



Jerry W. Friedman

In a city known for its lavish parties and elegant catering, by all standards it was a glorious event. No, it wasn't the accommodations, decorations, or food that made this event stand out, it was simply the reason. On June 22, 2004, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service hosted an awards ceremony in Washington, D.C., to celebrate the nationwide implementation of the Food Stamp Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) effort.

The program, which has its roots in a federal demonstration project in Reading, Pa., 20 years ago, replaced traditional paper Food Stamps with a plastic card similar to those used in commercial debit-card systems. That led to a number of notable projects, including Ramsey County, Minn., which integrated cash benefits with food purchases; the state of Maryland, which had the first statewide EBT implementation; and the Southern Alliance of States, which consolidated procurement from multiple jurisdictions to leverage better pricing and uniformity. It was an evolutionary process on a fast track. By the time Congress mandated Food Stamp EBT in August 1996, 14 states already had EBT systems. The advantages of EBT over a paper system are evident. It is more efficient, improves accountability, deters fraud, provides greater client dignity, and saves money.

As a former stockboy who grew up in a family of grocers, I was naturally drawn to EBT. During my career I was privileged to be involved in three major EBT efforts, including conversion of the Reading federal demonstration to a state project and an innovative procurement in Texas designed to attract multiple vendors. It seems to me that there was a special energy and creativity to EBT devel-

opment that was unique in human service programming. I believe that it was the blend of technology innovation and good policy, and the potential for new partnerships, that created this exciting and positive climate.

In my 34-year career in public service, EBT is perhaps the only effort that is liked by just about everybody. A diverse array of stakeholders, includ-

A Glorious Celebration

ing retailers, computer vendors, clients, advocates, public employees, politicians and federal officials all had something to gain through this new benefit delivery system. This isn't to say that EBT didn't have its share of problems, glitches, and challenges. But generally, it represented a positive convergence of good business, technology, social services, politics, public policy, and administration. One significant benefit was that EBT forged new partnerships among various sectors that traditionally had not worked together, thereby breaking down stereotypes.

The nationwide implementation of EBT for nutrition benefits closes one chapter, but opens others. The opportunity now exists to take the lessons learned from Food Stamp EBT and attain new heights, including child care, WIC, Medicaid, child support, transportation applications, etc. But we now have the advantage of working within the framework of a national platform, a history of collaboration, and a sense of team.

If you search the multitude of cable TV channels these days, you can invariably find some show where members of the entertainment industry are bestowing awards on themselves. While it may be a bit much, with

soaps, reality TV, advertisements, etc., I am a little envious of an industry that makes an effort to celebrate its successes. Due to the generally humble nature of human service professionals, I don't believe that we acknowledge our accomplishments and laud our heroes enough. Therefore, it was especially gratifying for the USDA to undertake the EBT celebration. The event

was attended by many of the early EBT pioneers, included a thoughtful presentation to each state based on the year that the state implemented EBT, and granted special awards, including one to APhSA for our role in the effort. I want to offer kudos to USDA for creating this glorious event and congratulations to all that made EBT such a great success. It is a wonderful legacy and we, at APhSA, are proud to be a part of it.