

CalFresh: Improving Low Participation Rates for Food Assistance In Sonoma County

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the federal government's food assistance program for low-income individuals and families. In California this program is called CalFresh. California has experienced low participation rates in CalFresh, and in the past few years more attention has been placed on increasing awareness, conducting education and outreach, and increasing enrollment into this benefits program. Stigma and lack of understanding about the program may partially explain these low rates of participation. County social service departments have begun to mobilize around increasing the rates of CalFresh, not just because the program provides nutritional assistance to lower income families, but also because it helps local economies by bringing in more federal dollars to be spent at local businesses.

This case study explores the steps Sonoma County took to move the needle on low CalFresh participation rates. The creation of a Community Outreach Unit, which places Eligibility Workers at community-based organizations that serve the target populations, provides a way for individuals to easily access and enroll into CalFresh at an agency they may be familiar with and perhaps where they are already receiving other services. Contracting with non-profits to conduct education, outreach, and enrollment assistance was a place-based strategy that increased access for residents to enroll into CalFresh while aligning with other services, such as medical care at the clinic or the food bank.

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Introduction

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the federal government's food assistance program for low-income individuals and families. This program is part of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) with the goal of providing a hunger safety net for low-income individuals and families. In California, this program is called CalFresh. CalFresh provides a monthly allocation based on income and family size. The allocation is distributed via an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) which is similar to a debit card. EBT cards can be used at many different retail food outlets to purchase food, including fruits and vegetables. EBT cards can now be used at many farmers markets and to purchase seeds and starters for those who are interested in growing their own produce.

The USDA monitors SNAP participation rates statewide. In 2012, a USDA report showed California as one of the states with the lowest participation rates in SNAP.¹ The California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA) conducted a study on poverty and food insecurity by county in 2012.² The outcome of both reports showed very low participation rates among many counties including Sonoma and Santa Cruz. There are a variety of reasons why participation rates could be low. The stigma of needing "food stamps"

may keep some eligible people from enrolling; the misbelief that depending on your immigration status you must eventually pay back the government for the benefits; or, that enrolling in this benefit might impact your immigration status later on. Many people find the application and renewal process arduous and feel that the actual dollar amount received is not worth the effort to apply.

Many social service departments were enrolling people into the benefits requested, usually Medi-Cal, without offering other potential benefits such as CalFresh. Based on the results of these reports, social service departments began reviewing their business processes and how benefits were being offered by their Eligibility Workers (EWs). Social service departments started encouraging all eligible people to enroll into all programs they were eligible for, including CalFresh.

Ensuring that low-income people have access to healthy food assistance is important, especially in terms of maintaining good health outcomes among this population. Inexpensive food can be unhealthy, such as processed foods, fast food, and sugary beverages. These foods are high in fat, salt, and sugar. Many times individuals and families with low incomes must make a choice between paying their rent and utility bills and buying food. Therefore, purchasing cheap, unhealthy food sometimes becomes a necessity. This can lead to obesity, Type 2 diabetes, and other chronic health conditions. CalFresh assists these individuals and families

¹ Reaching those in Need: Estimates of State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates in 2012. February 2015, Karen E. Cunningham, Mathematica Policy Research.

² California Food Policy Advocates, Nutrition and Food Insecurity Profile, Sonoma and Santa Cruz Counties, March 4, 2015.

with supplemental support to allow them to purchase healthier food options so they do not have to make a choice between health and housing.³ Ultimately, the ability to purchase healthier food options can lead to improved long-term health outcomes. Encouraging the use of CalFresh not only assists low-income residents with supplemental food, but also leverages federal funds that help the local economy; data show that for every five dollars spent on CalFresh benefits, nine dollars of community spending is generated.

Sonoma County

Sonoma County's CalFresh participation rates have been steadily increasing since 2006. The increase in participation followed the increase in poverty, which grew from 40,761 participants in 2007 to 58,646 by 2011, an increase of 30%.⁴ Although CalFresh participation rates were increasing, they were not keeping up with the increase in the eligible populations. When reports on low participation rates throughout California were published in 2012, Sonoma County ranked 49 out of 58 counties. At that point the department undertook an internal study of CalFresh rates. The report showed that children on CalFresh were overrepresented when compared to their proportion of the total county population and that both individuals aged 60 and over and Latinos were underrepresented. Based on the county report and reports from California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and the CFPA, Sonoma County began to explore innovative ways to increase participation especially among the populations that were underrepresented.

Sonoma County developed strategies to increase CalFresh participation rates both within the department and through partnering with community agencies. The county issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) that resulted in initial funding to three non-profit agencies: VOICES, Redwood Community Health Coalition, and 2-1-1.

VOICES, a program of On The Move, serves former foster care and at-risk youth, received funding to provide education and pre-screening assistance for CalFresh to its clients. In addition to educating clients at VOICES, the county sends an EW to the VOICES facility on a weekly basis to accept applications from the youth who had been pre-screened by VOICES staff. Since this relationship proved highly successful, Sonoma County continues to contract with VOICES for these services.

The Redwood Community Health Coalition (RCHC) also received funding through this RFP process. RCHC augmented its funding from the county with an outside grant directly from CDSS. RCHC hired 28 bilingual Certified Enrollment Counselors and Certified Application Assistors to work with patients at its seven community health centers and at Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) offices to accept applications for CalFresh using My Benefits CalWIN. The contract deliverables with Sonoma County included pre-screening 14,000 individuals and submitting 2,500 applications with a 70% or higher approval rate.

RCHC is responsible for training the staff at the community clinics and distributing educational materials promoting CalFresh at these health centers. RCHC included CalFresh information at various outreach events throughout the county including health fairs, community celebrations, media events, and farmers' markets.

RCHC partnered with Petaluma Bounty, a local organization that grows produce and helps distribute locally grown food to low-income families through various means. This unique partnership resulted in a farm stand at the Petaluma Community Health Clinic. During medical appointments, providers at the clinic give clients vouchers worth ten dollars that can be used at the farm stand. Petaluma Bounty staff who work at the farm stand screen the patients for CalFresh and a clinic Certified Application Assistor then initiates a CalFresh application. The program has now expanded to include a teen obesity program implemented by the clinic. The PLAY program is an

³ CalFresh 101 by Kerry Birnback, June 16, 2014. www.CPFA.net

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau American Communities Study

eight week program for youth at 85% BMI. The curriculum includes education on nutrition and exercise. Both the teen and his or her parents participate in this program. Families and their teens learn new healthy recipes that use vegetables offered at the farm stand as well as visiting Petaluma Bounty farm where vegetables are grown. All families in the PLAY program are enrolled into CalFresh if they were not already enrolled before.

2-1-1 contracts with Sonoma County to provide information to callers about CalFresh. Through the initial screening process, if the caller is potentially eligible, 2-1-1 will assist the caller with the application process and complete the telephonic signature for the Rights and Responsibilities form. 2-1-1 is responsible for submitting 1,100 total applications or up to 150 applications each month during the 2014-2015 contract time period.

In 2014, Sonoma County initiated a contract with Redwood Food Bank to pilot a program wherein the food bank would provide CalFresh outreach, education, and application assistance to eligible food bank recipients. The food bank hired two staff, a Coordinator and an Assistor, to initiate applications through My Benefits CalWIN. The food bank was granted access to read-only CalWIN in order to check enrollment status of its applicants. The food bank staff make appointments with potential CalFresh recipients while outreaching at food distribution sites. Clients who attend their application appointments at the food bank are also able to learn about and use the Food Market, which is located next to the food bank. The Food Market includes fresh produce and canned and packaged food that can be purchased with an EBT card or a WIC voucher. Cash is accepted but discouraged.

Catholic Charities of Sonoma County receives funding through Catholic Charities USA and Catholic Charities CA to conduct CalFresh outreach and education. Catholic Charities incorporates education about CalFresh into all its programs: immigration, home-bound seniors, housing and shelter programs, and outreach work with the homeless population. Catholic Charities will soon be sending

out electronic devices such as laptops or tablets and cell phones with its field outreach workers to begin applications and help the homeless individuals conduct their interviews with the EWs while in the field. Catholic Charities is partnering with the food bank at the food distribution sites to initiate applications as well.

HSD prepares monthly reports for the contracted CBOs and Catholic Charities that include applications received, applications processed, and applications denied. HSD created a special report showing denials and reasons for denials for two specific populations: homeless and Spanish-speaking. Although a denial report is work-intensive, it was determined that by learning why CBOs were experiencing higher denial rates than they hoped for on their CalFresh applications, it was considered to be worth the investment, with the end result being lower denial rates for applications submitted by CBOs.

The outcome of the report identified lack of appropriate verifications and missing the mandatory interview with the EW as primary reasons for denials. The report also included tips to overcome these barriers and ways to assist the client so his or her application would be approved.

The strategy used to expand CalFresh participation within HSD was through the creation of an outreach unit within the Economic Assistance Division. This unit is called CalFresh Community Connections. The unit launched in 2013 and staffing has grown from four Eligibility Workers (EWs) and a supervisor to seven EWs and a supervisor. The unit uses four mobile offices, which include a cell phone, laptop, portable scanner and printer, and a rolling briefcase that holds all the devices and can be easily moved from office to vehicle to outreach site. The EWs assist with applications for CalFresh, MediCal, and renewals targeting the following populations: seniors, veterans, homeless, working poor, and non-English speaking residents with eligible family members.

Agencies where the unit provides out-stationed EWs were initially identified by using the 2-1-1 resource directory. Currently there are 17 active

sites. The supervisor and the EWs initially visited the agencies that provided services to the clients who were under-represented in CalFresh and explained what services they could provide. With out-stationed EWs on site, CalFresh applications could be processed sooner and application services could be provided closer to where residents live. The Community Connections unit provides training to the CBOs on CalFresh eligibility and applications. Working with the Staff Development and Training unit, the curriculum was designed to provide information regarding eligibility for CalFresh, what to expect during the application process, and what can be purchased. This training helps staff at these agencies understand the requirements and process so they can educate their clientele and provide informed referrals to the EWs. These trainings increase the quality of the referrals and the readiness of clients to apply.

The EWs visit each location usually once a month. At first the EWs saw clients on a drop in basis but as the program became established appointments were made. The EWs will maintain their monthly presence at each agency as long as they continue to enroll clients. When enrollment appointments decrease the EWs will move on to another agency.

Staff for this unit are carefully selected based on their proven case management and, time management skills along with exemplary customer service. EWs self-selected to be interviewed, and it was ultimately up to the MediCal Eligibility Supervisor to determine who would be selected. The EWs are out-stationed at various community venues throughout the county and need to feel comfortable working in community-based settings with limited supervision. They participate in community health fairs and outreach events and engage in public speaking at the different community events.

The supervisor coordinates the outreach events and the out-station locations. Each EW starts and ends their day at the HSD office. The supervisor conducts safety training for the EWs so they know how to protect themselves when working outside the office. There are times when the EWs are in a

room with a client and are far away from other staff. To date, there have been no mishaps with outreach workers who are out-stationed.

Recommendations for Santa Cruz County

Santa Cruz County could benefit from further study of some of these strategies as well as continuing to expand on new strategies that have recently been implemented. The following are recommendations Santa Cruz County could explore:

Special Denial Report: This would provide useful information that could be used by Santa Cruz's Second Harvest Food Bank (SHFB) to train other CBOs in order to reduce their denial rate. SHFB contracts with Santa Cruz HSD for CalFresh education and enrollment assistance. A denial report that delineates why applications were denied would help SHFB identify technical assistance needs both for its own staff and when training other CBOs. In partnership with HSD, SHFB could develop strategies to address those issues and then work with other CBOs on improving the quality of their applications and verifications submitted. An investment in staff resources to produce the initial report would be required but ultimately the outcome of reducing the workload for HSD Benefits Representatives (BR) with improved quality applications submitted by community partners would out-weigh the staff time invested in preparing the report.

Approval Rate of Applications Submitted: SHFB's contract with HSD includes a deliverable that quantifies the percentage of approvals of applications submitted by SHFB at 50%. Sonoma County requires its food bank to show 70% approval rate among applications submitted. Currently SHFB is at approximately 53% approval rate. Increasing this deliverable in the contract language would help motivate SHFB to submit quality and accurate applications and verifications, leading to higher rates of CalFresh approvals.

Census Tract Maps: Recently HSD developed census tract maps to show geographic locations in Santa Cruz County where potential eligible CalFresh

recipients reside. These maps were created by identifying aid codes from CalWIN among Medi-Cal recipients who could potentially be eligible for CalFresh but are not currently receiving this benefit. Using these maps, HSD and SHFB should work to develop innovative strategies to provide outreach, education, and enrollment assistance to residents who live in identified areas of Santa Cruz County with low CalFresh participation rates.

Benefits Collaborative: Continue monthly meetings of the Benefits Collaborative, a group made up of over 26 countywide service providers. Provide in-depth trainings to participants that include how to message to clients the importance of applying for the CalFresh benefit; address topics to build capacity and create a culture change at community agencies to consider CalFresh as a benefit that helps clients move forward in their lives and consistently include CalFresh in their assessments and referrals; use the collaborative to trouble-shoot situations with tricky applications so all participants can learn from each other.

CalFresh Task Group: Convene a small group of supervisors/managers from selected CBO's to assist with developing a countywide workplan for CBOs to work in collaboration on increasing CalFresh rates. The task group would identify agencies that will continue to enroll through MBCW and increase training and capacity building among CBO staff so they do more than hand a client a flyer and initiate a conversation that dispels myths and clearly explains the application process and moves the client towards applying. This group would also help inform the agenda for the monthly Benefits Collaborative meetings based on what the agencies are experiencing and what their technical assistance needs might be.

Catholic Charities: Forge a stronger working relationship with Catholic Charities. Understand its work plan, strategies, and populations it is currently serving. Include Catholic Charities in the CalFresh Task Group and its activities in the countywide work plan.

CalFresh Internal-External Link: Identify a staff person who focuses on CalFresh from both an internal and external perspective. This person would act as a bridge between the internal changes and new business processes within HSD and what is taking place in the community. Tasks would include: assist with technical assistance needs from CBO's and ensure that trainings take place as needed; field questions from CBOs and disseminate information to all CBOs equally to increase capacity among staff; develop and disseminate common messages to be used both internally and by community partners; and, assist all HSD division programs on developing processes for their staff and clients on messaging and shifting the culture to include CalFresh in the conversation, regardless if the staff is a social worker working with a parent who has a CPS case or a clerk who is helping register an IHSS provider.

Create Benefits Representatives Outreach Unit: Create a small outreach unit that places Benefits Representatives (BRs) at specific CBOs. With less funding available to pay for CBO enrollment assistors, it is unlikely whether agencies will continue to assist with enrollments into MediCal and CalFresh. Primary care clinics will continue to enroll, but there is uncertainty whether other agencies that no longer receive grant funding for this service will continue to offer this. By out-stationing BRs, this will provide a way for clients who have difficulty applying on their own to receive much needed assistance with the process.

Direct Link to BR: In order to assist the homeless population with enrollment into benefits, identify a few BRs who are available to respond directly to field outreach workers who are with homeless clients in order to conduct the CalFresh interview or with specific questions regarding challenging cases. Working with the homeless population is always challenging. Limited followthrough on attending appointments and lack of a working phone makes it difficult to complete the interview part of the CalFresh enrollment process. Santa Cruz County is fortunate to

have agencies that provide outreach in the field to the homeless. Although this recommendation would require staff resources by making available a few specific BRs who are available at any time when an outreach worker calls, ultimately this could increase the approval rate for CalFresh among homeless.

Conclusion

Sonoma County has implemented unique strategies to increase CalFresh enrollments. Through engaging community based organizations, both through a contractual agreement to do education and enrollment assistance and by out-stationing EWs at non-profits, Sonoma County residents can learn about CalFresh more easily, dispel myths they may have, and enroll in the program at an agency they are familiar with.

Santa Cruz County can certainly learn from these strategies and adopt or modify some of them in order to increase CalFresh participation locally. With focused attention and efforts extending both within the department and with community partners, these new strategies will create a more coordinated approach to education, outreach and, enrollment across the whole county and should certainly move the dial on CalFresh rates.

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