

# S.F. leads U.S. in rare food stamp option

► CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

low-cost or discounted meals to food stamp participants, post a sign saying they are part of the program, agree to all USDA rules and regulations about food stamps, including not accepting EBTs for alcoholic beverages and not charging sales tax.

"After the MOU, there's state and federal paperwork, and I help any restaurant that wants to join the program do it all," Calloway said. "I know the ins and outs, and how to get applications into the right hands. It usually takes no more than a month."

Restaurants have to pass a Department of Public Health inspection and submit bank information. Once the USDA authorizes them to accept food stamps, they get free gear from the state — a point of sale device for swiping EBT cards, PIN pad, receipt printer and printer supplies. Calloway trains staff on how to use the equipment.

EBT purchases are deposited in the restaurant's bank electronically every working day. The EBT machine gives the owner or manager an accounting of the previous day's transactions.

"I also have confidential access to dollar amounts and transactions for individual restaurants," Calloway said. "That's how I monitor the program."

## THE SIXTH ST. EXPERIENCE

Lien Thai, owner and manager of Honey Donut & Deli on Sixth Street, signed on for the program two years ago, just a few months after she bought the restaurant. Besides doughnuts, she sells bacon and eggs, oatmeal, hamburgers and other hot fare.

Thai says she's had no problems with the EBTs, except that sometimes people don't have their yellow ID cards and get angry if she says she can't serve them. Though she gets a daily report of how much she's taken in via the EBTs, she wasn't sure how much that amounted to monthly.

"Right after people get their food stamps, maybe 10 to 15 people a day use the EBTs, but when they run out it's maybe four a day," Thai said. "Our business is very slow now — I don't know why. If I wasn't in the program, there'd be even less business."

Thai said she'd recommend the program to other restaurants.

Just up the street, at Victory Restaurant, steam tables of fried chicken, rice, fish and other hot foods were ready for the lunch crowd. Wendy Ho was sounding discouraged about the EBTs. She and her husband have owned the Victory for four years and they were among the first to join the restaurant program.

They make money from it — she estimates \$200 to \$300 a day early in the month and \$100 daily the final week — but she cites problems.

"A lot want to cheat. They come without their yellow IDs and lie about it," she said, "or they swipe the card when they know there's nothing left in it (as with ATMs, the sale is immediately rejected). Then they get very angry and yell at me. Or they want to pay after they get their food, but they don't have their card and when I say no, they get mad."

It's bad to have other customers see that, but there's worse. "I get a lot of people with cards who go and ask someone sitting in the restaurant for, say, \$3. They say they'll get them another meal. Then they swipe their card, get the food and take the cash."

She lowered her voice. "They're doing it to get money for drugs. And they do it right in front of me."

Ho and her husband are trying to sell their restaurant. She talked fondly of the 13 years she spent as a home health care worker for On Lok. It was a much easier life, she said.

## EBB AND FLOW OF EATERIES

Calloway hopes to keep adding more restaurants to the 17 on the program roster; as of the end of March, three more were in the hopper. "We're proud of this program, and we definitely need to do more outreach, but staffing shortages keep us from doing the necessary footwork," she said.

In March, she made a presentation at the Tenderloin Futures Collaborative and plans to do more of the same in other neighborhoods, keeping the focus on recruiting restaurants that are already serving the homeless.

Six months ago, there were 22 restaurants in the S.F. program, 14 of them Subway Sandwich shops. The number of Subways has now dropped to nine.

"The Subway numbers constantly change," Calloway said. "They're often sold or transferred from owner to owner. Just like with any retailer who accepts food stamps, if the ownership changes, the authoriza-

tion process has to start all over. But besides Subway, no one's dropped out of the program."

Elsewhere in the state, Los Angeles County is getting ready to add its homeless to the restaurant program, according to USDA's Stewart. He's pleased L.A.'s coming on board, but he's also concerned that the restaurant program, like the food stamp program in general, is underutilized.

"As few as half the people who are eligible for food stamps in California are taking advantage of the program," Stewart said.

In San Francisco, that figure may be higher or lower, 66% or 44%, depending on whose statistics you use.

District 10 Supervisor Sophie Maxwell held a hearing in February to explore how aggressively — or not — the city is going after federal funding to improve childhood nutrition. Since then, she's asked the city attorney to draft a policy of nutrition standards and to check into the possibility of mandating city agencies and CBOs to step up their efforts to bring in the bucks.

In question, at the top of the list, was DHS' food stamp program, which costs \$23.5 million to administer and whose staff oversee the distribution of \$33.5 million worth of food stamps to 11,546 children and 16,941 adults.

Harvey Rose, the supes' budget analyst, prepared a fat report for the February hearing. It included nutrition staff estimates of the percentage of people eligible for that benefit who actually get it. Food stamps said 56%. The other programs ranged from 17% of eligible students getting school breakfasts to 122% getting WIC benefits.

The budget analyst also included data from a 2004 report by California Food Policy Advocates, a nonprofit headquartered in San Francisco. It said 86,585 San Franciscans are eligible for food stamps but two-thirds don't get them, a loss of \$60 million in federal funds.

O'Farrell questions the nonprofit's number of eligible food stamp recipients.

"I think the advocates simply looked at annual income from the 2000 census," O'Farrell told The Extra when we asked about the budget analyst's report. "They just didn't factor in personal assets, resources, immigration status and SSI/SSP that can disqualify people. Here in the city we know there are people who are eligible who aren't getting food stamps. I support the 44% figure."

## FOOD STAMPS IN A DAY

On a rainy morning in late March, The Extra caught up with O'Farrell at the Hamilton Family Center in the Haight, a 24-hour shelter for homeless families that also provides meals and support services to homeless people.

O'Farrell arrived at Hamilton with six eligibility workers and a few supervisors and IT people, who lugged in cardboard boxes of applications and informational materials and computers. At long tables, they talked with about 50 people, mostly homeless from nearby Golden Gate Park and Haight Street. Homeless families weren't part of this outreach, O'Farrell said, because they are "mostly already wired for benefits" through other programs.

By midafternoon, he estimated that 40 people got the good news: Based on an interview, they appeared to be eligible for food stamps, their name had gone into the computer and their EBT card would be ready for them the next day.

This was DHS' third Food Stamps in a Day outreach effort, a program O'Farrell started in January.

"Our first two days were at St. Anthony's," O'Farrell said, "and each time we talked to about 50 people and got 40 approved. We plan to go back again."

While O'Farrell and his crew set up upstairs from the dining room, St. Anthony's volunteers



S.F. DEPT. OF HUMAN SERVICES

**St. Mary's College** volunteer helps food stamp applicant at the Jan. 12 St. Anthony's outreach effort, Food Stamps in a Day.

and staff had talked to people lined up outside waiting for lunch, explained Lisa O'Neill, St. Anthony's media associate.

The St. Anthony's folks used a one-page "screen-er," a list of questions to eliminate those with no chance of getting food stamps: noncitizens and illegal residents; SSI and SSP recipients; people with felony convictions for selling or trafficking drugs (as of Jan. 1 this year, convictions for drug use and possession no longer disqualified food stamp applicants); and monthly income over \$1,009 for a one-person household.

Those who appeared to be eligible went upstairs for a formal interview. They didn't even need paperwork to verify their identity or income; they could just state their Social Security number. O'Farrell told The Extra that in cases like that, his staff went so far as to call relatives or friends of the person applying to check the veracity of the information.

## FOOD STAMP STATS OVERSTATED

O'Neill said St. Anthony's was delighted to collaborate with DHS and to have more of its clients get food stamps and be able to eat at restaurants.

"We're serving an average of 2,400 meals day, up 20% from two years ago," O'Neill said. "We want our guests to be able to expand their resources for meals."

A Feb. 15 press release from St. Anthony's announcing the second Food Stamps in a Day included some numbers to explain the need for more outreach: "For every dollar in food stamp benefits entering the city, there is an economic impact of about \$1.84." O'Farrell said that figure came from USDA's economic research services and that Stewart had cited it at the city's February nutrition hearing. He had no quibbles with it.

Not so the other statistics in the release — that 66% of eligible people citywide weren't getting food stamps, that the city was losing \$60 million a year, and that 82% of people in the Tenderloin weren't getting the food stamps they were entitled to.

"I don't know where these numbers regarding Tenderloin food stamp participation come from," O'Farrell said in an e-mail.

As for the rest, he was emphatic: "Lies, damn lies and statistics!" ■

## CENTRAL CITY



CENTRAL CITY EXTRA is published monthly by San Francisco Study Center Inc., a private nonprofit serving the community since 1972. The Extra was initiated through grants from the S.F. Hotel Tax Fund and the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund. The contents are copyrighted by the San Francisco Study Center, 1095 Market Street, Suite 602, San Francisco, CA 94103.

PHONE: (415) 626-1650

FAX: (415) 626-7276

E-MAIL: [centralityextra@studycenter.org](mailto:centralityextra@studycenter.org)

EDITOR AND PUBLISHER: Geoffrey Link

SENIOR WRITER/EDITOR: Marjorie Beggs

COPY EDITOR: Gerry Fregoso

REPORTERS: Tom Carter, Phil Tracy

DESIGN AND LAYOUT: Carl Angel

DESIGN CONSULTANT: Don McCartney

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT: Rumi Eto

CIRCULATION: Steve Surncey

PHOTOGRAPHERS: Lenny Limjoco, Mark Ellinger

CONTRIBUTORS: Adrian D. Varnedoe, Diamond

Dave, William Crain, Mark Hedin, John Burks,

Eric Robertson

EDITORIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

David Baker, Michael Nulty, Debbie Larkin,

Nicholas Rosenberg, Brad Paul, Tariq Alazraie

Central City Extra is a member of the  
SAN FRANCISCO NEIGHBORHOOD NEWSPAPER ASSOCIATION