

Implementing a Voice Response Unit in the San Francisco Food Assistance Service Center

TANINHA FERREIRA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Technology in social services is sometimes viewed as unnecessary, too ambitious, or an excuse to implement change. However, in many cases technology is inevitable. In the case of the San Francisco Food Assistance Service Center (FASC), utilizing technology to balance the workload and better serve clients is unavoidable. In October 2007 the FASC carried over fifteen thousand cases among seventy six case-carrying workers and clerks. Almost two years later, the caseload has grown to seventeen thousand five hundred and the staff pool has decreased by nine full-time equivalents. To continue this trend of growing caseloads and decreasing staff is program suicide. Something must be done.

Alameda County has found great success in implementing Voice Response Unit (VRU) systems

throughout the programs in the Human Services Agency. In the Foster Care program, the VRU was used as a tool to bring money back to the agency and nearly eliminated millions of dollars of overpayments. In the program that houses Food Stamps, the VRU served as a streamlined and systematic way to respond to client inquiries with an automated system.

Just as in Alameda County, it is expected that San Francisco will adopt a VRU model to provide solutions to multiple problems while adhering to FASC core values: simplify, streamline and sustain. This case study provides an action plan for San Francisco's FASC to better serve clients in the time of a relentless economic recession.

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Introduction

Experts suggest that 50% of San Franciscans who are eligible for food stamps do not receive them. As a result, in September 2006, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) awarded the San Francisco Human Services Agency a one million dollar Access and Participation Grant to improve Food Stamp Program (FSP) services.

This grant was awarded on the condition that the FSP would implement a call center for potential customers and active clients, in addition to creating a community-based organization (CBO) network to enhance visibility and outreach in the community, launching a web application, and conducting new applicant interviews by web camera. One year later on October 11, 2007, the San Francisco Food Assistance Service Center (FASC) was launched. The FASC consists of a banked caseload, centralized clerical task distribution system, outreach, case maintenance and a call center staffed with eligibility workers.

Although the FASC has garnered much success and recognition, financial strains increase pressure to be more creative with service delivery and reach out more to the unaided. At launch, the FASC maintained over fifteen thousand cases spread among seventy six case-carrying workers and clerks. The current caseload exceeds seventeen thousand five hundred, yet staff has decreased by nine full-time equivalents (FTES). In a budget climate which requires layoffs and classification bumping and a steadily growing client caseload, technology resources must be used to offset the loss of experienced staff.

History—Alameda County and its Award-Winning VRU System

In an effort to combat the loss of millions of dollars in the form of overpayments in Foster Care, Alameda County utilized a Voice Response Unit system. A VRU is an “Automated telephone information system that speaks to the caller with a combination of fixed voice menus and data extracted from databases . . . The caller responds by pressing digits on the telephone,” (PCMagazine.com). Foster Care social workers are now able to call the system, digitally enter client case information and make an automated selection indicating a case update. The VRU system makes it possible for social workers to immediately and systematically report child placement changes, automatically stop payments to a provider once the child has left that home and automatically start payment to a child’s new foster care provider. Inefficiencies in these three areas were once the main contributors to the millions of dollars of overpayments in Foster Care. The new automated system makes the reporting process more accurate, efficient and effective.

In the 1999/2000 fiscal year, Alameda County Foster Care overpayments peaked at \$2.9 million. In 2002/2003, Alameda County implemented the VRU. By the end of 2004, the \$2.9 million figure fell by about half to \$1.5 million and at the beginning of 2007 annual overpayments amounted to just over \$380,000. After great success in the Foster Care Program, Alameda County decided to increase efficiencies in other programs by integrating the VRU system. This paper explores the ways in which Alameda

County uses their VRU system in the program that houses Food Stamps, and how its business model could assist the San Francisco Food Stamp Program to maintain a growing caseload with a shrinking staff pool.

Key Elements of Alameda County's VRU

Clients in Alameda County who want to retrieve case information on their food stamp account access the VRU called Customer Automated Response System (CARS). The client either calls or visits the website and is able to access information regarding the following:

- Whether the case is active
- Food stamp allotment
- Date benefit will be issued
- Recertification due date

This information is accessed by tens of thousands of clients each month.

Another key element of CARS is its simplicity. For example, clients access an already familiar phone number and are offered four selections regarding their food stamp cases. This model is user-friendly and does not confuse the client.

For the San Francisco FASC, similar information will be offered over the phone. In a recent canvassing survey session with eligibility workers in three FASC units, the following were the most frequent reasons clients called the FASC call center:

- Check status on case
- Food stamp allotment/balance on EBT card
- Quarterly reporting due date
- Recertification due date
- Date benefit will be issued
- Case updates (changes of address, change of household composition, etc.)
- Reschedule recertification appointment

Some of the most frequently asked questions included:

- Why was I discontinued?
- Why am I receiving fewer benefits?
- Why isn't my EBT card working?

Answers to some of these questions cannot be offered using an automated system.

However, as demonstrated in Alameda County, the majority of the inquiries can be resolved with a VRU. As with CARS, all inquiries that require additional explanation or information will be transferred to a live person. In the case of the FASC, such calls will be transferred to an eligibility worker.

Implications for the San Francisco FASC

If Alameda County was successful in turning their VRU into financial resources, why could not San Francisco implement a VRU and turn it into human resources? Yes, human resources. Consider the following hypothetical scenario from the San Francisco FASC's Case Carrying Section for active Food Stamp Clients:

On average, the San Francisco FASC receives six thousand three hundred phone calls per month. Currently, Alameda County's VRU resolves 60% of the calls coming to the program that houses Food Stamps. This means that 60% of the calls coming to the program never reach a worker; a worker does not physically respond to these calls. In addition, Robin Ynacay Nye and Estela Walsh of the Nevada Welfare Division report that 80% of their calls are resolved at the VRU.

If one takes the average between the two, one could boldly suggest that 70% of the FASC calls could be resolved at the VRU. This would mean that 4,410 of the 6,300 phone calls would never reach a worker. The average FASC phone call and wrap-up lasts around five minutes. 4,410 phone calls lasting five minutes each amounts to 22,050 minutes of work time saved by the VRU every month. 22,050 minutes per month equals 376.5 hours per month, or 47 additional eight-hour shifts per month. Because the average month has twenty workdays, 47 extra shifts is the equivalent of adding a little more than two Eligibility Workers to the program. If this seems farfetched, consider it from the perspective that nineteen hours per day currently spent resolving client issues by phone could be spent performing much needed case maintenance and retention.

Recommendations and Implementation

As previously stated, the FASC is faced with the challenge of retaining a growing caseload and recruiting new clients with a decreasing workforce. Because hiring new staff is not an option, and reorganization occurred during the launch of the FASC, technology is the only other option for balancing the workload. VRU technology has proven to resolve client inquiries without utilizing worker time and thereby freeing up worker time for other tasks.

To implement the VRU, the FASC would need to take action on the following:

- 1 Choosing a vendor.
- 2 Creating a plan for VRU/database interfacing.
- 3 Writing and editing VRU scripts in seven languages.
- 4 Recording scripts in seven languages.
- 5 Modifying staff schedules to reflect more time for case maintenance and retention.

First, the FASC will choose a VRU vendor. This process should take approximately four months. The Food Stamp Program Manager and Senior Analyst in conjunction with Human Services Agency Information Technology will review competitive bids and determine which vendor will create the VRU. At this time, Human Services Agency Information Technology will develop a system for VRU/Client Information Database interfacing. Also during the bidding process, a committee of analysts, specialists and supervisors will be formed to write VRU scripts, making sure to use common language and no technical jargon. Once the committee is formed, two months will be allotted to edit and finalize scripts.

Next, a bilingual committee of supervisors and eligibility workers will be formed to translate scripts. Currently the FASC Call Center serves seven languages: English, Spanish, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Russian, Mandarin and Tagalog. Scripts will be translated into all six non-English languages. Translations will be completed over the course of two weeks.

After scripts are translated and finalized, workers and supervisors will be chosen to record the scripts to the VRU. To avoid high ongoing maintenance

costs the FASC utilized Food Stamp staff members to record messages for the Call Center. For the same reason, this practice will be repeated for the VRU.

Finally, the Automatic Call Distributor (ACD) Analyst will alter worker schedules based upon projected call volumes and determine the number of hours eligibility workers should spend taking calls versus performing case maintenance. Considering staff shrinkage, peak call periods and language coverage, the ACD Analyst will complete the process by assigning new schedules to workers.

Because CARS is a client-based system, used only by clients, staff training was not a major issue during implementation. Minimal or no staff training is key because the FASC workload is steadily increasing and time spent away from case maintenance could mean paperwork being processed late, which could ultimately result in inadvertent non-compliance and an increase in the Food Stamp error rate.

Potential Problems

By the third month of implementation, Alameda County's VRU system paid for itself by recouping overpayments. However, unlike Alameda County's Foster Care Program's expeditious financial return, the San Francisco FASC will not realize such returns.

The starting salary for an eligibility worker is \$21.53/hr. This hourly rate multiplied by the 376.5 hours saved per month equals \$8,106.05 per month. With a basic VRU cost of \$136,000, the San Francisco FASC will not begin to pay for itself until a little over one year. In the midst of a budget crisis, the Human Services Agency may not consider it feasible to purchase VRU technology.

Additionally, San Francisco's Food Stamp Program is currently embarking upon two major projects: Web Application and Document Imaging. Both of these projects will necessitate staff training and physical changes in the areas of processes and workflows. Even though VRU implementation does not require staff training, simultaneous implementation of three major projects may not be practical until 2010-11.

Conclusion

The San Francisco Food Stamp program operates under the core values of simplification, streamlining and sustainability. With this in mind, it is important to consider that the VRU will provide much more than a balanced workload. It will streamline services, sustain a growing caseload, and simplify processes for clients. The VRU will indirectly increase client service and satisfaction by providing a systematic way of receiving information about their benefits. Don Edwards, Assistant Director of Alameda County Human Services, professes, “Technology is useless if it’s not serving the people.” In the case of San Francisco implementing a VRU, the technology is both useful for the client and the county. More importantly, the VRU will free-up eligibility worker time, allowing them to invest more time into retaining and soliciting new clients.

Acknowledgements

I’d like to thank Don Edwards and Alameda County for openly sharing information, best practices, and knowledge. In addition, I’d like to offer a special thanks to Julie Martinez from Alameda County. Finally I’d like to thank my colleagues at the City and County of San Francisco for all their support.