

Reaching Immigrant Populations: Mexican American Opportunity Foundation (MAOF)

Senior SNAP Enrollment Initiative Best Practices Report

April 2020

Introduction

The Mexican American Opportunity Foundation (MAOF) is a non-profit, community-based organization that was established in 1963 in order to serve disadvantaged individuals and families in the Los Angeles area. MAOF is the largest Latino-oriented, family services organization in the United States, and has achieved this status by providing high quality social services and programs to those communities where the need is the greatest.

MAOF's Senior Hispanic Information and Assistance Services provides free information, assistance and referrals to over 1,500 Spanish speaking low-income seniors and caregivers monthly. MAOF also serves as a Multipurpose Senior Center for the city of Los Angeles and provides nutrition services to over 400 clients monthly, and transportation services to over 200 clients monthly. The majority of our senior services clients are monolingual Spanish speakers. Lastly, MAOF has served as an NCOA-funded Benefits Enrollment Center since March 2016.

MAOF's Outreach Strategy

MAOF proposed to enroll Latino seniors in SNAP both in the community and online. MAOF's strategies to reach this vulnerable population included leveraging technology to enhance outcomes, as well as addressing barriers to access such as stigma, language, and a complex application process.

Challenges

Three key challenges arise when helping Latino older adults to access benefits:

- **Trust:** One challenge faced when working with Latino older adults is gaining their trust. Distrust is high within our community given the current political climate. Many Latinos feel the community is being targeted. By building a safe space for them to gather you can gain the community's trust.
- **Language:** Another challenge faced is the language barrier. Most of the clients we serve are monolingual Spanish speakers, and many have little to no education. The educational materials we present to our clients have to be clear and concise, as to not overwhelm. We educate ourselves to be able to explain benefit programs to our clients and their families in terms they can understand.

- **Public charge:** Lastly, the issue of public charge has become a barrier. There is a lot of misinformation regarding public charge and this has caused fear within the community. Some of our clients that are permanent residents have expressed concern about receiving SNAP benefits or declined to apply for SNAP or complete their recertification. We educate them about what is the public charge rule and who it applies to. We don't pressure any clients to stay in the program but we try to make sure they have all the facts so they can make an informed decision.

Best Practices

A best practice when working with Latino older adults is gaining their trust. Gaining the trust of seniors is paramount to get them to listen and open up to you. Part of gaining their trust requires building a safe space for them and speaking their language. Once trust is built seniors will spread the word about your agency.

Other key practices to keep in mind include:

- **Go where they gather:** You cannot wait for seniors to come to you; you must go where they gather. Senior centers, senior housing buildings, churches, Social Security offices, and hospitals are places where you will find seniors congregate.
- **Be prepared:** Educate yourself about a benefit program before you attempt to educate senior clients. Have materials in the language your clients speak. Materials should be concise to avoid overwhelming clients. Be prepared to answer questions and speak to family members.
- **Tailor your message:** Another best practice is tailoring your outreach message to the senior community. You must address any myths and or concerns seniors have about SNAP. Some myths include:
 - They will have pay the state back for participating in the program.
 - They will reduce their Social Security benefit if they participate in the program.
 - CalFresh is a public charge program, and they will not be able to become US citizens.
 - If they participate in the program, they will take the benefit away from families with children.
 - They will only receive \$15 in benefits.

- **Build partnerships:** Building partnerships is vital to outreach. Partners help in spreading your outreach message and are important in building trust. Partners also help with referrals. Partnerships allow you to be more visible in the community. In building partnerships, having a key contact person is important.

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