



EMPLOYMENT &
HUMAN SERVICES

M E M O R A N D U M

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To: – Family and Human Services Committee
 – Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors
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 • Kathi Kelly, CalFresh Policy Manager
Subject: **CALFRESH PROGRAM UPDATE**

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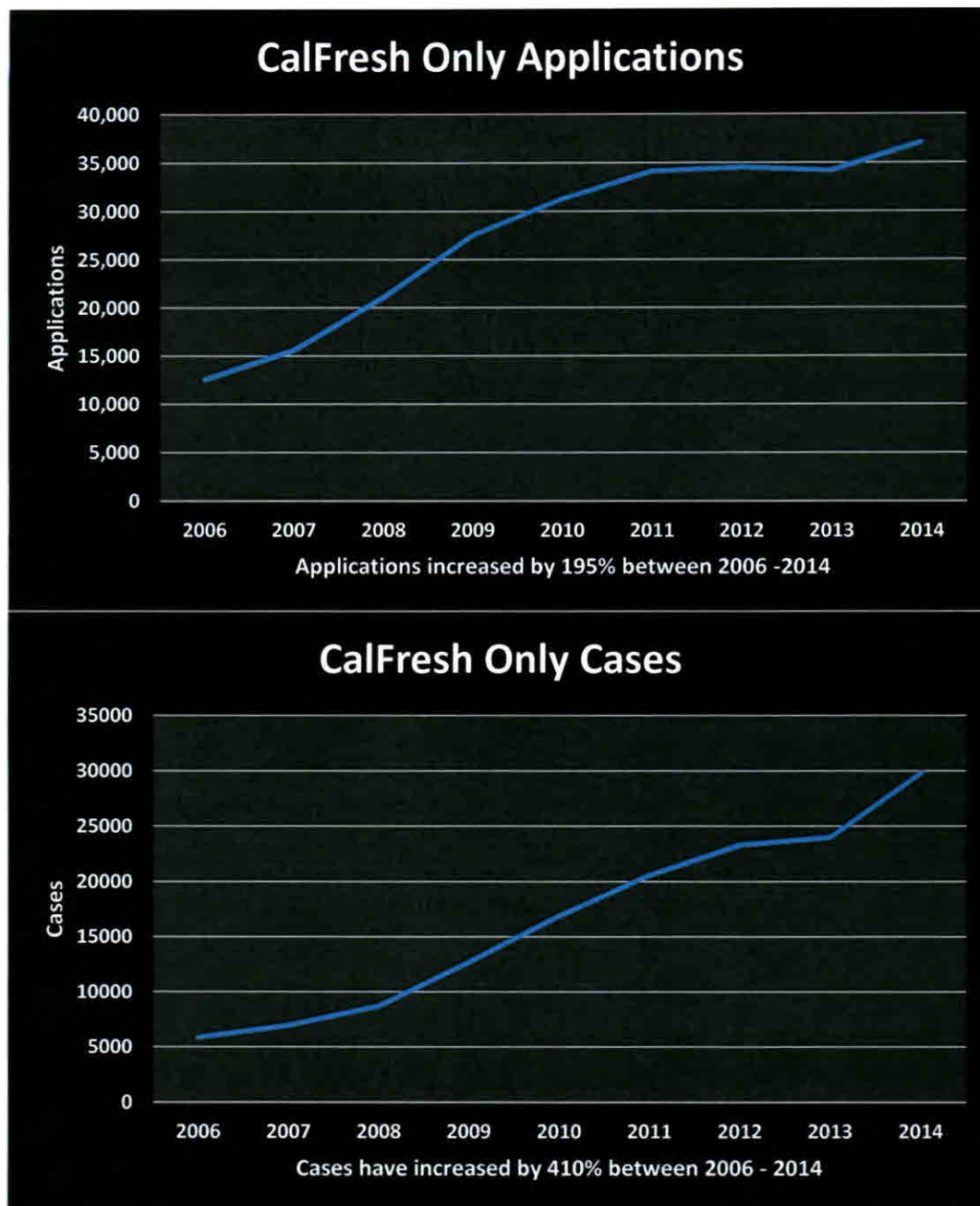
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I. Overview

The CalFresh program, formerly known as Food Stamps and federally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) was designed to help provide assistance to hungry people, regardless of their age, gender, marital or family status. The program issues monthly electronic benefits that can be used to buy most foods at many markets and food stores.

The CalFresh Program helps to improve the health and well-being of qualified households and individuals by providing them a means to meet their nutritional needs. At the federal level, the program is administered by the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). In California, the CalFresh Program is supervised at the state level by the California Department of Social Services and is administered at the local level by the Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD).

Since the Great Recession, we have experienced an unprecedented increase in the number of individuals applying for CalFresh benefits. In 2006, we had approximately 12,554 families applying for aid as compared to 37,089 in 2014. This represents a 195% increase in the number of CalFresh applications received during this period.



Over the last nine years, the CalFresh only cases have increased a total of 410% going from roughly 5,846 average cases a month in 2006 to 29,805 average monthly cases in 2014.

Beyond the CalFresh only average caseload of 29,805 in 2014, we also had an additional average of 5,507 Public Assistance cases which represents those households that receive both cash aid (CalWORKs) and CalFresh. This represents a total average of 35,312 CalFresh cases in 2014.

In Contra Costa County, CalFresh puts more than \$10 million into the local economy each month. As indicated by the USDA, research shows that every \$1 provided in CalFresh benefits generates \$1.79 in economic activity. Using the multiplier effect, CalFresh pumped more than \$17.9 million into the local economy in the past year. This economic

stimulus is almost exclusively Federal and State funded and provides an important local boost to our economy. CalFresh benefits help families stretch their food dollars to buy more healthy foods for the whole family.

II. Eligibility for CalFresh

Households that include single individuals, couples, or families are eligible for CalFresh benefits if they meet certain income criteria and legally reside in California. For some CalFresh beneficiaries' eligibility is not asset-based or resource-based which means that their property is not counted such as vehicles, cash on hand or money contained in bank accounts.

The amount of benefits a person receives depends on the number of people in the household who purchase and prepare food together and how much monthly income is left after certain expenses are deducted. Income consists of earned and unearned income. Expenses like rent, utilities, dependent care and certain medical expenses are allowable deductions. For example, a household of one (1) with no income would be eligible to receive \$194.00 a month in benefits and a household of 10 with no income would receive \$1,461.00 a month.

III. Program Accessibility

To make CalFresh benefits more readily accessible to County residents and families, over the last several years the Department has increased its efforts in working with the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano County as well as other community agencies dedicated to the CalFresh-eligible population.

As listed below, these efforts have contributed to the success of our expanding benefits to those in need of food security.

- The application process has been made easier by eliminating the requirement to apply through a face-to-face interview process. A telephone interview is now acceptable at both intake and recertification. A customer may still request a face-to-face interview if they are more comfortable meeting directly with an eligibility worker.
- Applicants can now apply for CalFresh benefits on-line through My Benefits CalWIN. Org portal. Many of our community-based partners have received orientations/trainings on assisting individuals through this on-line application process. In addition, Community Based Organizations (CBOs) can register their organizations as vendors in CalWIN. This will allow the CBOs to track the number of applications they register and the number processed each month by the Department.
- A customer can also access benefits through the use of a multi-program single paper application. For example, a customer who applies for and is found ineligible for CalWORKs benefits can use this same application (the SAWS 2 Plus) to automatically apply for CalFresh benefits without completing another application.

- A customer who applies for Medi-Cal by using the new Single Streamlined application may also use this application to apply for CalFresh benefits. The Affordable Care Act (ACA) more closely aligned the eligibility requirements of the new Modified Adjusted Gross Income (MAGI) Medi-Cal Program with the eligibility requirements of the CalFresh program to provide easier access to the programs through one application. This process is referred to as horizontal integration.
- In February 2014, the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) initiated the one year Express Lane Eligibility waiver program in which certain CalFresh beneficiaries were given Medi-Cal benefits without having to complete and file an application.
- The statewide Work Incentive Nutritional Supplement (WINS) Program was implemented in Contra Costa County on July 1, 2014. Under the WINS program, CalFresh households who are not in receipt of CalWORKs, but who meet the work participation hours of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and have a child in the household under 18 will receive an additional \$10.00 food benefit each month. From July 2014 through March 2015 there is a monthly average of 2,534 households in receipt of this additional benefit.
- Other efforts to increase CalFresh enrollments are outlined in the Outreach section of this report.

IV. Current CalFresh Service Levels and Program Performance

A. Service Levels:

During Program Year 2013-2014 CalFresh benefits were determined for approximately 61,292 families and individuals. This is an approximate 10% increase from the previous program year.

B. Program Performance:

1. Timeliness Processing Standards

FNS requires states and counties to maintain certain performance measures for the timely processing of CalFresh applications. These measures require that 90% of all applications received be processed within 30 days and requires a three (3) day processing period for those CalFresh applicants determined to require Expedited Services (ES).

We continue to meet the 30 day CalFresh application processing standard of 90%. For PY 2013-2014, 93% of applications received were processed within the 30 day processing requirement. However, during this same period, we fell short of the 90% processing requirement within three (3) days for those CalFresh ES applications requiring immediate needs (we achieved an 81% processing level on the ES applications for PY 2013 - 2014).

As a result, individual district offices have been tasked with developing an internal Corrective Action Plan (CAP) in order to reach and maintain the 90% standard. With these CAPs in place we anticipate meeting the standard for the current PY 2014-2015. The improvement shown in the last two quarters (October through December at 94.27%, and (January through March at 91.01%) is an indication that we should meet the ES standard for the current program year.

2. Management Evaluation (ME)

As mandated by FNS, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) is required to conduct a Management Evaluation (ME) review of Contra Costa County's administration of the CalFresh Program. The federal priority areas for the ME for FFY 2014 were Program Access, Customer Service, Timeliness of Application Processing, Payment Accuracy, Quality Control and Training.

While the ME review was to have been held in April 2015, the review was moved up to November 2014 by CDSS to coincide with the federal Local Program Access Review (LPAR) of SNAP scheduled by the federal Food & Nutrition Services (FNS) of the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

CDSS has requested corrective action in the areas of case reviews, second party reviews, training, program access, and Expedited Services (ES) timeliness which have or are being addressed in the current CAP.

Program access is being addressed by providing greater signage in district office lobbies with regard to how to apply for benefits as well as staff promoting the use of the "on line" application. There is also an increased focus on ES evaluation and eligibility determination. Policy on application processing timelines is being reinforced to staff through the use of Monthly Bulletins and CalFresh "Topic of the Months" distributions. There will also be more accountability and monitoring attached to these methods ensuring the training takes place during unit meeting discussions.

The Program Integrity Unit (PIU) which is responsible for gathering and reviewing data concerning CalFresh program standards to ensure service delivery is appropriate will include greater monitoring and coordinating of case record reviews, assessments and error trends. The PIU will be of great assistance in addressing and maintaining performance areas and in their monthly case reviews in which error trends are readily determined and addressed.

The next ME review is anticipated to take place sometime in 2016.

3. Local Program Access Review

The Local Program Access Review (LPAR) was conducted by USDA FNS staff during the week of November 17 through November 21, 2014. The last LPAR completed in Contra Costa County was in November 2004.

The focus of the review was on Program Access, Quality Control (QC) and Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT). The purpose is to identify barriers to the CalFresh Program and to monitor QC operations. This review was occurring at the same time CDSS was conducting the ME noted above.

Most of the findings and observations in the LPAR are similar to the issues identified in the ME which will allow for more streamlined implementation of our CAP. Areas to be addressed included application processing with focus on interviews, the ES evaluation and determination process, and wait times in the district offices.

FNS staff were impressed with the cooperation and collaboration of staff and management and noted that the case review findings were not indicative of the quality of work provided in the office.

4. CalFresh Error Rate

Every month for every county FNS selects a random sampling of CalFresh cases that are to be reviewed for case errors involving miscalculations of income or household composition which result in benefit issuance errors. Our Quality Control Unit reviews those cases that are selected and determines our CalFresh error rate. Based on the number of cases reviewed and the number of errors cited an error rate percentage is then derived.

While the results have not yet been finalized, Contra Costa County's CalFresh error rate is for FFY 2014 is lower than the state, yet exceeds the federal tolerance by less than half a percent. Preliminary results reflect Contra Costa County ending the FFY with a 3.82% error rate, California is at 5.11% and the Federal rate is at 3.66%.

5. Outside Consultants

In our attempt to improve customer service and performance levels we have hired outside consultants to assess our current business practices. It is anticipated that there will be recommendations that will improve program access and customer service. In addition, a quality control consultant has been hired to review existing practices to improve the Departments' Payment Accuracy and Case and Procedural Error Rate.

6. Staffing

The Department is continually evaluating its staffing needs and hiring new staff is an ongoing priority although the ability to readily fill new and approved vacant positions continues to be a systemic problem within the Department in terms of having readily available candidates from which to interview and hire.

Twenty (20) County Temp Eligibility Workers (EWs) were recently trained in CalFresh and deployed within the Department the end of March. These new temp EWs will take new applications and to manage ongoing CalFresh Cases. We have an additional forty-four (44) permanent EWs currently in training scheduled for

graduation in May. A number of these new 44 EWs will be working in the CalFresh program. This increase in staff will greatly assist in the timely and accurate processing of CalFresh applications/cases.

V. Outreach and Community Partnership

EHSD is proud of our efforts to increase CalFresh participation thereby ensuring that more children, families and individuals are able to put nutritious food on their tables each day. For the past 27 months, the Department has convened a CalFresh Partner Group with a goal of increasing CalFresh enrollment in the County so that 75% of eligible residents are enrolled by May 2016. The partners include the Food Bank of Contra Costa County and Solano, Crisis Center, the Multi-Faith ACTION Coalition, First 5, and Meals on Wheels. This group's strategies are to increase CalFresh enrollment and reach populations with historically lower enrollment which include:

- CalFresh Enrollment Process Improvements: We are developing new and strengthening existing business processes for helping people enroll in CalFresh. EHSD currently works with the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano to train nonprofit staff in CalFresh so they have a better understanding of the program and enrollment process. This enhanced training and knowledge as well as a more specifically identified EHSD liaison for the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano will not only enhance the quality of training and knowledge in the community, but will strengthen our community partnerships.
- Outreach:
 - The partnership between the Multi-Faith ACTION Coalition, EHSD and the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano is working to cultivate community volunteers who can help people with the CalFresh enrollment process. The Multi-Faith ACTION Coalition has a roster of 60 volunteers who received CalFresh training from the Food Bank. They are now ready to be deployed to nonprofit agencies, places of worship, food distribution sites and shelters to encourage and assist people to sign up for CalFresh benefits.
 - Fifty thousand (50,000) Medi-Cal (MC) recipients who are likely eligible for but not receiving CalFresh will receive CalFresh informational mailers from the Food Bank, in partnership with EHSD. The mailing will encourage people to come to the Food Bank to begin the application process.
 - We are working with the Pittsburg Unified School District to implement AB 402, which would allow information sharing between EHSD and the District so we can reach out to students' families receiving free / reduced lunch and encourage them to apply for CalFresh. We anticipate working with other school districts within the county in the same manner.
 - We are working with Building Blocks for Kids in Richmond to reach out to all of the eligible families in the Iron Triangle neighborhood to assist them in enrolling in CalFresh.

- We are planning a series of “CalFresh in a Day” events with the first taking place in San Pablo on June 26, 2015. After presenting at the April 2015 Mayor’s conference, there is increased interest from cities in partnering with the County on outreach of this type.
- EHSD is working with Code for America to utilize a mobile application equipped with electronic signature. This will allow the streamlining of preliminary applications through an electronic portal via assistants in our partnering agencies.
- Marketing:
 - Volunteers from the Leadership Contra Costa alumni group have expressed interest in helping advertise and market CalFresh to communities with many eligible people. Developing a marketing plan for CalFresh will require studying the issue and applying smart advertising techniques to the challenge of CalFresh enrollment. Leadership Contra Costa has marketing professionals who can help with this work.
 - The month of May has been designated “CalFresh Awareness Month” by several other California counties. Working with our community partners, we are developing a formal resolution for the County Board of Supervisors to adopt and declare the month of May as CalFresh Awareness month in Contra Costa County. This presentation is planned to be made to the Board of Supervisors on May 5, 2015.
 - We are also working with the City of Richmond to have a similar resolution adopted at the next Richmond City Council meeting. We are also working with the cities of Antioch, Pittsburg, Concord, Martinez, and San Pablo on the adoption of this same resolution.
- Community Training on CalFresh:
 - The EHSD CalFresh Program Analyst conducts “Facts and Myths” training with the Food Bank which takes place three to four times per year with 25 to 30 participants from community organizations in each session. Provided in the training is a CalFresh overview, hands-on outreach application exercise as well as an introduction to Benefits CalWIN.

This training has been a foundation in developing new partners since 2006. This training has been attended by aides of the Board of Supervisors, staff from Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) and regular attendees from WIC, the Monument Crisis Center, La Clinica, Rubicon, Public Health, Head Start and the One Stop Centers.

 - EHSD also participates in the Food Nutrition Policy Consortium which is chaired by the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano. The group meets to discuss nutrition-related events and activities within the county including CalFresh outreach opportunities.

- Over the last four (4) years, EHSD has attended an annual Food Bank Summit which is held on a rotational basis between Contra Costa and Solano Counties. The purpose of the Summit is to educate, inform and update those in attendance on topics such as Nutrition Education, Food Safety, what the Food Bank does, and provide instruction and mandates of USDA on the CalFresh Program. This is a day-long event and is attended by various county department representatives, agencies, and CBOs who work closely with the Food Bank.

VI. Restaurant Meals Program (RMP)

Federal regulations allow counties to implement a Restaurant Meals Program (RMP) that would enable eligible homeless, disabled and/or elderly (ages 60 and above) CalFresh households to use CalFresh benefits to purchase hot, prepared meals at participating restaurants. State regulations have been in place since May 1, 2004 allowing interested counties to submit proposals to CDSS requesting approval to implement the RMP.

Numerous requirements and mandates are necessary to be met in order to implement and operate a successful RMP. The key component of an RMP proposal is the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to be used with participating restaurants detailing obligations of both the county and the restaurant.

Since our last report there have been no increases in the number of counties who are participating in the RMP due to the need for dedicated staff to implement and operate the program as well as lack of restaurant/vendor interest in the program. Contra Costa County is one of the vast majority of California counties (approximately 88% of the counties) not participating in the RMP.

Contra Costa County is also geographically wide spread and does not have a concentrated area of homeless population. Of those counties who administer the RMP, there is a heavy concentration of restaurants to match the heavily populated areas of customers who can utilize the program.

The challenges of administering the program as stated by these counties are the requirement for dedicated staff to implement the RMP and to continually resolve and troubleshoot issues received from customers and participating restaurants. Proactive and immediate action is necessary in operating the RMP and there is a substantial reliance/dependence on County staff.

Besides ongoing monitoring activities, County staff is called upon to assist restaurants in completing the necessary paperwork to participate in the program, and to troubleshoot technical problems such as difficulties with the Point of Sale equipment or a customer's card that does not work or contain benefits. Counties also experience difficulties in getting vendors to participate in the program or those restaurants who want to participate are rejected by FNS.

Given what we have learned on the RMP especially in terms of required County staff resources, this program has been considered but not implemented in Contra Costa County.

VII. Policy Items of Interest

The following changes will have an impact to our CalFresh participation, and/or increase the workload of our staff.

- As of April 1, 2015, individuals with a drug related felony offense will now be able to apply for CalFresh benefits. If all other conditions of eligibility are met, individuals can begin receiving benefits or can be added to existing CalFresh households.
- Effective May 1, 2015 elderly or disabled households will be required to be interviewed prior to being recertified for continued eligibility. FNS did not extend the waiver that allowed these households to be recertified based on submitting a complete application. There was no need to contact the household or conduct an interview unless there were questions about eligibility.
- Effective October 1, 2015, our clients' who have "change reporting" requirements (homeless, elderly and or disabled) will change to Semi Annual Reporting. This will allow clients to report only once a year and at recertification. With fewer opportunities to report come fewer opportunities for our clients to be in non-compliance and potentially lose benefits.
- AB 402 - Under AB402 counties can now enter into Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with Local Education Agencies to share information regarding school lunch participants who may be eligible to receive CalFresh benefits. We are currently exploring this possibility with the Pittsburg Unified School District, and hope to also explore this possibility with other school districts in the County.

VIII. Important Next Steps

The Department remains committed to providing timely and ready access to CalFresh benefits for those with food insecurity, and in continuing to serve our CalFresh customers in a timely and accurate manner. To this end, we have a continual improvement objective in the areas of outreach, access, enrollment, and services delivery.

Part of this objective is to continue our community outreach efforts and to work even more closely with our community partners to expand access to CalFresh benefits. Expanding access includes our continued rollout of electronic and other alternative means for applying for benefits. We will also continue our efforts to further streamline our CalFresh application and benefits renewal process, and will also continue to work on increasing knowledge and awareness of the CalFresh program throughout and to targeted areas within the County.