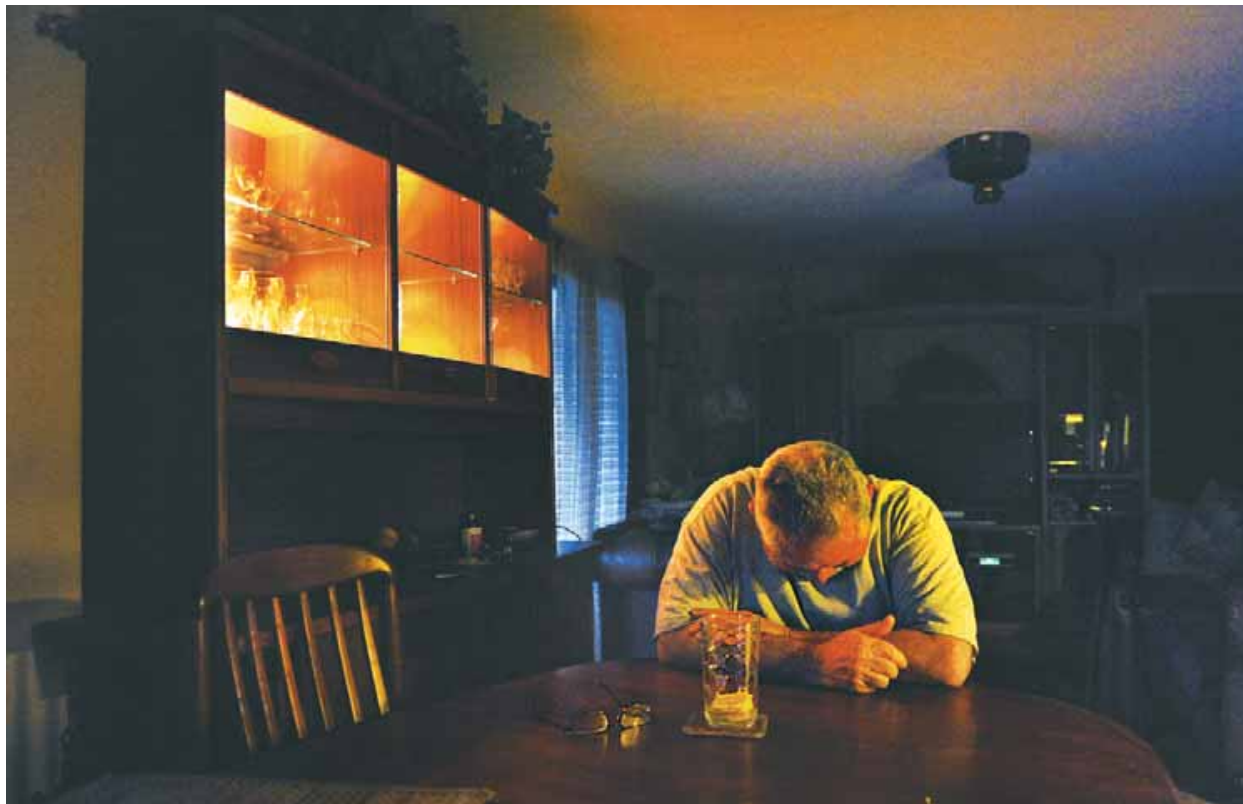


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'I'm not ready to sign up for this yet'

In Florida, a food-stamp recruiter faces would-be recipients' wrenching choices

BY ELI SASLOW
IN FORT PIERCE, FLA.

A good recruiter needs to be liked, so Dillie Nerios filled gift bags with dog toys for the dog people and cat food for the cat people. She packed crates of cookies, croissants, vegetables and fresh fruit. She curled her hair and painted her nails fluorescent pink. "A happy, it's-all-good look," she said, checking her reflection in the rearview mirror. Then she drove along the Florida coast to sign people up for food stamps.

Her destination on a recent morning was a 55-and-over community in central Florida, where single-wide trailers surround a parched golf course. On the drive, Nerios, 56, reviewed techniques she had learned for connecting with some of Florida's most desperate senior citizens during two years on the job. Touch a shoulder. Hold eye contact. Listen for as long as it takes.



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON/THE WASHINGTON POST

TOP: "How does anyone fall this far, this fast?" asks Lonnie Briglia, 60, at his trailer-park home. ABOVE: Food-stamp program recruiter Dillie Nerios talks to a couple who lost much of their wealth in the stock and housing downturns.

"Some seniors haven't had anyone to talk to in some time," one of the state-issued training manuals reads. "Make each person feel like the only one who matters."

In fact, it is Nerios's job to enroll at least 150 seniors for food stamps each month, a quota she usually exceeds. Alleviate hunger, lessen poverty: These are the primary goals



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON/THE WASHINGTON POST



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Food-stamp recruiter Dillie Nerios, right, follows Melba Thompson, 72, into Thompson's home in Indiantown, Fla., to talk about applying for benefits; an auto pawn business in Fort Pierce lends money to people in distress; a volunteer at the Dunbar Community Center food bank in Hobe Sound helps a man bundle food to bring home by bicycle.



of her work. But the job also has a second and more controversial purpose for cash-strapped Florida, where increasing food-stamp enrollment has become a means of economic growth, bringing almost \$6 billion each year into the state. The money

helps to sustain communities, grocery stores and food producers. It also adds to rising federal entitlement spending and the U.S. debt.

Nerios prefers to think of her job in more simple terms: "Help is available," she tells hundreds of seniors each week. "You deserve it. So, yes or no?"

In Florida and everywhere else, the answer in 2013 is almost always yes. A record 47 million Americans now rely on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as food stamps, available for people with annual incomes below about \$15,000. The program grew during the economic collapse because 10 million

more Americans dropped into poverty. It has continued to expand four years into the recovery because state governments and their partner organizations have become active promoters, creating official “SNAP outreach plans” and hiring hundreds of recruiters like Nerios.

A decade ago, only about half of eligible Americans chose to sign up for food stamps. Now that number is 75 percent.

Rhode Island hosts SNAP-themed bingo games for the elderly. Alabama hands out fliers that read: “Be a patriot. Bring your food stamp money home.” Three states in the Midwest throw food-stamp parties where new recipients sign up en masse.

On the Treasure Coast of Florida, the official outreach plan is mostly just Nerios, who works for a local food bank that is funded in part by the state. She roams four counties of sandbars and barrier islands in her Ford Escape, with an audio Bible in the CD player and a windshield sticker that reads “Faith, Hope and Love.” She distributes hundreds of fliers each week, giving out her personal cellphone number and helping seniors submit SNAP applications on her laptop.

On this particular morning, Nerios pulled into the Spanish Lakes retirement community near Port St. Lucie, Fla., and set up a display table in front of the senior center. She advertised her visit weeks in advance, but she can never predict how many people will come. Some events draw hundreds; others only a dozen. Her hope was to attract a crowd with giveaways of pet toys and hundreds of pounds of food, which she stacked high on the table. “What person in need doesn’t want food that’s immediate and free?” she said.

She watched as a few golf carts and motorized scooters drove toward her on a road lined with palm trees, passing Spanish Lakes signs that read “We Love Living Here!” and “Great Lifestyle!” The first seniors grabbed giveaway boxes and went home to tell their friends, who told more friends, until a line of 40 people had formed at Nerios’s table.

A husband and wife, just done with

nine holes of golf, clubs still on their cart.

An 84-year-old woman on her bicycle, teetering away with one hand on the handlebars and a case of applesauce under her other arm.

A Korean War veteran on oxygen who mostly wanted to talk, so Nerios listened: 32 years in the military, a sergeant major, Germany, Iron Curtain, medals and awards. “A hell of a life,” the veteran said. “So if I signed up, what would I tell my wife?”

“Tell her you’re an American and this is your benefit,” Nerios said, pulling him away from the crowd, so he could write the 26th name of the day on her SNAP sign-up sheet.

She distributed food and SNAP brochures for three hours. “Take what you need,” she said, again and again, until the fruit started to sweat and the vegetables wilted in the late-morning heat. Just as she prepared to leave, a car pulled into the senior center and a man with a gray mustache and a tattered T-shirt opened the driver-side door. He had seen the giveaway boxes earlier in the morning but waited to return until the crowd thinned. He had just moved to Spanish Lakes. He had never taken giveaways. He looked at the boxes but stayed near his car.

“Sir, can I help?” Nerios asked. She brought over some food. She gave him her business card and a few brochures about SNAP.

“I don’t want to be another person depending on the government,” he said.

“How about being another person getting the help you deserve?” she said.

Did he deserve it, though? Lonni Briglia, 60, drove back to his Spanish Lakes mobile home with the recruiter’s pamphlets and thought about that. He wasn’t so sure.

Wasn’t it his fault that he had flushed 40 years of savings into a bad investment, buying a fleet of delivery trucks just as the economy crashed? Wasn’t it his fault that he and his wife, Celeste, had missed mortgage payments on the house where they raised five kids, forcing the bank to fore-

close in 2012? Wasn't it his fault the only place they could afford was an abandoned mobile home in Spanish Lakes, bought for the entirety of their savings, \$750 in cash?

"We made horrible mistakes," he said. "We dug the hole. We should dig ourselves out."

Now he walked into their mobile home and set the SNAP brochures on the kitchen table. They had moved in three months before, and it had taken all of that time for them to make the place livable. They patched holes in the ceiling. They fixed the plumbing and rewired the electricity. They gave away most of their belongings to the kids — "like we died and executed the will," he said. They decorated the walls of the mobile home with memories of a different life: photos of Lonnie in his old New Jersey police officer uniform, or in Germany for a manufacturing job that paid \$25 an hour, or on vacation in their old pop-up camper.

A few weeks after they moved in, some of their 11 grandchildren had come over to visit. One of them, a 9-year-old girl, had looked around the mobile home and then turned to her grandparents on the verge of tears: "Grampy, this place is junky," she had said. He had smiled and told her that it was okay, because Spanish Lakes had a community pool, and now he could go swimming whenever he liked.

Only later, alone with Celeste, had he said what he really thought: "A damn sky dive. That's our life. How does anyone fall this far, this fast?"

And now SNAP brochures were next to him on the table — one more step down, he thought, reading over the bold type on the brochure. "Applying is easy." "Eat right!" "Every \$5 in SNAP generates \$9.20 for the local economy."

He sat in a sweltering home with no air conditioning and a refrigerator bought on layaway, which was mostly empty except for the "experienced" vegetables they sometimes bought at a discount grocery store to cook down and freeze for later. He had known a handful of people who depended on the government: former co-workers who exaggerated injuries to get

temporary disability; homeless people in the Fort Pierce park where he had taken the kids each week when they were young to hand out homemade peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, even though he suspected some of those homeless were drug addicts who spent their Social Security payments on crack.

"Makers and takers," Lonnie had told the kids then, explaining that the world divided into two categories. The Briglias were makers.

Now three of those kids worked in law enforcement and two were in management. One of them, the oldest, was on his way to visit Spanish Lakes, driving down at this very moment from Valdosta, Ga., with his wife and two kids. Lonnie placed the SNAP brochures in a drawer and turned on a fan to cool the mobile home.

His son arrived, and they went out to dinner. Lonnie tried to pay with a credit card, but his son wouldn't let him. Then, before leaving for Valdosta, the son gave his parents an air conditioner, bought for \$400. Lonnie started to protest.

"Please," his son said. "You need it. It's okay to take a little help."

The offer of more help came early the next morning. Nerios reached Lonnie on his cellphone to check on his interest in SNAP.

"Can I help sign you up?" she asked.

"I'm still not sure," he said. "We have a lot of frozen vegetables in the freezer."

"Don't wait until you're out," she said.

She was on her way to another outreach event, but she told Lonnie she had plenty of time to talk. She had always preferred working with what her colleagues called the Silent Generation, even though seniors were historically the least likely to enroll in SNAP. Only about 38 percent of eligible seniors choose to participate in the program, half the rate of the general population. In Florida, that means about 300,000 people over 60 are not getting their benefits, and at least \$381 million in available federal money isn't coming into the state. To help enroll more seniors, the govern-

ment has published an outreach guide that blends compassion with sales techniques, generating some protests in Congress. The guide teaches recruiters how to “overcome the word ‘no,’” suggesting answers for likely hesitations.

Welfare stigma: “You worked hard and the taxes you paid helped create SNAP.”

Embarrassment: “Everyone needs help now and then.”

Sense of failure: “Lots of people, young and old, are having financial difficulties.”

Nerios prefers a subtler touch. “It’s about patience, empathy,” she said. While she makes a middle-class salary and had never been on food stamps herself, she knows the emotional exhaustion that comes at the end of each month, after a few hundred conversations about money that didn’t exist. Nowhere had the SNAP program grown as it has in Florida, where enrollment had risen from 1.45 million people in 2008 to 3.35 million last year. And no place in Florida had been reshaped by the recession quite like the Treasure Coast, where middle-class retirees lost their savings in the housing collapse, forcing them to live on less than they expected for longer than they expected. Sometimes, Nerios believes it is more important to protect a client’s sense of self-worth than to meet her quota.

“I’m not going to push you,” she told Lonnie now. “This is your decision.”

“I have high blood pressure, so it’s true that diet is important to us,” he said, which sounded to her like a man arguing with himself.

“I can meet with you today, or tomorrow, or anytime you’d like,” she said.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m really sorry.”

“You don’t have to be,” she said. “Please, just think about it.”

She hung up the phone and began setting up her giveaway table at another event.

He hung up the phone and drove a few miles down the highway to his wife’s small knitting store. They had stayed mar-

ried 41 years because they made decisions together. She was an optimist and he was a realist; they leveled each other out. During the failures of the past three years, they had developed a code language that allowed them to acknowledge their misery without really talking about it.

“How you doing?” he asked.

“Just peachy,” she said, which meant to him that in fact she was exhausted, depressed, barely hanging on.

She opened the knitting store three years earlier, but it turned out her only customers were retirees on fixed incomes, seniors with little money to spend who just wanted an air-conditioned place to spend the day. So Celeste started giving them secondhand yarn and inviting customers to knit with her for charity in the shop. Together they had made 176 hats and scarves for poor families in the last year. The store, meanwhile, had barely made its overhead. Lonnie wanted her to close it, but it was the last place where she could pretend her life had turned out as she’d hoped, knitting to classical music at a wooden table in the center of the store.

Now Lonnie joined her at that table and started to tell her about his week: how he had been driving by the community center and seen boxes of food; how he had decided to take some, grabbing tomatoes and onions that looked fresher than anything they’d had in weeks; how a woman had touched his shoulder and offered to help, leaving him with brochures and a business card.

He pulled the card from his pocket and showed it to Celeste. She leaned in to read the small print. “SNAP Outreach,” it read.

“I think we qualify,” Lonnie said.

There was a pause.

“Might be a good idea,” Celeste said.

“It’s hard to accept,” he said.

Another pause.

“We have to take help when we need it,” she said.

Celeste looked down at her knitting, and Lonnie sat with her in the quiet shop and thought about what happened when he opened a barbershop a few years earlier,

as another effort of last resort. His dad, an Italian immigrant, had been a barber in New Jersey, and Lonnie decided to try it for himself after a dozen manufacturing job applications went unanswered in 2010. He enrolled in a local beauty school, graduated with a few dozen teenaged girls, took over the lease for a shop in Port St. Lucie and named it Man Cave. He had gone to work with his scissors and his clippers every day, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays, standing on the curb and waving a hand-made sign to advertise haircuts for \$5. He had done a total of 11 cuts in three months. But what tore him up inside had nothing to do with the lonely echo of his feet on the linoleum floor or the empty cash register or the weeks that went by without a

single customer. No, what convinced him to close the shop — the memory that stuck with him even now — were the weeks when old friends had come in to get their hair cut twice. He couldn't stand the idea of being pitied. He hated that his problems had become a burden to anyone else.

He wondered: Sixty years old now, and who was he? A maker? A taker?

"I'm not ready to sign up for this yet," he said.

"Soon we might have to," she said.

He tucked Nerios's business card into his back pocket.

"I know," he said. "I'm keeping it."

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