

Key Components of a Model Policy

Crafting a County Food Stamp Phone Interview Policy

States across the country have employed strategies that make it easier for the working poor to apply for nutrition assistance while also giving administrators greater flexibility to meet the demands of rising caseloads. California has an opportunity to do better by working families and remove a significant barrier to the program—namely, the face-to-face interview. California counties now have the option to provide phone interviews to all applicants at initial application and recertification without hardship.

At California Food Policy Advocates, we have gathered information and resources to support the implementation of phone interviews in counties across the state. As part of our work, we have identified the key components of a model phone interview policy to help counties take full advantage of the broader waiver of the face-to-face interview and increase access to the program by working families across the state.

Key Components of a Model County Phone Interview Policy

1) Train staff and prepare clients to ensure a thorough, successful interview.

A model policy includes staff training and job aids to guide and support the worker in preparing themselves and the client for the phone interview. Being focused, clear, and well versed in what is expected and needed to complete the interview and application process is an important strategy to ensure that workers receive the information required to determine eligibility. Staff training should include clear directions on how workers will prepare themselves and the client for the interview, how to conduct a thorough, timely, and effective telephone interview, telephone etiquette and listening skills, what types of documents or information are acceptable for verification purposes, and how to wrap up the interview. There are several examples of staff trainings and tips on preparing clients for a phone interview available on the [*411 on Phone Interviews in California*](#) website.

2) Implement a communication plan to spread the word about the new policy.

A model policy includes a communication plan to inform staff, partner organizations, and prospective applicants about the policy and procedures. The [*411 on Phone Interviews in California*](#) website includes a **Sample Communication Plan** that outlines actions and provides sample language for counties to adopt to help them spread the word. For example, counties should distribute a policy memo to all staff, including regional and satellite offices and update their Food Stamp Application Cover or Instructional Sheets, as well as the online food stamp screening and/or application tool, with information about new policy and process. The situation we want to avoid is someone making a trip to the office just to find out that they didn't have to come in. Of course, if an applicant does come into the office, they should not be turned away without being seen or provided information to begin the application process.

3) Offer phone interviews at initial application and recertification.

A model policy provides phone interviews at initial application and recertification. California's food stamp participation problem is so severe that we must do all we can to get more new applicants into the program and make it easier for existing participants to maintain the nutrition assistance they need. It is important to implement the policy at application and recertification to take full advantage of increasing access to working families, while giving administrators greater flexibility to meet the demands of rising caseloads. Prioritizing phone interviews at application will especially help to improve access by newly eligible, working Californians.

4) Schedule the interview at a mutually-convenient time and reduce the risk of “no shows.”

A model policy provides that phone interviews are scheduled at a time that is mutually-convenient for the client and worker, which helps to ensure that the client is available at the time of the interview. There are several successful ways to do this and counties should identify which approach works best in their county. For example, a county can update their Food Stamp Application Cover or Instruction Sheets and/or online screening and application portals to ask for three (3) key pieces of information:

1. Preferred/Available days of the week and times of day;
2. Preferred/Best Phone Number; and,
3. Alternate Phone Numbers.

Another example, known as the “batter-up” system, asks applicants to call the county office at time convenient for them within a five (5) day window to complete the phone interview. An available worker will answer the call, conduct the interview, and determine eligibility. The county will need to have an established process to immediately interview the applicant when they call.

5) Call multiple times and remind clients that they can reschedule, saving the county time and money.

A model policy recognizes that at times, things come up, and proactively seeks to make contact with the client before denying the application. These simple, proactive steps will save the county office time and money by reducing “churning.” There are several successful ways to do this and counties should identify which approach works best in their county. Here are two examples:

1. If a client does not answer at the time of the scheduled interview, the county worker will make three (3) additional calls to the household at 10 minute intervals and be sure to call the alternate numbers provided by the client. For example, if the phone interview appointment is at 10 a.m. and the worker does not reach the client, they will call again at 10:10 a.m., 10:20 a.m., and 10:30 a.m. If they remain unreachable, the worker will send the client a notice of missed interview that reminds them that they have an opportunity to reschedule the interview within 30 days of the filing of the initial application.
2. If a client does not answer at the time of the scheduled interview, the county worker will make two (2) additional calls to the household—at 10-30 minutes after the scheduled call and the next day at the same time as the initial scheduled call. For example, if the phone interview appointment is at 10 a.m. and the worker does not reach the client, they will call again between 10:10 and 10:30 a.m. and the next day at 10 a.m. If they remain unreachable, the worker will send the client a notice of missed interview that reminds them that they have an opportunity to reschedule the interview within 30 days of the filing of the initial application.

6) Simplify verification, increasing timeliness and improving customer service.

A model policy simplifies the verification process, which in turn will help staff reduce the number of applications pending for additional verification, increase timeliness, and improve customer service. Here are 3 key ways to simplify the verification process:

1. County staff is encouraged to approach applications with a “positive eligibility” mindset—that is, asking “What can I do within the rules to make you eligible for food stamps today?” This will save counties time and money in the long run as customers are less likely to drop off only to re-apply a month later.
2. Workers are well versed in what verification documents are mandatory and what information does not require documentary proof.
3. Every effort is made by county staff to ensure that applicants are aware and understand what documents or information they must provide and the timeline within which it must be provided.

7) Require only one signature and reduce unnecessary back and forth.

A model policy requires only one signature from the client. Phone interviews can provide county administrators and workers with greater flexibility to meet the demands of rising caseloads. Across the country, states require only one signature to complete the application process. By requiring only one signature, California counties can reduce the otherwise unnecessary back and forth between the client and county office and increase the timely delivery of benefits. The only signature needed is on the initial application (DFA 285 A1/SAWS 1). The Rights and Responsibilities are reviewed with the client over the phone and verbal acknowledgement recorded—a signature is not needed.

8) Provide clear instructions about the finger imaging requirement, streamlining the application process and reducing lengthy office visits.

A model policy provides clear and simple instructions for staff and clients about the finger imaging requirements. In this way, the county will be able to maintain a streamlined application process and reduce lengthy office visits. Instructions should include three (3) key points:

1. For all cases certified by phone, benefits are issued without a finger print and the finger imaging requirement can be met the next time the client is in the county office or by recertification.
2. During the initial phone interview, staff shall remind clients that it is their best interest to complete the finger print requirement the next time they are in the county office so that they can be recertified by phone. A similar reminder shall be included in the recertification notice mailed to clients.
3. Clients who do not complete the finger imaging requirement by recertification will be recertified by a face-to-face interview.

9) Assess implementation and policy to ensure staff is supported, quality of service is maintained, and access by working families has increased.

A model policy includes an evaluation to assess implementation, ensuring the broader goals of increasing access, improving timeliness, and easing the pressure on workers by reducing office traffic and improving caseload management are reached. There are several successful ways to do this and counties should identify which approach works best in their county. For example, a county can track the number of households certified by phone interview, number of households requesting in office interviews, number of households who did not complete phone interview, number of households who are not reached at time of scheduled interview, number of households denied a phone interview, etc. In addition, the county can survey staff one (1) month after implementation then again at three (3) months after implementation to identify successes and necessary adjustments to the policy. Also, a county can survey partner organizations, resource and referral services, and telephone hotlines, as well as clients.

For more information, visit our website at
<http://www.cfpa.net/PhoneInterviewsCalifornia.html>