

**BOARD OF SUPERVISORS RESPONSE TO
GRAND JURY REPORT NO. 1502:
UNDERUTILIZATION OF CALFRESH IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY**

FINDINGS

1. While the county is continually working to increase the number of applicants and to remove barriers to successful recertification, to reach the May 2016 targeted participation rate of 75%, the County needs to increase the number of new CalFresh applications by more outreach work and also maintain the number of ongoing cases by removing barriers to recertification.

Response: Respondent agrees with this finding.

2. Current CalFresh Partners Group membership does not include any representatives of local businesses such as business associations and/or Chambers of Commerce, area farmers markets, or cities with high concentrations of prospective CalFresh recipients.

Response: Respondent agrees with this finding.

3. Business associations, farmers' markets and cities, which have the knowledge, experience, and connections to local businesses to offer marketing ideas and outreach support, have a vested interest in increasing CalFresh participation due to the economic gains to the community generated by CalFresh funds.

Response: Respondent agrees with this finding.

4. The County could do more to increase outreach to seniors and low-income families with children – both targeted populations for CalFresh outreach – whether by EHSD direction to the CalFresh Partners Group or directly by EHSD.

Response: Respondent agrees with this finding.

5. Long lag times to fill vacancies coupled with the reduction in budgeted FTE staffing for 2015-16 likely will constrain the ability of EHSD to achieve and successfully handle the number of new CalFresh applications and ongoing cases needed to reach the May 2016 targeted participation rate of 75%.

Response: Respondent agrees with this finding as having the ability to readily fill vacant positions and to maintain FTE staffing at a level correlate to increased CalFresh participation rates is necessary to serve CalFresh applicants and customers in a timely manner.

6. The exterior signage at district offices lacks consistency and some do not include hours of operation or identification of a CalFresh presence inside the building. Some district offices also lack clear directions inside the building to CalFresh information and applications.

Response: Respondent agrees with this finding that improvements in consistency and clarity to signage, posted hours of operation, the identification and availability of CalFresh information, and directions as to where to apply for CalFresh within the Department's District Offices can be made.

7. EHSD likely could resolve more application issues and finalize eligibility determinations at offsite enrollment events if their tablets could access existing applications remotely.

Response: Respondent agrees with this finding that CalFresh application/eligibility approaches involving remote accessibility would not only expand access to CalFresh benefits, but would help to facilitate the application and eligibility determination process. This approach is currently being explored for pilot implementation by the end of June 2015.

8. Firewall issues, not yet resolved by the County's Department of Information and Technology, are impeding remote access to existing applications by tablet.

Response: Respondent agrees with this finding. The County's Department of Information Technology (DoIT) is aware of the firewall issue and a new firewall is in procurement. The new firewall is expected to be received by late June 2015 and installed shortly thereafter. After installation, DoIT and EHSD staff will perform testing to ensure the firewall works as planned. The firewall will increase security of data as it moves between the County and the CalWIN system and will allow EHSD staff at remote sites to more efficiently access applications. It will also allow data to securely move over cellular or other broadband services.

9. EHSD might benefit from increasing its use of newer modes of communication, including text messaging and internet-based modes such as Skype, FaceTime and Oovoo.

Response: Respondent agrees with this finding that increasing the utilization of electronic and internet-based modes of communication with CalFresh customers would be of benefit in the delivery of CalFresh services. Such means of communication are currently being explored for implementation by the end of June 2015.

10. The County's Department of Information and Technology can support EHSD's work by investigating, implementing and supporting newer modes of communication.

Response: Respondent agrees with this finding. EHSD is working closely with DoIT to determine a more effective use of technology to increase CalFresh participation.

11. With some simple improvements to the phone answering menu and the public website for CalFresh, potential applicants could more easily access information and/or assistance with the enrollment process.

Response: Respondent agrees with this finding. EHSD is currently revising its phone answering menu to make it more "user friendly" and to provide increased options to callers. Our public website is also being reviewed to ensure it is clear to users and facilitates applying for benefits.

12. As County workers gain more knowledge about the benefits and eligibility criteria for various programs administered by different County departments, cross-program, cross-department referrals will likely increase, as well as participation in CalFresh.

Response: Respondent agrees with this finding. Working closely with other County Departments and non-profits will allow all providers to leverage resources to more effectively serve all our customers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The County should organize an event to educate select city managers, economic development officers and local Chambers of Commerce representatives about (a) the economic gains to be realized from increased CalFresh participation, and (b) how to sponsor their own local enrollment events, after identifying funds to do so.

Response: The recommendation has not yet been implemented but is in process. EHSD is actively engaged in a “cities strategy” to implement the recommendation. CalFresh was presented at the April 2, 2015 Mayors Conference of Contra Costa. Since then members of the CalFresh Partners Group have been actively arranging meetings with city staff and working on Chambers of Commerce. The focus has been on cities with the highest numbers of CalFresh residents: Antioch, Pittsburg, Concord, San Pablo and Richmond. Focus is also on cities where Mayors have recognized the issue as important and approached CalFresh Partners: Martinez, El Cerrito and Walnut Creek.

2. The County should recruit representatives of local businesses, such as business associations and/or Chambers of Commerce, area farmers markets, and cities with high concentrations of prospective CalFresh recipients for membership in the CalFresh Partners Group.

Response: The recommendation has not yet been implemented but is in process. The CalFresh Partners Group has been actively working with the East Bay Leadership Council to recruit local businesses. A plan to recruit Chambers of Commerce and farmers markets is developed and within the next three months all of the local Chambers and farmers markets will have been contacted by members of the CalFresh Partners Group.

3. The County should issue a press release announcing May as CalFresh month and emphasizing the economic gains for local businesses that result from increased CalFresh participations. In addition to other local newspapers, the press release should be sent to the Contra Costa County edition of the Chamber Link, the weekly newsletter of the Association of Chambers of commerce, which reaches over 10,000 recipients in Contra Costa County.

Response: The recommendation has not yet been implemented but is in process. Implementation is planned to be completed by the end of May 2015. EHSD is establishing an Office of Community and Media relations, and publicizing CalFresh needs will be an ongoing part of their work.

4. The County should extend CalFresh enrollment outreach to schools, senior centers, and senior housing, either directly or through the CalFresh Partners Group, after identifying funds to do so.

Response: The recommendation has not yet been implemented but is in process. EHSD is meeting regularly with the Pittsburg Unified School District to increase outreach through implementation of AB 402. EHSD is also meeting regularly with staff from the West Contra Costa Unified School District to increase outreach. Additionally, EHSD operates the Area Agency on Aging which has a Senior Nutrition Program which will coordinate CalFresh outreach to seniors. Last year 154,000 congregate meals were served through the Area Agency on Aging, and this is a population that we will conduct outreach for CalFresh. EHSD will also market CalFresh to In-Home Support Services (IHSS) recipients as well as families in our Head Start facilities.

5. After identifying the necessary funds, the County should return budgeted FTE staffing for EHSD to last year's levels, and use County temps as necessary to meet and maintain that staffing level after determining the legality of doing so.

Response: The recommendation requires further analysis. Respondent agrees with this recommendation to have an adequate level of budgeted FTE staffing at least at the current year level (Program Year 2014-15), understanding that the budgeted FTE level for Program Year 2015-16 will be based on the Program Year 2015-16 CalFresh allocation to be determined by the State. Respondent also agrees with the use of County temporary employees where and when necessary to maintain necessary staffing levels to meet CalFresh service demands.

6. After identifying the necessary funds, the County should fast-track the current project to streamline the recruitment and hiring process by Human Resources, after considering the various legal requirements governing the County's recruitment and hiring.

Response: The recommendation has been implemented. Respondent agrees with this recommendation to fast-track and streamline the staff recruitment and hiring process for the CalFresh program. It is necessary for the Department to work with the County Human Resources Department in the implementation of this recommendation as County Human Resources has designated authority and jurisdiction for the recruitment and hiring of County employees.

The last meeting between the Department and County Human Resources Department to streamline the staff recruitment and hiring process was held on May 21, 2015; and it is planned for this to be a subject of future meeting discussions.

7. Within 60 days, the County should correct the signage at office locations with CalFresh information and application intake capability to include the hours of operation and notice of

CalFresh (or "Food Stamps") presence outside of the building, and directions to CalFresh information or service (preferably bilingual) inside the office if no greeter or knowledgeable receptionist is present.

Response: The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future. Respondent agrees with this recommendation and plans to make these corrections, where necessary, by July 15, 2015 to outside signage at the Department's District Office locations to include the hours of operation and availability of CalFresh intake services within the offices. Inside signage providing directions to CalFresh information and services will also be corrected, where necessary, by July 15, 2015.

8. The County through its Department of Information and Technology should (a) prioritize the resolution of firewall issues that currently prevent remote access of existing CalFresh applications; (b) support EHSD's expansion of the text messaging system, "PROMPTLY" to CalFresh; (c) investigate feasibility of internet-based communication modes such as Skype for EHSD, (d) add a link to 511 to the CalFresh website, and (e) mention 511 in the menu options in the automated telephone answering system, after identifying funds to do so.

Response: The recommendation has not yet been implemented but is in process.

- a) The County's Department of Information Technology (DoIT) is aware of the firewall issue and a new firewall is in procurement. The new firewall is expected to be received by late June 2015 and installed shortly thereafter. After installation, DoIT and EHSD staff will perform testing to ensure the firewall works as planned. The firewall will increase security of data as it moves between the County and the CalWIN system and will allow EHSD staff at remote sites to more efficiently access applications. It will also allow data to securely move over cellular or other broadband service.

In addition, EHSD is pursuing software that will allow staff to more easily, but securely access CalWIN to facilitate outreach and registration at remote sites.

- b) The Department has had a plan in place to actively expand the use of text messaging to CalFresh customers; however, there was an identified need to locate another contractor to handle the text messaging efforts that EHSD had underway. This new contract should be signed before the end of May 2015.
- c) EHSD is seeking to pilot the use of Internet based communications to have "face-to-face" meetings with customers. This technology will be installed in selected interview booths where privacy can be assured and will be offered to customers with access to the appropriate equipment and a willingness to participate. EHSD is also exploring the use of video technology to assist customers needing translation services. We are also planning to use Skype or similar technology with some of our community partners that have CalFresh application assisters.
- d & e) EHSD will continue to work with 511 to put appropriate information on the website as well as including information on its automated phone system.

9. The County should schedule a series of meetings between those departments that administer need-based programs to explicitly encourage increase cross-program referrals.

Response: The recommendation has not yet been implemented but is in process. Respondent agrees with this recommendation and will schedule meetings between those County Departments who also administer needs-based programs to provide enhanced knowledge of the CalFresh program and to encourage the cross-program referral of potentially eligible individuals. These meetings will be scheduled by July 15, 2015.