



# Government under fire for 'novela' ad campaign promoting food stamp enrollment

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The Department of Agriculture is coming under fire for its "aggressive" ad campaign, including a 10-part series of Spanish-language "novelas," to convince people to go on food stamps -- at a time when one in seven are already enrolled.

The food stamp rolls have swelled since the recession, growing roughly 40 percent since 2009. As of April, more than 46 million people were in the program, which costs \$80 billion a year. Yet the USDA is engaged in an ongoing ad campaign to convince those not on food stamps -- but still technically eligible -- to let down their pride and sign up.

Part of that campaign is the Spanish-language radio "novelas." The translated scripts, provided to FoxNews.com by the USDA, compose a 10-part miniseries called "Hope Park." In it, the characters are shown persistently trying to convince "Diana" to go on food stamps -- known these days as SNAP, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program -- even though her husband works and she doesn't think she needs it.

"I don't need help from anyone," Diana says in Episode 4. "My husband makes enough to take care of us."

But her friends are persistent, and by Episode 10 Diana is enrolled and singing the program's praises.

The radio spots were produced in 2008 and remain available for use, according to the USDA.

Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., ranking Republican on the Senate Budget Committee, slammed the campaign as a push to enroll individuals who don't feel they need it.

"It has become increasingly clear that, in recent years, the mission of the food stamp program has been converted from targeted assistance for those in need into an aggressive drive to expand enrollment regardless of need," he said in a statement. "Food stamp spending has quadrupled since 2001, yet USDA complains that too many eligible people continue to resist enrollment. ... Read as a whole, USDA's activities

suggest that the program administrators take personal offense when people who technically qualify for their largesse decline to accept -- and see it as an obstacle to overcome."

Sessions noted the radio ads are part of an effort to enroll immigrants and non-citizens, who are eligible provided they meet certain requirements.

The USDA notes that illegal immigrants cannot apply, however.

"Non-citizens who are unlawfully present, are not, nor have they ever been, eligible to receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits," the USDA said in a statement. "States must verify the immigration status of individuals who apply for benefits. Individuals applying for SNAP are required to provide documentation of their immigration status as a condition of eligibility."

As for the ad campaign itself, a USDA Food and Nutrition Service spokesman said it was targeted toward "communities most at risk for hunger."

"Congress allocates funds to USDA with the mandate to conduct public education about the benefits of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and how to apply to help reduce hunger in America," the spokesman said. "Partner organizations use the public service announcements and other tools to connect eligible households with the information they need to make an informed decision about SNAP participation."

The radio ads stress that the assistance can be used to buy healthy food and improve diets. They even direct listeners to the online "SNAP recipe finder" for recipe ideas.

The radio ads are among a series of USDA-sponsored ads produced between 2008 and 2012 to promote food stamp enrollment. Several other public service announcements, in English and in Spanish, are still on the department's website, though the "novelas" appear to have been taken down -- they were on the site as recently as Thursday.

Tad DeHaven, budget analyst for the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, said it's clear the government is trying to "get as many people using the program as possible."

"It's a clear attempt to foster greater government dependency," he said.

As for the pitch to non-citizens, he said it sends an unfortunate message: "Welcome to the United States, we'll take care of you."

The criticism over the ad campaigns comes amid debate on Capitol Hill over the proposed five-year farm bill funding food stamps. Proposals in the House and Senate seek to cut funding from the program.

Read more: <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/07/13/government-under-fire-for-novela-ad-campaign-promoting-food-stamp-enrollment/#ixzz20tHXf55a>

