



CalFresh Partnership Group: Key Achievements from the First Two Years

Background

In 2013, Contra Costa County's Employment & Human Services Department (EHSD) embarked on an innovative, proactive approach to increasing CalFresh participation for county residents. CalFresh is California's version of the Federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps. EHSD knew that many Contra Costa residents were eligible for CalFresh but not receiving it, and decided to do something about it. Not only did EHSD want to improve the food security and lives of Contra Costa County residents, EHSD also saw CalFresh participation increases as a way to strengthen the local economy as CalFresh is a known revenue generator, adding up to \$1.79 for every \$1 in benefits spent. Not only were eligible residents failing to access these critical nutrition benefits, the County was losing millions of dollars in guaranteed state and federal funding allocated to help eligible residents.

EHSD realized the best way to attack this program was through partnerships. EHSD ultimately partnered with the Food Bank of Contra Costa & Solano, First 5/Family Economic Security Partnership (FESP), the Multi-Faith Action Coalition, the Ensuring Opportunity Campaign, and other community organizations to figure out why eligible residents weren't applying and ways to remove those barriers. The group set a goal of having at least 75% of eligible residents receiving CalFresh by May 2016.

Over the last two years, the CalFresh Partner Group (CPG) identified three key challenges:

- Community Challenges
- EHSD Resource Limitations
- Policy Roadblocks and the National Conversation on SNAP

Community Challenges

The Partner Group investigated why people who were eligible and food insecure would rather not apply for benefits and discovered the stigma people associated with receiving CalFresh (formerly known as Food Stamps) was a significant barrier. And then, there were the people who did not know they were eligible for CalFresh or were too proud to take a “handout”. Many CalFresh participants are the working poor and applying for benefits often resulted in lost wages as applicants had to take time off to complete the application process at local offices. The Partner Group needed to make accessing CalFresh benefits easier and more efficient to encourage people to apply while addressing stigma and notifying potential participants about their eligibility. The CalFresh Partner Group approached these Community Challenges in a number of ways, through education and outreach, improved program access, and strengthening community partners.

1. Referral Form

EHSD has expanded partnerships with community agencies to conduct outreach and assist residents in applying for CalFresh. This includes training agency personnel on basic CalFresh eligibility and how they can assist residents in applying. While the training provided by EHSD and the Food Bank is comprehensive, it was discovered that agency representatives rarely felt confident enough to be responsible for the intensive work of providing application assistance. For this reason, the Food Bank created a CalFresh referral form. Using this form, the agency staff member can conduct a brief pre-screening for potential eligibility and collect the client’s basic information. The agency can then pass on this information to the Food Bank who contacts the client to help them complete an application. The referral form is available in hard copy as well as online. The Food Bank has completed 82 of applications as a result of the new referral form.

2. CalFresh Express

To increase outreach and access to CalFresh to local residents, EHSD held a one day enrollment event at Davis Park Community Center in San Pablo. Residents could be interviewed and even granted CalFresh benefits that day. In June of 2015, EHSD sent 30 staff to process applications and conduct eligibility interviews. EHSD’s Information Technology (IT) personnel created a temporary office at the community center including laptop computers, printers, and copiers allowing staff to assist residents on site.

The event was in conjunction with the Food Bank (FB) and other community organizations. The FB had their Community Produce Program truck there, handing out fresh fruits and vegetables to families while they waited. Volunteers from the MultiFaith ACTION Coalition reviewed the program’s rights and responsibilities with applicants with oversight from EHSD personnel. The UC Cooperative Extension gave out tastings and promoted healthy eating through various games and activities. West Contra Costa Unified School District passed out lunches to children playing in the park. Overall, 74 new applications were taken and 48 families were approved for benefits.

3. Medi-Cal and School Lunch Mailings

The John Muir/Mt. Diablo Community Health Fund awarded a grant to the Food Bank for CalFresh Outreach. Partnering with EHSD, the Food Bank mailed postcards to households currently receiving Medi-Cal but not CalFresh. The Food Bank also partnered with local school districts to mail to families with children on free/reduced lunch. To date, 939 families have filled out CalFresh applications based on these mailings. Funds were also used to print posters advertising the CalFresh program that are posted in health clinics, food pantries, and other locations where low-income families are likely to visit.

4. CLEAN/Get CalFresh Pilot Project

In an effort to expedite the application process, the Food Bank and EHSD piloted a new application called CLEAN. CLEAN is a simplified version of the online CalFresh application that can be used on a tablet, smartphone or laptop. It was designed by Code for America for use by community based organizations. The application takes only about 5-10 minutes to complete and is much simpler for outreach workers in the field. Clients' documents can also be uploaded for submission with the application. The Food Bank continues to use CLEAN (now called 'Get CalFresh'). It has greatly streamlined the application process and makes filling out an online application while in line at a food distribution event more feasible.

5. Funding for a Public Perception Media Campaign

In July 2015, the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano was awarded a two year grant that enabled the hiring of two bilingual CalFresh workers to conduct outreach to the Latino community. The funding also will cover a large public-perception campaign, airing on television, radio and the internet. The main aim of the ads will be to dispel myths and negative perceptions about the CalFresh program and encourage participation. Pre- and post-surveys will be conducted to gauge changes in public perception.

6. CalFresh Outreach at VITA Sites

Food Bank volunteers have conducted CalFresh outreach at Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites throughout Contra Costa. Clients receiving tax assistance often have their necessary paperwork with them, so it is a perfect opportunity to apply for CalFresh while having the necessary verifications. Food Bank staff has also provided VITA workers with referral forms so they can refer a client they think may be eligible for CalFresh to the Food Bank for follow-up.

7. AB 402 Pilot with Pittsburg Unified

Working with Pittsburg Unified School District's Food and Nutrition Services department, EHSD has begun a pilot to implement AB 402. AB 402 states that school districts can share information from families who opt-in on their school meal application with the local CalFresh office. Families who opt-in are sent applications to apply for CalFresh, shortening the application process and allowing families to apply without coming in to the office.

Pittsburg has been working with EHSD and the Food Bank and added a question to their school meal application in 2015 to easily identify families that desire to also apply for CalFresh. The families' information could then be sent to EHSD to begin the CalFresh application process. In addition, the CalFresh group made a presentation to all of the Superintendents at a County Office of Education meeting encouraging them to consider implementing AB 402.

8. Mayoral and Board of Supervisors Outreach

EHSD, Multi-Faith ACTION volunteers, FESP and Ensuring Opportunity conducted an outreach campaign with local mayors to raise awareness of the CalFresh program and to highlight the program's economic benefit. During May 2015, local Mayors and Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors issued CalFresh Awareness Proclamations, posted links to the CalFresh application on their websites, and advertised the health benefits of the CalFresh program. To engage the Mayors, the CalFresh Partner Group members highlighted the economic benefit the program brings to the local economy. For every dollar in CalFresh benefits issued, \$1.79 is generated in local economic activity.



EHSD Resource Limitations

The CalFresh Partner Group also recognized that EHSD faced resource limitations as funding cuts, layoffs, and slow recovery from the Great Recession had impeded efforts to increase participation. EHSD hired a consultant to evaluate existing business practices and recommend improvements. In addition to the Business Process Evaluation, EHSD is partnering with the Food Bank and giving them Read-Only Access to case information so they can help Food Bank clients complete the CalFresh application process.

The CalFresh Partner Group has also witnessed the changing culture at EHSD which can be a difficult task for large bureaucratic organizations. Over the past few years, EHSD has undergone a considerable shift in how it engages the community in increasing CalFresh participation. This has included deeper partnerships like the CalFresh Partner Group which includes members from community organizations. EHSD has focused attention on how residents apply for CalFresh, why people cycle on and off CalFresh (churn), and how it can increase CalFresh participation overall in Contra Costa. This shift in attitude has led to strong community partnerships that allow EHSD to try innovative projects and secure private funding to test out more experimental ideas.

9. Business Process Evaluation

Continuous improvement and streamlined access to benefits are part of EHSD’s mission and to this end; EHSD hired a consultant to map current CalFresh business processes and analyze data and identify areas for improvement. It was determined that missed appointments are a large barrier for many applicants. EHSD is evaluating options to reduce missed appointments, including providing same day appointments, text appointment reminders, and expanding alternatives to face-to-face interviews such as phone and video conferencing. EHSD is also planning to conduct a pilot in the Antioch office, testing whether extra “hands on” help in the initial stages of the process increases the success rate among new clients.

EHSD is also working to identify and reduce “churn,” which is when clients cycle on and off the program in a short amount of time; specifically, applicants who reapply within three months of their semi-annual report being due. If those clients were able to maintain continuous enrollment, it would greatly reduce the workload of EHSD staff without an interruption in service for clients. EHSD has begun work in this area, with a first step being the implementation of text reminders to clients when their reports are due.

10. Read-Only Access

To further support Food Bank efforts to assist clients more directly, EHSD will be working to start a pilot to give the Food Bank read-only access to CalWIN, EHSD’s CalFresh computer operating system. This will enable Food Bank staff to look up clients’ case status in real time, remind clients of their appointments, let them know what paperwork they are missing, etc. This should improve timely processing while also saving EHSD staff time. Currently the Food Bank has to contact EHSD staff to get case updates, so this will significantly streamline access to data.

Policy Roadblocks and the National Conversation on SNAP

As the CalFresh Partner Group worked at increasing access to increase participation, it was clear that changes at the local, State, and National level would be helpful, or even sometimes necessary, to improve access to CalFresh. Current CalFresh policies limit accessibility, including an application process that can be arduous for residents with young children, those who work

traditional hours, those who are disabled, and the elderly. Policy changes that allow residents to apply over the phone, through the mail, or on-line are recent additions, but work is still needed to make CalFresh as accessible as possible.

In 2016, the CalFresh Partner Group is looking to CalFresh advocacy to increase participation. Several partner organizations including the Food Bank, California Welfare Directors Association (CWDA), EHSD, Ensuring Opportunities, and First 5, have legislative platforms that include CalFresh concerns. There is legislative activity seeking to address college student food insecurity, providing supplemental benefits in the summer to families with school-age children, and simplifying the application process by using electronic employment databases to verify income.

Next Steps

The CalFresh Partner Group started with a goal of increasing CalFresh participation in Contra Costa to 75% of all eligible households. How are we doing on that goal? Unfortunately, because key data will not be available for another 6 to 12 months, we will need to wait a bit longer before we can provide a full response.

However, we can point to several promising trends indicating some level of success, even if the challenging goal of 75% is not met. From 2012 to 2014 (the most recent year for which there are available data), the percentage of eligible residents receiving CalFresh in Contra Costa County improved from 50% to 57%. Furthermore, several trends support the notion that the pool of eligible county residents is shrinking (likely in large part due to the improving economy). Thus, we are proud that CalFresh enrollment has not declined, as it has for other means-tested programs, like CalWORKs.

In the next year, the CalFresh Partner Group will continue to address the three identified challenge areas; Community Challenges, EHSD Resource limitations, and Policy Roadblocks and the National Conversation on SNAP.

What is already clear is that the CalFresh Partner Group has been a success. CPG will continue forging a path to partner with community organizations on a shared goal; strengthening its ability to evaluate and modify processes and procedures; and fostering a mindset that working together is always better.