

Feeding California: An Examination of Efforts to Decrease Food Insecurity by Increasing CalFresh Participation Rates

NATASHA BOURBONNAIS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of low-income individuals in California who do not have access to enough food for an active and healthy life.¹ The low-income households impacted with the worst level of food insecurity are those that have children and those that are Spanish-speaking.² Increased food insecurity is of significant concern because it is associated with higher chances of mental health issues, substance abuse disorders, and chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.^{3,4} In an effort to address this issue, California offers low-income residents access to CalFresh, a federal nutrition program that distributes monthly electronic benefits

that can be used to buy food at local markets.⁷ Currently, the San Mateo County Human Services Agency (SMC-HSA) wants to learn more about how to reduce barriers that impede access to the CalFresh program from qualified households. The SMC-HSA acknowledges that it is critical to learn about the strategies that other county agencies have used to improve food security for their most vulnerable citizens. This case study examines San Francisco County's CalFresh Office Modernization project, and how it might assist in providing San Mateo County with solutions to increase CalFresh participation rates and improve the health and well-being of all county residents.

Natasha Bourbonnais, Interim Human Services
Manager I, San Mateo County Human Services Agency

Feeding California: An Examination of Efforts to Decrease Food Insecurity by Increasing CalFresh Participation Rates

NATASHA BOURBONNAIS

Introduction

The Great Recession, occurring in 2007 and through June 2009, significantly increased food insecurity among low-income individuals in California.¹ According to the US Department of Agriculture, this means there is currently a substantial number of men, women, and children who do not have access to enough food and live with fear of starvation.² Adults who are food insecure have poorer health and are at higher risk of depression, substance abuse disorders, obesity, and chronic diseases.^{3,4} Also, food insecurity among children has been linked to negative academic performance and outcomes.^{5,6} Fortunately, California offers low-income households access to a federal nutrition program called CalFresh, which distributes monthly benefits that can be used to purchase food.⁷ Acknowledging the importance of food security on the health and well-being of all California residents, San Mateo County Human Services Agency (SMC-HSA) is diligently working to improve access to food for all low-income individuals. This case study examines San Francisco County's CalFresh Office Modernization, and how it might provide San Mateo County with solutions to increase CalFresh participation rates and decrease food insecurity.

Background

In 2012, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) made a number of regulatory changes that improved access to the CalFresh program for low-income individuals. In January 2012, the requirement to use the Statewide Fingerprint Imaging System for issuing CalFresh benefits was discontinued.⁸ In July 2012, the CDSS required all county agencies

to waive the face-to-face interview for all CalFresh applications and recertifications.⁹ Beginning in August 2013, the CDSS also simplified the CalFresh recertification process by moving from quarterly reports to semi-annual reporting.¹⁰ These three CDSS state efforts enabled county welfare departments to increase CalFresh participation and reduce unnecessary barriers to enrollment and recertification. In addition to these statewide efforts, each county was also required to submit a three-year plan to CDSS outlining their deliberate efforts to increase CalFresh caseloads over the next three years. San Francisco County has utilized a number of strategies to increase CalFresh participation rates, and is a leader in finding innovative solutions to providing nutritious and healthy food to all low-income residents.

San Francisco County's CalFresh Office Modernization

San Francisco County Human Services Agency (SFC-HSA) has implemented a variety of creative and collaborative modernization solutions for reducing the food insecurity of their low-income citizens. One of the most innovative strategies that SFC-HSA developed to increase CalFresh participation rates was utilizing new technology. Approximately four years ago, SFC-HSA created an online application system, BenefitsSF.org. For the first time ever in San Francisco, clients could apply for food benefits on the Internet. Today, all California counties utilize online application systems. San Mateo County Human Services Agency utilizes the website MyBenefitsCalWin.org, which is based on San Francisco's original website. Currently, San Francisco receives approximately

30% of their CalFresh applications online. This website has provided clients and community-based organizations more access to CalFresh and other county programs.

The second modernization initiative that has been successful at SFC-HSA is creating a more client-focused and streamlined service delivery model. For example, the SFC-HSA eligibility workers currently staff the front desk service counter. This strategy enables eligibility workers to meet the CalFresh clients' needs in a more efficient and effective manner. Overall, this delivery model has saved time and increased client satisfaction. In addition, SFC-HSA is currently initiating a lobby redesign plan that will increase this client-focused service delivery model. The lobby redesign will include self-serve kiosks, phone carrels, computer stations, and increased hours of operations.

Another interesting strategy that has been implemented to decrease food insecurity and increase access to food for low-income individuals in San Francisco County is the creation of the Food Security Task Force (FSTS). The FSTS is an advisory to the Board of Supervisors, and is responsible for creating a countywide plan for addressing food security. The FSTF is a multiagency, collaborative effort that consists of members from SFC-HSA and local community-based organizations. The focus is on collectively decreasing hunger and increasing food security in San Francisco. The task force consists of approximately 30 representatives, fifteen of whom are voting members, from SFC-HSA, faith based organizations, community-based agencies, health clinics, and the public. The task force tracks vital data regarding hunger and food security, including the utilization and demand for federal food programs and community-based organizations' meal programs.

Currently, the FSTS is focused on the following four goals. First, to maximize the utilization of federally funded nutrition programs. Second, to expand food security resources for populations not adequately covered by current government programs. Third, to improve access to and knowledge of obtaining and preparing healthy and nutritious

food. Fourth, to improve the coordination of efforts to decrease food waste. In order to achieve these goals, the FSTS created a six-committee structure comprised of separate committees addressing CalFresh participation and governance, and four additional committees addressing the needs of seniors, homeless individuals, single room occupancy residents, and children. In order to effectively address these goals, the FSTS stays current on the most recent government food policies. For example, FSTS invited California Food Policy advocates to come provide legislative updates. They have also worked with research students from the University of California, Berkeley Goldman School of Public Policy to examine the city's restaurant meals program. Similar to San Mateo County, FSTS is working with Code for America to identify ways to use technology to improve public service delivery and increase food security.

Aside from the aforementioned strategies, SFC-HSA has also worked on providing same-day CalFresh application services to homeless clients at the Project Homeless Connect (PHC) events. PHC provides a single location where nonprofit medical and social service providers work together to administer comprehensive services to the homeless population in San Francisco. PHC is recognized as a best-practice model by the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, and has been replicated in over 260 cities across the country, as well as in Canada and Australia.¹¹ The San Francisco PHC event has been a great success for getting eligible homeless clients enrolled in the CalFresh program because the eligibility workers have the technology to complete the application on the same-day. The clients can pick up their Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card the same afternoon, and access food in the local markets that same evening. This service delivery method has been especially helpful for homeless individuals, who often have a difficult time attending scheduled appointments. By simplifying the application to a one-day process, CalFresh participation rates increase and interview time slots remain open for walk-in clients.

Interestingly, many of the other SFC-HSA modernization efforts are similar to those implemented in San Mateo County. For example, SFC-HSA is shifting all eligibility programs to a call center model where cases are banked in the system and assigned to the next available staff person. This increases the agency's ability to process applications quickly and more efficiently. Also, in an effort to meet the demands of the upcoming implementation of the Affordable Care Act, SFC-HSA is training all the eligibility workers to process both Medi-Cal and CalFresh applications. This will enable eligibility workers to increase CalFresh participation by reaching out to Medi-Cal clients who may also qualify for food assistance. In addition, both San Francisco and San Mateo County recognize the importance of contracting with community-based organizations to recruit potential CalFresh applicants. However, despite all these outreach efforts, both counties continue to face barriers to increasing CalFresh participation rates.

Barriers and Opportunities to Increasing CalFresh Participation Rates

Over the past five years, CalFresh caseloads have grown in both San Francisco and San Mateo County. However, despite this increase, there continues to be similar barriers to participation rates. One of the major obstacles that both counties face is infiltrating diverse populations who encounter language barriers, myths, fears, and stigma about accessing county benefits. For example, San Francisco and San Mateo County have a difficult time engaging some Spanish-speaking and Cantonese/Mandarin-speaking immigrant populations who may fear that accessing CalFresh benefits may impact their ability to apply for citizenship. Another challenge that both county agencies face are the eligibility requirements for applying to the CalFresh program. For example, many clients and community-based organization (CBO) staff are confused about the needed documentation, and are not up-to-date on the most recent program changes. Even after the CBO staff members are trained on the CalFresh application process, there is

high staff turnover and the CBO staff are at-capacity with their own programmatic needs. Finally, due to the complexity of the regulation-driven application process, quarterly reporting, and recertification requirements, many clients do not complete the application, or are discontinued from the program at their reporting or renewal period.

Despite these obstacles, there are opportunities for San Francisco and San Mateo County to tackle these barriers and increase CalFresh participation rates. In order to connect with diverse populations that have language barriers, myths, and fears about accessing county benefits, both agencies have recommended targeted outreach through CBOs that have built trust with these populations. Second, both San Francisco and San Mateo have CalFresh outreach strategies that include contracting and training more CBO staff on how to complete the online CalFresh application and recruit more clients. Finally, both agencies continue to simplify the application and recertification process by using the most recent CDSS regulation changes and modernizing their offices to provide a more client-focused delivery system.

Recommendation for San Mateo County

The San Francisco County Human Services Agency (SFC-HSA) has implemented a number of innovative, collaborative, and client-focused strategies to increase their CalFresh participation rates and decrease food insecurity for low-income individuals. For example, SFC-HSA has made multiple efforts to engage diverse populations, to collaborate with community-based organizations, and to simplify the application and recertification process. San Mateo County Human Services Agency can benefit from the strategies, solutions, and recommendations made by San Francisco County to increase CalFresh participation rates. The following is a list of possible recommendations for the San Mateo County Human Services Agency offered within three main categories:

ENGAGING DIVERSE POPULATIONS

- Create an outreach unit that works closely with contracted community-based organizations

(CBOs) to engage targeted and hard-to-reach populations.

- Offer webcam video or phone interviews at the Family Resource Centers and CBOs in the county's rural areas, such as Pescadero.
- Reduce the stigma of using a county-administered food nutrition program by creating a better public image of CalFresh by educating the general population on how CalFresh positively impacts community wellbeing.

COLLABORATION AND EDUCATION

- Collaborate with organizations, such as the Thrive Alliance, to create a food security task force that provides advisory to the Board of Supervisors and is responsible for creating a countywide plan for addressing food insecurity.
- Contract with CBOs to train county staff on engaging targeted, diverse populations.
- Provide CBO staff with quarterly or on-demand tours of the CalFresh county offices.
- Train all Children and Family Services staff on how to use the online benefits application website, MyBenefitsCalWin.org.

STREAMLINING THE APPLICATION PROCESSES

- Utilize new technology, such as telephonic signatures, to get applications processed faster for those individuals who do not live near a county office.
- Continue reviewing discontinuances and denials for quality assurance to ensure all cases are being treated fairly and consistently.

Conclusion

Increasing the food security of California's low-income populations is vitally important to ensuring the creation of healthy and thriving communities. Current research highlights that food insecurity is associated with poorer health, as well as higher chances of mental health issues and substance abuse disorders.^{3,4} Also, food insecurity among children has been linked to negative academic outcomes and performance.^{5,6} This is a serious concern given that food insecurity in California significantly increased

during the Great Recession of 2007 through 2009.¹ Acknowledging the importance of food security, San Mateo County Human Services Agency will continue to make every effort to get food to all low-income individuals. In order to achieve this goal, San Mateo County will continue collaborating and learning from other innovative public service agencies such as San Francisco County Human Services Agency.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to all the staff members in San Francisco County Human Services Agency who took time to share information on their county's CalFresh Office Modernization. The passion they have for increasing food security for all low-income residents was truly inspiring. I especially want to thank the following staff members: Trent Rhorer, Executive Director; Leo O'Farrell, CalFresh Program Director; Steve Arcelona, Deputy Director; John Murray, Senior Analyst; Tiana Wertheim, Senior Administrative Analyst; Patricia Torres, Eligibility Worker Supervisor; Barbara Reynosa, Eligibility Worker Supervisor; Aida McIntyre, Eligibility Worker Supervisor; and James Choit, Eligibility Worker Supervisor.

I would also like to thank the staff at San Mateo County Human Services Agency who supported and assisted me during this project: Beverly Beasley-Johnson, Human Services Agency Director; Loc Nguyen, Children and Family Services Director; Donna Wochoer, Human Service Manager; Sherri Rosenberg, Human Services Supervisor; Linda Holman, Human Services Manager; Jaslin Yu, Human Services Analyst; and Nancy Rodriguez, Program Analyst.

References

1. Chaparro MP, Langellier B, Birnback K, Sharp M, Harrison G. Nearly four million Californians are food insecure. Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Health Policy Research; 2012. Available at http://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/publications/Documents/PDF/FoodP_Brevised7-11-12.pdf

2. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Definitions of food security. 2013. Available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>
3. McLaughlin KA, Greif Green J, Alegría M, Costello EJ, Gruber MJ, Sampson NA, et al. Food insecurity and mental disorders in a national sample of U.S. adolescents. *J American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry* 2012;51(12):1293-1303.
4. Stuff Je, Cawy PH, Szeto, KL, et al. Household food insecurity is associated with adult health status. *Journal of Nutrition* 2004; 134:2330-5
5. Winicki J, Jemison K. Food insecurity and hunger in the kindergarten classroom: Its effect on learning and growth. *Journal of Nutrition* 2005; 135:2831-9.
6. Jyoti DF, Frongill EAT, Jones SJ. Food insecurity affects school children's academic performance, weight gain and social skills. *Journal of Nutrition* 2005;135:2831-9
7. California Department of Social Services. Description of CalFresh. 2013. Available at <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/foodstamps/>
8. Department of Social Services. All County Letter on the Discontinuance of the Statewide Fingerprint Imaging System (SFIS) Requirement for the CalFresh Program. 2011. Available at <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/lettersnotices/entres/getinfo/acl/2011/11-83.pdf>
9. California Department of Social Services. All County Letter on CalFresh Waiver of Face to Face Interview. 2012. Available at <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/lettersnotices/entres/getinfo/acl/2012/12-26.pdf>
10. California Department of Social Services. All County Letter on Implementation of the Semi-Annual Reporting for CalFresh Participants. 2013. Available at <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/lettersnotices/entres/getinfo/acl/2012/12-25.pdf>
11. Project Homeless Connect. Program description. 2013. Available at <http://www.projecthomelessconnect.com/mission>

