

Reaching Rural Populations: Feeding the Gulf Coast

Senior SNAP Enrollment Initiative Best Practices Report

April 2020

Introduction

Feeding the Gulf Coast (FTGC) is part of the Feeding America network of food banks, with our mission focused on ending hunger and fighting food insecurity. Our unique outreach program was established in 2010 and collaborates with the other Feeding America food banks serving Alabama and Mississippi to aid individuals with benefits applications, with a specific focus on SNAP.

Through our vast network of food banks, partnering agencies and community partners, our staff (housed throughout both states) focus on finding underserved individuals, particularly in rural areas. We leverage these relationships to spread information about our services and to educate communities about benefits. Using data from Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap report and state SNAP offices, we identify and target the most vulnerable counties with the lowest SNAP participation rates.

FTGC's Outreach Strategy

FTGC helps enroll seniors in rural areas by taking a multi-faceted approach using direct mail and on the ground outreach efforts to drive applications to be completed both in-person and through our call center. By building awareness and trust in these rural areas, we are able to educate households that may otherwise not be reached. Direct mailers target rural counties and zip codes that are low income. Mail pieces explain how to overcome barriers and give seniors an opportunity to have their questions answered and applications filled out from the comfort and privacy of their home.

By targeting our mailing efforts with our in-person outreach, we are able to find more community partners and champions in rural areas to help support our work. Through common messaging and branding, we are able to saturate materials in each region for a concentrated effort. Layering our in-person outreach efforts with our mailers offers clients opportunities to engage face-to-face.

Challenges

Serving rural populations is our largest objective, given that our service area is vastly comprised of rural communities. Providing outreach to these rural communities comes with its own set of challenges unique to the landscape. The challenges we face are ongoing and we are constantly examining and evaluating these challenges to improve how we address them. In particular, we have four challenges related to serving rural populations:

- **Recognition:** The majority of the counties we serve are not located on the coast, making it hard for the people we are trying to reach to identify with our brand, Feeding the Gulf Coast. Establishing local connection is an important part of building trust, which makes it challenging when people do not see our brand as “local.”
- **Awareness:** Finding those who need our services in rural areas can be difficult because of a lack of awareness of our services within those communities, as well as limited internet access for communicating information about our services. Word of mouth is often the best way to reach people, which can be difficult if we do not have a strong connection to the local community.
- **Access:** Time and travel will always be part of the challenge of reaching the vast area we serve.
- **Return on investment:** We experience diminishing returns and sustainability of outreach in rural areas because we have to invest more time and resources into reaching these populations but often yield far fewer applications than we would for the same investment in more urban areas.

Best Practices

While each of these best practices addresses the challenges of working in rural communities, not all interventions work in every place. These are lessons learned and are part of our best practices when trying to meet the needs of each unique rural area.

- To address brand awareness and gain recognition, we leveraged our food bank partners and community allies to reach their local connections. By connecting with the agency network of each food bank, we have access to over 1,000 partner agencies operating feeding programs within their local communities. These agencies are often respected within their communities and already know who needs help and how to reach them. We utilized local food bank logos and branding and created flyers with the local county or city’s name included. By adding familiar logos and community partners, people experienced less confusion over why they were being reached out to by Feeding the Gulf Coast. The local branding also helped them connect the service to a familiar entity.

- In order to get those most in need in the community to have our services available, we have found some success in piggybacking on existing events, such as a food distribution at a local partner agency, and coupling our targeted mailers that either invited them to attend the event or call us for assistance. In addition to increasing access, these endeavors also strengthened our connections to the local communities for brand awareness and recognition.
- One of our tools and best practices is to find champions in the local communities and equip and empower them to whatever level they are able. This includes training a partner agency to help their clients complete applications, as well as having a volunteer who aids in distribution of materials in the town. We have learned that when you find someone who is willing to help, it is best to give them an opportunity to help in the way they are most comfortable. This ensures their continued support of our work and reduces the risk of volunteer burnout or over-commitment.
- While we know the importance of working in our rural areas, we know that some areas will never have the high return of applications that the more populated areas have. We have found that having a schedule for these counties which rotates both events and mailers helps us ensure counties are all being reached but that our resources are being managed appropriately.

SNAP Client Stories

- Ms. DiRico is 66 years old. She had been diagnosed with three forms of cancer and applied for SNAP early last year because she was struggling to pay all her bills due to the high cost of medical treatment. However, she was denied SNAP because she did not meet the net income test since she owned her house and could not claim rent as a deduction. Her medical expenses were also not considered because she had met her deductible earlier in the year and thus had no out-of-pocket costs for the 3 months before her application. Our team helped her reapply and helped her to do a more thorough job detailing her expenses, including mileage to her treatments, which quickly added up. She recently sold her house and is now paying rent. Between these extra steps and aiding in the documentation, we were able to demonstrate that Ms. DiRico qualifies for benefits. She told us that if she did not have an advocate, she would have given up and just resorted to only using what her local pantry had. We also helped her get connected with farmers market vouchers and other places to get food.

- Doris, 61, called our benefits enrollment center number and said she had just come back from packing Christmas shoe boxes for international people in need when she found out her husband had been laid off. She volunteers weekly at her church's food pantry in her small town but could not bring herself to ask for food because she felt like the other people coming in needed it more. She was very distraught at the situation and asked if there was any way for us to help her get food for her and her granddaughter. We helped her to submit her SNAP application and found another food pantry she could visit in the meantime. When we followed up with her later, she was grateful for our help, and while she and her husband were still sorting out their next steps, including raising their grandchild and considering retirement, they have been able to make ends meet. She told us she has had a greater appreciation for those she serves at her church pantry.
- Mr. Davis called our food bank looking for a pantry. He told us he was usually able to make ends meet with some help from his family, but that month he had some unexpected medical expenses. We asked if he had SNAP benefits, and he said he did not because he had been in prison several years ago, which had also made it hard for him to find a good job once he was released. After a few questions, we assured him that his prison time would not be the thing that kept him from benefits and we helped him apply. We helped him include his out-of-pocket medical expenses, and when we conducted our follow-up, he had been approved. He could not believe that he was eligible and shared with us this bit of wisdom from his incarceration, which while not directly related was certainly meaningful: *Take time to be with your family, really with them, because time is all we have and when everything is taken away that is the thing you want, just to be with the ones you love, your family.*
- Eddie, or "Pee-Wee" as he was known by in his football days, lived between two small towns that were each punctuated by 4-way stops and gas stations. He had lived a simple life working at a local factory that had closed down just a little too soon for him to retire, which left him, like many of the folks there, without a job. He took to doing odd jobs until he was old enough to receive Social Security. While he and his wife had been living frugally, the trips to "town" for regular doctors' visits had become more frequent, as they do, but driving over an hour was slowly taking its toll. He mentioned that he did not want to apply because in the small town he did not want everybody knowing his business. We assured him that because of his age his application would go to the state capital and none of his neighbors would be the wiser. We also helped him document the out-of-pocket medical

deductions he had, including his mileage. Through our help, Eddie and his wife were able to get the medical deductions and qualify for benefits.

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