

Senate Bill 297

CalFresh Verification Hub and Voice Signature

Senator McGuire

SUMMARY

SB 297 requires the Department of Social Services (CDSS) to develop an electronic data verification system for processing CalFresh applications and mandates that it be compatible with other systems.

It requires that the state issue guidance defining what constitutes a telephonic voice signature for counties doing telephone interviews with CalFresh applicants, and requires CDSS to create data capacity to store those signatures, if a county chooses to use it.

Additionally it defines in statute existing practice for determining when to do a face-to-face interview with a CalFresh applicant.

BACKGROUND

California is the poorest state in the nation – nearly one-quarter of its residents live at or below the poverty threshold. About 4 million people receive food benefits through the CalFresh program, at an average recipient benefit of \$153.13 per month, or \$5.10 or per person per day in 2014.

Despite an improving state economy, the number of poor families remains high and food insecurity is a significant problem. Just 63% of eligible Californians and half of eligible working Californians participate in the CalFresh program, according to the USDA. These are among the lowest rates in the country.

In March 2014, the Senate and Assembly Human Service Committees heard testimony about innovations to increase participation in CalFresh, including use of technology to expedite verification of eligibility.

In 2013, CDSS directed counties to conduct eligibility interviews by telephone to save time and transportation costs, as well as time to mail and process written applications. Several counties have created data hubs to store electronic signatures. Others are stymied by lack of clear definition about what constitutes an electronic signature, and what is needed to verify it. The inability to electronically store signatures collected telephonically has been identified as a major barrier to completing telephone applications.

PROBLEM

While state and federal law require applicants for CalFresh to conduct an interview with an employee, it allows these interviews to be conducted by phone. However, there is not a clear definition of how to capture a telephone voice signature and many counties lack the capacity to store those signatures, if recorded.

Despite many efforts to link the electronic verification resources to expedite the determination of eligibility for CalFresh, there still are time- and labor-consuming hurdles that slow the processing of applications.

SOLUTION

SB 297 makes critical changes to existing law:

- It requires CDSS to develop for county use an electronic data verification process that allows county eligibility workers to access electronic data from public and private agencies to verify information on applications for means tested public benefit programs.
- It mandates that creation of the verification process be completed in time to qualify for federally matched IT funding.
- It requires the state to issue guidance for recording and storing voice signatures, and to create a storage capacity system for those signatures for counties to use, if they choose.
- It clarifies the circumstances under which a face-to-face interview is conducted with a client.

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