

Increasing CalFresh Enrollment through Strategic Initiatives: Review of Sonoma County's CalFresh Outreach Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“America is the richest country in the world. And yet tonight, thousands of your neighbors will go to bed hungry. It may be your child’s schoolmate who is undernourished and has difficulty learning on an empty stomach. Or it could be a co-worker, a working mother whose low-wage job doesn’t make ends meet. Perhaps it’s an elderly neighbor who has to make a decision whether to delay filling a prescription or buying groceries. The faces of hunger are as broad as the faces of America.”

—David Nasby, General Mills

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, in 2011, 14.9 percent of households were food insecure. The United States is one of the wealthiest developed countries in the world with plenty of food resources, yet many of our citizens are food insecure. One of the biggest tools the federal government uses to combat hunger is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Yet California, as the largest state in the union, has ranked near the bottom among all fifty states in terms of SNAP participation. The state promotes the SNAP program as CalFresh in California, and focuses on connecting healthy and nutritional food with eligible residents.

This case study looks at Sonoma County Human Services Agency’s CalFresh outreach strategies, and their efforts to increase CalFresh enrollment and participation rate. Sonoma County uses a collaborative outreach approach with community-based organizations, and leverages technology to allow eligibility workers to perform CalFresh enrollments out in the community. The case study will suggest and offer recommendations that other jurisdictions could consider implementing to increase their CalFresh participation rate.

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Introduction

The California Food Policy Advocates release a report every two years to measure CalFresh utilization among all the counties in California. The most recent report, *Program Access Index 2011*, was released in February 2013. While the California Food Policy Advocates acknowledge that the index is not a “comprehensive tool for evaluating counties’ administration of CalFresh,” it does provide a ranking of all 58 counties by using the Program Access Index (PAI) formula. Whether or not the ranking reflects the best practices of counties’ administration of the CalFresh program, the ranking becomes a public report where counties are judged by their ranking.

Accompanying the *Program Access Index 2011* is the *Lost Dollars, Empty Plates* report that highlights the impact of CalFresh participation on the local economy. Since CalFresh benefits are federally funded, the report highlights the loss of economic activity when eligible residents are not enrolled, and thus not circulating the available federal funds in their local economy. It is often stated by the USDA that for every dollar spent on CalFresh, it generates a \$1.79 back into the local economy through the food stamp multiplier effect.

This paper will examine the practice and strategies of Sonoma County, and will compare them to my home county in San Mateo. San Mateo County was ranked 57 out of 58 counties in the *Program Access Index 2011*, which was the same ranking it received in the previous report. Sonoma County was ranked 46 out of 58 counties in the *Program Access Index 2011*. Sonoma County was ranked 52 in the previous report.

Background

This issue is of great interest to San Mateo County because although its Human Services Agency (HSA) has made significant increases in its CalFresh participation rate over the past three years by incorporating many best practices, the *Program Access Index 2011* still ranked San Mateo County at 57.

There are barriers that are known to human services agencies that are common across all jurisdictions. Those barriers include language barriers, a general lack of awareness, myths and misinformation, social stigma, and the perception of a complex application process. Social services agencies and the state are aware of these obstacles. The state has addressed some of these obstacles by eliminating the fingerprinting requirement, and is moving toward a bi-annual reporting schedule.

There are residents in the community that don't know what CalFresh is. There are others who do not trust government agencies. For those who do know about the program, they might not believe it's worth the hassle to apply for the benefits. They might not want to travel to a social services agency office. Social services agencies also have to work with a wide diverse population of community members: students, seniors, non-English speakers, residents who never needed assistance before, and homeless individuals.

Sonoma County's Initiatives

Sonoma County approached these barriers and the challenge to increase CalFresh enrollment and participation rate with three outreach tactics. The outreach

tactics specifically address some of the challenges and obstacles for increasing CalFresh participation.

- 1) Sonoma County contracted with a regional community-based organization (CBO) to perform CalFresh outreach and to accept CalFresh applications. By working with CBOs, the county developed partnerships with trusted service providers in the community.
- 2) Sonoma County created a CalFresh outreach team to conduct CalFresh outreach and perform applications intake with targeted communities. By scheduling intake at community locations, the county made it much easier for eligible residents to sign up for CalFresh.
- 3) Sonoma County is working out a partnership with 211 to take applications over the phone by using My Benefits CalWIN and telephonic signatures. This is an opportunity to offer another option for eligible clients to submit an application.

Sonoma County contracted with Redwood Community Health Coalition (RCHC) to take CalFresh applications, collect verifications, and submit the completed applications to the human services agency for processing. This action established a network of application takers and locations for clients to go to. The contractor is able to hire Certified Application Assistants (CAAs) to perform that work, and they are posted at various health clinics across the county. Currently, there are CAAs located at twelve community health clinics and hospitals.

CAAs are trained to promote CalFresh, and the outreach strategy is to have trusted medical personnel introduce the CalFresh program to their patients and have CAAs available on-site to further assist the patient and start the application. The county and RCHC discovered that residents trust their medical providers, and are more likely to be open to communication with the CAAs. This strategy allows CAAs to engage patients in a more comfortable environment, and has been effective because CAAs are able to communicate with non-English speaking patients

in their native languages and without being in a government office.

Sonoma County created a CalFresh outreach team in November 2012 to provide outreach and intake applications at targeted locations. The leadership allocated four eligibility workers to the outreach team. At the time of this paper, Sonoma has three of the positions filled doing the outreach work while the remaining position is helping the agency in another capacity. The team is filled with enthusiastic staff members who are passionate about CalFresh, and they enjoy going out to the community and have been effective with their targeted outreach.

The leadership saw in their report that only 25% of eligible seniors are enrolled in CalFresh, and the agency made a strategic commitment to target seniors in Sonoma County. The outreach team contacted senior centers throughout the county and spoke with key managers to get their buy-in. The team also learned about the seniors at the center prior to their presentation to maximize their success in connecting with them. They created senior-friendly Power-Point presentations that are short and concise to keep and maintain their attention on the subject. In addition to targeting the senior centers, the outreach team also attends farmers markets, schools events, veterans centers, and other nonprofit organizations to promote CalFresh.

The agency worked with their IT staff to create a mobile office for the eligibility workers so the team could take applications at the senior centers following their presentations, thus eliminating the need for a senior to travel to the agency's office locations or the Redwood Community Health Coalition office locations. This also keeps the CalFresh program fresh in their memories, as the team is right there to accept applications. The mobile office consists of a laptop with wireless or hotspot access to start clients' applications on My Benefits CalWIN, a portable scanner to scan required documents, and a portable printer to print materials on-site. All of the electronic equipment can fit into a small luggage bag for easy transport between the workers' cars and their office locations.

The staff at Sonoma County are also planning to expand their targeted engagement past senior centers, and will include strategies to target non-English speakers and working families. They are looking to collaborate with the Redwood Empire food bank, and the veterans centers. The CalFresh outreach team is also looking to have a presence in the more rural communities along the Russian River. Since Sonoma recently started this outreach program, data were not available to show any specific trends of increased participation rate. The contract with RCHC has existed since 2011, and intake applications have increased each year.

Comparison to San Mateo County

There are similarities and differences between the strategies that Sonoma County is undertaking and the strategies in place in San Mateo County. San Mateo County has contracted with nine agencies to promote CalFresh, and to offer eligibility screening and application intake. Those agencies are: Second Harvest Food Bank, JobTrain, Coastside Hope, Jefferson Union High School District, Pacifica Resource Center, African American Community Health Advisory Committee, Puente de la Costa Sur, SparkPoint, and North Peninsula Neighborhood Services Center. In addition to the listed contracted agencies above, San Mateo County has partnered with other regional CBOs (COREs Agencies), and has offered training for My Benefits CalWIN to its staff.

The concept is the same with Sonoma County, and that is to offer geographically accessible locations. In addition to the five regional HSA offices, the partnerships with community-based organizations allows multiple options for residents to apply for benefits. The main difference between Sonoma and San Mateo is the location of the CBOs. RCHC has a strong presence in hospitals and health clinics. San Mateo County's locations are mostly in social services oriented community-based organizations.

San Mateo County established a CalFresh Outreach Workgroup comprised of HSA and community

partners. HSA hosts the workgroup, which is convened every other month. Staff provide updates on policy and procedures to the CalFresh program, and maintain open communication with community partners. This process allows San Mateo County to share ideas with its partners and develop strategies for community engagement.

San Mateo County developed a three-year CalFresh outreach plan that includes targeted community outreach. The strategies include prioritizing key geographical areas, creating outreach materials for specific communities, concentrating on dispelling myths about the program, exploring partnerships with health systems to inform the benefits of CalFresh, and reaching out to families in subsidized housing.

San Mateo County staff have also promoted the CalFresh program at community events. In some cases, the county has sent benefit analysts to do intake work at off-site locations. For example, San Mateo County will have benefit analysts at the annual county fair to take CalFresh applications. However, these off-site intake opportunities are not regularly scheduled events, and are mostly done on an ad-hoc basis.

Like Sonoma County, San Mateo County is investing and leveraging technology to help address the CalFresh enrollment challenge. San Mateo County is working with Code for America, a non-profit based in San Francisco that connects talented private sector individuals with local cities and counties to improve local governments. San Mateo County was assigned a team of three people with tech and visual communication backgrounds to develop a web application to connect residents to all of the county's available food resources. This web application will be a simple and easy to use app that will provide information on food resources, including local food banks, congregations, and locations on where and how they can apply for CalFresh benefits.

Table 1 highlights some of the differences between Sonoma County and San Mateo County.

TABLE 1

	Sonoma County	San Mateo County
Total County Population	488,116	727,209
Ranking in California Food Policy Advocates Report	46	57
Number of Full-Time County Outreach Staff	4	1
Number of Contracted CBOs for CalFresh Screening and Application Intake	1	9
Number of Service Locations Offered by Contracted CBOs	12	13*
Technology Leveraged to Increase CalFresh Enrollment	Mobile office equipment for eligibility workers	Partnering with Code for America to increase food access and awareness of resources
Ongoing Targeted Site Visits at Senior Centers and Veterans Centers	Yes	No

*Includes contracted agencies and CORES agencies

Recommendations

San Mateo County Human Services Agency has shown great commitment with their outreach efforts, and has already adopted some of the same practices that Sonoma County implements. Like Sonoma County, San Mateo has a committed partner with Second Harvest Food Bank, performs similar community outreach duties as RCHC, and takes in applications from residents. As highlighted above, there are differences with Sonoma County focusing a stronger presence at the community health clinics and hospitals.

It is recommended that San Mateo staff communicate with Second Harvest Food Bank to schedule a stronger presence at the county's health clinics and hospitals. There are six hospitals in the county, and over a dozen health clinics. It is worth exploring to have Second Harvest start promoting and scheduling times at all the regional hospitals, the county health clinics, and other community-based health clinics.

It is also recommended that San Mateo County explore the possibility of procuring technology to allow selected benefits analysts to do intake with targeted communities, especially at senior centers.

The Human Services Agency is organized into three regional areas: northern, central, and southern regions. Each regional office has benefits analysts working in those regional offices. One analyst could rotate their time from the office and schedule intake work at off-site locations. Program and policy staff can create a similar custom presentation aimed for seniors, schedule appointments at senior centers to engage that population and do intake on-site. The estimated costs to provide a laptop, scanner, and printer for all three regions would be no more than \$10,000 total in one-time costs.

Conclusion

There are many social services agencies that are developing outreach strategies to promote CalFresh and to increase their program participation. Social services agencies must recognize that this is a community-wide effort and will need collaboration with community-based organizations, as it is difficult to be successful on your own. If all the counties adapt strategies that make it easy for eligible clients to enroll by giving them multiple options to apply, going to where they are located and eliminating the

client's travel time, having a presence at locations they trust, and providing targeted outreach, all the counties in the state could potentially increase their enrollment rates, connect eligible clients to a federal entitlement program to assist in purchasing food, and use federal funds to invest in the local economy. The strategies employed by Sonoma County could also be replicated in other jurisdictions throughout the state.

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