

Increasing CalFresh Participation Rates through Outreach: Connecting with Clients Outside of the Office

KRISTINA MILLER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Nearly 3.5 million Californians are eligible for food stamps, but don’t enroll in the CalFresh Program.”

—“California food stamps, 3.5M eligible don’t enroll;
\$5B federal funds unclaimed”

Residents of California are struggling to meet their needs and the needs of their families through very trying economic times. County welfare offices are busier than they have ever been, and yet the participation rate for CalFresh in the state of California is near the bottom of the list of all fifty United States. Contra Costa County strives to meet the needs of the community through outreach, partnerships with community based organizations, and advertisement in an effort to increase CalFresh participation rates.

Sonoma County has made considerable changes in the way they reach out to the community and has built strong relationships with organizations that already serve potentially eligible residents. Target groups are seniors, the working poor, and

non-English speakers. Local health centers have been assisting clients with Medi-Cal applications and services for years. It was a logical chance to take to try and add CalFresh services in those clinics, and it has proved to be successful. Sonoma County then built a unit of Eligibility Workers outfitted with traveling kits to get into the community and assist clients with the application process and conduct the intake interview, saving clients a trip to the county office.

This case study describes Sonoma County’s outreach plans, program development, and implementation, and how Contra Costa County may benefit from the information that follows as well as recommendations aimed at increasing CalFresh participation rates.

Kristina Miller, Eligibility Work Supervisor, Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department

Increasing CalFresh Participation Rates through Outreach: Connecting with Clients Outside of the Office

KRISTINA MILLER

Background

The CalFresh program, formerly known as Food Stamps and federally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), provides benefits to purchase food and increases nutrition for low-income families and individuals. Participation in the CalFresh program has typically relied on clients coming into a county welfare office to apply for benefits on their own, and the participation rates appear to reflect that. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), California has a long way to go to improve participation rates for CalFresh. The Program Access Index (PAI) is an estimation of the degree to which low-income individuals utilize CalFresh, and the USDA has figured California's PAI at 49 percent, which is below the national average of 69 percent. In order to improve the participation rates, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) has focused on outreach and other strategies. CDSS has now partnered with the California Welfare Directors Association (CWDA), and has requested that all 58 counties in the state submit a detailed plan on how they are going to increase CalFresh caseloads over the next three years.

According to the 2001 Department of Health Services (DHS) study, *Perceptions of the Food Stamp Program among Limited-Household Income Residents of California*, the main barriers to CalFresh participation are: lack of knowledge regarding who is eligible for the program, frustration with the application process, the stigma associated with the program, and misconceptions in immigrant communities. While the stigma attached to receiving

CalFresh benefits appears to be a large barrier, transportation issues, language differences, reading ability, and access to the Internet are significant as well. CDSS has analyzed county outreach plans, and the majority of them focus on reaching more seniors and including CalFresh access to MediCal applicants and recipients. Participation rates are also affected by something called churn. Churn occurs when eligible clients do not complete the recertification process, quarterly reports, or other program requirements needed to keep receiving benefits. Clients typically re-enroll within 90 days, but losing benefits for any period of time negatively impacts participation rates as well as perpetuates the bad feelings associated with receiving welfare benefits. Churn also increases the workload for counties and taxes the eligibility system.

Outreach through Community Partnership

Sonoma County is located on the northern coast of California, and is the largest (in area) of the nine San Francisco Bay Area counties. The County of Sonoma is known for its wineries, tourist industry, agriculture, beautiful landscapes, and a growing population that is nearing 490,000. When looking at its CalFresh outreach plan, the county's demographics and coverage area were major considerations. These factors were taken into account during the planning phases of the CalFresh outreach activities, and it was decided that the focus would be aimed at seniors, the working poor, and non-English speaking county residents. This group proved to have the largest number

of potentially eligible clients within the county's demographics as a whole.

Sonoma County has built very strong relationships with several community-based organizations (CBOs) through the Medi-Cal program and the County Medical Services Program (CMSP), which is the health care program for low income and medically indigent adults. The Redwood Community Health Coalition (RCHC) is an important partner in the outreach program. RCHC is a coalition of community health centers in Sonoma, Napa, Yolo, and Marin counties whose mission is to provide high quality, cost effective health care for everyone regardless of their ability to pay, and serves the target populations of the CalFresh outreach program. The medical centers already do a great deal of community outreach along with wellness programs, a children's play program emphasizing nutrition and exercise, and senior services. Patients that come into the centers speak with several members of the staff regarding their needs, finances, and living situation. Nurses who treat the patients are able to determine if there is a nutritional deficiency or dietary restriction, and will refer the client to a Certified Application Assistant (CAA). CAAs are employees of RCHC or the clinics, and their responsibilities cover a myriad of client connections. At first, CAAs referred uninsured clients to Medi-Cal and assisted them with the application process. They would also aid in Medi-Cal retention by contacting clients whose redeterminations were coming up and mail out reminder postcards. Sonoma County shares the list with CAAs through CMSP. With the addition of the CalFresh piece, CAAs now have the ability to look at the client's situation and speak with them about CalFresh. County staff have worked together with CAAs and given them an overview of the program; now they are able to answer general questions and assist with the application process. CAAs use MyBenefitCalWIN.org and go through the application while the client is sitting with them. Verifications and other documents are copied and/or scanned, and the ultimate goal is to be able to hand in a complete application and thus speed up the eligibility evaluation for the county

and the client. Sonoma County has found that the approval rating increased significantly when applications are handed in complete and correct. CAAs have the time to build a rapport with the clients and gain their trust, which is a vital part of the human services both RCHC and Sonoma County strive for.

Sonoma County entered into a contract with RCHC for the specific purpose of CalFresh outreach. The county requires a minimum of 1,800 completed applications per year, or 150 per month. Currently, RCHC is submitting approximately 300 complete applications per month. The approval rating, meaning CalFresh benefits granted, is nearing 70 percent. The relationship with RCHC has a positive impact on churn rates as well. CAAs assist clients with quarterly reports, recertifications, and other required forms. Many times, CalFresh benefits are terminated for failure to submit reports or submitting incomplete reports. With assistance, many clients are now submitting documents on time and with all required verifications. There is a question of the client's responsibility in the process of applying for and receiving benefits. However, the goal is not to do the work for the client, but to assist them with initial processes and show support. In order to keep CAAs up to date with information and program changes, staff from the county schedule a collaborative meeting once a month. The county shares details regarding the application process, specifically what the backlog is, and the number of days out intake appointments is on the calendar. If there are CalFresh program changes, CAAs will be updated and get answers to frequently asked questions. Referral information may be updated at this time, and any new situations or roadblocks are addressed. A county liaison, knowledgeable in program eligibility and processes, is available to CAAs should they run into any problems or have specific questions. CAAs have just started to visit local schools to pull emergency cards looking for health insurance information. For those children who do not have health insurance, a telephone call is made to the family to inform them of the services available through RCHC and Sonoma County. It has been determined that children are

easier to keep track of throughout the county than the adults, as many families tend to be transient. By being able to keep in touch with the families, county services are less likely to be lost. This whole process Sonoma County has with RCHC and the CalFresh component is still relatively new, but has shown to have great potential and is showing great success so far.

CalFresh Community Connections Unit

Sonoma County asked some tough questions when deciding how it was going to address CalFresh outreach for the underserved populations. Where in the county do the potential clients live? What are the reasons they are not applying for CalFresh? What can the county do to reach and serve these people? With the successful RCHC partnership, the medical clinics were covered. Senior housing complexes, farmers markets, food banks, veterans assistance offices, and not-for-profit organizations currently serving the target populations were identified as the areas that now needed to be reached. The next question was, are there enough potential clients at these places to justify having an eligibility worker on-site? County leadership decided to approach the current eligibility staff to get their input on outreach and the possibility of having a mobile unit set up in these locations to assist people with applications and program questions. The staff had a positive reaction to this idea and became very excited at the prospect of being able to reach out to the community in a more personal manner. They came up with ideas, plans, and proposals for the county directors, and through team work the CalFresh Community Connections Unit was born.

The Eligibility Worker Supervisor and liaison to RCHC was put in charge of this new unit with four available worker positions. Consideration of the current staffing levels and needs of the clients coming into the county office dictated filling three out of the four available positions in this unit for the time being. The main function of the Eligibility Workers (EWs) is to take CalFresh applications and conduct the intake interview; however, they are able to assist

clients with all county programs as well as help clients currently receiving benefits with any reports or paperwork they have. Clients looking to apply for CalWORKS or General Assistance are directed to a county office, but the EWs are able to answer questions and hand out forms. The Benefits CalWIN (BCW) website is the primary tool for clients applying in these outside locations, and the EWs assist them with getting through the application process. A hurdle for processing BCW applications is the need for a personal email address, which many clients do not have or do not want to create. Signing up for a new email address, while free, is a time-consuming task. The unit supervisor discovered a way to register as a community-based organization by creating a Help Desk ticket, and sent it to the CalWIN Project in Folsom. It is then possible to create an immediate email address through Mailinator.com while on the MyBenefitsCalWIN.org webpage, without filling out any forms on another webpage. Application information is immediately emailed to the worker taking the application for tracking purposes. Clients can check the application information using this email through the Mailinator.com website for 24 hours, but all specific case information will be provided to them through regular mail, telephone calls, and county appointments.

This new unit was officially created on November 25, 2012, and because this is the first mobile unit for Sonoma County, many of the tasks are still under consideration. The workers have been very active in the development of this unit, and have contributed an Expedited Services Screening Sheet that clients may complete while waiting to speak with the EW in the satellite offices, and brochures advertising for CalFresh and the new services being offered through outreach. New relationships needed to be formed with community contacts, so the EWs were expected to make contact with them to set up presentations and, if there was a need, office time for client appointments. The supervisor made the EWs available for backup in the county office so clients do not have to wait for services when they have some downtime. Currently, the EWs have become busy with

appointments in community offices, but the option to assist in-house is still there. A relationship with a community organization in the western part of the county has proved to be very fruitful. Each week, an EW is sent to an office where VetConnect has established itself. The county has found that veterans have a huge need for additional services, and a number of them do not like to go into county offices. Relationships are also being formed with senior housing complexes and buildings by contacting building managers directly. It benefits the apartment buildings because residents are able to stay, and a lot of the managers already assist the residents with other benefits so adding CalFresh is a natural fit. Sonoma County currently has an agreement with Redwood Empire Food Bank. An EW will be able to give presentations on the CalFresh program to their clients, and if the need is warranted, an area for the worker to sit for applications and interviews will be set up. The supervisor is currently working closely with Meals on Wheels. She speaks with the people who come into the dining centers about CalFresh and answers any questions regarding county services they may have. The outreach unit's schedule is quickly filling up and although they are still in the early stages, the impact they are having in the community has already increased the number of CalFresh applications.

Equipment and Funding

In order to have a fully functional mobile unit, the EWs needed to have access to CalWIN, MEDS, and the county imaging system. Each worker was given a laptop with an Internet hotspot set up, a portable printer, and a portable scanner. Two county cars are available and, if needed, another car may be accessed through the county fleet. Each setup comes in a travel bag on wheels, and forms will be held in a filing box kept in the vehicles. Confidential information is maintained through county systems, and client verifications are scanned into the imaging system on-site.

Two grants exist for CalFresh outreach: one directed at the general public and one for at-risk youth. Solano County instead chose to use a portion

of their CalFresh allocation to fund community relationships and the outreach unit. Approximately \$851,000 was put aside for everything, but it is a fluid number as any unused funds can be reallocated back into the county's CalFresh program. Department directors decided that an increase in applications and program approvals would result in a larger allocation for the county, and ultimately the outreach program would be covered.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Contra Costa County has recently implemented outreach activities. The "Office of the Future" business model rolled out for intake units, which follows a similar structure to the Medi-Cal Service Center in using a task management system as opposed to an individual caseload for each worker. Continuing workers have been trained to better meet the needs of the clients in order to increase benefit retention, and improvements in customer service practices aid in client satisfaction. The county has instituted the restoration waiver to help reduce churn rates, and an integrated voice system that allows clients to check on their eligibility and benefits. Clients are directed toward multiple ways to apply for aid, including knowledgeable "greeters" and self-serve kiosks in county reception offices, and MyBenefitsCalWIN.org. Outreach activities incorporate billboards; presentations at food banks; and information packets containing CalFresh brochures, frequently asked questions, and information on the Low Income Energy Assistance Program (LIEAP). With the start of health care reform, more clients will be served through county departments, which will allow for more cross-collaboration between programs and access to services.

Recommendations for Contra Costa County:

- Assess the need for CalFresh outreach services in local medical clinics, and determine if a greater number of potentially eligible clients could be served through presentations or having an EW present to assist with applications and conduct intake interviews.

- Create a Help Desk ticket so that Contra Costa County can be a CBO on the MyBenefitsCalWIN.org website. This will make working on the website easier for staff assisting clients with an online application over the telephone or in person. Using the Mailinator.com website will also save time and effort for clients and workers.
- Continue fostering relationships with local food banks and scheduling presentations and meetings with their clients. Reach out to senior housing complexes, public housing, senior centers, and veterans centers. Learn what services are currently being offered through these locations, and add complimentary services the county can offer and CalFresh outreach programs.
- While the CalFresh Community Connection Unit is an effective and innovative method of improving participation rates, a full unit may not be necessary for Contra Costa County at this time. Due to major business procedural changes and a new intake model, moving EWs to a new unit might not be the most efficient use of resources. However, it would benefit the county's outreach goals to build two computer setups like Sonoma County has, so that when the need arises for an EW to visit a CBO and take applications, equipment is available.
- Recruit at least four volunteers who are EWs, train them on the use of the equipment, and prepare them for remote application processing and procedures. A plan for maintaining confidentiality and assisting non-English speaking clientele should be taken into account as well. When a visit is planned to an outside location, arrangements can be made for an EW to either accompany the presenter or set up appointments at the location. As outreach grows for the county, the creation of a full unit may be taken under consideration using CalFresh allocations.
- Data collection is a key component in the development and direction of outreach

programs. The number of new applications taken, approved/denied benefits, and other actions must be tracked in order to determine the level of success there is at each location. The EWs in Sonoma County enter their actions into a database and the supervisor monitors the spreadsheets for meetings with managers and directors.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to the professionals in Sonoma County for sharing their knowledge, time, and passion for CalFresh outreach with me. Their service and dedication to the residents of Sonoma County is evident in all the steps they have taken toward success in such a short amount of time. Thank you to Elden McFarland, Section Manager; Tom Richardson, BASSC Liaison; Shaydra Ennis, CalFresh Analyst; and Rebecca Barragan, CalFresh Community Connections Unit Supervisor, and her team.

I also owe a heartfelt thank you to an incredible person, and my Division Manager, Angela Bullock-Hayes; John Cottrell, Aging & Adult Services Director; and Carolyn Foudy, who never turned me away when I had questions or needed support.

References

- Sonoma County Human Services Department, Information Integration Division, CalFresh Outreach Report December 18, 2012
- California Department of Social Services, CalFresh Program, "County Plans to Improve CalFresh Participation" FY 2013–FY 2015
- Miranda, Nannette "California food stamps, 3.5M eligible don't enroll; \$5B federal funds unclaimed" February 21, 2013 (<http://abclocal.go.com/kabc/story?section=news/state&id=9001890>)

