

HUNGER & THE SAFETY NET IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY:

Executive Summary

A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

CONDUCTED BY

SUPPORTIVE PARENTS INFORMATION NETWORK

SPIN

**IN ALLIANCE WITH THE
CARING COUNCIL OF SAN DIEGO**

AND THE SUPPORT OF

**THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT
PRICE CHARITIES**

JANUARY 2010

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Authors

This research is the result of a collaborative effort by SPIN Leaders, project mentors and supporters. The contributors to this study were:

Maria Aceves, Data Coordinator, Interviewer

Hilda Chan, Logistics Coordinator, Interviewer, Editing Team

Ilene Davis, Grant Manager

Marisela Espitia, Interviewer

Sandra Galindo, Interviewer

Joni Halpern, Executive Director, Editing Team

Raynita Johnson, Interviewer

Ofelia Olguin, Interviewer

Maria Orozco, Interviewer

Bill Oswald, Ph.D., Principal Investigator

Lydia Patton, Interviewer

Aída Reyes, Outreach Coordinator, Interpreter, Interviewer

Carmen Visoso, Interviewer

Michelle Wise, Data Coordinator, Interviewer

Acknowledgements: Colin Mathewson, Price Charities, for securing the start up funding for the project; Steve Eldred and Judi Larsen, California Endowment, for their advocacy in securing funding for the project; Don Davis for arranging venues for presenting the study; Derek Staats for his constant input into the development of the project; Nan Mitchell for her guidance and for keeping the flow of communication open; Marjie Larson for support in arranging venues and rating of Family Resource Centers; Irene Biyo, Max Blumenshine, Jasmine Colorado, Susana Figuero, Melissa Johnson, and Rachel Kentner for their assistance in rating the Family Resource Centers; Monica Honoré for her skilled proofreading; **the people who have given their time and shared their stories with the interviewers.**

Copies of the full report are available at: www.caringcouncilsd.org and www.spinsandiego.org

SPIN is located at:

2717 University Avenue, San Diego CA, 92104
(619) 296-3402

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Supportive Parents Information Network (SPIN) is a nonprofit, all volunteer organization providing information, advocacy and peer support to families living near or below the federal poverty line. The purpose of the SPIN study described below was threefold: 1) To look more deeply into the experience of hunger through the eyes of those challenged by hunger; 2) To document peoples' experience with the San Diego County Safety Net from the perspective of the applicant/potential applicant for public assistance; and 3) To use the insights gained from this study to develop recommendations for improving access to healthy food for people living near or below the federal poverty line.

In September of 2009, San Diego County's participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program⁵ (SNAP/FSP, also known as "Food Stamps") was declared the worst in the nation for the fifth straight year by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). FRAC reported the past year's participation rate of 35%. These rankings confirmed what low-income families have been reporting to SPIN about their experiences attempting to access or maintain SNAP/FSP through San Diego County's Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA), the local agency charged with administering the program.

As economic conditions have deteriorated, SPIN found that more people were struggling with hunger, yet those who sought SNAP/FSP benefits had great difficulty obtaining them. In an attempt to address the problems of hunger and SNAP/FSP access, SPIN, in conjunction with the Caring Council of San Diego⁶, launched a campaign to study the problems, educate the public, and identify areas of possible solutions and alternatives that could improve SNAP/FSP participation in San Diego County. SPIN began this campaign with preparation followed by detailed interviews related to hunger and SNAP/FSP access. The extensive interviews were conducted in early 2009 with 187 respondents from mostly parents living in deep poverty.⁷

Preliminary findings were presented to public officials beginning in March 2009. Publicly confronted with low SNAP/FSP participation rates, HHSA responded by unveiling a new Nutrition Safety Plan. Two essential elements of the plan—a software system that bypasses human oversight and a business process model that removes cases from an assigned caseworker—have already been identified as obstacles to SNAP/FSP participation. Further, HHSA's plan calls for increased outreach, requires nutrition classes for anyone attempting to obtain SNAP/FSP and mandates agency lobbying to restrict access to "non-nutritious" foods for persons on SNAP/FSP. These elements directly conflict with findings from the SPIN study which shows that SNAP/FSP is widely known among low-income families, but the problems of access lie within HHSA. The study also indicates that low-income parents are aware of the basic elements of good nutrition, but that despite their best efforts at budgeting, they simply cannot afford to buy enough food to provide adequate quality and quantity during the last two weeks of each month. Finally, the study indicates that starting in the third week of each month, the least nutritious and cheapest foods are consumed as a last resort. If these foods were barred from purchase, low-income families would go hungry.

⁵ The food stamp program was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/FSP) in 2008 by the federal government; California still uses the term "Food Stamps".

⁶ The Caring Council, formed in 1998, is an informal association of about 130 persons who have met monthly to obtain and share information about poverty in San Diego County and to join with SPIN and other organizations in promoting ways to address barriers to self-sufficiency.

⁷ "Deep poverty" is defined as persons living below 50% of the federal poverty threshold.

As SPIN worked with people to gain access to SNAP/FSP, it found the application process to be daunting. The findings of this study validate these experiences. People talked about how long the process took, how they were treated, and the conditions in the welfare offices. Many people reported being denied applications because they were told they weren't eligible so they need not apply. Based on these experiences, SPIN concludes that HHSA's consistently poor performance in enrolling eligible persons in the SNAP/FSP program is caused by the ways in which HHSA conducts its business. The low participation rate is not likely to be improved through more outreach or nutrition education.

FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY:

1. Respondents came to the County for help already filled with shame, embarrassment and fear.

Feelings of shame and fear permeated individual responses to questions about needing and getting help. These feelings of shame and fear were so strong that 58% of the respondents reported that they had denied needing food even though they were hungry when asked by teachers, case workers, etc., whether they had enough. Of those respondents, almost half (48.6%) reported shame as the reason for denying their need for food. *"I feel like a failure going in there. Because you already know you can't do it by yourself."* Thirty-nine percent of the respondents reported fear as the reason for not reporting their hunger. Nearly two-thirds (65.5%) of those who gave fear as a reason were afraid they would have their children taken away. *"I'm scared to tell them, because I'm afraid they're going call CPS, because we don't have hardly anything to eat."*

Responses indicated that many people had internalized the general population's derogatory image of those living in poverty. *". . . I felt I should know better, I was educated and should have known how not to be in that situation, so I was embarrassed. To find myself in that situation in spite of everything that I had tried to do."* The decision to seek help from the County was not an easy one for the respondents of this study.

2. Respondents experienced San Diego County Family Resource Centers as enveloped in a Culture of Fear and Degradation.

Experiences with the County HHSA public assistance offices exacerbated peoples' sense of shame. *"I have always felt that I am worth nothing, but with them I felt even worse, very ugly."* These feelings arose from the conditions of the facilities, how applicants were treated by staff, and the application procedures. People are searched and/or scanned as they enter the Family Resource Centers (FRCs). They face long lines and are not given clear directions about the process. The first person they speak to is behind bulletproof glass. When there is a face-to-face interaction with a staff person, the experience is characterized along a continuum from indifferent to slightly hostile. Completing the application requires up to five visits (the average number of visits was 4.35), with each visit taking several hours (the average wait time was 3.9 hours, with 36% waiting four or more hours). The FRCs prohibit food or drink, are not children-friendly, and are often crowded and unsanitary.

Almost half of the respondents (48.1%) reported that their first experience at a Family Resource Center was a negative one. While 24% did say the experience was positive, only 1.9% of the respondents reported positive emotions as a result of the experience. Twenty-nine percent reported being saddened by the experience and 18.3% felt angry. Many people reported feeling ignored and neglected. *"[I felt] completely demoralized. You know every*

single person I encountered there had not one ounce of care, [not] one ounce of compassion, not one ounce of anything” “You could see the stress on their faces. It was, and you know, it was like in their eyes it was just next, next, next.” Others felt they were treated with mild hostility. “It wasn’t a very welcoming environment. It was more of a, I don’t want to say hostile, although it did become hostile at times.”

Many respondents found the application process of applying offensive and insulting, even when the staff treated them respectfully. Almost a third (32.6%) reported that being fingerprinted made them feel like a criminal. Similarly, the home searches imposed upon applicants who requested both cash aid and food stamps were also experienced as offensive and degrading. *“I guess their thing is to try and catch us in the act. So my thing is you’re automatically thinking that we’re bad, automatically you’re just assuming we’re bad.”* Interestingly, many respondents (42%) reported feeling criminalized by the process even when they were treated respectfully by staff, reinforcing the finding that the some of the County’s procedures are degrading by their very nature.

3. The County is highly inefficient in processing SNAP/FSP applications.

The federal regulations require counties to process all SNAP/FSP applications within thirty days. San Diego County has failed to meet that deadline in an average of more than 45% of SNAP/FSP applications during the first ten months of 2009 (latest data available), ranking among the worst Counties in the State for compliance with statutory deadlines. Its ranking has ranged from last place to 50th out of 58 Counties.⁸

4. Hunger may be deeper and more widespread than is generally known.

The USDA study on hunger found that 42% of people living below the federal poverty line were food insecure. However, despite the SPIN study’s inclusion of families at 200% of the federal poverty level and below, all of the respondents reported some level of food insecurity: 6% marginal food security; 9% low food security and 85% very low food security. Food insecurity was higher among respondents receiving SNAP/FSP (89%) than those not receiving SNAP/FSP (77%)⁹ and was generally higher among households with children (97% low to very low food security) than those without children (85% low to very low food security). Two factors explain the difference in level of reported food security between the USDA and SPIN studies. First, the SPIN study reveals that many people (58% of respondents) deny or underreport their hunger. Second, the respondents in this study were drawn primarily from people living in deep or extreme poverty. More than half of the respondents (55.1%) reported incomes that place them below 75% of the federal poverty level, and only 6.8% of the respondents have incomes above 125% of the federal poverty level.

The USDA study also indicated that children and adults categorized as having low food security had difficulty accessing food but did not experience disruptions in eating patterns or reductions in food intake. The SPIN study found these claims to be only partially true. The data show that people struggle to maintain an adequate diet for as long as they can. This diet, however, begins to collapse in the third week of the month. The eating patterns

⁸ See <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research/PG353.htm> for county reports to the state.

⁹ Non-SNAP/FSP recipients report slightly higher incomes than those on SNAP/FSP. SNAP/FSP recipients reported an average income below 75% of the federal poverty line while non-SNAP/FSP recipients reported an average income closer to 100% of the federal poverty line.

identified in the data show that both adults and children experience a reduction in both the quantity and quality of food as the month progresses. While adults regularly sacrifice their own eating for the children in the household, they are unable to fully shield their children from hunger. Almost three-quarters of respondents (71.9%) reported that food was their greatest worry and that the concern for feeding children rises steadily as the month progresses. While less than 30% of the respondents worried about feeding their children in the first two weeks of the month (22.6% and 28.5% for Weeks 1 and 2 respectively), this number jumps to over half the respondents (57.7%) by the fourth week of the month. People worry most when rent is due and/or at the end of the month. A detailed examination of the respondents' diets shows that rationing of food and reduction in food for both children and adults are the dominant strategies for stretching food resources.

5. Respondents struggle to maintain an adequate healthy diet.

This study asked respondents to give detailed descriptions of the menus in their households for children and adults for each week of the month. The findings in the SPIN study are consistent with the USDA study on food choices of people in poverty. Both studies show that the eating habits of people living in poverty are no different from those of others when both groups have the same resources and that an increase in food money results in an increase in purchases of fruits and vegetables.¹⁰ While all food groups decline in consumption over the month, the decline is faster for adults than children. Also, the decline is faster for some foods more than others. Using the food pyramid as a way of assessing household diets, the SPIN study shows that adults sacrifice their consumption of fruits and vegetables in order to give them to their children. It also shows that while households buy fruits for the children in the beginning of the month, fruits almost disappear from menus after the first week. It is also evident in the data that households experience a dramatic change in their menus after Week 2. Sharp declines in "Meats & Beans," "Grains," and "Milk" between Weeks 2 and 3 show how the menu begins to deteriorate by Week 3. By Week 4 the diet is made up of anything available to the household. By then, a food item's ability to satisfy hunger is more important than healthiness. *"And since we're Latinos I make them eat more tortillas in order to satisfy them because with only the stew, they'd be hungry again later."*

Households struggle to maintain an adequate and healthy diet for as long as they can during each month. For the first week of the month when food is most abundant, rationing is the most common strategy. This strategy remains important throughout the month, but reduction in food intake becomes the most common strategy used from Week 2 through the remainder of the month.

6. The quality of life deteriorates as food resources decline.

Respondents were asked to describe two weeks in their household, one when food was adequate and one when it was not. Behavior changes during weeks of inadequate food included more fighting and arguing (39.8%), loss of concentration (27.1%) and deterioration in school performance (25.3%). Additionally, households reported the following changes in emotions: increased depression (47.6%); increased feelings of anger (36.7%); feeling more stressed (31.3%); increased fatigue (28.3%), and an increase in worrying (17.5%).

¹⁰ See: Stewart, H. & Blisard, N. (2008). Are lower income households willing and able to budget for fruits and vegetables? Economic Research Report Number 54, USDA.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Two sets of recommendations have emerged from this study. One set addresses County policies and steps to be taken to increase the SNAP/FSP participation. The second set of recommendations addresses the issue of hunger.

For The County:

1. Reinstate the client-caseworker relationship, decrease caseloads, and require all negative County actions generated by CalWIN to be reviewed by a caseworker.

Public benefits have been hampered greatly in San Diego County by two systems—CalWIN¹¹ and ACCESS¹²—which HHSA identifies as remedies to low SNAP/FSP participation rates. However, CalWIN sends clients countless contradictory and confusing notices, warnings and requests without ever passing these actions in front of a caseworker for review or approval. The ACCESS business process model transforms the caseworker staff into a kind of assembly line with no particular person responsible for any individual caseload. In practical reality, no staff person is responsible for anything when something goes wrong with a client's case. It has been reported that the ACCESS telephone line, where clients call for assistance with their case, is typically busy for 20-30 minutes, whereupon clients hear a recorded message to call back when the line is not so busy, or they are referred to a voicemail that is full or the call is never returned. While the interviews in the SPIN study were conducted before HHSA fully implemented these changes, SPIN's experience with people attempting to obtain SNAP/FSP is that these changes have made the application processes for any kind of public benefits, including SNAP/FSP, harder to complete successfully. The study does show, however, that people who need help so desperately that they will bear the humiliation and shame of entering a welfare office need to see a real person with whom they can establish a respectful relationship. The removal of the client-caseworker relationship is detrimental to the program goal of fostering economic self-sufficiency. A supportive relationship between the client and caseworker strengthens the client, gets her through hard times and facilitates her re-entry into the competitive mainstream.

2. End Project 100%.

There are ample and detailed requirements for documentation, verification, computerized matches and other data that are much more effective in ensuring compliance with eligibility standards than Project 100%. Without losing any vigilance against suspected fraud or factual inconsistencies, San Diego County could redirect the money it spends needlessly treating innocent applicants as criminals to improve staffing and facilities at Family Resource Centers.

¹¹ CalWIN is a software system used in public benefits systems in several California counties. It responds to the presence or absence of information by adjusting, reducing or terminating benefits without worker oversight.

¹² ACCESS is the central phone line assistance for all persons applying for or receiving CalWORKs, food stamps, and other public benefits. People call the ACCESS line to find out why something has happened or not in their case. ACCESS is one element of business process re-engineering, a business model that has removed oversight of individual cases from an assigned caseworker.

3. Lobby to end all fingerprinting.

The County's Nutrition Safety Plan calls for lobbying to end fingerprinting for foster youth. Given the significant negative effect fingerprinting has on the applicant and its duplicative nature in protecting against fraud, the County should direct its lobbyists to work toward ending fingerprinting for all SNAP/FSP applicants.

4. Reduce wait times in Family Resource Centers to one hour or less.

For participants in the SPIN study, the average wait for assistance at a County FRC was 3.9 hours. This time was spent in an area where no food and drink are allowed and, with little exception, no space for children to play, to be fed, or be cared for.

5. Upgrade the facilities.

An evaluation of thirteen of the fifteen FRCs in San Diego County yielded grades of F/D- in Customer Service, F in Condition of Facilities, and F in Family Friendliness. There are several ways the County FRCS could be upgraded to reduce their contribution to client experiences of indifference, hostility and neglect. These are: remove bulletproof glass, create a space for eating and drinking, create a children's space, provide stimulating reading material or play activities, and decorate the facility with positive images.

6. Meet with SPIN/Caring Council to discuss the study.

The data collected for the SPIN study and the information obtained by the Caring Council in this joint project provides enormous insight into the perspective of the "SNAP/FSP customers" and could be of great assistance in guiding the County in their attempt to improve its participation rate.

To Address Hunger:

1. Expand eligibility and increase the benefit levels in SNAP/FSP.

Relatively small increases in household income increase the quantity and quality of food purchases. Raising the cut-off for SNAP/FSP eligibility from 130% to 185% of the federal poverty line and increasing benefit levels by 100% would significantly increase a household's purchase of healthy foods in adequate amounts.¹³ This requires action at the federal level, but the influence of counties can be exerted through lobbyists.

2. Eliminate the asset test for SNAP/FSP eligibility for all recipients.

Requiring a household to spend down all its assets before it can become eligible for SNAP/FSP is a counter-productive policy that forces people more deeply into poverty, making it harder for them to recover. California law allows for the elimination of the asset test for everyone. The California Department of Social Services has applied this policy to

¹³ See: Steward, H., Blisard, N. (January 2008). Are Lower Income Households Willing and Able to Budget for Fruits and Vegetables? Economic Research Report Number 54, USDA.

families with children only.¹⁴ This policy should be applied to all eligible recipients regardless of household makeup.

3. Join the Food Research and Action Center call to end childhood hunger by 2015.

As a presidential hopeful Barack Obama took a stand on hunger, claiming, “My top priority is making sure that people are able to get enough to eat.”¹⁵ He also called for the end to childhood hunger by 2015. FRAC¹⁶ has offered seven strategies to achieve this goal, including strengthening the SNAP/FSP and child nutrition programs.

4. Develop alternative ways to access healthy foods.

The recommendations thus far require action on a national level. This recommendation, however, calls for local action, i.e., the creation of community gardens, farmers markets that take SNAP/FSP and WIC, food cooperatives, buying clubs, etc.

The full report can be found at: www.caringcouncilsd.org and www.spinsandiego.org

¹⁴ California AB 433 allows the State Department of Social Services (DSS) to use categorical eligibility to remove the asset test for Californians. CDSS has instructed counties to apply this change to families with children by January 2010.

¹⁵ Meet the Press, 5/4/08.

¹⁶ For more information: www.frac.org