Face-to-Face Interview Alternative for Hungry, Working Californians

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**Issue**

Food stamps are a critical work support, yet working families are less likely to participate in the Food Stamp Program. The face-to-face interview, which is a standard requirement for every application, can be a barrier to food stamp access since it almost exclusively takes place during normal business hours when many clients must be at work. In addition, going to the food stamp office costs money, something that eligible clients have little to spare.

Policymakers have already taken action to remove this barrier from other programs supporting the working poor. Our state's health program, MediCal, no longer requires face-to-face interviews. Because the Food Stamp Program provides valuable nutritional support, it is essentially a health program. All hungry families should have equal access to the health benefits of food stamps and MediCal.

At the same time, over-burdened caseworkers are experiencing even heavier workloads due to budget cuts. These caseworkers need an opportunity to ease their workload by granting phone interviews to clients experiencing hardship circumstances. This legislation would require counties to waive face-to-face interviews for all households that experience certain hardships such as transportation difficulties, work or job training, or illness.

**Need**

UCLA researchers recently found that among adults who are likely to be eligible and who experience the actual pains of hunger, only 20 percent receive food stamps. Overall, less than half of all eligible people receive food stamps in California. Working families—who make up 71 percent of working households—are especially unlikely to participate in the program. Research by USDA and CFPA has documented that hungry workers have a difficult time getting food assistance because it takes an average of 5 hours and 3 trips to apply for food stamps. And, since the inception of the Food Stamp Program, the vast majority of county food stamp offices have held traditional weekday office hours. In order to avoid having to make the choice between missing work and getting food stamps, applicants should be able to make use of the phone interview option.

**Request**

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<td>Increasing access to food stamps for people with hardships will increase participation in the Food Stamp Program. However, because counties will save time and money in administering the program, this change will be cost neutral. The federal government pays the majority of Food Stamp benefits.</td>
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**History**

The Food Stamp Program evolved as a program targeted to people who are unemployed or receiving some kind of public assistance. With dropping welfare rolls and increasing numbers of low-wage workers, the program must now become a work support. The 2003 state budget eliminated 235 county eligibility workers, putting counties under greater pressure to reduce costs, yet serve hungry families at the same time.

**Outcomes**

Providing accessibility options for hungry, working Californians would:
- Ensure that hard-working families do not go hungry.
- Give low-wage workers and their children more opportunities to succeed. By simplifying the food stamp application process as other work support programs have done, both clients and caseworkers will benefit.