

ATTACHMENT A – USDA FOOD STAMP PROGRAM FOCUS GROUPS

Project Background

The Food Stamp Program (FSP), the cornerstone of the food assistance programs managed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), is responsible for providing food assistance and nutrition education to foster improved nutrition among economically disadvantaged American citizens. Approximately 26 million people¹ receive benefits from the Food Stamp Program. However, more than 16 million eligible individuals do not use these resources.²

In 2003, FNS contracted with Fleishman-Hillard (FH) to help reposition the FSP as a nutrition assistance program, and in turn increase the national food stamp participation rate, motivating hard-to-reach audiences to apply for benefits so that their families may have access to healthier foods and nutrition education. To help accomplish this, in 2006 FH, along with advertising partner GMMB, conducted 11 qualitative focus group sessions across the United States with current FSP participants, consumers who are eligible but not participating in the FSP, and higher-income adults. During these focus groups, FH/GMMB obtained reactions and feedback to proposed program names, potential slogans for the FSP, potential program messages/radio advertisements, as well as two Spanish-language television ad concepts.

Research Objectives

To further encourage FSP participation, FNS awarded a new contract to FH in October 2007. Through additional qualitative focus group sessions in 2008, FH/GMMB will assess consumers' awareness of the FSP, and reactions to program messages and communication materials, and one English language TV ad concept to be used as a Public Service Announcement (PSA). The focus group stakeholders will consist of two key categories: (1) current FSP participants and (2) consumers who are eligible but not participating in the FSP.³ Both are target audiences for FNS external communication in promoting the FSP.

¹ *Reaching Those in Need: Food Stamp Program Participation Rates in 2005*. USDA, FNS. October 2007.

² *Food Stamp Program Participation Rates: 2006 Summary*. USDA, FNS. June 2007.

³ In 2006, FNS conducted a series of focus groups to better understand the public's reaction to and perceptions of a program name change. Because a name change affects multiple audiences (current participants, eligible nonparticipants, and taxpayers in general), FNS met with individuals from households with middle- to upper-incomes. However, since the goal of the proposed 2008 focus groups is to test outreach materials targeted at eligible nonparticipants, FH/GMMB does not recommend testing FNS materials with consumers from middle- to upper-household incomes.

STAKEHOLDERS REPRESENTED AND FOCUS GROUP DESIGN

We propose conducting 12 focus groups across the four U.S. Census Bureau regions. Up to 144 consumers will participate in the discussions. The types of consumer stakeholder groups included in this project are the following:

- Food stamp-eligible nonparticipants (those living 130 percent below the Federal poverty level): seven groups. *Rationale: This is a primary group to meet with and obtain feedback from regarding the FSP because it represents potential users of the FSP (about 16 million people.) We recommend conducting the largest number of groups with this audience because they are the main target audience that the campaign is working to reach and encourage to sign up for the FSP.*
- Current FSP participants: five groups. *Rationale: This audience is important because they already participate in the FSP. We want to make sure that program messages and related communication efforts resonate well with this group, as well as uncover any new barriers to staying in the program. We recommend conducting fewer focus groups with this audience because they already participate in the program; therefore, they have already overcome any barriers that they may have associated with the program.*

Composition/Structure of Groups

Four characteristics were taken into consideration when determining how many and which types of consumers to include in the 12 focus groups. The lists below summarize the number and types of groups shown in Attachment B.

Stakeholder audience:

- Those who are food stamp-eligible, but not participating in the program (seven groups).
- Current FSP participants (five groups).

Urban/suburban vs. rural segments:

- Urban/suburban (nine groups)
- Rural (three groups)

Potential urban/suburban markets:

- East Region: New York, New York, or Washington D.C. (three groups)
- South Region: Atlanta, Georgia, or San Antonio, Texas. (three groups)
- Midwest Region: Chicago, Illinois, or Kansas City, Missouri (three groups)
- West Region: Los Angeles or San Diego, California (three groups)

Examples of rural communities associated with regional markets include:

- Atlanta, Georgia – Gainesville, Jackson, Shady Dale, and Chestnut Mountain
- Kansas City, Missouri – Holden, Chillicothe, Harrisonville, and Sedalia
- San Antonio, Texas – Pearsall, Beeville, and Gonzales
- Los Angeles, California – Fresno and Salinas

Demographic Composition of Groups

Each focus group recruited will represent a diverse (and fairly representative) mix of consumers based on characteristics such as gender, age, race/ethnicity (for the general market and elderly groups), occupation, presence of children in the household, and education. Because each group is relatively small, we cannot control who does (or does not) show up for the discussions. As a result, despite the best efforts to recruit a representative mix of consumers, those who actually show up for and participate in the discussion may not be quite as representative (for example, out of seven men and seven women recruited, it is possible that six women show up but only one man. Additionally, if we are recruiting for only 12 individuals to show and nine women and five men show up, we will send two women home).

We recommend the following demographic composition of the 12 focus groups:

- Four groups with a mix of consumers based on age and race/ethnicity (referred to as “general market”).
- Four groups with Spanish-speaking consumers (two groups with individuals 60 years of age or older; two groups with a mix of ages).
- Two groups with African-American consumers.
- Two groups with elderly consumers (60 years of age or older).

The following proposed markets are those in which we plan to conduct the groups. However, the actual market selected to represent each of the four regions may change once we begin the process of identifying facilities for the focus groups and negotiating prices for the use of these facilities.

Potential Sites

Region	Recommended Site	Alternative Sites
East	New York, New York, or Washington D.C.	Hartford, Connecticut; Boston, Massachusetts; or Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
South Region	Atlanta, Georgia, or San Antonio, Texas	Dallas, Texas; Miami, Florida; or Charlotte, North Carolina
Midwest Region	Chicago, Illinois, or Kansas City, Missouri	Minneapolis, Minnesota; St. Louis, Missouri; or Denver, Colorado
West Region	Los Angeles or San Diego, California	Phoenix, Arizona; Sacramento, California; or Portland, Oregon

Focus Group Sites/Facilities

FNS will work with the contractor to determine the most appropriate markets for discussions. Our next step will be to locate vendors that have focus group facilities within each of the desired markets/regions. For the rural groups, we will also locate community-based organizations and/or facilities in which to conduct the discussions, such as

Veterans of Foreign War (VFW) halls, hotel meeting rooms, banquet rooms of local restaurants, etc. Additionally, because transportation may be a challenge for some participants, where possible we will choose facilities that are easily accessible to public transportation.

We will conduct most of the focus groups in professional focus group facilities. The facilities will consist of a focus group discussion room (meeting room with a conference table that comfortably seats eight to 12 people) and an adjoining room with a one-way mirror, from which the FNS and FH/GMMB staff can observe the discussion.

With the rural groups, we will most likely identify facilities with two rooms and use a closed-circuit video and a television monitor so that the FNS and FH/GMMB representatives can observe the discussion from the room adjoining (or across) the discussion group.

Identification and Recruitment of Focus Group Participants

Between 108 and 144 consumers will participate in the 12 discussions.

Attachment C shows recruitment screeners that the professional interviewers at the focus group facilities will use to identify and recruit qualified participants.

Regardless of the type of facility in which the discussions are held, we will adhere to the American Association for Public Opinion Research guidelines (See Attachment G). This will ensure that the participants are comfortable and confident that the research study is being conducted with integrity. Additionally, we will ensure that all focus group facilities are Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant.

Recruitment:

- The focus group facilities will use their own database of consumers as well as cold-calling methods (for example, posting signs at post offices/boxes, asking for referrals, and placing advertisements in local newspapers and on bulletin boards) to identify which participants to contact.
- Professional interviewers will conduct the screening and recruiting interviews by telephone by using a pre-approved script. Supervisors will monitor their work. (See Attachment C. The recruiting scripts will be transadapted into Spanish for Spanish-speaking discussion groups.)
- FH/GMMB/HMA will review the completed recruitment screeners to ensure that those recruited meet all of the required specifications.
- The focus group facility will mail a letter to those recruited. This letter will confirm date, time, and location of the focus group, as well as provide directions. They will also make a reminder telephone call to all participants the day before the discussion group. (See Attachment D.)

Participant stipend:

- At the end of the discussion, participants will receive a stipend to reimburse them for their expenses (\$50 to \$75), depending on the market. The focus group facility will

ask participants to sign a form acknowledging receipt of the stipend. The recipients can use this money in any way they wish (for example, they can reimburse a child care provider who watched their child during the discussion or pay for parking). The actual amount of the reimbursement may vary due to area – rural or urban – and proximity to the focus group site. For example, if participants are asked to drive a long distance, they may receive a higher reimbursement.

Participation:

- A professional host/hostess will greet the participants (and observers) and escort them to the appropriate room. The host/hostess will be available throughout the discussion to help answer questions, deliver messages, and address any other issues that arise.
- Those recruited, as well as observers from FNS and FH/GMMB, will be asked to confirm their identity by showing their identification upon arriving at the focus group facility.
- The participants will be re-screened upon arriving at the facility to ensure that they qualify for the discussion. Participants will fill out the recruitment screener when they arrive to the focus group facility, prior to the start of the group. (See Attachment C.) The burden hours accounts for 10 minutes for participants to fill out paperwork before the start of the groups.
- Depending on the time of day, a light meal and/or snacks will be provided to the participants and observers.

Confidentiality:

- The participants will be informed of confidentiality and privacy act provisions before participating in the discussion. The participants will be told the length of time the discussion will require of them both during the screening/recruiting process and immediately before beginning the discussion. The confidentiality agreement will be provided in both English and Spanish.
- The identity of the focus group participants will remain confidential, and the participants will be assured that their name will never appear in any reports to the USDA.
- The USDA’s sponsorship of the research will be revealed to the participants during the recruiting process as well as at the beginning of the focus group discussions.

Pretest of Discussion Guides

A moderator’s guide has been developed for each audience (see Attachment D). Upon approval by the OMB, FH/GMMB will test the discussion guides in order to assess the clarity of our questions and their relevance to the target audiences. The pre-test will be conducted with fewer than nine participants; therefore the time required for the pre-test is not included in the burden hours. This exercise will also determine how well the organization of the discussion guide flows from one question to another. We implement this test by having professional research staff members conduct in-depth, one-on-one interviews (either in person or by telephone) with two members of each target audience (four total interviews). These individuals will be recruited to participate in this test a week or so before the interviews.

During the pretest interviews, the professional research staff members who conduct the interviews will take notes and evaluate each question within the guide based on:

- How clear and easy it is for consumers to understand (i.e., where appropriate, we can include questions during the pretest to assess consumers' cognitive understanding of key questions).
- The extent to which the question is relevant and meaningful to respondents.
- How well one questions flows to the next.
- We estimate that these interviews will take between 30 and 45 minutes to complete, and we will reimburse participants (approximately \$25 to \$50) for their expenses. The actual length of the interview will vary depending on how engaged and responsive the participants are (e.g., some will be more talkative than others), and the extent to which participants ask for clarification or more information. The actual amount of the reimbursement will depend on the location of the interview – rural or urban. FH/GMMB will summarize these notes and provide FNS with a memo that reports the pretest findings. This memo will include recommendations for revising or fine-tuning the discussion guides.

Focus Group Moderating

- The focus group moderators will be professionally trained moderators who are experienced in leading discussion groups with a variety of consumers and who know how to build trust and confidence in focus group participants.
- The responsibilities of the moderator are to lead the discussion by ensuring that he/she asks all of the questions outlined in the discussion guide, encourages open and insightful discussion among all of the participants, minimizes any negative effects of uncooperative participants, and ensures that the feedback from participants is probed and explored.
- There will also be a note-taker present who will observe the focus groups and take notes that summarize the participants' feedback. The note-taker will also respond to questions or inquiries about the discussion and ensure that questions are forwarded to the moderator.
- The discussions will be audiotaped for future reference.

Discussion Length

Each group will take 120 minutes to conduct and include about eight to 12 pre-screened individuals. During the focus groups, those who are observing can submit handwritten notes to the moderator by way of the hostess or note-taker. The moderator will review the notes and incorporate appropriate questions/comments from the observers during the discussion. However, a new set of questions will not be added to the discussion guide. The moderator will simply probe to gain a better understanding of participants' opinions and positions. In addition, the moderator will take a brief two- to five-minute break either at the discussion's midpoint or toward the discussion's end. This will allow him/her to visit with the observers to see if they have any additional questions that they want the moderator to ask participants.

Translation

All focus group materials will be translated in Spanish after OMB approval for this package has been obtained. A FH/GMMB subcontractor will translate all materials. More specifically, FH/GMMB will provide Spanish-language versions of the recruitment screener (Attachment C), reminder letter (Attachment D) discussion guide (Attachment E) and supporting handouts and scripts, as well as the confidentiality agreement (Attachment J.)

Burden Hours

Estimated burden hours take into the account the amount of time required for participants to be screened, fill out relevant paperwork prior to the start of the group, and the time required participating in the discussion.

Estimated Burden Hours Associated with the 12 Discussion Groups

Affected Public	Type of Respondent	Number of Respondents	Number of responses annually per Respondent	Total annual responses (c x d)	Estimate of Burden Hours per response	Total Annual Burden Hours (e x f)
Individual Household income less than 130% of poverty level	non-Food Stamp-participants	68	1	68	2.338	158.984
	Food Stamp-participants	68	1	68	2.338	158.984
	Recruited (interview/confidentially agreement only)	24	1	24	0.334	8.016
	non-response	8	1	8	0.0334	0.2672
Total		168				326.2512

Time Frame

We will conduct the groups over a period of approximately six business weeks, and the discussions will be held on weekdays either during daytime or evening hours, depending on the availability of the stakeholder group.

- **Food Stamp-Eligible, Nonparticipants.** The discussion will be held on a weekday (Monday through Thursday) evening or daytime hours, depending on the availability of the participants. Most likely, we will meet with elderly consumers during the middle of the day because many of them choose not to travel at night or during rush-hour traffic.
- **Current FSP Participants.** The discussion will be held on a weekday (Monday through Thursday) evening or daytime hour, depending on the availability of the participants. Most likely, we will meet with the elderly consumers during the middle of the day.

An example of how we may schedule the groups is shown in the table below. Because a representative of the FNS will attend each of the groups, we will work with the FNS to develop the schedule.

Region	Number of Business Days Needed to Complete Discussion Groups	Week Number
West	3	1
East	3	3
Midwest	3	4
South	3	6

Data Collection

The focus group moderator will use a discussion guide to moderate each of the 12 discussions. This guide is not a verbatim script of the questions (or order of the questions) that the moderator will ask the participants. Instead, the moderator will use the guide to direct the flow of the discussion and to ensure that all pertinent questions are asked. However, the moderator may ask other questions that are not in the guide as a result of the participants bringing to light new or unexpected issues or insights.

Attachment D provides the moderator’s guide for the discussion groups. The discussion guides will be translated into Spanish, if necessary, for the Spanish-speaking moderator who will lead these discussions. An interpreter will sit in the observation room and perform a Spanish-to-English translation of the discussions, in real time, while the observers are watching the group in the viewing room. This narration by translator will be audiotaped.

Each focus group will be audiotaped so that those analyzing the data and writing the report can refer to and listen to the tapes to extract verbatim quotes and/or confirm the meaning/context of something that was said. In addition, a representative from FH/GMMB will take notes during each discussion, and the moderator will lead a debriefing session with the observers following each market’s discussions. The purpose of the debriefing session is to share insights from the discussions and to reach conclusions regarding the most important findings.

Data Analysis

The responses to and feedback from the discussion groups will be analyzed through a multi-step process performed by the FH/GMMB research staff.

- Conduct on-site debriefing sessions with the FNS observers immediately following each market’s focus groups. The purpose of these sessions is to share, compare, and record key findings from the discussion. The FH/GMMB research moderator will lead the debriefing sessions, which will take about 15 to 30 minutes each, depending on the number of issues or findings that arise from each group.
- Compile and review the notes taken by the FH/GMMB note-taker during the 12 focus groups.

- Tabulate, review, and analyze the findings from any self-administered questionnaires completed by the focus group participants during the discussions. (See Attachment D.)
- As needed, listen to key portions of the recordings from individual focus group sessions in order to explore, confirm, or clarify key findings and to obtain insightful comments to be included as paraphrased quotes within the report or pull short audio files for an oral presentation.

Upon completion of a report draft, FH/GMMB will share the report with the Hispanic and African-American moderators and ask them to read and edit the report for clarity and accuracy. These steps will ensure that the analysis of the findings reflects the insight and understanding of multiple people – not just the note-takers’ findings.

Focus Group Report

The focus group report will be prepared for FNS. It will be in narrative and include the following key sections:

- Introduction and explanation of focus group methods (in tabular form), dates, and participant profiles.
- Executive summary of key findings and their communication implications.
- Detailed findings segregated into relevant and meaningful sections or chapters (for example, perceptions of the FSP as a nutrition program and reactions to communication concepts).

This report will help FNS refine its current outreach efforts to current and eligible participants. More specifically, findings from the report will help FNS craft messages for radio PSAs, program materials such as brochures, and it will help FNS develop media and outreach strategies designed to reach and educate hard to serve audiences such as the elderly and working poor.