

Improving Food Stamps in Alameda County and Beyond

Recommendations to Strengthen Social Services Agency Food Stamp Procedures and Community Outreach Practices



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Forward

The Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellowship

The Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellowship is a program of the Congressional Hunger Center (CHC), a bipartisan government nonprofit organization that seeks to eradicate hunger by developing leaders. Each year, the CHC places 24 Emerson Fellows across the country for five-month assignments out in the field, followed by a five-month policy assignment in Washington, DC. As a member of the twelfth class of Emerson Fellows, the CHC placed me with the Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) and the Alameda County Community Food Bank (ACCFB) for my field assignment. Brigit Adamus, my CHC partner in the San Francisco Bay Area, was placed with the San Francisco Department of Social Services and completed a cost assessment of various food stamp (FS) outreach models employed by counties in several west coast states, including California.

Executive Summary

During the fall of 2002, The Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) partnered with the Alameda County Community Food Bank (ACCFB) to develop a countywide food stamp (FS) outreach network that would increase the FS participation rate. Since the FS outreach initiative began, Alameda County Community Based Organizations (CBOs) have pre-screened over 3,400 residents for FS eligibility and SSA has experienced a 72 percent increase in its Non-Assistance Food Stamps (NAFS) caseload.¹ Despite these successes, SSA has ultimately denied a high rate of pre-screened applicants for failing to finish the application process.

Based on an in-depth analysis of SSA's internal processes and how they can best interface with the external FS outreach efforts of Alameda County CBOs, this report presents a series of suggestions for improving food stamp application processing in Alameda County. I crafted the report's recommendations with the goal of formulating ideas that are cost effective and viable at the local level. Although the particulars of the report's analysis are directed toward SSA, the broad themes of the proposals are applicable to counties across California and elsewhere. Moreover, the process of undertaking a focused examination of a county's FS program from the dual perspectives of the social services agency and the CBO community is relevant throughout the United States.

Recommendations to Improve SSA's Procedures

SSA should:

1. Develop a phone-in FS process using a countywide FS application hotline.
2. Ensure that a standardized procedure exists for processing Emergency Food Stamps.
3. Streamline the office orientation process.
4. Increase the number of intake interview timeslots and align them with the waiting room orientation timeslots.
5. Increase the number of FS-only intake eligibility workers.
6. Continue to expand language capabilities at office locations.
7. Promptly scan incoming mail so that it is available for workers to process.
8. Explore consolidating the duties of clerical staff that work behind the scenes to prepare applications for processing.
9. Consider reinstating a modified and expanded Client Contact Unit.
10. Formalize important procedural changes as official SSA Business Processes (operating procedures).
11. Require all four office locations to track FS outreach applications to ensure their delivery.

FS Outreach Recommendations

CBOs and advocates, in partnership with SSA should:

12. Introduce "authorization for release of information" forms into their outreach procedures.
13. Expand their language services.
14. Develop an official certification process for CBO FS outreach workers.
15. Move toward a FS outreach setup that allows CBOs to complete the entire FS application.
16. Continue to explore the development of an electronic FS application.
17. Blend new, proposed FS phone-in process with FS outreach system.
18. Conduct a FS outreach media campaign in Alameda County.

¹ Between November 2002 and November 2005, the number of households receiving Non-Assistance Food Stamps (NAFS) in Alameda County has increased from 6,996 to 12,066. "Food Stamp Program Participation and Benefit Issuance Report." California Department of Social Services: Sacramento, CA. November 2002 and November 2005. Available at: http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research/DFA256-Foo_422.htm.

I. Project Description

This report is a culmination of my five-month placement in Alameda County working with the Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) and the Alameda County Community Food Bank (ACCFB). It is designed both for my host organizations and other counties across California and the US, interested in reforming internal county food stamp (FS) application procedures or improving food stamp outreach programs. My goal is for the report to be a narrative of my observations of the food stamp program in Alameda County and a collection of documents and tools I developed along the way, as well as a useful set of recommendations for improving the local administration of Alameda County's Food Stamp Program.

My host organizations charged me with strengthening the relationship between ACCFB and SSA and improving county food stamp policies and procedures to increase participation. Pursuant to those goals, I began by tracking 60 FS applications through the process to examine barriers to approval. Then, I conducted interviews with the 39 eligibility workers assigned to those applications, as well as approximately 45 clerical staff members and supervisors at SSA to understand how applications are processed. I also developed a client interview tool designed for interviewing individuals who applied for food stamps, but failed to complete the application process. Then, in partnership with Elizabeth Gomez, Winnie Yi, and Suzanne Ryan, I pilot tested this tool on a sample of FS applicants who applied in October, November, and December of 2005.

I also hope that my work builds on the efforts of Congressional Hunger Fellows placed in California during the previous two years. In 2003, Rachel Lopez worked with the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank to develop a comprehensive set of action items to improve California's FS program. Her recommendations focused on issues such as how to streamline the application process, improve conditions and procedures at social services offices, increase local partnerships among service providers, and reduce state and federal obstacles to participation.² Her work helped generate greater awareness in California of the major shortcomings facing the Food Stamp Program at the local, state, and federal levels.

Last year, Dennis Barrett and Laura Tatum, 2004 Hunger Fellows, placed in Fresno and Tulare counties, were tasked with establishing food stamp outreach programs in their respective counties, much like the system currently in place in Alameda County. They embarked on an ambitious and highly successful food stamp outreach project involving a media campaign, the creation of county task forces, and enrollment workshops.³ Their efforts have helped Fresno and Tulare counties increase their non-assistance food stamp (NAFS) participation rates by 67 percent and 87 percent between August 2004 and August 2005.⁴

My project involves a focused analysis of the food stamp system as a whole in Alameda County, especially SSA's internal application processing system and how the CBO network's one-on-one application assistance outreach model harmonizes with that system. Having arrived at Alameda County with a CBO network outreach framework already in place, as opposed to Dennis and Laura, my task has been to examine and fine-tune Alameda's FS outreach, both at the county office and CBO level, in ways that effectively increase food stamp participation, are cost effective, and have potential applicability to counties throughout California and elsewhere. Moreover, my joint

² See Lopez, Rachel and Sharp, Matthew. *Serving Up Solutions*. A Publication of the Congressional Hunger Center, California Food Policy Advocates, and the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank. February 2004.

³ See Barrett, Dennis and Tatum, Laura. *Growing Health and Wealth: Food Stamp Outreach and Participation California's Central Valley and Beyond*. A Publication of the Community Food Bank of Fresno County, FoodLink for Tulare County and The Congressional Hunger Center. February 4th, 2005.

⁴ "Food Stamp Program Participation and Benefit Issuance Report." California Department of Social Services. Available at: <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research/res/pdf/DFA%20256/2005/DFA256aug05.pdf>.

placement with ACCFB and SSA permitted me to take the broad policy proposals of the 2003 Hunger Fellows one step further and offer suggestions based on my in-house experience working in a county social services office.

Along with Brigit's FS outreach cost-effectiveness study, which will inform counties across California and elsewhere of the positive and negative attributes of several popular FS outreach models, my report will help Alameda County and other counties improve their FS application processing systems and tailor their outreach techniques to the internal procedures of the social services agency. Our work is based on a focused, case-study approach that analyzes specific county FS systems along with their associated outreach programs and examines ways to augment and enhance them. This approach allows us to provide tangible, concrete recommendations for the counties we evaluated. In addition, I think our projects will aid other counties that have already adopted innovative FS outreach and application processing procedures as they further refine their systems, as well as counties interested in implementing more dramatic changes to their county processes or initiating FS outreach programs in the future.

The first section of the report provides background information regarding the processes and setup of SSA. Then, the second section details findings and recommendations to improve SSA procedures, based on my observations and analysis. In sections three and four, I offer some suggestions to improve Alameda County's FS outreach system and strengthen SSA's partnership with area CBOs. The fifth section details the client interview tool's development, intended uses and learning from the pilot interviews. Finally, in section six, I provide a personal reflection of my experiences working for SSA and ACCFB.

Hunger and Food Stamps in Alameda County: A Brief Overview

With 36 million food insecure individuals residing in the United States (US) today and four million in California alone, any realistic solution to the hunger pandemic seems to require a national response, giant in reach and scope.⁵ Volunteers at churches, pantries, and soup kitchens across the nation struggle to meet the immediate need of so vast a group, working hard with the limited resources they have. However, they are unable to offer a sustainable and lasting solution to the problem of poverty in America.

Even our government's most basic safeguard against hunger, the Food Stamp Program, reveals the challenges of crafting sweeping federal anti-poverty legislation. Just because the federal government appropriates the money, does not mean it will reach those in need. The most recent USDA data indicates that 56 percent of those eligible for food stamps across the US received them in 2003; for California, that number is 48 percent.⁶ In social services offices across California and the rest of the US, as eligibility workers (EWs) determine who is entitled to receive food stamps, they continually balance complex regulations and requirements that arise out of political compromises inherent in the legislative process.

Here, at the front lines of federal social programs, one-size-fits-all legislation clashes with the local intricacies of cities and counties across the country, making it difficult for food stamps to reach all of those in need. In Alameda County, California, poor food stamp participation rates have prompted the Social Services Agency (SSA) and local community based organizations (CBO) to

⁵ "California" and "United States." *State of the States 2003*. Food Research and Action Center: Washington, DC. 2003.

⁶ Castner, L. and A. Schirm (2005). *Reaching Those in Need: State Food Stamp Participation Rates in 2003*. USDA. Food and Nutrition Service. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc, Washington, D.C.

initiate a series of outreach and program simplification measures. A 2001 study by the Alameda County Community Food Bank (ACCFB) found that only 21 percent of individuals accessing emergency food in Alameda County received food stamps, despite the fact that 80 percent of those surveyed were income eligible.⁷ Moreover, the 21 percent figure was down from 37 percent in 1997, a possible indication that low-income individuals faced increased barriers in obtaining food stamps.

Beginning in late 2002, SSA and ACCFB initiated a Food Stamp Promotion Project (The Project), which involved training a network of CBO outreach workers from throughout the county in FS pre-screening techniques. The Project adopted a one-on-one application assistance model designed to generate applications with a high likelihood of approval. Since SSA only has one Program Specialist⁸ to administer the FS Program and no funding for FS outreach staff, the willingness of ACCFB to organize a network of CBO partners has been instrumental in enabling FS outreach to occur in Alameda County.

During the past three years, this network has continued to expand as SSA and ACCFB have held 27 workshops that trained 246 outreach workers; in addition, ACCFB has conducted roughly 100 workshops to pre-screen individuals for food stamps.⁹ To date, CBO outreach partners have pre-screened over 3,400 Alameda households for food stamps, finding approximately 1,800 to be potentially eligible for food stamps.¹⁰ Between 2003 and 2005, the number of households receiving NAFS in Alameda County has increased by 72 percent.¹¹

Despite the sustained efforts of Alameda County CBOs to enroll individuals on food stamps, more than half of the applications generated through FS outreach have ultimately been denied, preventing the FS participation rate from increasing as much as it could.¹² The majority of FS outreach applicants have been denied for reasons such as: failure to provide essential information, failure to attend a face-to-face interview, or failure to complete the application process. This bodes poorly not only for low-income individuals in need of food and nutrition services, but also for SSA, which expends its limited personnel resources each time it processes an application. In order for SSA, ACCFB and other Alameda County CBOs to effectively increase the food stamp participation rate in Alameda County, their partnership must generate approvable applications.

Overview of Alameda County and the City of Oakland

Alameda County is located on the East Side of the San Francisco Bay, stretching from Berkeley in the north to Fremont in the south and out to Dublin and Livermore in the East. The county possesses an extremely diverse population, with approximately two-thirds of residents coming

⁷ Barthalow, Jessica, Chanse, Ursula, Marquez, Lily, and Glesman, Caroline (2001). *Hunger: The Faces and Facts*. Alameda County Community Food Bank: Oakland, CA.

⁸ At SSA, the FS Program is administered by a Program Specialist, who oversees all internal FS procedures and issues final interpretations of all regulations.

⁹ Elizabeth Gomez, Community Outreach Coordinator, Alameda County Community Food Bank: Oakland, CA. Information provided to author on February 1st, 2006.

¹⁰ Ibid. These numbers are only for ACCFB and Lao Family Community Development Inc., which have been the lead FS outreach CBOs. There is no accurate record of the true total number of individuals pre-screened by Alameda County CBOs during the past three years.

¹¹ "Food Stamp Program Participation and Benefit Issuance Report." California Department of Social Services: Sacramento, CA. November 2002 and November 2005. Available at: http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research/DFA256-Foo_422.htm.

¹² Julia Martinez, Food Stamp Program Specialist, Alameda County Social Services Agency: Alameda County, CA. Information provided to author on February 8th, 2006.

from nonwhite or mixed-race backgrounds.¹³ In terms of specific minority groups, this breaks down to 20 percent Asian, 19 percent Hispanic, 15 percent black/African American and roughly 10 percent coming from other racial backgrounds.¹⁴ In addition, nearly 30 percent of Alameda County residents were born in foreign countries.

In terms of income statistics, 11 percent of county residents and 20 percent of Oakland residents live below the poverty line.¹⁵ The average federal poverty rate is about 12 percent; however, the San Francisco Bay Area is considered one of the five most expensive places to live in the U.S., which makes it difficult even for families slightly above the poverty threshold to afford basic living expenses.¹⁶ In 2000, several California nonprofit organizations estimated that a family of four would need more than \$50,000 per year to meet their expenses in Alameda County.¹⁷

Target Populations in Alameda County

A specific focus of Alameda County's food stamp outreach has been to increase participation rates among immigrant populations. Between September 2002 and December 2003, Alameda County's Non-Assistance Food Stamp (NAFS)¹⁸ caseload increased by 13 percent; however, most of the gains were among Spanish and English-speaking populations.¹⁹ Individuals that speak Asian languages actually experienced a net decrease in FS participation rate during that period, sparking concern that The Project was failing to reach a diversity of ethnic and language backgrounds.

Between November 2002 and December 2003, The Project's Steering Committee convened a series of focus groups to examine obstacles faced by immigrant populations in accessing FS benefits. The focus groups identified several barriers such as: "language access issues, complicated eligibility rules, confusion about 'public charge' and sponsor liability rules, and fear of disclosing immigration status and social security numbers."²⁰ In response to these findings, ACCFB and SSA partnered with Lao Family Services, an organization with staff fluent in over 15 Asian and Middle Eastern languages, as well as several other organizations to increase the language capabilities of the FS outreach network engaged in application assistance.

¹³ Bay Area Census 2000. Metropolitan Transportation Commission: Oakland, CA. Available at: <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/counties/AlamedaCounty.htm>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See "Poverty Spreads." *CNN Money*. August 24th, 2004. Available at: http://money.cnn.com/2004/08/26/news/economy/poverty_survey/. See also "World's Most Expensive Cities." *CNN Money*. June 14th, 2004. Available at: <http://money.cnn.com/2004/06/11/pf/costofliving/?cnn=yes>.

¹⁷ See a) Equal Rights Advocates (<http://www.equalrights.org/welfare/ssavg.htm>); b) Economic Policy Institute (<http://www.epinet.org/datazone>); c) The California Budget Project (http://www.cbp.org/2005/0509_mem.pdf).

¹⁸ NAFS refers to Food Stamps without cash aid. When someone receives Food Stamps through welfare, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), it is referred to as Public Assistance Food Stamps.

¹⁹ See "Immigrant Food Stamp Promotion Project." Grant Request Submitted by the City of Oakland to USDA. October 2004. City of Oakland: Oakland, CA.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 5.

II. Examining SSA's FS Application Process

The primary task of my field placement involved an in-depth examination of SSA's in-house procedures to determine how FS applications could be processed more efficiently and accurately. Pursuant to this goal, I assembled a pool of 60 FS applications generated through CBO outreach efforts during the months of September and October. First, I tracked these applications through the application process to isolate relevant factors such as eligibility worker actions, application processing time, and common denial reasons. Simultaneously, I conducted interviews with the eligibility workers assigned to these cases, as well as several categories of relevant clerical staff involved with the processing of FS applications.

In this section, I provide some background information regarding standard FS procedures at Alameda County, taking into consideration the impact of a recently implemented eligibility determination system called CalWIN. I also describe proposed FS procedure modifications devised by Julia Martinez (FS Program Specialist for Alameda County) and myself that would allow an applicant to complete a FS application without ever visiting an office. In addition, I discuss the process of conducting my interviews with SSA staff and provide an overview of my interview results. Finally, I present a series of limitations with the current FS system in Alameda County, as well as possible improvements, all of which could be implemented without drastic policy changes or significant monetary costs.

Visiting the SSA Offices: An Overview

Alameda County SSA has four primary offices – The North County Multiservice Center, The Eastmont Self-Sufficiency Center, The Enterprise Office, and the Eden Multiservice Center – each designed to serve a different geographic area within Alameda County. These four offices provide an array of services to clients, such as Food Stamps, CalWORKS, MediCal, and General Assistance (GA). Although the multiservice centers are best equipped for residents interested in accessing a variety of social services, Alameda County possesses an open door policy, meaning that individuals can submit an application for any of the offered programs at any of the four offices.²¹

The FS application process varies to some extent depending on whether an individual mails-in an application or submits an application in person. In addition, each office has slightly different procedures for processing applications, although the recent adoption of CalWIN promoted increased uniformity of procedures across offices.²² There are some common staff positions across offices that are involved with processing FS applications, including Mailroom Clerks, Eligibility Support Clerks, Data Input Clerks, Client Contact Unit workers, and Ongoing/Intake eligibility staff.²³

Electronic Eligibility Determination Software

In California, there are currently five electronic systems in place for determining FS eligibility: Welfare Case Data System (WCDS), Interim Statewide Automated Welfare System

²¹ In addition, SSA has 2 outstations, one in Livermore and one in Fremont. Individuals can submit applications and materials at an outstation, but they will be assigned an EW at the Hayward office.

²² See "CalWIN Proposed INTAKE Business Model – CALWORKS, Food Stamps, GA." Alameda County Social Service Agency: Alameda County, CA.

²³ This report is designed to be read by in-house SSA staff as well as outside advocates and CBO employees. Consequently, I have attached a glossary of terms for individuals not familiar with specific SSA terminology.

(ISAWS), CalWORKS Information Network (CalWIN), Consortium IV (C-IV), and Los Angeles Eligibility Automated Evaluation Determination and Reporting (LEADER).²⁴ CalWIN and C-IV are currently replacing both WCDS and ISAWS. Eighteen California counties, including Alameda County, are currently in the process of adopting CalWIN, which is a new, windows-based eligibility determination software system.²⁵ Alameda County switched to CalWIN on December 5th, 2005, replacing WCDS, a command-line style²⁶ software program in place since November 1981. The new CalWIN system – which is compatible with all social service programs – promises to modernize Alameda County’s application processing capabilities, streamline in-house processing techniques, and standardize county procedures between offices.

Once Alameda County works through the initial kinks and glitches involved with implementing the new software, CalWIN’s benefits should be numerous. For example, CalWIN permits the real time editing of case information, whereas revisions made with WCDS required a one-day delay to view changes. Likewise, CalWIN automates a wide array of previously manual processes, including case assignment, appointment scheduling, eligibility determination and benefit calculation. The user-friendly windows based approach also automatically presents specific screens, fields and tabs according to program. In addition, CalWIN allows employees to send and receive electronic alerts, which enables clerical staff to notify a worker that a new case has been assigned or that a client has arrived for an appointment. Finally, CalWIN will interface with a wide variety of external automated systems, including: Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT), State Quality Control (QC) and the MediCal Eligibility Determination System (MEDS).²⁷

Every state operates electronic eligibility determination systems to perform a variety of case maintenance and eligibility determination functions for food stamps and other government programs. When social services programs are administered at the state level, there are generally fewer systems than in states where each county independently administers social services programs. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services profiles some 400 different eligibility determinations currently in use across the nation.²⁸

Eligibility determination systems significantly impact the specific processes a social services agency adopts to implement the food stamp program, and hence, the experience of an applicant. For example, a highly-advanced software system enables an eligibility worker to input information and calculate benefits on the spot, which speeds up the application process and reduces error compared with a system where many tasks are manual. Nevertheless, all social services agencies are capable of processing applications manually, in the event that the electronic system temporarily fails.

²⁴ “All Systems Profiles.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Washington, DC. Available at: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/nhsitrcapps/main.jsp?pageID=listprofiles>.

²⁵ The following is a list of the 18 California counties implementing CalWIN between January 1st, 2005 and July 3rd, 2006: Placer, Sacramento, Yolo, Santa Cruz, Santa Clara, Solano, Contra Costa, Sonoma, San Mateo, San Francisco, Alameda, Tulare, Orange, Santa Barbara, Ventura, San Luis Obispo, San Diego, and Fresno.

²⁶ Modern computer programs employ a graphical interface, in which the user interacts with the computer using windows, menus, icons, text and other graphics. Before the development of graphical interfaces, computer programs used a command-line interface, in which a user interacted with a computer using simple, text-only prompts.

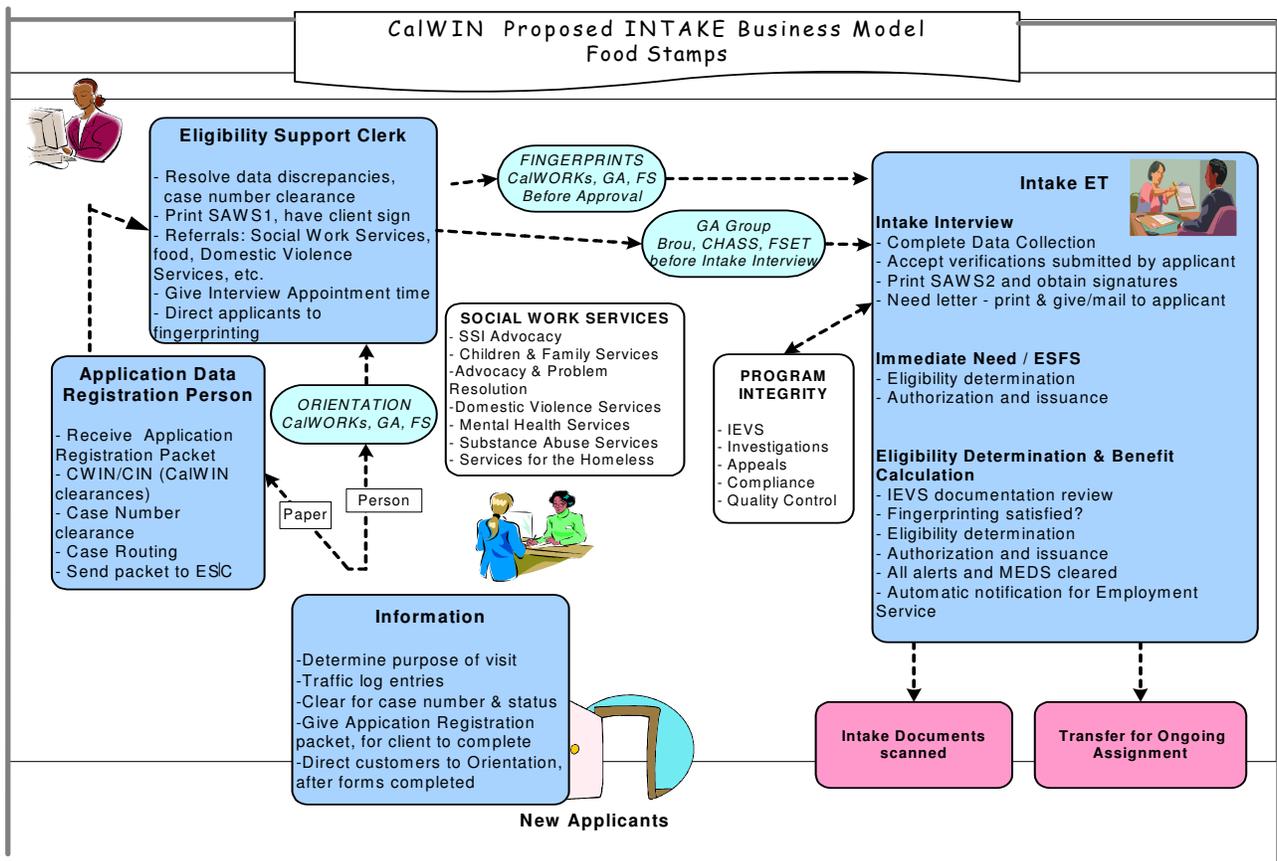
²⁷ “CalWIN: About CalWIN.” Alameda County Social Services Agency: Alameda County, CA. December, 2005.

²⁸ “All Systems Profiles.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Washington, DC. Available at: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/nhsitrcapps/main.jsp?pageID=listprofiles>.

Walk-in Procedure

Prior to CalWIN's implementation, Alameda County's four offices each employed differing procedures for food stamp applicants who walked-in to apply. Although CalWIN is no panacea, it has generated considerable uniformity across offices.²⁹ When a new applicant walks in to apply, he or she first goes to the information booth, where a clerk ascertains the purpose of the visit, determines if he or she is in the CalWIN database and distributes an application registration packet.³⁰ Then, the applicant attends an orientation that provides an overview of various social services programs, to help the individual decide what type of aid they need.

Concurrently, a clerk registers the individual's application information into CalWIN. Under WCDS, which was not a real time program, individuals could not complete the Statewide Finger Imaging System (SFIS) requirement until the next day. Under CalWIN, however, once the application registration process is complete, clerical staff takes the customer's finger image following orientation. Finally, the applicant meets with an Intake EW for a face-to-face interview, during which he or she will provide verifications and documentation for processing. If the individual is seeking Emergency Food Stamps (ESFS), the EW will determine eligibility during the interview and concurrently authorize benefits.



²⁹ See "CalWIN Proposed INTAKE Business Model- CALWORKS, Food Stamps, GA." Alameda County Social Services Agency: Alameda County, CA.

³⁰ This is a general packet designed to obtain information needed to register the person in CalWIN, not a specific application for any program.

III. Recommendations to Improve SSA's Procedures

A). Improving Office Procedure

During my examination of SSA's internal processes, which involved tracking 60 FS applications and interviewing approximately 85 eligibility workers and clerical staff, I identified a variety of issues that need to be addressed. Certain issues pertained to minute processes specific only to Alameda County or even to individual offices. Many issues, however, had countywide significance and implications for FS procedures in other counties. In this section, I outline my observations, findings and recommendations.

Promoting the following procedures will create a more customer-friendly process, which in turn has benefits for SSA. An easier application process will boost Alameda's FS participation rate, especially among groups facing obstacles to making office visits. Likewise, SSA's image among advocates and clients will improve, as applicants have increased opportunities to apply for food stamps without coming into the office. Fewer clients in the office also mean less congestion for walk-in applicants and decreased demands on staff in the office waiting rooms.

1. Recommendation: Develop a phone-in & mail-in FS application process for eligible households.

Key Points:

- ❑ Applicants should be able to call a phone number and request a FS application.
- ❑ Applicants who obtain an application by phone will mail back the application and verifications once a hardship is determined. The face-to-face interview should then be completed over the phone.
- ❑ If the individual does not return the application after 20 days, a reminder notice should be sent.
- ❑ MediCal has a similar system in place that allows applicants to initiate an application over the phone, which could serve as a model for FS.

As a way to improve access for individuals applying for FS, Julia Martinez and I have developed a proposed procedure that would enable Alameda residents with certain hardships to apply for FS without coming to the office. The new FS procedures draw heavily from SSA's existing MediCal application process. Under the new proposed FS procedures, a FS applicant can call a county hotline to request a mailed FS application.³¹ First, a clerk will receive the call and record basic information about the applicant; then, in order to mail the application, the clerk will explain the application process to the client. If a client does not return the application within 20 days, SSA will send them a courtesy reminder notice.³² Once the applications are returned to SSA, the applicant will be considered for a waiver of the face-to-face interview and SFIS, instead completing a telephone interview with his or her caseworker.³³

³¹ The entire FS application will be mailed out, including the DFA 285 A1 (Part I), DFA 285 A2 (Statement of Facts) and DFA 285 A3 (Rights and Responsibilities).

³² The reminder notice will not be an official NOA, as the county will not have an actual FS application until the client returns the signed application forms.

³³ For greater detail, see "Moving Outside of the Office: Proposed Food Stamp Application Process," Appendix E.

Presently, MediCal applicants have three options that facilitate remote applications, including a mail-in-process, a phone-in process and an electronic application process. The mail-in and phone-in processes begin with a call to the MediCal application hotline, where a clerk provides the individual with the option of initiating an application over the phone, or receiving an application in the mail to complete at his or her leisure. If the applicant selects the phone application process, the clerk will complete part I of the MediCal application,³⁴ sign the application as an authorized representative of the individual and mail out the remaining portions. Under this approach, the date of aid is preserved for the applicant, who has 60 days to return the completed application.³⁵

Alameda County residents also have the option to apply for MediCal using One-E-App, an electronic application system. Authorized individuals in hospitals and clinics complete a One-E-App application, which is automatically submitted to SSA for processing. One-E-App provides both applicants and SSA with a quick, easy-to-complete option for completing a MediCal application.

Unfortunately, certain barriers prevent the Food Stamp Program from adopting some of the MediCal innovations. Federal regulations prohibit county employees from serving as an authorized representative for a FS applicant, meaning that the date of aid will not begin until a signed application is received, regardless of when the initial phone call took place. Nevertheless, the new FS process will provide clients with certain hardships an avenue for completing an application without making a single office visit, which is an important and innovative measure.

2. Recommendation: SSA should ensure that a standardized procedure for processing Emergency Food Stamps (ESFS) is followed by all offices.

Key Points:

- ❑ Intake workers should process ESFS applications of new SSA customers.
- ❑ A reinstated CCU should process ESFS applications for customers who already have an ongoing worker.
- ❑ A reinstated CCU should process all ESFS applications during carryover.

The Food Stamp Program provides that certain individuals with especially minimal resources or shelter can obtain expedited or Emergency Food Stamps (ESFS) in three days.³⁶ While determining eligibility for ESFS is easier than for regular food stamp eligibility, largely because individuals seeking ESFS have few verifications that need to be processed, it is still a difficult burden for counties to meet the three-day requirement.

When I questioned clerical office staff and eligibility workers regarding ESFS office procedures, I obtained conflicting responses. Some ongoing workers indicated that they periodically receive an ESFS application either through the mail or forwarded from the waiting room. By the time they receive the application, three or more days have already passed and they cannot process the application in the expected timeframe. Other SSA staff noted that during carryover – the point at the end of the month when worker caseloads reach capacity – there is no consistent procedure for processing ESFS applications.

In general, Alameda County should have a uniform procedure for processing ESFS applications. Ongoing workers at all four offices mentioned the importance of completing ESFS

³⁴ Part I of the MediCal application refers to the SAWS I.

³⁵ If the entire application is mailed without a signed Part I, then the date of aid is not preserved.

³⁶ For basic eligibility information see “What Are Emergency Food Stamps.” Gettingfoodstamps.org: Boston, MA. Available at: <http://www.gettingfoodstamps.org/emergencyfs.htm>.

screening upfront, indicating that while this has improved, ESFS applications still arrive at their desks beyond the three-day time limit. Ongoing staff should not process these applications unless they personally interview the client. Intake workers should process ESFS requests for new applicants and the Client Contact Unit (CCU) should process ESFS applications for individuals already receiving some form of aid. During carryover, the CCU should be responsible for processing all ESFS requests during carryover.

3. Recommendation: SSA should streamline the office orientation process.

Key Points:

- ❑ Shorten the orientation video by removing the portions that discuss quarterly reporting. Explain quarterly reporting to clients during the face-to-face interview.
- ❑ Consider waiving the requirement to attend orientation if it will require a 2nd office trip.
- ❑ Increase the number of orientation time slots.

The orientation process in Alameda County warrants continued examination and consideration. Prior to CalWIN implementation, each office chose whether or not FS applicants attended an orientation consisting of an oral presentation by a clerk and a video describing the different types of aid offered at social services. At all of the county offices, applicants for CalWORKS and GA were required to attend orientation, scheduled approximately every one to two hours at each office. In response to CalWIN, new countywide SSA Business Processes require all FS applicants to attend orientation. The goal of showing an informational video to everyone is to provide applicants with basic knowledge about different social services programs, so that they can make an informed decision when choosing what programs are offered and what applications to fill out.

Under the new CalWIN system, the real time technology enables clerical staff to register an application in a matter of minutes. Consequently, while an applicant is attending orientation, their application is registered in CalWIN and they are able to complete the SFIS requirement after orientation instead of the next day. Nevertheless, requiring an individual to attend orientation can result in an extra office trip; if the applicant arrives during the afternoon, there may not be time to attend orientation and see a worker to complete the face-to-face interview. Thus, SSA should increase the number of orientation timeslots and consider waiving the orientation requirement when it will require a 2nd trip to the office.

In addition, the content of the 45-minute orientation video is confusing to some applicants. The first portion of the video, which provides an overview of the different assistance programs offered by SSA, is informative and relatively easy to follow. This is the portion of the video designed to provide applicants with an overview of SSA's many aid programs. However, the second part of the video delves into the quarterly reporting responsibilities of aid recipients and introduces a lot of terminology that makes it confusing. The client will be better served if this portion of the orientation video is removed and the EW explains quarterly reporting during the face-to-face interview.

4. Recommendation: Increase the number of intake interview timeslots and align them with the orientation timeslots.

Key Points:

- ❑ Reduce customer wait time and the likelihood of a return visit by increasing the number of intake interview timeslots.
- ❑ As intake workers grow more accustomed to CalWIN, increase the number of applications they take per day.
- ❑ Ensure that orientation timeslots and intake timeslots are harmonized.
- ❑ When possible, apply hardship waiver of the face-to-face interview requirement, instead offering a telephone interview to prevent families with hardships from returning to the office.

Like the orientation process, the intake workers conduct interviews at pre-set times throughout the day. These timeslots generally occur between late morning and mid-afternoon. At each timeslot, intake workers meet with a set number of applicants, with slots sometimes filling-up by early afternoon. Moreover, applicants who arrive during the afternoon might not be able to complete orientation and a face-to-face interview the same day. For example, the last orientation slot might be 2:00 pm and the last interview slot at 3:00 pm. Consequently, an individual who arrives at 2:00 pm or later cannot complete the process that day.

The timeslot intake process should be reexamined in conjunction with the orientation process. Adding additional timeslots would alleviate the problem, as would increasing the number of applicants that intake workers see. As workers get more comfortable with the new system, the ability to see more people per day is likely to occur. In addition, afternoon arrivals who cannot be processed that day should have the orientation and face-to-face interview waived leaving only the SFIS requirement to complete. Once their case is registered and assigned, their worker can conduct a telephone interview with the applicant. Only in the event that a worker cannot establish telephone contact should SSA require the individual to return to the office.

5. Recommendation: Increase the number of FS-only intake workers.

Key Points:

- ❑ FS-only intake workers possessed greater knowledge of program regulations, processes and procedures than generic workers.
- ❑ During upcoming hiring cycles, designate four intake workers to FS-only roles and place them in pairs at the two SSA offices currently lacking FS-only workers.

Alameda County has just four FS-only intake workers, two at the Hayward Office and two at North Oakland, which creates several problems. My staff interviews revealed that FS-only workers are far better at applying the correct application processing procedures than generic ongoing workers or dual program intake workers. For example, the FS-only workers at Hayward represented two of three interviewed workers who used the automated Notice of Action to schedule face-to-face interviews. Likewise, the Hayward FS-only intake workers always sent out a Notice of Missed Appointment, which is a required procedure.

Consequently, I would recommend that in the normal course of hiring additional workers in Alameda County, more be allocated to FS-only roles. If SSA apportioned four additional FS-only workers – two in Eastmont and two in Enterprise – it would result in improved services to Alameda

County residents and the ability to see an intake worker for Food Stamps in any of the four offices, thus enhancing internal processing.

6. Recommendation: Continue to expand language capabilities at SSA offices.

Key Points:

- ❑ CalWIN enables automatic client correspondence in English, Spanish, Mandarin, Vietnamese and Cambodian, whereas WCDS only offered English and Spanish.
- ❑ CalWIN allows EWs to insert additional information into Notices of Action (NOAs); the inserted language, however, appears in English.
- ❑ More residents of Alameda County speak languages other than English and Spanish than are represented in SSA's caseload, suggesting that certain language groups might be underserved.
- ❑ SSA should use Alameda County population language data in conjunction with SSA caseload data to inform language access decisions.

Another topic that surfaced during my interviews was the issue of client correspondence with individuals who speak different languages. When WCDS was in place, NOAs only went out automatically in English and Spanish. Notices in other languages sometimes existed in the system, but eligibility workers had to make a special effort to locate them. During my interviews, many bilingual workers explained that they would print out a NOA in English, and translate key portions of it by hand. English speaking workers would send the NOA in English, which was the default if a language other than English or Spanish was coded in the system.

CalWIN automatically prints out FS applications and NOAs in English, Spanish, Mandarin, Vietnamese and Cambodian, which is certainly a step in the right direction.³⁷ However, when EWs insert information into NOAs to supplement the standard text, this inserted information remains in English. For example, if an EW requested a wage stub or a utility bill, this would appear in English although the rest of the NOA would be in the correct language.

The California Department of Social Services requires a social services agency to provide services in a particular language when the caseload in that language reaches five percent.³⁸ Nevertheless, with such a diverse population in Alameda County, SSA has recently begun setting an even lower threshold on a case-by-case basis, a practice that should be continued.³⁹ Moreover, when services are not offered in a language, it might be difficult for the caseload to ever reach the five percent threshold.⁴⁰ Thus, it is important for SSA to consider the languages spoken by Alameda residents, not just the languages spoken by their caseload population.

A comparison of 2004 SSA caseload data and 2000 Census data shows that a higher percentage of Alameda County residents speak languages other than English and Spanish than are represented by SSA's caseload. Specifically, about 76 percent of Alameda County residents speak

³⁷ Workers view the NOAs in English even though they print in other languages.

³⁸ "Requirements for Language Services." All County Letter No. 03-56. California Department of Social Services: Sacramento, CA. Available at: <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/cdssweb/>.

³⁹ SSA currently has no formal procedure for going below the five percent threshold, but will consider doing so on a case-by-case basis.

⁴⁰ It is a chicken and egg problem. Without the language services in place, the caseload in that language will remain low.

English and Spanish, while roughly 88 percent of SSA's FS caseload speaks those languages.⁴¹ As noted earlier, the vast majority of recent increases in FS enrollment have come from English and Spanish-speaking populations. Accordingly, a continued effort on SSA's part to expand their services in different languages will be essential to increasing Alameda County's FS participation rates among non-English-speaking populations.

7. Recommendation: Promptly scan incoming mail so that it is available electronically for workers to process.

Key Points:

- ❑ Mail sent to SSA P.O. Box numbers is scanned by SSA's administrative headquarters, ensuring that it is available promptly for EWs.
- ❑ Mail sent to individual SSA office locations is first distributed to workers before being scanned into electronic webfiles.
- ❑ Workers expressed confusion at not knowing when important documents will arrive as a hard copy or in an electronic form.

Currently, mail sent to SSA follows varying paths depending on where it is sent. If mail is addressed to an SSA P.O. Box, it is received at SSA's main county mail office.⁴² The mail office then turns all case correspondence over to SSA's administrative headquarters, where it is scanned and made available electronically for workers. Conversely, if something is mailed directly to a worker at a specific office, then it will be sent to that office's street address and delivered to that worker before it is scanned.

The current mail process is, in large part, a response to the pressures of a stressful time period for SSA's Workforce & Benefits Administration (WBA).⁴³ In addition to implementing CalWIN on December 5th, 2005, WBA began a project of converting all case documents into online files called webfiles in June 2005. The goal of webfiles is to increase efficiency and decrease the number of lost documents by creating a system of electronic cases. Between June 2005 and December 5th, 2005, all CDS case files were imaged, except for those pertaining to cases currently being processed. Because of the large volume of documents to be scanned, all documents sent directly to SSA office locations are initially forwarded to the worker for processing; then, the worker sends the documents for imaging. However, mail sent to the SSA P.O. Box Number is imaged immediately, rather than being re-routed in a paper form to individual offices.

As of January 2006, WBA is in the process of scanning the backlog of documents from recent cases, meaning that workers cannot access documents forwarded for imaging within recent weeks. In addition, during my interviews, EWs expressed frustration at not knowing whether mail will appear in a paper or electronic form. Consequently, it is crucial that SSA move quickly toward a system where all mail is promptly scanned and available to EWs.⁴⁴ Once all documents that arrive to SSA

⁴¹ "Alameda County Demographic Profile." Alameda County Public Health Department: Oakland, CA. p. 15. Available at: http://www.acphd.org/AXBYCZ/Admin/DataReports/2achsr03_demographic.pdf. See also "Quarterly Report – Program Data and Trends." Alameda County Social Services Agency: Alameda County, California. September 2004. p. 12. Available at: https://alamedasocialservices.org/public/pdfs/quarterly_reports/QR_09_04.pdf. It is important to mention that many non-English speaking applicants request for correspondence to be sent in English because they have access to a translator. In addition, it is possible that there are different rates of FS eligibility among language groups, which could partially explain the gap.

⁴² The main mail office is located at 401 Broadway in Oakland, California.

⁴³ WBA is the division of SSA that implements the Food Stamp Program.

⁴⁴ As of January 2005, SSA is hiring temporary clerks to scan the backlog of remaining documents.

are swiftly scanned, this will dramatically improve the ability of EWs to process applications efficiently.

8. Recommendation: Explore consolidating the duties of SSA clerical staff that work behind the scenes to prepare applications for processing.

Key Points:

- ❑ Currently, several clerical positions each perform compartmentalized tasks before an application reaches an EW.
- ❑ Certain clerical functions – application registration, case assignment, and maintaining a log of EW caseloads – have been altered or eliminated by CalWIN.
- ❑ By combining clerical functions and creating generic clerical positions, SSA could reduce the number of steps an application follows before reaching an EW.

During my examination of the FS process in Alameda County, I observed that it frequently requires many different steps for an application to get to a worker. As the impacts of CalWIN and case imaging continue to reverberate through SSA, there should be a continual reexamination of clerical staff roles. Currently, the clerical staff that work behind the scenes to prepare a FS application for processing fall into several categories, such as application registration clerks, intake clerks, assignment clerks and mailroom clerks.⁴⁵

The general flow of a FS application under CalWIN business processes is as follows. After an eligibility support clerk (ESC) receives an application in SSA's waiting room, the application is sent to an application registration clerk where the information is entered into CalWIN. Then, an intake or assignment clerk assigns the application based on worker availability, and brings the application to an EW for processing.

Now that all SSA materials are becoming paperless, it makes sense that mailroom clerks assume the roll of scanning all case documents received through the mail and the waiting room into webfiles. The appropriate duties for the other clerical positions are less clear. Under WCDS, a primary function of an intake clerk was to create a monthly report cataloguing worker caseloads and availability. This process, along with worker caseload information, has become mechanized under CalWIN. Application registration clerks rather than assignment clerks frequently handle the specific task of assigning cases to workers. Therefore, one possibility worth considering is to create generic clerical staff responsible for application registration, case assignment, and ensuring that workers are assigned balanced caseloads. The advantage to this arrangement is that submitted applications could go to one type of clerk before being sent to an ET for processing. Labor issues may need to be considered when reassignments of duties are involved.

9. Recommendation: Consider reinstating a modified and expanded SSA Client Contact Unit (CCU).

Key Points:

- ❑ As previously configured, the EWs assigned to the CCU provided client contact for ongoing EWs, who had no client contact due to their extremely large caseloads.

⁴⁵ See glossary for in-depth definitions of clerical positions.

- ❑ Under the new setup, the CCU would take appointments while others would meet with walk-in customers.
- ❑ The CCU could also assume the responsibility of processing ongoing workers who are away from their desks for more than one week.
- ❑ SSA would need to adopt measures to prevent workers from intentionally neglecting their work prior to a leave of absence, with the expectation the CCU would bring their caseloads up to speed.
- ❑ SSA should also consider hiring more EWs to reduce caseload size, thus allowing workers to interview their own clients.

Prior to CalWIN implementation, ongoing EWs never met face-to-face with their clients. Instead, each office had a CCU, comprised of roughly three-five EWs without caseloads, who met with clients on behalf of their worker. The CCU arrangement, which allows ongoing EWs to focus on case maintenance and processing, instead of meeting with clients on a daily basis, possesses both advantages and disadvantages.

On the plus side, ongoing workers strapped with 500 or more cases, are able to process cases more quickly, without face-to-face meetings draining their limited time. In addition, the presence of a CCU helps ensure that ESFS applications are processed in a timely fashion, especially during carryover. On the other hand, clients who meet with the CCU do not receive appointments, but rather arrive in the waiting room, take a number and then wait to be seen. In addition, when CCU workers serve as an intermediary between ongoing workers and customers, there are sometimes miscommunications between what a worker needs to process an application and the specific situation of a particular client.

Although the positives and negatives associated with the CCU must receive continual evaluation, SSA should consider reinstating an expanded CCU with modifications to the previous setup. Properly staffed, some EWs in the CCU could take appointments, while others would see walk-in customers. Using CalWIN's electronic scheduling capabilities, ongoing workers could provide clients with specific appointment times, instead of simply requesting individuals to come into the office and see a CCU EW.

In addition, the CCU could assume the responsibility of processing applications for ongoing workers away from work on a vacation or due to illness. Currently, there is an SSA procedure in place for reassigning the caseloads of individuals on an extended leave of absence, such as maternity leave or surgery. However, when caseworkers are away from their desks for several weeks, such as during the two-week CalWIN training, no one is available to maintain their caseloads. During my interviews, I encountered numerous situations where during a six-week period, caseworkers spent three weeks away from their desks (i.e. two weeks for CalWIN training and one week for vacation). The result was a backlog of unserved clients, who allowed their applications to lapse when they could not communicate with their worker.

Consequently, I recommend exploring the possibility of using the CCU to process urgent customer requests when ongoing workers are away from their desks for one week or more. Working out the specifics will be tricky, as caseworkers might intentionally neglect their duties prior to a leave-of-absence in the hopes that the CCU will catch them up. Consequently, for a planned leave of absence, specific procedures should be in place requiring EWs to update their caseloads before departing. In instances where the absence is unplanned, SSA would need to develop a specific process for ensuring the CCU only responded to "urgent" client needs and requests. If the kinks were worked out, however, such a system would enhance customer service and application processing efficiency at SSA.

Finally, SSA should consider hiring additional EWs to reduce caseload size and enable workers to interview their own clients. Currently, ongoing workers have 600-800 cases at any given time, which makes it impossible for them to meet with all of their clients. Consequently, if funding permits, SSA should hire enough workers so that a CCU would be largely unnecessary. Even with a reduced caseload, however, SSA should consider leaving a few workers in the CCU so that individuals who drop by unexpectedly can meet with an EW.⁴⁶

B). Strengthening Worker Performance

Beyond issues related to office operating procedures, my interviews highlighted several problems and misconceptions related to the practices of eligibility workers. I found that many tenured (ongoing) workers fail to implement proper procedures when processing food stamp applications, a problem that can result in weakened communication with clients. Part of the problem can certainly be attributed to the fact that ongoing workers manage 600 to 800 cases at any given time. Even so, countywide newsletters or half-day training sessions could theoretically remedy most of these problems. Changing behaviors with long-time employees can be a challenge; as such, communication regarding a new process may need to be repeated.

Finding: There is inconsistency among workers in keeping FS cases open for 30 days.

Key Points:

- ❑ Many workers do not send a NOA (Notice of Missed Appointment) informing clients that they have missed their face-to-face interview and encouraging them to reschedule.

State regulations require that all FS applicants receive ample time to complete the face-to-face interview requirement.⁴⁷ Unless an applicant presents a clear-cut denial, such as an individual who is resource ineligible, income ineligible or an ineligible student, the county must leave the case open for 30 days if an applicant has not completed the face-to-face interview.

Currently, there is inconsistency among SSA EWs in how they meet this 30-day requirement. Many workers send an initial need letter requesting an applicant to come in for a face-to-face interview and bring certain verifications; the need letter allows the client 12 days to comply. During the interview, the EW completes part II of the FS application with the applicant. After that, EWs frequently deny the case for failure to provide essential information, which satisfies the regulations because the failure to provide notice requires the worker to list the 30th day for the client to comply. As a courtesy, other EWs send out a second need letter before sending the failure to provide notice. If the information requested in the failure to provide notice is received by the 30th day, the application will be re-evaluated.

The correct procedure as outlined by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) is to send an appointment NOA to set up the interview and a send a Notice of Missed Appointment (NOMI) if an applicant misses their appointment. Then, the case will be denied on the 30th day if the

⁴⁶ For example, if a client drops by and his or her worker is in training or out of the office, they should still be able to meet with an EW.

⁴⁷ "Food Stamp Regulations Application Process." Food Stamp Manual. Division 63, Section 301.3. p. 125. California Department of Social Services: Sacramento, CA.

client still does not respond to the NOMI. This procedure should be followed to synchronize SSA's internal process and so that all clients receive essentially the same treatment, regardless of which EW happens to be assigned to their case.⁴⁸

Finding: Many Workers send Manual Need Letters rather than NOAs to set up the face-to-face interview.

Key Points:

- The automated NOA is designed for setting up an interview and the text is clearer for customers.

A common practice identified during my interviews was that most workers sent a Manual Need Letter rather than a NOA to set up an interview. Although this is mainly just a procedural issue, the NOA's text is much more succinct and direct. The need letter is designed for use during a face-to-face interview so that an EW can request additional documentation. It also specifies in clear language that if an individual cannot attend their appointment, they have the option of calling and rescheduling. This language is important, especially to an applicant who has already made one trip to the office and is now being asked to make a second trip.

Finding: EWs harbor myths about FS program regulations and processes.

Key Points:

- Two-thirds of EWs were aware that the face-to-face interview can be substituted with a phone interview, but they had divergent views as to what constituted a hardship.
- Less than one-fourth of workers knew that the SFIS requirement could be postponed if the face-to-face interview is waived.
- Some workers lacked knowledge about the FS outreach system in Alameda County.

I observed during my interviews that many workers, especially ongoing staff, harbored a variety of misconceptions and confusions regarding additional program procedures. About two-thirds of the workers I interviewed were aware that the face-to-face interview can be substituted with a phone interview in the presence of a hardship; however, there were different notions as to what constituted a hardship. Some workers felt a face-to-face interview should only be waived for people with significant mobility problems or other serious barriers. Others correctly understood that the face-to-face interview could be waived for a wide array of reasons.

In addition, less than one-fourth of surveyed workers knew that the SFIS requirement could be postponed if the face-to-face interview is waived. If a client comes into the office and requests a waiver of SFIS, this is tantamount to a refusal to be finger imaged. However, according to the state regulations, an individual cannot be required to come into the office for the sole purpose of completing the SFIS requirement.

⁴⁸ In other words, just as with the face-to-face interview waiver, these FS application processing procedures should be applied consistently regardless of worker.

Many EWs also lacked an understanding of the current FS outreach procedure in Alameda County. Frequently, they believed that SSA outreach EWs rather than CBO volunteers completed FS outreach applications. Consequently, workers interpreted these applications as “incorrect” or “incomplete,” often asking me why the outreach workers regularly failed to complete the entire FS application. In actuality, however, CBOs only have authorization to complete part I of the FS application (DFA 285 A1), so the applications submitted by CBOs never contain part II (DFA 285 A2), despite their requests to assist clients with this portion of the application.

10. Recommendation: Important procedural changes should be outlined in periodic training sessions and newsletters, but also formalized as official SSA Business Processes⁴⁹ and flow from the top of the agency down to EWs and clerical staff.

Key Points:

- ❑ Circulate important procedural changes at management meetings and then adopt them as official SSA Business Processes.
- ❑ FS Roadshow training sessions should be mandatory for all EWs and Supervisory EWs to ensure that programmatic changes adopted by SSA management are adopted by eligibility staff.
- ❑ Build into CalWIN important procedural reminders for EWs, such as “consider waiving the face-to-face interview” or “have you allowed the applicant 30 days to complete the face-to-face interview.”

In general, there are several straightforward steps SSA could take to remedy the confusion among EWs regarding important FS procedures. Most importantly, it is essential that information regarding procedural changes flow from the top of the agency down to EWs and clerical staff. Significant procedural changes – such as liberal use of the face-to-face interview waiver and postponement of the SFIS requirement – should be circulated at the Quality Improvement Panel Meetings, Division Director Meetings, and other management staff meetings. Then, the procedures should be adopted as formal SSA Business Processes. It is not sufficient to circulate new procedures in the form of newsletters and tip sheets because not all workers will read them.

During my interviews, I observed the importance of incentives to ensuring the correct application of policies. When a mass email or newsletter is distributed regarding a new policy, it is not enough to assume that all workers will read about the change and begin applying it correctly. If management staff is not aware of alterations to SSA processes, then changes will not trickle down to supervisors and EWs. Moreover, FS Roadshows⁵⁰ should be mandatory for all EWs and Supervisory EWs, which will ensure that all eligibility staff is current in their program knowledge. Not only is it essential that supervisors read the same letters and information as workers, but supervisors should also verify that correct processes are followed, such as sending the proper NOAs, waiving requirements when appropriate, and keeping cases open for 30 days.

Finally, electronic reminders should be built into CalWIN to help EWs remember important procedures. For example, when EWs are sending out an appointment NOA, CalWIN could ask if they checked for a hardship that would warrant waiving the face-to-face interview. Likewise, as EWs are closing a case, CalWIN could ask if they have allowed clients enough time to complete their face-

⁴⁹ Internal SSA operating procedures that have been codified are referred to as Business Processes.

⁵⁰ Roadshow refers to the biannual, 3-hour training sessions conducted by the FS Program Specialist at county offices.

to-face interview. These types of reminders could be used selectively for those procedures that workers appear to neglect more frequently.

11. Recommendation: All SSA offices should track FS outreach applications to ensure their delivery.

Key Points:

- ❑ A continual problem has been that EWs sometimes claim to never have received FS outreach applications, even though there is a record that SSA has the application somewhere.
- ❑ If all offices tracked FS outreach applications, there would be a record of when documents were delivered to workers.

The current FS outreach procedure involves all CBO applications first going to the Hayward Office. At that point, the applications are inventoried in a spreadsheet, registered in CalWIN and then sent to an EW for processing.⁵¹ A perennial problem with this setup has been that workers sometimes claim not to receive assigned applications. One step to remedy this problem has been to send the applications directly to a Clerical Supervisor at each office. Another option, which was recently adopted by the Enterprise Office, is to inventory FS outreach applications, noting their date of arrival and the date the application is forwarded to the appropriate worker. I recommend that the N. Oakland and Eastmost offices also begin tracking FS outreach applications using a spreadsheet format. Tracking the applications also enables supervisors to follow-up with workers on applications that are taking a long time to process.

IV. Strengthening Partnerships: Improving Alameda County's FS Outreach System

Beyond the suggestions I proposed in the previous section, my interviews revealed some issues that will require the joint attention of SSA and ACCFB. Reforms such as changing CBO outreach procedures and implementing an electronic FS application will require the sustained efforts and commitment of SSA and ACCFB. Nevertheless, the ideas listed below are realistic and feasible, none of which requires substantial costs or authorizing new legislation.

I learned during my joint placement with SSA and ACCFB that outreach practices must be driven by the internal procedures and processes of the social services agency. The role of CBOs should be to assess the limitations of the social services agency and do whatever they can to fill in the gaps. Effective FS outreach therefore requires partnership between the social services agency and local CBOs. In the recommendations that follow, I offer suggestions on how Alameda's CBOs can improve their FS outreach efforts, based on the understanding of SSA's internal operations that I have gained during my placement.

⁵¹ If the applicant already has a worker because he or she is receiving another type of aid, the application will be forwarded to that worker. Applicants not currently receiving aid will have their applications assigned to an intake worker in the Hayward office.

12. Recommendation: Develop an official certification process for CBO FS outreach workers.

Key Points:

- ❑ A certification process would enhance FS outreach efforts in Alameda County and across the state by paving the way for innovations that allow greater SSA – CBO collaboration, such as CBOs completing the entire FS application, a CBO initiated electronic FS application, and a FS application follow-up service through which CBOs would help ensure that clients complete all of the requirements.
- ❑ Agreement between SSA and ACCFB would be necessary on the extent of privileges granted through the certification process.
- ❑ The California Association of Food Banks should work with its FS outreach partners, the California Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to develop a statewide training and certification program.

Several California public health programs have developed certification processes that enable employees at hospitals, clinics and CBOs to help individuals fill-out an application. For example, the MediCal process in Alameda County permits certified hospital and clinic employee's read-only access to CalWIN, as well as other unique privileges. Known as Patient Services Technicians (PST), these individuals provide MediCal outreach in the field and are responsible for submitting electronic MediCal applications to SSA.

A process that enabled a limited number of FS outreach workers to gain a similar certification would help circumvent the confidentiality rules that prevent SSA from working more closely with ACCFB. Currently, when a CBO employee contacts SSA on behalf of a client, the outreach worker must use an 800 number, which is a time-consuming and inefficient experience for the individual placing the call. SSA also cannot share case information with CBOs, even if the applicant applied through the FS outreach process, due to confidentiality. CBOs are currently only allowed to fill-out Part I of the FS application, rather than the entire application.

Because SSA does not have the funding to pay certified CBO employees, participants would need to hail from CBOs committed to FS outreach and already receiving federal FS outreach funding. ACCFB and SSA would have to develop a process by which an individual obtained training and certification from the county, but received payment from ACCFB or other sources. Initially, SSA could pilot the idea by certifying a limited number of ACCFB employees, before expanding to other CBOs. To make the proposal workable, SSA and ACCFB would also have to engage in a consultative process to agree on what privileges the certification process will grant.

Ideally, the outreach worker certification process could take place on a state level. CAFB and its statewide FS outreach partners should work to create a statewide training model approved by CWDA and CDSS to ensure a level of expertise of all outreach workers and improve relations and partnership between CBOs and counties.

13. Recommendation: Alameda County CBOs should start introducing authorization to release information forms (consent to release) into their FS outreach procedures.

Key Points:

- ❑ Using consent to release forms helps address the confidentiality concerns between SSA and its partner CBOs by enabling SSA to release FS application information to CBOs for client follow-up.

- ❑ Using consent to release forms would not enable CBOs to complete the entire FS application or an electronic application.
- ❑ An agreement between SSA and CBOs would be needed to ensure that CBO employees do not overwhelm EWs with phone calls on behalf of FS applicants.

Another way to strengthen the ties between SSA and its partner CBOs is for the CBOs to introduce “consent to release” forms into their outreach procedures. Currently, the Community Action Partnership of Orange County and the Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties are using the forms as part of their outreach efforts.⁵² A CBO would have a FS applicant sign this form, which would enable SSA to release application information back to the CBO. In turn, the CBO could help ensure the client attended the face-to-face interview and assembled the proper verifications, as well as follow up with the caseworker if necessary.

Currently, SSA tracks relevant information pertaining to FS outreach applications such as application timeframe, denial reason, and applicant contact information. However, ACCFB cannot access the information because of confidentiality regulations. In fact, when CBO outreach workers mail an application to an Alameda County resident, they have no way of knowing if the application was then mailed to SSA. Once CBOs begin using consent to release forms, they will be able to make use of the information that SSA tracks to better serve Alameda’s low-income residents.

A concern on the SSA side with the widespread use of consent to release forms is that CBO advocates will start overwhelming EWs with phone calls on behalf of clients. Consequently, a process would need to be put in place by which CBOs agreed only to use the forms to follow up with clients, not workers. I suggest adopting a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between SSA and CBOs specifying the terms of use for consent to release forms.⁵³ In addition, the idea should be piloted on a limited basis with ACCFB and a handful of other CBOs to see if the new process results in a significant increase in calls to caseworkers.

CBOs and advocates need the tools to provide crucial support to FS applicants in need. A significant problem highlighted by the FS cases I tracked is that clients fail to attend face-to-face interviews or provide the proper verifications, often because that individual is confused about some element of the application process and does not know where to turn. The result is a lapsed application and a missed opportunity. SSA does not have the resources to provide comprehensive client support, while CBOs face confidentiality barriers that encumber their efforts dramatically. If the consent to release form is used in conjunction with an employee certification process, it will greatly enhance the FS outreach services of CBOs.

⁵² Email from Jessica Bartholow, Statewide Program Manager, FS outreach and nutrition education, California Association of Food Banks. February 8th, 2006. On file with author.

⁵³ The terms would include provisions such as: the CBO must agree to keep client information confidential and only use the information for the purpose of client follow-up (as opposed to caseworker follow-up) except in rare circumstances. Rare circumstances might include a clear violation of FS policy by a worker, or when the CBO partner cannot remedy the situation by calling the SSA hotline. In other words, CBOs would only call a specific worker as a last resort.

14. Recommendation: Move toward a FS outreach setup that allows Alameda County CBOs to complete the entire FS application.

Key Points:

- ❑ Greater collaboration and information sharing between SSA and partner CBOs will be made possible through developments such as a certification process and the use of consent to release forms.
- ❑ An important consequence of the process of increased collaboration should be permitting CBOs to complete all parts of the FS application.

Another beneficial ripple effect of increased information sharing between SSA and their outreach partners is the possibility of permitting CBOs to complete the entire FS application. Initiating such a process would require a dual SSA-CBO employee certification process as described earlier, since Part II (DFA 285 A2) of the FS application must be completed by a county EW.⁵⁴ Permitting CBOs to fill out Part II of the FS application would benefit SSA and clients. Caseworkers could focus on processing applications and determining eligibility rather than completing application forms, ultimately improving client services.

My interview results suggest that EWs spend less time processing a case when they receive a complete application. Similarly, this measure would simplify the process for clients, who often become confused when they complete Part I with a CBO and Part II with a caseworker.⁵⁵ Consequently, I recommend allowing CBOs to complete the entire FS application, which could become viable if Alameda County adopts a dual SSA-CBO employee certification process.

15. Recommendation: Continue to explore the development of an electronic FS application.

Key Points:

- ❑ Currently in California, several public health programs have authorized individuals to complete electronic applications in hospitals and clinics using software designed by One-E-App.⁵⁶
- ❑ California programs that currently interface with One-E-App's software include: MediCal, Healthy Families, Healthy Kids, and County Indigent Care. One-E-App has shown interest in expanding their software to other programs, including food stamps.
- ❑ H & R Block is also in the process of developing electronic screening and enrollment software for public benefit programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, MediCal and food stamps as part of its Benefits Enrollment Network.⁵⁷
- ❑ Other states are piloting or using electronic screening and enrollment software such as the Benefits Bank and the Benefits Screener.⁵⁸
- ❑ As SSA and its partner CBOs increase their linkages, they should adopt an electronic FS application process.

⁵⁴ California labor agreements require that an EW complete Part II, even though a clerical staff person can fill out Part I.

⁵⁵ During interviews, EWs reported that many applicants believe they have completed the application when a CBO completes Part I for them.

⁵⁶ For background information on One-E-App see www.oneeapp.org.

⁵⁷ See Appendix D for more information on the Benefits Enrollment Network.

⁵⁸ For more information regarding the use of electronic applications in other states, see "Coffey Sean, Holsclaw Abby, and Bosland Julie." *Screening Tools to Help Families Access Public Benefits*. National League of Cities – Insitute for Youth, Education, and Families. Washington, DC. June, 2005.

Along with several other California counties, Alameda is currently piloting a new electronic application designed by One-E-App.⁵⁹ One-E-App enables authorized individuals, such as Patient Services Technicians (PSTs) and EWs, to complete an electronic MediCal application from a clinic or hospital and submit the application to SSA for processing. One-E-App provides consumers in Alameda County with an easy, efficient avenue for submitting their MediCal application without visiting a social services office. It also contains an automatic error check feature and a user-friendly interview system, which help ensure that applications are accurate and complete.⁶⁰

To date, One-E-App interfaces with a variety of public health programs, including MediCal, Healthy Families, Healthy Kids, and County Indigent Care.⁶¹ According to Marsha Rice, SSA Project Manager, the final stages of One-E-App for MediCal will take effect in Alameda County during August 2006, followed shortly thereafter by the implementation of One-E-App for Child Health and Disability Prevention (CHDP). The One-E-App website indicates that several programs are currently “being considered for inclusion” in One-E-App, such as Food Stamps, Women Infants and Children (WIC), Access for Infants and Mothers (AIM), Kaiser Cares for Kids (Kaiser Permanente Child Health Plan), and California Kids (CalKids).⁶²

Now that SSA is piloting One-E-App for MediCal, the stage is set for a parallel electronic FS application. A One-E-App for FS will become a viable option beginning in fall 2006. Likewise, H&R Block – through their Benefit Enrollment Network – is currently developing an electronic FS application.⁶³ In addition, other states are piloting or using electronic applications through Benefit Bank and a variety of other programs, which should also be investigated for possible expansion to California. Because PSTs or MediCal outreach EWs⁶⁴ currently complete One-E-Applications and submit them electronically to SSA, applying such a process to FS would require a dual employee certification process, as discussed earlier.

16. Recommendation: Expand the language services of FS outreach partners.

Key Points:

- Harmonize the language services of SSA and CBO outreach partners.

With approximately one quarter of Alameda County residents speaking languages other than English and Spanish, ACCFB must lead the effort to expand FS outreach services to new languages. With CalWIN now translating FS applications and client correspondence into Mandarin, Vietnamese, and Cambodian, outreach assistance is necessary in these languages to maintain compatibility. ACCFB currently provides language services in English, Spanish, Mandarin and Cantonese. In the future, ACCFB should either add additional language capabilities or recruit another CBO for this task.

⁵⁹ I refer to One-E-App’s software program as “One-E-App.”

⁶⁰ “How it Works.” OneEApp. California HealthCare Foundation: Oakland, CA. Available at: <http://www.oneeapp.org/works/>.

⁶¹ “Programs.” OneEApp-California Healthcare Foundation: Oakland, CA. Available at: <http://www.oneeapp.org/works/index.cfm?subclass=CL455&n1v1=0>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ See Appendix D.

⁶⁴ MediCal currently has funding to outstation EWs in clinics and hospitals where they complete MediCal applications.

17. Recommendation: Blend new, proposed SSA FS phone-in process with FS outreach system.

Key Points:

- ❑ The new SSA FS process will enable applicants to call a hotline, obtain a FS application by mail, receive a hardship waiver, and complete a face-to-face interview via telephone.
- ❑ Applicants with hardships who apply through a CBO should receive the same waiver of the face-to-face interview as applicants who apply through the SSA hotline.
- ❑ Both application routes, the SSA hotline and the FS outreach system, should enable a client to complete the entire FS application without a visit to the office.

As described earlier, SSA will soon initiate a series of improvements to its FS program, drawing heavily on current MediCal procedures. Once the proposed system is in place – including a FS hotline – the FS outreach process will need to adapt to the latest changes. Under the new proposed system, all individuals who apply through the call center will be deemed unable to come into an SSA office, so they will instead complete a phone interview at a later time with their worker. In addition, an individual who applies through the SSA hotline will obtain a complete application. Conversely, those who apply through CBOs can only complete part I of the FS application and request a waiver of the face-to-face interview if a hardship exists.

Therefore, as SSA improves its services through the development of a FS hotline, this will decrease the role of CBOs. Once the new phone-in system is in place, CBOs will be able to refer many applicants to the county hotline for processing. On the other hand, the FS outreach efforts of CBOs will still be needed for hard-to-reach populations who need special application assistance such as immigrants and illiterate individuals. In addition, the FS hotline will only provide services in English and perhaps Spanish, which means that it will not be an option for many people.

Consequently, I recommend granting all CBO outreach applicants a comparable exemption of the face-to-face interview. Like individuals who apply through the new county hotline, SSA can determine that requiring these applicants to make an office visit, after already initiating an application at a CBO, constitutes an unnecessary burden. Furthermore, CBOs should work with SSA to gain permission to complete the entire FS application, as described earlier in section V.

18. Recommendation: Conduct a FS outreach media campaign in Alameda County.

Key Points:

- ❑ There is mounting evidence that media campaigns are a cost-effective, highly successful way to increase awareness about the FS Program and boost enrollment.
- ❑ A media campaign in Alameda County should coincide with the adoption of creative, new application processes to maximize their effectiveness.

Evidence continues to accumulate regarding the benefits of media campaigns as a FS outreach technique. According to California Food Policy Advocates, 71 percent of eligible nonparticipants lack knowledge about FS eligibility and application requirements.⁶⁵ Likewise, the Food Stamp Program Access Study highlighted lack of awareness as a primary barrier preventing eligible individuals from receiving FS.⁶⁶ In addition, 2004 California Congressional Hunger Fellows, Dennis

⁶⁵ “Knocking Down Barriers to Food Assistance: A Short Progress Report for California.” California Food Policy Advocates: San Francisco, CA. 2004. Available at: http://www.cfpa.net/forum_materials/2004/barriers.pdf.

⁶⁶ See Bartlett, Susan and Burstein, Nancy. *Food Stamp Program Access Study: Eligible Nonparticipants*. Report submitted to USDA Economic Research Service. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, May 2004.

Barrett and Laura Tatum, concluded that their media campaign constituted the most successful component of their multifaceted FS outreach project.⁶⁷ In their Hunger Free Community Report, they conclude that “media is the non-profit sector’s form of advertising and educating, and use of varied and different mediums broadly communicates essential messages.”⁶⁸

More recently, Brigit Adamus found that media campaigns – while expensive in absolute terms – are more cost effective than other forms of FS outreach on a per application basis. In Arizona, the cost per approved FS application of a media campaign is less than one dollar.⁶⁹ In Alameda County, a successful media campaign would include a broad range of culturally sensitive mediums, with advertising placed in television and print sources in multiple languages. SSA will also need to be prepared to handle the increased volume of applications generated by the media campaign. As SSA and its outreach partners implement novel and innovative FS procedures – such as an application process that does not require an office visit – a media campaign could be used to spread both general FS Program information as well as details on new, simplified application procedures.

V. Client Interview Tool

Background

In addition to my in-depth examination of the FS process in Alameda County, I also undertook a FS client interview project. The goal of the project was to create and pilot test a survey tool designed for examining why certain FS applicants abandon their application. As social services agencies attempt to increase FS participation rates, they could use the tool to inform the development of new processes and procedures. Likewise, food banks and other CBOs could utilize the survey to better understand vulnerable populations, identify specific local barriers to access and develop policy recommendations for state and local governments.

Limitations of Previous Research

In addition, members of my Hunger Fellow workgroup stressed the utility of a client interview tool, noting a lack of focused research that examines individuals who applied for food stamps, but dropped out of the process for some reason. The most current, comprehensive research on Food Stamp participation is the *Food Stamp Program Access Study* by Bartlett et al., which is a three-part study released in 2003 and 2004 that examines how the policies and practices of local social service offices impact the likelihood of individuals receiving Food Stamps.⁷⁰ However, this study

⁶⁷ See Barrett and Tatum.

⁶⁸ Barrett and Tatum, p. 20.

⁶⁹ Adamus, Brigit. *The Outreach Aisle: A Showcase of Cost-Effectiveness in Food Stamp Outreach*. A publication of the Congressional Hunger Center, San Francisco Department of Human Services, and USDA’s Food and Nutrition Services. February 10th, 2006.

⁷⁰ See 1). Gabor, Vivian, Hardison, Lynne, and Botsko, Christopher. *Food Stamp Program Access Study: Local Office Policies and Practices*. Report submitted to USDA Economic Research Service. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates. December 2003. 2). Bartlett, Susan and Burstein, Nancy. *Food Stamp Program Access Study: Eligible Nonparticipants*. Report submitted to USDA Economic Research Service. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, May 2004. 3). Bartlett, Susan, Burstein, Nancy and Hamilton, William. *Food Stamp Program Access Study: Final Report*. Report submitted to USDA Economic Research Service. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, November 2004.

does not specifically examine the subgroup of individuals who applied for food stamps, but failed to complete the process.

In the second report, which analyzes eligible nonparticipants, Bartlett et al. examine a nationwide sample of households that are eligible for Food Stamps based upon income and resources. Bartlett et al. break down the broad group of nonparticipants into small categories, such as those who choose not to participate in food stamps or those who failed to apply because of presumed ineligibility. Most relevant to my survey is the analysis of those eligible nonparticipants deemed “near applicants.” This group consists of households that visited or “contacted the local food stamp office within the last six-to-twelve months prior to the survey to inquire about food stamp benefits, but never followed through by submitting an application.”⁷¹

Although the subcategory of “near participants” consists of individuals who never actually submitted an application, there are clear similarities between near participants and applicants who fail to complete the process. In both cases, “something happened to prevent their application, either a change in their circumstances or a change in their evaluation of applying for benefits.”⁷² Bartlett et al. concludes that in many cases, barriers such as limited office hours or an inability to compile the required verifications, prevented near applicants from completing and submitting a FS application. Nevertheless, the study did not explore in more depth the specific obstacles that deterred these individuals from applying.

Although Bartlett et al. note that near participants comprised only about five percent of eligible nonparticipant households,⁷³ for counties with FS outreach systems, the group of near participants is highly relevant. In Alameda County, for example, all households that initiate a FS application with the Food Bank or another CBO are essentially near participants until they take action to submit the rest of their application and supporting documents. In addition, as mentioned earlier, a significant percentage of FS outreach applications are denied for failure to attend an interview or provide necessary information. To better understand why these applicants did not complete the application process after being told they were likely eligible, I developed the client interview tool to assist county social services offices that receive a high volume of unfinished FS applications.⁷⁴

Designing the Client Interview Tool

The first step in developing the interview tool was to outline its primary goals and objectives. In a consultative process involving Barbara Mknelly (MS), Jessica Barthalow (MA), Melissa Daigle (MPH), Julia Martinez, Elizabeth Gomez, and others, we decided the interview tool should uncover the extent to which incomplete applications are intentional, the degree to which the application process itself creates a barrier for applicants and specific characteristics about applicants who fail to complete the process.⁷⁵ Once the goals were firmly in place, I authored an initial draft of the questionnaire, which went through numerous initial revisions for completeness, understandability, and methodological soundness.

Due to limited time and resources, I could not complete a full-scale, statistically representative study using the interview tool. Nevertheless, I piloted the interview tool on a sample

⁷¹ Bartlett and Burstein, p. 37.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 38.

⁷⁴ Although the issue of households failing to complete the FS application process was raised by my Hunger Fellow Workgroup in the context of FS outreach, the problem certainly extends to individuals who walk into the office, submit an application and then fail to return for follow-up.

⁷⁵ See Appendix G for a list of goals of the client interview tool.

of 21 individuals: ten English speakers, six Spanish speakers, and five Cantonese speakers. Based on these interviews, I further revised the interview tool to ensure its utility across a range of language, ethnic and educational backgrounds. Therefore, the interview tool is now available and ready for use by interested researchers, CBOs and social services agencies.

The Client Interview Tool's Intended Use

While the primary goal of the client interview tool is to inform advocates and service providers about the barriers that prevent FS applicants from completing their applications, it has the potential to strain the relationship between a community's social services agency and CBOs. If a group of CBOs decides to perform interviews using the tool, they should alert their local social services agency. The tool should not be used to discredit a social services agency, but rather, in the context of a committed partnership between CBOs and a social services agency to improve the FS application process for clients and counties.

Key Learning from Pilot Interviews

Interview Subjects Sometimes Get Off Track

- Frankly, many of the interview subjects are not accustomed to people from the social services agency calling them and giving them their full attention. While some people will express gratitude that a government agency is interested in their viewpoint, many will use this opportunity to express their frustration with the system. Consequently, be prepared to listen to people's experiences and steer them back on track.

Do Not Call it a Survey

- Do not present what you are doing as a survey. Instead, you are the social services agency or a community partner asking some question in an attempt to learn how you can improve services for clients.

Expect Program Confusion

- You are calling about food stamps, but don't expect clients to make the same distinctions you make. For some clients, aid programs may blend together; as a result, the experiences they tell you may be about programs other than food stamps.

Expect Some Repetitiveness

- The interview tool is designed to get survey participants to share as much information about their case as possible. Early in the interview, the survey participant might feel he or she has provided a very clear explanation for not completing the process. Nevertheless, additional questions will frequently spark the participant's memory and yield additional information.

Content of the Client Interview Tool

Section I

1). How did you learn about the FS program?

■ The goal of this question is to obtain background information about the client and also to ascertain how people learn about food stamps. The question could be modified to suit a county's specific circumstances. For example, if there has been a recent media campaign in a county, the interviewing organization(s) might want to see if people are aware of it.

2). How did you apply for food stamps?

■ In counties across the U.S., including Alameda County, it's becoming increasingly possible to apply for FS without ever coming into the office. This question examines which application methods people are using, which is important for counties with more than one option.

3). Did any agency pre-screen you for food stamps before you applied at the food stamp office?

■ One method of FS outreach is individual pre-screening assistance performed by CBOs. Counties that have adopted this form of outreach can use this question to see if clients are accessing FS outreach services. Even if counties are already tracking FS outreach information, this question has the additional benefit of revealing whether or not clients understand that the pre-screening was conducted by an organization other than social services.

Section II

1). Have you received letters from your worker regarding your application?

2). How many letters did you receive?

■ These questions examine whether clients have received and kept track of all of the letters sent by the social services agency.

3). Was the letter written in a language that you are comfortable with?

4). Would you say the letter(s) was/were: (a) very difficult to understand, (b) somewhat difficult to understand, or (c) not at all difficult to understand?

■ The goal of these questions is to ensure that notices are going out in the language that people requested, unless client correspondence has not been translated into that language yet.

5). Did you request to have mail from Social Services sent in a language you don't understand because you have a translator?

■ Based on the pilot interview responses, as well as the SSA staff interviews, there is evidence that many applicants request correspondence in English – even though they do not speak the

language – because they have a translator. This question attempts to find people who have done so.

- 6). Was one of the letters a request for additional information?
- 6a). Was it difficult for you to provide these documents?
- 6b). Why was it difficult for you to provide these documents?
- 6c). How did you respond to the request for additional information?

■ As noted, a significant problem with Alameda County’s FS system is the high number of applicants who are denied for failure to provide essential information or attend an interview. These questions seek to understand whether certain documents are particularly difficult for clients to provide and also how clients handle a request for additional information that they cannot fulfill. For example, it is of particular concern if applicants drop out of the process because they do not know how to respond to a request from social services, or because they think it will take longer than the application timeline permits for them to gather their documents together.

- 7). Did you receive a denial letter?

■ All of the individuals interviewed using this tool were denied, so they should have received a denial notice. Although social services agencies keep track of what correspondence they send, some clients claim not to receive certain notices. This question examines whether clients actually received the denial notice and if they interpreted it as such.

- 8). County records show you were denied for food stamps because of one or more reasons. These reasons are: a) you did not turn in the necessary paperwork, b) you did not go to the face-to-face interview, or c) you changed your mind about getting food stamps and withdrew your application.

- A). Do any of these reasons apply to you?
- B). Which reason(s) apply to you?
- C). Why don’t these reasons apply to you?

■ The goal of these questions is to see if applicants understand why they are denied and also if they agree with the reason. For example, a notice might deny someone for failure to provide essential information or attend an interview; however, when probed, the individual might indicate that he or she tried to contact a worker to explain that he or she could not attend the interview or assemble all of the documents and therefore, should not be denied for that reason.

- 9). Did you try to contact your worker at any time during the application process?
- 10). Were you able to speak with your worker on the phone?
- 10a). Was this because you called your worker or your worker called you?

■ In Alameda County, as in many others, clients sometimes express frustration that they cannot make phone contact with their worker. These questions look at how many clients attempted to call their workers and whether or not they were successful.

11). Which one of the following statements best describes your recent food stamp application experience?

- a). You did not finish the application process because you did not need food stamps any more.
- b). You were unable to finish the application process for some reason.

■ This question is designed to find out what percentage of applicants drop out of the application process because it is too difficult, and what percentage drop out because of some kind of barrier. If the survey results indicate that a substantial majority of clients in a county fail to receive benefits because of obstacles rather than lack of need, then it is important for CBOs and the social services agency to do whatever they can to remove those barriers.

12.) Do you mind sharing why you no longer need food stamps?

■ This question serves two purposes. First, it gathers general background information about the survey participants and their personal circumstances. Secondly, it explores applicants' perceptions about FS eligibility and what changes in financial circumstances would deem them ineligible. For example, an elderly couple might assume that once they start receiving social security, their \$900 per month check disqualifies them from food stamps, when in fact they are still eligible.

13). Why were you unable to finish the application process?

■ If they have not surfaced already, this question attempts to draw out the specific hurdles that prevented an individual from completing the application process. The responses focus on personal factors that prevent someone from finishing the application process. The long list of possible answers represents common hypotheses and assumptions about why people have trouble obtaining food stamps. Items could be added or removed from the list based on unique local barriers and conditions.

14). Was there anything in particular about the application process itself that made you not want to complete the process?

■ While the last question focused more on the individual characteristics of FS applicants, this question examines how specific components of the process hinder applicants. Items could be added or removed based on specific state regulations and requirements.

15). Did you know you could call to change your appointment if you were unable to go?

16). If you had a problem coming to the office, were you offered a chance to complete your application by phone or by mail?

■ These questions are intended to check if the social services agency is promoting its policies that make the process easier for applicants. Question 16 could be dropped if your county does not have a policy that permits the completion of telephone interviews.

Section III

1). Did not being a U.S. citizen make you decide not to finish the application process?

■ This question concentrates on the various myths among immigrant populations regarding food stamps. For example, some immigrants believe that receiving food stamps will cause them to be considered a public charge or will impact their immigration status in some fashion. This question is especially relevant in counties with large immigrant populations.

2). Is there anything the Social Services Agency could have done that would have helped you finish the application process?

■ This is an open-ended question intended to get feedback from survey participants about any aspect of the process they found frustrating or challenging. It is their opportunity to articulate in their own words, the social services agency's shortcomings that contributed to their inability to access food stamps. Many individuals will already have expressed their views at different points during the course of the survey, but this question is designed to catch any thoughts that were not expressed already.

3). If you could have applied for food stamps by phone or by mail, do you think you would have been able to complete the entire process?

■ For some people, the biggest barrier to obtaining food stamps is navigating the gauntlet of county social services offices. This question examines whether a significant percentage of applicants would have completed the process if they did not have to go to a county office.

Pilot Interview Findings

The primary intent of conducting pilot interviews using the survey tool was to improve the survey's questions and ensure that they draw out important information about why some FS applicants fail to complete the process. Nevertheless, in this section I present several qualified findings from the 21 conducted interviews as well as some questions that deem further investigation. It is essential to remember that any findings presented here are not based on statistically significant data, but are intended as points to consider during future studies based on large sample sizes.

Findings:

- ❖ The vast majority of applicants (19 of 21) interviewed failed to complete the application not because they no longer needed food stamps, but rather, because of some type of barrier.
- ❖ The barriers that prevented applicants from completing the process were diverse, ranging from a difficulty in assembling all of the required verifications or communicating with their caseworkers, to personal issues related to transportation, disability or elderly status.
- ❖ The survey responses of English-speaking populations differed from non-English-speaking populations in certain categories. Non-English-speaking populations expressed greater

difficulty understanding county correspondence and increased concern regarding the SFIS requirement and background checks that are part of the application process.

Questions to Consider for Large-Scale Studies:

- ❖ Do most applicants actually drop out of the application process because of barriers, or are applicants who no longer need food stamps more likely to decline to participate in the survey?
- ❖ If large-scale surveys also find a diverse set of barriers impact applicants' inability to finish the process, are their ways to group the barriers so that one solution could remove multiple barriers?⁷⁶
- ❖ How are barriers different for non-English-speaking populations than for English speakers?

VI. Personal Reflection – My Experience Working for ACCFB and SSA

My joint placement with ACCFB and SSA provided me with a unique opportunity to observe the overlapping roles of a county social services agency versus a substantial, countywide non-profit company. First and foremost, both organizations exist to serve the low-income residents of Alameda County on a large scale. At any given time, over 150 thousand individuals receive some form of public assistance from SSA, including 31 thousand individuals on Non-Assistance Food Stamps.⁷⁷ Similarly, ACCFB distributes approximately 12 million pounds of food annually, supplying nearly 300 partner agencies and reaching 120 thousand people each month.⁷⁸ In addition, the two organizations have a relationship as service providers, with the Food Bank acting as a referral mechanism for individuals that might qualify for public benefits.

Both ACCFB and SSA are highly committed to improving services for Alameda County's low-income population. The two organizations have developed a positive working relationship over the past several years as they have jointly implemented an extensive, countywide FS outreach Network. Nevertheless, the different roles of ACCFB and SSA impact how their dedication is realized. As advocates, the staff at ACCFB frequently devises inventive ideas to improve the FS program in Alameda County, without fully considering the legality or practicability of the plan. SSA must then respond by explaining how various regulations render the Food Bank's proposal unfeasible. For example, ACCFB expressed repeated interest in helping applicants complete the entire FS application as well as contacting FS applicants to ensure that they complete all of the necessary application requirements. Although SSA agreed such a setup would simplify the process for clients, they rejected the proposal due to confidentiality regulations.

Julia Martinez, FS Program Specialist at SSA, sometimes wishes she could adopt ACCFB's suggestions. As the administrator of Alameda County's FS program, however, she is responsible for ensuring the legality, integrity, and cost-effectiveness of the program, which sometimes means she cannot implement all of the ideas generated by the advocate community. Despite the scale of both organizations and their commitment to working together, the lack of power they have to effect drastic change at times impedes their efforts. SSA's primary function is to implement government social programs, which places them in the delicate position of notifying frustrated applicants that confusing

⁷⁶ For example, if clients express that poor office experiences, inability to communicate with workers, and processing delays all played a role in their inability to complete the process, then the social services agency could examine ways to fix these staffing and operating procedure issues.

⁷⁷ DFA 256 – Food Stamp Program Participation and Benefit Issuance Report. California Department of Social Services. http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research/DFA256-Foo_422.htm.

⁷⁸ "About Us." Alameda County Community Food Bank. Oakland, CA. Available at: http://www.accfb.org/about_us.html.

guidelines set at the state and federal levels disqualify them from eligibility. Similarly, ACCFB serves as a central clearinghouse for the emergency food system in Alameda County – supplying pantries, soup kitchens and other first-line agencies with the resources they need to feed Alameda’s hungry residents.

Both organizations ultimately want to improve the lives of Alameda County’s low-income residents, but they sometimes lack the means or authority to actualize the solutions they develop. As I observed the systemic, intersecting barriers facing ACCFB and SSA, I saw the potential for each side to place responsibility for program improvement on one another. Fortunately, ACCFB and SSA have demonstrated that their organizations can partner in a way that maximizes their efforts.

Their solution has been diligent communication, with both sides working to address problems jointly, to the best of their abilities. When a client notifies ACCFB of a poor experience at SSA, the Food Bank allows the Social Services Agency a chance to explain the circumstances that produced that complaint. At the same time, SSA understands that ACCFB’s goal is to advocate for the best service possible for the people of Alameda County. With only one Program Specialist at SSA to administer the FS Program and no funding for FS outreach staff, the sustained partnership between SSA and ACCFB has been vital to enabling FS outreach to occur in Alameda County. I hope this constructive relationship continues in Alameda County and expands to other counties. When a social services agency and its food bank do not work together, in the end, it is the disadvantaged residents of that county who suffer.

APPENDIX

A. Background: The Federal Food Stamp Program

The modern FS Program was piloted in 1961, made permanent by the Food Stamp Act of 1964 and expanded nationwide as part of the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act of 1973.⁷⁹ The program's benefits are comprised entirely of federal funds, although the administrative costs of implementing the program are split between states and the federal government. Legislation reauthorizing Food Stamps is attached to the Farm Bill, an omnibus body of legislation approved every five to seven years that addresses government nutrition programs, farm subsidies, rural development and agricultural trade policy.⁸⁰

Food Stamps work by providing monthly allowances to participating individuals that can be redeemed for food products. With the nationwide rollout of Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) over the last decade, food stamp benefits are now accessed like a debit card, as opposed to paper vouchers.⁸¹ Eligibility for Food Stamps is based primarily on income; however, a variety of underprivileged individuals who fall into certain categories – such as students and certain types of immigrants – are ineligible. The amount of food stamps a household receives is based on the Thrifty Food Plan, which is USDA's estimate of a low-cost, nutritious meal.⁸²

Federal Eligibility Guidelines⁸³

Household Composition

- ❖ Food Stamp eligibility begins with household composition. A household is generally defined as a group of individuals living under the same roof who purchase and prepare their meals together. Consequently, when determining eligibility, a social services agency will factor in all income from household members 18 years of age and older. Certain categories of individuals, such as children under the age of 22 living with their parents, are automatically considered part of the household, even if they claim to purchase and prepare their meals separately.

⁷⁹ "Food Stamp Program – A Short History of the Food Stamp Program." USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Washington, DC. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/rules/Legislation/history.htm>. See Also Federal Food Programs – Food Stamp Program." Food Research and Action Center. Washington, DC. Available at http://www.frac.org/html/federal_food_programs/programs/fsp.html.

⁸⁰ See "United States Farm Bills." The National Agricultural Law Center. Fayetteville, AR. <http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org/farmbills/>.

⁸¹ "Applicants and Recipients – Electronic Benefits Transfer." USDA Food and Nutrition Service: Washington, DC. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/ebt/>.

⁸² "Applicants and Recipients: Facts About the Food Stamp Program." USDA Food And Nutrition Service. Washington, DC. Available at: http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/applicant_recipients/facts_E.htm.

⁸³ For additional information on FS eligibility see (1) "Food Stamp Act of 1977." Available at: <http://agriculture.senate.gov/Legislation/Compilations/FNS/FSA77.pdf>. (2) "Food Stamp Program – A Short History of the Food Stamp Program. USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Washington, DC. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/rules/Legislation/history.htm>. (3) "Applicants and Recipients: Facts About the Food Stamp Program." USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Washington, DC. Available at: http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/applicant_recipients/facts_E.htm.

Income and Resources

- ❖ To qualify for food stamps, a household must have a gross income below 130 percent of the federal poverty limit. Currently, this translates into \$1,037 per month for a family of one and \$2,097 per month for a family of four. A household is permitted to have up to \$2000 worth of resources, which is defined as cash, bank accounts, real estate, personal property, stocks and bonds etc. Many types of resources are exempted, such as a household's home, personal belongings and life insurance policies. Depending on the state's regulations, one or more vehicles are also exempted from the resource limits. In addition, income and resource limits are different for families with an elderly or disabled individual in the household.⁸⁴

Deductions

- ❖ Certain expenses not only go uncounted toward the monthly income limit, but are also deductible. Examples of deductible costs include: rent or mortgage expenses, utility bills, some costs of dependent childcare, legally owed child-support payments, and medical expenses that exceed \$35 per month for household members older than 60 or disabled,

Citizenship

- ❖ All U.S. citizens are eligible for food stamps, as well as certain immigrants (non-citizens). Immigrants who are refugees, asylees or part of other special status groups are eligible for food stamps as soon as they arrive in the U.S.⁸⁵ Immigrants not part of a special status group are required to reside in the U.S. for five years before they are eligible for Federal Food Stamps. Some states have their own food stamp programs that enable immigrants to receive state benefits before the five-year point.
- ❖ Many immigrants are sponsored, which means that an individual in the U.S. signed an affidavit of support, promising to provide financial support to an individual as a condition for their admittance to the U.S. Unless a sponsored immigrant becomes battered, destitute, reaches 40 quarters of work, or the sponsor dies, Federal FS eligibility is based on the income of both the sponsor and the sponsored immigrant ("sponsor deeming").⁸⁶

Work Requirements

- ❖ In general, all able-bodied adults (ages 18 to 49) without dependents must either work 20 hours per week or participate in 20 hours per week worth of job training programs to be eligible for food stamps. Able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDS) who do not meet the work requirement may only receive three months of Food Stamps in any given three year period. There are some exceptions to the work requirement, so check with your local county social services agency for additional information.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Food Stamp Program – Food Stamp Special Rules for the Elderly or Disabled. USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Washington, DC. Available at: http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/rules/Elderly_Disabled.htm.

⁸⁵ "Food Stamp Program: Food Stamp Policy on Immigrants." USDA Food And Nutrition Service. Washington, DC. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/rules/memo/02/polimgrt.htm>.

⁸⁶ The "sponsor deeming rule" only applies to sponsor's who signed their affidavit of support after December 19th, 1997. For more information see "Immigrants and Public Benefits – Food and Nutrition Programs." The National Immigration Law Center. Los Angeles, CA. Available at: <http://www.nilc.org/immspbs/fnutr/foodnutr015.htm>.

⁸⁷ For example, USDA Food and Nutrition Services grants waivers to counties for up to 15% of ABAWDS.

Students

- ❖ Most able-bodied students attending an institution of higher education are ineligible for food stamps, unless they meet certain exceptions. These exceptions include: working at least 20 hours per week, participating in a federally financed work study program, status as a single parent taking care of a dependent child under the age of six. High school students, however, are not subject to work requirements.

State Eligibility Guidelines

In addition, to a myriad of federal regulations, most states impose a series of additional eligibility guidelines. In California, these requirements fall under several categories: Supplemental Security Income/State Support Payment (SSI/SSP), State Finger Imaging Requirement (SFIS), and varying food stamp participant reporting requirements.

SSI/SSP

- ❖ California is the only state in which individuals who receive SSI/SSP are ineligible for food stamps. Beginning in 1974, the federal government implemented the joint federal-state SSI/SSP Program, giving states the option to raise the state portion of the allotment instead of providing food stamps to SSI/SSP recipients.⁸⁸ Over time, Congress has required California to factor in cost-of-living increases and alter its SSP payment threshold to maintain its cash-out status. Since March 1983, however, the SSP allowance has remained at \$156.⁸⁹
- ❖ There is some disagreement as to whether or not California's SSI/SSP cash-out policy should be maintained. Under the cash-out policy, households with an SSI/SSP recipient benefit because members not receiving SSI/SSP are still eligible for Food Stamps and the income received by the SSI/SSP recipient will not be counted. On the other hand, SSI/SSP recipients living alone would benefit from the increased financial boost that receiving food stamps would provide.

SFIS

- ❖ California requires all adult household members to be finger imaged – unless they are physically unable – prior to receiving food stamps.⁹⁰ The legislative intent behind this requirement is to prevent fraud – maintaining a database of finger images enables state welfare offices to easily catch individuals attempting to simultaneously access benefits in multiple counties (“multiple-aid fraud”). Opponents argue that the SFIS requirement is unnecessary, due to the infrequency of multiple-aid fraud. “In a given month, fewer than 70 households are even suspected of multiple-aid fraud... [which is] minuscule compared to the 660,000 households that receive food stamps and makes the over \$8.5 million California

⁸⁸ Arnold, Autumn and Marinacci, Amy. “Cash-Out in California: A History of Help and Harm.” California Food Policy Advocates. San Francisco, California. August 2003. Available at: <http://www.cfpa.net/CashoutinCA2003.pdf>.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 7.

⁹⁰ “Food Stamp Programs: Eligibility and Issuance Requirements.” California Department of Social Services: Sacramento, CA. Available at http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/foodstamps/eligibilit_1723.htm.

spends on finger imaging cost-ineffective.”⁹¹ In addition, California has rolled out EBT in all 58 California counties, which has considerably strengthened anti-fraud efforts.⁹²

- ❖ Counties have some leeway when implementing this requirement. For example, counties determine who is physically unable to complete the SFIS requirement and when a household member’s person circumstances warrant a postponement of the SFIS requirement due to an exemption. In addition, county welfare departments cannot require an individual to make a special trip to the office for the sole purpose of satisfying the SFIS requirement.

Varying Reporting Requirements

- ❖ Federal and state regulations require states to implement a reporting requirement for food stamp recipients. Households complete reports to update a wide variety of information pertinent to their case, including housing circumstances, income, changes in citizenship status, and the addition or departure of household members. The 2002 Farm Bill gave states the option to adopt biannual reporting requirements, as opposed to monthly or quarterly reporting requirements.⁹³ States generally require households to report certain information, such as a change of address, more frequently. California just moved from monthly to quarterly reporting in 2004 as required by legislation passed in 2002. Quarterly reporting requires participants to report predicted changes in income, medical costs, and childcare expenses for upcoming three-month periods.⁹⁴

County Policies and Procedures

County FS administrators have some degree of freedom to interpret state and federal regulations in ways that make sense for their local communities. Known as procedures or policies, counties develop detailed business processes to outline how employees should apply state and federal regulations in specific circumstances. For example, as noted previously, California state regulations require all FS applicants to be finger imaged prior to receiving benefits unless someone has a hardship. Counties, in turn, have the freedom to interpret on a case-by-case basis whether or not an individual’s hardship constitutes waiving the finger-imaging requirement. Consequently, an applicant’s location within California will impact how rigidly the SFIS requirement is implemented.

In addition, state departments of social services have the option to submit an application to USDA Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) for a waiver of specific federal regulations. In certain situations, “FNS grants waivers of sections of the rules to food stamp State agencies to allow deviations from standard procedures, to allow for temporary conditions, to allow more effective and efficient administration, or to accommodate unique local conditions.”⁹⁵ In California, which has

⁹¹ “Frequently Asked Questions: Save Money, Fight Hunger, Reduce Government Waste: End Finger Imaging.” California Food Policy Advocates: San Francisco, CA. p. 1. Available at: <http://www.cfpa.net/legislation/2004/agendasignon/FAQFingerimaging.pdf>.

⁹² Ibid, p. 1.

⁹³ “2002 Farm Bill: Section by Section Analysis of Provisions Affecting Food Stamp Provisions.” USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Available at: http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/2002_Farm_Bill/food_stamps.html.

⁹⁴ “Food Stamp Programs: Eligibility and Issuance Requirements.”

⁹⁵ “Governments – Legislation, Rules, Waivers and Certification Policy.” USDA Food and Nutrition Service: Washington, DC. Available at: http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/government/legislation_rules_cert.htm.

considerable diversity among counties in their systems of FS administration, counties have the option to apply directly for individual county-specific waivers. For additional information about applying for a waiver, contact your state department of social services or your regional FNS office.

Why is it a necessary program?

First and foremost, Food Stamps serve as the fundamental safety net for low-income households in the U.S., helping them to move toward self-sufficiency while still eating nutritious meals. As recently as the 1960s, researchers documented severe hunger in Appalachia and other poor regions of the United States, finding that children were suffering from diseases caused by malnutrition.⁹⁶ By 1977, a follow-up study found that nationwide nutrition programs such as food stamps had dramatically reduced hunger related illnesses in the U.S.⁹⁷

The Food Stamp Program targets the poorest Americans, with 90 percent of recipients falling below the poverty line.⁹⁸ When a family of four combines the revenue generated from one person working full time earning minimum wage, with the income available through food stamps and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), that family can reach 94 percent of the poverty line. The minimum wage job alone only brings the family to about 50 percent of the poverty line, with food stamps accounting for about 25 percent and EITC accounting for approximately 20 percent.⁹⁹ Because the Food Stamp income is allocated monthly and can be used only for purchasing food, it helps ensure that low-income households consistently have enough money to meet their nutrition needs. Moreover, food stamp recipients generally use their allotments wisely, spending three quarters of the benefits on vegetables, fruits, grain products, meat, and meat alternatives.¹⁰⁰ The result is that over three-fourths of food stamp recipients meet or exceed recommended daily values for important vitamins and minerals.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Rosenbaum, Dorothy and Neuberger. "Food and Nutrition Programs: Reducing Hunger, Bolstering Nutrition." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: Washington, DC. July 19th, 2005. <http://www.cbpp.org/7-19-05fa.htm>

⁹⁷ Ibid.

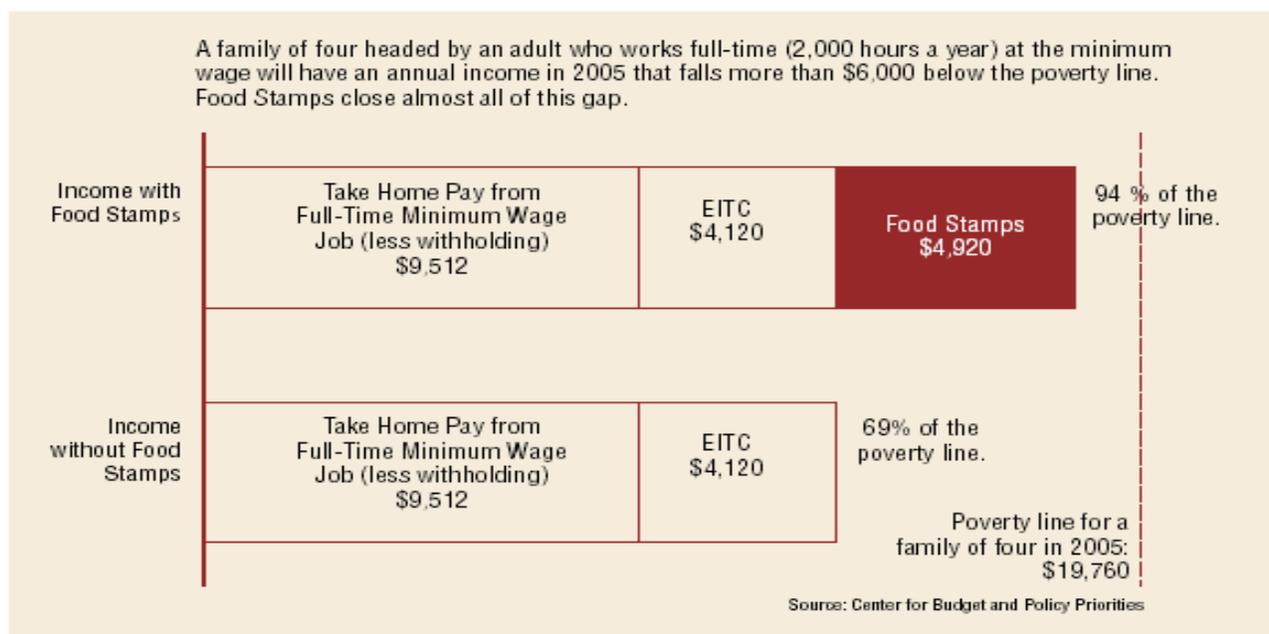
⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid. A full-time minimum wage job would produce about \$9,512 dollars annually, while EITC and Food Stamps would add \$4,120 and \$4,920 respectively.

¹⁰⁰ *Making America Stronger: A Profile of the Food Stamp Program*. USDA Food and Nutrition Service: Washington, DC. September 2005. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/FSP/FILES/Other/FSPPProfile.pdf>. p. 18.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 18.

THE DIFFERENCE FOOD STAMPS MAKE FOR THE WORKING POOR



Source: Bread for the World¹⁰²

Because the Food Stamp Program is based on the Thrifty Food Plan, it achieves its primary goal of providing nutritional support to poor individuals in a cost effective manner. Significant reductions in hunger have been achieved at a cost of only \$1 per person per meal.¹⁰³ Similarly, the Food Stamp Program delivers benefits accurately and efficiently. Ninety-eight percent of Food Stamp Benefits are delivered to program participants and approximately 95 percent of households receive their correct Food Stamp allotment.¹⁰⁴

The flexible design of the food stamp program is another important strength. As an Entitlement Program, Food Stamp funding and program guidelines are guaranteed from year to year, meaning that anyone who meets the eligibility criteria can receive food stamps, regardless of governmental budgetary constraints.¹⁰⁵ During the last thirty years, Food Stamp participation has fluctuated in sync with the U.S. population of individuals living in poverty. Moreover, the 2002 Farm Bill contained a series of measures designed to enhance program simplification, including greater freedom for states and counties to align income deductions with Medicaid and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) as well as the option to adopt a simplified biannual reporting system.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² *Frontline Issues in Nutrition Assistance*. 2006 Hunger Report. Bread for the World Institute: Washington, DC. January 2006. p. 25. Available at: <http://www.bread.org/learn/hunger-reports/hunger-report-2006-download.html>.

¹⁰³ *Making America Stronger: A Profile of the Food Stamp Program*. USDA Food and Nutrition Service: Washington, DC. September 2005. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/FSP/FILES/Other/FSPProfile.pdf>. p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Rosenbaum, Dorothy, and Super, David. "The Food Stamp Program – Working Smarter for Working Families." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: Washington, DC. June 29th, 2005. Available at: <http://www.cbpp.org/3-15-05fa.htm>.

¹⁰⁵ *Making America Stronger: A Profile of the Food Stamp Program*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ "Farm Policy: Title IV – Nutrition Programs." USDA Economic Research Service: Washington, DC. Available at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/features/farmland/titles/titleIVnutritionprograms.htm>.

Benefits to Local Communities

The benefits of Food Stamps also extend beyond program participants to the broader community. For example, a \$5 billion increase in Food Stamp expenditures generates \$9.2 billion of economic activity, as well as the creation of 82,100 jobs.¹⁰⁷ Because FS outlays are 100 percent federally funded, growing food stamp participation rates generate increased benefits to local economies. This often translates into millions of dollars in economic stimulus for a particular county. Alameda County, for example, received \$6.1 million in FS dollars during November 2005, which translates into \$11.2 million dollars in economic activity.¹⁰⁸

Barriers to FS Participation

There are many reasons why eligible individuals do not participate in the Food Stamp program. In many cases, individuals have varying perceptions regarding the costs and benefits of food stamps which influence their decision to pursue benefits. In other cases, various forms of misinformation dissuade individuals who would otherwise choose to participate. Twenty-seven percent of nonparticipants indicate that they would not participate, even if they knew they were eligible.¹⁰⁹ The majority of nonparticipants who fall into this category choose not to participate because of a desire for personal independence. The bulk of nonparticipants – approximately 70 percent – would seek benefits if they knew they were eligible, but fail to access benefits due to a wide variety of obstacles and barriers.

Misconceptions or Lack of Information Regarding Eligibility

- ❖ A major barrier to increasing food stamp participation rates is lack of information about the program. Although 96 percent of nonparticipants have heard of the program, only two-thirds know where to apply for benefits and less than half think they are eligible.¹¹⁰ Consequently, many eligible nonparticipants never attempt to access benefits due to lack of knowledge.

Confusion of Food Stamps with Welfare & Immigration Concerns

- ❖ Many people are unaware that Food Stamps is not a form of welfare. Welfare programs such as TANF and General Assistance both fall under the rubric of public charge, a longstanding immigration classification that is applied to individuals who rely on the U.S. government for financial support.¹¹¹ If an immigrant is determined to be a “public charge,” then he or she may not receive a residency card, which gives someone status as legal permanent resident. Receiving Food Stamps – as well as other non-cash government assistance programs such as Medicaid – does not subject an immigrant to public charge consideration.

¹⁰⁷ Hanson, Kenneth and Golan, Elise. “Effects of Changes in Food Stamp Expenditures Across the U.S. Economy.” USDA Economic Research Service: Washington, DC. August 2002. Available at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr26/fanrr26-6/fanrr26-6.pdf>.

¹⁰⁸ DFA 256 – Food Stamp Program Participation and Benefit Issuance Report. California Department of Social Services: Sacramento, CA. http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research/DFA256-Foo_422.htm.

¹⁰⁹ Bartlett, Susan and Burstein, Nancy. *Food Stamp Program Access Study: Eligible Nonparticipants*. Report submitted to USDA Economic Research Service. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, December 2003, p. 26.

¹¹⁰ Bartlett and Burstein, p. 22.

¹¹¹ See <http://www2.uiuc.edu/unit/oisa/OISAService/HealthCareInsurance/publiccharge2000.html>.

- ❖ In addition, able-bodied adults who obtain benefits through TANF or GA are required to repay the money they receive. Many FS applicants become confused that food stamp benefits will also have to be repaid in the future.

Distrust of government

- ❖ Many individuals, especially immigrants born in countries with corrupt regimes, possess a genuine distrust of the government. FS outreach in Alameda County and elsewhere frequently involves a partnership between the social service agency and community organizations that are trusted by target populations.¹¹² By engaging local organizations, county social service agencies can reach populations that might otherwise go un-served.

Obstacles stemming from Application Requirements

- ❖ In most counties, successfully completing a food stamp application requires considerable effort on an applicant's part. Quite frequently, an applicant must make one or more trips to the office, assemble a wide range of verifications (such as a driver's license, social security card, wage stubs, and other types of documentation). At the same time, individuals applying for food stamps frequently face many personal barriers, such as a lack of childcare, poor transportation options, or inflexible work hours. Consequently, the time, energy and perseverance that it requires to obtain FS benefits often discourage eligible nonparticipants.

Desire for Personal Independence / Stigma

- ❖ Among those nonparticipants who actively choose not to access food stamp benefits, approximately 90 percent cite a desire for personal independence as the primary factor motivating their decision.¹¹³ About half that many, 44 percent, indicate that the stigma associated with receiving and using food stamps discourages them. For these individuals, the psychological costs associated with food stamps outweigh the perceived benefits.

Low Expected Benefit

- ❖ Finally, over a third of individuals cite that expected benefit is too small to warrant the hassle of applying. In some situations, individuals expect that they would receive an amount close to the minimum benefit of \$10 per month. For another individual, the application process might be extremely inconvenient because he or she works during the welfare office's hours of operation and the monetary costs of missing work might appear to outweigh the financial benefits of obtaining food stamps.

¹¹² See Chen, Susan, McLaughlin, Dan and Manalo-LeClair, George. *Best Practices to Improve the Food Stamp Program in California*. California Food Policy Advocates: San Francisco, CA. Available at: <http://www.cfpa.net/foodstamps/BestPractices.pdf>.

¹¹³ Bartlett and Burnstein, 26.

B. Glossary

- ❖ **California Welfare Information Network (CalWIN)** – CalWIN is the new electronic eligibility determination software recently adopted by 18 counties, including Alameda County.
- ❖ **Client Contact Unit (CCU)** – CCU eligibility workers are stationed at each of Alameda County's four offices to meet with customers who are already receiving aid through one of SSA's programs. CCU eligibility workers meet with clients on behalf of their assigned workers, who have too many cases to meet with clients.
- ❖ **Data Input Clerk (DIC)** – Data Input Clerks work behind the scenes and are in charge of registering applications into CalWIN.
- ❖ **Eligibility Support Clerk (ESC)** – Eligibility Support Clerks work in the office waiting rooms and are an intermediate position between a DIC and an Eligibility worker. They can complete Part I of the food stamp application and answer basic eligibility questions, but are not trained to process entire applications.
- ❖ **Intake Clerk** – Intake Clerks ensure that EWs have even caseloads. Under CDS, they also created a monthly report of worker caseload status; however, with the CalWIN system, this function is now mechanized.
- ❖ **Intake Eligibility Worker** – Intake workers process applications for individuals who are not currently receiving any type of social service. After they approve an individual for aid, the case is forwarded to an ongoing worker.
- ❖ **Mailroom Clerk** – Currently, mailroom clerks sort incoming mail and deliver it to the appropriate staff member. Over the next several months, their new assignment will be to scan all incoming mail into webfiles.
- ❖ **Ongoing Eligibility Worker** – Ongoing workers maintain the cases of applicants who have already been approved for aid.
- ❖ **Carryover** – All intake workers have a set number of applications they can process each month. When SSA reaches a point where they cannot assign additional applications to intake workers, this is known as carryover. These applications are placed on hold and assigned next month. If approved, aid will be retroactive back to the original date of application.
- ❖ **Webfiles** – SSA is currently embarking on a project of scanning most incoming documents into a digital file, known as a web file. The goal is to have an entirely paperless system, whereby all documents pertaining to a case are available as a digital image.

III. Ongoing/Intake Workers

a. How does an FS application get to you?

Mail –

Office –

b. Are you able to tell when an application arrives if it is a CBO application?

c. How do you screen for ES FS applications? How do you communicate with the client in ES cases?

d. I noticed that you have not sent out a NOA 613 (schedule an appointment). Have you instead sent out a manual need letter?

e. When will you be meeting with the client? Would it be all right if I attended?

f. How do you decide when to schedule an individual for an interview?

g. How many days to you allow an applicant to complete the face-to-face requirement?

h. How many days do you wait to deny an applicant that has missed an interview? (i.e. Is it the full 30 days?)

i. If a client misses an appointment, what do you do? (i.e. Do you send a Notice of Missed Appointment?)

- j. What do you do if a client provides you with a valid reason for not being able to come to the office at any time? (i.e. Are you aware that you can waive the face-to-face and do a telephone interview?)
- k. Are you lenient in waiving the face-to-face interview? What do you consider a valid reason for waiving the face-to-face interview?
- l. Have you been receiving “hardship cards” along with the CBO FS applications?
- m. Can you exempt people from being finger imaged if they have a hardship?
- n. Are you lenient in waiving the Finger Imaging requirement and setting a tickler until the next time the individual comes into the office? If so, how often do you do this?
- o. Are you familiar with the cheat sheet “FS application process?” (i.e. Julie’s cheat sheet for all EWs)
- p. If you come across an application for someone who does not speak English and requests interpreting services, what do you do?
- q. What is happening with Imaging? Do you get FS applications and verifications on webfiles or as a hard copy? What comes to you by mail vs. webfiles?
- r. Now that we have asked all of these questions, is there anything about the application process that could be changed to improve things for workers or applicants?

D. H&R Block FS Outreach Project¹¹⁴

At offices throughout the country, H&R Block currently provides low-income clients with information and applications for public assistance programs (Block Advantage). During the 2006 tax season (January 1st to April 15th), H&R Block will be piloting FS outreach services in Alameda County and San Francisco County using a newly designed electronic pre-screening tool.¹¹⁵ The new project is the beginning of a national effort known as The Benefits Enrollment Network, which seeks to connect hospitals, clinics, CBOs, researchers, policy organizations and social service agencies to help facilitate the enrollment of eligible individuals onto public assistance programs. When low-income individuals come into an H&R Block office for tax preparation, the tax preparer will use a software program to provide a basic eligibility screening and then provide FS applications to people who appear to qualify.

Another component of the new pilot project is a research study headed by Emmanuel Saez, Diane Schanzenbach and Stacy Dean.¹¹⁶ The first part of the study is designed to assess the impact of stigma on FS applicants. In one set of offices, the FS program will be described and promoted as the Golden State Advantage Program. In the second set of offices, standard language will be used to see if this decreases the number of individuals interested in applying. The second portion of the study involves pre-screening applicants in two different ways to ascertain whether increased levels of application assistance result in higher approval rates.¹¹⁷ The first group will simply be given a FS application and instructed to apply at their nearest social service office. The second group will be checked for eligibility using the electronic pre-screening tool; when someone appears eligible, H&R block staff will help the individual fill out Part I of the FS application and then mail in their applications to the social service agency. The agency will conduct a phone interview and waive the SFIS requirement.

The final goal of the H&R Block FS outreach project is to develop an electronic FS application that will interface with various electronic eligibility determination systems used by social services agencies. According to SSA, this project is still in a development stage because there is currently no procedure for permitting H&R Block to complete the entire FS application. In addition, SSA currently does not have the capability to automatically determine how to assign the electronic application, depending on whether the applicant is already on another aid program. In addition, technology issues involved with ensuring compatibility between the H&R Block software and electronic eligibility determination systems still need to be addressed.

¹¹⁴ For additional information see “H&R Block Food Stamp Outreach Project.” All County Information Notice No. 1-15-05. California Department of Social Services: Sacramento, CA. Available at:

http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/getinfo/acin05/pdf/I-15_05.pdf.

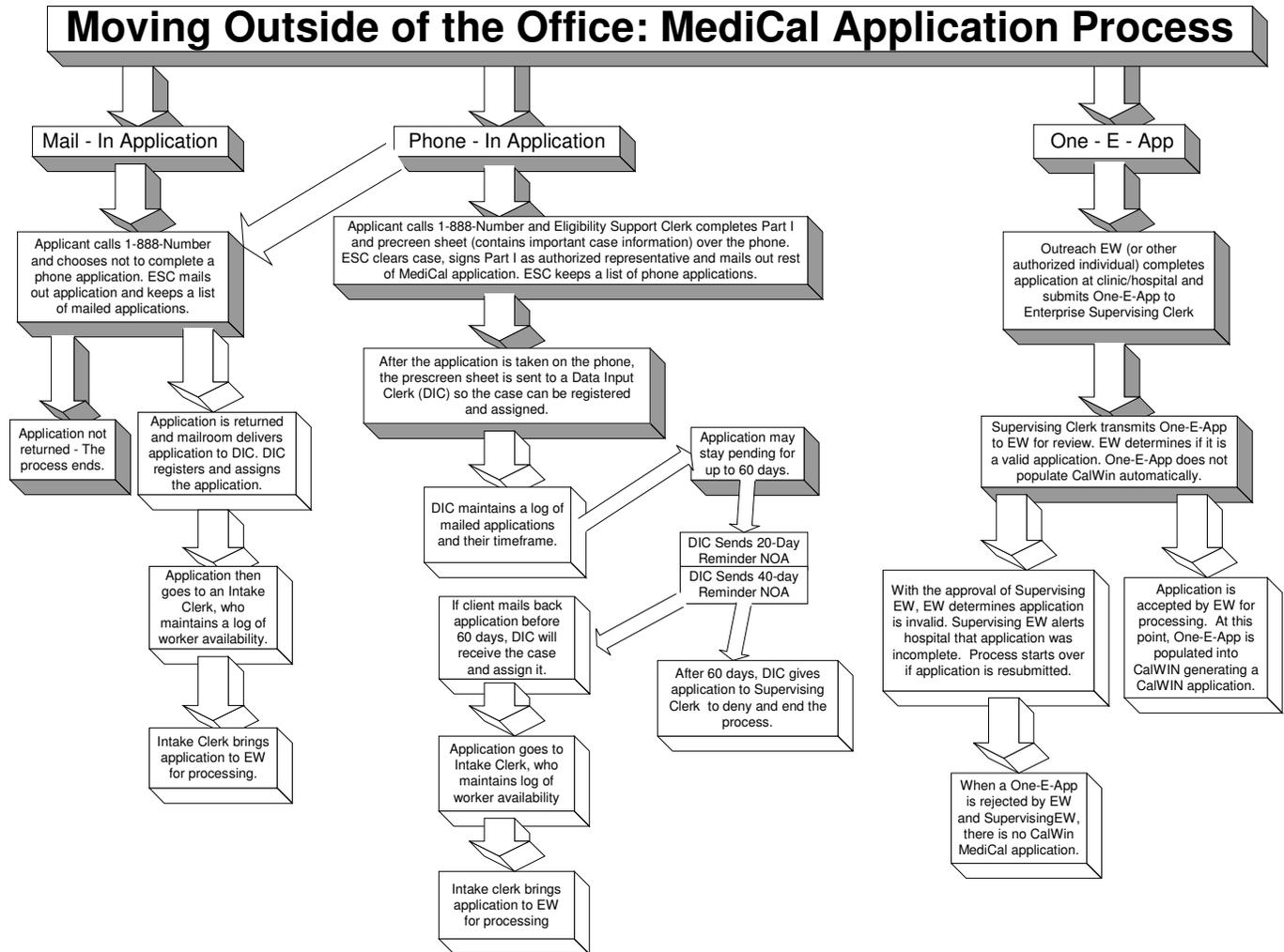
¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Emmanuel Saez, Diane Schanzenbach and Stacy dean are scholars at the University of California-Berkeley, University of Chicago, and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, respectively.

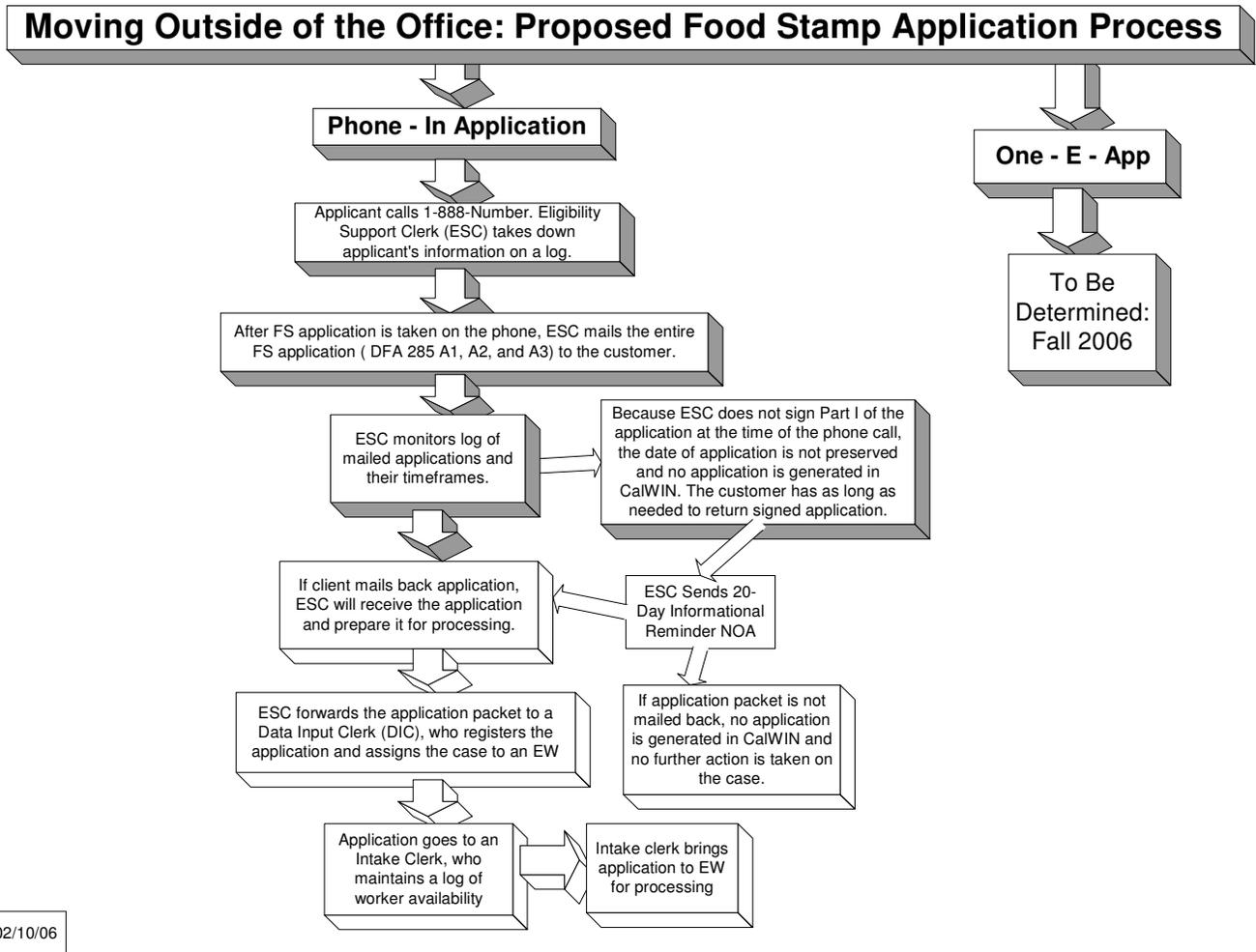
¹¹⁷ People will be grouped randomly according to social security number. Information obtained during Meeting with Brian Plunkett. December 15th, 2005. Alameda County Department of Social Services – Hayward Office.

E. Proposed FS Business Processes

I. Current Mail-in, Phone-in and Electronic MediCal Processes in Alameda County



II. Proposed Phone-in FS Process in Alameda



F. Consent to Release Information Forms



I. AUTHORIZATION FOR RELEASE OF INFORMATION (English)

I voluntarily authorize **Alameda County Social Services Agency** to release any and all information about my case to the **Alameda County Community Food Bank** staff and representatives, for the purpose of providing assistance during my application process and as needed, while my case is active.

I am authorizing the release of all past information as well as any information created within 12 months after the date this authorization is signed. I authorize the use of a copy of this form for the disclosure of the information described above. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose of helping to document my eligibility for food stamp benefits. This authorization is good for 12 months from the date signed or until revoked by me in writing.

II. Autorización Para Revelar Información (Spanish)

Yo voluntariamente autorizo a **Alameda County Social Services Agency** (Agencia de Servicios Sociales) que revele información mía a representantes del **Alameda County Community Food Bank** (Banco de Comida). Esta información incluye información acerca de mi caso de estampillas para comida para el propósito de recibir asistencia durante mi proceso de aplicación y cuando sea necesario durante el tiempo en el cual mi caso este activo.

Yo autorizo que la información que será revelada incluya información mía previa, al igual que información creada dentro de 12 meses después de que esta autorización es firmada y fechada. Entiendo que esta información solo será usada para el propósito de recibir ayuda y/o documentar mi elegibilidad para beneficios de estampillas para comida. Esta autorización es valida por 12 meses después del día que es firmada o cuando yo revoqué esta información por escrito.

Full Name/ Nombre Completo: _____

Social Security Number/ Número de Seguro Social: _____

Date of Birth/ Fecha de Nacimiento: _____

Address/ Dirección: _____

I have read, or been read, this form and understand and agree to the disclosures described above.

Yo e leído, o me han leído, esta forma. Entiendo y acuerdo lo escrito en esta forma.

Signature/ Firma: _____ **Date/ Fecha:** _____

CHO PHÉP TIẾT LỘ THÔNG TIN (Vietnamese)

Tôi tự nguyện cho phép **Cơ Quan Dịch Vụ Xã Hội Quận Hạt Alameda (Alameda County Social Services Agency)** tiết lộ bất cứ hay toàn bộ thông tin về hồ sơ của tôi cho ban điều hành hoặc đại diện của **Ngân Hàng Thực Phẩm Cộng Đồng Quận hạt Alameda (Alameda County Community Food Bank)**, với mục đích cung cấp sự giúp đỡ trong thủ tục nộp đơn xin và nếu cần thiết, trong khi hồ sơ của tôi được kích hoạt.

Tôi cho phép tiết lộ bất cứ hay toàn bộ thông tin trong quá khứ cũng như thông tin được tạo ra trong vòng 12 tháng sau ngày ký giấy cho phép. Tôi cho phép dùng bản sao của mẫu này để tiết lộ thông tin mô tả trên đây. Tôi hiểu rõ rằng thông tin này sẽ chỉ được dùng cho mục đích bổ túc hồ sơ cho việc đủ điều kiện của tôi để hưởng tem phiếu thực phẩm. Giấy cho phép này có giá trị 12 tháng kể từ ngày ký hoặc cho đến khi tôi hủy bỏ bằng văn thư.

Full name / Tên và Họ: _____

Social Security Number / Số An Sinh Xã Hội: _____

Date of Birth / Ngày Sinh: _____

Address / Địa chỉ: _____

I have read, or been read, this form and understand and agree to the disclosures described above.

Tôi đã đọc, hoặc được đọc cho nghe, mẫu này và hiểu rõ và đồng ý cho việc tiết lộ mô tả trên đây.

Signature / Chữ ký: _____ **Date / Ngày:** _____

G. Denied Food Stamp Applicant Survey

Goals:

1. To ascertain why certain Food Stamp applicants do not complete the FS application process;
2. Determine degree to which incomplete applications are due to clients' intentional withdrawal of applications and if so why e.g. no longer needs food stamps, own or other family members' reservations that the FS benefits will be minimal, the cumbersome nature of the application process, immigration related concerns, fear or dislike of contact with government officials and government intrusion, fear of getting finger imaged, fear of appearing before an eligibility worker;
3. Determine degree to which incomplete application due to difficulties or inadequacies with the application process. e.g. a failure to receive or understand county correspondence, personal hardship, uninformed of face-to-face interview/SFIS waivers, difficulty securing necessary paperwork, language barriers;
4. Better understanding of the characteristics of applicants who are not completing the application process and whether these characteristics contribute to incomplete applications e.g. were contacted first by community outreach workers, are receiving other benefits, have children, lack transportation, are foreign born, have working family members, etc.

Directions for the Interviewer:

THE INTERVIEWER SHOULD ONLY READ STATEMENTS IN **lower case**. INSTRUCTIONS TO THE INTERVIEWER ARE IN **UPPER CASE**. MARK ALL ANSWERS IN THE BRACKET SPACE PROVIDED NEXT TO EACH RESPONSE.

(I.E. [X])

IN SEVERAL PLACES DURING THE SURVEY, THERE ARE INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEWER TO OBTAIN A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE FROM THE APPLICANT. IF THE CLIENT HAS NOT PROVIDED A SPECIFIC ANSWER AFTER THE STATED QUESTION HAS BEEN ASKED, THE INTERVIEWER SHOULD FOLLOW UP WITH: "please provide an example." IF THE CLIENT DOES NOT REMEMBER OR DOES NOT KNOW, NOTE THAT IN THE SPACE PROVIDED.

Questionnaire

Good Afternoon. May I speak with _____. This is _____ and I am calling from _____. I am calling you because you recently applied for food stamps but your case was denied for some reason. We are currently in the process of following up with individuals who applied for food stamps but failed to complete the process. We are trying to find out if there is anything the Social Services Agency could have done to help you make it through the whole application process.

Would it be okay if I asked you a few questions about your application? We will also give you a \$10 gift certificate for taking the time to answer our questions.

I. Beginning the Application

1). How did you learn about the food stamp program?

- A. Received food stamps in the past
- B. From a caseworker working with (SPECIFY)

-
- C. From a friend or family member
 - D. From advertisements or promotions, (SPECIFY) seen

-
- E. From another source (SPECIFY) _____

2). Did any agency prescreen you for food stamps before you applied at the Food Stamp Office?
 Yes No (SKIP TO QUESTION 1 OF NEXT SECTION)

2a). If yes, where did this pre-screening take place? (SPECIFY) _____

2b). If you know, what organization did the person who “pre-screened” you work for?
 (SPECIFY) _____

3). How did you apply for food stamps?

A. Did you walk-in to the office and apply? Yes No (SKIP TO 3C)

B. Describe what happened when you visited the social services office to apply for food stamps.

C. Did you mail-in an application? Yes No

II. The Application Process

1). Have you received letters from Social Services regarding your application?

Yes No (SKIP TO QUESTION 8) Don't know (SKIP TO QUESTION 8)

2) How many letters did you receive? (REPEAT QUESTIONS 3-4 FOR EACH LETTER RECEIVED BY THE APPLICANT. QUESTION 3 SHOULD BE READ ONLY TO NON-ENGLISH SPEAKERS)

number don't know

	Letter #1	Letter #2	Letter #3	Letter #4
3). Was the letter written in a language that you are	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No			

comfortable with?	(GO TO QUESTION NUMBER 5)			
4.). Would you say the letter(s) was/were	<input type="checkbox"/> A. Very difficult to understand <input type="checkbox"/> B. Somewhat difficult to understand <input type="checkbox"/> C. Not at all difficult to understand	<input type="checkbox"/> A. Very difficult to understand <input type="checkbox"/> B. Somewhat difficult to understand <input type="checkbox"/> C. Not at all difficult to understand	<input type="checkbox"/> A. Very difficult to understand <input type="checkbox"/> B. Somewhat difficult to understand <input type="checkbox"/> C. Not at all difficult to understand	<input type="checkbox"/> A. Very difficult to understand <input type="checkbox"/> B. Somewhat difficult to understand <input type="checkbox"/> C. Not at all difficult to understand

5). Did you request to have mail from Social Services sent in a language you don't understand because you have a translator?

Yes No

6). Was one of the letters a request for additional information?

Yes No (SKIP TO QUESTION 7) Don't know

6a). Was it difficult for you to provide these documents?

Yes No (SKIP TO QUESTION 6C)

6b). Why was it difficult for you to provide these documents? (SPECIFY)

6c). How did you respond to the request for additional information?

A. You did not respond (ASK FOR AN EXPLANATION AS TO WHY)

B. You did respond by

- a. Going into the office
- b. Calling your caseworker
- c. Mailing the requested information
- d. Anything else (SPECIFY)

7). Did you receive a denial letter?

Yes No

8). County records show you were denied for food stamps because of one or more reason. These reasons are (READ SLOWLY, REPEAT IF NECESSARY): a) you did not turn in the necessary paperwork, b) you did not go to the face-to-face interview, or c) you changed your mind about getting food stamps and withdrew your application.

A. Do any of these reasons apply to you? Yes No (GO TO 8C)

B. Which reason(s) apply to you? _____

C. Why don't these reasons apply to you (SPECIFY)

9). Did you try to contact your worker at any time during the application process?

A. No (SKIP TO QUESTION 11)

B. Yes

a. By Phone

b. In Writing

c. In Person

C. Not aware that you had a worker.

10). Were you able to speak with your worker on the phone?

Yes

No

Don't know

10a). Was this because you called your worker or your worker called you?

a. You called your worker.

b. Your worker called you.

c. You both attempted to call one another.

11). Which one of the following statements best describes your recent food stamp application experience? (APPLICANT MUST CHOOSE ONE)

A. You did not finish the application process because you did not need Food Stamps any more. (GO TO QUESTION 12)

B. You were unable to finish the application process for some reason. (GO TO QUESTION 13)

12.) (IF RESPONDED 11A) Do mind sharing why you no longer needed Food Stamps? (SPECIFY)

Interview ends here for this group

13). (IF RESPONDED 11B) Why were you unable to finish the application process? (MORE THAN ONE ANSWER POSSIBLE)

(NOTE: PLEAE READ): I am going to read a long list of possible answers. Please let me know which ones apply to you.

A. You did not have transportation to the county office

- B. You work and were unable to go to the county office
- C. You did not have child care and did not want to bring your children to the county office
- D. You are currently taking care of a family member and could not bring them to the county office
- E. You are sick and were unable to go to the county office
- F. You are elderly or disabled and were unable to go to the county office
- G. You could not get the requested information in time (PROBE FOR WHAT TYPE OF INFORMATION) _____
- H. Another family member did not want you to apply (PROBE FOR WHY, LIST SPECIFIC REASON) _____
- I. You did not receive information about when your appointment was scheduled
- J. The appointment time was not convenient or not possible for you
- K. The application process is too difficult (PROBE FOR WHAT ASPECT OF THE APPLICATION) _____
- L. The benefit is too small or benefit is too small given the application requirements
- M. Not comfortable receiving food stamps – stigma, do not want government assistance, or think others need it more
- N. Your interaction with the county office was unpleasant so you decided not to continue (NOTE WHAT WAS SPECIFICALLY UNPLEASANT) _____
- O. You were afraid of providing requested information or that receiving food stamps would hurt immigration or citizenship application _____
- P. Was there some other reason? (SPECIFY) _____

14). Was there anything in particular about the application process itself that made you not want to complete the process? (MORE THAN ONE ANSWER POSSIBLE)

- A. Meeting with a county worker Yes No
- B. The Finger Printing Requirement Yes No
- C. The paperwork Yes No
- D. Permitting the county to investigate your personal information such as financial, criminal, and immigration status Yes No
- E. Having to go the social services office Yes No
- F. Was there something else?(SPECIFY) Yes No

15). Did you know you could call to change your appointment if you were unable to go?
 Yes No

16). If you had a problem coming to the office, were you offered a chance to complete your application by phone or by mail? Yes No

III. Applicant Characteristics

1). (ONLY ASK NON-CITIZENS) Did not being a U.S. citizen make you decide not to finish the application process? (MORE THAN ONE ANSWER POSSIBLE)

- A. No
- B. Yes, you worried about immigration
- D. Yes, you worried that you or your child couldn't get citizenship
- E. Yes, you worried about your sponsor
- F. Other (SPECIFY)

2.). Is there anything that the Social Services Agency could have done that would have helped you finish the application process?

3). If you could have applied for Food Stamps by phone or by mail, do you think you would have been able to complete the entire process?

(READ TO THE INTERVIEW SUBJECT): Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. Your responses are very important as we attempt to improve Alameda County's Food Stamp system. Within the next week (STATE AN APPROPRIATE LENGTH OF TIME) you should receive your \$10 gift card, which is our way of thanking you for answering our questions. Thanks again.