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Texas' program for food stamps called the worst

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By Gary Scharrer - Express-News

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AUSTIN — Texas has the worst-performing food stamp program in the nation, the federal director for food assistance told state officials here Tuesday.

It ranks last among the 50 states and U.S. territories in processing food stamp applications and also does a poor job getting eligible low-income people to apply, Kevin Concannon, a U.S. Department of Agriculture undersecretary, said in an earlier meeting with reporters.

And because Texas doesn't even come close to the national average in enrolling those eligible, grocery retailers like H-E-B are missing out on nearly \$1 billion a year in food sales, he said.

"If I were a native son sitting down here, I would be very upset that my state was not the leader that it is capable of being," Concannon said.

Texas doesn't have enough workers to process food stamp applications and is one of only three states that fingerprints applicants for food assistance.

The state also imposes a time-consuming and complicated assets test that impedes the effort to help desperate and hungry people, Concannon said.

Getting the Legislature to eliminate those requirements would require Texas Health and Human Services Commissioner Tom Suehs "to persuade, cajole and convince a whole bunch of people," Concannon said before meeting with Suehs. "And we are very much in his corner."

However, Gov. Rick Perry has no intention of backing down on the requirements.

"The governor supports the continued use of fingerprinting and assets tests to protect the integrity of the program," Perry spokeswoman Katherine Cesinger said. "It's shocking the Obama administration would even suggest weakening the fraud protections we have in state law."

Fingerprinting, or finger imaging, requirements shouldn't be relaxed, agreed former state Rep. Arlene Wohlgemuth, now executive director of the Texas Public Policy Foundation. It only takes two to four minutes and deters people from trying to sign up at multiple food stamp offices, she said.

"I'm mystified that people would not be in favor of deterring fraud," Wohlgemuth said. "I hardly think that that's burdensome on anybody, and it protects the taxpayer."

She blamed a faulty computer system for contributing to the lengthy processing time for food stamp applications.

All through 2009, Texas lagged far behind a federal requirement that food stamp applications be processed within 30 days, or seven days in emergency cases. Some 43 percent of the applications were not processed on time in November, the most recent reporting period.

The state hired more than 600 people last fall to help speed things, which Concannon called a "step taken in the right direction."

The government provided Texans with about \$4 billion in food assistance last year but only enrolls 55 percent of those eligible to receive it, based on census income data. The average among the 50 states is 66 percent — and if Texas met that average, the state's grocery retailers would see another \$1 billion pouring into their cash registers annually, he said.

About 3.1 million Texans qualified for food stamps last month, including 224,090 in Bexar County.

"This is a proven way to get food into the hands of hungry people. It also would have an impact on the state economy," Concannon said.

The government pays for the food. States pick up half the administrative costs. The USDA could cut funding to Texas for poor performance, but "it would have to be extreme for that to happen" because hungry people would get hurt, he said.

Pending litigation should influence state leaders to fix things, Concannon said, because Texas "flat out is not meeting our federal law."

Suehs took over the job at the Texas Health and Human Services Commission last year.

"I am encouraged that you have new leadership that gets it and that wants to bring Texas into the 21st century," Concannon said.

H-E-B is working with the state and with nonprofit groups and food banks to improve access to the program, and "is aware of the urgent situation that many Texans face with food insecurity," company spokeswoman Dya Campos said.

Federal officials are hopeful that food banks in Houston, San Antonio and Dallas soon will be able to initiate food stamp applications, which will catch needy Texans in a convenient location and reduce processing time for state employees.

"The most hopeful, expeditious way to solve this is for the state to act in good faith and good will to get the resources they need," Concannon said.

Participation levels

Participation rate for all eligible people, by state. The rate for the country as a whole is 66 percent.

Top 10	Bottom 10
MISSOURI: 100 percent	NEW JERSEY: 59 percent
MAINE: 91	FLORIDA: 57
MICHIGAN: 89	KANSAS: 57
TENNESSEE: 87	TEXAS: 55
OREGON: 87	COLORADO: 55
WEST VIRGINIA: 85	UTAH: 52
KENTUCKY: 83	NEVADA: 52
ILLINOIS: 83	IDAHO: 50
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA: 78	CALIFORNIA: 48
ARKANSAS: 77	WYOMING: 47

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture (November 2009 report using 2007 data). AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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	American Idol New		The Simpsons		Local Programming	

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Way2Go 8:47 AM

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What I would like to see happen, is people no longer allowed to purchase, 1. Sodas, 2. Chips, 3. Cookies & Cakes 4. Candy with food stamps. What I see people buying in the stores with these Lone Star Cards is unbelievable. What I

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- DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA: 78
- ARKANSAS: 77

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- TEXAS: 55
- COLORADO: 55
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- NEVADA: 52
- IDAHO: 50
- CALIFORNIA: 48
- WYOMING: 47

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture November 2009 report using 2007 data.
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