

Fighting Hunger: Efforts to Increase CalFresh Program Participation Rates through Modernization Efforts

LILY VASQUEZ

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Others have questioned if hunger exists in our country; I can tell you that hunger does exist in this country. For many adults and children, going to sleep hungry is not a threat; it’s a regular occurrence. And it must end.”

—Former USDA Secretary Mike Espy

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), California ranks second to last among all states for participation in the CalFresh program. The low rate of participation not only harms state and local economies, but it also has great impact on the health and productivity of Californians.¹ Over the years, county agencies across the state have confronted several challenges in their efforts to enroll participants in the program. Fortunately, policy changes have removed barriers for applicants to participate in CalFresh. Furthermore, agencies have

implemented innovative strategies to enroll more participants in the program utilizing county and city resources, technology, and outreach initiatives.

This case study explores the San Francisco County Human Services Agency office modernization efforts, and studies how some of these initiatives can potentially be implemented by the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency with the objective of improving or implementing a more efficient business process to expedite the issuance of benefits utilizing existing resources and technology.

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Background

The CalFresh program is California's version of the federally-known Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which is the nation's largest source of nutrition assistance. While CalFresh provides benefits to supplement household food budgets and access to a nutritious, affordable diet, it also supports productivity, promotes health, and helps prevent hunger.¹ The program issues monthly electronic benefits through an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card. Although CalFresh is in existence, there are many barriers that prevent individuals and families in California from participating in the program. Based upon a 2001 Department of Health Services (DHS) study, main barriers to participation are lack of knowledge regarding eligibility, frustration with the application process, the stigma associated with the program, and misconceptions in immigrant communities.² According to California Food Policy Advocates, California rated second to last among states for overall participation. Low participation rates in the CalFresh program substantially impact communities both socially and economically. Socially, this means that millions of people are not getting enough to eat, leading to a range of other issues, including health problems and hungry children underperforming at school. Economically, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has found that every five dollars spent from CalFresh benefits generates about nine dollars in related economic activity.³ Fortunately, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) has taken a proactive approach and implemented initiatives in order to modernize

CalFresh and increase participation. In 2012, CDSS removed barriers to access CalFresh by waiving face-to-face interviews, requiring counties to offer telephone interviews, and eliminating the finger imaging requirement.⁴ Another approach CDSS has taken is providing online case access for participants, moving from quarterly reporting to semi-annual reporting, and authorizing telephonic signatures.⁵

San Francisco County CalFresh Office Modernization Efforts

County agencies statewide have had different approaches over the past years in trying to increase CalFresh participation rates. San Francisco County Human Services Agency (SFC HSA) has been a pioneer in several innovative initiatives in an effort to increase its CalFresh program participation.

- **Benefits CalWIN.** Utilizing technology, SFC HSA was the first agency in California to implement an innovative online application system for clients to apply for CalFresh benefits. The agency created BenefitsSF.org—now called [MyBenefitsCalWIN](http://MyBenefitsCalWIN.org)—and used by all CalWIN consortia counties.

SFC HSA receives an average of 20 CalFresh online applications per day, which constitutes roughly 30% of the total CalFresh applications received per month. Its business process consists of clerical staff accessing the External Referral Subsystem in CalWIN, registering the applications, and assigning them to eligibility worker (EW) staff the same day. Once the application

is registered, a task number is created on iTASK and assigned to any available EW. The iTASK system is equivalent to the Task Management Tool (TMT) utilized in Santa Clara County.

Eligibility Units process CalFresh applications only. Interviews for Benefits CalWIN (BCW) applications are conducted mostly via telephone, which drastically reduces lobby traffic. EWs are responsible for initiating client contact, downloading the applications from BCW, setting up the appointment, and requesting and obtaining verifications. EWs in SFC HSA process an average of 3 intakes (including one BCW) and 2 annual recertifications per day, adding up to 5 assignments per day. They are responsible and expected to process the cases to disposition.

- **Implementation of “Promptly” – Easy text messaging for government services.** A non-profit organization, Code for America, in joint efforts with the city and SFC HSA, built Promptly, a text messaging notification system that alerts CalFresh participants with important information to keep them enrolled in services, reducing the “churn rate,” and improving the client experience.⁶ According to CDSS, “churn” is when eligible clients do not complete the renewal process or other requirements for various reasons, but then quickly re-enroll, typically within 90 days. Although ‘Promptly’ was first used to keep people enrolled in CalFresh, the app is easy to use and can be utilized to help schedule, monitor and send text message notifications for any reason.⁷ Enrolled clients automatically receive text notifications before their case is discontinued. ‘Promptly’ is open source software, public and free to use. The code base is available at <https://github.com/codeforamerica/promptly>.
- **“CalFresh in a day initiative” – Project Homeless Connect.** In addition, SFC HSA implemented the “CalFresh in a day initiative,” offering same day service to homeless clients participating in the Project Homeless Connect (PHC). The mission of this organization is to connect homeless

residents with the care they need to move forward.⁸ During these events, a person experiencing homelessness is able to obtain as many services in one day as would otherwise take longer to obtain. During the event, corporate, non-profit, and government agencies provide PHC and its participants with critical services such as dental and medical care, housing, and food. SFC HSA plays an important role in providing PHC participants with the resources they need to expedite the receipt of their CalFresh benefits. At the site, PHC participants apply for CalFresh benefits and while their application is submitted, registered and processed, the clients utilize any of the other services offered at the event. CalFresh benefits are authorized within the day so the client is able to have access to food the same day. This approach works really well, especially for homeless clients who often times face barriers to keeping appointments and providing required verifications. The federal government’s U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness declared PHC a national best practice model, which has been replicated in over 260 cities across the United States, Canada, and Australia.⁸

- **Eatfresh Website.** Eatfresh is a project of the SFC HAS managed by Leah’s Pantry. Eatfresh is an online resource for CalFresh-eligible individuals and families, or anyone who wants to improve their health.⁹ It provides users with simple recipes to healthy meals, breakfasts, and snacks, as well as information about different foods and their nutritional properties, different preparation methods, and tips for a healthy lifestyle. The user can locate the farmers’ markets near them, as well as other food resources in the community such as food banks and the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) program. Users also have the ability to pose questions to a registered dietitian and apply online for CalFresh benefits, school lunches, and WIC. Some of the goals of Eatfresh are to encourage users to cook at home with fresh food and minimally processed non-perishables,

and to better understand the link between lifestyle/diet choices with the prevention of chronic diseases.⁹

- **Creation of Food Security Task Force.** Another initiative of SFC HSA is the implementation of the Food Security Task Force (FSTF), established in 2005 by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. This task force is charged with the responsibility of creating a city-wide plan for addressing food security. The group tracks vital data regarding hunger and food security in San Francisco, including the utilization and demand for federal food programs, community-based organizations' meal programs, and programs targeting particular populations. The FSTF educates the public about the role of food security in public health and community development, and advocates for policies and programs that improve food security. Current members include community-based organizations and government agencies addressing hunger in San Francisco.¹⁰

Looking at Santa Clara County

In 2012, the CDSS requested each county to develop goals to increase CalFresh enrollment. Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SCC SSA) submitted an ambitious goal to increase its CalFresh participation by 20% each year. Since then, the total number of CalFresh applications submitted from January 2013 to August 2013 increased by 53 percent, compared to the same period the prior year.¹¹ SCC SSA implemented a series of outreach strategies that contributed to this success; however, exploring and learning of SFC HSA modernization efforts has opened a window to explore the potential for similar strategies. For example, SCC SSA partners with Second Harvest Food Bank (SHFB) to conduct outreach and enrollment assistance to individuals and families who may be eligible for CalFresh. SHFB works directly with a liaison at the district Intake Office and follows up on the status of the applications to ensure the timely processing of client applications. In addition to the outreach efforts mentioned,

SCC SSA has enjoyed a long-standing Safety Net Committee (SNC) that has proven to be effective in providing a "safety net" for residents of SCC. SNC is comprised of community-based organizations (CBOs) that come together in partnership to educate, access, strategize, develop, and implement service recommendations to strengthen food and other services provided to those in need throughout Santa Clara County.

SCC SSA, similarly to SFC HSA, has utilized technology in the effort to reduce the churn rate and address the retention of cases by implementing an automated outbound call system to remind clients of their application and recertification appointments. This initiative has expanded social media communication with program participants.

Counties across the State have expanded the sources of applications where clients can apply for CalFresh benefits. Although SCC SSA clients continue to apply for CalFresh in person, technology has been a big player in the efforts to increase CalFresh participation. For instance, clients are now able to apply for benefits online at www.mybenefitscalwin.org and to request an in-office appointment or a telephone interview. Furthermore, clients who own a smartphone can download the CalWIN mobile app to get an overview of the programs and services offered in CalWIN, find information on their CalWIN benefits, and find the nearest CalWIN office location by utilizing their smartphone's GPS.

Recommendations for Santa Clara County Social Services Agency

There are various strategies from SFC HSA that appeared interesting and are being recommended as best practices to be implemented by SCC SSA.

BCW Pilot Unit: On a monthly average, about 21.5% of the total applications received in SCC SSA are BCWs. This data point identifies the need to evaluate the current business processes to address the shift in the way clients are applying for benefits. One of the recommendations as result of the last CalFresh Management Evaluation (ME) in March 2014 is to

increase the appointment slots for telephone interviews. With recent policy changes and the upcoming implementation of telephonic signatures, the feasibility to process cases more effectively by conducting telephone interviews has been amplified. One way of accomplishing this will be by conducting a pilot project with a unit of intake eligibility workers (EWs) who will focus on processing BCW applications. The unit can be rotated on a monthly basis, and will be charged with processing BCW CalFresh-only and a combination of CalFresh and Medical applications via telephone interviews. Clerical staff will continue to be responsible for registering the BCW applications and assigning them to available EWs. The EW will be responsible for downloading the BCW application, setting up the telephone interviews, interviewing the client, requesting verifications, and processing the case to disposition. Based on internal data, a total of 1,117 unduplicated BCW applications were received during the month of March 2014. Out of this total, 67% were CalFresh-only and 9% were a combination of CalFresh and Medi-Cal applications. This means that workers in the BCW unit will receive mostly one-program applications; therefore, it is suitable to increase the number of assignments to 4 applications per day.

Exploring the Implementation of the Promptly App: SCC has already implemented various initiatives with the intention of expanding social media communication and ensuring program compliance. SSC SSA could explore the implementation of the Promptly app. Among the many benefits of Promptly is that CalFresh program participants will receive up-to-date information about any adverse actions, and be informed of their case status so they are able to prevent their cases from discontinuing. It can also be used to help schedule appointments, and monitor and send text messages notifications for other reasons.

Incorporating a Nutrition Education Component: CalFresh participants would benefit from receiving nutrition education in order to make healthy choices at the market and in preparing food. Intake EWs

could inform clients during the interview about the Eatfresh website and encourage them to explore the features the website offers. At the office level, organizing a potluck that includes recipes from the Eatfresh website will promote healthy, delicious, and low-cost eating among staff.

“CalFresh in a Day” Initiative: This could be accomplished at community events or health fairs where intake EWs with proper remote access would initiate BCW applications and process them on-site. The same day, the EW would authorize the benefits to make them available to the client, who can obtain their EBT card on-site or at the district office.

Conclusion

Over the last few years, SCC SSA has implemented a series of good initiatives to increase the participation rate in the CalFresh program. The opportunity to visit SFC HSA and learn about its modernization efforts has yielded recommendations for SCC SSA to continue supporting the goal to fight hunger by providing healthy and nutritious food to those in need. Aside from these recommendations, it is important for Santa Clara County to continue partnering with SHFB through the Safety Net Committee agencies to promote and strategize essential services among Santa Clara County residents. Another recommendation is to identify Medi-Cal recipients who are potentially eligible for CalFresh and not receiving benefits, like the “Express Lane Enrollment” concept, where Medi-Cal enrollment for adults and children was streamlined by using CalFresh eligibility criteria. These initiatives could clearly have a positive impact on the CalFresh participation rate.

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