

Chapter Two: Outreach Worker Preparation

Effective CalFresh Outreach requires knowledge and skill, which is best gained through experience, education, and mentorship. To begin, it helps to know some key facts about CalFresh recipients.

- In FFY 2012, the maximum gross weekly income for a CalFresh household of three was less than \$464 per week, or \$2,008 per month.¹
- Families living in poverty often focus on relieving hunger as inexpensively as possible and may choose shelter over food when there is not enough money in the household.
- Some people living in poverty have been victims of abuse.
- Many people need CalFresh benefits for the first time due to underemployment, unemployment or low wages.
- According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2010 *Supplemental Poverty Measure*, the estimated percentage of Americans age 65 and older living in poverty is 15.9 percent.²

SNAP/CalFresh plays a key role in alleviating the effects of poverty in the United States.³



However, many CalFresh clients feel embarrassed about their situation and may delay applying for, or accepting, benefits. According to some CalFresh eligibility workers, an estimated 60 percent of those who submit an application fail to follow up for the initial interview.

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services, Supplemental Nutrition Services Program, *Fact Sheet on Resources, Income, and Benefits*, March 2012. Accessed September 10, 2012, http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/applicant_recipients/fs_Res_Ben_Elig.htm

² Short, Kathleen, *The Research Supplemental Poverty Measure: 2010*, U.S. Department of Commerce, United States Census Bureau, November 2011. Accessed September 10, 2012, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p60-241.pdf>

³ Tiehen, Laura, Dean Jolliffe, and Craig Gundersen, *Alleviating Poverty in the United States: The Critical Role of SNAP Benefits*. ERR-132, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, April 2012. Accessed September 10, 2012, www.ers.usda.gov/publications/ERR132/ERR132.pdf

Build Client Confidence with a Tangible Resource

You did not create the problems that you find in the community. However, you can contribute to a solution. The average CalFresh monthly benefit in California in 2011 was \$147 per person, or \$335 per household.^{4,5} This is very real relief for many households. As an outreach worker, you may be able to help households overcome the barriers to get their entitled benefits.

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Make a Good First Impression

Your initial contact with the client will set the tone for the entire encounter. Be on time if it is an appointment, have helpful information available, show compassion, listen carefully, and use body language that demonstrates respect.

 See *Tip Sheet A* for keys to compassionate interviewing.



People living in poverty are just like everybody else, except that they have to survive daily under very difficult circumstances. You might be the first person the client tells about his or her situation. They may rattle off a list of hardships without any emotion. You may feel overwhelmed. Realize that you are part of a community of service providers; your contribution is to help relieve hunger. Focus on what you can contribute. Set reasonable expectations for yourself and with your client.

Clients may be angry and resentful and blame those who offer to help for not helping them enough. Allow the client to vent. Acknowledge their difficulties. **Try to offer hope and focus on the most beneficial thing you can do: help them complete the CalFresh application.**

Most clients are very appreciative of the outreach worker's help. The client may feel vulnerable when acknowledging hardship to a stranger and you may feel inadequate. Know that the act of listening to someone in pain can be very healing.

⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Average Monthly Benefit Per Person*, August 2012. Accessed September 10, 2012, [http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/18SNAPavg\\$PPP.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/18SNAPavg$PPP.htm)

⁵ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Average Monthly Benefit per Household*, August 2012. Accessed September 10, 2012, [www.fns.usda.gov/pd/19SNAPavg\\$HH.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/19SNAPavg$HH.htm)

Demonstrate Self-Confidence

To do your best work, you need self-confidence. You can maximize your confidence by knowing as much as possible about CalFresh and other local community resources, as well as the client's cultural perspective and their unique strengths and barriers.

Gather Information

To supplement the information in this toolkit, talk to colleagues, review similar toolkits, or read the April 2012 in-depth profile of SNAP.⁶

For local community information, attend community service provider hunger coalition meetings, visit local food banks, stop by emergency shelters, and shadow (or do outreach with) an experienced outreach worker.

To understand the client's unique strengths and barriers, ask the client to tell their story.

Use Effective Communication Skills

Communication is the foundation of any successful outreach worker/client relationship. To communicate in a way that fosters mutual trust and understanding between you and your client, try using the following techniques:

- Listen with an open mind and avoid value judgments. If clients sense they are being judged, they can become defensive or hostile.

- Show that you are listening actively. Ask questions to clarify what the client has told you, and paraphrase what you heard back to the client. The client will know that you are interested and will likely be more open and cooperative.
- Ask questions that require more than “Yes” or “No” answers. This lets the client know that you want to understand his or her unique situation.
- Use “I” statements rather than “You” statements: “*I would like to help you fill out this application*” rather than “*You have to fill out this application,*” for example. This keeps the client in control of the application process.
- Share examples from real life, such as: “*One of my clients waited an extra month to get their CalFresh benefits because they missed an appointment with the eligibility worker.*” This lets the client know that they can learn from another person's experience.
- Be honest. If you don't exaggerate or make false promises, the client will most likely trust you. Stick with the facts, and finish every encounter by offering the client reassurance.

CalFresh eligibility is based on the client's income, minus approved deductions. The client feels best if they know that the regulations and requirements are not personal. You can explain that the requirements have developed over time; the regulations are there to make sure that only people who are eligible for the benefits will get them.

⁶U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services, *Building a Healthy America: A Profile of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*, Office of Research and Analysis, April 2012. Accessed September 10, 2012, www.fns.usda.gov/ORA/menu/Published/SNAP/FILES/Other/BuildingHealthyAmerica.pdf

In order to help the client, you must work closely with your local CalFresh office. When communicating with the CalFresh office, keep in mind that **the eligibility worker is the only person who can determine eligibility**. Be diplomatic, professional, and factual when you communicate with the county on the client's behalf.

Once you establish a reliable relationship with the local county office, barriers for the client are reduced and the chances of a complete application and a timely application determination increase.

You can expect routine hiccups in the application process. Understanding that the process is pretty much the same for everyone helps the client handle delays without frustration.

Maintain Confidentiality

Outreach workers are required to keep clients' personal information confidential.⁷

Each agency has its own protocol for protecting client privacy. When client privacy is not protected, the individual who releases the information improperly may be held accountable.

Personal and confidential information includes but is not limited to the following:

- Client names
- Names of household members
- Social Security numbers
- Physical descriptions

- Home addresses
- Telephone numbers
- Education levels
- Financial matters
- Medical or employment history

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Remember, disclosure of information obtained from clients may be made only to the person authorized by the client. Do not leave client information, whether hard copy or on computer, in your car. Place confidential information in a secure location and do not leave it in the open where it can be seen by anyone. If you

⁷U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services, *State Outreach Plan Guidance*, updated April 2012. Accessed September 8, 2012. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/guidance/stateplan.htm>

use a computer to keep records, make sure it is encrypted with appropriate software. Follow your agency's protocol for protecting client privacy.

Get a Release/Exchange of Information

Sometimes it is necessary for you to talk to the eligibility worker without the client present. A signed Release/Exchange of Information Form is required to allow you to do this. Protect yourself, your client, and your agency by asking the client to sign a Release/Exchange of Information Form.

 Go to *Worksheet G* for a sample Release/Exchange of Information Form.

The client has the right to refuse to sign a release. Keep in mind, though, that in order to follow up on a client you must have the signed Release of Information Form available when you contact the eligibility worker.

You can avoid the need for a release by having the client submit their CalFresh application themselves. A client can go online and complete the application in either English or Spanish.⁸ (Remember, adopting a motto of “do with” and not “do for” the client keeps the client in charge.) With the exception of a signed release, CalFresh outreach workers are not required to keep copies of client information.

Apart from the release being a legal requirement, asking permission first before you share the client's information is another way that you show respect for the client. Finding a quiet place to ask questions builds trust. Asking permission to follow up with the client after the

initial application lets the client know that you care what happens to them.

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To further build client confidence and trust, it is often helpful for you to provide phone numbers to resources that are not food related, like housing or counseling.

 Go to *Worksheet H* to create a list of local resources that you can share with your client, if needed.

Find an Outreach Mentor

CAFB offers its subcontractors a mentorship program, which is a valuable resource for new outreach workers. Outreach veterans can help new outreach workers navigate challenges, locate information, and become familiar with resources that already exist.

If you work with CAFB, contact them to participate in the mentorship program. If you do not work with CAFB and would like a mentor, see who else in your area is doing CalFresh Outreach. Knowledgeable outreach workers can

⁸ *Your Online Resource for California Benefits Simplified*. Accessed September 8, 2012, <http://www.benefitscal.org/> and <http://beneficioscal.org>

be found in a number of places, including local CalFresh task forces, anti-hunger coalitions and meetings.

Be Culturally Competent

Cultural competence refers to how well people understand and interact with people from diverse backgrounds. A diverse population includes people of different nationalities, ethnic groups, and religious backgrounds, as well as different socio-economic positions, genders, ages, abilities, and levels of integration into mainstream American culture.

By the year 2030, according to Census Bureau reports, 40 percent of the United States population will describe themselves as members of a racial and ethnic group other than non-Hispanic white.⁹

To become culturally competent, spend time with the people you need to get to know. Talk to trusted members of the community to learn the practices and beliefs that are new to you. Look for opportunities to attend cultural awareness training. Know your own cultural biases so that you do not offend others or appear judgmental.⁹

Refer to Frequently Asked Questions

As you work with community members and your outreach partners, it is helpful to have a list of frequently asked questions for reference.



- ✎ Go to *General Market Appendix F1* to find a list of common questions along with the suggested responses.

Use Media Talking Points

Everyone relies on media to advertise their programs or to find out about a different program. From time to time outreach workers are interviewed about CalFresh.

- ✎ To find some approved talking points that are best to use when dealing with members of the media, go to *General Market Appendix F5*.

Help to Overcome Myths

A myth is a false belief, and there are many associated with CalFresh. Replacing myth with fact is an ongoing job for the outreach worker. Many clients believe they will have to repay

⁹U.S. Department of Agriculture, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, *Engaging Special Populations – Cultural Competency*. Accessed September 10, 2012, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/default.htm>

CalFresh benefits, they will be deported, their children will be drafted into the military, or they will not be allowed to become citizens.

 All of these myths and more are covered in *General Market Appendix F8*.

Know the facts and you will be able to educate and reduce barriers for your clients.

Be Prepared and Be Successful

Successful outreach workers are prepared. With each success, they find that their reputation spreads in the community and clients will refer friends to them for support.

