

San Francisco County's Internet Application for Food Stamps and Medi-Cal: A Glimpse of the Future for Eligibility Programs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The San Francisco Bay Area faces an invisible humanitarian crisis. Over half a million Bay Area residents are at risk of going hungry each month. Over 38% of these are children. Every month, one in five Bay Area children is at risk of hunger. Food Stamps are an effective tool in fighting hunger, but 50% of eligible persons do not receive them. To help expand the reach of the Food Stamps program, the San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) is implementing an internet program that will allow residents to apply for Food Stamps and Medi-Cal benefits online.

Human services departments face increasing caseloads, decreased funding for staff, and pressure to extend access to services to underserved areas and populations. Departments must find more efficient ways to handle the increased workload with fewer workers. The relatively new CalWIN system did not anticipate the opportunities that have come with the increased use of the internet.

San Francisco County engaged community-based organizations (CBO) in planning a new online application system. Their model will allow CBO staff to help clients apply for aid online, scan and attach verifications to the electronic application, and provide for an interview using videoconferencing technology. In addition, members of the public who are already online can apply from any internet-connected computer.

Benefits of this new system include:

- Improved access to benefits for underserved neighborhoods;
- Access during non-business hours,
- Online application saves time compared to face to face interviews and relieves pressure on waiting rooms.

Challenges include:

- No CalWIN interface
- Funding still needing to be obtained

Recommendations for Sonoma County Involve

- Planning and assessment in order to implement an internet application,
- exploring grant funding opportunities, and
- lobbying CalWIN counties to develop a CalWIN interface and to adopt this internet application or develop a similar system for the entire consortium.

Conclusion

An internet-based application process will help enable Sonoma County to meet the challenges it faces today. The County Strategic Plan calls for extending services to outlying areas. A web application in partnership with CBOs is a cost-effective solution that will allow the county to meet that challenge. San Francisco has taken a bold step in developing this important new tool and deserves a great deal of credit for blazing the path for other CalWIN counties.

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The San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) is preparing to roll out an internet program that will allow residents to apply for Food Stamps and Medi-Cal benefits online. This represents the logical next step in the evolution of how eligibility programs are applied for and administered. As applicants become more proficient with computers, and the internet and counties strive to expand access to more eligible persons, it will allow residents to apply online and it will open up a lot of possibilities for efficiencies and improved access to services.

Why a Web Application?

Like other Bay Area counties, San Francisco faces an invisible humanitarian crisis. The homeless population is a relatively visible reminder of poverty but is just the tip of the hunger iceberg. Over half a million Bay Area residents are at risk of going hungry each month. Over 38% of these are children. Every month one in five Bay Area children is at risk of hunger. Food Stamps are an effective supplement, but 50% of eligible persons do not receive them. San Francisco wanted to extend the reach of its limited resources to ensure more people receive the Food Stamps for which they are eligible. An internet application provides possibilities to improve outreach that were not available in past years.

The Business Model

Today, increased demand for services, pressure to decentralize and make services available in more neighborhoods, and budget and staffing cuts are causing welfare agencies to look for innovative ways to increase efficiency and provide all the services needed in our communities. San Francisco County noted the growing national trend to allow people to apply for public assistance over the internet. The State of

Wisconsin has a well-regarded online application program that includes Medicaid and Food Stamps. Here in California, the C-IV Consortium has an online Food Stamps application called C4Yourself.

San Francisco engaged in a community organizing effort to involve neighborhood based agencies in planning a new online application system. They created a model that will allow these CBOs to offer their clients the opportunity to apply for Food Stamps and Medi-Cal in their offices. CBO staff can help clients apply for aid online, scan and attach verifications to the electronic application, and provide for an interview using videoconferencing technology. In addition, members of the public who are already online and comfortable with computers can apply from their own homes via the internet.

The Internet Application

When clients navigate to the BenefitsSF.org web page, they have the option to test whether they are eligible for assistance, to start a new application, or to continue work on a previous application. Clients may also test whether they are eligible for the reduced price school lunch program, WIC, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and the San Francisco-specific Working Families Credit. Once the client provides the requested information, they will be informed which programs they are potentially eligible for. If they choose to file an application for Food Stamps and Medi-Cal, they have the option to create their personal log-in profile, and all the information provided in the eligibility test is transferred to the application.

To apply for Food Stamps and Medi-Cal, clients must enter at least a minimum amount of demographic information before they can submit the application. However, the client is encouraged to provide more complete information before submit-

ting. Once the application is ready to be finalized, the client is given the opportunity to scan verifications and attach them to the application. The client is then presented the rights and responsibilities and other required information for review. Finally, the client creates an electronic signature and “signs” the application before submitting. The format is colorful and easy to follow.

The application is received electronically by HSA and is made available to clerical and eligibility staff in the City Worker application, an in-house program that interfaces with the website and allows staff to view and track applications. HSA staff print out the submitted information and type the information into CalWIN. Designated eligibility workers review requests for phone or videoconference interviews and contact clients to schedule or initiate an interview. The eligibility worker interviews the client and adds any additional required information into CalWIN to complete the application.

Benefits

San Francisco HSA expects to realize two important benefits from this effort:

- Improved access to services for underserved San Francisco residents, and
- Increased efficiency in processing incoming applications for Food Stamps and Medi-Cal.

Improved Access

San Francisco has a centralized Food Stamps application office on Mission Street. Clients who arrive at the office by 7:30 AM can be assured of being seen that day for a Food Stamp interview. Applicants pass through a metal detector, and several security guards are on duty to ensure safety. Applicants may need to wait several hours for their interview. While this may work out for a lot of applicants, many people are unable to devote an entire day to the process, may have work or child care obligations, have difficulties in obtaining transportation, or may be intimidated by the entire ordeal.

Many people who could not or would not come to Mission Street to apply but still need help with the

application process would be willing to apply in a local neighborhood agency where they feel comfortable and can get help from trained CBO staff members. CBO staff are frequently frustrated by the difficulties involved in sending clients to the Mission Street office to apply and are eager for the opportunity to better help their clients get the services they need. In this way, San Francisco has effectively scattered application outstations throughout the city and decentralized the application process. This is a win-win for CBOs and the HSA. Those individuals with more computer savvy who have other obligations during regular business hours could apply online in the evenings or on weekends. This would make every internet connected computer an application outpost.

Efficiencies

This expanded access will bring in more applications for Human Services Agency staff to process at the same time staffing is being trimmed. HSA managers expect the new model will provide efficiencies that will decrease the amount of time spent on processing each application. CBO staff have been trained and will be able to assist clients to provide complete applications. Clients applying on their own over the internet will have the opportunity to provide very complete information that will allow their Food Stamps applications to be approved with very little additional work. When the application is received by HSA staff, the relevant information has already been assembled for them, allowing them to focus on inputting the information into CalWIN without having to elicit each detail from the client.

The face-to-face interview process, though it is more satisfying to many eligibility workers, is more time consuming than processing applications that come in through other means. Clients are often ill-prepared to answer questions on the spot and must fumble to assemble and provide information to the worker. With the internet process, the shuffling for information happens before the worker even sees the application. In addition, there is a good deal of information that is shared with clients during the interview that clients can review online on their own time.

The County Medical Services Program (CMSP) Governing Board commissioned a study on the efficiency of mail-in versus face-to-face applications.* It found that mail-in CMSP applications took an average of 27% less time to process than in-person applications. Some of that same increased efficiency is expected for the internet application when compared to in-person applications.

Challenges

One potential area for increased efficiency that is not currently possible would be an automatic interface to import the internet application data directly into CalWIN. Without the interface, HSA staff will have to retype the data from these applications into CalWIN, losing the data entry done by the clients themselves. Given the increased application volume the web application will bring during a time a staff cutbacks and decreased resources, every possible efficiency will be required to handle the extra work.

San Francisco obtained a preliminary estimate last year from CalWIN vendor EDS on implementing an interface for BenefitsSF. Development would take 12 months and would cost approximately \$528,372. Each county to come onto the system would need to pay \$60,000 to be added to the interface.

There is a new effort by the CalWIN consortium and EDS to instead create a “generic” CalWIN interface using federal Food Stamp stimulus money. If funding can be obtained, implementation would take 6-9 months and would cost \$2.4 million. This would allow not only an interface to BenefitsSF but to other applications as well. For instance, an interactive voice response system could allow clients to obtain information about their case through an automated phone system.

An integral part of this proposal is to customize BenefitsSF for the other 17 CalWIN counties or to have a BenefitsCA version that resides on a centralized site. This front-end application is estimated to cost \$1.1 million, making the total cost for the upgrade an estimated \$3.5 million. The California De-

partment of Social Services has to spend up to \$11 million this fiscal year on Food Stamp simplification, so this project is being seen as “shovel ready.”

The original EDS estimate included charges for ongoing support and maintenance in the form of transaction charges—6¢ per transaction and 8¢ per imaged page. These charges have not been well-defined, and it is not yet possible to estimate annual support and maintenance costs.

Development and Maintenance

San Francisco contracted with vendor Nets to Ladders to build the web application, and later with former subcontractor NWN, to complete the job. The system was designed to be easily updated with new information or customized for county-specific programs. HSA will host the system in its data center. A web server and a SQL (database) server are required to host the system.

If the consortium-wide model is not adopted, technical maintenance of the program will probably require the equivalent of one full-time position with expertise in Microsoft.NET (a programming language) and web hosting. Data can be extracted from the SQL server to develop reporting capabilities as needed. Depending on the expertise available, enhancements could be done in-house or contracted out since San Francisco owns the program.

Funding

San Francisco hired a grant-writing firm to apply for a \$999,993 Federal grant from the Food and Nutrition Service to develop a call center and the web application/CBO collaboration model. An additional \$318,000 in local, non-federal funding was allocated to pay salaries for HSA employees involved in project development. Of the nearly \$1 million in federal money, \$696,003 was allocated to development and setup of the web application, and \$54,000 allocated to purchase computer equipment for CBOs.

Should Sonoma County Adopt This System?

Sonoma County faces many of the same challenges as San Francisco. Sonoma County is large geographi-

*Robert E. Nolan Company, Inc., *Work Measurement Time and Motion Study Initiative*, 2007

cally, and there is only one central location in Santa Rosa to apply for Food Stamps and Medi-Cal. Traveling to the office in Santa Rosa from remote areas of the county can take an hour or more. The office is always crowded, and most clients must schedule an appointment to return at a future date. On their scheduled date, they may have to wait for hours to complete their application. In-person application volume has increased by 23% over the last year while eligibility intake staffing has been decreased by 8%.

In its Strategic Plan, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors has placed a strong emphasis on making these services available outside of Santa Rosa.

Sonoma County could benefit from the improved access and greater efficiencies the San Francisco model offers. There is a strong network of CBOs in the area with whom partnerships could be forged. The department has expertise in .NET, SQL and web hosting. A document imaging system is in place, and eligibility staff have dual monitors to work in two systems simultaneously. Most of the pieces Sonoma would need to make this work are already in place. However, there are two hurdles to be overcome before Sonoma implements this system. First is the lack of a CalWIN interface. The importation of data from the internet application directly into CalWIN is one of the greatest potential sources of efficiency and time savings.

If federal stimulus money cannot be obtained to fund a consortium-wide web application, it would require an intense lobbying effort to get all the CalWIN Consortium counties to buy into this project and agree to help in the development and funding. Even if CalWIN counties can be convinced to join the project, other improvements that have already been prioritized and scheduled could add years to the implementation of the interface. Sonoma County would need to have the CalWIN interface in place before implementing an online internet application.

The other hurdle is obtaining the local funding needed to bring Sonoma County on to the system. Firm estimates are not available on what it would cost to adapt the system for local use, but expected costs to customize the website for Sonoma County

specific information and purchase servers would be in the area of \$100,000. In addition, EDS estimates a cost of \$60,000 to add each county to the CalWIN interface. Although we already have the required technical expertise on staff, the additional workload needed to maintain the application would probably require hiring an additional IT staff person.

The county would be required to invest some money up front, but the increased efficiencies would allow more applications to be processed by each worker and save on eligibility staffing costs. This would increase the capacity to handle more traffic with existing positions while extending services to outlying areas not currently served adequately.

With General Fund cutbacks in Sonoma County, local funding is simply not available at this time. Again, if federal stimulus money can be obtained for a consortium-wide system, most of these hurdles would no longer be a factor.

Recommendations

- Sonoma County should begin planning now and assessing its capability to implement an
- internet application for Food Stamps and Medi-Cal once funding becomes available.
- The system must include the capability to apply for CMSP online.
- There should be a focused exploration of grant funding opportunities.
- Sonoma County should play an active role in lobbying CalWIN counties to prioritize development of a CalWIN interface and to adopt San Francisco's internet application or develop a similar system for the entire consortium.

Conclusion

It is clear that internet access to the benefit application process is the next significant technological advance that will impact welfare programs. The question is not whether Sonoma County should plan for an internet benefits application; it is a question of how soon such a system can be implemented. The potential benefits are too significant to forgo and the costs are not significant enough to deter the county

from moving in this direction. The inertia of the CalWIN bureaucracy will make it difficult to implement such a system any time soon and strong advocacy will be required to get it accomplished. San Francisco has taken a bold step in developing this important new tool and deserves a great deal of credit for blazing the path for CalWIN counties.

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