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Volunteers Help With Cheese Distribution

Dairymen in Nevada. Truckers in California. Eagle Scouts in Massachusetts. Church groups in New Jersey. These and thousands of other volunteers across the country have helped with the nationwide effort to get USDA-donated cheese to the needy. **Page 4**

Food Banks Offer Valuable Service



Ever wonder what a food bank is and how it works? In this article, you'll find information on how food banks collect, transport, and distribute food. You'll also find information on a USDA project to test the feasibility of providing USDA-donated foods to food banks for emergency distribution to needy people. **Page 2**



Elementary Schools Give Kids More Lunch Choice

Elementary schools can now use a marketing tool that's been available to junior high and high schools for some time. The offer versus serve plan gives kids more choice and, studies show, that means they eat more and waste less. **Page 9**

1981 Index

FOOD BANKS



At the Community Food Bank in Raleigh, North Carolina, warehouse manager John Wilson helps community workers Teresa Bullard and Shirley Locklear select food for needy families in Robeson County.

of particular foods. Sometimes food must be removed from a store's shelves because it cannot be sold before its "pull date."

Some food banks have "gleaning" programs. Food is gleaned by volunteers who go into the fields, canneries, orchards and packing houses to collect food that is slightly bruised or in danger of being plowed under.

Monetary support for food banks comes from individual contributions, gifts from local foundations, organizations, and clubs, or from a handling fee charged to community agencies for banks' services. Maintenance costs are kept at a minimum by using volunteer help and donated buildings, refrigeration, vehicles, and printing.

Services benefit charities and donors

Some food banks form networks. A network is made up of food banks from various parts of the country that agree to help each other by sharing information about the availability of surplus food in their area. Food banks that join networks have access to surplus food nationwide. The largest network is Second Harvest in Phoenix, Arizona. It was started in 1967 and has grown into a nationwide network of 40 food banks.

The services provided by food banks benefit both charity organizations and food donors. Instead of individual agencies soliciting food from local businesses, one central agency, the food bank, solicits for them. The charities have access to all the surplus food that can be obtained by the bank, which ensures a wide variety of nutritious food from which to choose.

"The food bank helps us very much," says Bob Hernandez, social

A fruit juice producer from the South cannot sell hundreds of gallons of grapefruit juice because the juice has lost its bright yellow color during processing. A bakery in the North has baked too many English muffins. A Midwest farmer has acres of tomatoes spoiling in the field, and a box car loaded with watermelons has derailed, bruising the fruit. If it were not for food banks, most of this unsaleable food would be destroyed. Instead, it is given to the needy.

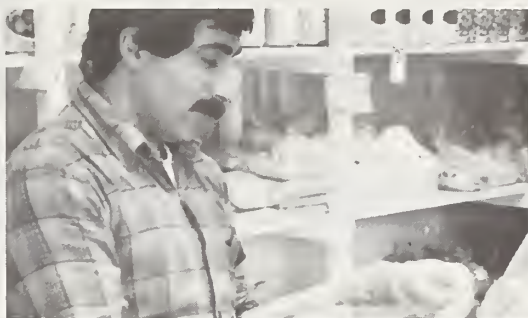
A nonprofit clearinghouse

A food bank is a nonprofit clearinghouse that collects, stores and redistributes food to charitable organizations and nonprofit community agencies. The food comes from producers, wholesalers, retailers, grocery chains, and individual stores that find themselves with items that are useable but cannot be sold for a variety of reasons.

Cans may be mislabeled; packages may be underweight; fruits and vegetables may be too large or too small for standard packing; or there may simply be production overruns

"It was just before a holiday when we received a call from a local bakery telling us they had baked too many English muffins. We alerted the community food pantries, and every needy family had English muffins for the holiday."

Greater Cleveland Food Bank



service director for the Association House of Chicago, whose organization gets food from the Greater Chicago Food Depository Food Bank.

"We depend on private donations of money and food to support our agency," he says, "and when these don't come through, we have to depend on the food bank. Our food pantry distributes between 2,000 and 2,500 food boxes per year. The families we help have very low incomes and really need the food."

By giving the surplus food to the food banks, the donor is assured that the products will feed many hungry people. A spokesperson for a large Chicago food processor says her company, like other food processors, has surplus foods to dispose of from time to time.

"We've found food banks to be a good source to dispose of our surpluses," she says. "Last year we gave 6 million pounds of food to 18 of the Second Harvest food banks. The company made one phone call to inform the network of what and how much food was available." The network then got this information to all member food banks.

Banks arrange transportation

Once food banks are alerted about available surplus food, arrangements are made for the food to be delivered to the local food banks' warehouses. For example, when Pam Bennett, director of the Gleaners Food Bank of Indianapolis, was informed about surplus grapefruit juice in Florida, she began making phone calls to trucking companies.

"We got four semi-trailers of the juice for our food bank," she says. "However, other food banks received as many as 12 to 15 semi-trailer loads. How much a food bank orders from a donor depends on how much money is available to pay for the transportation fees. Sometimes trucking firms transport donated food for a reduced rate or for free."

Storage is rarely a problem because the turnaround is fast. Food banks can usually take any amount of food available to them. A volunteer worker for the Greater Cleveland Food Bank in Cleveland, Ohio, says, "It was just before a holiday when we received a call from a local bakery telling us they had baked too many English muffins. We alerted the community food pantries, and every needy family had English muffins for the holiday."

On another occasion, said the volunteer, "We received a donation of a ton of surplus piroghi (dumplings stuffed with vegetables, such as cabbage, or meat) from a local distributor of Polish food."

Tax credits offer an incentive for a business to make donations to food banks. The Tax Reform Act of 1976 allows donors to deduct from their taxes the cost of producing an item plus 50 percent of the difference between its cost and the normal sale price. This legislation has been instrumental in the success of food banks throughout the country.

North Carolina has three food banks currently operating in the state. The Community Food Bank in Raleigh presently provides food to more than 90 outlets, including senior citizens programs, halfway houses, churches and other service organizations.

According to Barbara Oates, director of the Community Food Bank, a "Good Samaritan" bill passed by the North Carolina state legislature has been a big help to food banks. The law absolves individuals or businesses who make donations to food banks from liability for the food's safety.

Instead, the food banks assume responsibility for safety and sanitation. Any questionable foods are discarded or contributed to farmers for animal food and other uses. The North Carolina Department of Agriculture, as well as the health

department, regularly inspects all food banks to ensure their compliance with sanitation standards.

Demonstration project underway

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is currently conducting a demonstration project to test the feasibility of providing USDA-donated foods to food banks for emergency distribution to needy people.

The food bank project, which began in November 1981 and continues through 1983, is authorized by the Agricultural Act of 1980. Under the project, USDA provides nonfat dry milk, butter and processed American cheese to selected sites. These items supplement food obtained by the food banks from other sources.

Food banks were considered for participation in the demonstration if they had provided emergency food distribution since March 1980. USDA selected three sites: Gleaners Food Bank of Indianapolis, Indiana; The Food Bank of Santa Clara County, Santa Clara, California; and the Hunger Action Coalition Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Each participating food bank was required to develop accountability, distribution, and monitoring guidelines for its project.*

The Food and Nutrition Service will report to Congress by January 1984 on the effectiveness of the project and the feasibility of distributing surplus foods through food banks. For more information, write:

Joseph Shepherd
Director, Food Distribution
Food and Nutrition Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Alexandria, Virginia 22302

*Four additional sites will begin projects this summer.

*article by Eunice Bowman
and Brenda Schuler
photos by Warren Uzzle*

Volunteers Help With Cheese Distribution

When state and local governments asked for community help in getting USDA surplus cheese to the needy last winter, the response was enormous. More than 10,000 volunteers turned out in Indiana alone. Business men and women throughout the country came forward with trucks and drivers to transport the cheese and facilities to store it. In many areas, food banks and other nonprofit organizations took charge of the actual distribution, putting in hundreds of hours to make sure the cheese got to those who needed it.

As we see in the examples below, many of these efforts took place during some of the worst winter weather in recent memory, yet people of all ages came out to lend a hand.

Began in December

The special cheese distribution began December 22 when President Reagan issued orders to release at least 30 million pounds of process American cheese from U.S. Department of Agriculture warehouses. The cheese was part of an especially large government surplus that if not used, government officials worried, might go to waste.

USDA buys cheese on a regular basis through the dairy price support system, which is designed to prevent extreme fluctuations in milk prices. The cheese is used by agencies participating in USDA's child nutrition and food distribution programs—schools, child care centers, charitable organizations, institutions for the mentally or physically handicapped, and meal services for the elderly. Some also goes to needy families on Indian reservations, and to hospitals, prisons, and the military.

Last year, even with USDA urging greater use by these agencies, cheese surpluses continued to grow. In December, close to 600 million pounds of cheese were stored in warehouses throughout the country.

To make the cheese available to those who needed it most, USDA offered the cheese to states that were willing to distribute it at no cost to needy persons. Each state was responsible for setting up its own distribution system and for determining who would be eligible.

Many states began distributing the cheese right away. By February, 16 states and the District of Columbia had begun distribution and most of the remaining states had placed orders with USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, the agency coordinating the effort nationally. Because of this response, the federal government made an additional 190 million pounds of cheese available and gave states until December 31 to place orders. Some states choose to distribute their allotments all at once, while others continue the distribution over several months.

In time for the holidays

Nevada and California were among the first states to actually put cheese into the hands of needy people. Both states delivered thousands of pounds within days of its release and before Christmas.

In Nevada, where the problem was finding ways to deliver the cheese to isolated rural towns such as Battle Mountain, Ruth, and Pahrump, state officials turned to local dairy distributors for help.

Five dairy distributors that had existing runs to these rural areas volunteered the use of their drivers and refrigerated trucks to get the cheese delivered. This meant extra deliveries and, in some cases, drivers working late on Christmas eve.

The dairymen gladly helped even though they were, in a sense, competing with themselves by distribut-

ing the free cheese. "It's an example of people doing something for the well-being of the state," says Bill Smith of the Nevada Dairy Commission.

In just over 24 hours, Nevada state officials and the dairy people were able to distribute 33,000 pounds of the surplus cheese to over 6,000 households.

"Without the help of the dairy people we couldn't possibly have delivered the cheese before Christmas," says Debra Meizel, one of the state officials responsible for coordinating the cheese distribution.

California asks for help

In California, as in Nevada, the distances to be covered were great—the state measures 770 miles from end to end. In addition, the amount of cheese to be distributed was huge.

News of the distribution generated a great deal of public interest. "Our phones started ringing and kept ringing for days," says Janet Hughes of the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

While state officials welcomed the interest, the calls presented some logistical problems for staffers trying to get the distribution underway. "All our lines were taken by incoming calls," says Hughes. "We had trouble making phone calls out. It was amazing."

The first task facing California officials was to arrange to move the cheese from USDA warehouses to the 22 food banks that coordinated distribution to local community groups. A press release calling for volunteer truckers capable of hauling 33,000-pound loads netted 34 volunteers.

The volunteers ranged from large companies like Coca-Cola and Clorox, who donated the services of their trucks and drivers, to inde-

"One town in our state declared it 'Cheese Day.' Members of the Kiwanis Club, the Lions Club, the Volunteer Fire Department, and local churches worked all day to get the cheese to the needy in that community."

Jean Merritt, Indiana Commission on Aging and Community Services



pendent truckers who did the driving themselves.

"We felt good about being able to get involved in something like this," says Steve Shields of Clorox, "especially since we could help in Oakland where our company is based. If we are going to be part of a community in a business sense we want to be part of it in a social sense also."

Duke Camblin of Camblin Steel volunteered to haul 100,000 pounds of cheese. "Every one of our people involved had a good time," he says. "Christmas was an especially good time for this to have happened. One of our drivers even put a wreath on the front of his truck."

One of the volunteer drivers had a harder time than some of the others, as the following story shows. But

even with a series of mix-ups and mishaps, his company's eagerness to help was unshaken.

Jeff Jacobs of the California Department of Food and Agriculture explains: "The driver started out running 4 hours behind schedule because his trailer had to be removed from a flooded parking lot. Then, when he got to the USDA warehouse, he didn't have the correct size pallets so 33,000 pounds of cheese had to be loaded by hand.

"When the driver finally was able to begin his journey back to Southern California, he was pulled over at a weigh station by the California highway patrol. They discovered that even though his overall weight

The Contra Costa Food Coalition is one of several food banks in California coordinating distribution to local community groups, including agencies serving the elderly.

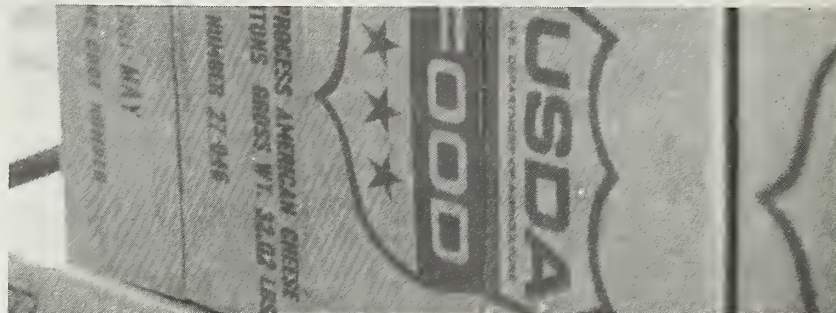
was okay, he was overweight on one axle. This meant he couldn't continue his trip and was liable for a \$1,000 fine.

"With the help of the highway patrol he was able to find a dairy distributor who would help him unload and store 5,000 pounds of the cheese so he could continue on his way.

"Well," continues Jacobs, "to give you an idea of the commitment of the people who helped us out—even after all these problems the driver's boss, Tom Hess, called us and said, 'When can we get another load?' " (Soon after, a judge dismissed the

"We felt good about being able to get involved in something like this, especially since we could help in Oakland where our company is based. If we are going to be part of a community in a business sense we want to be part of it in a social sense also."

Steve Shields, Clorox



\$1,000 overweight fine against Roadway Construction.)

Nevada and California were not the only states to get help from local businesses. The list is almost endless. In Oregon, companies like McCracken Storage and Follett's Meat Packing donated refrigerated storage space. Valdez Transferring in Yuma, Arizona, provided shipping for nearly 10,000 pounds of cheese. Olsen's Market in the small town of Welton, Arizona, provided storage until the town could hand out the cheese to needy people.

Working on distribution

While private companies were important in the initial stages of the cheese distribution, especially in the areas of shipping and storage, food banks, community agencies and individual volunteers played the most important role in the actual distribution.

"One town in our state declared it 'Cheese Day,'" says Jean Merritt, executive director for the Indiana Commission on Aging and Community Services. "Members of the Kiwanis Club, the Lions Club, the Volunteer Fire Department, and local churches worked all day to get the cheese to the needy in that community."

Before setting up the state's distribution system, Jean Merritt analyzed news stories from other areas to learn about states' experiences. "I found things such as long lines, not enough distribution sites, and delays in getting the cheese into the community. We tried to avoid these mistakes," she says.

State officials targeted the distribution to two groups—low-income families and the needy elderly—and

they set the following goals: to complete the distribution within 2 days once it began; to involve as many already existing community sites as possible; and to solicit volunteers from the community.

They arranged to have all the cheese delivered to the state from federally contracted warehouses on the same day. Two correctional institutions, one prison, two state hospitals, and two commercial warehouses—all already being used by the state for storage of commodities—served as the central locations to receive the cheese. The amount delivered to each site was determined by the number of needy people living in the area.

Twelve hundred district community agencies, such as the Salvation Army, the Community Action Agency, and the Red Cross, helped with delivery to local distribution sites. Each had a specific time to go to the warehouse in their area, pick up the cheese, and take it back to local churches, food pantries, and self-help centers for distribution to low-income families.

Helping with deliveries to the elderly were nutritionists from the

state's 415 nutrition offices for the elderly. The nutritionists and their staffs personally delivered the cheese to elderly people living in highrise apartment buildings. Elderly people living in their own homes were able to get their free cheese at senior citizens' centers where they eat during the week.

Despite a severe snowstorm, the 48-hour goal was met in most parts of the state. In cities where the snow storm hit the hardest, it took 2 extra days. "Cars, trucks, and people on foot were stuck in the snow trying to get the cheese out," Merritt says.

The turnout of volunteers and cooperation of existing community organizations allowed the state to meet the other goals and accomplish the project for very little money. "The cheese distribution was a very challenging project," says Merritt, "but well worth all the work."

Labor unions help in Iowa

In Iowa, labor union volunteers played an important role. In Waterloo, where the Hawkeye Valley Area on Aging coordinated the effort, two of the main distribution centers were the union halls of United Auto Workers Local 838 and the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 46. Volunteers from the Teamsters Local 844, the Iowa Progressive Coalition, and the Iowa Labor Coalition also helped transport, distribute and deliver the cheese in the 10-county area.

Chris Harshbarger, who directs the Hawkeye Valley Area Agency on Aging, calls the cheese distribution project an unqualified success, even though it occurred during Iowa's worst blizzard in 80 years.

"In fact," he says, "the volunteer effort may have been stronger due to the poor weather." People helped each other dig out their vehicles and get them running. When only four-wheel-drive vehicles could get through, volunteers came forward to keep the cheese moving.



A California man loads his van with cheese he will deliver to needy families. Such services were volunteered by thousands of people throughout the country.

Harshbarger strongly advocates a 1-day "blitz" distribution system. "It's labor intensive," he says, "but there's less confusion."

Such an operation requires a corps of ready volunteers, a thorough preliminary media campaign, and a careful analysis of the target population. Hawkeye Valley staff worked with the University of Northern Iowa to prepare a list of eligible populations by township, using 1980 census data.

Hawkeye Valley's well-orchestrated distribution was in several stages. On both January 8 and 9, distribution was confined to the "metro" area of Waterloo and Cedar Falls as well as Black Hawk County. On January 13, distribution took place at 14 field sites—senior nutrition centers and Agency on Aging's area offices. On February 26, a second distribution took place simultaneously at the same two metro sites and at 90 field sites in the 10 counties.

Several hours before distribution to families began, volunteers from each site picked up their allotments and delivered them to the distribution points. Deliveries were staggered to make for a smooth, continuous operation. About a dozen volunteers were assigned to each field site and 60 volunteers manned the two metro sites.

Thanks to the volunteers, says Harshbarger, almost 60,000 people received food that might have gone to waste. "We're ready for round three," he says.

Strong support in New Jersey

In New Jersey, 265,000 people received more than 1.3 million pounds of cheese in January and February through a distribution system organized and run by two food banks and the Red Cross.

The Community Food Bank of the Archdiocese of Newark handled the largest distribution in northern New Jersey. Working through community organizations, such as inner-city churches and other nonprofit organizations, the Archdiocese distributed 250,000 pounds of cheese in Essex, Union, Hudson, and Bergen Counties on January 25, February 2, and

FACTS

*about
Pasteurized Process
American Cheese*

Nutritional value: Process cheese is high in protein, riboflavin, and calcium. It helps build strong bones, good teeth, and muscle.

How to store . . .

Store process American cheese in the refrigerator. Keep it in the packing it comes in, until you are ready to use it. Air can cause cheese to become dry and mold to grow.

To help protect cheese, always work with it with clean hands and in a clean area. Cheese that's well wrapped will keep in the refrigerator for 3 to 4 weeks.

We do not recommend that you freeze cheese, because it dries out and crumbles. If you do freeze it, do so only for a few months and thaw it in the refrigerator. This will make it less crumbly.

How to prepare . . .

When you eat cheese "as is" it tastes best at room temperature. Let the cheese warm at room temperature for at least 30 minutes before you serve it.

Process cheese is convenient to use in cooked foods. It melts easily and blends well with other foods. It blends more easily with other ingredients and melts more quickly when you shred it or cut it in small pieces.

Cook all dishes that contain cheese at low temperature. This prevents the cheese from becoming rubbery and stringy.

Suggestions for serving . . .

You can serve process cheese "as is," with fruit, in sandwiches, in salads, and grated over soups. Or you can cook the cheese in sauces, breads, and in combination with other foods.

A few ideas . . .

Cheese-Vegetable Bake

Slice some zucchini, broccoli or other vegetables in 1-inch pieces. Cook them until they are tender but still crisp, then drain well. Place in a baking pan and layer with grated or

cut-up cheese. Bake at 250°F about 30 minutes, or until cheese is melted through.

Macaroni and Cheese

2 tablespoons butter or margarine
¼ cup unsifted flour
½ teaspoon salt
2 cups milk
½ teaspoon mustard
1½ cups shredded or cut-up cheese
3 cups cooked macaroni

Melt butter or margarine in a saucepan. Mix in flour and salt. Add milk slowly, stirring all the time and cook over medium heat until sauce starts to boil. Lower heat and cook until thickened, about 3 minutes. Add mustard and cheese and stir over low heat until cheese melts. Mix in cooked macaroni and heat. Makes six servings, about 2/3 cup each.

Cheese Meat Loaf

2 slices bread
1/3 cup milk
½ onion
2 eggs
3/4 pound ground beef
½ cup cut-up cheese
1 teaspoon salt

Soak bread in milk. Chop onion. Beat eggs. Mix all ingredients well. Shape into a loaf in a baking pan. Bake at 375°F for 1 hour.

Cheese Rarebit

3 cups shredded or cut-up cheese
1¼ cups milk
1 beaten egg
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
½ teaspoon mustard
6 or 12 slices toast, as desired

Combine all ingredients except toast. Cook over low heat, stirring constantly, until cheese melts and mixture is slightly thickened. Serve immediately on toast. Makes six servings, ½ cup each.

On a special diet?

If you are on a low-fat or low-salt diet, you may want to limit the amount of process cheese you eat in a day.

February 18. The largest group they served were the needy elderly.

"We worked with 487 different agencies," says Kathleen DiChiara, the full-time volunteer who directs the Archdiocese's food bank. "We didn't want people standing in line, so we decided to work through groups who knew who the needy were in their communities."

The Archdiocese Food Bank is a member of the Second Harvest network of food banks. The organization distributes some 25 tons of food a month. To cover their handling costs, the food bank usually charges agencies that pick up the food 10 cents per pound. For the cheese distribution, however, there was no charge to participating agencies.

DiChiara coordinated the January 25 and February 2 distributions from the parking lot adjacent to the tiny Stella Maris Roman Catholic Church, a seamen's chapel, on the south side of Port Newark. Helping her were 30 volunteers, including seven young men from St. Benedict's Prep in Newark, and her 15-year old daughter, Erin, who later received a plaque from the Veterans of Foreign Wars for her work in organizing the teenage volunteers.

The cheese had been shipped from a Philadelphia warehouse. To speed distribution, the Archdiocese gave out red and white tickets to the people who came to pick up the cheese for their communities.

Groups picking up 50 cases or more got red tickets, while those getting smaller amounts had white tickets.

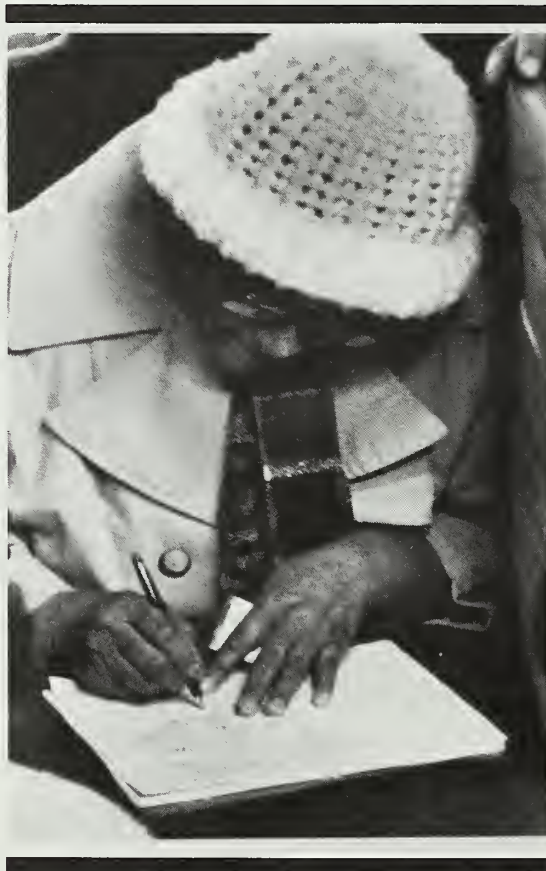
"We unloaded 70,000 pounds in less than 3 hours," says DiChiara. "The longshoremen working nearby were amazed."

The Food Action Center of Englewood also distributed the cheese through community organizations; however, they arranged for groups to pick up the cheese

directly from the warehouses where it was stored.

"We did not get into transportation," says Leslie Smith, executive director of the center, who feels the arrangement worked very well. The Food Action Center coordinated the distribution with 80 groups throughout the state.

The largest distribution in New Jersey was coordinated by the



At a distribution center in Washington, D.C., an elderly woman certifies she is eligible to receive USDA-donated cheese.

American Red Cross of Greater New York. Ken Curtin, assistant director of disaster services, arranged for shipments of the cheese to go to each of the 21 local chapters. Each chapter made sure the cheese got to local community groups, who in turn distributed it to people in need.

According to Curtin, the Salvation Army was especially helpful in the Red Cross effort, distributing approximately one-third of the 1 million pounds of cheese the Red Cross handled in New Jersey.

Young scout takes the lead

Volunteers of all ages turned out to help with the cheese project, but perhaps the youngest volunteer coordinator was 14-year-old Eagle Scout Roger Gleason of Framingham, Massachusetts.

When he learned that cheese was available to communities throughout the country, Roger suggested his scout troop offer to distribute the cheese in Framingham.

"It was a natural choice for an Eagle project," says Richard Gleason, Roger's father and Scoutmaster of Troop 78.

The distribution took place April 22 and 24 at the Penobscot Grange Hall and at the National Guard Armory. The National Guard and a local trucking company transported the cheese from its Boston Quincy Market to Framingham, then the scouts took over.

Distribution continues

In many areas, the cheese distribution continues. As we mentioned earlier, states have until December 31 to place orders with USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. If you'd like more information on how the distribution is working in your state, the Food and Nutrition Service can tell you who to call. Contact:

Joseph Shepherd
Director, Food Distribution
Food and Nutrition Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Alexandria, Virginia 22302

*article by Phil Canuto
with contributions from:
Eunice Bowman, David Lancaster,
Ellen Ladoucer, and Linda Feldman
photos by Phil Canuto
and Murray Lemmon*

Elementary Schools Give Kids More Lunch Choice

“After 40 years of being in this program and being very vocal about the mandated waste that was imposed upon us in the old regulations, I am delighted to have this option. The plan allows schools to meet the needs of the children and yet not throw food, and therefore money, into the garbage can.”

Liz Cagan, New York City

A new marketing tool is available to food service managers in elementary schools. Legislation passed last August allows elementary schools to use, for the first time, what's known as the “offer versus serve” plan. The plan has increased participation and reduced food waste this year in many elementary schools selecting this option.

Under offer versus serve, a school must offer a child the five food items required in a USDA-subsidized lunch (meat, milk, bread, and two fruits and/or vegetables), but the child can turn down one or two items if he or she doesn't intend to eat them.

Results are encouraging

Children like the plan. According to a USDA poll, about 95 percent of the children in grade schools that have tried offer versus serve rate the program as good. The plan has increased participation by about 3 percent in elementary schools using it.

About 19,000 schools implemented the plan this year—close to 40 percent of the elementary schools in the country. According to the USDA survey, an overwhelming majority of the food service workers trying the plan said it significantly

What will it be today?
With the offer versus
serve plan, children
get to select their own
lunch items.

reduced plate waste, and more than half said that food costs were reduced by an average of 4 to 5 cents per meal as a result.

"Offer versus serve has reduced plate waste at the same time it has maintained student consumption of a wide variety of nutrients," says Mary Jarratt, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Food and Consumer Services.

"The goal of the lunch program is still to provide one-third of a student's Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA), and students are encouraged to choose all five food items," she adds. "However, offer versus serve means students are not forced to take food they do not intend to eat."

Plan used in other schools

While this is the first year offer versus serve has been tried at the elementary level, the plan has been mandatory in high schools since 1975 and a local option for junior high and middle schools since 1977.

"USDA's experience with offer versus serve in high schools, junior highs and middle schools shows that schools will strive to plan menus that are both nutritious and appealing to their students," Jarratt says. "Local food service workers

At the A.W. Cox Elementary School in Guilford, Connecticut, food service manager Jean Criscuolo (left) helps children make their selections.

“ We're excited about the new program. The children go through the line and tell the cafeteria workers what they want, just as they would do at any restaurant in the city.”

Shirley Watkins, Memphis, Tennessee

are committed to serving nutritious meals because they care about the health and well-being of the children."

Last March USDA proposed regulations that would set minimum standards for the offer versus serve plan in elementary schools. The proposal would also allow local officials to set stricter standards for schools below high school. USDA is currently reviewing public comments on the proposal and expects to print final regulations this summer.

Food service operators have discovered that implementing offer versus serve in elementary schools involves different problems than it does in high schools or junior highs. In the past year, they have come up with creative ways to make the plan work well for younger students.

Here's how offer versus serve is working in a number of school districts around the country:

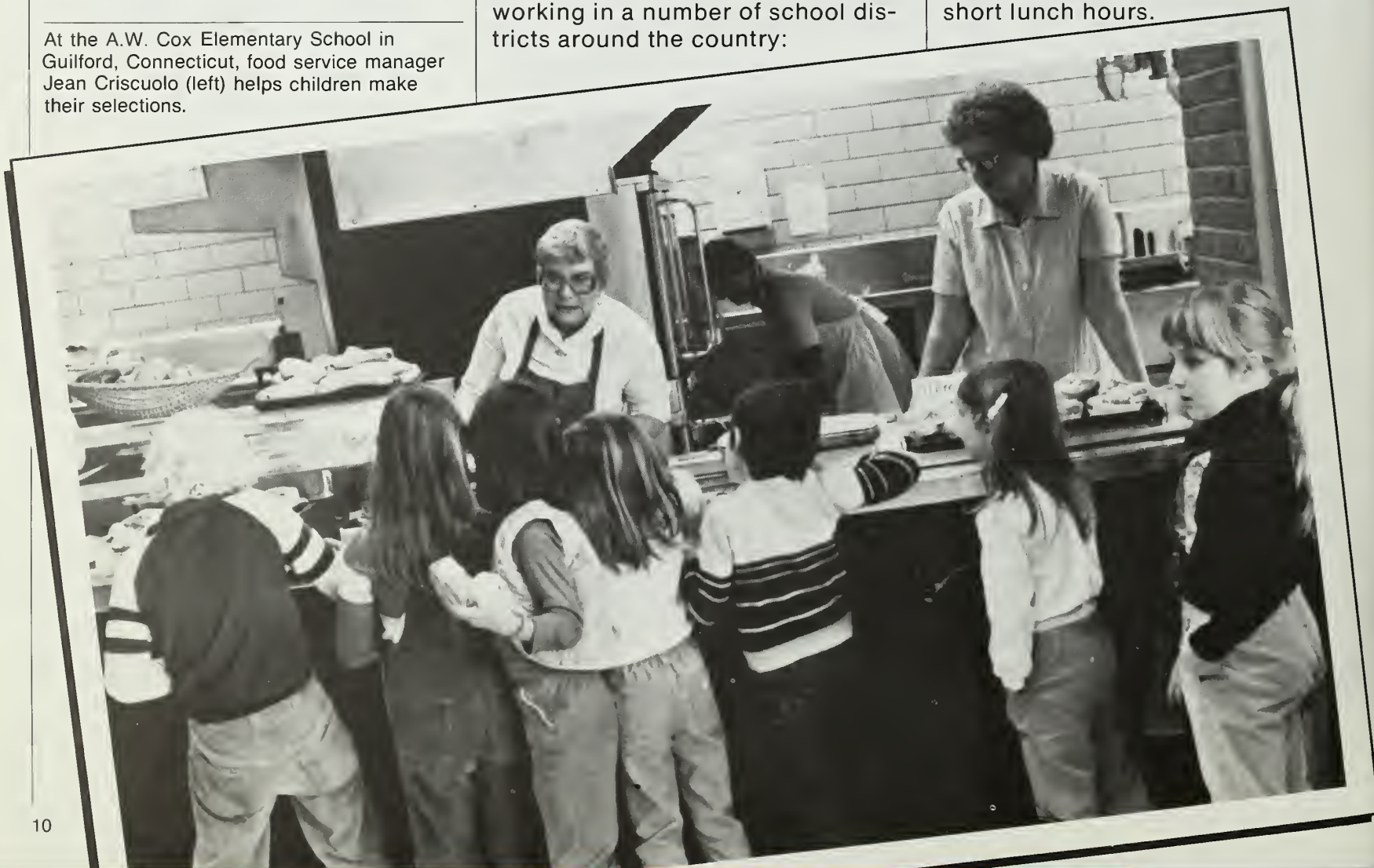
Colorado

Barbara Davis, manager of food services for Boulder Valley, Colorado, concedes the decision to try offer versus serve wasn't a snap. As a dietitian, Davis could see the value of making foods available to kids so they would try them and learn to like them. As a business woman, however, she could see no sense in forcing kids to take foods they would throw away.

Davis decided to give offer versus serve a try and set about convincing the superintendent. She wrote a letter to elementary school principals in August, then visited each school during the first 3 weeks of operation to see how practical offer versus serve was in each one.

Davis evaluated several factors. In some cases, the physical set-up and lunch service times presented problems. One elementary school in Bloomfield, for example, is suffering from tight quarters and is waiting for remodeling to expand its programs. Two other schools serve only a few children and utilize pre-served trays stacked on carts.

Lunch periods in Boulder Valley schools vary from as little as 20 minutes to serve 250 children to an hour for 140 children. Choices, especially at first, could slow down serving lines and create havoc with short lunch hours.



Schools that had trouble with offer versus serve were the minority, however. After 4 months of operation, the plan was working well in about two-thirds of Boulder Valley's 26 elementary schools. The results so far? "Plate waste has definitely gone down," says Davis.

Davis feels offer versus serve is an especially valuable tool for food service managers willing to take the time to evaluate children's selections. Boulder Valley schools have found that almost every child takes the main dish, and few refuse fruit. Some vegetables, like corn, are always popular, while others, like peas and green beans, are less popular. Age patterns occasionally appear, as well as ethnic preferences which vary by community and neighborhood.

For districts getting ready to implement offer versus serve, Davis has this advice: Analyze each school individually. Study attitudes of the food service staff, serving times, and facilities, and be ready to make some compromises. If your study indicates the option is likely to succeed for you, she says, the savings can be worth the effort.

Tennessee

In Memphis, educating the community was the cornerstone for making offer versus serve work. The plan was introduced in elementary schools last fall in conjunction with a month-long nutrition education program aimed at principals, teachers, parents, students, and cafeteria workers. The school district consulted an advertising agency to develop a merchandising strategy to go along with the new plan.

"Our participation had declined in all categories, as it had for other school districts," says Shirley Watkins, director of food and nutrition services for Memphis City Schools. "When we implemented offer versus serve, we saw our participation start increasing by 3,500 children per day. This was a staggering amount to us. We saw empty garbage cans."

Memphis City schools serve lunch to 66,000 students each day. Of these, 45,000 are elementary school students.

Watkins has made lunch attractive to students by offering more than five food items. Each day her schools offer two entrees, two fruits, two vegetables, milk, and two bread items from which children can select.

"We're excited about the new program," Watkins says. "The children go through the line and tell the cafeteria workers what they want, just as they would do at any restaurant in the city."

She continues, "We have thousands of letters from children who write to us and say, 'We love the program. We love to choose our foods.' This is what we're after. If children are able to select the food items they want, then they are inclined to eat those foods."

“ Out of 5,000 students in my elementary schools, I am serving school lunch to 4,200. I think the reason our participation is so high is because we have instituted offer versus serve. ”

Thelma Becker, Souderton, Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania

Souderton, Pennsylvania, is a rural area. The offer versus serve plan is working well in elementary schools there.

"Out of 5,000 students in my elementary schools, I am serving school lunch to 4,200," says Thelma Becker, school food service director for the Souderton Area School District. "I think the reason our participation is so high is because we have instituted offer versus serve."

Becker took special care in presenting the plan to teachers and parents last fall. She billed the new program "Your Choice," and combined the offer versus serve provision with expanded choices in all five food categories. She worked with the local school board on developing special news bulletins to help the community understand the new program.

"We handle the plan just a bit differently in our elementary schools than we do in our secondary schools," Becker says. "At the elementary level we have smaller portions so that when children do not



want to take a large portion of vegetables, they may take the smaller selection as they go through the line." This means that instead of turning down an item under offer versus serve, they can at least try it.

Offer versus serve is fun for the children, Becker says. "And," she adds, "we have found it to be educational for everyone."

New York

Liz Cagan, administrator of New York City's Office of School Food Service, has opted for what she calls "offer versus serve plus." She requires children to take a small "tasting portion" of a food they wish to decline.

"We have found that when children are told they only have to take three full portions, most children then will take four or five. We insist the children take a tasting portion, and they can come back and get more if they want it. Little children eat that way," she says. "For example, we found children who ask for the smaller cup of milk coming back and then ending up drinking more than 8 ounces. That's fine with us."

New York City has more than 1,200 sites which serve school lunches. For the past 3 years, nutrition education has been an integral part of the city's lunch program, and

children have been organized into nutrition committees with input into menu planning.

“ We have found that when children are told they only have to take three full portions, most children will take four or five. We insist the children take a tasting portion, and they can come back and get more if they want it. Little children eat that way. ”

Liz Cagan, New York City

Cagan says offer versus serve has worked well in her schools that have family style service as well as in those with the traditional cafeteria line.

“After 40 years of being in this program and being very vocal about the mandated waste that was imposed upon us in the old regulations, I am delighted to have this option. The plan allows schools to meet the needs of the children and yet not throw food, and therefore money, into the garbage can.”

Texas

Some of the 43 elementary school principals in Corpus Christi were apprehensive about the new offer versus serve system last fall. School food service director Gertrude Applebaum had to convince them the plan would work before they would agree to allow the option in local elementary schools. She carefully explained the plan to each school principal, and everyone agreed to try.

“We have found that the implementation of offer versus serve on the elementary level is entirely different than on the junior high or senior high level,” Applebaum says. “Principals for schools with older children weren’t hesitant about implementing the plan. But principals, parents and cafeteria workers all were sensitive to beginning the plan for younger children.”

People had different concerns, according to Applebaum. Principals worried that more time might be needed for children to go through the lunch line. Parents wondered whether their children would select properly. Food service workers voiced other concerns.

Undaunted, Applebaum educated each group, and sent her assistants to introduce the program to schools on an individual basis.

“My assistants would go to each school for a week and actually stand in line with the children to teach them what to do, even how to hold the trays,” she says. “It was really a learning process, and I’ve found it’s opened wide the whole idea of incorporating nutrition education into the lunch program.

“We found the plan really worked,” she says. “It did not require more time, as our principals had been concerned. Parents were delighted because they found that their children would actually eat the foods they selected for themselves. Our food service staff was happy, too, because everybody wants to see kids eat, and they’re eating under this new program.”

Applebaum encourages students to at least take a taste of foods they turn down. She has found that often children end up trying foods they would not eat at all before, and they find they like those foods.

“Our job is to encourage children to eat. To do that we’re customizing service, individualizing the portions,” Applebaum says. “My bottom line is never just to save money—it’s to build a nation of healthy children. And if offer versus serve is one way to do that—you bet I’m going to like it—especially if I’m going to save money at the same time.”

Implementing the offer versus serve plan in elementary schools around the country has required a dedicated effort from school food service operators in cooperation with their schools and communities.

It has provided a means to increase student interest in the lunch program and cut costs at the same time.

The plan has also caused a closer monitoring of foods prepared and eaten in the lunch program. For many in the school food service business, the plan has been an important step toward providing cost-effective local nutrition programs.

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1981 Index

A

- A Look at One County's Efforts to Reach the Blind June 1981
- A Maryland Nutritionist Works with Head Start Centers Dec. 1981
- A Visit to a Training Center for the Mentally Retarded June 1981
- Alabama
 - Food Help in a Hurry Feb. 1981
 - Southeast States Work Together on Film Series Dec. 1981
- Alaska
 - Extension Aides Use Supermarket Demonstrations in Alaska Aug. 1981
 - Reaching Food Stamp Shoppers Aug. 1981
- An Interview with FNS Administrator Hoagland Oct. 1981
- Arizona
 - They've Come a Long Way—Food Service and Food Service People Dec. 1981

B

- Breakfast (see School Breakfast)

C

- California
 - Meals and Companionship for the Elderly June 1981
- Changes in the Food Programs Oct. 1981
- Child Care and Food Apr. 1981
- Child Care Food Program
 - A Maryland Nutritionist Works with Head Start Centers Dec. 1981
- An Interview with FNS Administrator Hoagland Oct. 1981
- Child Care and Food Apr. 1981
- Child Care Food Program Facts for Sponsoring Organizations Apr. 1981
- Day Care with a Family Feeling Apr. 1981
- Florida Asks Extension Home Economists to Help Dec. 1981
- Help for Farmers, Food for People Feb. 1981
- Highlights of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 Oct. 1981
- Latch Key . . . for Before and After School Apr. 1981
- Southeast States Work Together on Film Series Dec. 1981
- Training for Child Care People Dec. 1981
- Child Care Food Program Facts for Sponsoring Organizations Apr. 1981
- Commodity Assistance (see Food Distribution)
- Commodity Supplemental Food Program
 - An Interview with FNS Administrator Hoagland Oct. 1981
 - Help for Farmers, Food for People Feb. 1981
- Connecticut
 - Latch Key . . . for Before and After School Apr. 1981
 - Making the Most of School Lunch Dollars Dec. 1981
 - Reaching Food Stamp Shoppers Aug. 1981
 - Two Connecticut Women Help Train Community Workers Aug. 1981
- Creative Shopping Can Help Stretch Food Dollars Aug. 1981
- D
 - Day Care with a Family Feeling Apr. 1981
 - Disaster Assistance
 - Food Help in a Hurry Feb. 1981
 - Help for Farmers, Food for People Feb. 1981
 - Donated Foods (see Food Distribution)

E

- Elderly
 - Cooking for One or Two Dec. 1981
 - Creative Shopping Can Help Stretch Food Dollars Aug. 1981
 - For Food Stamp Users with Special Needs June 1981
 - Help for Farmers, Food for People Feb. 1981
 - Highlights of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 Oct. 1981
 - International Year Heightens Awareness June 1981
 - Looking for Advice on Budgeting and Buying Food? Aug. 1981
 - Meals and Companionship for the Elderly June 1981
- Extension Aides Use Supermarket Demonstrations in Alaska Aug. 1981

F

- Family Day Care (see Child Care Food Program)
- Florida
 - Florida Asks Extension Home Economists to Help Dec. 1981
 - From the Farm to the Lunchroom—An Unusual USDA Purchase Feb. 1981
 - Meals and Companionship for the Elderly June 1981
 - Southeast States Work Together on Film Series Dec. 1981
 - They've Come a Long Way—Food Service and Food Service People Dec. 1981
 - Training for Child Care People Dec. 1981
- Food Stamps
 - A Look at One County's Efforts to Reach the Blind June 1981
 - An Interview with FNS Administrator Hoagland Oct. 1981
 - Cooking for One or Two Dec. 1981
 - Creative Shopping Can Help Stretch Food Dollars Aug. 1981
 - Extension Aides Use Supermarket Demonstrations in Alaska Aug. 1981
 - For Food Stamp Users with Special Needs June 1981
 - Highlights of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 Oct. 1981
 - Looking for Advice on Budgeting and Buying Food? Aug. 1981
 - Pennsylvania's Direct Delivery Project Oct. 1981
 - Reaching Food Stamp Shoppers Aug. 1981
 - Two Connecticut Women Help Train Community Workers Aug. 1981
 - For Food Stamp Users with Special Needs June 1981
 - From the Farm to the Lunchroom—An Unusual USDA Purchase Feb. 1981

G, H

- Georgia
 - They've Come a Long Way—Food Service and Food Service People Dec. 1981
- Getting New Skills for the 1980's Dec. 1981
- Handicapped
 - A Look at One County's Efforts to Reach the Blind June 1981
 - A Visit to a Training Center for the Mentally Retarded June 1981
 - Food and Training Expand Opportunities June 1981
 - For Food Stamp Users with Special Needs June 1981
 - International Year Heightens Awareness June 1981
 - Schools Make Mealtime a Time to Learn New Skills June 1981
 - Workshops Give Clients a Sense of Identity and Purpose June 1981
 - Help for Farmers, Food for People Feb. 1981

1981 Index

I, J, K

- Index for 1980 Apr. 1981
- International Year Heightens Awareness June 1981
- Kentucky
 - Southeast States Work Together on Film Series Dec. 1981

L

- Latch Key . . . for Before and After School Apr. 1981
- Legislation
 - An Interview with FNS Administrator Hoagland Oct. 1981
 - Help for Farmers, Food for People Feb. 1981
 - Highlights of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 Oct. 1981
- Looking for Advice on Budgeting and Buying Food? Aug. 1981
- Lunch (see School Lunch)

M

- Maine
 - Looking for Advice on Budgeting and Buying Food? Aug. 1981
- Making Commodities Work . . . In Large
 - Big City Schools Feb. 1981
- Making Commodities Work . . . In Small
 - Rural Schools Feb. 1981
- Making the Most of School Lunch Dollars Dec. 1981
- Maryland
 - A Maryland Nutritionist Works with Head Start Centers Dec. 1981
- Massachusetts
 - Making the Most of School Lunch Dollars Dec. 1981
 - Meals and Companionship for the Elderly June 1981
- Michigan
 - Creative Shopping Can Help Stretch Food Dollars Aug. 1981
 - Looking for Advice on Budgeting and Buying Food? Aug. 1981
 - Meals and Companionship for the Elderly June 1981
 - Putting Nutrition and Business Together Dec. 1981
- Mississippi
 - Food Help in a Hurry Feb. 1981

N

- National School Lunch Program (see School Lunch)
- Native Americans
 - Food Help in a Hurry Feb. 1981
 - Help for Farmers, Food for People Feb. 1981
 - Making Commodities Work . . . In Small
 - Rural Schools Feb. 1981
 - WIC on the Standing Rock Reservation Oct. 1981
- Nebraska
 - Help for Farmers, Food for People Feb. 1981
- NET (see Nutrition Education and Training Program)
- New Hampshire
 - Day Care with a Family Feeling Apr. 1981
 - Making the Most of School Lunch Dollars Dec. 1981
 - New Hampshire's Kitchen on Wheels Dec. 1981
 - Schools Make Mealtime a Time to Learn
 - New Skills June 1981
- New Hampshire's Kitchen on Wheels Dec. 1981
- New Mexico
 - Making Commodities Work . . . In Small
 - Rural Schools Feb. 1981
 - They've Come a Long Way—Food Service and Food Service People Dec. 1981
- New York
 - Creative Shopping Can Help Stretch Food Dollars Aug. 1981

- From the Farm to the Lunchroom—An Unusual USDA Purchase Feb. 1981
- Making Commodities Work . . . In Large
 - Big City Schools Feb. 1981
- North Dakota
 - WIC on the Standing Rock Reservation Oct. 1981
- Nutrition Education
 - A Maryland Nutritionist Works with Head Start Centers Dec. 1981
 - Cooking for One or Two Dec. 1981
 - Creative Shopping Can Help Stretch Food Dollars Aug. 1981
 - Extension Aides Use Supermarket Demonstrations in Alaska Aug. 1981
 - Getting New Skills for the 1980's Dec. 1981
 - Looking for Advice on Budgeting and Buying Food? Aug. 1981
 - New Hampshire's Kitchen on Wheels Dec. 1981
 - Planned Spending by Food Group Aug. 1981
 - Reaching Food Stamp Shoppers Aug. 1981
 - Schools Make Mealtime a Time to Learn
 - New Skills June 1981
 - Southeast States Work Together on Film Series Dec. 1981
 - The Grocery List as a Management Tool Aug. 1981
 - They've Come a Long Way—Food Service and Food Service People Dec. 1981
 - Two Connecticut Women Help Train Community Workers Aug. 1981
- Nutrition Education and Training Program (NET)
 - Florida Asks Extension Home Economists to Help Dec. 1981

O

- Ohio
 - A Look at One County's Efforts to Reach the Blind June 1981
 - Looking for Advice on Budgeting and Buying Food? Aug. 1981
 - Schools Make Mealtime a Time to Learn
 - New Skills June 1981
- Oregon
 - Creative Shopping Can Help Stretch Food Dollars Aug. 1981

P

- Pennsylvania
 - Looking for Advice on Budgeting and Buying Food? Aug. 1981
 - Pennsylvania's Direct Delivery Project Oct. 1981
- Pennsylvania's Direct Delivery Project Oct. 1981
- Planned Spending by Food Group Aug. 1981
- Processing Contracts
 - Help for Farmers, Food for People Feb. 1981
 - Making Commodities Work . . . In Large
 - Big City Schools Feb. 1981
 - Making Commodities Work . . . In Small
 - Rural Schools Feb. 1981
- Puerto Rico
 - An Interview with FNS Administrator Hoagland Oct. 1981
 - From the Farm to the Lunchroom—An Unusual USDA Purchase Feb. 1981
 - Highlights of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 Oct. 1981
 - Putting Nutrition and Business Together Dec. 1981

Q, R

- Reaching Food Stamp Shoppers Aug. 1981
- Rhode Island
 - Making the Most of School Lunch Dollars Dec. 1981

1981 Index

S

School Breakfast
 Highlights of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 Oct. 1981
 Making Commodities Work . . . In Large Big City Schools Feb. 1981

School Lunch
 An Interview with FNS Administrator Hoagland Oct. 1981
 Changes in the Food Programs Oct. 1981
 Getting New Skills for the 1980's Dec. 1981
 Help for Farmers, Food for People Feb. 1981
 Highlights of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 Oct. 1981
 Making Commodities Work . . . In Large Big City Schools Feb. 1981
 Making Commodities Work . . . In Small Rural Schools Feb. 1981
 Making the Most of School Lunch Dollars Dec. 1981
 New Hampshire's Kitchen on Wheels Dec. 1981
 Putting Nutrition and Business Together Dec. 1981
 Schools Make Mealtime a Time to Learn New Skills June 1981
 They've Come a Long Way—Food Service and Food Service People Dec. 1981
 USDA Studies the Commodity System Oct. 1981

Schools Make Mealtime a Time to Learn
 New Skills June 1981

South Carolina
 They've Come a Long Way—Food Service and Food Service People Dec. 1981

South Dakota
 WIC on the Standing Rock Reservation Oct. 1981

Southeast States Work Together on Film Series Dec. 1981

Special Milk Program
 Highlights of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 Oct. 1981

Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)
 An Interview with FNS Administrator Hoagland Oct. 1981
 Highlights of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 Oct. 1981
 Looking for Advice on Budgeting and Buying Food? Aug. 1981
 WIC on the Standing Rock Reservation Oct. 1981

Summer Food Service Program
 Help for Farmers, Food for People Feb. 1981

Highlights of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 Oct. 1981

T, U, V

The Grocery List as a Management Tool Aug. 1981
 They've Come a Long Way—Food Service and Food Service People Dec. 1981
 Training for Child Care People Dec. 1981
 Two Connecticut Women Help Train Community Workers Aug. 1981

USDA Studies the Commodity System Oct. 1981

Vermont
 Looking for Advice on Budgeting and Buying Food? Aug. 1981

Virginia
 A Visit to a Training Center for the Mentally Retarded June 1981
 Creative Shopping Can Help Stretch Food Dollars Aug. 1981

Volunteers
 Creative Shopping Can Help Stretch Food Dollars Aug. 1981
 Extension Aides Uses Supermarket Demonstrations in Alaska Aug. 1981
 Food Help in a Hurry Feb. 1981
 International Year Heightens Awareness June 1981
 Looking for Advice on Budgeting and Buying Food? Aug. 1981
 Meals and Companionship for the Elderly June 1981
 Two Connecticut Women Help Train Community Workers Aug. 1981

W, X, Y, Z

Washington D.C.
 Looking for Advice on Budgeting and Buying Food? Aug. 1981
 Workshops Give Clients a Sense of Identity and Purpose June 1981

WIC (See Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children)

WIC on the Standing Rock Reservation Oct. 1981
 Workshops Give Clients a Sense of Identity and Purpose June 1981

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