

## Focus on the Food Stamp Application Process

Doug O'Brien, Director of Policy and Research America's Second Harvest, John Knaus, Program Development Branch Chief, USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, John Morrison, Manager Transition Support Programs, Minnesota Dept. of Human Services, and Judy Denton, Director Texas Works, Texas Dept. of Human Services lead a lively discussion focused on the findings of America's Second Harvest Study, "The Red Tape Divide". Mr. O'Brien led the discussion on his organization's study on the length and complexity of the food stamp application forms.

The study found that application lengths across the nation averaged anywhere from 12 to 36 pages, depending on the number of programs for which the form was used. This study, which help draw attention to state food stamp forms, has resulted in some states revising their forms with the goal of designing a shorter more user friendly form. Currently, fourteen states have radically changed their applications while other states have done some tweaking.

Other panel members followed with their observations on the challenges of simplifying the application form. John Knaus, of USDA indicated "I am not sure length is everything." Questions are still impacted by rules, legislation and regulatory requirements. Information still has to be gathered somehow regardless of the length of the application. FNS plans to hire a consultant to evaluate the current forms, develop guidelines for states and to work with individual states in their efforts to simplify their application forms.

The panel discussion ended with a lively discussion about other factors impacting the form's length and perceived complexity, such as, translating the form, addressing the average reading level of those who complete it and the overall negative image of the program. In conclusion, the problem with simplifying the food stamp application form is only a symptom of a much larger, complicated set of issues impacting the program.