

Empowering Communities: County of San Mateo's Outreach Team Success Stories

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sonoma County is a geographically large, urban-rural county encompassing 1,575 square miles. The county's total population is currently estimated at 487,011 individuals. Sonoma County residents inhabit nine cities and a large unincorporated area, including many geographically isolated communities. Sonoma County offices have historically been centralized in Santa Rosa, the largest city in Sonoma County. Accessing public assistance services has been a challenge and a hardship for individuals residing in these rural communities due to the lack of public transportation, high gas prices, the lengthy commute to a county office, and poor telephone and internet connections. In recent years, Sonoma County, through the direction of the Board of Supervisors, has opened or is in the process of opening remote offices in targeted locations throughout the County. In contrast, the County of San Mateo developed a mobile enrollment office to allow the Human Services Agency (HSA) to respond to community locations while providing privacy and having the technological capabilities that were not otherwise available at traditional outreach tables. San Mateo County created an outreach team focused on connecting with the most vulnerable residents in their county by bringing staff and services to those impoverished communities with limited access to county services and up-to-date information. By implementing a mobile office in Sonoma County, we too can enhance access to crucial services for our community members while building relationships and trust in the community. Although the remote offices in Sonoma County are targeted to assist certain community members, there is still a great need for our services in several rural communities throughout Sonoma County. A mobile office would allow our staff to connect with the most vulnerable residents in the community who have limited access to county services and up-to-date information.

Introduction

The San Mateo County mobile outreach team aims to boost participation in public assistance programs by providing a positive customer experience through their mobile office. By reaching different parts of the county, they offer program information and assistance to community members facing challenges, potentially improving access to essential services and creating a more inclusive and supportive community atmosphere.

The mobile office allows staff to conduct mandatory household interviews, process cases immediately, provide Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards on-site to those households that are immediately found eligible for the CalFresh program or for those who have lost their EBT cards, and provide up-to-date and accurate program information directly to the community.

The outreach team also participates in community-based events during both traditional and non-traditional business hours to increase program participation and program retention rates. In addition, the mobile office is a valuable resource that can be utilized for emergency response in the event of a disaster (e.g. fire, flooding, etc.).

Background

The CalFresh program is the California implementation of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp program, which provides financial assistance for purchasing food to low-income California residents. Medi-Cal is the California implementation of the federal Medicaid program serving low-income individuals, including families,

seniors, persons with disabilities, children, and pregnant women, among others.

Getting people to apply for CalFresh and Medi-Cal benefits is not as easy as one might expect. According to a 2001 study by the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), a state agency in California, there are several barriers that contribute to low participation rates in the CalFresh program (Verduzco, 2013). The idea of accepting government assistance is a concept that for many individuals translates into shame or embarrassment. Due to this stigma, individuals who are eligible for government assistance are not applying for benefits.

Other barriers include lack of knowledge (many eligible individuals are unaware of their eligibility for the CalFresh program); frustration with the application process (the application process can be cumbersome and confusing); and misconceptions in immigrant communities (immigrant communities may have misunderstood the eligibility criteria or fear that participating in the program could affect their immigration status).

To address these barriers, outreach efforts and strategic planning are essential. California has one of the lowest rates of CalFresh participation in the U.S. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture it is estimated that only 70% of eligible Californians are actually benefiting from CalFresh benefits, compared to 82% nationally. For the working poor and elderly Californians, participation rates are even lower, estimated at 59% and 19% respectively, putting California in 46th place among the 50 states (Klisch, 2022).

While the Affordable Care Act (ACA) expanded health insurance coverage to millions of Americans, an estimated 30.4 million individuals remained uninsured in 2018 with nearly half of those individuals being eligible for Medi-Cal/Medicaid benefits through the state's expansion of the Medi-Cal/Medicaid program (Gunja & Collins, 2019). The Medi-Cal/Medicaid enrollment did soar by 25% between February 2020 and May 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Donohue & Roberts, 2022).

The way to enhance participation in public assistance programs and maintain program retention rates is by having an outreach team and a mobile office to provide services to individuals in their own environment where they feel most comfortable and safe. Survey research indicates that people who received personal assistance were more likely to enroll in these services than those who did not (Collins et al., 2017).

With a mobile office, the staff is able to take public assistance services out into the community and take the customer through the application process from beginning to end, work with the community in retaining their public assistance benefits, and provide up-to-date and accurate program information to the community. There are the residents in the community who do not know what CalFresh or Medi-Cal benefits are. There are others who do not trust government agencies. For those who do not know about the programs, they might not believe it is worth the hassle of applying for benefits. There are also residents that might not be able to travel to a social services agency office. The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) has emphasized that outreach improves participation rates by addressing knowledge gaps, simplifying the application process, and reducing stigma (Miller, 2013).

San Mateo County's Initiative

San Mateo County approached these barriers by creating an Outreach Unit. Prior to creating their Outreach Unit and purchasing their Mobile Office, San Mateo County had historically placed among the lowest enrollment rates statewide for the CalFresh program even though they had strived to increase participation rates over the past several years (County of San Mateo, 2016). By raising awareness and debunking myths and stereotypes that discouraged residents from applying for CalFresh benefits, San Mateo County's Human Services Agency (HSA) was determined to actively conduct outreach in their community. San Mateo County identified that some of the barriers to enrollment included limited access of coastal communities to safety net organizations and agencies, a transient seasonal worker population, multi-family households, and a complex and hard-to-understand self-enrollment option, among others.

With this information in mind, San Mateo County HSA created an Outreach program. San Mateo County purchased a mobile office and determined that by utilizing it in the more remote communities and at community events such as visiting schools, seasonal worker housing sites, and attending church events, they could make CalFresh and other government programs more accessible to the community. Purchasing a mobile office and creating an Outreach Team with a staff of seven allows the HSA to respond dynamically to changing locations, conditions, and availability to potential customers. Furthermore, a mobile office provides privacy and technological capability that is not otherwise available at traditional outreach tables.

San Mateo County published a Request for Proposal on May 10, 2016, inviting sealed proposals from qualified vendors who were interested in providing two Mobile Offices for the HSA. Although there were numerous requirements for this vehicle, the Mobile Offices were to have four defined rooms/areas:

- Reception/Waiting Room: bench seat for clients and two computers for client use.
- Employee Only Area: secured area with door, computer, fingerprinting area, printer/fax/scanner/copier for all computers to print, and panic button.
- Two identical Interview Offices: door, desk with computer workstation for interviewing clients, and panic button.

The mobile office is also equipped with heating, air-conditioning, WIFI, wall-mounted cabinets that lock for storage, an EBT machine to print EBT cards on-site, and stocked with all proper materials such as pamphlets, office tools, and safety measure materials such as gloves and sanitizing wipes.

The San Mateo HSA Outreach Team consists of a staff of seven: A Human Services Supervisor, Benefits Analyst II, Benefits Analyst III, CalFresh Outreach Coordinator, and three Community Workers. The team is responsible for providing program awareness (for Medi-Cal, CalFresh, General Assistance (GA), CalWORKS, and Cash Assistance Program for immigrants

San Mateo County has also developed a partnership with the City of South San Francisco and community-based

(CAPI)), nutrition education, and application assistance within San Mateo County.

The team participates in community events during both traditional and non-traditional business hours to increase program participation and retention rates. The team builds relationships and establishes trust with community members and effectively communicates information about available services, resources, and programs. The Outreach Team provides immediate assistance and support to their community members during challenging times with cultural sensitivity and inclusivity.

The Outreach Team's goal is to connect with San Mateo County residents who need their services, especially those in impoverished communities with limited access to services and up-to-date information. In addition, the Mobile Office is also utilized for Emergency Response (e.g. fires and COVID).

Since the Mobile Office has been implemented in San Mateo County, awareness of the CalFresh program has increased in their community. San Mateo County's goal and efforts to make public assistance programs equitable and accessible have also noticeably increased. In addition, Medi-Cal retention rates in San Mateo County have increased due to their Outreach Team's efforts. When San Mateo County receives the monthly Medi-Cal Termination list from the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), the Outreach Team contacts each client on the list directly to complete the Medi-Cal Annual Renewal process so the customer is able to retain their medical coverage.

organizations by providing weekly assistance to the uninsured, individuals with food insecurities, and disadvantaged residents of South San Francisco. The

Navigation Center provides emergency, temporary, or permanent housing to every unsheltered person who seeks assistance. San Mateo County HSA is an on-site partner and staff are available to connect residents to Medi-Cal and assist residents with applying for and maintaining their CalFresh and General Assistance benefits. Staff make regular visits to the Navigation Center every two weeks. Other partnerships include the San Mateo-Foster City School Districts, Second Harvest of Silicon Valley, and local colleges.

Comparison to Sonoma County

There are similarities and differences between the strategies that San Mateo County is undertaking and the strategies in place in Sonoma County. Sonoma County has partnered with several different agencies to offer eligibility screening and application assistance/submission. Those agencies include: Redwood Food Bank, Catholic Charities, Aliados Health, Sonoma State University, Santa Rosa Junior College, and 211. Like San Mateo County, Sonoma County is working to offer services in geographically diverse locations. Currently, Sonoma County has three regional offices located in Santa Rosa and Petaluma. In addition, Sonoma County has opened two remote outstation locations in Guerneville and Sonoma. The main difference between San Mateo County and Sonoma County is the ability to secure regular and routine outreach sites that could offer more opportunities and expand service delivery to larger audiences such as working families, children, seniors, disabled individuals, and veterans who reside in the more rural part of Sonoma County. Sonoma County's unincorporated areas are home to 146,739 residents, 30.1% of the total population. A significant number of these individuals live in locations that are very rural and geographically remote. Residents of these

areas may experience social isolation and significant barriers to accessing basic services such as transportation, health care, and nutritious foods (Sonoma County Dept. of Health Services). The CalFresh Program Reach Index (PRI) estimated that in 2021 an average of 30,917 individuals received CalFresh benefits in Sonoma County while an estimated 51,508 individuals were eligible for CalFresh benefits (California Department of Social Services).

Recommendations

Sonoma County Human Services Department has shown great commitment to outreach efforts, and has already adopted some of the same practices as San Mateo County such as partnering with local community-based organizations that are able to secure program applications and answer general questions; however, a big difference with San Mateo County is their ability to create a stronger presence out in the community with their Outreach Team and Mobile Offices. In 2021, Sonoma County expressed interest in purchasing a mobile unit comparable to the vehicle purchased by San Mateo County, built by Aleph Group, Inc. (AGI). Sonoma County completed an American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Preliminary Funding Request and received an initial estimate from the company to build a Mobile Office. Based on the research of San Mateo's Mobile Outreach, it is recommended to move forward with purchasing a Mobile Unit as proposed in 2021 with the requirement to include an EBT machine, PIN device, and card safe to allow the issuance of EBT cards to clients. As demonstrated in San Mateo, the county's ability to issue EBT cards in real time would decrease access timeframes as clients would not have to wait for a card to be mailed or come to the office to pick a card up. Once the Mobile Unit is ready to launch, it is recommended that services target Sonoma

County's most at-risk and underserved individuals in the rural parts of Sonoma County. The Mobile Unit should also attend community events such as health & wellness fairs, farmers markets, school and church events, etc.

Conclusion

There are many social service agencies that are developing outreach strategies to enhance participation in public assistance programs. If social services agencies adapted strategies to build trust and relationships within their community and assist individuals with the application process it would increase program participation and retention rates. A Mobile Unit would allow staff to go out into the community to where our most at-risk and underserved customers are located to eliminate the customers' travel time, dispel myths the customers may have, conduct mandatory household interviews, provide an EBT card on-site, and establish trust in the community while maintaining client confidentiality.

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