



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  
Date: May 9, 2016

From: Rebecca Darnell, Interim Workforce Services Director  
Kathi Kelly, CalFresh Policy Manager

Subject: **CALFRESH PROGRAM UPDATE**

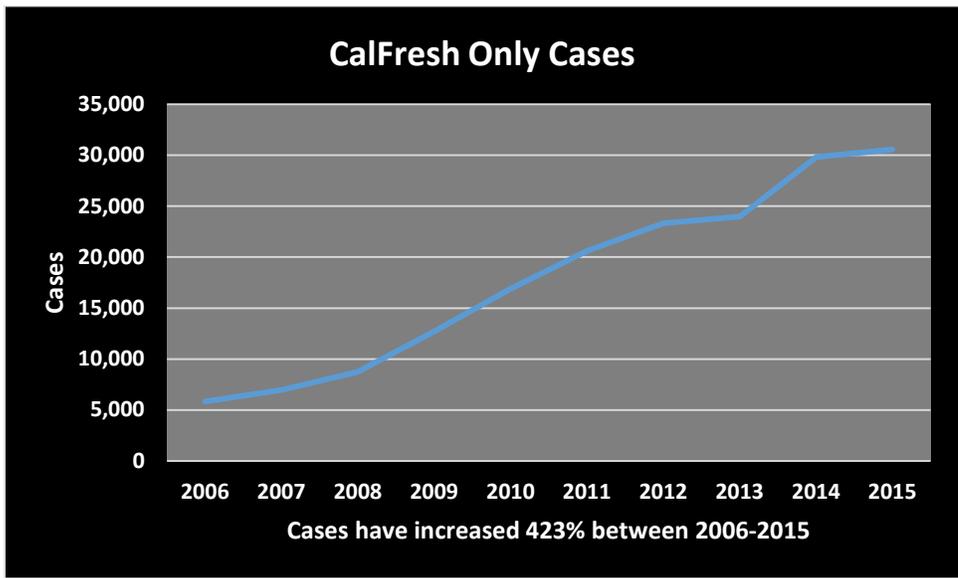
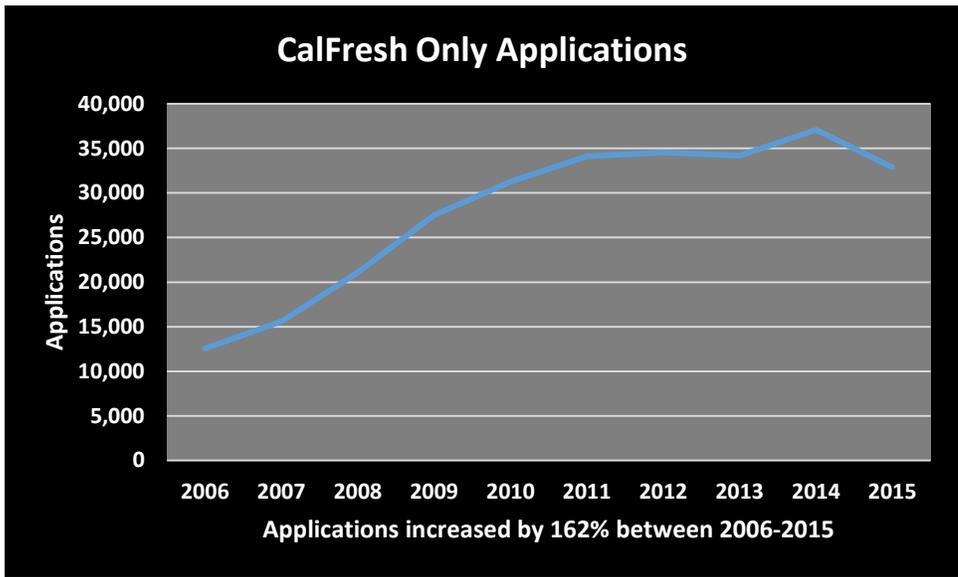
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**I. Overview**

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 32,851 in 2015. This represents a 162% increase in the number of CalFresh applications received during this period



Over the last ten years, the CalFresh only cases have increased a total of 423% going from roughly 5,846 average cases a month in 2006 to 30,560 average monthly cases in 2015.

Beyond the CalFresh only average caseload of 30,560 in 2015, we also had an additional average of 5,034 Public Assistance cases which represent those households that receive both cash aid (CalWORKs) and CalFresh. This represents a total average of 35,594 CalFresh cases in 2015.

In Contra Costa County, CalFresh puts more than \$10 million in State and Federal Funding 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 generated \$17.9 million into the local economy in the past year. The return on investment benefits local businesses, landlords, and many service

providers. CalFresh benefits help families stretch their food dollars to buy more healthy foods for the whole family.

The average monthly CalFresh benefit issued in 2006 was \$3,285,939.58 compared to 2015 issuance of \$10,548,167.33. This accounts for an increase of 221% for our households and the local economy.

## **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, such as vehicles, cash on hand, or money contained in bank accounts, is not counted.

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**

Over the last several years, in order to make CalFresh benefits more readily accessible to County residents and families, 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.
- Use of telephonic signature has begun at locations that have Automated Call Distributions capability such as the Medi-Cal CalFresh Service Center (MCSC). The MCSC will begin with the CalFresh recertification and we hope to expand to the Hercules office for new applications. As we obtain the necessary technology, the use of telephonic signature will be used department wide.
- Applicants can now apply for CalFresh benefits online through My Benefits CalWIN Org portal. Many of our community-based partners have received orientations/trainings on assisting individuals through this online 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.
- In February 2014, the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) initiated the Express Lane Eligibility waiver program in which certain CalFresh beneficiaries were given MediCal benefits without having to complete and file an application. The waiver was expanded with no known sunset date.
- 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 2016 there is a monthly average of 2,766 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 2014- 2015 the monthly average of individuals (families and single) who were in receipt of CalFresh benefits was 73,468. This is a 46% 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 2014- 2015, 94.6% of applications received were processed within the 30 day processing requirement. During this same period we reached the 90% processing requirement within three (3) days for those CalFresh ES applications with a 91.72%. The department continues to show improvement in this area as there has been consistency with meeting the 90% standard. For the first three quarters for PY 2015 – 2016 our compliance rate is at 97.32%.

## 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 are or have been addressed in the current Program Improvement Response.

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 "online" 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 Month" 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 at the beginning of FFY 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 Program Improvement Response. 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 2015 is lower than the state and federal tolerance. Preliminary results reflect Contra Costa County ending the FFY with a 2.19% error rate, California is at 3.07% and the Federal rate is at 3.09%.

#### 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 Department's Payment Accuracy and Case and Procedural Error Rate.

- The Quality Control (QC) consultant has worked with our IT staff in developing a Case Review Management System tool. This tool will allow the reviewer to go online to complete the case review as well as produce real time data reports. This has been instrumental in allowing the unit supervisors and the Program Integrity Unit to quickly identify error trends so that corrective action can be taken. In addition, the consultant has assisted with our ability to fine tune the QC and QA process with focus placed on the root cause of errors. This has allowed us to mitigate QC errors as well as identify error trends and develop corrective action strategies.
- The Business Process consultant has evaluated our current CalFresh business processes and analyzed data to identify areas for improvement. It was determined that missed appointments are a large barrier for many applicants. EHSD is evaluating options to reduce missed appointments, including providing same day appointments, text appointment reminders, and expanding alternatives to face-to-face interviews such as phone and video conferencing. EHSD is also planning to conduct a pilot in the Antioch office, testing whether extra "hands on" help in the initial stages of the process increases the success rate among new clients. In addition, EHSD is also working to identify

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

#### 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 County in terms of having readily available candidates from which to interview and hire. The County Human Resources Department recently increased staff dedicated to EHSD which we expect will improve our ability to fill positions more quickly.

### 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. The Department has convened a CalFresh Partner Group with a goal of increasing 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. Data is not yet available to test whether the goal has been met. However, it is important to note that CalFresh enrollment has not declined despite an improving economy. What is already clearly a success is forging a path to partner with community organizations on a shared goal; the ability to evaluate and modify processes and procedures, and a mindset that working together is always better.

Successful efforts and key achievements of the group are illustrated as follows:

- **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.

- The John Muir/Mt. Diablo Community Health Fund awarded a grant to the Food Bank for CalFresh Outreach. Partnering with EHSD, the Food Bank mailed postcards to households currently receiving MediCal but not CalFresh. The Food Bank also partnered with local school districts to mail to families with children on free/reduced lunch. To date, 939 families have filled out CalFresh applications based on these mailings. Funds were also used to print posters advertising the CalFresh program that are posted in health clinics, food pantries, and other locations where low-income families are likely to visit.
- We are working with the Pittsburg Unified School District (PUSD) 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. Families who opt-in are sent applications to apply for CalFresh, shortening the application process by allowing families to apply without coming in to the office. PUSD has been working with EHSD and the Food Bank by adding a question to their school meal application in order to easily identify families that desire to also apply for CalFresh. The families' information is then sent to EHSD to begin the CalFresh application process. 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.
- Mayoral Outreach  
EHSD, Multi-Faith ACTION volunteers, and Ensuring Opportunity conducted an outreach campaign with local Mayors to raise awareness of the CalFresh program and to highlight the program's economic benefit. During May 2015, local Mayors issued CalFresh Awareness Proclamations, posted links to the CalFresh application on their city websites, and advertised the health benefits of the CalFresh program. To engage the Mayors, the CalFresh Partner Group members highlighted the economic benefit the program brings to the local economy.
- We are planning a series of "CalFresh Express" events that will provide an opportunity to process applications and issue same day benefits while in the community. 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.

The first CalFresh Express took place on June 26, 2015, at the Davis Park Community Center in San Pablo. The event was a true collaboration with the

Food Bank and other community organizations. The date was selected as this was the same day that the Food Bank's Community Produce Program truck was at this location. Families in the community were provided with fresh fruits and vegetables on the spot. The UC Cooperative Extension gave out tastings from this produce and promoted healthy eating through various games and activities. Volunteers from the MultiFaith ACTION Coalition reviewed the program's rights and responsibilities with applicants with oversight from EHSD personnel. West Contra Costa Unified School District passed out lunches to children playing in the park. Overall, 74 new applications were taken and 48 (65%) families were approved for benefits.

The next event is planned for April 29, 2016 at the Ambrose Community Center in Bay Point. We anticipate approximately 200 applications to be processed including the availability of issuing same day benefits. We are excited about the same partners participating making this event even more successful for the Bay Point community.

- Technology partnership
  - 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 assistors in our partnering agencies. The Food Bank and EHSD piloted a new application called CLEAN, which is a simplified version of the online CalFresh application that can be used on a tablet, smartphone or laptop. It was designed by Code for America for use by community based organizations. The application takes only about 5-10 minutes to complete and is much simpler for outreach workers in the field. Clients' documents can also be uploaded for submission with the application. The Food Bank continues to use CLEAN (now called 'Get CalFresh'). It has greatly streamlined the application process and makes filling out an online application while in line at a food distribution event more feasible.
  - Read Only Access  
To further support Food Bank efforts to assist clients more directly, EHSD is exploring CalWIN read only access for the Food Bank. Once the technology is available, Food Bank staff will be able to look up a clients' case status in real time, remind clients of their appointments, let them know what paperwork they are missing, etc. This should improve timely processing while also saving EHSD staff time. Currently the Food Bank has to contact EHSD staff to get case updates, so this will significantly streamline access to data.

- 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, the County Board of Supervisors provided an official resolution and declared May as CalFresh Awareness month in Contra Costa County.
  - 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 and 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.

- Advocacy

As the CalFresh Partner Group worked at increasing access to increase participation, it was clear that changes at the local, state, and national level would be helpful, or sometimes even necessary, to improve access to CalFresh. Current CalFresh policies limit accessibility, including an application process that can be arduous for residents with young children, those who work traditional hours, those who are disabled, and the elderly. Policy changes that allow residents to apply over the phone, through the mail, or online are recent additions, but work is still needed to make CalFresh as accessible as possible.

In 2016, the CalFresh Partner Group is looking to CalFresh advocacy to increase participation. Several partner organizations have legislative platforms that include CalFresh concerns addressing college student food insecurity, providing supplemental benefits in the summer to families with school-age children, and simplifying the application process by using electronic employment databases to verify income.

## **VI. Policy Items of Interest**

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

- Effective June 1, 2016, 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. Notices were sent in December 2015, March 2016 and May 2016 informing these households of this change. In addition, posters have been made for our lobbies advising of this change. Good Cause will be provided for the first year to help those households who are not familiar with the Semi Annual Reporting responsibilities.
- Use of a Single Signature application became effective March 1, 2016. This allows the application process to begin with the initial application submitted. The advantage is that it is no longer necessary to return the Statement of Facts in order to obtain the client signature. This process initiates the start of the 30 day processing timeline with less information upfront than previously received, but it will reduce the need for the client to return to the district office in order for application processing to begin.
- Telephonic Signature  
The telephonic signature is a type of electronic signature that uses an individual’s recorded spoken signature or verbal assent in place of an actual written signature. The use of the telephonic signature, as part of the application or recertification process, will eliminate the need to mail documents in order to gather a client’s ink signature. In addition, by utilizing this process it will also reduce the amount of cases being discontinued for failure to complete the recertification process which will assist with reducing churn. EHSD does not yet have the technology in place to roll out department wide, so we are utilizing existing technologies at locations that operate an

Automated Call Distribution center such as the Health Care Access Center. The MediCal CalFresh Service center will begin to use this process with the recertifications effective May 2016.

- **SNAP to Skills**  
Contra Costa County is currently participating in the SNAP to Skills led by Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI). The Federal and State CalFresh agencies have contracted with SJI to help selected California counties develop Employment and Training programs.

## **VII. 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.