

Web-Based Food Stamp Access for San Francisco and San Mateo County Residents

KARYN MCELROY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

San Francisco City and County has embarked on a Food Stamp Program Access and Participation Initiative that seeks to simplify, streamline and sustain access to food stamps for all eligible San Franciscans. Three strategies of this grant are the Food Stamp Program Phone Bank, web-based screening and application capability and remote enrollment and recertification assistance. The phone bank has been operational; however, the web-based screening application in conjunction with the remote enrollment and recertification with assistance is in the process of being launched. San Mateo County residents also underutilize the food stamp program that is available to mitigate food insecurity. Food insecurity is defined as being unable to obtain enough food or feeling uncertain of having enough food to fulfill an individual's or family's basic needs. The foremost target populations for both San Mateo County and San Francisco City and County are senior citizens, low-income residents, and immigrant populations. However, due to the current economic recession and nearly unprecedented job losses, the need for food stamps has increased in all counties, and easy access remains a critical component of full participation. Given the use of technology, it is hard to imagine not having the ability to apply for food stamps online in most areas within ten years.

Recommendation for San Mateo County

San Francisco City and County has had implementation challenges with www.BenefitsSF.org. I would, therefore, suggest that the San Mateo County Human Service Agency (HSA) first wait for San Francisco's program to go live and then further examine its feasibility as the foundation for San Mateo County's program with the guidance and consultation of San Mateo County's Business System Group (BSG) and Informational Service Department (ISD). Clearly, there are potential cost-benefits if, in fact, San Mateo can implement an effective program for roughly \$100,000. At the same time, the potential benefits of integration with CalWIN are equally significant. Finally, the potential for obtaining grant money for this project seems promising. In conclusion, if the San Francisco launch goes well, I strongly recommend that San Mateo County carefully but actively study customizing www.BenefitsSF.org to meet the needs of its residents suffering food insecurity and work with those CalWIN counties willing to obtain a CalWIN interface. The CalWIN interface would minimize the duplication of work for eligibility workers.

**Karyn McElroy, Human Service Manager,
Children and Family Services,
San Mateo County Children and Family Services**

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Background

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Federal Food Stamp Program, estimates that only 67% of people in the United States eligible for food stamps actually receive food stamps. California has one of the lowest rates of food stamp participation. The California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA) reports that California loses out on \$2.3 billion in federal nutrition funds each year. Food stamps are funded by federal dollars; when spent, they put money into state and local communities in addition to providing good nutrition for those individual and families in need. CFPA works with the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), which is the leading national nonprofit organization working to improve public policies and public-private partnerships to eradicate hunger and poor nutrition in the United States.

According to a 2009 FRAC press release:

FRAC works with hundreds of national, state and local nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and corporations to address hunger and its root cause, poverty. . . . 38 million people in our nation—13.9 million of them children—live in households that suffer from hunger or live on the edge of hunger. This hunger and “food insecurity” are far too widespread in our wealthy society. Hunger in the United States is a problem that can be cured.

FRAC harnesses the nation’s resources on behalf of those who need help to stave off hunger—poor children and their families, the elderly, the unemployed, low-income workers, the ill and the homeless. Hunger reduces a child’s ability to learn, decreases a worker’s productive energy, and weakens an elderly person’s resistance to disease. It weakens families and prevents our nation from reaching its full potential.¹

The State of California and its 58 counties have a mission to improve food stamp participation, yet barriers to food stamp participation are common.

¹SNAP Food Stamp Participation Rates State by State (FRAC Press Release, January 2009)

The following are barriers that San Mateo County and San Francisco City and County have in common:

- Time-consuming, lengthy and cumbersome enrollment process
- Inflexible office hours
- Office environments not especially hospitable to families and the elderly
- Lack of easy access by public transportation
- Limited outreach efforts, resulting in a lack of awareness by clients
- Language barriers
- Lack of information sharing by involved professionals

To address these barriers, both counties have added outreach activities and have worked with community-based organizations to increase participation. San Mateo County has offices in all four areas of the county (North, South Central and Coast Side), with a total of eight offices to service residents. San Francisco has a program in conjunction with St. Anthony’s Foundation to enroll applicants the same day they apply. These efforts to increase food stamp participation have proven effective. San Mateo’s outreach efforts have raised the participation rate of eligible residents from 54% in July of 2007 to 70% in November of 2008.

For the current fiscal year, (FY 2008–09) San Mateo County has a four-step plan to continue to improve food stamp participation:

- 1 Advocate for legislative changes to the Food Stamp Program at the state and federal levels that will remove barriers to participation, such as fingerprinting (SFIS) requirements;
- 2 Expand the Social Marketing and Community Education Campaign;
- 3 Expand outreach to vendors, such as farmer’s markets, to increase the number of locations

where recipients can use their Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards; and

- 4 Implement quality improvement measures within Food Stamp offices to ensure program integrity.²

San Francisco City and County has embarked on a Food Stamp Program Access and Participation Initiative that seeks to simplify, streamline and sustain access to food stamps for all eligible San Franciscans. Three strategies of this grant are:

- The Food Stamp Program (FSP) Phone Bank
- Web-based screening and application capability
- Remote enrollment and recertification assistance

The phone bank has been operational; however, the web-based screening application, in conjunction with the remote enrollment and recertification with assistance, is in the process of being launched.

According to San Francisco's Food Stamp Grant application:

Telephones are accessible to nearly all San Franciscans. The phone bank will have the potential to connect thousands of San Franciscans in need to the FSP. San Francisco's FSP will utilize a network of telephone services including an FSP phone bank, along with centralized social service information and referral lines (the United Way's 211/Helplink, and San Francisco's new one-number City services line, 311) to provide FSP access, screening, and enrollment help for those in need.

The FSP will establish a phone bank to provide active and potential FSP participants with direct access to eligibility workers, information, and food stamp services. The primary purpose of the phone bank will be to provide participants with convenient, simplified, and streamlined FSP enrollment and recertification services. Services will be available in multiple languages to mitigate the effects of language barriers that can make interfacing with the FSP difficult. Secondly, the phone bank will increase the FSP's capacity to serve more participants, more effectively and efficiently. Planning efforts to develop the phone bank is currently underway and implementation will take place in two phases.

The initial phase of phone banking will target active FSP participants. Phone bank workers will provide information and recertification services to participants to help them sustain participation in the program. Many logistical barriers will be avoided by providing the entire process of recertification over the telephone. Following successful implementation of the initial phase, the FSP phone bank will enter its second phase. The phone bank will provide services to potential FSP participants. Participants will be able to access general information, complete a food stamp eligibility screening, and complete an application via telephone.

²County of San Mateo Inter Departmental Correspondence, Human Service Agency, January 5, 2009 memo to Board of Supervisors

Upon completion of a few preliminary screening questions, likely eligible participants will be invited to complete an FSP application immediately. They will also have the option to reschedule a phone application for a better time, or complete a fully automated web-based FSP application on-line. If the screening suggests that the caller is likely to be ineligible, he or she will be referred to 211/Helplink, 311, and other information sources regarding services that they may find beneficial. Using the phone system, potential and active FSP participants will also be able to schedule, reschedule, and cancel any screening, application, and enrollment interview appointments with eligibility workers via the phone bank. The option remains open for anyone to complete an FSP application regardless of the results of their screening, and in-person services will also remain available.³

San Francisco Food Stamp Initiative Program

The cost of living in San Francisco is extremely high, primarily due to high housing costs for both renters and homeowners. As a result, San Francisco City and County has a relatively high number of residents eligible for food stamps. However, it has been determined that over 10% of eligible San Francisco residents do not receive food stamps, and that San Francisco has the lowest rate of food stamp participation of any city in the United States.

In September, 2006, San Francisco received a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to fund San Francisco's web-based Food Stamp Program initiative (FSP). This grant was sought by San Francisco's Human Service Agency (HSA) with the approval and guidance of the San Francisco Food Security Task Force, the Board of Supervisors and the Mayor of San Francisco. The grant was needed to help accomplish the goal of providing maximum participation and access to all eligible San Francisco residents. The idea of web-based food stamp applications is not new. Several states and several counties within California have received grants to develop web-based systems. San Francisco city and county web-based program is actually similar to Wisconsin's web-based model.

San Mateo County residents also underutilize the food stamp program that is available to mitigate food insecurity. Food insecurity is defined as being unable to obtain enough food or feeling uncertain of having enough food to fulfill an individual's or family's basic needs. The foremost target populations for both

³Excerpt from San Francisco's Food Stamp Grant application

San Mateo county and San Francisco counties are senior citizens, low-income residents, and immigrant populations. In San Francisco, immigrant groups consist mainly in Asian and Latino populations; for San Mateo, it is mostly Pacific Islanders and Asians. However, due to the current economic recession and unprecedented job losses, the need for food stamps has increased in all counties, and easy access remains a critical component of full participation.

San Francisco City and County's web-based application program and its remote enrollment and recertification assistance is in the process of being launched. The program will allow food stamp clients to fill out an application via the Internet instead of mailing in an application or going to a central office that might not be convenient. When the program is up and running, San Francisco residents will be able to go on the Internet and fill out their food stamp application at any computer, including computers located at local community-based organizations (CBOs). The CBOs have been provided with computers, software, scanners, web cams, fax machines and training in order to facilitate helping food stamp clients fill out the application, scan or fax the required verification documents, and use the web cam for face-to-face interviews, as needed. The CBOs are strategically located in communities throughout the city that contain the target populations of immigrant communities, particularly Asian and Latino communities, senior citizens, and low-income residents. From May 2008 through January 2009, trainings called "Learning Circles" were held and consisted of monthly two-hour meetings. These trainings ensured that CBO staff understood the electronic process, qualifying benefits and verification documents required in order to help food stamp applicants. The applicants visiting CBOs will have the advantage of scheduling a webcam interview that will take the place of a face-to-face or phone interview. The other remote internet use sites will not be able to use a webcam.

Tiana Wherteim is the Project Manager for the web-based/remote access and recertification components of the FSP initiative. The web-based application process enables clients to apply online, learn if

they are eligible and send in verification documents using the computers and scanners. While the cooperation of the CBOs was critical, so was the cooperation and buy-in of the program's unionized eligibility workers. Tiana, along with Leo O'Farrell, the Food Stamp Program Director, met with union leaders to discuss the FSP initiative and to gain support for the program. In addition, Tiana held meetings with the supervisors of the eligibility workers (EW), explaining how the web-based system would work and garnering the workers' input. Town Hall meetings gave staff a chance for questions and answers.

The internet address while not yet live, has been established at www.BenefitsSF.org. The site will be available in three languages: English, Spanish and Chinese. The eligibility workers themselves provided very useful input on these languages. In addition, the eligibility workers were part of the decision to have two workers dedicated to the web-based application along with trained back-up workers.

The www.BenefitsSF.org site will enable clients to apply for food stamps, while eventually enabling applicants to learn if they are eligible for the following services and benefits:

- Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)
- School Lunch Program
- Medi-Cal
- Summer Lunch Program
- WIC (Women, Infants and Children)

The site is also user-friendly, even for clients at a fourth grade reading level, available in the three languages noted above, and accessible throughout various neighborhoods in San Francisco. It is hoped the program will increase food stamp participation by the 10% that is projected within the grant proposal. It certainly will mark a shift from the traditional case-based food stamp management system to a task-based/functional model. As food stamp participation increases, having one caseworker manage an excessively large number of cases becomes inefficient and processing becomes slow and laborious.

The new task based/functional model will enable a classic division of labor, allowing workers to focus considerable time and energy on particular tasks such as fielding phone calls; processing applications, re-

certification's and change reports; and developing quarterly reports. Eligibility workers will be assigned tasks on a rotating basis rather than individual cases and exclusive caseloads, and will rotate task assignments regularly to create a diverse and stimulating workload for each worker.⁴

Challenges for San Francisco Food Stamp Initiative

The launching of www.BenefitsSF.org has been postponed due to vendor problems (including one vendor going out of business) and delays in the approval process of a new vendor. In addition, there were issues with language usage on the site which contributed to postponement of the launch date.

Findings and Fiscal Implications

San Francisco city and county and San Mateo Counties are two of eighteen counties belonging to the CalWIN Consortium. CalWIN is a computer program which serves as the vehicle that issues welfare benefits, including for Medi-Cal, TANF and Food Stamps. San Mateo County is interested in building upon San Francisco's www.BenefitsSF.org program. According to Leo O'Farrell, Director of San Francisco's Food Stamp Program, purchasing a server and customizing www.BenefitsSF.org to its needs would cost San Mateo County approximately \$100,000. In comparison, San Francisco's grant was for approximately \$1 million. Moreover, Mr. O'Farrell states that California will be receiving \$22 million in Federal American Recovery and Reinvestment (ARRA) stimulus funds, some slated for Food Stamp programs. San Francisco, along with several other CalWIN counties, is interested in integrating www.BenefitsSF.org with the CalWIN application. This would result in a huge decrease in duplicate data entry (and potential errors) by eligibility workers across programs and counties. The CalWIN Policy Board is looking into this possibility, while also looking at different funding sources such as SNAP grant money.

Evaluation of Web-Based Food Stamps

According to the Government Accountability Office:

Few evolutions of the web-based food stamps are being done because the states are using different methods and the studies can be very costly. However GAO is requiring that the Food and Institution Service (FNS) work with the Economic Research Service to do research on the effects of alternative methods of distributing food stamps including web-based applications.⁵

There was a study done by the FNS Office of Analysis, Nutrition and Evaluation, that concluded using technology to facilitate food stamp application requires knowledgeable staff and investment in the tools used for the program to continue for long periods. Additionally, this study found that while challenging in implementation, web-based access eventually pays off. Another study by a mental health practitioner found negative mental health effects for food stamp recipients during the food stamp application process when applicants were required to travel for a face-to-face appointment. The suggestion was that a web-based application be used to eliminate the face-to-face process and allow the client to choose the time and place to submit an application.

Recommendation for San Mateo County

San Francisco has had implementation challenges with www.BenefitsSF.org. I would therefore suggest that San Mateo's Human Service Agency (HSA) first wait for San Francisco's program to go live, and then further examine its feasibility as the foundation for San Mateo County's program with the guidance and consultation of San Mateo County's Business System Group (BSG) and Informational Service Department (ISD). Clearly there are potential cost-benefits if in fact, San Mateo can implement an effective program for roughly \$100,000. At the same time, the potential benefits of integration with CalWIN are equally significant. Finally, the potential for obtaining grant money for this project seems promising.

In conclusion, if the San Francisco launch goes well, I strongly recommend San Mateo County carefully, but actively study customizing www.BenefitsSF.org to meet the needs of its residents suffering food insecurity and work with the willing CalWIN counties to obtain a CalWIN interface. The CalWIN in-

⁴Food Stamp Program participation, Grant Application from San Francisco FSP initiative, p. 10

⁵GAO-07-573 Food stamp program use of alternative methods, May 4, 2007

terface would minimize the duplication of work for eligibility workers. Given the use of technology, it is hard to imagine not having the ability to apply for food stamps on-line in most areas within ten years. Other counties in California have web-based food stamp services. Alameda County has on-line recertification access. Four counties in California that now use web-based food stamp applications Merced, Stanislaus, San Bernardino and Riverside counties all use a program called C4Yourself, and they are a part of the original C-IV Consortium. Thirty-eight counties that have joined C-IV Consortium are exploring using this web-based program. The California Department of Social Services has as one of its goals the use of an on-line application in order to facilitate easier and faster access to benefits.

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Resources

- SNAP Food Stamp Participation Rates State by State, FRAC Press Release (January 2009)
- County of San Mateo Inter-Departmental Correspondence, Human Service Agency, January 5, 2009 memo to Board of Supervisors
- Food Stamp Program Participation Grant Application (San Francisco FSP initiative).
- GAO-07-573 food Stamp Program Use of Alternative Methods (May 3 and 4, 2007)
- Food Insecurity, Food Stamp Participation and Mental Health, *Social Science Quarterly* (September 2006)
- California Department of Social Service (CDSS), Increasing Food Stamp Access in California, CDSS website (2009)