Engaging Special Populations

Cultural Competency

Section I. The Right Thing: The Importance of Effective SNAP Outreach Across Cultures

What is cultural competence?

Cultural competence refers to how well people understand and interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Diversity means not only people of different nationalities, ethnic groups, and religious backgrounds, but also includes gender and age, people with disabilities, as well as the extent to which immigrants have integrated into mainstream American culture.

While there are many definitions of cultural competence, we have chosen to use the following as the foundation for this section of the Outreach Toolkit:

Cultural competence is the capacity of an individual or an organization and its personnel to communicate effectively and to convey information in a manner that is easily understood by and tailored for diverse audiences.

What does this section hope to accomplish?

This section of the toolkit provides suggestions and practical tips, planning tools, and real-life examples of how to make SNAP outreach more culturally competent. It is not, however, intended to provide specific strategies and tactics for reaching individuals of distinct races, ethnicities, cultures, or other demographic groups.

Why should agency staff workers care about being culturally competent?

By using language and materials that are tailored for specific target groups, workers improve communication with clients for better customer service. Ultimately, their jobs are easier, more productive, and more fulfilling. Culturally competent communication allows outreach workers to:

- Spend more time providing services and less time trying to clarify confusing or misunderstood information.
- Decrease the level of stress and anxiety for themselves and clients.
- Reduce the likelihood of errors on applications and other important paperwork.
- Increase the level of trust with clients and improve overall satisfaction with SNAP.

Reaching Diverse Audiences

You Know You Are Being Effective When...

- Your staff reflects your client population, or target client population, in racial and cultural makeup and language.
- Your staff is aware of and demonstrates the behaviors, attitudes, and skills that enable them to work well across cultures.
- You work with organizations that are directly involved with the diverse communities you need to reach.
- You have relationships with ethnic or minority media in your community.
- Your outreach includes varied approaches to sharing information with individuals with disabilities.
- You use translation and interpretive services to meet the language needs of your clients.
- Print materials are easy to read and meet the sixth grade literacy level. Print materials include picture and symbol formats, as needed.
- Materials are available in different formats, such as video, audiotape and enlarged print.

Why is cultural competence important for SNAP outreach?

The need to reach diverse audiences is greater now than ever before. The U.S. population is changing, and communities today are more racially, ethnically, culturally, and economically different. By the year 2030, the Census Bureau reports that 40 percent of the U.S. population will describe themselves as members of racial and ethnic groups other than non-Hispanic and White.

A recent report on participation rates by various demographic characteristics shows that more than half of all individuals receiving SNAP benefits are non-White:

- More than 33 percent or one-third of participants are Black or African-American.
- Nineteen percent are Hispanic.
- Another 4 percent belong to other races or ethnic groups.

Still, not everyone who is eligible for SNAP takes part in the program. Participation among target populations continues to be low. This is especially true among Hispanics and the elderly:

- About 51 percent of the eligible Hispanic population participate in SNAP.
- Only 30 percent of the elderly who are eligible for SNAP actually participate.

What are the implications of not being culturally competent?

Given the current and projected demographic changes in the United States, outreach providers must take the Nation's increasingly diverse and complex backgrounds into account when conducting SNAP outreach in order to be effective in reaching as many eligible people as possible.

Workers who are not culturally competent are less effective or successful when conducting outreach due to potential miscommunications and misunderstandings. A small amount of time invested up front in learning to communicate effectively with diverse groups, especially those groups that the office serves frequently, will pay off with more efficient time management, better customer relations, and improved participation in SNAP.

SNAP is a nutrition assistance program that enables families to supplement their food budget so that they can buy more healthful food, such as vegetables and fruits. A healthy diet and physical exercise are important. An increasing number of studies and reports, such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Healthy People 2010 (www.healthypeople.gov), cite poor nutrition as a leading contributor to diseases that disproportionately affect minorities and low-income populations. Consider these other facts:

- Obesity among low-income Americans is linked to having limited or uncertain access to nutritious and safe foods.
- People living in rural areas are more likely to be older, poorer, and less healthy than people living in urban areas.
- Obesity continues to be higher for African-American and Mexican-American women than for non-Hispanic and White women.
- The prevalence of high blood pressure in African-Americans is among the highest in the world.

? Myths About SNAP

Myth
"I work every day. SNAP benefits are for people who are unemployed or who can't work."

Fact
Many SNAP users are employed full-time yet need extra help to afford more nutritious foods.

Myth
"I can't buy the types of food my family eats with SNAP benefits."

Fact
Most grocery store chains and even some small specialty or "corner" stores and farmers markets accept SNAP benefits. What's most important is that there are very few foods that you cannot purchase with SNAP benefits; examples of items that may not be purchased are alcohol, pet food, and hot, prepared foods.

Myth
"I refuse to be on welfare. Only welfare recipients receive SNAP benefits."

Fact
SNAP is a nutrition assistance program, which is not the same as welfare. Participants do not have to receive welfare to be eligible for SNAP benefits.

Section II. Getting To Know Your Community: How To Conduct a Needs Assessment

What is a needs assessment?

A needs assessment is the process of gathering and examining information to get a clearer and more accurate picture of an issue, challenge, or environment. In this case, the needs assessment will help you better understand the diverse community in which you want to conduct SNAP outreach. This information is gathered through a series of carefully crafted questions that will likely be asked of individuals inside and outside of your organization so that you can get a number of different opinions. The results can be presented as a formal report or an informal document—the key is to summarize the findings accurately.

Why is a needs assessment an important part of SNAP community outreach?

A needs assessment will help you better understand the challenges facing underserved communities and the barriers that potential clients face in applying for SNAP. It allows for a more indepth and unbiased look at the problem from a wide range of people. This information can provide new insights and answer questions you may have, such as:

- What do we know about the local needs for SNAP outreach?
- Are we reaching out to the neediest groups?
- Which organizations in our community are conducting SNAP outreach, what services do they provide, and how are these services funded?
- Do various groups understand who is eligible for SNAP?
- Which media are most credible among our target populations?
- How do we establish and maintain trust?
- How can we strengthen the effectiveness of current community outreach activities?
- Do our materials appeal to multicultural audiences?
- Are our materials in the appropriate languages? At the sixth grade reading level?
- Are we maximizing relationships with influential people and organizations to reach diverse communities?

Having the facts in hand enables you to set specific goals, develop tailored plans-of-action, and determine the best use of limited resources. Once you know and understand your audience, it is easier to develop strategies to reach them.

Reasons To Conduct a Needs Assessment

- To learn how other organizations, such as community-based groups or your local SNAP office, might support your outreach efforts.
- To get tried-and-true suggestions that worked with other programs.
- To get insight into what your target audience really thinks and believes about SNAP.
- To help set goals and measure success.
- To understand basic statistical and other information about the needs in your community and the gaps between services and needs in order to identify appropriate strategies to address them.

How Do I Get Started?

Step 1 Identify The Community

Through your day-to-day activities, you may have a clear understanding of the population in the community you wish to target. If you are not sure which groups to reach, there are many sources that can help you create profiles of key populations in your area to identify which group(s) you want to conduct the needs assessment on, starting with your State SNAP agency and your city's Web site.

How To Identify the Community You Want To Reach

The State SNAP agency may have population profiles of the community. You can find your State SNAP agency at http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/contact_info/state-contacts.htm.

Other sources include:

When using demographic information or statistics, be mindful that numbers change. Check yearly or frequently for updates.

- The Census Bureau (http://www.census.gov)
- The U.S. Department of Labor (http://www.dol.gov)
- Visit the Web site of the city or community you wish to target. Here, you'll likely find demographic information on the racial and ethnic groups in your community and average household incomes. If it's not readily available on the Web site, make a few quick phone calls to city agencies requesting the data you want.
- Contact the local Office on Aging. The Office on Aging should be able to help identify the number of low-income seniors in your community, along with ZIP code data on where they might reside.
- Contact the local department of education to request schools in your targeted community where large numbers of students receive free or reduced-price lunches. In many cases, they can also provide a profile of the students—their racial/ethnic backgrounds and languages that are spoken.
- Contact the local health department and department of social services. Because both of these agencies have specific programs for low-income residents, they can also provide information
- Contact the local United Way, whose mission is to help identify community needs and provide funding to support these efforts. The United Way may be willing to share research and other data that it has collected from and about local groups.
- Contact professors or research institutes in local colleges and universities that may be collecting data or conducting research with your target population.

Step 2 Review What You Know

After choosing the population you want to reach, you may find that you already know something about how to reach them with information about SNAP. In fact, you may be aware of many possible solutions. But it's important to go through the process. Ask yourself:

- What other organizations have similar goals and might be willing to work with us to address this need?
- What resources (staff, in-language support, materials) do we have but may not be fully using?
- Has any research been conducted that highlights effective ways of reaching the target population within the community? Can we rely on other work to give us insight and answers?

Step 3 Draft Questions

Asking the right questions is the key to getting the information for your needs assessment. Accurate information helps you develop the most effective and culturally competent outreach plan. This is an important step, so take your time to think broadly about the type of information you need. You may want to invite other groups to join you, including members of the communities you wish to target and representatives from culturally specific organizations, to help draft or to review your list of questions. Ask if someone has already done a needs assessment—you may want to build upon their model. While your questions may be tailored to meet local needs, the following list of questions can act as a guide.

You may wish to have more than one person in your organization complete the questions to get different opinions and a range of responses.

Stories of Culturally Incompetent Interactions

Could this happen at your organization?

Ms. G. speaks very little English. She knows she could qualify for social services, such as SNAP and WIC, but finds it very difficult to communicate over the telephone, and is frustrated when she shows up in person because she usually must wait until the only bilingual person in the office is free to assist her. Thus, Ms. G. has to ask a friend or one of her older children to make the call or go with her to the office.

A fixed appointment with a bilingual person is one way to help someone like Ms. G. This way she could avoid long waits, which are often difficult when coordinating schedules with others. The office could also arrange to have its bilingual staff person call Ms. G at home at a scheduled time. This is an opportunity to review the application and identify documents Ms. G would need to provide.

Sample Questions for a Needs Assessment

- Which group(s) are you most interested in reaching and why?
- How many SNAP offices are in your area? Where are they located, and does the location pose a potential barrier (e.g., is it accessible by public transportation)?
- Are there any linguistic or cultural barriers that prevent individuals from participating in SNAP? What community resources are available to help minimize these barriers?
- What is happening with your outreach efforts vs. what you would like to happen?
- What groups are already successfully reaching the population you want to access?
- Which of their initiatives have been particularly effective and why?
- Where does the majority of the target population live? Are they clustered in one area or spread out?
- What local organizations and individuals have the greatest influence with the population?
- Do the grocers/farmers markets they patronize accept SNAP benefits? Are they served by public transportation?
- Is public transportation easily accessible in their community? Do public transportation routes reach the local SNAP office and grocery stores? If no, how do people access SNAP and grocery stores?
- Are there existing community events and activities that attract the people you're interested in reaching? Is there a Diabetes Support Group meeting nearby? Is there an annual Cinco de Mayo celebration coming up? What events or activities are popular with your target group?
- What media outlets does this group prefer?
- Is the "word on the street" about SNAP positive or negative? What are the positives and negatives?
- What types of partnerships would help achieve the outreach objectives?
- Would these partners be able and willing to provide volunteer outreach workers? If yes, what services will the volunteers provide; what type of training will they need; and how often will they be available?
- What outreach activities might motivate your audiences to seek more information?
- How can media and community channels be used most effectively?
- Are there any other barriers that prevent potentially eligible individuals of this community from enrolling in SNAP? What are the barriers? What can your organization do to help eliminate the barriers?

Step 4 Identify Whom To Talk To

Once you've created a profile of the group(s) you intend to target and gathered the necessary background information, it's time to speak directly to individuals in the "field." It's these "primary sources" that will help you fine-tune your outreach strategies, avoid potential pitfalls and, hopefully, provide ongoing support. While there are a wide range of people who can participate in the needs assessment, you will want to identify those who will provide the most useful information. Once you've identified the people you want to talk to, revisit the questions to make sure they are appropriate for each group. You may need to reword some questions or eliminate one or two for a specific group.

Examples of influential people:

- Religious leaders
- Representatives of faith-based and community-based organizations
- Business leaders
- Doctors, nurses, and nutrition educators
- State or County SNAP workers
- City, County, State, or Federal workers
- Elected officials at the State and community level
- Schools, teachers, and coaches
- Leaders of age- or race-based or culturally specific organizations that advocate for those groups
- Current SNAP participants
- Opinion/trusted leaders in the identified communities such as promotoras
- People in the community you want to reach, including potentially eligible nonparticipants

Step 5 Decide How to Collect Info

Some common and effective methods for gathering information include:

- One-on-one interviews with influential community members. These are useful if you are working with a small budget and are already knowledgeable in the area.
- Written questionnaires conducted with influential community members and members of the community at-large. While it might be a little more time consuming to collect and tabulate the data, there are online tools, such as www.surveymonkey.com, that make drafting a well-crafted research instrument easy for the beginner and experienced researcher alike. Graduate students in survey research courses may be willing to help you design, collect, and/or analyze information. Establish relationships with professors in local colleges and universities who could help you with this project.

Stories of Culturally Incompetent Interactions

Could this happen at your organization?

Mr. M. is an independent, 23-year-old young man with a hearing impairment who uses sign language. He also participates in SNAP. He is able to communicate effectively in most day-to-day situations, but one of his parents or an interpreter usually goes with him on appointments to the doctor, or the Medicaid or SNAP offices, because staff cannot communicate with him. Recently, he had an appointment at a SNAP office, but work emergencies prohibited either parent from accompanying him. To make matters worse, it was too late to get an interpreter. Mr. M arrived at the office during an extremely busy time—several clients were already waiting for assistance. Realizing that an interpreter was not available and believing that helping Mr. M would be a lengthy process, the staff immediately brushed him off and asked him to come back later when an interpreter was available.

Unfortunately, no one took the time to ask if Mr. M was comfortable communicating in writing, which he was. Sometimes people assume that individuals with physical disabilities are also developmentally delayed or have limited literacy skills. In addition, if an outreach worker had taken the time to ask if there was someone they could call to help interpret, Mr. M would not have had to make another trip. The night before, he had role-played with his parents on how best to respond to any communication problems. Therefore, a quick telephone call to either parent would have enabled Mr. M to get the information he needed.

Additional Techniques for a More Comprehensive Needs Assessment

Your organization's resources will likely dictate the complexity of your needs assessment. With additional staffing and budget, focus groups and/or literature reviews can help fill in remaining information gaps. If you have the budget but not the time, market research firms can help you; www.greenbook.org provides an extensive listing of market research firms.

Focus Groups

These are sessions held with small groups of the target audience. A facilitator, who speaks the same language as the participants, will ask specific questions and the responses will be recorded for later analysis. However, getting individuals to participate in a focus group can take time and may require some sort of incentive for participation, such as meals, transportation costs, or childcare expenses. Your partners can play an important role in helping you stay within your budget by locating facilitators and focus group participants. Focus groups with current participants and eligible nonparticipants can help you get a sense of what community members know and feel about SNAP, as well as resources, barriers, and possible solutions. With current SNAP participants, you can explore their motivations for enrolling and where they received information about the program. By contrast, potential participants may be able to share what they've heard about SNAP benefits, any concerns they have, and outreach methods that might be effective.

Literature Review

Review existing research about the population of interest and their behaviors, habits, or preferences as they relate to nutrition and/or nutrition programs. The reference desk at your public library may conduct a search for you—free or for very little cost. Of course, many of the documents you're looking for may be found online. Another idea is to seek volunteers at your local university. Often graduate students are looking for research projects to enhance their coursework or gain real-world experience. Another good starting point is the bibliography located in the Resources section.

Regardless of the methods you use, the most important part is to listen and respect the insights of people who have access to and understand the populations you want to reach. In the end, your needs assessment will not only ring with a richness that only a diverse, multifaceted group can provide, but will also provide a blueprint for enhancing culturally competent SNAP outreach.

Free or Low-Cost Sources of Information

- The Food and Nutrition Service's Office of Research, Nutrition, and Analysis (*http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns/research.htm*)
- Local SNAP office or State SNAP agency
- Local or college library
- Local Census Bureau or Census Bureau Web site (*www.census.gov*)
- City/County/State health department Web sites and community clinics
- Local United Way or other community funding sources
- Professors in local colleges and universities who conduct research with your target population
- Race-, ethnic-, and/or culturally specific business associations
- Race-, ethnic-, culture-, disability-, and hunger-related advocacy groups

Section III. The Right Messengers

How can community partners help us reach diverse audiences?

One of the key elements of reaching out to diverse audiences about the benefits of SNAP is working with your community partners. Outreach providers who reach diverse groups must extend their reach beyond the walls of their own organizations to other programs with similar missions and services. Community partners can offer substantive and long-lasting benefits to your organization and to the health of the community. They can:

- Provide cultural perspectives.
- Bring credibility to your efforts.
- Bring expertise in working with the groups you want to target. For instance, they may have knowledge of health and nutrition beliefs and practices, and preferred sources of information and distribution channels.
- Offer help with providing translation and interpretive services or allowing your organization to conduct SNAP prescreenings at their offices.
- Bring community resources to support your efforts; for example, access to media, community opinion leaders, or financial and/or in-kind support for costly services such as translation and interpretive assistance.
- Discuss new ways of doing business.
- Assist in efforts to select focus group participants or "pretest" materials.

Lastly, some community partners can become ambassadors for your organization within the target communities. Those partners who will be most effective at conveying your program messages will be ones who are already trusted messengers within those communities.

Stories of Culturally Incompetent Interactions

Could this happen at your organization?

Ms. B. takes great pride in her appearance and frequently receives compliments on her choice of clothing and jewelry. On this day, Ms. B walks into the SNAP Office to apply for benefits. She sits down with a caseworker who immediately compliments Ms. B on her outfit. The caseworker goes on to remark how she can't believe someone so well-dressed would need SNAP benefits. Although Ms. B finished her appointment, she left feeling insulted. She could not believe that anyone, especially a caseworker, would stereotype the way SNAP recipients dress. The next day, Ms. B. called the county grievance office to lodge a complaint.

There's an old adage that's well known but not practiced nearly enough: "Don't judge a book by its cover." Always avoid making assumptions or judgments about people based on outward appearance, or even a few moments of conversation. The USDA prohibits discrimination in all its programs, including SNAP outreach activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, or disability. In this scenario, the caseworker should have refrained from making remarks related to Ms. B's outfit or outward appearance. In Ms. B's case, this was not only a wrong assumption, but one based on stereotypes about race and income. Instead, the case worker should have followed federal mandated SNAP policy (*www.fns.usda.gov/snap/government/policy.htm*)

How do i identify community partners?

Step 1 Assess The Gaps

Are you in regular contact with anyone who works with or has ties to the communities you need to reach? If not, then you'll want to look specifically for partners who are linked to those communities.

Step 2 Ask Your Colleagues

Some names of community partners may surface through the needs assessment process. In addition, coworkers, SNAP workers, advisory groups, board members, or other professional colleagues, particularly ones who work with the communities you want to target or are focused on access to health and nutrition information, are good sources for information about possible partners.

Step 3 Don't Forget Your Clients

Your SNAP clients can be the best source for identifying good community partners. Informally poll several clients about whom they trust for information about issues that matter in the community and, more specifically, about issues such as health and nutrition.

Step 4 Broaden Your Thinking

You'll want to make sure that you are not limiting your potential partnership pool to those organizations or individuals you know or with whom your organization has had a previous relationship. Other reliable sources to check for suitable partners include:

- Internet, including news search engines to see what organizations are quoted in the media
- Nonprofit or charity directories (available at your local library)
- Community and faith-based organizations
- United Way
- Schools
- Local age-, cultural-, or ethnic-specific businesses or professional organIzations, such as local Office on Aging; local Office of Asian and Pacific Islanders; or local in-language newspapers (most staff speak English)

More on identifying valuable community partners can be found in the Partnership section of the SNAP Outreach Toolkit.

Maintaining Relationships With Diverse Partners

- Share information and resources that could support one another's efforts.
- Recognize and respect cultural differences in expressing opinions and in the decisionmaking process.
- Be flexible. Meeting times and locations may need to support childcare arrangements and/or attendance by family members or children.
- Rotate meetings to visit groups located in ethnic and rural communities.
- Be sensitive to the fact that the level of formality associated with meetings, meeting times, conference calls, or other group endeavors may reflect differences in racial, ethnic, or cultural habits, customs, and traditions.
- If hosting meetings, be prepared to provide interpretation and translation services for participants with limited English proficiency or who need accommodations due to disability.
- If chairing a committee, consider including a SNAP participant representing each of the diverse communities you want to reach.

How do i reach out to community partners?

Send a letter to potential partners to introduce yourself and your program. Acknowledge their work in the community, and identify the specific audience you need to reach. State your desire to discuss how you might work together. Make sure to include what you want them to respond to or your planned follow up to the correspondence.

"Please call me if you are interested in discussing how we might work together..." or,

"I will call you next week to discuss how we might work together...."

Telephone potential partners and schedule a convenient time to discuss your suggestions and requests. If the potential partner is referred by a colleague, ask him or her to facilitate an introduction.

What is the difference between a partnership and a coalition, and what can one do that the other cannot?

There is strength in numbers. Sometimes that strength lies with just two or three people and other times it comes with 10 or 12. A partnership – typically defined as two or three individuals or organizations coming together to work toward a common goal – is ideal for many organizations. Partnerships are more likely than coalitions to include members who are of like mind and mission. They tend to be much easier to manage. Finally, they reach decisions more quickly and are more likely to stay on point and focused toward reaching a single goal. On the other hand, because of the limited number of individuals, a partnership may not offer a broad representation of ideas. Depending on the project, the workload could be quite heavy.

Because coalitions are more structured and tend to meet more regularly, there's a greater opportunity to share ideas, lessons, and resources. Because coalitions often function as work groups, you are also more likely to get in on the ground floor when planning culturally specific activities and events.

Challenges in Working With Coalition Partners

Anytime you are working with a large group, there are bound to be challenges. While the benefits of coalitions certainly outweigh the negatives, you should be aware of the following:

- Larger, better-funded organizations tend to have more experience conducting meetings and outreach and may talk more than those with less experience. Make an effort to engage everyone equally and focus on your topic and goals to maintain control of your meetings.
- People may have had previous bad experiences with other members of the coalition. Encourage participants to focus on the business issues being discussed rather than personal issues.
- Group decisionmaking may require a longer approval process. Propose and agree on an approach for achieving consensus.
- You may have to compromise on some issues. Determine which issues or positions you are willing to compromise on before negotiations.
- Additional workload, meetings, and outside activities can be time-consuming. Consider the members' time and interests when organizing events.

Ways To Ensure Outreach Materials Are Appropriate

Materials Are Culturally Competent When They...

- Show respect for the cultural values, beliefs, and practices of the intended audiences both in content and graphics.
- Contain straightforward messages and are free from idioms, clichés, and colloquialisms that the intended audience may not be familiar with or understand.
- Convey the intended concept in a manner that is meaningful to the target audience. Some words or ideas are more difficult than others to get across, especially in translation. For instance, in other languages the concept of SNAP benefits must be conveyed, rather than translating the actual words. Use your community partners or a translation service, if needed, to make sure that the message you are trying to convey is on target.
- Do not lay blame or use guilt or negative stereotypes to get the point across.
- Are readily available in the preferred language or medium of the target audience.
- If appropriate, use pictures and symbols to simplify messages for low-literate audiences.
- Use large and/or bold type for seniors or people who are visually impaired.
- Depict the family and community as primary systems of support and intervention. To achieve greater efficiency, use pictures of persons and families that reflect the community you are trying to reach. If you are depicting activities, illustrate an activity that your target group is familiar with and enjoys.

Section IV. The Right Materials for Diverse Audiences

How are materials important in SNAP outreach?

Once you have identified your target audience and have community partners on board to help you, one of the next steps is to make sure you have the materials to conduct outreach. Your materials must tell the story–that there is a program that can help individuals and their families with their unique nutrition needs.

What culturally competent materials already exist?

A wealth of translated SNAP information–from forms and brochures, to fliers and fact sheets–is available on the FNS Web site. To view translations and to print out the materials, visit http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/translations.htm. Also, be sure to check out your local SNAP office to see what materials are available.

How do i go about creating my own culturally competent materials?

Materials should be tailored to reflect the demographics and cultural backgrounds of the intended audience. This should be evident in how they look, what they say, and the manner in which actions and people are depicted. As a rule of thumb, keep information simple and be sure to provide a description of the program, how to get it, where to ask for help, and where to use the benefits.

Is there a way to test materials to make sure they are culturally competent before i use money to produce and distribute them?

Yes. That's where your community partners can help! Call on their expertise and ask them to review draft materials and point out areas that could be problematic given the intended audience. Also, partners can assist by helping to assemble small groups of the intended audience to test materials for unbiased feedback.

This may seem a bit time-consuming on the front end, but it can go a long way in mitigating costs associated with "fixing" inappropriate materials later on. Keep in mind that some feedback about the materials may have more to do with preferences than possible barriers. For example, while paper quality or brochure colors are important considerations, your goal in testing for cultural competence is to identify wording, graphics, or other content that could be a barrier to someone understanding or taking part in your program.

How can i find good, reliable translation services on a shoe-string budget?

If you are trying to reach a certain segment of the population because of their predominance in the community and need for service, chances are other organizations and programs are, too. Local universities and colleges, community partners, and other neighborhood programs and services are all good resources for obtaining low-cost translation and interpretive services.

What is the best way to ensure that my materials reach the intended audience?

The importance of the mode of delivery cannot be overstated when communicating health messages to certain audiences. Through your needs assessment, you identified trusted messengers or sources of information about food and nutrition. In your community, these sources could be peers, elders, spiritual leaders, business leaders, or medical professionals. They can help distribute materials or steer you toward appropriate distribution points. Grassroots outreach through faith-based organizations may also play a critical role in reaching intended audiences, particularly in African-American, Asian, and Hispanic communities, where churches and related organizations often play a central role.

Knowing the preferred language will help you decide whether or not to transcreate or adapt your materials, or provide information in alternative formats, such as large print, Braille, or video.

What are some other ways of reaching my target audience?

Don't rely solely on written materials to get the word out! Printed materials are the least preferred mode of communication–and that goes for most Americans today. Among diverse populations, surveys consistently reveal that word-of-mouth, phone calls, or face-to-face and peer-to-peer communications are the most desired forms of communication. Consider asking volunteers from partnering organizations to help spread the word. Public service announcements (PSAs) are another way to get free publicity for your program. Most stations will run a select number of PSAs at no cost; however, there is stiff competition for airtime. There is no guarantee that your ad will be chosen and, if it is, that it will air during a time when your target audience(s) is listening or watching. Generally, paid advertisements are run during the most desirable time slots.

- By participating in community events, such as health fairs, supermarket openings, or anniversary promotions, your chances of reaching large numbers of people are pretty good. But you'll still need to check beforehand to make sure that the event reaches the population you want to connect with, and that it is usually well-attended and conducive to disseminating SNAP information. A block party or festival with loud music might be popular with the intended audience and well-attended, but at the end of the day, you'll probably find most of your materials on the ground or in the trash. Look to your community partners, clients, and even event organizers for help to identify the most worthwhile events.
- Another way to personally touch clients and individuals who are potentially eligible for SNAP benefits is by using the promotora model. Promotora, the Spanish word for "promoter," is a model for outreach that uses a lay worker who lives in the targeted community to educate residents. Their expertise? The knowledge they have of the community rather than their formal education, and the established level of trust they have with residents–something an "outsider" would have difficulty gaining-coupled with some basic training in a specific health issue or SNAP outreach. The promotora model can use both male and female outreach workers, depending on the target population, and can be successful in reaching all minority communities, particularly immigrants.

Stories of Culturally Incompetent Interactions

Could this happen at your organization?

For the past two years at the Henson Community Health Fair, Maria has talked with Mr. Williams, who stops by her table with his son to talk about SNAP and whether or not she thinks he might be eligible. Each year, Maria invites Mr. Williams to have a seat at her table, where she gives him an application and asks him to read and complete it to get the process started. But Mr. Williams says he's in a hurry--his son has football practice--and that he doesn't have time to do it right here, but that he'll fill it out at home and mail it back to the office in the next few days. Maria never hears back from Mr. Williams, that is, until the next year's health fair where he hangs around her table asking for the same information.

Reluctance in filling out paperwork or signing documents can be a sign that an individual may have difficulties with reading, writing, or comprehension. This can be hard to spot because often they will go to great lengths to avoid the embarrassment of asking for assistance. For instance, Mr. Williams was trying to find out as much information as he could without having to read anything, and he had a good excuse for not filling out the application onsite, where his problem might have become apparent. Some people even carry around newspapers and magazines to throw off anyone who might be suspicious.

To help the individual, and most importantly avoid causing embarrassment, outreach workers can acknowledge that the process can get overwhelming and offer to go over a brochure with the person—point by point—or read through the application—question by question—and write the answers, if necessary. This presents a win-win situation—it meets the goals of both the outreach worker and the individual, in an efficient, professional, and respectful manner.

Section V. Getting to the Root of It: How To Work With Minority Media

What are minority media?

Today there is an abundance of media outlets that specifically target one or more ethnic populations, races of people, or age groups. Local demographics typically will drive the need for and preponderance of minority media in a given geographic area. In the case of media that target African-Americans and Hispanics, there are well-established outlets in most big cities and urban areas across the country. Asian media are emerging in those same areas, as well. Building relationships with media that specifically target your audience can be important to communicating the benefits of SNAP.

Why is it important to use minority media?

Minority media are another trusted messenger for reaching diverse audiences about SNAP. Minority media highlight news and events of particular importance to their audience. In addition, in-language media provide an invaluable service for those who do not speak English. Further, minority media personalities tend to be well-respected and credible sources on issues that affect their community. Minority media are also more likely to use public service advertising and news that target their audience. Topics concerning health and education are of primary importance for the audience as well as the media.

I know radio and television are popular media, but what about newspapers and magazines?

Print outlets, like newspapers and magazines, are still a very popular medium for older people across all racial and ethnic groups. For some cultures, newspapers are also a link to the community and to the country of origin and serve as a resource guide. Print also allows for further explanation of topics that cannot be fully covered on radio or television.

How should facts and figures be presented to minority and targeted media?

It's okay to use statistics, but do not rely on facts and figures alone to tell your story. Prove your story's relevance to your target audience. Make sure your statistics and data focus on the target audience, as well. Keep in mind that sources and spokespeople should be credible with groups you are trying to reach. If possible, bring statements from community leaders as testimonials for your story and consider including real-life examples of how the program can be used.

Beyond sending out materials regularly to media, how else can i build relationships with minority media in my area?

You may find that editors and staff at many minority media outlets are actively involved in the community and sit on numerous committees and local boards. In short, they make great advocates for your organization beyond today's story.

How can i find the minority media in my area?

To ensure that your media contact list is up-to-date on minority or targeted media in your area, go to your local library or check online for media directories, such as Bacon's, or do a general Internet search. It's also worthwhile to go into the communities you want to reach and check out what free papers are available–ethnic supermarkets and restaurants are a good place to pick up a few or visit a local newsstand for a broad range of local media. Chambers of Commerce may also have information about local media.

Step 1 Identify Media Outlets

Outlets should be those with readers or listeners who represent your target audience.

Step 2 Know What is Newsworthy

Stories that are newsworthy to minority media will have a sense of immediacy and offer fresh, new information that will impact their audience's lives.

Step 3 Develop Story Angles

One story can be presented from different perspectives, which will make it more appealing to the media and their audiences.

Step 4 Pitch Your Story

Decide how best to present your story–in a press release or letter.

Step 5 Follow Up!

This is an important step to getting your story covered in mainstream or minority media given the amount of information most media outlets receive and the ever decreasing number of reporters available to cover stories.

Tools & Tips

Tips for Success When Working With Minority Media

- Use statistics about SNAP that are relevant to your target audience.
- Be prepared with SNAP information and other supporting materials. Minority media often work with much smaller staffs and may ask you to provide photographs and background materials.
- Check with each media outlet on whether or not they need information in English or translated. Some will translate for you, but not always.
- Identify and offer culturally appropriate spokespeople, including community leaders and trusted people such as religious leaders. Don't forget about the director of your local SNAP office.
- Include tips and educational information about how to use the program

Section VI. Culturally Competent + Customer Service

The focus of this toolkit is on outreach, but really that is only the first step in ensuring that more diverse audiences participate in SNAP. Outreach efforts can be undone in a matter of seconds with a negative encounter at the first point of contact with SNAP. If individuals or families are met with insensitivity, lack of courtesy and respect, bias, or even discrimination, we may lose a potential participant.

After a negative encounter, clients may experience:

- Feelings of being unwelcome, unwanted, and not valued.
- Fear of further contact with the office or agency.
- Fear that complaining about negative experiences with staff will compromise service or benefits.
- Anger, frustration, and insult. Thus, they may refuse to initiate further contact.
- Confusion about completing paperwork, following instructions or next steps, because clients did not understand acronyms used by an eligibility worker.

After a negative encounter, organizations may experience:

- Loss in time and resources due to missed appointments or errors on paperwork.
- Loss of clients due to negative first impressions or word-of-mouth.
- Frustrated staff due to lack of training and knowledge of appropriate ways to handle certain situations.
- Possible filing of a grievance or report of discrimination based on a bad experience with a first point of contact.

Being Culturally Sensitive in the Application Process

- Support and obtain professional development and training for frontline and eligibility staff on diversity and cultural and linguistic competence. Share articles and other materials that will help in this effort.
- Emphasize customer service and courtesy. Accurate information should be provided in a respectful and timely manner.
- Ensure that everyone is aware of outside resources that may exist, and how and when it is appropriate to access those resources.
- Develop written guidelines for handling situations that are procedural in nature, such as accessing TTY or language-line services and interpreters.
- Train and retrain frontline workers on your agency's policies and procedures regarding communication issues, such as serving individuals who speak little or no English.
- Identify bilingual staff or those who have an affinity with other cultures in your agency who can make a connection with individuals whose primary language is not English.
- Train and retrain frontline workers on how to serve individuals who have special communication challenges, such as a limited literacy level.
- Do not assume that supervisors are knowledgeable about the behaviors, attitudes, and skill sets necessary to work effectively with diverse populations. They may also need training.
- Consider cross-training with an organization that can teach you about a specific culture. In return, you can teach them about the SNAP application process so they can relay this information to their constituents.

Tips for Communicating With Clients & Families

At the heart of cultural competence is learning to communicate effectively with individuals and their families. Here are a few tried and true suggestions:

- When working with people different from yourself, it's important to put your own personal biases aside. Keep an open mind and don't jump to conclusions. Because a person speaks with an accent does not mean they are not a native-born citizen. Take time to learn about the person you are speaking with, which demonstrates respect and an understanding of cultural competency.
- Establish rapport. In many cultures, it is important to establish some type of relationship before discussing business. Taking a few extra moments to ask questions and learn more about an individual and his/her family often makes an enormous difference in the long run.
- While developing rapport, refrain from discussing topics such as personal relationships or behaviors that may be misinterpreted. As a practice, avoid making jokes or displaying questionable posters or artwork in your office or workspace.
- If you don't know what their native language is, use the "I Speak" document available at http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/translations.htm, which lists, in 36 different languages, the words "I Speak." Give this document to your clients so they can point out for you which language they speak when they spot it.
- Respect personal space. When you first meet with potential clients, ask them to sit where they feel the most comfortable. This will allow people to choose the personal distance that makes them most comfortable. Similarly, refrain from casually tapping or touching someone, which in some cultures can be perceived as being too familiar.
- Identify the decisionmaker. Find out who the influential parties are and how they make decisions.
- It may be important to ask, "Do you want to discuss SNAP with other members of your family?"
- Send a message through children but do not use children as interpreters. For many parents who don't speak English well, their children often serve as conduits for information. They can take home what they received in school—for instance, information on summer programs or SNAP. However, some caution must be taken if a parent brings a child to a meeting to serve as an interpreter. Children may be able to informally convey casual conversation points. However, eligibility for a government program is different. Children may not understand the meaning of technical words such as income and resources. Also, parents may not feel comfortable discussing certain information such as household income in front of their children.
- Ask questions and listen to the answers. Asking questions shows that you really are interested in what a person has to say and his or her perspectives. But pay attention. Do not interrupt your client or try to put words in his or her mouth.
- Check for understanding. In some cultures, people are reluctant to ask questions of authority figures. Explain that asking for clarification is acceptable–then ask follow up questions to determine whether they correctly understood you. Ask open-ended questions to ensure the information has been adequately understood.
- Learn greetings and titles of respect in other languages that you commonly encounter.
- Write numbers down. People easily confuse numbers spoken in a new language.

Eight Common Mistakes To Avoid

1. Disrupting home and work schedules when conducting education and outreach activities.
2. Dismissing cultural preferences, customs, and traditions when discussing health and nutrition.
3. Assuming others perceive things the same way you do.
4. Getting "right down to business." In many cultures, socializing is an important first step before discussing business or personal matters.
5. Conducting interviews or discussing personal information in an open setting. Receiving assistance from outside agencies is an embarrassment in some cultures, and may be better discussed behind closed doors.
6. Misreading silence for confusion or lack of knowledge. Allow for a short period of silence or reflection. Rather than asking if the person understood what was discussed, ask open-ended questions as you probe for understanding.
7. Ignoring the importance of such factors as age, gender, or position in family when asking for decisions.

Examples

Ms. L. has a Hispanic surname and speaks with an accent. She arrives for a community-sponsored workshop on how to apply for SNAP. When she approaches the sign-in table and gives her name to the staff person, she is promptly asked to step to the side and wait a moment. The staff person speaks slowly and in a loud voice. Ms. L immediately knows that the staff person assumes she cannot speak English, and has gone to get someone who is bilingual to help out. Although she is pleased that they are making the effort to provide translators for individuals who require this level of language assistance, she wishes they had asked about her specific needs.

Ms. T is African-American. She stops by the SNAP booth at a citywide festival and asks where in her community she can find out more about applying for SNAP. She notices that instead of asking where she lives, the outreach worker assumes she lives in a predominately African-American section of town and immediately refers her to a location in that area. This infuriates Ms. T because she does not live in that area and must point that out before receiving the correct information.

Kernels of Wisdom

I participate on a weekly talk show for the Haitian community. It's a 20-minute question-and-answer, call-in show that has a cultural theme each week. My job is to tie that theme into a nutrition-focused topic.

SNAP Outreach Grantee

We cover everything that affects and benefits the Hispanic community. We are always interested in initiatives that benefit the Hispanic community. Personally, I prefer receiving information via email. And we always appreciate good quality photos.

Mary Aviles, Hispanic editor, EFE News Service (national news agency)

Recently, we've been covering stories about how Hispanics are the minority group that's been able to overcome poverty the fastest, according to studies. I think there needs to be more education on the program. There are families that qualify for SNAP, and yet don't take advantage of it. Others don't take advantage of their right because they're scared they'd draw criticism and that they'd be labeled as lazy and as irresponsibly having too may kids.

Jose Carrera, El Dia (Houston)

Our biggest pet peeve is old news. We also don't like it when we are given little time before an event. We value information that affects the Hispanic community: education, crime, etc. Sometimes we get information that is unrelated to Chicago or to Hispanics.

Arely Padilla, reporter, La Raza (Chicago)

Kernels of Wisdom

Almost all our reporters are native Chinese speakers, and some may not speak English well or at all. Therefore, we prefer translated, in-language fact sheets and releases.

Emerson Chu, Southern Chinese Daily News (Houston)

If organizations have big presence in our communities, then we are more likely to cover news about that organization. By participating in our events and supporting our communities, they will appear credible, trustworthy, and recognizable in our particular ethnic community. Consequently, our community will be more interested in their news.

Yunju Choi, News Korea (Dallas)

While we cover news that is relevant to the Asian community, we prefer to get news that is specifically relevant to our target nationality group. As a Japanese publication, our ideal news relates to the Japanese population specifically.

Jacob Marolies, Yomiuri Shimbun, (New York City)

Partnerships can be extremely effective, even among groups that don't agree on some issues; our common points are far more numerous and powerful than our differences.

Larry Goolsby, American Public Human Services Association

We have quite a few helpful volunteers from local credit unions. Their customer service skills are great, and they're used to helping people complete applications.

Teresa Kunze, FNS Outreach Grantee Catholic Charities of Wichita, Kansas

Kernels of Wisdom: Partnerships

Faith-based groups sometimes get church volunteers to go door-to-door talking to those they imagine could use a service or program.

Jean Beil, Catholic Charities USA

We partner with the traditional organizations, like senior centers. But we also work with grocery stores and apartment complex managers. We make it a priority to free up our outreach workers so they can attend community meetings, whenever they happen.

Ana Paguaga, FNS Outreach Grantee
Greater Waterbury Interfaith Ministries, Waterbury, CT

Give partnerships a chance to work; invest time to develop trust.

Nicole Christensen, FNS Outreach Grantee
Food Change, New York City

Fostering of partnerships is difficult, however, vitally important. Partnerships are beneficial for agencies, especially to underserved populations and community organizations that work with these populations. As for Vietnamese Social Services, it has a positive effect and brings growth to our Somali, Vietnamese, and Burmese immigrants and refugees.

Thao Dao, FNS Outreach Grantee
Vietnamese Social Services

The best tool is the power of the relationship.

Jose Humphreys, Esperanza USA