

MYTHS AND FACTS

The 411 on Phone Interviews in California

MYTH: People like to come into the office. They don't want phone interviews.

FACT: It is clear that many people want phone interviews based on experience in California and in the rest of the country. In California, several counties liberally utilized "hardship exemptions" to allow interviews to occur by phone or other means. Additionally, some counties have already embraced phone interviews for recertification for large portions of their caseloads. Some states, like Utah, have moved almost exclusively to phone interviews.

This new phone interview policy in California allows for people to get an in-office interview if they want one or for the county to require it to verify conditions of eligibility. So if applicants don't want an interview, they don't have to have one; but based on past experience we expect many will want the flexibility of phone interviews. They should have that chance.

MYTH: Providing phone interviews to all households will slow down the process.

FACT: With the proper training, phone interviews allow the application process to move forward smoothly and quickly. There are key techniques to ensure a successful and accurate phone interview, such as knowing when to ask open-ended or close-ended questions, and to avoid leading questions. Households are actively responding when answering questions in this way, and states have seen a correlation between active participation and accuracy. There are [several resources available](#) on this website to help counties train staff to schedule, conduct, and process a phone interview.

MYTH: We are unable to provide phone interviews to all households unless we have a call center, document imaging, electronic signature, and other technologies?

FACT: While it may seem that technology would make the phone interview process easier, it is clear that it is not necessary and the experiences across the state and country have shown that this is true. Instead, agencies are focusing on simple ways to meet their goals of increased access and participation to nutrition assistance with the phone interview.

For example, New Mexico does not currently have the technology for document imaging and found that households were not completing the interview packets. Given that they could not rely on technology to address the problem, they focused on simplifying their overloaded interview packets. As a result, they have seen an increase in completed documents returned to their office. In addition, Massachusetts and New Mexico do not currently have call centers, as is the case for many California counties. In these two states, as well as in some California counties, they adjusted their workflow to be focused on process management as opposed to case management. In this way, offices are able to triage the cases, better managing their office case load. For more information, please visit the "[Sample Documents](#)" section.

MYTH: If someone really needs food assistance, they will come into the office.

FACT: Over 70% of households eligible for food stamps in California are working households. If food stamp offices are generally open only during traditional work hours, why would someone want to jeopardize their employment to apply? There are indeed people who need assistance, but can't come to the office because of employment obligations. The phone interview option gives these working people and other applicants the flexibility interview by phone before or after work or during breaks – so that they do not have to lose time traveling to the office or waiting in line.

Based on USDA research, only 33% of eligible working people in California participate in food stamps. The remaining 66% haven't been coming into the office to apply – the phone interview provides a new tool to reach this population.

MYTH: Face-to-face interviews are better and faster for the client and worker.

FACT: Across the country, social services offices are moving towards providing phone interviews in lieu of face to face interviews, and other out of the office options for enrollment, as it allows the office to use their limited resources more efficiently and effectively. From Massachusetts to New Mexico to Oregon, states are finding that phone interviews provide an opportunity for to fine-tune their processes and manage their caseloads better. In fact, in Massachusetts, workers found phone interviews to be a quicker process as they can stay focused on the "business at hand." In California, many counties have moved to phone interviews for the same reasons.

From a client perspective, face-to-face interviews are a burdensome requirement to receiving nutrition assistance. Given the dire economy, more working families are finding themselves in need of support, looking to food stamps to provide the increased purchasing power of their earnings allowing them to make ends meet. The face-to-face interview places an enormous burden on working families.

This broader phone interview policy will increase access to and retention in the Food Stamp Program by working families across the state. Working families are able to access nutrition assistance without taking time off of work, making the process better and faster for more people. At the same time, under this policy, clients who prefer face-to-face interviews can request to receive on at the time of their application.

MYTH: With phone interviews, we will need to request more information from the client, which will make the process longer and decrease our timeliness.

FACT: First of all, this not just an issue for phone interviews. Even when applicants come into the office for a traditional in-office interview, they don't always come in with all of the necessary information. Follow-up is needed. Similarly, during a phone interview, the worker will need to identify what additional information is needed. This does not make the process any longer than the traditional interview.

Counties can take further steps to resolve this issue by:

- 1) Not requiring information when it is optional;
- 2) By using information provided by other parties other than the applicant to meet the need; and/or
- 3) By improving document handling and processing times.

MYTH: Phone interviews will increase my caseload, which is already enormous.

FACT: Phone interviews will enhance working families' access to and participation in nutrition assistance through food stamps. In addition, they provide local county offices and workers the opportunity to better manage their caseload and have greater control over the food stamp interviews.

Given the likelihood of increased participation, responding to the increase need of working families across the state, there are several actions that local county offices can take in anticipation, such as:

- Provide training on how to make the phone interview work for county offices. *Please see the [Sample Documents](#) page for sample training presentations from Los Angeles County, New York, and Oregon.*
- Provide documents to eligibility workers outlining helpful hints for phone interviews, as well as interview checklists and guide for verification requirements. *Please see the [Sample Documents](#) section for sample documents from Massachusetts, Oregon, New York, and Los Angeles County.*
- Evaluate workflow to identify ways to better manage caseload, provide timely services, and increase capacity to do more good. *Please join us at the [11th Annual Food Stamp Forum](#) to learn more about how New Mexico and select California counties have enhance the workflow of their food stamp processes.*

MYTH: Phone interviews increase error rates and fraud.

FACT: Phone interviews do not increase error rates or fraud. The USDA's Food and Nutrition Services has found this to be true and as a result, they have waived face-to-face interviews for nearly 35 states across the nation. In addition, given the positive outcomes of the phone interview policy in other states, FNS has extended the waiver period from 2 to 4 years for California.

Phone interviews and face-to-face interviews are similar. Eligibility workers will gather the same information and take the same actions for a phone interview as during a face-to-face interview. What is different is that phone interviews allow working families to access and participation in the food stamp program without jeopardizing their employment. In addition, with simple and proper training, counties can increase timeliness and decrease the volume of activity in the office, without jeopardizing the error rates and fraud. For sample training materials, please visit our [Sample Documents](#) section.