

Helping CalFresh clients understand program rules so they can keep their benefits

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A partnership between the City Performance Lean Team and the Human Services Agency

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Low-income individuals and families eligible or enrolled in CalFresh (food stamps) face unnecessary burdens and risk losing benefits needed to feed themselves or their families when they miss deadlines or otherwise inadvertently fail to meet CalFresh program requirements. Helping clients avoid confusion would save time for both clients and staff and likely keep clients from falling off benefits.

SOLUTIONS

In the Fall of 2017, ten staff from SF BenefitsNet, the City agency that administers CalFresh, worked over three days to improve their processes. Their initiatives include: (1) making forms easier for clients to understand; (2) creating lobby posters so clients know what documents they need; (3) removing unneeded, confusing materials from the client interview packet; and (4) establishing a practice of using a standard checklist to set clients' expectations for requirements during the year-long benefits renewal cycle.



Clients in the group waiting area wait to speak to a staff person.



Thuy Wong and Randy Mano receive feedback from SFBN eligibility workers on their prototype that explains client expectations following the interview.

EXPERIMENTS

The project team tested improvements through quick prototypes, soliciting rapid feedback from other eligibility workers and from SF BenefitsNet and agency leadership:

- Designing visual examples of documents
- Revising county forms to make them easier
- Drafting appointment reminders and text messages to notify clients when their forms have been received
- Developing standard language for eligibility workers to use on income verification requests to clients
- Creating a method to track how often workers give clients the option to sign applications electronically

ROOT CAUSES OF PROBLEMS

Before designing solutions, the project team determined the root causes for these issues. The team found: **(1) issues with standards:** eligibility workers ask inconsistent questions during client interviews and explain requirements differently; **(2) communications not clear:** language used in notices sent to clients is wordy, complex, vague, and/or misleading; and **(3) lack of communication:** clients are not notified if documents are received, missing, or unacceptable; nor do clients know what is expected of them throughout the benefits cycle.

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