
Empowering Communities: San Mateo's Mobile Office Outreach Team

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Napa County Health and Human Services has been on a mission to enhance the overall customer experience for all those seeking our array of services. Great customer service is vital for the people who seek health and human services because it can significantly impact their well-being by providing essential support, ensuring access to vital services, reducing stress and anxiety, promoting dignity, and fostering a sense of respect and fairness when attempting to navigate such complex systems. Within Self Sufficiency Services, the efforts to enhance the overall customer experience are centered around ensuring that the Napa County community has easy and reliable access to our services. Napa County is considered a medium-sized county with a land area of 748.3 square miles and a population of around 138,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The county is primarily considered rural, with a large portion of its land used for agriculture, while urban areas are relatively small. Napa County residents inhabit five main cities and a large unincorporated area. People living in geographically isolated communities often face significant challenges in accessing public assistance due to limited infrastructure, transportation barriers, and the distance from service providers. Additionally, 22% of Napa County's population is aged 65 and older (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Many older residents live alone and face significant challenges accessing public assistance due to administrative burdens, lack of awareness, mobility limitations and technology barriers. While Self Sufficiency Services has made significant strides in increasing its presence in the community through dedicated outreach efforts, there is still potential to further expand its impact, especially to those communities and populations who need us to meet them exactly where they are at.

San Mateo County Human Services Agency invested in a mobile outreach office, allowing their outreach team to travel throughout the county to provide public assistance program awareness, nutrition and health education to those most vulnerable residents with limited access to county

services. By implementing a mobile outreach office and fostering collaboration within the health and human services divisions, as well as partnering with our community-based organizations, Napa County Health and Human Services Agency can improve access to essential services for its most vulnerable populations, creating a one-stop shop that offers comprehensive support.

Introduction

The San Mateo County Human Services Agency's mobile outreach team is responsible for providing program awareness, nutrition education and application assistance within San Mateo County. The team participates in community events in both traditional and nontraditional business hours to increase program access, participation and retention.

San Mateo County purchased the mobile office in 2017 and began operations that same year. To announce and promote the arrival of the mobile office, events sponsored by the Board of Supervisors were planned and lined up in advance. The San Mateo Department of Public Works oversees all mobile office maintenance, and they will charge the Human Services Agency for any fuel and upkeep. The expenses are officially categorized as CalFresh-related. The overall cost is divided between federal, state, and net county costs, similar to overhead costs.

The mobile office was primarily utilized for CalFresh-driven events during its first two years, as the funding for its operation was sourced from CalFresh funds. However, it has since become more widely used across all public assistance programs, including its utilization for emergency response in the event of a disaster (R. Silva, personal communication, March 26, 2025). When out in the community, the mobile outreach team will travel to different locations throughout the county to help individuals and families with the following: apply for all public assistance programs, conduct intake and recertification interviews, process cases, and provide EBT cards on-site to eligible individuals.

Barriers to Access

Access to public assistance programs in the United States plays a pivotal role in advancing economic security and enabling upward economic mobility for those individuals living in or near poverty. Yet, public assistance programs encounter persistent challenges that hinder their accessibility and the efficiency of their delivery (Allen et al., 2024; Kulkarni, 2024; Wiley, 2024).

According to the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research (SPUR) Regional Strategy Report "Fixing the Holes in California's Social Safety Net," millions of Californians have lost their jobs since the start of COVID-19 pandemic, putting them in a precarious financial situation and heading towards poverty. Public benefits are a lifeline in these situations, enabling families to weather the storm with some measure of financial stability. However, many people never receive the benefits to which they are entitled. In addition, according to this report, nearly a third of CalFresh applicants are denied the benefits due to procedural reasons (Denney et al., 2021).

According to "Barriers to Care and Healthcare Utilization Among the Publicly Insured", barriers to accessing public assistance programs include eligibility criteria, lack of information, social

stigma, bureaucratic hurdles, and personal circumstances like lack of transportation and technology access (Allen et al., 2017). The article “Integration and Coordination Across Public Benefit Programs” adds that households frequently must deal with several agencies that are located independently, submit duplicate information across several eligibility systems and update income and employment data on a regular basis to access programs and keep benefits (Headrick et al., 2023).

To help address some of these access barriers, communication and collaboration across agencies is vital. “Integration and Coordination across Public Benefit Programs” highlights that states implementing co-enrollment practices and coordinating service delivery saw improvement in participation, less paperwork, shorter wait times, reduced program churn and an increased number of eligible families receiving benefits. In addition to collaborating across departments and agencies to implement co-enrollment practices, being able to take services out to the community and meeting our most vulnerable community members where they are at will assure the community has better access to vital services. According to the SPUR Regional Strategy Report, for everyone to receive the assistance they require, administrative obstacles to obtaining public benefits must be removed and one of the best strategies to enhance access and raise participation rates is to make benefit applications simpler, procedures more transparent and creating a “one-stop shop” where individuals can quickly obtain information and submit applications for all benefits at once (Denney et al., 2021).

San Mateo County’s Outreach Unit

San Mateo County’s first outreach unit was established and put into operation in 2016, marking the full implementation of the San Mateo County Human Services Agency’s initiative to assist in lowering barriers throughout their communities. According to San Mateo County, in 2016, the California Department of Social Services shared that San Mateo had a CalFresh Program Reach Index (PRI) of 29.9%, meaning that only about 30% of the potential eligible population were receiving CalFresh benefits (San Mateo County HSA, personal communication, April 2025). Furthermore, additional data received by the county showed that there were access gaps across the county, particularly in the most rural areas.

In light of this, San Mateo County began formulating a proactive outreach strategy to improve access to its community. The county quickly was able to identify that some of the barriers to program access included the lack of transportation to safety net organizations and agencies by people who lived in remote areas, high transient seasonal worker population, people with traditional jobs not being available to apply or renew benefits during traditional business hours, among others.

With the launch of their first outreach unit came the purchase of their outreach mobile office in 2017 and, consequently, the birth of their CalFresh Mobile Office initiative. The mobile office aimed at increasing program enrollment and retention, and it proved to be successful in addressing the gaps in service in remote areas as well as provided services outside of the traditional business hours of 8am-5pm. San Mateo County also used this as an opportunity to create more personable relationships with community partners and clients alike. Events like CalFresh in a Day, Senior Centers, Board Chambers, Food Distribution Sites, and Back to School Nights were all attended by the mobile office. The scheduled events determined the mobile office's operating hours.

Even though the mobile office started as a CalFresh initiative, it quickly pivoted to promoting all public assistance programs. The county has also participated in joint enrollment efforts with other community partners that provide services to mutual clients. Second Harvest of Silicon Valley is the main community-based organization with which they collaborate. The county has been able to collaborate with Second Harvest of Silicon Valley on large-scale food distribution events, with over 500 people attending in some locations. In addition, the mobile office has been used at many Board of Supervisors special events that focus on community development and community resources.

The San Mateo County Outreach Team is composed of the following members: Human Services Supervisor, Benefits Analyst III, CalFresh Outreach Coordinator, two Benefits Analyst II, and three Community Workers. The team is responsible for assisting individuals and households to apply and renew all public assistance benefits on site, as well as any follow-up needed in the case that there were pending items missing that did not allow the worker to approve cases on the spot. These workers also provide information and resources, as well as help answer many general questions people may have.

The mobile office is equipped with two identical interview offices, one employee secure area with a door that locks, and a small reception/waiting area. Additional features include heating, air-conditioning, Wi-Fi, wall-mounted cabinets for lock storage, and an EBT machine to print EBT cards on-site.

The outreach team's goal is to connect the San Mateo County residents with all and any services they may be eligible for, especially those in impoverished communities. They also advocate for the rights and well-being of the community, address systematic problems that may impact the community, and respond to emergencies within it. To accomplish this, aside from their mobile outreach vehicle, the team has partnered with the City of South San Francisco to provide weekly assistance to uninsured individuals with food insecurities as well as low income residents. The outreach team is also an on-site partner at the Navigation Center, where emergency shelter as well as temporary or permanent housing assistance is offered to every unsheltered person who

seeks assistance. The outreach team helps connect these people, seeking services at the Navigation Center, with Medi-Cal as well as other public assistance programs such as CalFresh and General Assistance. Other partnerships include the San Mateo-Foster City School District, Second Harvest of Silicon Valley Food Bank, local colleges, and Stanford's Gardner Packard Children's Health Clinic.

According to the San Mateo Human Services Agency, there were a few lessons learned through the implementation of the mobile office. In order to keep the mobile office operational, ongoing maintenance and upkeep are essential. Additionally, you need a safe, easily accessible location to keep the vehicle. Lastly, it's important to keep in mind that there is a chance that items will be broken or improperly used, causing damage when people who are unfamiliar with the proper use of the mobile office use the office.

Napa County Health and Human Services Agency's Self-Sufficiency Services Division Outreach Approach

Like San Mateo County, Napa County has been committed to further developing and expanding its outreach efforts to ensure Napa County residents have access to all offered services, specifically those people in impoverished and/or hard-to-reach communities with limited access to the main office. Napa has established a strong outreach program, similar to that of San Mateo County. In 2024, the Self Sufficiency Community Outreach Team attended a total of 42 community-held events, gathering a total of 2,351 contacts.

In addition to actively participating in community events, one outreach strategy that Napa has been focusing on further expanding is place-based services. Napa County Health and Human Services Agency's (HHSA) main Self-Sufficiency Services office is in the city of Napa. There is also a satellite office located in the city of American Canyon. American Canyon is located at the southern end of Napa County. Within the city of Napa, there are also public assistance eligibility specialists embedded within the Adult Probation Department and HHSA's Comprehensive Services for Older Adults Division.

In addition, also in the city of Napa, there are outreach eligibility specialists visiting the homeless shelter, library, mental health community center, and five family resource centers that are each located in an elementary school on a weekly, biweekly and monthly basis as part of our place-based services approach. The initiative to station eligibility specialists at local elementary school family resource centers began after a 2016 town hall meeting held at Phillips Elementary School identified the need for on-site public assistance support. Finally, to help target the northernmost tip of Napa County, we have a public assistance team that consists of an office assistant and an eligibility specialist embedded in the Calistoga Family Resource Center. The

Calistoga Family Resource Center is located in the city of Calistoga, 27 miles north from the city of Napa.

Napa County has been actively addressing access barriers from our community through this outreach strategy by bringing services closer to the community and helping with enrollment and retention services, collecting and processing applications, conducting interviews, processing paperwork on the spot, and answering program questions. Yet, there is opportunity for improvement as there are cities and unincorporated communities within Napa County where residents may still be experiencing social isolation and barriers to accessing basic services such as transportation, health care, and food resources.

Recommendations

A self-contained outreach mobile vehicle has already been purchased by the Napa County Health and Human Services Agency, and it's expected to be delivered this summer. Like San Mateo County, the agency ought to proceed with deploying a mobile outreach vehicle. However, given that the organization integrates human and health services, I advise using this mobile outreach vehicle to deliver social services, healthcare, and educational materials straight to these communities. This mobile outreach vehicle can be designed to provide:

- A one-stop shop for social services where people can apply or renew public assistance programs and be issued an EBT card in real time.
- Access to healthcare services such as basic medical care, screenings and vaccinations.
- Access to mental health services.
- Educational resources and community engagement programs.
- Collaboration among multiple divisions within the agency.
- Collaboration with community-based providers.

It will be crucial that focus groups and interviews be conducted during the planning and design phases to determine the most urgent needs of the underserved Napa community that will be prioritized with the implementation of the mobile outreach vehicle. Extensive internal and external stakeholder input is already underway at HHSA and began in early 2025, inclusive of a committee to assist in the program design to maximize the one-stop model and optimal service configurations, use of GIS mapping to determine ideal locations within the Napa Valley, a community calendar, and targeted outreach through social media. This is because the project will require collaboration between various divisions within the agency as well as community-based organizations. Staff safety, staff training on how to operate the vehicle,

vehicle scheduling, vehicle maintenance, and developing a centralized communication system should all be considered during the operations and evaluation stages.

Conclusion

A mobile outreach vehicle will significantly expand the reach and impact of Napa County Health and Human Services Agency. By providing comprehensive mobile services and bridging the gap in service delivery, the agency will be able to meet the needs of underserved communities, improving health outcomes and empowering individuals to access the resources they need for a better quality of life.

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