

Coburn Amendment 1002 — To limit the amount of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program amounts that may be used to promote increased participation and enrollment in the program.

Participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has skyrocketed over the last few years. At the end of 2012, more than 47 million Americans received SNAP benefits, a record high that meant 1 in every 6.5 people in America were on food stamps.

This record enrollment in SNAP was due in part to the faltering economy, but it was also a result of relaxed eligibility standards and a strong effort from USDA to vastly expand the program under the Obama Administration. In fact, as recently as 2008 only 27 million people received food stamp benefits, according to USDA statistics.¹

Since then, however, USDA has made it a stated goal to enroll as many people as possible in the program. In a written response to questions from the Senate Budget Committee, Secretary Vilsack said that ““USDA’s strategic plan includes a goal to reach 75 percent of the SNAP-eligible population by 2015.”

This plan included extensive outreach and enrollment efforts. One document drafted and released by USDA to its employees was entitled “Addressing Barriers & Challenges,” and included “Talking Points to Address Concerns About Applying for SNAP Benefits.” These “concerns” were identified as embarrassment, a sense of failure, culture, and difficulty completing an application.

A recent Washington Post article highlights USDA’s outreach efforts. In this article, a SNAP recruiter is introduced and her efforts to enroll retirees in Florida are profiled. Specifically, we learn she set up a display table in front of a senior center, hoping “to attract a crowd with giveaways of pet toys and hundreds of pounds of food, which she stacked high on the table...She distributed food and SNAP brochures for three hours.”²

¹ *Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: 2001-2008*, United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/MENU/Published/snap/SNAPPartNational.htm>, accessed 5/21/13.

² Saslow, Eli. “In Florida, a food-stamp recruiter deals with wrenching choices.” *Washington Post*, April 23, 2013. http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/in-florida-a-food-stamp-recruiter-deals-with-wrenching-choices/2013/04/23/b3d6b41c-a3a4-11e2-9c03-6952ff305f35_story.html

Furthermore, the food stamp program has wasted millions of dollars on promotional campaigns encouraging local SNAP offices to throw parties and producing radio soap operas and advertisements. One recommended way to promote the program according to USDA is to “Throw a Great Party. Host social events where people mix and mingle. Make it fun by having activities, games, food, and entertainment, and provide information about SNAP. Putting SNAP information in a game format like BINGO, crossword puzzles, or even a ‘true/false’ quiz is fun and helps get your message across in a memorable way.”³

USDA also produced “a compilation of ten two-minute Spanish public service announcements in the form of radio novelas or miniseries” of soap operas to promote food stamp use.⁴ “Each novela, comprising a ten-part series called ‘Parque Alegria,’ or ‘Happiness Park,’ presents a semi-dramatic scenario involving characters convincing others to get on food stamps, or explaining how much healthier it is to be on food stamps.”⁵

Episodes conclude “with the announcer encouraging the listener to tune in again to see if” the characters apply for food stamps or to learn the importance of SNAP benefits to their health.⁶ ⁷ USDA also spent between \$2.5 million and \$3 million for four months of radio ads this year to promote the program in California, Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Ohio, and New York.⁸

Giveaways, soap operas, and radio miniseries all may be solid advertising opportunities for private companies wishing to market a product. They are

³ May, Caroline. “USDA suggests food stamp parties, games to increase participation,” *The Daily Caller*, June 27, 2012, <http://dailycaller.com/2012/06/27/usda-suggests-food-stamp-parties-games-to-increase-participation/>, accessed August 16, 2012.

⁴ “Tips & Tools: Resources for Outreach,” US Department of Agriculture, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/pdfs/toolkit/2011/State/Tips-Tools/resources.pdf/>, accessed August 16, 2012.

⁵ May, Caroline. “USDA uses Spanish soap operas to push food stamps among non-citizens, citizens [AUDIO],” *The Daily Caller*, July 12, 2012, <http://dailycaller.com/2012/07/12/usda-uses-spanish-soap-operas-to-push-food-stamp-participation-among-non-citizens-citizens/>, accessed August 16, 2012.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ In July, the novelas were removed from the USDA website and the department’s Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services announced production of SNAP advertisements would be ceased. May, Caroline. “USDA suggests food stamp parties, games to increase participation,” *The Daily Caller*, June 27, 2012, <http://dailycaller.com/2012/06/27/usda-suggests-food-stamp-parties-games-to-increase-participation/>, accessed August 16, 2012.

⁸ Luhby, Tami. “Government wants more people on food stamps,” *CNNMoney.com*, June 25, 2012, <http://money.cnn.com/2012/06/25/news/economy/food-stamps-ads/index.htm>, accessed August 16, 2012.

not, however, appropriate uses of taxpayer funds to advocate for greater enrollment in SNAP, which would even further drain the government's already-depleted coffers. In this time of tightened federal spending, limiting the marketing and outreach for government programs is a commonsense reform.