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Same Day Service for CalFresh: Quickly Providing Food to People in Need in All Counties

December 2, 2014

People in need of food need fast customer service from CalFresh (SNAP), the nation's number one defense against hunger, so they can get the food and economic stability they need. Counties can serve clients faster – and many already are – than the federal maximum of 30 days for most applicants. **It's time for California to accelerate this trend and provide same day service in all counties to people in need of food and eligible for CalFresh.**

I. What is "Same Day Service" for CalFresh?

The term same day service represents a bold vision for customer service that results in measurably faster processing times for consumers -- from initial application through the interview, verifications, and issuance of an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card to purchase food. It requires a modernizing of business processes, staffing, and technology to eliminate unnecessary delays. It is constrained by program rules and available resources. It involves collaborative planning between management and staff, as well as consumer advocates.

At the outset, same day service must be translated into a specific performance goal, in order to drive measurably faster customer service. Same day service does not literally mean that all clients are served the same day. Instead, specific, achievable, and ambitious customer-service goals must be established: for example, "X percentage of applicants have their eligibility determined in Y number of days via Z type of application" (e.g., office, on-line, telephone, or other). Other metrics – such as error and churn rates – must also continued to be tracked, so speed is not achieved at the expense of other customer service values, especially accuracy and stability.

Same day service is different from *expedited* service which requires that people in extreme need receive an eligibility determination within days and, if eligible, an EBT card for food (with verifications allowed to pend for up to 45 days). That said, the same business processes that a county uses to effectively deliver expedited service to the 40% of its applicants who are found entitled to it (per the most recent state DFA 296X) can be extended to the other 60% of applicants also seeking food assistance as quickly as possible.

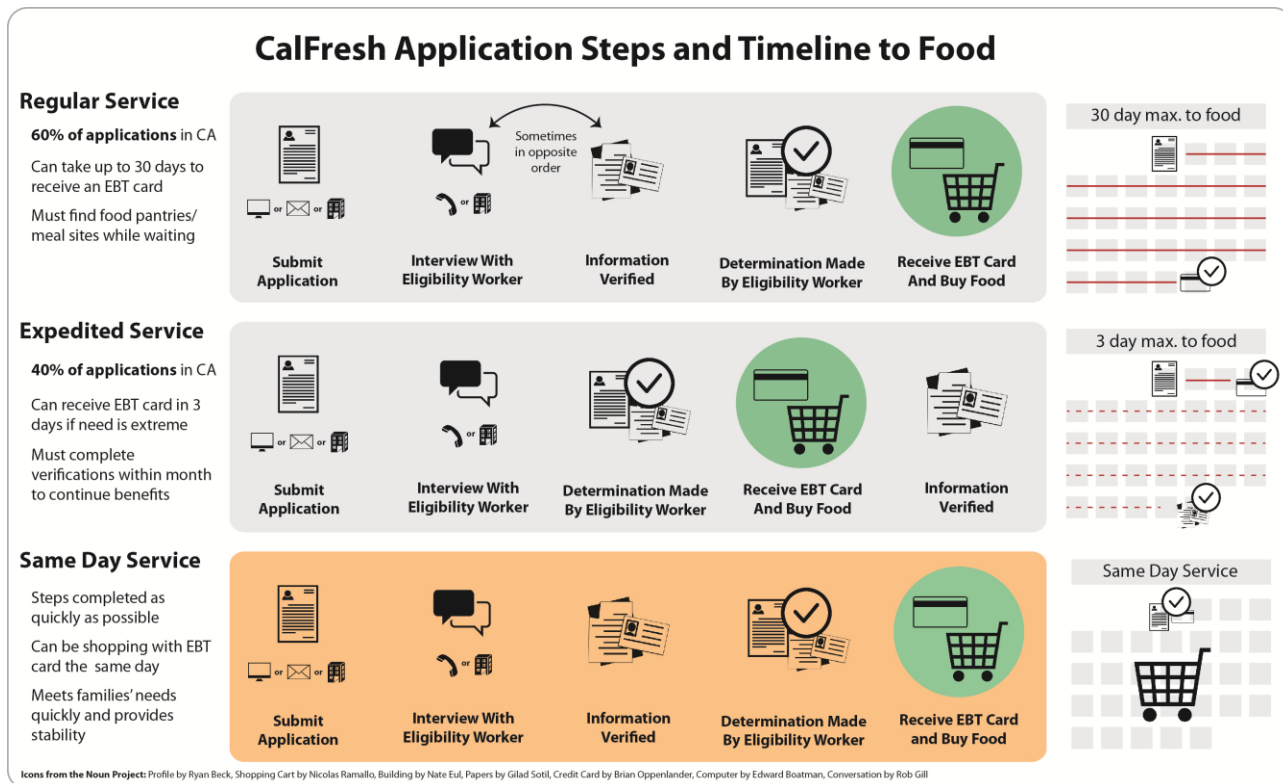
II. Why is Same Day Service Important to Consumers and Communities?

Delivering same day service to all consumers statewide would significantly increase access to CalFresh by eligible people. Improving access for eligible people is a priority in California. The state was ranked 49th in USDA's most recent ranking of state participation rates (2012) and a range of efforts are underway to improve the state's participation rate. California is making progress: throughout 2014, the number of people served by CalFresh is rising faster than other states' enrollment in their SNAP programs, even as unemployment drops. Same day service can increase participation and decrease hunger in two vital ways:

- First and foremost, people receive help feeding and stabilizing their families much earlier than the federally required 30-day timeframe – usually within 1-5 days.
- Second, providing same day service eliminates slower, more burdensome processes that are derailing or discouraging people from receiving any help at all.

Additionally, if people are promptly connected to CalFresh to help purchase food, food banks and other local safety net providers can receive fewer requests to meet emergency needs for food and stability. By the same token, people's immediate food purchases with their EBT card generate more economic stimulus for grocery stores and the entire food sector. Overall, an increase in eligible people receiving federal food assistance results in *less* hunger and suffering by people in our communities and *more* federal funds infused into local grocery stores and economies.

III. What is the Same Day Service Experience for Consumers?



In brief, when an individual applies in-person at the county social service office, s/he should be able to:

- Complete the application, interview, and required verifications during that first visit (or, if prefer, be able to call in to complete the process at a more convenient time);
- Receive an eligibility determination; and
- If determined eligible, leave with an EBT card that's then loaded with benefits within one business day.

Similarly, people who apply on-line, by mailing or dropping off an application at the office, or over the telephone should also receive same day service. In these cases, county workers can call back the applicant that same or next day (or stay on the telephone in case of telephone applicants) to help them complete the necessary information, secure verifications, conduct the interview, and determine eligibility. In all cases, the EBT cards can be mailed or available for in-office pick-up by the consumer within the same or next business day.

Of course, same day service is not possible or even desirable for 100% of applicants: some may not have the time when they initially apply to complete the process and may prefer to follow-up by telephone later; some may need more time to secure required verifications; and some present complex determinations.

IV. Where Can Customers Receive Same Day Service in CalFresh (or SNAP) Now?

A complete statewide picture is not readily available. Current data do not track same day service at a state or national level, although some individual counties do as part of their management initiatives. Instead, the available state data track whether counties meet the federal requirement to provide an eligibility determination within 30 days, as well as the federal 7-day and state 3-day requirements for those eligible for expedited service. California's counties largely meet these requirements. Current data also capture average processing time, combining expedited (3 days) and regular (30 days): by that measure, the statewide average is around 15 days. While these metrics are essential to measure compliance, they do not reflect counties' best practices on speed nor drive all counties to deliver the fastest customer service possible.

Despite the data gaps, we know from surveys, reports, and tours that a few California counties are now serving a majority of their customers for CalFresh on the same or next business day -- dramatically faster than the federal limit of 30 days for most applicants and state requirement of 3 days for those in extreme need. Many more are taking steps to speed up parts of their customer service. Examples of California counties and other states providing some degree of same day service to consumers include:

- Early adopter counties – such as Placer, Tulare, and San Mateo -- paved the way and showed that same day service can be delivered to clients in California in diverse county contexts.
- Other states – including Washington, Idaho, and Hawaii in the Western Region of the USDA -- implemented same day service statewide for all consumers, as centrally-run states, and now each serve around 80% of their customers the same day. USDA reported on 9 states (DC, ID, KY, MA, MN, MS, NM, OR, WV) with particularly fast customer service in a 2013 publication “Timeliness in the SNAP Application Process.”
- Now, more California counties are seeking to transform customer service through a range of initiatives. Many are focused on moving from case to task management and establishing robust customer service centers. Examples of recent county initiatives include: central customer service centers staffed by county eligibility workers to handle all telephone and follow-up communications (San Bernardino); same day service work groups to handle tasks ripe for streamlining (Sacramento); pilots in two local offices as part of an all-county business process transformation (Los Angeles); and a new \$1 million grant from USDA to improve business process (San Diego).

V. How Can Same Day Service be Provided to All Californians in Need of Food?

The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and the 58 counties can deliver same day service statewide to all Californians who need food by aligning the decentralized management structure in support of this goal. The State and county leadership, with the support of consumer-advocates, USDA, and other stakeholders, can come together on a three part agenda for California consumers:

1. Make same day service a top priority statewide for 2015.

- A. *Create a new metric to measure same day service in all counties.* Several counties have successfully driven their processing times for all applicants to a faster, higher standard than is federally required. Informed by this county data and experience, a faster customer-service goal for all California counties should be established (e.g., X% in Y days via Z type of application). At a minimum, the current state data collection of total average processing days should be broken out by expedited and regular service, and by each application type, so each consumer experience can be measured.
- B. *Identify the proven county practices that result in fast, accurate processing times.* This will likely include: same day and on-demand interviewing; consumer-driven options for scheduling interviews; consumer

access to banks of eligibility workers at call centers, not just their original eligibility worker; telephonic signatures; high use of electronic verifications; and more.

- C. *Standardize and replicate statewide those proven county practices that deliver same day service.* Once data is tracked and decoded, the State and counties have several tools that can be used to incorporate this information into new evidence-based standards and replicate them statewide. Potential tools for standardization and replication include: All County Letters and other communications; monthly reports; the Data Dashboard for CalFresh; the Annual Program Survey of Operations and Access; monthly meetings, ad hoc work groups, annual conferences, on-going trainings; on-line databases; awards for excellence; joint work plans; and more.
2. **Modernize the outdated verification system, which presents one of the biggest road blocks to speedy customer service in California.** Both the technology and the policies around verifications can significantly burden the client and the eligibility workers -- and drive delays in service.
 - A. *Standardize the best business processes.* The new standard verification form issued in 2014 (CW 2200) took two steps that are vital to replicating excellent customer service: it standardized the protocols for securing verifications for all consumers in all counties and it pro-actively promoted the fastest, most modern verification methods (i.e., electronic verifications in place of paper verifications). Data tracking the impact of this change on speed and completion rates is needed.
 - B. *Upgrade outdated state technologies.* The current State electronic verification systems for CalFresh (and other human services) are neither as comprehensive nor as fast as other states' and are sorely overdue for modernization.
 - C. *Continue to advocate for federal integration of verifications.* Additionally, continued advocacy for federal policies that better support integration is needed (e.g., allowing states to rely on information verified for Medi-Cal participants via the new federal hub when enrolling those participants in other health and human services programs, including CalFresh, for efficiency, accuracy, and faster customer service).
 3. **Capitalize on the upcoming Expedited Service updates to deliver faster service to all applicants.** The recent focus on improving expedited service provides an opportunity for the counties to both a) refine immediate aid to people in extreme need as required by law (currently 40% of applicants) and also b) leverage the same business processes and technologies to provide equally fast service to all other applicants (currently 60%). A fall 2014 work group convened by CDSS and made up of counties, consortia, and consumer-advocates is reviewing current expedited service practices. The goal is to produce an excellent expedited system statewide for all consumers, through a forthcoming All County Letter that standardizes successful, evidence-based practices (including model business process flows and scripts) and that is supported by trainings and technical assistance. This work group process can be repeated to advance same day service for regular applicants. Meanwhile, specific recommendations emerging for expedited service can be applied to all applicants now (e.g., strategies to encourage the provision of telephone numbers and emails, to facilitate same day communication, rather than relying solely on mailed notices).