benefits are based on financial and non-financial criteria. Benefit amounts are determined by household size and monthly net income after deductions. The lower the net income, the more benefits a household may receive. Only families with very little or no monthly net income will receive the maximum amount of benefits. Eligible Native Americans who elect to participate in the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) are ineligible for FoodShare benefits.

Access/Participation

As of July 2007, 386,232 individuals in 164,379 households were enrolled in FoodShare – nearly half of enrolled people were children. Since July 2002 the number of participating households has increased over 50% (from 108,236 households). The most recent USDA data ranks Wisconsin 30th for participation with a rate of 55%. In Milwaukee County, the largest county by population, the participation rate is 90% - the third highest rate in the country among major urban areas. The average participation in other counties is below 50%. Wisconsin has set a goal to increase the participation rate by an additional 15% in 2007.

Benefit Details

The federal government pays 100 percent of FSP benefits. Federal and state governments share administrative costs, with the federal government contributing nearly 50 percent. As of June 2007, the average statewide FoodShare allotment amount per household was \$186 per month. The total average monthly value of benefits for Wisconsin is currently \$31.1 million or \$373 million annually. Benefits are delivered by means of the Quest card, an electronic debit card that has increased the confidentiality of FoodShare transactions. Benefits may be used to purchase food, seed and seedlings, but not non-food and personal care items, pet food, and hot food.

Program Impact

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FoodShare benefits have a significant positive impact on recipients' overall health and nutrition. FoodShare improves access to food through normal retail grocery stores rather than through charitable food providers, provides maximum client choice and control, improves access to ethnically appropriate food and foods meeting special dietary needs (low salt, sugar & fat; kosher foods). Additionally USDA research shows that participation in WIC and/or Food Stamps reduces the risk of child abuse or neglect, the occurrences of anemia, and nutritional deficiency. Federal studies have found that for every \$5 of food stamp benefits, \$9.75 is generated in community economic activity.

Positive Developments & Trends

Wisconsin changed the name to *FoodShare Wisconsin* in October 2004 to reduce stigma, promote its nutritional benefits and to reflect the fact that benefits are no longer paper stamps but are now on a card similar to a debit card. FNS has proposed to change the program's name for the same reasons.

Wisconsin has taken a number of steps to increase access and simplify administration.

- ACCESS has become a nationally recognized model for internet-based screening, application and benefits management. The ACCESS website at <http://access.wisconsin.gov>, offers:
 - “*Am I Eligible*,” an easy 15-minute online screening tool for a dozen nutrition and health programs. During the past 3 years more than 143,000 people completed ACCESS self-assessment screenings – of those, over 91,000 were potentially eligible for FoodShare.
 - “*Apply for Benefits*,” an online application for FoodShare, BadgerCare, Family Planning Waiver and Medicaid. More than 24,000 FoodShare applications have been submitted online. For those found eligible, the monthly benefit averaged \$190 per household.
 - “*Check My Benefits*,” enables current customers to check the status of their benefits online. From September 2005 to July 2007, 7,878 households used the tool.
 - “*Report My Changes*,” allows current customers to report changes in income, household composition and other categories of changes reducing the volume of calls to caseworkers.
- Wisconsin has simplified application, eliminated the asset test, lengthened the certification period for working households, reduced reporting requirements, implemented simplified 6-month change reporting, and increased coordination with BadgerCare, WIC and other programs.
- Wisconsin is one of 11 states now operating under expanded categorical eligibility, which eliminates the asset test and raises gross income limit to 200% of the federal poverty level.

Wisconsin is in the planning phase on several initiatives to improve access to benefits while further simplifying the program. Some of these include:

- Waiving the face-to-face interview requirement for initial applications and reviews.
- Submitted a plan to FNS for a pilot project to simplify application for elderly and disabled households that receive SSI. All newly approved SSI recipients who meet requirements for age, residence and household size would receive a short application in the mail with about five questions. Reported shelter expenses would determine benefit levels. Eligibility would be determined without an interview and recipients would remain eligible for three years.

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- Waiving the application requirement for recently closed FS cases, as long as eligibility is reestablished within the calendar month following case closure.
- Applied for a federal Food Stamp Program participation grant to build on modernization using a “multiple access” service delivery model to actively engage community partners as local portals where potentially eligible clients can receive application assistance.
- The 2007 biennial budget contains policy changes related to child support cooperation and FoodShare employment and training that would improve access to benefits.
- Preliminary work to establish a 24 month certification period for households in which all members are elderly or disabled with a 12 month interim change report.
- A recent survey indicated 92% of respondents were satisfied with FS customer service.
- A Milwaukee County workgroup has been established to identify solutions to the unique challenges facing Milwaukee’s FoodShare program.
- BadgerCare Plus – if passed by the state legislature - will require families to report fewer changes, which may also reduce the FoodShare error rate. Increased BadgerCare Plus outreach and education could positively impact FoodShare participation.

Concerns and Areas for Potential Improvement

- The \$10 minimum benefit set by federal law has not increased since 1977 although the USDA market basket cost has risen 300%. Over 22,000 households receive the \$10 minimum.
- Wisconsin serves just more than half of eligible people. Participation in areas outside of Milwaukee is much lower. Participation by elderly is the lowest of any group. An estimated 350,000 individuals at 125% of the federal poverty level are eligible but not participating. This means Wisconsin households lose tens of millions in federal nutrition benefits annually.
- Second Harvest research reports that only a third of Wisconsin food pantry households participate in FoodShare, despite an estimated 90% being financially eligible. This increase demand on local food pantries which are serving 60% more households over the past 5 years.
- Some view FoodShare as welfare and are reluctant to apply. Some clients report being treated disrespectfully or rudely by county caseworkers, which exacerbates negative community perceptions and increases reluctance to apply for benefits.
- Some customers and community advocates report significant difficulties reaching case workers when they have questions or need to provide information to maintain benefits. The ratio of clients to caseworkers in Milwaukee is high and adversely impacts customer service.
- Federal laws that establish child care deductions are too low; caps on shelter costs for working households are unfair; there is no transportation deduction; dual income limits (gross and net) to determine eligibility are too complex; and basic benefit levels are too low.
- Although ACCESS is a major advancement in access, many eligible people lack computers, internet access, or computer literacy and cannot use ACCESS unaided. Community organizations can provide much needed application support to clients but lack funding to enable them to assist eligible people to apply online from community locations.
- Continued emphasis on simplifying program administration can enhance customer service and reduce the workload for local agencies.

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FoodShare would be more effective if...

- The above stated problems are effectively solved.
- Wisconsin's application process is further simplified within limits to FNS regulations so that more eligible persons apply for and receive benefits.
- The Congressional reauthorization of Food Stamps currently underway at the federal level implements genuine policy and funding improvements. Wisconsin FSP staff and community organizations are actively advocating for positive changes to the program.
- FoodShare could encourage greater consumption of fruits and vegetables by providing additional benefits to buy produce or by distributing Farmers Market vouchers to clients.
- Food pantries could issue short-term interim benefits to connect clients rapidly to the program.
- The share of Food Stamp administrative costs paid by the federal government has slipped below 50% in recent years leaving states to pick up an increasingly larger share. The federal government should pay its full share of administrative costs.
- FoodShare applications for retired elderly receiving Social Security benefits might be streamlined by utilizing Social Security income data to determine eligibility, similar to the SSI pilot.
- FoodShare income eligibility is increased to 150% of the federal poverty level.
- The number of caseworkers is increased in counties with high caseload volume per caseworker.