



## **FoodShare Churning Survey Report of Results**

Report compiled by Hannah Picchiottino, Researcher

**Survey Conducted in November 2008  
Results Published in January 2009**

In early 2007 federal, state, local and union FoodShare leaders convened at the Wingspread Conference, coordinated by Hunger Task Force. These decision makers discussed the challenges of administering the FoodShare program in Milwaukee County, due to its serving one-third of the total state FoodShare cases in Wisconsin and experiencing ongoing growth of Milwaukee's caseload. The group emerged with plans to modernize the way that Milwaukee County serves their FoodShare caseload, through using technology and streamlining the application process. The FoodShare Steering Committee was also formed from this core group, meeting every two to three months since to discuss the progress and next steps in FoodShare modernization.

The FoodShare Steering Committee recognized that one of the largest problems with the Milwaukee's FoodShare caseload is not that more eligible individuals need to enroll, but that they experienced benefit interruptions. Milwaukee currently has an 89 percent enrollment rate of those who are eligible for FoodShare, the second highest rate in the nation among large cities.<sup>1</sup> However, those who are enrolled in FoodShare often "churn" off, or experience interruptions in their benefits, during the six month reporting process or the twelve month review. Churning can be a result of Milwaukee County's inability to timely and effectively administer the program due to staffing and budget constraints or may be due to customers unable to maintain their cases.

Based on this discussion, the first FoodShare Churning Survey was developed by the FoodShare Steering Committee and conducted in November 2007. The survey was intended to gain a better understanding of the FoodShare clients who were experiencing case churning. It also served as an opportunity to examine whether the Milwaukee County FoodShare constituency would be capable of maintaining their benefits using technological and modernized methods, rather than needing to visit the welfare office for all case interactions.

The survey found that nearly three-fourths of those who were at the Coggs Center were currently not receiving FoodShare benefits because they had churned off the system. While most respondents had access to a computer with internet and many knew about using ACCESS, the state's online website to maintain assistance program benefits, most had never used it. These findings led Hunger Task Force and the FoodShare Steering Committee to explore and implement modernization initiatives utilizing technology to help clients self-serve and streamline county processes in an attempt to reduce churning.<sup>2</sup>

## **Methodology**

The 2008 FoodShare Churning Survey was designed using similar questions from the 2007 survey.<sup>3</sup> Most questions were maintained in order to track trends and changes between years among major churning indicators.<sup>4</sup> Other questions were updated or added based on last year's findings or needed follow up.

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<sup>1</sup> "Food Stamp Access in Urban America: A City-by-City Snapshot" (October 2008). Food Research and Action Center. Available at [www.frac.org](http://www.frac.org).

<sup>2</sup> The complete 2007 FoodShare Churning report is available upon request from HTF at [www.hungertaskforce.org](http://www.hungertaskforce.org).

<sup>3</sup> The 2008 FoodShare Churning Survey questionnaire is available in Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup> Trends between 2007 and 2008 results are indicated throughout the report. Where 2007 survey results are not reported indicate a change in question or available answers, limiting or eliminating the comparison power between years.

All surveys were conducted at the Milwaukee County Marcia P. Coggs Human Services Center (the Coggs Center).<sup>5</sup> Hunger Task Force hired four paid temporary field interviewers to conduct the surveys through face-to-face interviews at the Coggs Center. Two of the four field interviewers had the ability to interview Coggs Center clients in Spanish. The field interviewers conducted surveys from November 3 to November 7, 2008, during the peak business hours of 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

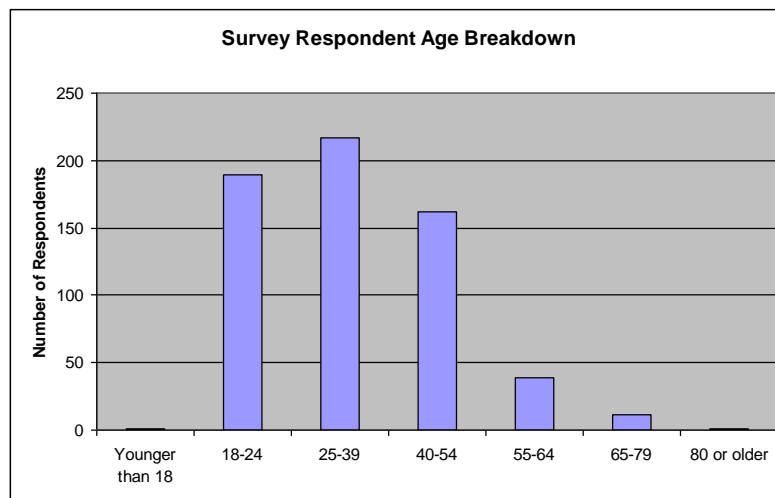
A total of 621 surveys were at least partially completed and compiled in this analysis. This sample size is significant at the 95 percent confidence level, with a margin of error of +/- 4 percent.

## 2008 Coggs Churning Survey Results

### *Demographics*

The demographic section provides a foundation to better understand the FoodShare customers who visit the Coggs Center. It also provides a foundation of comparison between 2007 and 2008 survey results.

- In 2008, 70 percent of those interviewed were women (79 percent in 2007).
- 73 percent were African American (74 percent in 2007); 14 percent were white (16 percent in 2007).
- 10 percent considered themselves to be Hispanic or Latino (same as 2007)
- 95 percent classified English as their primary language to speak, read and receive letters in (same as 2007); 3 percent classified Spanish as their primary language (4 percent in 2007).
- Most Coggs Center visitors were between the age of 18 and 54:



<sup>5</sup> The Coggs Center is the main Human Services Center in Milwaukee County, experiencing the highest level of FoodShare client traffic daily, including new applicants, customers with case questions and those requesting fair hearings. The county's other Human Service Center, the Robles Center, also experiences FoodShare client traffic, but is limited to new FoodShare applicants.

Two-thirds of respondents were unemployed (same as 2007). Of those who did have jobs, approximately half worked full time and the other half had part-time jobs. Sixty percent of the respondents who were unemployed were looking for work and 25 percent were unable to work because of a disability.

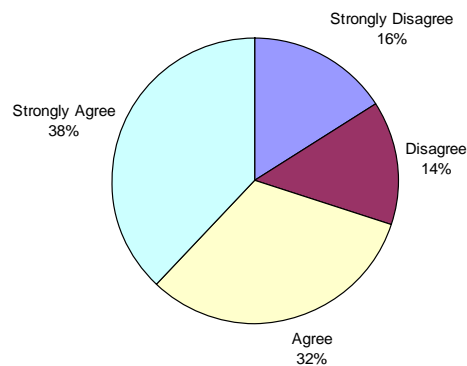
Eighteen percent of respondents were enrolled in school during the time of the survey. One in four respondents reported that they had to take off of work or skip school in order to visit the Coggs Center that day.

### *Hunger and FoodShare*

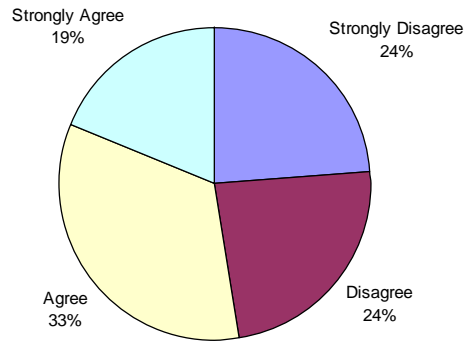
Two-thirds of respondents report that there have been food shortages in their home in the past six months (same as 2007). Sixty-four percent have skipped meals or eaten less due to recent food shortages in their home (65 percent in 2007).

Nearly all of the respondents were visiting the Coggs Center on the day of the survey because of their FoodShare cases. Some were also visiting to get assistance with health insurance, childcare and energy assistance. Thirty-eight percent of respondents have just begun receiving FoodShare benefits within the past six months. Other responses evenly ranged from one year to more than six years.

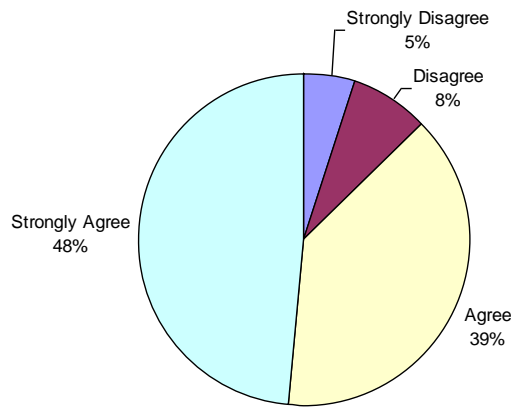
Survey respondents were asked a series of agree/disagree questions to gauge their attitude towards the FoodShare program. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement that “the FoodShare program has helped me get enough food to be healthy”:



When asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement that “it is easy to apply for the FoodShare program”:



When asked to agree or disagree with the statement that “I understand how to maintain FoodShare program benefits once I become eligible”:



The results of these questions indicate that most agree that the FoodShare program helps supplement their diets and increases access to healthy food options that they otherwise may not be able to afford. In terms of the local FoodShare program, there is an even breakdown of those who agree and disagree that applying for FoodShare benefits is a simple process. FoodShare clients very strongly understand their responsibilities in maintaining their FoodShare benefits. This leads to the conclusion that there are other reasons, outside of clients not maintaining their cases, for why FoodShare churning is occurring.

#### *Churning Indicators*

FoodShare customers continue to be churned off the FoodShare system in Milwaukee County. Three out of four respondents stated that they were signed up for FoodShare at the time of the survey. Yet, only one out of four respondents had actually received FoodShare benefits in the current month. Two-thirds of respondents have experienced FoodShare interruptions (churning) within the past year (64 percent in 2007).

Of those who were currently receiving FoodShare benefits:

- 47 percent were at the Cogg Center for a review
- 15 percent were there to complain about their case
- 15 percent needed to report a change in their household

Of those who were not currently receiving benefits:

- 33 percent were at the Cogg Center to reapply for benefits
- 19 percent needed to get information about their case because they did not know why their benefits ended
- 14 percent needed to submit verification to begin receiving benefits again
- 6 percent needed to report a change in their households
- 2 percent were at the Cogg Center to complain about their cases and/or file for a fair hearing

### *Modernization*

Milwaukee County's modernization processes to administer FoodShare program were initiated in April 2008. Modernization efforts are designed to make the FoodShare program run more smoothly. Modernization efforts are intended to provide FoodShare clients with dignity and respect. Through technological options, FoodShare clients can manage their case without needing to physically visit the local welfare office.

To streamline their administrative processes, Milwaukee County recently installed the Q-Matic system at the Cogg Center to manage the customer traffic flow. The County attempted unsuccessfully to outsource the Call Center to a non-profit vendor so that there would be more staff available to answer customer calls. Milwaukee County is currently planning for a addition of a scanning unit to transition the verification center to completely electronic case files.<sup>6</sup> The FoodShare Churning Survey asked a number of questions related to modernization. The intention was to evaluate customer access to technology, document the frequency that technology was utilized, and examine the success of client education about modernization. The following sections outline the findings of the 2008 FoodShare Churning report:

### *Call Center*

Milwaukee County's Call Center is designed for program clients to have the opportunity to ask questions about their case or report changes without needing to physically visit a welfare office. It is easily accessible to nearly all clients, as 90 percent of survey respondents report that they have regular access to either a landline telephone or cell phone (86 percent in 2007).

Two-thirds of respondents were aware that they could use the Milwaukee County Call Center to apply for FoodShare, report changes to their case or check on their benefits. Four out of five respondents attempted to use the Call Center in 2008 (72 percent in 2007). Of those who had used the Call Center:

- 35 percent used the Call Center to check on their benefits

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<sup>6</sup> For a full description and analysis of Milwaukee County's current modernization efforts, see Congressional Hunger Fellow Ayanna Williams' report, available at [www.hungertaskforce.org](http://www.hungertaskforce.org) in February 2009.

- 26 percent used the Call Center to apply for benefits
- 21 percent used the Call Center to report changes

Milwaukee County's Call Center receives more than one million phone calls per month.<sup>7</sup> Only a small percentage of calls are answered each month due to the center being understaffed and overburdened with calls. Out of the survey respondents who had attempted to use the Call Center, a staggering 71 percent who tried to use the Call Center called during the daytime but could not get through to talk to a worker.

Milwaukee County also offers an interactive voice response (IVR) system, which customers can call after business hours and on the weekend to get information about their case. Only 7 percent of survey respondents knew about or had attempted to use the IVR system to learn about their case status.

### *ACCESS*

The ACCESS website is designed and maintained by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. ACCESS allows individuals to check if they are eligible for assistance programs, including FoodShare, BadgerCare and energy assistance, as well as apply for benefits, check their benefit status and report changes to their case.

While concerns have been raised that FoodShare clientele may not have access to computers with internet or may not have strong computer literacy skills, this survey finds the opposite is true. Eighty-one percent of respondents report that they know how to use a computer (76 percent in 2007). There was a significant jump in survey respondents having access to a computer with internet between 2007 and 2008. More than two-thirds report that they have computer access in 2008, compared to 58 percent in 2007. One-third of respondents normally use a computer in their home. Others use a computer at the library (17 percent), a family member's or friend's home (13 percent), school (7 percent) or work (6 percent).

Nearly two-thirds of respondents knew that they could use a computer and the internet to apply for FoodShare, check benefits or report changes, constituting a 51 percent increase in knowledge of ACCESS since 2007. Similarly, 44 percent reported attempting to use some aspect of ACCESS in the past year, compared to 19 percent in 2007. However, of those who did try to use ACCESS to manage their FoodShare case, only one out of four respondents was able to fully manage their case. Most stated that they could not determine how to get the ACCESS program to do what they needed, such as completing an application or reporting a change.

### *Faxing or Mailing*

Verification documents are required for all forms of assistance programs, including FoodShare. Milwaukee County offers the option for FoodShare clients to fax or mail in their verification documents, rather than physically dropping them off, to reduce traffic flow at the Coggs Center.

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<sup>7</sup> Data are provided by Milwaukee County's Call Center. The one million average calls are estimated based on the number of phone call hits that the Call Center receives each month. This estimate may or may not be representative of the actual number of individuals phoning the Call Center monthly.

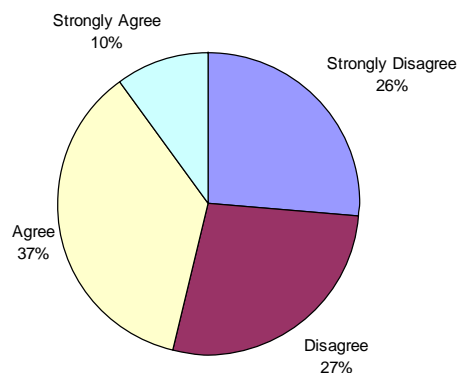
Yet 54 percent of respondents had never mailed or faxed in verification documents to maintain their FoodShare benefits (50 percent in 2007). Only 16 percent of respondents stated that mailing or faxing in verification documents had helped them maintain their FoodShare benefits, a 53 percent decrease from 2007. Those who had used a fax machine usually accessed one at their job or at a government job office.

### Visiting Coggs

Survey respondents were then asked why they chose to visit the Coggs Center, instead of using technology options available to them:

- 48 percent stated that they wanted to talk to someone face-to-face
- 19 percent had lost their FoodShare benefits and needed urgent help
- 17 percent had a scheduled face-to-face interview
- 9 percent did not know about the technology options available to them
- 5 percent did not trust technology to correctly manage their FoodShare case
- 2 percent needed direct help from a worker because of a disability, literacy or limited English proficiency

FoodShare customers were asked whether they agreed with the statement, “I feel that I get the help I need when I visit the Coggs Center”:



The responses were relatively even between agreeing and disagreeing about receiving the needed help at the Coggs Center.

### **Major Findings / Recommendations**

- FoodShare customers understand their responsibilities in order to maintain their FoodShare cases. It appears that the reason many customers are churned off the system and experience a loss in benefits is not a result a lack of understanding of how to maintain their case, but rather the current conditions of the County system that cause many clients to experience benefit interruptions.
- FoodShare customers still experience a high level of case churning or interruptions in benefits. Even with modernization efforts over the past year that are intended to streamline the County’s application and verification processes, little progress has been made to actually reduce the effects of case churning between 2007 and 2008.

- Milwaukee County continues to experience a record FoodShare caseload that increases monthly, as evidenced by the high number of survey respondents who began receiving FoodShare within the past six months. As six month reporting and 12 month reviews begin to occur for this new population, case churning will continue to increase if the same number of administrative staff and the same internal processes are maintained.
- The survey found that there were significant increases both in computer accessibility for survey respondents and increased knowledge of ACCESS. However, there still remain a minimal number of individuals willing to use ACCESS and even fewer who have used the Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system, while many state that they prefer face-to-face interactions. With basic client education on how to use these systems to maintain and check assistance program benefits, traffic at the Coggs Center has the potential to be significantly reduced as people became empowered with the self-service technology options. Reduction in Coggs Center traffic would free up county staff to target areas that affect case churning.

Milwaukee County must continue modernization efforts to streamline behind-the-scenes processes to reduce FoodShare churning. The County, in collaboration with Hunger Task Force and other community-based organizations, must also work to educate the clientele about technology options that will assist in maintaining their case and answer questions without inflowing and overwhelming the physical human services buildings.



# Milwaukee County FoodShare Survey

Survey Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Field Interviewer Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: November \_\_\_\_\_, 2008

Day of week:  Monday  Tuesday  Wednesday  Thursday  Friday

**Time period survey was administered:**

- Between 8:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.  Between 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.  
 Between 12:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.  Between 2:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.

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**Script:**

*Hi, I am from Hunger Task Force and we are surveying people who use the Food Stamp Program.  
As a customer of the program your opinion matters.  
Do you have a few minutes to answer some questions for us?*

*All answers that you tell me are confidential.  
The first few questions will tell us more about you.*

1. Respondent's gender:  Male  Female
2. Please describe your race (check all that apply):
  - American Indian or Alaska Native
  - Arab
  - Black or African-American
  - East Asian
  - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Afghani)
  - White
  - Other, specify: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Refused to answer
3. Do you consider yourself to be Hispanic or Latino?





- Yes, I used the Call Center to report changes to my case
- No, I've never used the Call Center

***If you answered "no" to question 21, skip to question 23.***

**22. What happened when you called the Call Center? (Check all that apply.)**

- I called during the day but could not get through (busy signal/no answer).
- I was able to leave a message and a worker returned my phone call.
- I was able to leave a message but my call was never returned.
- I talked to a worker on the phone, and my case was taken care of.
- I talked to a worker on the phone, but was told I had to come to Coggs.
- I called after hours, used the automated system and my case was taken care of.
- I called after hours and used the automated system, but my case was not taken care of.
- Other, specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**23. Did you know that you can use a computer and the internet to apply for FoodShare, check benefits or report changes?**

- Yes     No

***If you answered "no" to question 23, skip to question 27.***

**24. Have you ever used a computer to apply for FoodShare, check benefits or report changes?**

- Yes, I used a computer to apply for FoodShare
- Yes, I used a computer to check my benefits
- Yes, I used a computer to report changes to my case
- No, I've never used the computer to manage my FoodShare case

***If you answered "no" to question 24, skip to question 27.***

**25. Were you able to manage your FoodShare case using a computer?**

- Yes     No

***If you answered "yes" to question 25, skip to question 27.***

**26. If using the computer did not work, explain why not:**

- It took too long and I needed help right away
- I did not understand how to make it work for me
- I could not do what I wanted to do (complete an application, report a change, etc.)
- Other, specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**27. Have you ever mailed or faxed verification paperwork in for your FoodShare benefits? (Check all that apply.)**

- Yes, I have mailed in verification paperwork
- Yes, I have faxed in verification paperwork
- No, I have never mailed or faxed in verification paperwork

**28. Has mailing or faxing in verification paperwork helped you keep your FoodShare benefits without interruption?**

- Yes     No

**29. If you have faxed in verification paperwork, where have you used a fax machine? (Check all that apply.)**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Home                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Store   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Work                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Food pantry   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family/friend's home | <input type="checkbox"/> Social service organization                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> School               | <input type="checkbox"/> Government jobs office (e.g. Jobs Center, W-2 office) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Church               | <input type="checkbox"/> Other, specify: _____                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Library              | <input type="checkbox"/> I have never used a fax machine                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hospital             |  |

**30. The Coggs Center is visited by many people who might be able to call, fax, mail or use a computer to manage their FoodShare benefits. Please explain why you visited Coggs to apply for or maintain your FoodShare benefits, instead of using one of these technological options (check all that apply):**

- I had a scheduled face-to-face appointment
- I lost my benefits and needed help urgently
- I wanted to talk to someone face-to-face
- I did not know I could use the phone, computer or fax options to manage my case
- I do not trust using technology to correctly manage my FoodShare case
- I need direct help from a worker to get or keep benefits because of a disability, literacy or limited English proficiency.

***For the remaining questions, please respond on a scale of 1 to 10:***

**31. I feel that I get the help I need when I visit the Coggs Center.**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Strongly</b>			<b>Disagree</b>			<b>Agree</b>			<b>Strongly</b>
<b>Disagree</b>									<b>Agree</b>

**32. It is easy to apply to apply for the FoodShare Program.**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Strongly</b>			<b>Disagree</b>			<b>Agree</b>			<b>Strongly</b>
<b>Disagree</b>									<b>Agree</b>

**33. I understand how to maintain FoodShare program benefits once I become eligible for them.**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Strongly</b>			<b>Disagree</b>			<b>Agree</b>			<b>Strongly</b>
<b>Disagree</b>									<b>Agree</b>

**34. The FoodShare program has helped me get enough food to be healthy.**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Strongly</b>			<b>Disagree</b>			<b>Agree</b>			<b>Strongly</b>
<b>Disagree</b>									<b>Agree</b>

***Thank you for your participation in our survey.***