

SERVICE WOES TRIP UP FOOD STAMP AID

Author(s): Bruce Mohl, Globe Staff

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Poor customer service by an understaffed state agency is hindering efforts by Massachusetts to improve its food stamp participation rate, which is the lowest in the nation.

The Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, which administers the federally funded food stamp program, is both understaffed and zealous in its verification procedures, a combination that advocates for the needy say looks lean and mean on paper and can be daunting for a food stamp applicant who is typically poor and in crisis. The most recent national data indicate only about 43 percent of the people who qualify for **food stamps** in Massachusetts receive them. Nudging the rate up to 66 percent would bring in at least \$80 million more in federal support.

Nationally, some portion of people eligible for **food stamps** never apply because of the stigma associated with government assistance or because they aren't aware they qualify. But in Massachusetts, advocates say one of the biggest hurdles is the application process itself. State officials say improvements have been made to the program, but workers at the agency nonetheless average 300 food stamp cases, double the number four years ago. They also have had to contend with clerical cutbacks as well as aging phone and computer systems, leaving them less time to spend with applicants.

John Wagner, commissioner of the Department of Transitional Assistance, said flaws in the gateway application process are being fixed. He said that the agency faces many challenges, but that a lot of progress has been made in the last few years.

Phil Doyle of Weymouth, who applied for **food stamps** after he and his wife had trouble making ends meet because of illness and injury, said state workers repeatedly lost his paperwork, didn't return phone calls, and then denied his application because of questions about his son's part-time work at a karate studio.

Doyle ultimately prevailed on appeal, but it took 3 1/2 months before his badly needed food money arrived.

"I can't imagine another family without the support system that we had that could have gotten through this without ending up in a homeless shelter or worse," he said.

Ellen Lawton, director of the Family Advocacy Program at Boston Medical Center, said applicants have to contend with telephones that go unanswered, voicemail boxes that are full, offices that are poorly staffed, and caseworkers who are disrespectful.

"What we discovered, in tracking eligible families that were applying for **food stamps**, was that the agency was simply unable to provide good customer service," Lawton said.

The state agency generally doesn't track how many applications are denied and why, but earlier this year those data were gathered for several hundred applications that came in through the state's online "virtual gateway."

Patricia Baker, senior policy analyst with the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, which just completed a critical report on the Massachusetts food stamp program for the US Department of Agriculture, said her analysis of the gateway applications over six months indicates 87 percent were denied, primarily for procedural reasons.

"The virtual gateway isn't a gateway; it's a gangplank," Baker said.

The Department of Transitional Assistance has shortened and simplified the state's food stamp application, allowed people to apply online, dispensed with face-to-face interviews in most cases, and boosted participation, although the increase hasn't shown up in national data yet.

"We've worked very hard with some pretty limited resources to try to improve the food stamp

program," said Wagner, who believes the state no longer has the worst participation rate in the country. "We've made tremendous progress."

Staffing issues are Wagner's biggest concern. Even as the number of food stamp cases was up 75 percent last month compared with the same month four years ago, the agency's budget has been cut 2 percent over the same period and the number of workers handling food stamp cases has fallen 8.5 percent to 718.

Food stamps are the nation's primary nutrition assistance program, serving more than 25 million people nationwide. The "stamps" are actually electronic cards that can be recharged on a monthly basis. Income standards vary, but generally recipients can't make more than 200 percent of the federal poverty level, which is currently \$16,090 for a family of three. The average monthly benefit paid in Massachusetts is \$82 for an individual, \$172 for a family.

Congress has been debating steep cuts in the food stamp budget, but medical specialists say the health problems associated with hunger are growing, not decreasing.

"**Food stamps** are a good medicine, just like penicillin is a good medicine," said Dr. Deborah Frank, professor of pediatrics at Boston University and director of the Grow Clinic at Boston Medical Center. "The problem is that even people who get the highest dose don't get enough and many people who need the medicine don't get it at all because of barriers."

The Massachusetts food stamp participation rate began dropping in the mid- to late 1990s, following changes in the state's welfare laws. The laws created confusion about government benefits in general, and state officials acknowledge food stamp outreach efforts were minimal. They also say the state's private food bank system provided a convenient alternative.

According to the latest federal data, from 2003, about 43 percent, or about 283,000, of the 658,000 Massachusetts residents eligible for **food stamps** were actually receiving them. It was the third year in a row that Massachusetts' participation was the lowest in the nation. The average participation rate nationally in 2003 was 56 percent; Oregon led the nation at 83 percent.

But Wagner said the number of people on **food stamps** here is rising rapidly. Preliminary federal figures indicate the number of people in Massachusetts receiving **food stamps** rose to 368,122 this year, up 30 percent from 2003. He said the percentage of eligible recipients who are participating is also rising, but by how much won't be known until late next year when new federal numbers on how many people are eligible are released.

A big chunk of the increase came this year from a pilot program with the Social Security Administration that bypassed the existing application process, automatically enrolling more than 40,000 preapproved Massachusetts residents, most of them elderly and disabled.

Wagner said his agency has also reduced the rate of people improperly collecting **food stamps** to 4.6 percent, well below the national average of 5.5 percent. States are financially penalized by the federal government if their error rate rises above the national average.

For the past two years, the agency has received \$1 million in federal awards for processing food stamp approvals quickly within 30 days for a standard application and seven days for emergency assistance.

But the processing speed does not take into account denials for procedural or verification reasons, which force the applicant to start the process over again.

"The problem with the system is there's no punishment for declining cases," said Doyle, the Weymouth resident who had trouble getting his **food stamps** approved. "The attitude is: Don't give out anything unless you're 100 percent sure that they're qualified."

Wagner said the agency is considering putting applications that are not quite completed on hold, so that neither the agency nor the applicant has to start over.

Rick Morrow, program manager for the food stamp program in Maine, which has the fifth-best participation rate in the nation at 72 percent, said Massachusetts officials recently invited him down to discuss the fine line between access and accuracy in awarding **food stamps**. "It's a balance, a very fine balance," Morrow said. "But we have to keep in mind we're eligibility specialists, not ineligibility specialists."

Bruce Mohl can be reached at mohl@globe.com.

SIDEBAR:

2003 PARTICIPATION RANK

PLEASE REFER TO MICROFILM FOR CHART DATA.