

Endless stream of paperwork makes low-income applicants feel powerless

by Jennifer Bauman
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This spring, just as we did four years ago, the Food Bank of Lincoln participated in a nationwide hunger study organized by Feeding America. And once again, I accompanied teams of volunteers to pantries and kitchens in Lincoln and surrounding communities to interview clients about their food needs.

Lincoln Journal Star columnist Cindy Lange-Kubick lent a hand to the effort and reported her experiences in a May 12 article. If you missed the piece, you can read it online in the archives at journalstar.com. Cindy really captured the feel of the

hunger study and offered a glimpse of local food distribution programs.

As I was thinking about what I could add to the story I remembered something that several of the hunger study volunteers remarked on; they were surprised by people's willingness to give personal information to relative strangers. And truly, most of the people we interviewed didn't flinch at potentially uncomfortable questions like did they have unpaid medical bills, did they ever skip meals so their kids could eat, or were they late paying last month's rent or mortgage.

So did we just happen to sit down with 321 congenial people or is there another ex-

planation for this openness? Yes, our interviewers were disarming and tactful. But another factor may be that people who have applied for various kinds of assistance, like so many of the folks we interviewed, become accustomed to answering questions that others might find intrusive. It's a world of forms, questions, documentation, and waiting games. And if you don't play along, you lose.

Why would our 80-question hunger study questionnaire cause consternation to anyone who's completed Nebraska's food stamp application? One of the longest in the nation, it's 22 pages of dense forms, caveats, rights,

responsibilities, and penalty warnings. Applicants must have detailed documentation on all household members, income, and expenses.

After completing the form, applicants can expect interviews with social workers for further verification. Once approved, many recipients must also complete a specified amount of training or volunteer work each week to get their food stamps. Any breach of this requirement can result in suspended benefits. It's a very rigorous



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process for benefits that can be as small as \$10 a month. But these are the hoops people must jump through to get food stamps. And most other forms of assistance for low-income people are similarly designed to make applicants feel powerless.

People have to cultivate a great deal of patience to play the assistance game. Lines are long, and they're getting longer as the need for services rises. Increasingly, agencies are running out of food and having to offer less desirable products. Given the challenges associated with getting food, it's remarkable that the people we talked to were open and sanguine. Frankly the system could easily engender suspicion, frustration, and bitterness. But we found that fairly infrequently.

This fall, Feeding America will release the results of the 2009 hunger study and we'll learn more about who's needing assistance and why - locally, statewide, and nationally. And when the report comes out, those of us who conducted interviews will recall some memorable conversations with some very patient people. Whatever the project reveals will have been made possible by their cooperation.