

# Transitioning Food Stamp Cases into a Call Center Environment

ROBERT SACASA

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A growing shortage of resources has resulted in creating increased pressure to maintain existing service levels. Counties must explore new and innovative ways of doing business, such as expanding the Medi-Cal (MC) call center business model to include other aid programs. The adoption of the following recommendations will help to ensure that Santa Clara County experiences a successful transition in moving Food Stamp (FS) cases into a call center environment.

### **Recommendations for Santa Clara County**

- Determine total staff required to manage cases in the call center and district offices
- Decide which cases will be conducive to a call center environment
- Establish committees/workgroups with all classifications represented
- Determine if a separate call center site will be needed
- Develop workflows for cases not exempt from a face-to-face interview
- Develop induction training that should either be generic or Food Stamp/Medi-Cal
- Plan to implement an FS call center by November, 2009

---

**Robert Sacasa**, Social Services Program Manager,  
Santa Clara County Social Services Agency



# Transitioning Food Stamp Cases into a Call Center Environment

ROBERT SACASA

## Introduction

With the collapse of the financial and housing markets and rapidly increasing unemployment, the U.S. economy continues to spiral downward, threatening to apply even further pressures on Santa Clara and other California counties already facing difficult challenges in providing even basic services to their most vulnerable residents. Statewide, the unemployment rate was 11.5% in March, 2009. This is up from 6.5% one year ago and is expected to rise to 12–13% by 2011. The growing shortage of staff and other resources in county social service agencies across the Bay Area will continue to exacerbate the increasing backlog of work and lengthen the time it takes to determine eligibility benefits for clients.

In Santa Clara County, applications have increased for Medi-Cal (MC) and Food Stamps (FS), 13.9% and 60%, respectively, compared to just over one year ago. Staffing cannot keep up with the increase in caseloads, making timely accurate processing of Periodic Reports and Annual Reviews (RRRs) more challenging. As a result, counties must explore new and innovative methods for addressing clients' needs and delivering quality service. This case study explores the possibility of expanding the call center business model currently in place for Santa Clara County's MC only cases to include certain Non Assistance FS and Food Stamp/Medi-Cal (FS/MC) combined cases. Observations made while visiting San Mateo County's Health Insurance and FS call center are taken into consideration.

## Background: San Mateo's Call Center History

The San Mateo Call Center, known as the Health Insurance Telecenter (HIT), was launched as a MC-only call center in November 2003. Non-Assistance FS cases were incorporated approximately six months

after going live. The primary goals were to improve the quality of service to clients, decrease errors in casework, reduce a significant backlog of work, and increase the level of efficiencies in business processes. FS cases that have a CalWORKS or General Assistance component have remained in regional offices managed by case-carrying workers.

By some estimates, HIT was initially understaffed by approximately eleven full-time positions. No specific formula was used to determine how many benefit analysts were to transfer into the call center to manage the work associated with the 1,700 FS cases transferred at implementation. HIT received only three full-time staff from other offices due to competing priorities and the need to retain staff in the regional offices. It quickly became apparent that more staff would be needed to both handle the call volume and process the casework. Thus, two existing HIT benefit analysts were selected to receive extensive FS training and join the newly created unit.

In addition to the shortage of staff, the early implementation of FS in the call center posed significant challenges, including:

- The FS program's requirement to conduct a face-to-face interview with clients.
- The need to employ some manual workarounds in the CalWIN system for FS/MC combined cases to avoid erroneous negative action or auto discontinuance. The different program regulations necessitate these workarounds. For example: bank verifications are not required for FS but are required for MC. If a client does not provide verification, the worker must utilize a workaround in CalWIN to avoid FS being erroneously discontinued.
- Initially, there was little support from regional offices which viewed the call center as a separate entity entirely due to a unique business model.

- At implementation, only 45% of the FS Quarterly Status Reports (QR-7s) were processed in a timely manner.
- Although the state imposed a mandatory corrective action plan to meet the Performance Measure of processing 90% of MC RRRs in a timely fashion, there is no good comparative data available for FS prior to and after call center implementation. Data collection was further complicated by CalWIN implementation subsequent to the introduction of FS to the call center.
- With the absence of an automated task management system, keeping track of assignments was a very manual process. Supervisors relied heavily on daily worker logs to determine what was completed and what needed follow up.
- Today, over 90% of the FS Quarterly Status Reports (QR-7s) are processed in a timely manner.
- The most recent state audit found that they process over 90% of their RRR's in a timely manner.
- The call center has successfully implemented a task management tool called Track HIT. It was rolled out in phases, first to the phone staff and then to the case maintenance staff. The tool has enabled clerical and supervisory staff to assign tasks to specific benefit analysts. Any individual is able to easily search for tasks and determine the status, whether complete, pending, overdue, etc. Supervisors can monitor a worker's performance and level of production. Managers have the capability to view reports that provide statistics on the number and type of tasks being generated to determine how best to utilize resources.

### Current Business in San Mateo

In addition to the nearly 25,000 MC cases, there are approximately 2,000 ongoing Non-Assistance FS cases in the call center today. The FS unit composition consists of four Telephone Benefit Analysts (TCBA's), two Case Maintenance Benefit Analysts (CMBA's) who are responsible for the processing of the FS RRRs and two CMBA's responsible for the processing of the MC RRRs for FS/MC combined cases.

Having a hands-on, knowledgeable supervisor who is well versed in the FS program has helped to decrease the FS error rate to below 10%. Centralizing these cases and having them maintained by one unit has also streamlined the process. Significant progress has been made in the following areas:

- San Mateo County received a waiver some time ago that allows them to waive the face-to-face interview requirement and conduct phone interviews.
- Benefit analysts in the call center have become familiar with the various workarounds required when handling cases for clients who receive benefits in multiple eligibility programs.
- HIT has developed a strong working relationship with the regional offices. The call center is now seen as a vital partner in delivering service to needy county residents.

It is important to note that cost savings have not been realized in the area of staffing. The call center remains understaffed, and the total number of benefit analysts has remained unchanged department-wide. San Mateo County plans to increase the number of benefit analysts in the near future to ensure HIT is adequately staffed for the volume of phone calls and casework. As with most county operations, staffing is linked more closely to budgetary concerns than ideal staffing for workload.

### Considerations When Transitioning Food Stamps into a Call Center

Many valuable lessons can be derived from San Mateo County's experience including FS in its call center. Thoughtful planning and sufficient time to consider the advantages and disadvantages may prove essential when transitioning these cases to a call center business model in Santa Clara County. Among the things to take into account include:

- Santa Clara County has a considerably larger MC and FS population compared to San Mateo. There are approximately 65,000 MC-only cases, and 13,039 cases that are either Non-Assistance FS or FS/MC combined. There are a total of 2,434 FS or FS/MC cases currently at the General Assistance office.

- Cases with a FS component generate more tasks to process, due, in part, to more frequent reporting timelines than those of MC-only cases; quarterly reporting as opposed to mid-year reporting for MC-only families and yearly for elderly and disabled households. Statistics for the month of January 2009 in San Mateo County show that a total of 6,952 calls were answered. Nine hundred and twenty seven of those pertained to FS. In February 2009, a total of 6,732 calls were answered. Eight hundred thirty six of those pertained to FS cases.
- Calls pertaining to FS cases take an average of 25% to 30% longer than calls relating to MC-only cases. There is no current formula to determine the number of phone workers needed to adequately answer calls for FS cases. An assessment should be conducted to determine the “call-handle” time, which is the time it takes to both complete the phone call and process the work associated with it.
- Special consideration will need to be made for cases that are not exempt from a face-to-face interview. For example, situations where the household members are currently homeless will require specific instructions to clients and arrangements made with other offices to accommodate the interview. Staffing at out-stationed facilities will need to increase in order to allow scheduling of face-to-face appointments to complete the renewal process.
- Funding implications for cases currently at the General Assistance office will need to be considered. Cases for the Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants (CAPI) should remain in General Assistance with case-carrying workers. San Mateo County incorporated these cases into the call center, but they are managed by a CAPI unit which operates under a traditional caseload carrying business model.

have proven time and again that they are up to the challenge of adapting to new ways of doing business and learning the different automated systems that support them in completing their job, including: the call center phone system, CalWIN, an Integrated Document Management system (IDM), and the Online Contact Record for case documentation (OCR—discontinued with CalWIN implementation). MCSC employees are now in the process of learning a Task Management Tool (TMT) implemented in April 2009. To properly prepare Santa Clara County to transition FS cases into a call center environment and to ensure the transition is successful, strategies should aim to do the following:\*

- Determine total staff required to manage cases in the call center and district offices. There will be a learning curve. Staffing at implementation should be maximized in the call center to adequately cover the phone calls and assignments. As proficiency increases new vacancies can perhaps be reallocated to other areas. The shortage of intake staff, for example, poses challenges as CalWIN was not designed to handle an intake backlog.
- Decide which cases will be conducive to a call center environment and which will remain in district offices with case-carrying eligibility workers, such as homeless households and any other household not exempt from the face-to-face requirement. These cases may be more conducive to a caseload carrying business model.
- Establish committees/workgroups with all classifications represented—clerical, eligibility, supervisors, and management. This practice proved successful when planning for MCSC and for TMT. These groups create a venue for the different levels of staff to brainstorm and provide very thoughtful feedback and recommendations for the successful inclusion of FS, such as developing detailed processes for the incoming FS cases.

### Recommendations for Santa Clara County

Santa Clara County's Medi-Cal Service Center (MCSC), has been operational since May 2004. Staff

\*Please note that no additional costs will be incurred by the county as a result of these recommendations, with the potential exception of expenses related to additional space for a call center site.

- Determine if a separate call center site will be needed. Little space is currently available at MCSC, yet one site is more efficient. The FS call center should be co-located at MCSC as there is an experienced management staff that is well versed in call center management. A large section of the building is currently not occupied by the call center. Key individuals from facilities and information systems will need to be involved in the event needed furniture and equipment is to be secured and installed. The cost implications to refurbish the unused section of MCSC for eligibility units are unknown at this time.
- Develop workflows for cases not exempt from a face-to-face interview. Out-stationed eligibility workers will be required to handle face-to-face contacts generated by the additional cases. Can additional out-stationed staff be accommodated at the Assistance Application Center (AAC) and at the North and South satellite out-stationed locations? Can training or tools be provided to outreach workers to minimize these appointments? More clerical staff will be needed to handle the increased caseload, process requests for Electronic Benefit Transfers (EBT) and the Statewide Fingerprint Imaging System (SFIS).
- New induction training (AD classes) must either be generic or FS/MC. To avoid a spike in the error rate, experienced staff should be selected for the call center. New staff and staff that do not have current knowledge in the FS Program should not be assigned to the call center during the imple-

mentation period. One staffing model would be to train current MCSC outreach workers to answer FS questions. Staff transferring to the call center from other offices could be assigned to processing so that FS/MC cases would be processed by experienced workers minimizing the risk of increasing the error rate. Over time additional training could be provided, ultimately resulting in the blending of staff without the loss of productivity that would occur if all current MCSC staff were trained prior to implementation.

In these economically challenging times, it is important to assess and maximize existing resources to ensure the county continues to make a difference in the community through dedicated people, excellent service and exceptional performance. The strategies recommended here, along with taking advantage of technology already available, will allow Santa Clara County to successfully transition Food Stamp cases to a call center business model by November 2009.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank San Mateo County for taking the time to assist me with this case study. Allowing me to observe business processes on site and meeting one-on-one during my internship to share information was extremely valuable to me. Special thanks to the following individuals: Sherri Rosenberg, Supervisor; Kim Pearson, Coach/Trainer; Navjeet Singh, Supervisor; Eduardo Kiryczun, HIT Operations Manager.