Leveraging Technology and Partnerships to Enhance Food Stamps Program Access in the City and County of San Francisco

David Brown

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Of all eligible Californians for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), only 50% participate. As county human services agencies struggle with recent funding reductions, this lamentable figure adds pressure to expand service delivery efficiencies and demonstrate more effective use of existing allocations. BenefitsSF, implemented by the City and County of San Francisco in June of 2009, is an acclaimed business model leveraging technology and community based organization (CBO) partnerships to improve access to program services.

BenefitsSF is a web portal residents can use to self-screen for Food Stamps and Medi-Cal program eligibility, to apply for benefits, and to fulfill reporting requirements. Applicants can apply from any location using a computer with high-speed internet access, or they can utilize a computer at one of several neighborhood CBOs equipped and trained to provide support. The effort's successes have led to the development of a consortium project for CalWIN (California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids Information Network), an eligibility determination system implemented five years ago. The new project, Benefits CalWIN, will replicate the BenefitsSF model and will be implemented in CalWIN counties in the summer of 2010.

The County of Santa Cruz will implement Benefits CalWIN in July of 2010. It is recommended that the local implementation plan incorporate the following action items aimed at:

- Conducting a comparative analysis of San Francisco and Santa Cruz Counties to develop first year workload forecasts
- Using a "soft-rollout" strategy to ensure adequate process development, a pace compatible with on-the-job training, and the capacity to process the new workload
- Using a phased implementation approach with CBO partners as time constraints limit resources for simultaneously building technical and administrative capacities in both Santa Cruz Human Services and its community programs
- Implementing San Francisco's best practice of making special eligibility rules for students of higher education easily accessible on the web portal
- Researching California Statewide Fingerprint Imaging System requirements further to ensure compliance is maintained in a manner that minimizes barriers for applicants and new clients

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Introduction

The United State Department of Agriculture reports that California has the worst Food Stamps Program participation rate in the nation. Of all eligible Californians for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), only 50% participate. As county human services agencies struggle with recent reductions in funding and prepare for the likelihood this trend will continue, these lamentable figures add to an existing pressure to expand service delivery efficiencies and demonstrate more effective use of existing allocations. Innovative automation projects, self-service business models, and efforts to strengthen community partnerships are thus garnering a high level of interest from counties intent on using technology and emerging best practices to preserve their own service offerings in this economic climate. BenefitsSF, implemented by the City and County of San Francisco in June of 2009, is one such project worthy of interest.

The City and County of San Francisco's Human Services Agency has stepped into the spotlight with its acclaimed implementation of the BenefitsSF business model. BenefitsSF is a web-based portal where residents can pre-screen themselves for Food Stamps and Medi-Cal program eligibility, apply for benefits, and maintain their case by fulfilling periodic reporting requirements. This successful effort has led to an 18 county consortium project known as Benefits Cal-WIN that launches during the summer of 2010. Cal-WIN is an automated eligibility determination and administration software application for state administered human services programs. Benefits CalWIN seeks to replicate its model in all CalWIN counties.

The BenefitsSF business model leverages existing technologies and builds upon CBO partnerships to reach new eligible populations and remove accessibility barriers. The model adds two prongs to existing approaches to reduce geographic accessibility constraints, work around traditional daytime business hours, broaden limited application processing resources, and reduce lobby wait times. These new tools are bringing the program to clients in a more convenient manner. San Francisco's Human Services Agency's Food Stamps Program Director, Leo O'Farrell, characterizes the client's experience to that which a customer might have when visiting a copy center. Copy centers, dispersed city-wide and open during a broad range of hours, make standard self-service equipment available and eliminate customer wait time. The transaction is supported, guided and finalized by knowledgeable staffers at the counter.

The Model Explained

The new access point for the public begins at any broadband connected computer, be it at a library, CBO, or in the comfort of one's own home. Potential applicants in San Francisco may prescreen themselves anytime for Food Stamps and Medi-Cal eligibility using an online questionnaire known as, "Am I Eligible". This tool provides a likely eligibility determination and estimated benefit amount based on unverified information that users enter. Both simple and anonymous, the "Am I Eligible" tool saves significant time and labor for the potential applicant and for the eligibility worker who would have otherwise needed to process an application to determine eligibility. By using an eligibility prescreening tool, potential ap-

plicants are empowered to decide for themselves the benefit of committing to the application process. In turn, San Francisco gains efficiency by screening out some applications likely to have been denied. BenefitsSF also makes referral information for programs, such as WIC (Women, Infants, Children), school meals, and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), readily available for self-motivated clients.

Potential clients may still use traditional methods, such as applying in-person at the application center or requesting by phone that an application be mailed to them. With BenefitsSF, however, there are two additional gateways available to the public. Applicants can securely apply online, or they may go through one of the neighborhood CBOs trained and equipped to assist with the process. Regardless of the application method chosen, the application center has eligibility workers ready to provide phone support should applicants need help at any point. Once an application is received, the eligibility worker schedules an intake interview using the client's selected method (face to face, over the phone, or via web cam at a CBO office) and proceeds to process the application. Clients deemed eligible for benefits may choose to submit their required reporting documents via BenefitsSF as well.

One element of the BenefitsSF business model is forging stronger partnerships with CBOs to provide additional access points and support, which in turn connects residents to the aid they are eligible to receive. Ongoing trainings and peer-to-peer learning circles were intrinsic to San Francisco's success in building a network of community partners equipped and ready to support clients as they moved through the application and interview process. Participating CBOs set aside space for completing applications, scanning necessary documents, submitting applications online, and having intake interviews with eligibility workers conducted via webcam over Skype internet telephone service.

Since inception, CBO-based applications have composed less than 1% of total applications received; however, CBO participation holds great potential to cost-effectively deepen the Food Stamps penetration rate. Strengthened partnerships in San Francisco reach applicants who otherwise would not have applied, creates more comfortable and convenient entry points, provides additional support to applicants, and improves approval rates for web applications. Though it has only begun to be realized in the results, participating CBOs have brought significant value to the model. The distribution of CBOs throughout the city has a geographic advantage the agency cannot afford to replicate. By virtue of the work they perform and the social capital they possess, these organizations add convenience and comfort to the process, as well as a technological capacity that is not readily available to many in eligible populations. Having staff on hand who are familiar with program requirements adds a degree of attention and support to clients that human services agency staff would be hard-pressed to provide. Additionally, CBO staff possess knowledge of referral resources available to dovetail with client efforts to access benefits.

Initial Findings

When BenefitsSF went live in 2009, it was unknown what level of enthusiasm to expect from the public. First year results, however, have been promising. Since implementation, nearly 13% of the almost 21,500 Food Stamp applications received have been processed via the BenefitsSF website or CBO partners. Of the 2,878 applications received through BenefitsSF, 64% of applicants were new to CalWIN. Additionally, almost 37% of web applications are submitted on the evening and weekends, an indicator that the approach is reaching new clients that may not have applied for aid otherwise. There have been 3,400 pre-screenings completed since inception, approximately 550 more than the number of applications submitted. While applicants are not required to pre-screen, the numbers indicate that the tool is being used often. As a result, some application processing work has been prevented, while eligible residents have been encouraged to follow through with seeking benefits. Applicants are taking advantage of the options available for meeting intake interview

requirements with around 54% choosing in person interviews, 35% choosing phone interviews, and 11% selecting interviews by web cam.

Addressing Challenges

BenefitsSF's results are occurring despite challenges that had to be overcome, some which will require ongoing vigilance for the model to reach its full potential. Difficult conditions include a technological capacity gap within the agency and CBOs, balancing community enthusiasm with a capacity to process and support, a higher web application denial rate which must still be processed, and Statewide Fingerprint Imaging System (SFIS) requirements forcing clients to make a personal application center visit to maintain benefits they are eligible to receive. San Francisco's thoughtful approach to these hurdles has contributed to the effort's success.

To address the technological capacity gap, San Francisco utilized grant funding to supplement the computer infrastructure within its own agency and that of pilot CBOs. Designated users of the new scanners and web cams were trained to utilize the equipment, Skype internet telephone service, and the BenefitsSF site. Ongoing peer learning circles reinforce trainings and maintain interagency contact, allow for administrative capacity development, and provide a venue for sharing best practices. The frequency of peer learning circle meetings has tapered down, but the agency continues to see value in their potential to build upon gains made through the process.

San Francisco chose a soft and measured rollout because the public's level of interest in the new model could not be predicted. Although a full marketing plan was not launched, the web portal was announced via press conference and links from the agency's web site. This allowed time for staff to adapt to new workflows, to ensure a cooperative process was in place with pilot CBOs, and to gain familiarity with newly employed technologies. Word spread quickly, and, by the second month, the agency received more than triple the number of web applications than it had during the launch month (from 100 in June 2009 to 338 the following month). It is important to note that cautious planning and avoiding excessive fanfare at the launch helped staff overload.

Initial agency data showed elevated web application denial rates. Approximately 43% of web applications were denied, while the whole agency holds a 26% denial rate. As every application must be processed, the issue warranted swift attention. Applicant demographics research revealed that a difficult-to-qualify student population had quickly taken to the web approach. To clarify regulations for students, the agency added prominent information regarding rules for higher education students to the "Am I Eligible?" tool. The denial rate gap has nevertheless persisted. This has prompted speculation that the web tool may appeal to population segments financially closer to eligibility limits and that the lower time investments required by BenefitsSF may convince more potential applicants to apply. Underlying causes for the gap continue to be studied, with encouragement from the data related to partner CBO applications. To date, the CBO-supported web application denial rate is only 24%. Results for this small number of applications are on par with approval ratings for the whole agency. As the program expands, the joint CBO and eligibility staff efforts could lead to higher overall and web approval rates.

Some California regulations have served as obstacles, preventing BenefitsSF applicants and clients from having a fully web-based experience. In particular, the Statewide Fingerprint Imaging System (SFIS), a technology intended to prevent fraud and benefits issuance duplication, adds a time and travel burden to beneficiaries who would otherwise be able to maintain eligibility without having to travel to an application center. SFIS requires a client to be imaged and fingerprinted before receiving benefits in most cases, but no later than at the time of benefits renewal. This means compelling the client to complete these requirements upon their next visit to an application center as a beneficiary and, if need be, requiring the client to visit at their renewal date. While San Francisco makes efforts to bring applicants into SFIS compliance early in the process, it is too soon to tell how deep an impact SFIS will have on efforts to

maintain penetration rate inroads on cases initiated through the web and CBO access points.

Implications for Implementation in Other Counties

In California, recent years have been marked by a struggle to preserve and expand access to human services programs to meet an increasing demand while the budgets to do so have been dwindling. Unable to sustain caseloads using traditional delivery methods, counties are looking toward new technologies, CBO partners, and self-service models to gain efficiency and distribute workloads. Agencies successfully maximizing efficiencies and expanding Food Stamps Program penetration rates are receiving keen interest from agencies eager to adopt emerging best practices. The BenefitsSF approach, while still young, has already proven successful and is being adopted by the CalWIN consortium as a model for all of its members.

Project development funding is already in place for counties moving forward with what is now Benefits CalWIN. Funding alone, however, does not ensure success for those committing to the project. As the consortium moves toward the new model's rollout, county agencies are encouraged to compare their populations and organizational structures with San Francisco's so local plans can be adjusted accordingly. Differences in population makeup and density, office distribution, degree of broadband connectivity, and relationships with CBOs will all be factors for setting expectations and planning. Developing forecasts using baseline data collected by San Francisco can inform operational, staffing, and outreach considerations.

Recommendations

The County of Santa Cruz is moving forward in implementing the CalWIN version of BenefitsSF in July 2010. With the direction set, Santa Cruz Human Services can apply lessons learned from San Francisco's experience. It is recommended that Santa Cruz County's local implementation of Benefits CalWIN should:

1 Conduct a comparison analysis between the City and County of San Francisco and the County of Santa Cruz to develop first year workload forecasts.

2 Use a "soft rollout" strategy to ensure adequate process development, a pace compatible with on-the-job training, and the capacity to process the new workload.

3 Use a phased implementation approach with CBO partners as time constraints limit resources for simultaneously building technical and administrative capacities in both Santa Cruz Human Services and its community programs.

4 Implement San Francisco's best practice of making special eligibility rules for students of higher education easily accessible on the web portal.

5 Research California SFIS requirements further to ensure compliance is maintained in a manner that minimizes barriers for applicants and new clients.

Acknowledgements