

# The Muskegon GET FED

## Final Evaluation Report

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# *Muskegon GET FED Final Report*

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# ***Muskegon GET FED Evaluation***

## **Executive Summary**

The *Muskegon GET FED* project was funded to conduct outreach at the local level in Muskegon, Oceana and Newaygo Counties in Michigan to enroll eligible families into the Food Stamp program. The project required a high enrollment goal for families during the lifespan of the project as well as for hard to reach subpopulations, towards which, they would target outreach efforts. Ascertaining the specific outcomes of the funding of the *Muskegon GET FED* project (as opposed to what would have happened in the absence of the grant) was the task of the evaluation team from the Center for Collaborative Research in Health Outcomes and Policy. This evaluation examined four project components:

1. The application of proposed strategies and the modification of strategies as barriers were identified.
2. The methods utilized to enroll hard to reach subpopulations during the lifespan of the grant.
3. A comparative assessment using Michigan counties that were not a part of the *Muskegon GET FED* project.
4. An assessment of the policies in place at the Family Independence Agency (FIA) in Michigan as well as the policies enforced by the USDA in regards to the Food Stamp program.

### **Strategy Assessment**

This evaluation found that effective strategies employed in one community did not necessarily translate to the same ethnic population in another geographic area. Thus, generalizing from the success or failure from all of the strategies employed by each site is not possible. However, notable similarities across the project did surface. These common outcomes include:

- Applications that ask for “other parent” are a hindrance in cases where the other parent is delinquent in child support.
- Outreach workers require believable assurances that social security numbers, addresses and names will not be turned over to INS, or this becomes a serious barrier to enrolling the families of undocumented immigrants.
- Hispanic populations within Michigan are closed groups. Establishing a trusting relationship with the Hispanic Community is essential to the successful referrals and outreach conducted by the Muskegon Community Health Project (MCHP).
- The stigma associated with Food Stamps and other welfare programs discourages some people from either using the benefits, if they are eligible, or from completing the application once told that they might be referred to FIA if they qualify.

### **Enrollment Efforts**

The *Muskegon GET FED* project used project partners, or “outreach extenders” to help them get necessary information and assistance to potential eligibles. In Muskegon, this outreach was mostly focused on a successful development of outreach extenders in the local business community, including

food banks, grocery stores, other advocacy groups, and religious organizations. Some of the findings are:

- Successful outreach strategies for the Hispanic populations depend upon outreach being conducted by trusted members of the Hispanic community, who have established relationships with influential members and organizations within the community.
- The application for publicly-funded programs requires some information regarding the parents of prospective enrollees. Due to the threat of domestic violence, the effort to obtain this information may also place the applicant at risk of further physical harm.

### **Outcomes Assessment-Progress Toward Enrollment Targets & Comparative Analyses**

The evaluation assessed the progress toward the proposed goals for each local project site (at the county level) and compared each project site to another county in Michigan with similar characteristics in order to determine if the presence of the *Muskegon GET FED* project had an impact in enrollment levels. Below are our findings:

- Analysis of the data would suggest that major factors in the increase in enrollment for the project sites are attributable to state economic factors, demographic characteristics of the counties where outreach is taking place, and the stigma associated with Food Stamps and other welfare programs within a region. The steady increases in enrollment in the Food Stamp program since the inception of *the Muskegon GET FED* project would suggest that the economy and active outreach are the most important factors for the increase of enrollment.
- While local media campaigns create public awareness of the Food Stamp program, the active outreach funded by the *Muskegon GET FED* project produced a steady increase in enrollment, which may in part be attributed to the funding of this grant. Although evidence exists from all three comparative analyses to support this conclusion, this is particularly supported by the Muskegon-Berrien comparative analysis. During the last five months, Muskegon has continued to steadily increase enrollment into the Food Stamp program while it appears that Berrien has reached a plateau. There are two possible explanations. Either Berrien has reached the saturation point for enrollment or, more likely, the steady increase in enrollment occurring in Muskegon is a result of the active outreach taking place.
- The project site achieved and surpassed their proposed goals of 4,000 families to be educated and enrolled into the Food Stamp program in Muskegon, Oceana and Newaygo counties. During the course of the grant period, 4,229 eligible households were enrolled into the Food Stamp program.
- A measurable difference occurred in the Food Stamp denial rates after the inception of the *Muskegon GET FED* project. The evaluation team attributes this difference to the Food Stamp application assistance provided by the staff at MCHP as part of its funded outreach activities.

The data indicate that the *Muskegon GET FED* project had an impact on enrollments in its funded counties.

## Policy Assessment

In an attempt to ascertain the environment in which MCHP conducted its *Muskegon GET FED* project, the evaluation team reviewed and analyzed the relevant policies and procedures in place at the local FIA offices, the State of Michigan FIA and the USDA. In looking at the historical relationship that has existed between the USDA and that State of Michigan FIA, some noteworthy items surfaced.

- The fines imposed by the USDA on the State of Michigan produced an environment in which the State's FIA offices were apt to deny applications if any error was present.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that reviewers of Food Stamp applications ceased the review process when an error was found. This led to multiple resubmissions since all errors were not identified during the first review process.
- The regulations governing Food Stamp eligibility are cumbersome and require experienced professionals to review applications. This process may have been hindered by the large number of experienced state FIA employees opting for early retirement in 2002.
- The State of Michigan's early retirement option, taken by 73% of the State's FIA staff, resulted in heavier caseloads for existing FIA staff and a large number of new, inexperienced staff to replace those who retired.

## Conclusion

The USDA made a difference in the number of families receiving Food Stamps in Muskegon, Oceana and Newaygo counties by funding the *Muskegon GET FED* project. While definitive statements regarding the "amount" of the difference made are not possible, the evidence from the separate pieces of the mixed methods evaluation strongly supports the conclusion that the outreach efforts made a difference in enrollment. The trend lines for the three county sites have not flattened, and total enrollment in these counties continues to rise, suggesting there are still many eligible families in Michigan. This evaluation supports the concept that active, local-level outreach is an important component in maximizing the enrollment of eligible families.

## Project Overview

The Muskegon Community Health Project (MCHP) is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization with a community-based board of directors. It was initiated in 1993 as the result of a partnership between the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Community Foundation for Muskegon County. MCHP employs 8 full-time staff and has over 700 active community volunteers. MCHP staff spends, on average, about 70% of their time in outreach and community-centered activities, including meetings. The mission of MCHP is to improve the quality of life for county residents by developing health care systems and policy reform initiatives through community based decision-making.

MCHP implemented the program, Getting Educated to Find Enriched Diets (GET FED) project in late September of 2002 and completed the program in November of 2004. The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Food Stamp Outreach grant sought to improve access to the Food Stamp program by providing funding to MCHP for the purposes of conducting Food Stamp outreach, client pre-screening, and application assistance for those eligible for the federal Food Stamp program.

The Get Fed program initially included ten health and human service agency partners in Muskegon, Newaygo, and Oceana Counties in West Michigan. MCHP acted as the lead agency and fiduciary with agency partners including the Muskegon County Family Independence Agency (FIA), Newaygo County FIA, Oceana County FIA, the Muskegon County Health Department, Family Services Center, Inc. Work First, Access Health and Muskegon Care, Multicultural Community Services Coalition, Head Start of Muskegon/ Oceana, Shelby Public Schools Early Childhood Programs, Muskegon County Department of Veterans Affairs, Nutritional Services, Meals on Wheels, and Catholic Human Development Outreach.

The partners chose to undertake this project in recognition of the increasing numbers of persons whom, because of Michigan's welfare reform Work First program, have moved into low-income jobs and are living below the Federal Poverty Level. This project targeted low-income persons, with emphasis on the working poor and Hispanics in Muskegon, Newaygo, and Oceana counties. These counties were chosen because they have a high concentration of these low-income populations. According to FIA data, an average of 22,051 Food Stamp Program (FSP) participants reside in the three targeted counties in FY 2001. Extrapolating from the 2000 U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service finding that the FSP is only reaching 60% of eligible individuals for program benefits, it was estimated there are 8,820 persons in the three counties eligible for but not enrolled in the FSP.

The objectives of the project were:

1. to develop a secure computer subsystem for project data collection and maintenance
2. educate 4,000 persons about the benefits, eligibility rules, and application procedures of the FSP
3. assist 2,000 persons to participate in the FSP
4. identify barriers to participation in the FSP process
5. develop strategies to overcome barriers to participation in the FSP, and evaluate project outcomes.

## **Michigan Food Stamp Program**

In Michigan, the Food Stamp Program is known as the Food Assistance Program (FAP) and is administered by the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA)<sup>1</sup>, the state's social service agency. Michigan utilizes the Bridge Card, which is an easy to use electronic debit card issued to clients to be used like a credit or debit card when purchasing food.

### **Purpose**

According to U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), as of July 2000, participation in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) had declined by nearly 40 percent from its peak in FY 1995. Documented reasons for this decline included a healthy economy, welfare reform, the belief that if no longer eligible for welfare benefits then no longer eligible for food stamps, misinformation or lack of knowledge about program requirements, misunderstanding that the FSP is primarily a nutrition program, and not a "welfare program", stigma associated with using food stamp benefits, perceived lack of need, expected benefits are too low, bad experiences with food stamp program administration, and fear or antipathy to government programs. Examining these reasons, it is clear there is a need to dispel the myths about the FSP, provide accurate information about the FSP, develop strategies to simplify the application and enrollment process, determine the relative importance of the barriers to FSP non-participation, and develop strategies to overcome them. The purpose of the project is to strengthen and coordinate relationships among community nutrition assistance providers to address these needs.

### **Goals**

The goals set forth by the MCHP for the Muskegon GET FED project were:

1. To increase awareness about the FSP by promoting a positive image of the FSP, dispelling myths about the FSP, and providing accurate information about the FSP.
2. To increase participation in the FSP through outreach to eligible persons not enrolled in the FSP and facilitating their enrollment.
3. To improve access to the FSP by gathering data to validate the reasons for non-participation in the FSP and to drive positive change to reduce identified barriers.

### **Objectives:**

1. *Develop a secure computer subsystem for project data collection and maintenance.* This objective was established to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants and provide accurate aggregate data for project evaluation.
2. *Educate 4,000 persons about the benefits, eligibility rules, and application procedures of the FSP.* This objective was established to increase awareness about the FSP.
3. *Assist 2,200 persons to enroll in the FSP.* This objective was established to increase participation in the FSP.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that as of December 2004, the Family Independence Agency is now known as the Michigan Department of Human Services.

4. *Identify barriers to participation in the FSP.*
5. *Develop strategies to overcome barriers to participation in the FSP.* Objectives 4 and 5 were established to improve access to the FSP.
6. *Evaluate project outcomes.* This objective was established to develop a profile of the FSP eligible but not enrolled targeted populations, to develop hypotheses and recommendations for a best practice model, and to influence public policy formation.

## **Tasks**

Prior to initiating contacts with any potential applicants, the steering committee convened to develop protocols and procedures for outreach, education, promotion, and referral activities. Further, training sessions were conducted to educate the partners about the benefits, eligibility rules, and application procedures of the FSP. This permitted the partners to carry out uniform informed FSP education and promotion activities at their sites.

For purposes of the research project, all pre-screening for FSP eligibility and referral of eligible persons to the FIA were conducted by the MCHP outreach specialists. This pre-screening and referral process took place both at the MCHP site and at partner sites on a regularly scheduled basis. Education, promotion, and pre-screening sessions were held on different days and times to accommodate potential applicants' schedules. The Spanish speaking MCHP outreach specialist conducted sessions scheduled for non-English speaking Hispanics.

FSP educational materials and applications were placed in each partner site as well as distributed throughout the MCHP outreach network. Prior to distribution, the materials and applications were labeled with MCHP access information, to readily identify them as part of the research project and alert potential applicants where to call for further information or assistance.

The three MCHP outreach specialists who conducted the outreach, education, promotion, pre-screening and referral activities are all certified for food stamp advocacy and outreach, having received FSP training through the Center for Civil Justice and Michigan Poverty Law Program Fill the Basket.

## **Target Populations and Geographic Reach**

The target population for the research project were low-income persons, with emphasis on the working poor, veterans, and Hispanics in Muskegon, Newaygo, and Oceana counties.

In 2000, the US Census Bureau reported there were 170,200 persons in Muskegon County; 24,768 or 14.4% were living below Federal Poverty Level. The two major county municipalities are the City of Muskegon and Muskegon Heights; both of which are "Enterprise" communities. Muskegon Heights is also a "Weed and Seed" community. According to FIA data, an average of 16,147 persons received food assistance in FY 2001. Extrapolating from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FSN) July 2000 finding that the Food Stamp Program is only reaching about 60% of individuals eligible for program benefits, it is estimated 6,459 persons are eligible for but not enrolled in the FSP in Muskegon County.

In 2000, the U.S. Census reported there were 47,874 persons in Newaygo County; 6,032 or 12.6% were living below the Federal Poverty Level. According to FIA data, an average of 3,395

persons received food assistance in FY 2001. Extrapolating from USDA FSN finding, it is estimated 1,358 persons are eligible for but not enrolled in the FSP in Newaygo County.

In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau reported there were 26,873 persons in Oceana County; 4,515 or 16.8% were living below Federal Poverty Level. According to FIA data, an average of 2,509 persons received food assistance in FY 2001. Extrapolating from the USDA FSN finding, it is estimated 1,003 persons are eligible for but not enrolled in the FSP in Oceana County.

### **Targeted Populations**

The working poor were chosen for the project because many of the persons leaving public assistance have limited job skills and migrate to low-income jobs. According to a 1999 Educational, Political, Industrial, Consumer Market Research Analysis (EPIC MRA) survey done in Muskegon County, many of these low-income workers are clustered in small business settings. Many often are single, head-of-household females with children, and are making \$6-10 per hour. One of the project partners, Access Health, has links with over 300 small businesses and provides health coverage for over 1,000 workers who earn a median wage of \$8-10 per hour. Access Health estimates 500 of these workers may be eligible for but not receiving food stamps.

Veterans were chosen because Muskegon has an active Veteran Affairs Office, providing one-stop health, employment, job training, and social services to over 20,000 veterans in the three counties. The Veteran Affairs Office, another project partner, estimates that over 50% of the veterans are low-income and potentially eligible for FSP.

Hispanics were chosen because U.S. Census Bureau data indicates that the population of Hispanics in the three counties has nearly doubled in the last ten years. In 2000, there were 5,957 Hispanics in Muskegon County, 1,867 in Newaygo County, and 3,117 in Oceana County. However, according to FIA data, an average of only 406 Hispanic workers in each of the three counties received food assistance in FY 2001. It is estimated that of the 10,941 Hispanics in the three counties, 4,376 may be eligible for but not receiving food stamps.

### **Anticipated Barriers to Participation and Activities to Overcome Barriers**

Anticipated barriers to participation in this project included lack of knowledge about the FSP; stigma associated with participating in a “welfare program”; pride; language; hours of operation of FIA and other partner agencies not coinciding with low-income worker’s schedules; and complexity of the FSP application and enrollment/recertification processes.

The project was designed to address these anticipated barriers. An aggressive multimedia FSP promotion and education campaign was conducted; project outreach staff were trained about cultural values and norms regarding acceptability of “assistance”; written and spoken information was provided in English and Spanish (See Appendix C and D); FSP promotion, education, and pre-screening for eligibility was conducted at MCHP and partner sites on different days and at varying times; and project outreach staff were available to assist eligible applicants in completing the required FIA enrollment/recertification activities.

## Evaluation Overview

The Michigan Public Health Institute (MPHI), Center for Collaborative Research in Health Outcomes and Policy (CRHOP), evaluated the *Muskegon GET FED* project. The evaluation design provided for both continuous formative evaluation feedback to project leadership throughout the life of the project, and for a summative evaluation of intended and unintended outcomes, barriers encountered, strategies for addressing barriers, a description of intended and unintended facilitators, as well as an assessment of the sustainability and added long-term value of the *Muskegon GET FED* project.

The methodology employed a mixed methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to maximize the validity and reliability of the findings from both the formative and summative components of the evaluation. The qualitative portion of the evaluation included capturing documentation from the original proposal, reviewing project workgroup meeting minutes, information transmittals, conducting quarterly semi-structured formative evaluation interviews with key participants, and structured summative key informant interviews with project participants in the seventh funded quarter of the project (See Appendix A). The data collected addresses intended and unintended outcomes, barriers encountered, strategies employed for addressing barriers, intended and unintended facilitators, and the perceived and planned sustainability and added long-term value of the *Muskegon GET FED* project at the end of the grant period.

The quantitative component consists of the analysis and reporting of USDA and State of Michigan policies regarding the Food Stamp program as well as interviews with project partners to ascertain strategies implemented and barriers encountered regarding the outreach efforts of MCHP.

The formative evaluation consisted of quarterly feedback to project leaders from the semi-structured interviews (anonymity is ensured), coupled with analysis of the quantitative data collected to date.

# Local Project's Strategy Assessment

## Introduction

The qualitative strategy assessment was conducted to create a better understanding of the development (what did it look like when designed?) and implementation (what changes had to be made during implementation?) of both state and local outreach strategies. A key component of the strategy evaluation was to review “lessons learned” from previous local and state efforts to develop and implement outreach strategies. The evaluation team facilitated the review of “lessons learned” by implementing a structured interview instrument, implementing evaluation conference calls, and attending special events or meetings that the participating partners hosted. The findings presented here are designed to inform the USDA about what has been proven to work, what does not work, and why.

## Muskegon Community Health Project Proposed Strategies

As cited earlier, the Muskegon Community Health Project targeted the Hispanic community, low-income working families and veterans for focused outreach efforts. Strategies proposed by MCHP at the inception of the *Muskegon GET FED* project to enroll eligible households included:

### Eligible Hispanic Households

- The Hispanic Community Services (HCS), a Hispanic advocacy group, served as advisors to the outreach and enrollment activities.
- The MCHP Hispanic Outreach Worker developed relationships with those agencies and programs known to access the target population to ensure that outreach strategies are complementary and maximize advocacy, and to train organization staff for outreach and enrollment.
- The Outreach Worker conducted community-based outreach and enrollment in homes, schools, organizations, businesses, churches, etc. The worker coordinated with partnering organizations to attend Hispanic events and functions to provide information and assistance with the application process.
- Partnering with three Hispanic-serving churches to disseminate information on available health insurance programs and to identify church functions as opportunities for outreach workers to assist families in completing applications.

### Low-Income Working Families

- Work with the two local employer associations and two temporary employment agencies to identify employees for outreach and enrollment.
- Engage the employer associations to distribute insurance program information through business development, information packets, mailings, newsletters, and events.

- Train reception staff of the temporary employment agencies to hand out information and establish a schedule for the Outreach Worker to conduct on-site enrollment activities.

## **Veterans**

- Partnering with the Veterans Affairs Office to access veterans in need of assistance.

# **Outreach to Target Populations**

## **Strategies Implemented**

MCHP is dedicated to the “no wrong door” approach. Once operationalized, this philosophy dedicates itself to ensuring that, upon request, potential eligibles obtain applications and assistance in completing them whenever and wherever they are.

MCHP begins its efforts through monthly meetings with the local FIA office in which policies and procedures for each department are discussed and adjusted to accommodate the other when possible. The cooperation level between the local FIA offices and MCHP is extremely high and has served as a model of cooperation.

## **Outreach to the Hispanic Community**

The Muskegon Community Health Project has maintained a bilingual staff member for a number of years to provide outreach and enrollment to the growing West Michigan Hispanic population. Efforts of this staff person have been to provide outreach and enrollment of available federal insurance coverages, for children and pregnant women. MCHP staff have also provided navigation, advocacy, and limited support services for those uninsured non English speaking families seeking health care services. In its work with the uninsured, staff would fill out the long state form FIA –1171, which is the general assistance application from for the state’s department of social service.

The relationship between the MCHP and Hispanic Community Services (HCS) has been productive. MCHP receives many referrals regularly from several local agencies. MCHP attributes this to HCS leadership being primarily Hispanic and their high level of comfort in working with Hispanic staff at MCHP.

Bilingual MCHP staff made contact and established a relationship with the Oceana County Family Independence Agency personnel who provided orientation on the various forms and procedures specific to the migrant community. Migrant families typically use the longer comprehensive form (FIA-1171). Although parents may be ineligible for programs, having American born children may qualify families for Food Stamps and Child Care services.

In the summer of 2004, MCHP developed and mailed a letter to 48 area farms asking for times appropriate for an outreach day or to set up appointments with families. MCHP targeted multifamily unit facilities and larger operations in Oceana County hoping to maximize efforts and visit with many families. Response to the letter was minimal, with only six farms expressing interest.

MCHP focused on the migrant farms calling and making appearances at different farms, such as Chase Farms, four of the Grenier Farms, and several smaller operations. Although prior permission was obtained, some of the farm owners had requested MCHP leave after setting up a booth. MCHP also went to the farm units, knocked on doors, and spoke with the families with limited success.

MCHP conducted outreach at the Migrant and Bilingual Health Fair, the Sparta Town Fair, the Mexican Consulate in Hart, and the Farm Worker Informational Fair. MCHP also disseminated flyers, applications, and cards at different churches, social service agencies, and commercial businesses in the Oceana area.

After assessing the outreach and enrollment response from the camps, MCHP targeted other migrant specific programs with congregations of children and families, specifically within the local elementary schools and Telemon, Head Start Centers for Migrant Workers.

The Telemon Centers are located in heavily populated migrant worker areas, mostly on the west side of the state. Centers are in operation based upon the growing season for the area. They provide a one stop center for families seeking childcare and additional educational programs for older migrant children. Most families with children are aware of and visit Telemon when they arrive in an area. Although late in the season, MCHP was given permission to use the Telemon facility as an outreach site to provide one on one application assistance for families and to provide enrollment assistance at the monthly parent meetings.

MCHP targeted the local heavily migrant child populated schools in Hart and Shelby and arranged enrollment times with the Hart Public schools during open houses as well as school conferences.

Through this outreach initiative, MCHP contacted approximately 65 migrant families and explained various programs to them. MCHP enrolled four pregnant women in the Maternity Outpatient Medical Services (MOMS) program and assisted with nine FIA-1171 applications and 22 online applications. MCHP also provided extensive advocacy between the clients and the local FIA offices.

### **Outreach to Working Families**

The second target population listed in the proposal was that of the working poor. In an effort to reach these persons, MCHP invested funds in several media campaigns aimed at informing working people regarding eligibility criteria for the Food Stamps program. Further, MCHP has identified areas in Muskegon County that are more likely to have self-employed workers, seasonal workers, or farmers on which to focus outreach efforts.

MCHP also provided on site outreach to over 130 outreach events in 2003 and 2004. These included food specific events, general health fairs, school conferences, Head Start screening days, and a variety of other venues.

MCHP's distribution of brochures and informational literature to food pantries, government agencies and religious organizations has made information regarding the Food Stamp program easily accessible to the community (See Appendix C and D).

In addition, the assistance given by MCHP in helping the community complete the forms is exemplary. Staff members accommodated the schedules and needs of the applicant making themselves available at all hours and various locations. MCHP is also committed to educating the community regarding the importance of proper nutrition for children and the long-term benefits of being healthy. In addition, MCHP works closely with members of its coalition to overcome some of these barriers.

## **Outreach to Veterans**

Attempts to employ outreach strategies incorporating the Veterans Affairs Office proved to be unsuccessful. After months of trying and failing to initiate a dialogue with representatives from the Veterans Affairs Office, the staff of MCHP decided to expend its efforts in fostering relationships with other groups to enhance outreach efforts in other communities.

## **Outreach Strategies Employed**

### **Events**

MCHP provided face to face outreach at over 130 events during the period from September 2002 to November 2004.

The most successful events involved those in which the clients were seeking food, i.e. pantry sites, U.S.D.A. commodity trucks, and the Gleaners produce trucks. The outreach personnel would hand each food seeking client a simple flyer on potential eligibility for the Food Stamp program with instructions on where to call. Following these events, MCHP staff had a rise in the number of those requesting prescreening and application assistance.

Other outreach events included health fairs, human service events, back to school and head start enrollment days, parent/teacher conferences, Hispanic events, and several community parties and events where working families would be present. Staff generally set up outreach materials on a table and engaged interested clients in conversations. While these events were worthwhile to attend, they did not have the same impact that the food specific events did.

### **Media Use**

MCHP utilized a multi-tiered media approach to reach working families about the food stamp program. In consultation with the steering committee, project partners, and media consultants, staff began development of a multi-media campaign which utilized billboards, radio, and news paper advertisement placement.

#### Billboards

One of the first media strategies to be attempted included the use of billboard placements in Muskegon, Oceana, and Newaygo Counties. MCHP staff localized the “Food Stamps Makes America Stronger” campaign with the “Food Assistance Makes Muskegon Stronger” and the local phone number. These advertisements were placed in March of 2003 for a month to six weeks, and MCHP determined that the use of billboards were not effective as few referrals from the MCHP client intake indicated “billboards” as the means by which they were referred to

MCHP.



### Radio

MCHP purchased its first radio time scheduled to run from January 20 - April 4, 2003 with commercial placements alternating one week on then one week off. This was done to allow MCHP staff to take pre-screening calls on the week of the media intervention and schedule appointments if necessary.

The first commercial featured Project Director Laura Fitzpatrick's voice indicating that working families may be eligible for food assistance and to call MCHP for a simple pre-screening. MCHP again purchased time from January 19 – March 26, 2004 utilizing the locally produced commercial.

MCHP then ran the USDA produced spot in May of 2004 and July 2004 through September 2004. The radio advertisements were effective in referring persons to MCHP.

### Cable Television Advertising

The last media intervention in October of 2004 was the use of Comcast cable advertising. MCHP purchased \$4,130 of media time from television cable provider Comcast. The advertisements were produced by the USDA to educate and generate awareness within the community of the Food Stamp program. Comcast was able to produce an ad from the U.S.D.A. radio commercial combined with the U.S.D.A. images. Television commercials aired at various times throughout the day on channels carrying CNN, Discovery Channel, TNT, BET, USA Network, and the Weather Channel. The television advertisements were effective in referring persons to MCHP and were deemed to be the most successful in targeting the “working families” subpopulation.

### **Get Fed Partner Participation**

During the initial implementation period of the project many of the partner agencies had representatives of the program attend steering committee meetings and become actively engaged. In addition, partners placed FNS and local Food Stamp outreach materials at their sites and/or distributed to the client populations.

One of the priority partners included in the Get Fed program was the local FIA offices that administered the Food Stamp program. FIA staff brought up implementation issues and concerns regarding the project which were addressed immediately. The FIA personnel were concerned MCHP may be perceived as yet another necessary screening process for the potential client and wanted MCHP to make clear that people could contact FIA at any time for assistance. According to FIA staff, this perception could create a barrier to access and may affect the Standard of Promptness with the cases. MCHP pre-screening staff and partner agencies were instructed to provide immediate referrals to the local FIAs.

While most of the partners continued to attend meetings, some did not participate in the Get Fed program except to place materials at their sites. As one partner indicated, the grant provided no incentive of funding to his agency and it was difficult to send staff already committed to other programming.

### **Staff, Partner, and Community Training**

Several of MCHP's outreach workers received "Fill the Basket" training in March 2001 on food stamp outreach and eligibility screening. The training was sponsored by The Michigan Poverty Law Program, Center for Civil Justice, Legal Aid of West Michigan, and Access Health, Inc. Instructors included a certified "Fill the Basket" trainer from Muskegon County FIA, an attorney from Legal Aid, and an Access Health RN/case manager. Since the training, MCHP had been filling out assistance applications for clients and were fully knowledgeable about the local FIA procedures. When MCHP received the FNS funding, the staff was prepared to begin application assistance right away.

In March 2003, MCHP staff organized a training session for 46 health and human services workers and volunteers in Muskegon. Staff from the Muskegon FIA office were able to explain eligibility and the procedures at the local offices. In addition, all participants were given the USDA materials for distribution at their agencies.

The local senior nutrition staff of FIA spoke about the need for outreach into the senior community and the need for education on the use of the Bridge Card. In April 2003, MCHP staff provided three one-hour long training sessions to seniors regarding applying for Food Stamps and using the Bridge Card at the grocery store.

### **Prescreening Services**

A client would either be referred to MCHP by a partner agency or contact MCHP by either calling or walking in. The staff would pre-screen the family utilizing a variety of tools to determine eligibility. The initial pre-screen included questions regarding the household size and income to assess if a more extensive screen was necessary. For instance, if a single adult 21-year old male would call with an income of \$1,400 per month, it was determined that he would not be eligible for the food stamp program and no further prescreen was performed. Staff was able to use the Federal Poverty Guideline and eligibility table on the USDA brochure. If an individual was within \$300-\$400 and had considerable expenses and allowable deductions, the staff would utilize an online pre-screening service provided by the USDA or the Michigan Food Stamp Network to further determine eligibility.

The online tools assess all the members of the household for income and expenses and were able to provide an estimated amount of an award. These online tools were seen found on the web at the following sites:

USDA Pre-screening tool at: <http://209.48.219.49/fns/index.jsp>

Michigan Food Stamp Network Calculator: <http://calculator.foodstamphelp.org/index.php>

If the client was determined ineligible, the staff would provide a list of pantry sites or organizations that also provided food or had other resources.

### **Application Assistance**

If the client was determined potentially eligible, the staff would instruct them on the application procedure with the Michigan Family Independence Agency and inquire if they would like to be sent a food stamp application. The client was also instructed that MCHP staff could provide assistance filling out the application and deliver it to the local food stamp office. The Michigan Assistance Application is the general seven page application for all Family Independence Agency programs.

One of the barriers that the potential food stamp client has is that if any section of the application is not filled out properly, the FIA staff will deny the application without seeking additional information. This frustration prompted several clients to allow MCHP staff to assist them with filling out a new application. In addition to filling out the paperwork, copies of all the necessary paperwork, a checklist, and identification information is neatly assembled for the FIA caseworker to use. MCHP staff indicated on the FIA – 1171 form that the application was filled out by MCHP staff. Follow-up of a submitted application by MCHP was allowed if applicants signed an Authorization to Release Information form (See Appendix E). The application assistance staff provided client advocacy calls to the FIA and other organizations that provided assistance on a variety of issues, if needed. Those most interested in obtaining application assistance were Hispanic and non-English speaking clients who were unsure of the procedures to obtain food stamps.

*“All project FIA offices have posed obstacles to enrolling eligible families into the Food Stamp program.”*

### **Barriers to Outreach**

Information asking for “other parent” is a hindrance in cases where the other parent is delinquent in child support to the Friend of the Court (FOC)-(social services that support the Michigan Court system for children in separated/divorced families). MCHP was initially told by the Medical Services Administration (MSA)-(Administrator of both Medicaid and MICHild) that this information would not be given to FOC, however MSA was at first unaware that it was required to turn this information over to FOC under state law. Further, because of the erroneous information given before, outreach worker assurances that social security numbers, addresses, and names will not be turned over to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) is considered by applicants to be a falsehood. MCHP is telling its migrant worker population that this information can in fact fall into the hands of the INS. As a result, there is great hesitation on the part of the migrant workers to enroll into the Food Stamp or other government assistance programs.

MCHP has discovered that the Hispanic population is a rather closed group. There is a definite need to go through confidence building steps to develop a trusting relationship with the Hispanic community if MCHP is to have any success in accessing this group. In addition, MCHP is perceived by the Hispanic population as another governmental organization and is therefore distrusted. Convincing the Hispanic population that MCHP is not a governmental organization and in turn establishing a trustful relationship with them has proven difficult.

The stigma associated with Food Stamps and other welfare programs discourages some people from either using the benefits, if they are eligible, or from even filling out the application once told that they might be referred to the FIA if they qualify.

Many farmers were unfamiliar with MCHP and were concerned about the programs being presented to workers. This hesitance was not surprising, as this was the first time that a specific outreach intervention was attempted by Health Project personnel. As MCHP provided outreach throughout the summer, they became more familiar to farmers, and other migrant organization personnel, as well as migrant families.

## Effective/Ineffective Strategies

### Effective Strategies

When key project informants were formally interviewed to evaluate the strategies employed by MCHP, the following were cited as being the most successful outreach strategies:

- Fostering relationships with different community groups, churches, and schools has proven to be the single most effective means to access Hispanic families in need of assistance. The relationship that exists between MCHP and Hispanic Community Services provided opportunities to address prominent Hispanic members of this group and incorporate their assistance with outreach activities.
- Outreach at food seeking events or venues is the most useful for food stamp outreach events. Food seeking events attended commodities food trucks, pantry site referrals, and WIC office referrals.
- The success rate for application approval is much higher when application assistance was provided by a MCHP outreach worker.
- Building a good working relationship with the local FIA is imperative due to the amount of communication and case-management that occurs with this type of outreach.
- Having a Hispanic outreach worker on staff to foster relationships and generate trust is essential to outreach efforts in the Hispanic community.
- Educating the population about the Food Stamp program through media campaigns in the form of televised commercials on local cable channels and radio advertisements serves to increase awareness and remove stigmas of programs.

*“Education empowers populations.”*

- Receiving referrals from other health-related providers such as the “Miles of Smiles” program that provides dental services to area children and local health clinics proved to be an effective means for targeting potential eligibles for the FSP.
- Prescreening for other programs Medicaid, SCHIP, free care, and indigent medical services provided a good opportunity to prescreen for the Food Stamp program.

### **Ineffective Strategies**

The following were cited as strategies that had little effect:

- Distribution of material has not had much impact especially within the Latino community where the education level is between the third and sixth grade level.
- The use of billboards to generate community awareness.
- Using limited school programs to find eligible families. Schools are inconsistently distributing the materials provided them to give to parents on the Food Stamp. A specific program to target reduced lunch program participants may be more effective if applied annually and consistently.

### **Lessons Learned**

In general, MCHP attempted to implement all of their proposed strategies with differential success. When barriers arose, project staff networked locally and consulted with community organizations on altering strategies.

This evaluation found that effective strategies in one community do not translate to the same ethnic population in another geographic area. Thus, generalizing from the success or failure from all of the strategies employed is not possible. However, notable similarities across the project’s geographic area did surface. These common outcomes include:

- The stigma associated with the Food Stamp and other welfare programs discourages some people from either using the benefits, if they are eligible, or from completing the application once told that they might be referred to FIA if they qualify.
- Applications that ask for “other parent” are a hindrance in cases where the other parent is delinquent in child support.
- Migrant workers require believable assurances that social security numbers, addresses and names will not be turned over to INS, or this becomes a serious barrier to enrolling the families of undocumented immigrants.
- Hispanic populations within Michigan are rather closed groups. Confidence building steps are a prerequisite to the building of a trusting relationship with the Hispanic community, which will then open the door to referrals and the extension of outreach.

# Project Outcomes Assessment

## Progress Toward Goal

### Methodology

The evaluation for the *Muskegon GET FED* project assessed the strategies employed by the project site, the changes in and implementation of policy and the way information was disseminated among the various stakeholders for this initiative. The primary question underlying all evaluation components was: “How was enrollment into the Food Stamp program affected?” To answer this question, enrollment and application denial data for the Food Stamp program were collected. This data reported the number of new enrollees per month at the state and county levels. Monthly analysis of this data was conducted to offer immediate and continuous feedback to the project site with respect to their progress toward their proposed goals, as well as to give feedback on strategy effectiveness. Using enrollment and application denial data, the graphs presented in this section were created to illustrate the following:

- Project sites’ progress toward proposed targets.
- Comparative enrollment trends to control sites.
- Project’s efforts to assist persons in filling out the Food Stamp application.

To assess the progress of each local project site in reaching its target enrollment, data from the previous 12 months were examined for enrollment trends. In each county this was accomplished by examining the net monthly gain/loss in Food Stamp enrollment over the previous year.<sup>2</sup> This number was then subtracted from the monthly figure for new enrollees for each local project site’s county. This method represents a less biased assessment of the local project’s progress towards its targeted number of newly enrolled households.

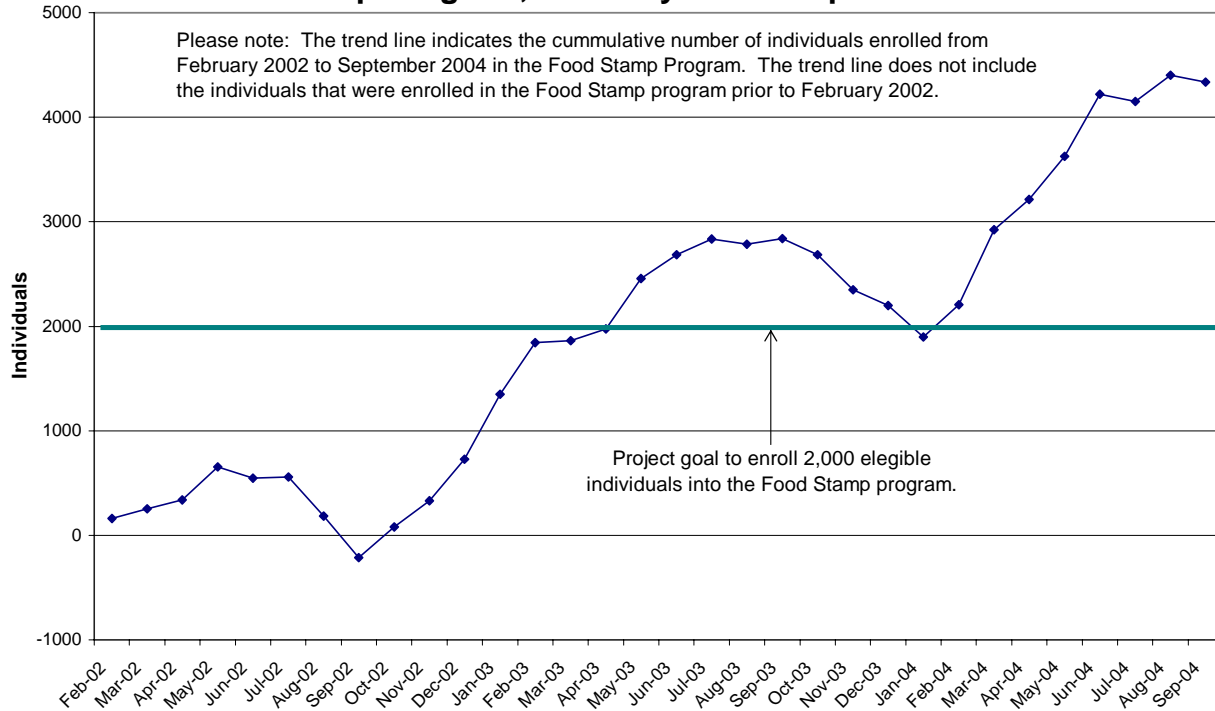
The goal set forth by MCHP in its proposal to the USDA stipulated that it would attempt to educate 4,000 households and enroll 2,000 individuals into the Food Stamp program. As the following graph indicates, MCHP achieved and surpassed this goal during the course of the grant period by enrolling 4,336 individuals into the Food Stamp program.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Please note: The average number of new monthly enrollees in the Food Stamp program, for time period January-01 through January-02, was subtracted from the monthly cumulative total (Muskegon + Newaygo + Oceana enrollees) to better illustrate the number of new enrollees into the Food Stamp program as a result of all outreach efforts since the implementation of the *Muskegon GET FED* project. The average number of new monthly Food Stamp enrollees was determined by calculating the average number of new enrollees for the time period beginning January-01 and ending January-02.

<sup>3</sup> Assistance Payments Statistics. Family Independence Agency. Prepared by Bureau of Accounting, February 2002-September 2004.

## Muskegon, Newaygo & Oceana Individuals Enrolled in the Food Stamp Program, February 2002 - September 2004\*



\*The average number of new monthly enrollees in the Food Stamp program, for time period January-01 through January-02, was subtracted from the monthly cumulative total (Muskegon + Newaygo + Oceana enrollees) to better illustrate the number of new enrollees into the Food Stamp program as a result of all outreach efforts since the implementation of the Muskegon GET FED project. The average number of new monthly Food Stamp enrollees was determined by calculating the average number of new enrollees for the time period beginning January-01 and ending January-02.

## Comparative Analysis

### Overview

The *Muskegon GET FED* evaluation team has concluded a comparison study whereby the counties in the project site (Muskegon, Newaygo and Oceana) were compared to other Michigan counties on the basis of Food Stamp enrollment data. The question we attempted to answer through these comparisons was, “Did the *Muskegon GET FED* project make a difference?” The comparisons examine only enrollment data. The comparisons do not take into account the unique obstacles present in the local project sites, nor does it attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of individual strategies employed by the project or comparison sites. Lastly, we were unable to estimate the extent to which outreach for enrollment was conducted by other agencies or organizations in the comparison counties.

### Methodology

To identify the most appropriate comparison counties, we reviewed various demographic characteristics of counties throughout Michigan. The demographic variables we reviewed included: population, median income for county, poverty level, unemployment rate, race composition, children in poverty, and others. While the comparison sites are not perfect matches

to the project sites, enough similarity in demographic variables exists to warrant some confidence in the comparison analysis' results. Finally, comparison sites did not have active, externally-funded FSP outreach efforts underway at the time of this analysis.

The comparison sites chosen were:

- Berrien County compared to Muskegon County
- Osceola County compared to Oceana County
- Montcalm County compared to Newaygo County

The following table illustrates the demographic variables that were used as guides for selection of comparison counties, as well as the data associated with each of the sites in the comparison study. The data in the graphs present the enrollments in both the project sites and the comparison counties over the time span of the project.

Demographic Variables	Project Site	Comparison Site
	Muskegon	Berrien
Population <sup>1</sup>	171,765	162,285
Estimate of all ages of people living in poverty <sup>2</sup>	26,451	24,343
Estimate percent of people of all ages in poverty <sup>2</sup>	15.4	15
Estimate of people 0-17 in poverty <sup>2</sup>	11,026	10,677
Estimate of percent of people age 0-17 in families in poverty <sup>2</sup>	23.7	24.4
Estimate of median household income <sup>2</sup>	\$22,829	\$25,659
Unemployment Rate <sup>3</sup>	6.9	5.7
	Oceana	Osceola
Population <sup>1</sup>	27,650	23,500
Estimate of all ages of people living in poverty <sup>2</sup>	4,092	3,384
Estimate percent of people of all ages in poverty <sup>2</sup>	14.8	14.4
Estimate of people 0-17 in poverty <sup>2</sup>	1,894	1,684
Estimate of percent of people age 0-17 in families in poverty <sup>2</sup>	20.2	21.4
Estimate of median household income <sup>2</sup>	\$18,628	\$18,630
Unemployment Rate <sup>3</sup>	8.2	8.0
	Newaygo	Montcalm
Population <sup>1</sup>	49,013	62,420
Estimate of all ages of people living in poverty <sup>2</sup>	7,058	8,676
Estimate percent of people of all ages in poverty <sup>2</sup>	14.4	13.9
Estimate of people 0-17 in poverty <sup>2</sup>	3,285	3,956
Estimate of percent of people age 0-17 in families in poverty <sup>2</sup>	21.3	24.8
Estimate of median household income <sup>2</sup>	\$18,849	\$17,521
Unemployment Rate <sup>3</sup>	8.2	7.8

1. Source: Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau, April 17, 2003

2. Source: Michigan Employment Service Agency, 2001

3. Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic and Statistics Administration, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Issued May 2002

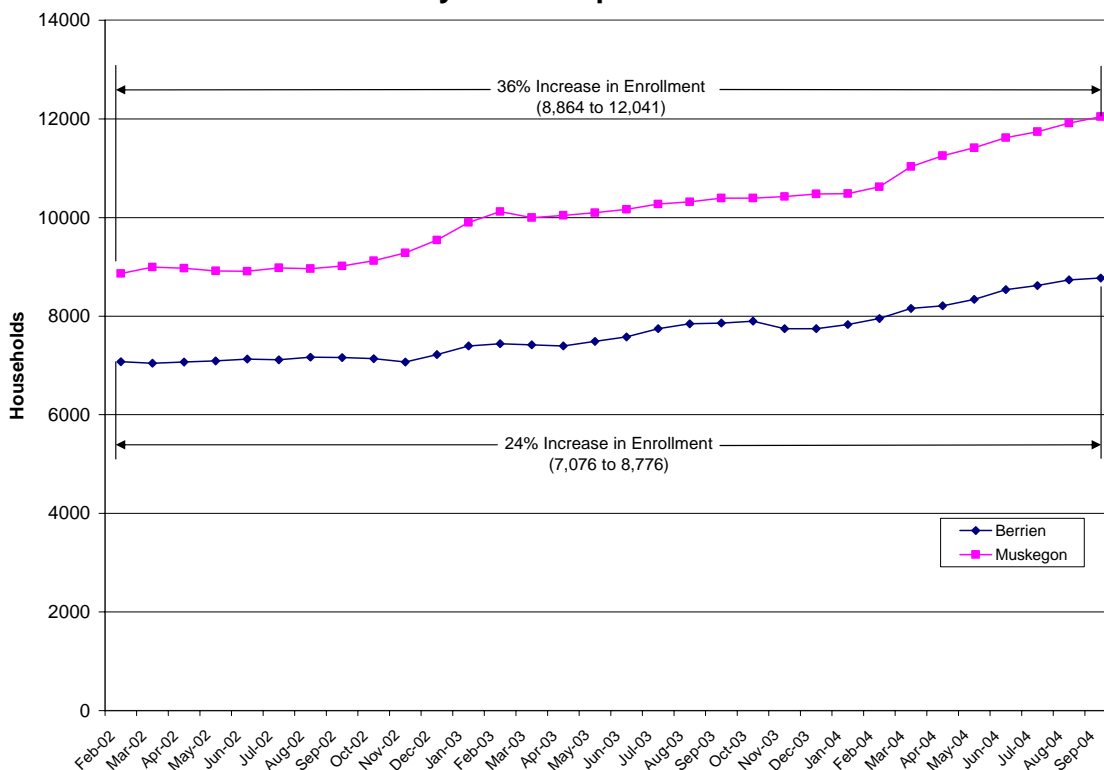
### Muskegon County-Berrien County Comparison

The Muskegon-Berrien analysis offers the closest match of the study. Populations, median incomes, poverty levels and unemployment levels for both Muskegon and Berrien are very similar. Both counties are located on the lakeshore and have similar ethnic compositions, with

one exception. Muskegon County, having a larger farm industry than Berrien County, has a significantly higher migrant worker population. This poses unique obstacles to Muskegon County enrollment that are not experienced at the same level in Berrien County.

As the line graph below depicts, the difference made by *Muskegon GET FED* project cannot be seen until the project is over half completed. At about the 25-month point (February 2004), the enrollment trend lines separate. While enrollments in Berrien continue to increase, enrollments in Muskegon begin to increase at a more dramatic rate. Due to the lateness of this separation of the trend lines, no statistically significant differences were found between the enrollment trend lines for Muskegon and Berrien. Although difference in enrollment between the two counties cannot be attributed to the *Muskegon GET FED* project, the primary identifiable difference between these two counties was the presence of an externally-funded outreach project for enrolling children into the Food Stamp program.

**Muskegon-Berrien Household Enrollment Comparison  
February 2002 - September 2004**



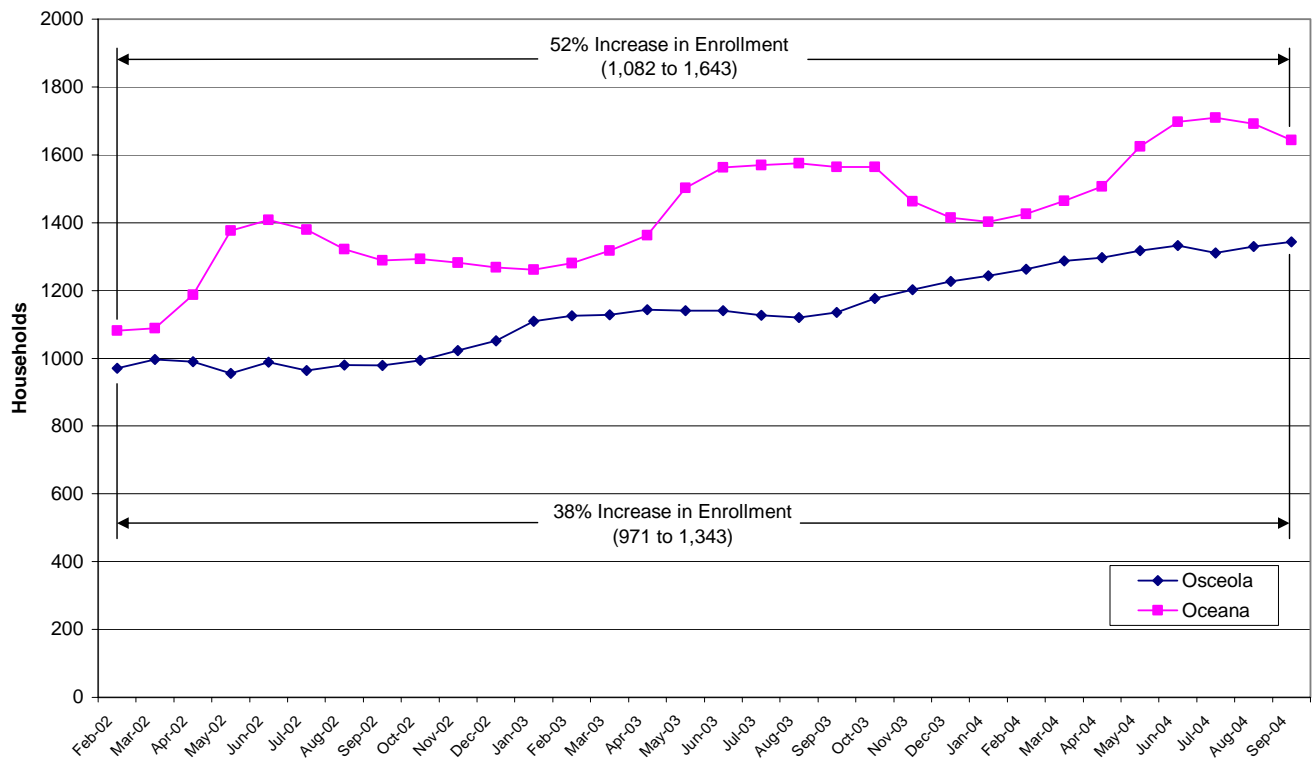
### Oceana County-Osceola County Comparison

While the determinant values used to select Osceola County as the comparison site for Oceana match up well, there is one significant difference that helps to explain the cyclical enrollment numbers for Oceana County during the course of the grant period. Oceana County is much more agricultural and may have a much higher number of migrant workers. In comparing the counties economies, it was determined that Osceola County generates \$451,000 in farm earnings compared to \$1,540,700 in farm earnings in Oceana County.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic and Statistics Administration, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Issued May 2002

One of the challenges facing MCHP was conducting outreach to the migrant population. As documented earlier in the Strategy Assessment section, MCHP conducted outreach to the farms in Oceana County in an attempt to enroll migrant and farm workers. As seen in the graph below, while both Oceana and Osceola counties enrollment begin at nearly the same point, the gap between the two widens over the course of the grant period. The significant spikes in enrollment occurred during the “growing season”. From this graph, the evaluation team concludes that the active outreach taking place in the farm community did have a significant impact on enrollment over the course of the grant period. Additionally, the widened gap at the end of this graph may be attributable to increased awareness and education of the Food Stamp program, which probably resulted from the active outreach in the farming and migrant worker communities.

### Oceana-Osceola Household Enrollment Comparison February 2002 - September 2004

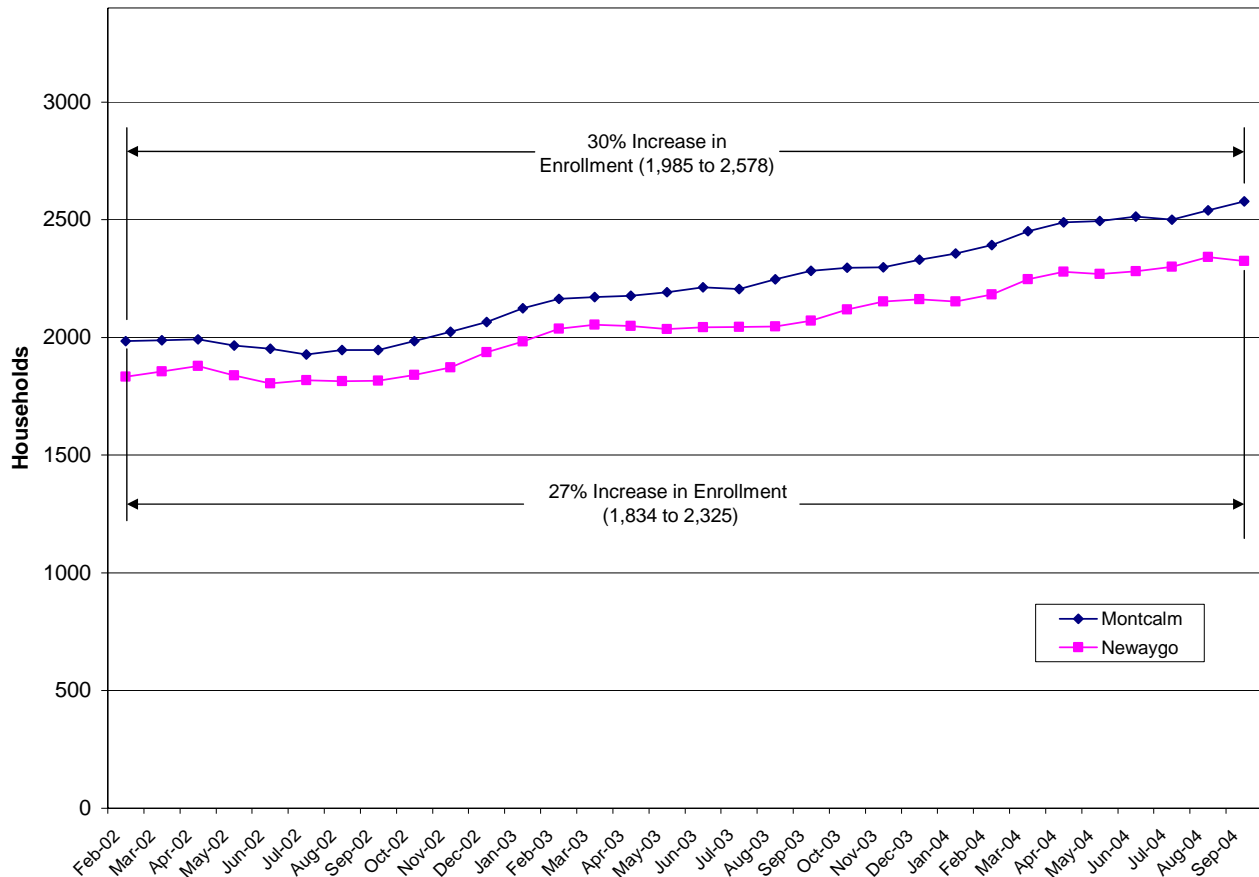


### Newaygo County-Montcalm County Comparison

At first glance, the Newaygo/Montcalm graph may not reveal much more than that Montcalm is closely matched with Newaygo County. After formal and informal interviews with staff members from MCHP, it was discovered that very little active outreach took place in Newaygo. Newaygo does not have the large agricultural community that Oceana County has, and as a result, the strategies employed to seek out farm and migrant workers did not work here. Additionally, the media campaign, in the form of television, radio and newspaper advertisements exercised in Muskegon County was not as prevalent in Newaygo County, since MCHP opted to purchase the advertisements where they would have the most affect. Finally, establishing a collaborative relationship with the Newaygo County FIA office proved to be more difficult than the other two counties and the least responsive to the goal of enrolling eligible families into the Food Stamp program.

While the enrollments into the Food Stamp program did increase over the course of the grant period, this may be partially due to economic factors that occurred during this time period.

### Newaygo-Montcalm Household Enrollment Comparison February 2002- September 2004



### Application Assistance Assessment

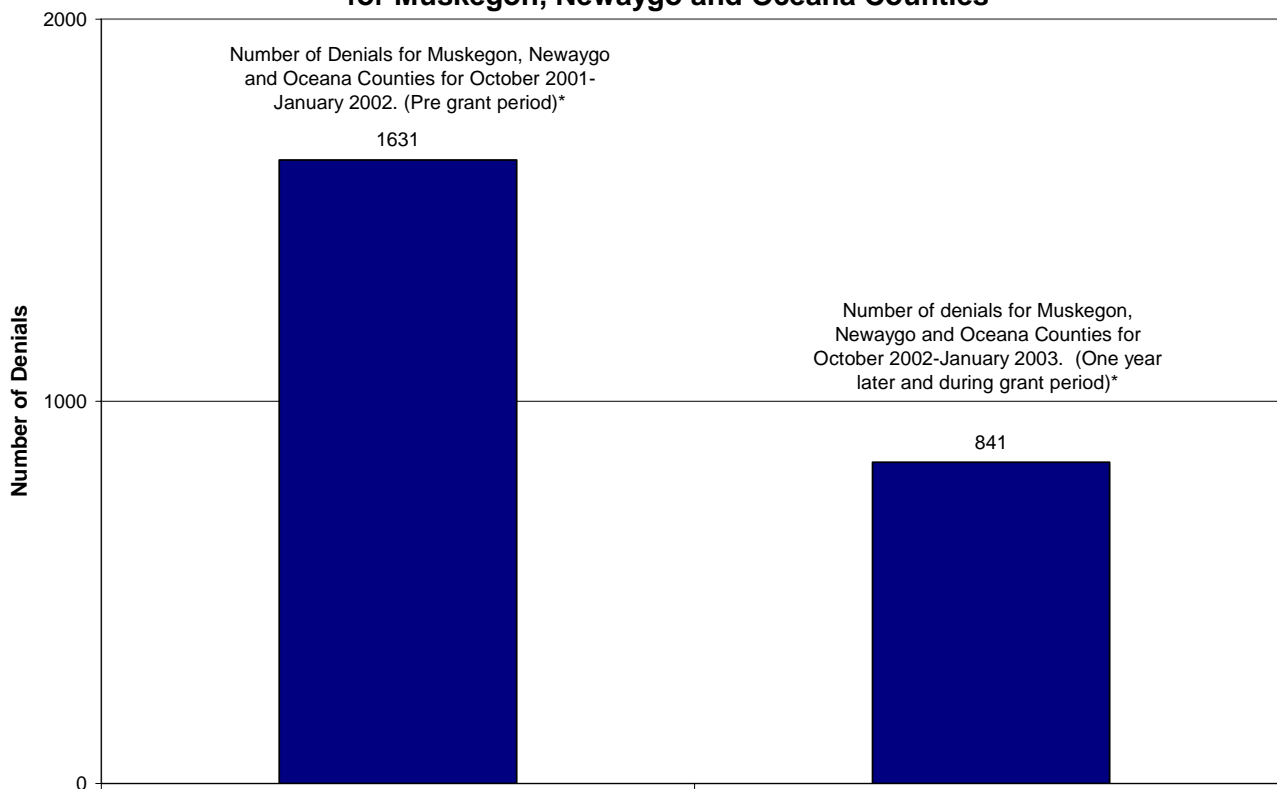
The following graph illustrates the reduction in application denial rates in the project area during the course of the grant period compared to the rate before the grant period. The evaluation team believes the reduction in the denial rate is the direct result of the application assistance provided by MCHP over the course of the grant period. Please note however, that MCHP offered a wide array of assistance to Muskegon County residents prior to the grant period. The reduction in denials may be a direct result of the active outreach conducted by MCHP in conjunction with the Food Stamp application assistance that it performed.

As illustrated by the graph, the number of application denials for Muskegon, Newaygo and Oceana Counties during the time period of October 2001-January 2002 was 1,631.<sup>5</sup> This number represents the number of application denials that occurred over a four month span before the

<sup>5</sup> Source: State of Michigan MH-537 Report

grant period. One year later, over the same four months and during the *Muskegon GET FED* project, the number of application denials dropped to 841. The reduction of denials by 48% demonstrates the impact that application assistance given by MCHP has had.

**Food Stamp Application Denial Comparison  
October 2001-January 2002 Compared to October 2002-January 2003  
for Muskegon, Newaygo and Oceana Counties**



\* Source: State of Michigan MH-537 Report

### Outcomes Based on Local Outreach Efforts

The data reported in the following table were extracted from the MCHP Case Management system. While MCHP staff provided assistance within the first four months of receiving the grant, much of the data was not adequately recorded until the MCHP Case Management system was implemented in March 2003. Listed below are some of the relevant factors to take into account to better understand the data represented in the table.

- The total number of households pre-screened represents those phone contacts that MCHP received and pre-screened for the Food Stamp program. Approximately 73% percent of those who called for a pre-screen were eligible for the food stamp program.
- The number of clients who received application assistance includes those that MCHP assisted in completing the forms, copied paperwork, utilized checklists, assembled materials, and delivered the form to the local FIA. Approximately one-third of the clients who were pre-screened asked for application assistance of some kind.

- The total number of households referred to FIA includes clients who called and did not require application assistance in addition to those who received application assistance.

<b>MCHP Outreach Efforts for the Muskegon GET FED Project September 2002-November 2004*</b>	
Total number of households pre-screened:	575
Total number of people in prescreened households	1273
Total number of households sent additional forms and information:	232
Total number of clients given application assistance:	193
Total number of people in household covered with application assistance:	456
Total number of food stamp applications filed at sites other than the local FIA	0**
Total number of applications filed electronically:	0**
Total number of applications filed as a result of the research project:	193
Total number of households referred to FIA	425
Total number of research project approvals:	Because the local FIA offices were not able to track applicants that were referrals from MCHP, this information cannot be obtained.
Total number of research project denials:	Because the local FIA offices were not able to track applicants that were referrals from MCHP, this information cannot be obtained
*No data for the total number of persons prescreened in the households were recorded from 9/2002 – 3/2003.	
** During the course of the grant period, submitting a Food Stamp application in this manner was not an option.	

### **Barriers to Outcome Assessment**

The data used to conduct the outcomes assessments were obtained from cooperating state agencies. There were limitations to what data could be collected. The Food Stamp enrollment data that were collected are monthly enrollment numbers only. The FIA agencies in the relevant counties were unwilling to provide us with enrollment or denial data, as they felt it was a burden on their already tight resources. All data were obtained from reports published to the web by the State of Michigan FIA or from the State’s Central FIA office.

### **Lessons Learned**

- Analysis of the data would suggest that major factors in the increase in enrollment for the project site are attributable to state economic factors, demographic characteristics of the counties where outreach is taking place, and the stigma associated with Food Stamps and other welfare programs within a region. The steady increases in enrollment in the Food Stamp program since the inception of *the Muskegon GET FED* project would suggest that the economy and active outreach are the most important factors for the increase of enrollment.

- While local media campaigns create public awareness of the Food Stamp program, the active outreach funded by the *Muskegon GET FED* project produced a steady increase in enrollment, which may, at least in part, be attributed to the funding of this grant. Although evidence exists from all three comparative analyses to support this conclusion, this is particularly supported by the Muskegon-Berrien comparative analysis. During the last five months, Muskegon has continued to steadily increase enrollment into the Food Stamp program while Berrien's increase in enrollments has remained steady. There are two possible explanations. Either Berrien has reached the saturation point for enrollment or, more likely, the more dramatic increase in enrollment occurring in Muskegon is a result of the active outreach taking place.
  
- Providing application assistance can greatly reduce the number of denials that occur during the review process and thus expedite obtaining benefits.

# Policy Assessment

## Introduction

In an attempt to ascertain the environment in which MCHP conducted its *Muskegon GET FED* project, the evaluation team reviewed and analyzed the relevant policies and procedures in place at the local FIA offices, the Michigan FIA and the USDA. In looking at the historical relationship that has existed between the USDA and Michigan FIA, some interesting items surfaced. It should be noted that the following analysis is only meant to give a better understanding of the barriers and obstacles that were encountered during the *Muskegon GET FED* project.

## Background

On June 30, 2003, the USDA fined the State of Michigan \$24.7 million dollars for having the nation's second highest error rate in its Food Stamp program at 14.1%. Only California had a higher rate at 14.8%. A spokeswoman for the USDA and Nutrition Service, reported that Michigan distributed nearly \$61.5 million in food stamps to ineligible individuals. Between 1995 and 2001, Michigan was ordered to pay the USDA \$64.5 million in fines.<sup>6</sup>

At a time when the State of Michigan was already facing huge deficits, the fine hit Michigan hard. Douglas Howard, then Director for the state FIA, expressed the following:

With food stamps, we're a victim of our own welfare-reform success. Howard states that Michigan's high percent error rate is due to people moving from welfare to work. Caseworkers are required to track income, utility payments, medical bills, child support payments and other items when determining the amount of food stamps a family should get. Howard hopes the federal government will cut back on unwieldy regulations. He prefers a system where family size and income determine food-stamp eligibility, not things such as utility bills. He said rules governing utility and shelter eligibility are 75 pages alone, with 24 memorandums.<sup>7</sup>

## Current Environment

As a result of the closer scrutiny that local FIA offices were asked to enforce, food-stamp applications are now often denied if any error is found. Families needing food-stamps are often delayed in receiving this assistance.

In 2002, the FIA issued a report indicating the reasons for the high error rates, as well as a list of the corrective actions that were put into place. (See Appendix B for the full report.) The following is an excerpt from that report.

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<sup>6</sup> The State News. Wednesday, July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2003.

<sup>7</sup> The Detroit News. Monday, February 21, 2000

## Reasons for Current Problems

- An emphasis on welfare reform implementation. FIA's priority has been on moving families toward employment and independence. Cases with earnings are significantly more error prone than those without.
- Workforce reductions in 1997 and 2002. FIA lost approximately 2,700 staff due to the 2002 early retirement option. Prior to that, FIA had 3,644 specialists. Post retirement position replacement focused on specialist positions and FIA currently has 3,335 employees. Ongoing staffing studies will assist in determining the impact of this reduction.
- Hiring freezes.
- Participation increases resulting in higher worker caseloads.
- The lack of an advanced, comprehensive and integrated automated eligibility system.
- The complexity of federal rules and regulations for administration of the program.

## Corrective Measures Proposed by Michigan

Concerted and sustained efforts have led to improvements in reducing the Food Stamp program error rate in recent years. A summary of major initiatives is provided below:

- **Food Assistance Case Read Sweep** 28,600 cases were reviewed in the fall of 2002. Corrections made as a result of the sweep resulted in a cost avoidance figure of approximately \$5 million. Further, data collected during the sweep was used in the development and delivery of targeted training.
- **Technical Assistance Teams (TAT)** These specialized teams were developed to assist local offices in error analysis, process mapping, and performance improvement planning. TAT teams also conduct targeted case reads. TAT teams can also be utilized to provide local, targeted training.
- **Top Ten Hit List** Cases with data elements suggesting potential error were identified. Field staff reviewed more than 48,000 cases. Corrections made as a result of these reviews resulted in a cost avoidance figure of approximately \$2.5 million.
- **Targeted Case Reading** This statewide payment accuracy activity utilizes a targeted reading form with automated support that provides individual and statewide data roll-up relative to the type and cause of errors.
- **Performance Improvement Plans** Local offices and central office administrations are required to develop and monitor plans designed to focus activity on payment accuracy, improvement, and accountability.

## **Inconsistent Reviews**

An obstacle encountered by MCHP during its outreach efforts was the issue of inconsistent review of applications. The evaluation team has only anecdotal evidence, but it suggests that reviewers of Food Stamp applications at local FIA offices differ on the review process, with some being more stringent than others. This may be due to the State's goal of reducing the number of individuals receiving assistance from the Food Stamp program that are not qualified for the service. It may also be due, in part, to the large number of relatively new FIA case workers that were hired during the *Muskegon GET FED* grant period.

In 2002, in an effort to reduce the number of employees on the State payroll, the State of Michigan offered an early retirement option. Of the State workers that took advantage of this option, 35% were FIA staff. In addition, the Muskegon County FIA office had 40 persons opting for early retirement.<sup>8</sup> More noteworthy however, is that of the 3,644 FIA staff, 2,677 opted for early retirement. This translates to 73% of the State FIA staff retiring within a five month time span.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the remaining caseworkers found their caseload increase dramatically and newer, inexperienced caseworkers were brought in to replace some of those that chose early retirement.

## **A Comparison Case Study**

As a comparison to the State of Michigan's Food Stamp program application process, the evaluation offers the following case study of the State of Michigan's Medical Services Administration (MSA) and its successes in modifying its application process for the MICHild program, the state children's health insurance program (SCHIP) and Healthy Kids, the state's Medicaid program for children. Given the task of implementing these programs, the MSA encountered similar issues with its application process.

Dedicated to the goal that no child should be without health insurance, MSA underwent a complete revamping of its application process. The first significant change was the ability for applicants to mail back a completed application for health insurance for their child/children. The application was mailed to a centralized office that determined eligibility for all applicants. This was successful for the following reasons. First, applications were reviewed by persons trained in application review, thus reducing inconsistencies and errors in approvals/denials. Second, in many instances, applicants were more likely to mail an application than go to the local FIA office to seek out benefits. The stigma associated with going to a FIA office was avoided.

Being able to mail in the application for children's health insurance was only the first step. Simplifying the application was necessary to ensure that applicants would be able to complete the forms correctly. However, the most significant revision to the application process was for the applicant to "self-declare" income, as described below.

In August 2000, the state of Michigan revised its policy with regard to the verification of applicant income on the mail-in application for MICHild and Healthy Kids. The revision allowed applicants to self-declare their income as opposed to being required to submit supporting documentation of income. Prior to this revision, applications were being rejected for lack of

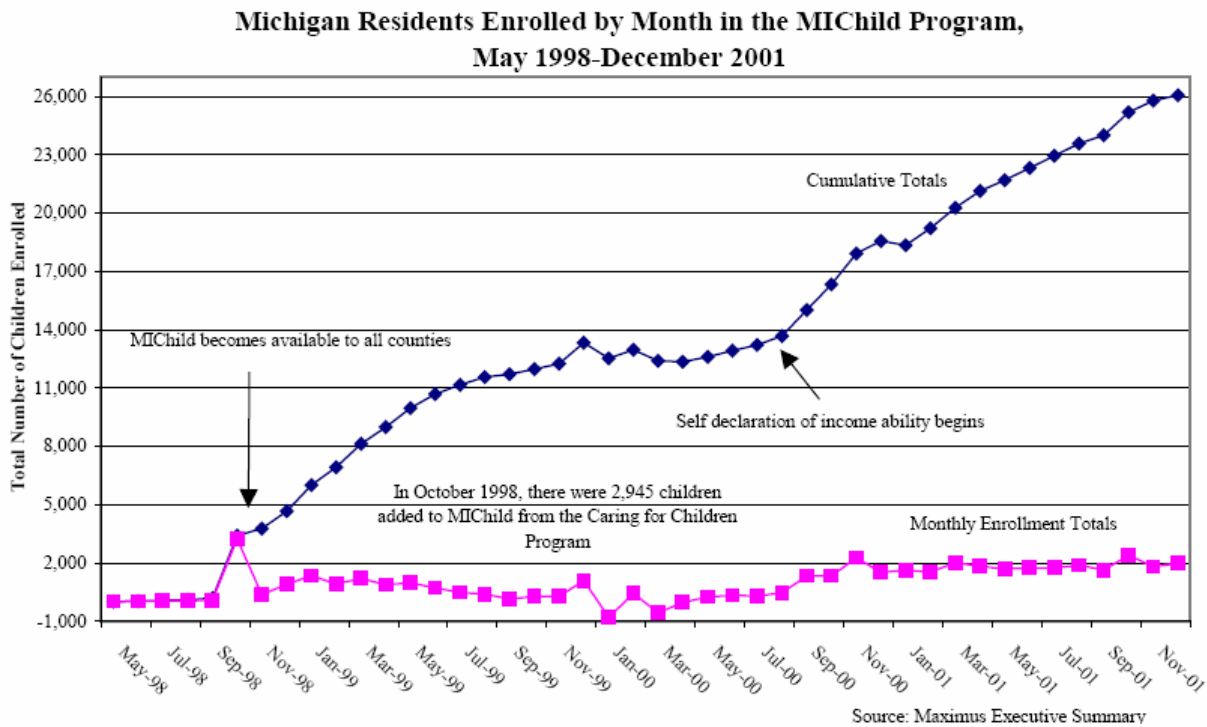
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<sup>8</sup> State of Michigan Department of Civil Service. State of Michigan Employee Early Retirements by Department Report. June 2, 2002-November 1, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> P.A. 529 of 2002. Section 213(2). Food Assistance Error Report Rate Report.

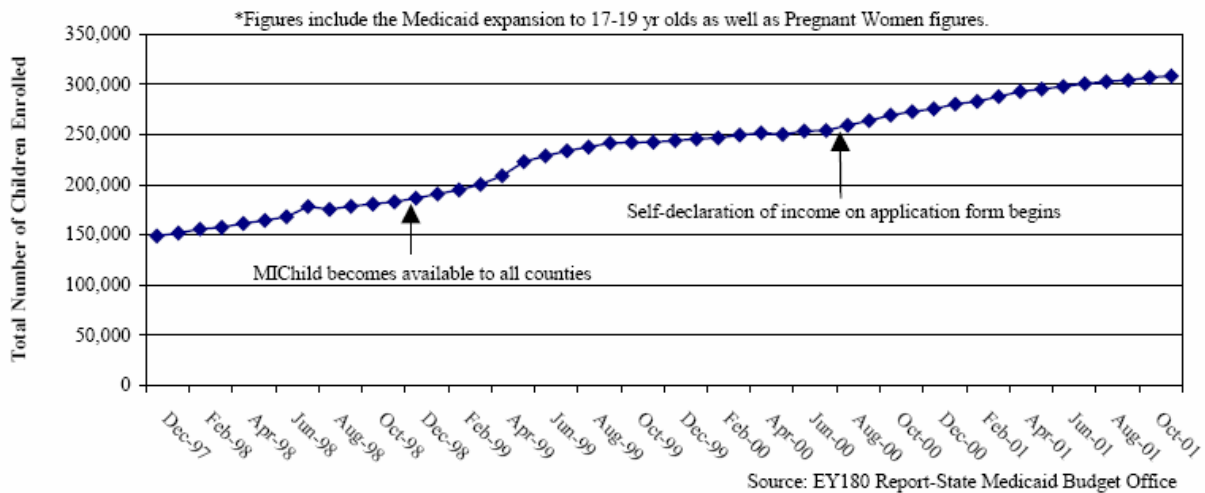
supporting documentation and delayed due to inconsistencies in income reporting. Through self-auditing of random applications, the state has found only three percent of the applications submitted have discrepancies in the income amounts reported. Not only did the ability for applicants to self-declare their income aid in timely processing of applications, the simplification of this process appears to have had a dramatic effect on the number of enrollees into both MICHild and Healthy Kids.<sup>10</sup>

As evidenced in the following two graphs, monthly enrollment numbers increased greatly with the advent of the ability for the applicants to self-declare their income. Additionally, since the change in policy, enrollment per month numbers remained constant at about 2,000 new enrollees added to the MICHild program. Prior to August 2000, enrollment numbers ranged from a high of 1,342 new enrollments to a low of 807. Our time series analysis demonstrates that the change in the enrollment trend line was significantly and positively affected by some event coincident with the advent of self-declaration income. Given that MICHild had been available for some time, one might expect enrollments to have begun to flatten, and certainly an unlikely scenario for permanent, upward shift in the enrollment trend line. As we are aware of no other coincident event, we must assume that this policy change is the causal factor that accounts for this positive change.



<sup>10</sup> Covering Michigan's Kids Final Evaluation Report. Prepared by the Center for Collaborative Research in Health Outcomes and Policy at the Michigan Public Health Institute. January 2002.

### Michigan Residents Enrolled in Healthy Kids\*, December 1997-November 2001



Michigan found through this process that removing some of the cumbersome income verification requirements improved the application process, allowed for an increase in enrollments to households needing assistance, and increased the efficiency of the state workers reviewing applications to determine eligibility. In short, simplification of the application process and removal of income verification requirements can alleviate many of the obstacles found during the application process.

#### Lessons Learned

- The fines imposed by the USDA on the State of Michigan produced an environment in which the State’s FIA offices were apt to deny applications if any error was present.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that reviewers of Food Stamp applications ceased the review process when an error was found. This led to multiple resubmissions since all errors were not identified during the first review process.
- The regulations governing Food Stamp eligibility are cumbersome and require experienced professionals to review. This process may have been hindered by the large number of experienced state FIA employees opting for early retirement when this became an option in 2002 and a large number of new, inexperienced staff replacing those that retired.

# Key Lessons Learned

While the strategy, outcomes, and policy assessments contained lessons to be learned, the following is a summary of key lessons that might be used as guidance for future projects.

## Lessons Learned from Strategy Assessment

This evaluation found that strategies employed with effect in one geographic area within the project scope are not generalizable to the same population in other geographic areas. However, notable similarities across the project's geographic area did surface, and these are presented below.

- Applications that ask for “other parent” can be a hindrance in cases where the other parent is delinquent in child support.
- Migrant workers require believable assurances that social security numbers, addresses and names will not be turned over to INS, or this becomes a serious barrier to enrolling the families of undocumented immigrants.
- Hispanic populations within Michigan are rather closed groups. Confidence building steps are a prerequisite to the building of a trusting relationship with the Hispanic community, which will then open the door to referrals and the extension of outreach.
- The stigma associated with Food Stamps and other welfare programs discourages some people from either using the benefits, if they are eligible, or from even filling out the application once told that they might be referred to FIA if they qualify.
- Successful outreach strategies depend on having a good relationship with local FIA offices so that application assistance and follow-up can be conducted.

## Lessons Learned from Outcomes Assessment

The progress toward the proposed goals was assessed for each local project site (at the county level). Each project site was also compared to another county in Michigan with similar characteristics in order to see if the presence of the *Muskegon GET FED* project made a comparative difference in enrollment levels for the food stamp program. Findings are presented below:

- Analysis of the data suggests that major factors in the increase in enrollment for the project site include; state economic factors, demographic characteristics of the counties where outreach is taking place, and the stigma associated with Food Stamps and other welfare programs within a region. The steady increases in enrollment in the Food Stamp program since the inception of the *Muskegon GET FED* project may imply that the economy and active outreach are the most important factors for the increase of enrollment.
- While local media campaigns create public awareness of the Food Stamp program, the active outreach funded by the *Muskegon GET FED* project produced a steady increase in

enrollment, which can at least in part be attributed to the funding of this grant. Although evidence exists from all three comparative analyses to support this conclusion, this is particularly supported by the Muskegon-Berrien comparative analysis. During the last five months, Muskegon has continued to steadily increase enrollment into the Food Stamp program, while it appears that Berrien's enrollments have leveled off. There are two possible explanations. Either Berrien has reached the saturation point for enrollment, or more likely, the steady increase in enrollment occurring in Muskegon is a result of the active outreach taking place.

- Providing application assistance can greatly reduce the number of Food Stamp program denials and thus expedite the receipt of benefits.

### **Lessons Learned from Policy Assessment**

In an attempt to ascertain the environment that MCHP would be conducting its *Muskegon GET FED* project, the evaluation team reviewed and analyzed the relevant policies and procedures in place at the local FIA offices, the State of Michigan FIA and the USDA. In looking at the historical relationship that has existed between the USDA and that State of Michigan FIA, some noteworthy items surfaced.

- The fines imposed by the USDA on the State of Michigan produced an environment in which the State's FIA offices were apt to deny applications if any error were present.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that reviewers of Food Stamp applications ceased the review process when an error was found. This led to multiple resubmissions since all errors were not identified during the first review process.
- The regulations governing Food Stamp eligibility are cumbersome and require experienced professionals to review. This process may have been hindered by the large number of experienced state FIA employees opting for early retirement when this became an option in 2002 and a large number of new, inexperienced staff replacing those that retired.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the Muskegon GET FED project had an impact on enrollment into the FSP in participating counties. While economic factors in Michigan contributed to the increasing number of enrollees, enrollment in counties with outreach activities is higher than the comparison counties. The trend for the three county sites have not flattened and total enrollment in these counties continues to rise, suggesting there are still many eligible families in Michigan. This evaluation supports the concept that active, local-level outreach will be an important component in maximizing the number of these persons who become enrolled.

# Appendix A

## USDA Interview Instrument for MCHP

The *USDA-GET FED* grant contains a component for the evaluation of the initiative. As we are in the third and final year of this grant, the evaluation team operating in the Center for Collaborative Research in Health Outcomes and Policy at the Michigan Public Health Institute (MPHI) is assimilating all the data and information received during the first two years of the grant and finalizing our evaluation of the initiative. In an attempt to offer as complete as possible an evaluation of this initiative we would like to supplement the data and information collected during the first two years of the grant by gaining insight on the following topics:

- Outreach Strategies Implemented
- Barriers to Outreach that were encountered
- Information Dissemination Occurring with Project Partners
- Federal and State Policies that Aided and Hindered Outreach Efforts

Towards these ends, the evaluation team would like to conduct an informal interview pertaining to the topics cited above. Your insights into these and other issues will aid the evaluation team's efforts greatly. We thank you for your participation.

### **On Outreach Strategies Implemented:**

1. Identify 1 or 2 strategies that were/are successful in targeting eligible families into the food stamp program.
2. “ “ were not successful in targeting eligible families into the food stamp program.
3. “ “ were/are successful in targeting specific counties (Oceana, Newaygo, Muskegon).
4. “ “ were not successful in targeting specific counties (Oceana, Newaygo, Muskegon).
5. What were specific barriers to outreach that were encountered?  
Did you use this information to modify outreach activities based on success?
6. Has there been a change or expansion to targeted groups for enrollment? What new strategies coincided with this?

### **Identifying Project Partners/Staff Training**

7. Who at MCHP were trained? (New or existing employees?)
8. What daily jobs/roles did these employees/volunteers have?
9. What training did they receive?
10. Who conducted training?
11. Who are project partners?
12. How were they identified?
13. Were they successful in assisting with outreach activities?
14. How has information been conveyed to your project partners?
15. How has feedback from project partners been encouraged and documented? How?
16. How has partnering member feedback been implemented into existing strategies or been used to implement new ones?
17. What methods were used to disseminate information?
18. Were project partner meetings conducted? Were they helpful?
19. What worked-what didn't?

### **Federal and State Policy**

20. What federal policies or regulations helped your organization's outreach efforts?

21. What federal policies or regulations hindered your organization's outreach efforts?
22. What state policies or regulations helped your organization's outreach efforts?
23. What state policies or regulations hindered your organization's outreach efforts?
24. In your opinion, what is the single policy or regulation change that would help increase the efforts of enrollment for your organization?

# Appendix B

## Food Assistance Error Rate Report

P.A. 529 of 2002

Section 213(2)

The Food Assistance Program (FAP) operates under the federal Food Stamp Act of 1977. The program's purpose is to end hunger and improve nutrition and health. The Food and Nutrition Service, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers the program at the federal level and the Family Independence Agency administers the program in Michigan. The federal government funds 100% of the cost of the food assistance provided to recipients. The state and federal government share the administrative costs of operating the program.

FIA is responsible for determining applicant eligibility and providing benefits through electronic debit cards. Under federal law, food assistance is an entitlement available to those who meet both financial and nonfinancial eligibility requirements. Generally, eligibility for and determination of amount depends on the income and the number of individuals in the household

During 2002 FIA served 326,699 households and 748,421 individuals deemed eligible for the Food Assistance Program. This amounted to \$647,851,000 in total annual benefits. Administrative costs for 2002 were \$171,536,229 of which \$89,356,535 was the state share and \$82,179,694 was the federal share.

### USDA Sanctions

All states are required to conduct audits designed to measure how accurately they determine and issue benefits. If a state's error rate is above the national average for any reporting year, the federal government may impose sanctions in the form of dollar penalties. Michigan's performance relative to the error rate began to slip in 1996 and has been above the national average each year through 2001. The state and federal figures for 2002 have not yet been finalized, but Michigan was at 12.72% pending federal adjustment. The rate for the current fiscal year is 9.99% through December, 2002.

USDA has sanctioned Michigan \$64.6 million for fiscal years 1995-96 through 2000-2001. In order to reduce these sanctions, FIA entered into settlement agreements with USDA that would allow FIA to use \$26.7 million in state funds (referred to as reinvestment funds) in lieu of sanction payments. These reinvestment funds must be utilized to fund activities directly related to error reductions. In addition, substantial portions of the remaining sanction can be waived by USDA if annual error rate targets are met. It is the goal of FIA to do everything possible to minimize the sanction amount that must be paid.

### Reasons for Current Problems

The following is a summary of factors that have contributed to the current problem.

- An emphasis on welfare reform implementation. FIA's priority has been on moving families toward employment and independence. Cases with earnings are significantly more error prone than those without.

- Workforce reductions in 1997 and 2002. FIA lost approximately 2,700 staff due to the 2002 early retirement option. Prior to that, FIA had 3,644 specialists, carrying along with other programs the FAP caseload. Post retirement position replacement focused on specialist positions, and FIA currently has 3,335. Ongoing staffing studies will assist in determining the impact of this reduction.
- Hiring freezes.
- Participation increases resulting in higher worker caseloads.
- The lack of an advanced, comprehensive and integrated automated eligibility system.
- The complexity of federal rules and regulations for administration of the program.

#### Corrective Actions Proposed by Michigan

Concerted and sustained efforts have led to improvement in reducing the Food Stamp program error rate in recent years. A summary of major initiatives is provided below:

- **Food Assistance Case Read Sweep** 28,600 cases were read in the fall of 2002. Corrections made as a result of the sweep resulted in a cost avoidance figure of approximately \$5 million. Further, data collected during the sweep was used in the development and delivery of targeted training.
- **Technical Assistance Teams (TAT)** These specialized teams were developed to assist local offices in error analysis, process mapping and performance improvement planning. TAT teams also conduct targeted case reads. TAT teams can also be utilized to provide local, targeted training.
- **Top Ten Hit List** Cases with data elements suggesting potential error were identified. Field staff reviewed more than 48,000 cases. Corrections made as a result of these reviews resulted in a cost avoidance figure of approximately \$2.5 million.
- **Targeted Case Reading** This statewide payment accuracy activity utilizes a targeted reading form with automated support that provides individual and statewide data roll-up relative to the type and cause of errors.
- **Performance Improvement Plans** Local offices and central office administrations are required to develop and monitor plans designed to focus activity on payment accuracy improvement and accountability.
- **Policy Simplification and Systems Solutions** Recommendations of a statewide work group have resulted in policy changes, supported by system enhancements designed to result in major work saving. These are changes to shelter, heat and utility, income and worker alerts that began to roll out in the fall of 2002 and will continue through the balance of this fiscal year.

Since Director Bowler's appointment, FIA has taken the following additional steps:

- Clearly defined organization responsibility for the FAP program under Donna Mullins, Director of the Service Delivery Administration.
- Approved the structure of a coordinated FAP action plan designed to accomplish error reduction via policy and systems simplification, workload reduction and performance analysis and feedback.
- Empanelled a work group charged with integrating current automated systems FIA leadership is committed to the delivery of quality services to its customers and to the identification of solutions that will result in improved accuracy in the Food Assistance Program. Virtually every aspect of FAP administration is currently under review. The department is cognizant however that current budgetary and staffing restrictions may make implementation of corrective action extremely difficult.

## Appendix C

# DO YOU NEED MORE HELP WITH FOOD?

YOU MAY BE ELIGIBLE FOR FOOD ASSISTANCE  
TO FIND OUT IF YOU MAY BE ELIGIBLE, CALL  
THE MUSKEGON COMMUNITY HEALTH PROJECT  
FOR A FREE FOOD STAMP SCREENING AT:

# 231-728-3201

*M-F 8 AM-5 PM*

*Se Habla Espanol*

IF: YOU MAY BE ELIGIBLE FOR FOOD STAMPS EVEN

- ❑ you are working
- ❑ you were denied help in the past
- ❑ you get WIC or other benefits
- ❑ you own a car
- ❑ you have high rent, utility, child care or child support bills
- ❑ you don't live with any children
- ❑ you are 60 or older or disabled and have high medical bills
- ❑ you are not a U.S. citizen but are here legally



**The food assistance program rules have been changing over the past few years and now uses the electronic debit card called the Bridge Card.** Don't assume you are not eligible! MCHP can't issue the Bridge Card, but they can tell you how many dollars in food stamps you may be missing out on based on your household situation. MCHP will also send you application forms and instructions and provide application assistance. Don't miss out on this valuable source for food for you and your family!

## Appendix D Food Stamp Flyer (Spanish)

### ¿NECESITAS MAS AYUDA PARA LA COMIDA?

#### USTED PUEDE SER ELEGIBLE Y CALIFICAR PARA ASISTENCIA

PARA INFORMARSE SI USTED CALIFICA, LLAMENOS A EL PROYECTO DE SALUD COMUNITARIO DE MUSKEGON. PARA EL ANALISIS DE SU CASO, LLAME A EL TELEFONO 231-728-3201 y pregunte por Liz Chala.

LLAMENOS DE LUNES A VIERNES DE LAS 8 DE LA MAÑANA A LAS 5 DE LA TARDE.

ORGULLOSAMENTE HABLAMOS ESPAÑOL.

#### USTED PUEDE SER ELEGIBLE SI:

- Usted esta trabajando
- Le ha sido negada la ayuda en el pasado
- Usted recibe beneficios del WIC y otros beneficios
- Usted posee un automóvil
- Usted tiene altos gastos de renta, utilidades, cuidado de niños o gastos de soporte de niños.
- Usted no vive con ningún menor
- Usted no es un ciudadano de los E.U. pero su estancia en este país es legal.



#### **Las reglas del programa de estampillas de comida han cambiado durante los**

últimos años. ¡No suponga que usted no es elegible! En MCHP no podemos emitir Estampillas de Comida. Pero podemos ayudarle a determinar cuantos dólares en estampillas de comida podría usted estar perdiendo por esta situación. ¡No pierda esta valiosa oportunidad de obtener estos beneficios!

# Appendix E AUTHORIZATION TO RELEASE INFORMATION

TO: Family Independence Agency

FROM: Muskegon Community Health Project  
565 W. Western Avenue  
Muskegon, Michigan 49440  
Phone (231) 728-3201 Fax (231) 728-8404

PROGRAMS:  
FSP \_\_\_\_\_  
HK/MICchild \_\_\_\_\_  
MOMS \_\_\_\_\_

I \_\_\_\_\_ (# \_\_\_\_\_)  
*Print Client Name and Social Security Number*

Authorize the Family Independence Agency to release information about my Public Assistance status as  
of: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date of FSP Application

If I am enrolled in the Food Stamp services, this release will remain in effect for the length of my enrollment.

Case Name	Case Number	Date of Birth
-----------	-------------	---------------

\_\_\_\_\_  
Applicant Signature and Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
MCHP Signature and Date

---

### (FIA OFFICE USE ONLY)

The \_\_\_\_\_ County Family Independence Agency affirms that the above named applicant and/or case  
name is receiving the following service on \_\_\_\_\_  
FSP App. Date

	Yes/Mo. Amount	No
TANF:	_____	_____
General Assistance:	_____	_____
Work First Participant:	_____	_____
Food Stamp Recipient or Determined Eligible within Last (6) Months:	_____	_____
Medicaid:	_____	_____
Migrant Assistance:	_____	_____

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

Please list all individuals on this case: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
FIA Authorized Signature Date 39

