

# HUNGER & THE SAFETY NET IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY:

ABSTRACT & ANECDOTES

**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**

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Copies of the full report are available at: [www.caringcouncilsd.org](http://www.caringcouncilsd.org) and [www.spinsandiego.org](http://www.spinsandiego.org)

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# ABSTRACT

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 Program<sup>1</sup> (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). 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 Diego<sup>2</sup>, 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 interviews were conducted in early 2009 with 187 respondents mostly from parents living in deep poverty.<sup>3</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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".

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> "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 and the findings in this study, 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 HHSA for help already filled with shame, embarrassment and fear.
2. Respondents experienced HHSA Family Resource Centers as enveloped in a Culture of Fear and Degradation.
3. HHSA is highly inefficient in processing SNAP/FSP applications.
4. Hunger may be deeper and more widespread than is generally known.
5. Respondents struggle to maintain a healthy diet.
6. The quality of life deteriorates as food resources decline.

### **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<sup>4</sup> to be reviewed by a caseworker.
2. End Project 100% (home inspections of applicants not suspected of fraud).
3. Lobby to end all fingerprinting.
4. Reduce wait times in Family Resource Centers to one hour or less.
5. Upgrade the facilities.
6. Meet with SPIN/Caring Council to discuss this study.

#### **To Address Hunger:**

1. Expand eligibility and increase the benefit levels in SNAP/FSP.
2. Eliminate the asset test for SNAP/FSP eligibility for all recipients.
3. Join FRAC's call to end childhood hunger by 2015.
4. Develop alternative ways to access healthy foods.

The full report can be found at: [www.caringcouncilsd.org](http://www.caringcouncilsd.org), and [www.spinsandiego.org](http://www.spinsandiego.org)

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

## ANECDOTES

In a study like this it is easy to get lost in the numbers and lose the heart of the story. Numbers, while helpful in understanding the whole picture, are sterile and cannot provide a window into what life is like for the individuals represented in this study. This appendix is an attempt to present a fuller picture by giving examples of more complete stories. These anecdotes were chosen because they are illustrative of the lives of the people interviewed, not because they tell the worst of the stories.

***This single mother lost her job in December 2008. She has a 12-year-old daughter and 9-year-old son.***

It gets worse when watching food commercials. It breaks my heart having no food and watching a McDonald's commercial. Please Mother Earth swallow me, I'd like to hide somewhere because I can't stand it, watching a well-dressed girl eating and my girl staring at it.

Well my daughter has this problem that I haven't been able to stop. She sucks her finger. I ask her to stop it and she responds, "I'm hungry so I'll suck my finger." Yeah every time I try to take it away from her mouth she says, "No because I feel hungry." And I tell her, "But you won't feel less hungry by sucking your finger." "No," she says, "I imagine its real food." She's twelve.

I took my son to the doctor. He asked me to step back and told me, "Do you know what your kid has? He's depressed due to the situation you're going through. So I'd like to know what problem he has." And I told the doctor it's because of having no food. He told me what his problem was. Not having what he wanted has caused his depression.

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***These are the words of an elderly woman who lives in San Diego with her husband. She has major health problems but lacks adequate health care. Each month, the couple survives on a food budget of only \$80.***

Right now we're spending almost all of the money that we have just to keep the rent of the house that we're living in, to stay in it. So we don't have anything left over. We have only my husband's unemployment. I'm getting Social Security Disability, which is very small.

Well, we don't celebrate birthdays on the birthday anymore. We usually, we ask everybody if they can wait to, say, the next week or whenever the money would be coming in, you know. And that takes a lot of the fun out of it, the happiness out of it. And then it also hurts my husband's pride. Not me so much. I've always been flexible. But we even do holidays on a different day. If it's 3 days off for Thanksgiving, we wait. I think we've become more spiritual. Just being grateful that we have food.

I lost my job. The job I had for 9 and a half years. The whole laboratory of San Diego State closed. It closed. So we don't have that job, and I was getting disability and was able to work a little bit. But now, no work. And then at my age with my disability, trying to go for another job without medical care. If I get a certain medication, I can walk better. If I don't get it, then I'm very crippled up, and I can barely walk. And nobody is gonna hire me if I look like that.

When there's no food, the arguments come. "Why don't you look harder for another job?" And

he's criticizing me, "Well if you could've worked more, or if you could have got a better paying job." I say, "Well, if you could have finish your education, you could be the supervisor," and he complains about having to dig holes.

And I yell at him because I think he uses too much coffee. And it's like, "Oh, why did you take so much?" We can't make it. And he says, "I'm tired of having it watered down so bad so that I can't even taste it!"

And then we were in the embarrassing position of borrowing food from our daughter. Which we never, we swore we never would. You know, we would always provide for her, but life has not turned out that way.

And the temptation is there. And it is horrifying to think, "Oh, they didn't notice this that I didn't pay for this, this is in the bag." I never thought I would feel that way. I never thought I would feel that way! Sometimes, if they made a mistake, I don't go back to the store and tell them and make sure I paid it. You know.

He'll eat something from the food bank, and if it has wheat in it, then he'll have the allergic reaction. Yeah. And this will make him congested, and he can't breathe. And he's like swollen around the eyes and everything. And he's like choking, can't breathe and coughing. And so this keeps him from being able to take daily labor. Which he might earn \$25, \$50 in a day. And even if we have the food, if he gets that bad of a reaction, then he loses the food that he's eaten. You know, he can't keep it down.

So we have health problems, but we're not getting any health care. Not getting any health care. And I go to one free clinic once one Saturday. The third Saturday of each month, I have to go all the way to Nashville City. And they'll give me samples, if they have them. I have to go on the bus and on the trolley. And it takes about 3 hours every month. 3 hours waiting to see if the doctors have it. It takes an hour and half to get there. And an hour and a half to get home.

I got to tell you one health problem for me. My teeth have started breaking and falling out. And so now I have so many broken teeth. Even if I have food I couldn't eat it. I find it almost impossible to eat just, like, freshly cooked chicken.

None of my relatives would lend me any money any more. Which is embarrassing. But we borrow from friends that have their money coming in at a different time of the month. And when they don't have the money and we do, we lend them some.

Or we barter, we give some of the, you know, the fruits or avocados, the things that we harvested, you know. We grew pumpkins, we grew some. We got some seeds, we grew pumpkins and zucchini. We grew. We grew a lot; we had a lot of zucchini, a lot of squash to supplement. But whatever is the cheapest. Like sometimes they're clearing something out and they have like a lot of tomatoes or like roasted tomatoes.

I don't usually tell people about our situation. Because I feel I should know better. I was educated and should have known how not to be in this situation. So I'm embarrassed. To find myself in this situation in spite of everything that I have tried to do. It just became overwhelming.

***This is the story of a single mother of four. She and her children have been staying in a domestic violence shelter in San Diego. She arrived at SPIN for help with bruises covering her face. She experienced problems obtaining food stamps and welfare for her children.***

I have more stress because of my family situation right now. So alone, I can't attend their necessities. I'm homeless, I'm unemployed. So I need the cash aid and the food stamps. But sometimes it's not enough.

Most of all, you feel angry and depressed because an adult can hold, but a child or a baby is more difficult. Even over a slice of bread, the kids fight. If one is eating slowly, one goes and steals his meal. They get violent, aggressive. I understand the parents that murder their own children out of desperation, of not having anything to give them.

We make foamy flowers, and we place them in the entrances and exits of the stores with a little table and a little basket, my kids and I. And then we put the money together and with that we cover the costs of food. Yes, yes. My kids help me, someone cuts, someone pastes, and the others wrap.

One time I came out of the store crying. Yes, it was because my daughter had grabbed a box of cereal that had candies and a CD. But it cost almost \$5. I grabbed those cereals that cost less. I said that I don't have enough money. If I'd buy it to you, your siblings are going to eat the whole the box in just a day, and what am I going to do for the rest of the days?

So, this is what makes me cry. She told me, "One day I'll be a president and all the children will eat everything they want." And I told her "Don't worry baby, we'll have money."

But she didn't cry or anything. "Mom, someday I'll be the president. I'm going to be an important person," she said. And that's the reason why she is going to school.

What hurt me more was the lady was near me spoke Spanish. She looked like she had some money. She grabbed two boxes and told me, "She deserves a good Christmas gift; take them for the girl," she said. My daughter went and gave her a hug and told her "God bless you. God bless you and thanks for my cereal," that one I couldn't buy for her.

That was what hurt me a lot. They're children, how do you explain to them? The big one is looking for a job so he can help me with the food, because sometimes we don't have enough. And he says, "Mommy with what I will earn, we're going to buy food," and I tell him yes.

And the church, they gave a basket of food. We also share food with the women at the shelter because they've denied them welfare too. There's a lady that is three months pregnant, and they've denied her the stamps. Yes. I know it's wrong, I know it's wrong. She's pregnant, the name's Martita. I saw her need and had to give her some, she needs it.

SPIN was the ones that helped me. You don't know how much I battled all bruised up. You realized when I got here all banged up, without knowing where to go, with no money and no home.

***These are the words of an unemployed single mother of two who is living below 75% of the federal poverty line.***

My son is a big milk drinker. I mean him alone. Even though he's only 3-years-old! He puts away a gallon of milk easy every week.

And at the end of the month when you don't have it, he'll tell. He'll flat out tell me, "Mommy you need to go to the store and get some milk." And I'll say, ok. I'll just tell him "Yeah, I will, I will," and then I blame it on, like, I forgot. "Oh I forgot to go to the store," instead of saying I don't have any money to him. I'll say I forgot. And then he'll say "Mommy you forgot again!" and then he'll get all bratty, "You forgot again Mommy and you knew I wanted milk."

What are you gonna do? It's either admitting that you have no money or you admit that you forgot.

It's so often. It's like we can't afford that, we can't afford that. No, we can't get that. No, no, no. I mean every time we go anywhere.

That first week of the month when everything is kind of a little bit more abundant, she hordes. My 9-year-old. She hordes food. And she eats way too much. And she makes little secret trips to that refrigerator. 'Cause it's gonna go. It's gonna be gone. We've had talks. We've talked about it, and we've talked about it. It's just become a part of her now. When there's that abundance, she's gonna get as much as she can while it's still there. Meanwhile I'm trying to explain to her we could make it stretch. Or I have to hide it. I have to hide things from her, you know. So that it will be there the next week when we need it.

I didn't eat lunch today. I won't eat lunch tomorrow. You know? I mean that's just the way it's gonna be. And like I need it, you know. But still I'll cut my meals in half and give it to my kids. I know I need it, but not compared to my children. My children need it more.

[When I went to apply for welfare and food stamps,] I was crying for everything, you know, 'cause it was not a good day for me. 'Cause I was working. I worked. It wasn't like I was sitting on my butt doing nothing. I was working and found myself a month behind on my rent. A month behind on my car payment. Had no food, nothing. You know because, that's just the way it went at the time. And I just didn't want to be there any more than they did.

[I left the welfare office] completely demoralized. You know, every single person I encountered there had not one ounce of care, one ounce of compassion, not one ounce of anything. You could see the stress on their face. It was, like in their eyes. It was just next, next, next. And if you went up to the counter to say "When am I [gonna be called]," there was attitude. You were talked down to. You know? You, you got no respect. I mean it was like, "Oh you're begging."

I'm sorry. I paid taxes for 20 years. I worked. I was working then when I originally got on food stamps. It wasn't like I'm just sitting on my butt doing nothing, tossing, you know, a coin in the air, drinking a beer.

*Now that you've had to experience this food stamp process and the application, would you go do it again, if you had to?*

Definitely. You have no choice. You have children to feed. You know. That's what you do. You

lay down on hot coals for your kid. You walk over glass. You bend over backwards. That's what you do. You get humiliated.

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***These are the words of an African American woman with a degree in Communications. Her husband has a Masters in Social Work. They had previously been financial stable but descended into poverty over the last two years, when both lost their jobs. Her husband's job search efforts have been unsuccessful largely because he does not own a car. The positions he is qualified to take require him to be on-call and travel to sites all over the county. Her husband skips lunch every day to make sure their 4- and 5-year-old children have enough. But when he comes home every day, he's irritated and has a headache. The family is currently on welfare and food stamps, surviving on a total income of about \$1000/month. That puts their family at 50% of the federal poverty line.***

***This is how a college-educated adult felt about the process of asking for government aid.***

We waited all day like we were supposed to. It was overwhelming. I had never seen so many people. There was no visual direction of where you should go. Where do you get the form? What form needs to be completed before getting into line? They don't give you information to help you save time.

We had to buy two \$5 bus tickets for the round trip to the welfare office. So it was \$10 out of the money we had. Since we had to come back the next day, they gave us a token. But that's if you have an appointment. If you made an error and need to come back, you don't get reimbursed.

Think of a factory. It seemed like people were being processed. There was no human connection. We waited all day at the welfare office like we were supposed to, then we went back there, and there's this glass. He's behind this glass, and you're on the other side. So that's the first type of interaction.

The case worker was very cold. Not interested. When I asked the case worker about housing, he just said, "That's why we give you the money." Then he got up and walked away. Later, when I tried to make sure we did everything correctly, his tone went up three levels. He talked to me like a child. I had shared something very intimate and personal about our needs, but he was not interested. He was very cold. We were tolerated. Everyone is tolerated.

There are people who are intimidated by the process. The forms are intimidating. You're not sure what information they're necessarily asking for. You have to have those completed before the interview. And if you don't, you'll be kicked out of the process. I've seen people finish the paperwork, wait in line for an hour, and get to the front of the line. Then they tell them that something is wrong, and they're told they have to wait in line again. The line takes 45 minutes to one hour. Standing up.

If we were not desperate for it, I would have walked out the door. If I was paying for the service, I would have called the manager. But you don't get the same kind of rights.

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***These are the words of a single mother of five kids. Her oldest daughter, age fifteen, has schizophrenia, and another child is mentally retarded. She is on disability. She skips meals often, and even her 15-year-old eats less so that the 5-year-old will have more. One week before our team interviewed this woman, she had to check herself into the hospital because she was so stressed from her inability to provide for her family. By the fourth week of every month, they have no food left. That week, they have to rely on whatever they can get from a church. The family barely survives on welfare, food stamps, and disability income. This is her account of the mandatory home search to which she had to submit in order to receive welfare for her family.***

The investigator showed up, and I was not there. And they assumed I was not living there. And when I went to fight with them, because I had to fight with them (and that's why it took so long for me to get approved), I say, "I had to take my kids to school." And they say you [committed] fraud because they [did not] find you. But it's not my fault they don't call, because they know your number. When you fill out your application, you give your number and your address. So they can call you. At least have the respect to call you and say, "You know what, we're gonna be there."

The investigator asked me a lot about my private life. It was really bad, because he asked if I [had] my ex-husband [with] me. When I applied, I applied as a single parent. So it's obvious that I don't have him. And he said, "Do you know where he is?" And I said, "If I know where he is, do you think I would apply for welfare? I can [get] child support." He was quiet because he was thinking I was going to be quiet, because he was treating me like a criminal. I'm not gonna let no one treat me with no respect. If I had the money, a way to provide for my kids, I'm not gonna be on welfare. I'm not gonna humiliate myself and let people treat me that way, with no respect.

Then, he goes to look in my freezer, and he goes through my clothes, he goes through my things, to find out if my husband was not living there. I said, "Why are you treating me this way? I think you're treating me like a criminal, like I was having drugs, or I was doing something bad." He went through my cabinets to find out-- I don't know what he was looking for. He treated me like a criminal, with no respect. No, he did not ask for permission [to search in these places]. They think they have the tag [badge], the investigator, so they can do whatever they want.

My sister had the same experience. She said, "Search wherever you want. I got nothing to hide." It was the same thing as me. When we were doing that, I feel they violated my rights.