

Improving the CalFresh Enrollment Process for Applicants: CFPA Recommendations

CalFresh, known federally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, is a state-administered and county-run benefit. Efforts to improve the CalFresh application process involve change at the local, state, and federal level. The recommendations in this document are for policymakers and CalFresh administrators at the state and local levels.

Get the CalFresh name out there

In 2010, California renamed what is known federally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to CalFresh. Based on extensive focus group testing, *CalFresh: Better Food for Better Living*, emerged as a positive name and brand for benefits that support a health via the purchase of fresh foods.

Recommendations:

- Conduct an expanded communication campaign to increase the use of the CalFresh name and brand.
- Provide current and future clients with updated materials that include the new name and brand.

Applicants' Testimony:*

"[CalFresh] sounds good. It sounds healthy... fresh foods... nutritious."

"A lot of people don't know it is called CalFresh. They still think it is called food stamps."

Promote and encourage applications online and over the phone, as well as in person

As state agencies, counties, and local partners work to improve access to the CalFresh application, particularly over the phone and online, applicants need to know that out-of-office options exist and how to use them. In addition, new messaging promoting new and simplified application requirements would help to encourage participation across the board.

"Yes, I went in-person... Isn't that what everyone has to do?"

"I thought it was going to be more difficult, but it was not difficult at all applying online."

Recommendations:

- A large scale communications campaign needs to convey the simple steps now required to apply for CalFresh with the option of not entering the office.
- Messaging should incorporate an effort to correct "myths" about CalFresh eligibility.
- Convene an internet access meeting to review options to expedite client access to the correct online portals and standardize the information available.
- Applicants should be able to access a statewide hotline that can connect them to their local county office and provide the online link for CalFresh applications in every county.
- All CalFresh materials should mention the numerous application methods- voice messages at local offices, brochures, in-office posters, county websites, etc.

* Interviews were conducted by Lake Research Partners in a variety of counties, in both English and Spanish, with a diverse group of 18 applicants in January- March 2012. Excerpts from the interviews are included here to provide a sense of the human experiences related to CFPA's recommendations, which are informed through a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative research.

Keep it straightforward

Over the past few years, state agencies have made significant progress in simplifying the CalFresh application process. Continued efforts to make the application clear and to develop a standard enrollment process that all applicants should expect would help make the process uniform within and between counties across the state.

"I had everything at home. I just did not know what I needed to bring. No one told me on the first day."

Recommendations:

- Applicants should receive a clear and consistent list of the information they need to collect before they apply for benefits. No matter how or where they apply.
- Whether they apply online, over the phone, or in-person, applicants should leave knowing the general timeline for processing of applications, likely follow-up, and next steps.
- Provide a uniform checklist or follow-up list to decrease confusion among applicants and reduce multiple calls to check on the status of cases. Enable applicants to contact caseworker by email or check case status online.

"It is really hard to get in contact with the worker."

Transitioning from applicants to participants

A CalFresh applicant's experience does not end after eligibility determination. Ensuring that participants know when and how to maintain benefits, who to contact, etc. would prevent clients from inadvertently dropping-off the program, thus saving time and administrative costs associated with duplicate applications.

Recommendations:

- Once an applicant has been determined eligible for CalFresh, they should receive clear and uniform instructions for how to activate and maintain their benefits, who they can check in with about their case's status, and how to use their EBT card. Clear upfront directions for applicants can reduce churning and keep eligible families enrolled.
- Improve CalFresh customer service to help maintain participant eligibility and reduce multiple applications by providing comment cards or feedback forms to gather input from applicants/participants. Local processes for receiving comments/feedback and incorporating suggestions into practice must be developed.

Further connect applicants with other benefits

Because of overlapping eligibility standards, many CalFresh applicants are eligible for other public benefits (e.g. health benefits). Connecting applicants to additional benefits upfront can save time for applicants and administrators and eliminate the need for the applicant to start a new application process.

"She answered all the questions I had. She told me about MediCal and Healthy Families. She made sure I checked the box on the application... I feel she helped me."

Recommendations

- Let applicants know about other benefits for which they may be eligible and provide brief explanations of what those benefits provide. Applicants are not always aware that other benefit programs, for which they may be eligible, exist or what additional information they may need to provide to apply for these benefits.