

Frequently Asked Questions: Customer Service Improvements in the Food Stamp Program

Assembly member Judy Chu has introduced the Food for Families Act, AB 696. This bill makes a number of improvements to California's last-place Food Stamp Program. Included in this package of reforms are proposals to improve service delivery and customer service in this vital nutrition program. This brief responds to common questions about these proposals.

Why is customer service an issue?

Consider this from the Schwarzenegger Administration's California Performance Review:

- **Statewide customer service standards don't exist.** Customer service takes a backseat to other issues.
- **Services are not readily accessible.** The state does not employ the most modern customer service technologies.
- **Programs are designed for the convenience of government.** The state designs programs from a bureaucratic perspective instead of a consumer perspective.
- **Coordination with local government is poor.** Many services are delivered by our partners in local government, but we do a poor job of collaborating with our partners.

These findings are about government services in general, but these statements could easily be applied to the food stamp program. There aren't statewide customer service standards; food stamp benefits are often inaccessible, especially to the working poor; food stamp participants and non-participants have rarely been utilized in the design and delivery of food stamps.

There are many reasons why eligible families don't participate in the food stamp program. Improving customer service would go a long way removing barriers to food stamp participation.

But why is customer service an issue for the legislature? Can you legislate good customer service?

With 58 counties and about 200 food stamp offices in the state, Food Stamp applicants should be able to expect some minimal standards of customer service at every location. While the legislature can't exactly legislate good service, it can require that it be raised as a priority; it can require that customers' perspectives be included in the develop of policy; and it can promote specific initiatives that have been proven to improve customer service.

What do the customer service sections of the bill do?

The bill would have the Department of Social Services:

1. Develop and implement customer surveys.
2. Convene a workgroup to establish customer standards.
3. Adapt the existing food stamp application for mail-in use.

What do food stamp recipients think about customer service in the food stamp program?

It has been many years since a significant customer service review of the food stamp program has occurred. Research from the 1990's found that recipients were generally pleased with the service they received, but did complain about long waits and many trips to the office. Recent small-scale surveys of recipients in California suggest that long waits are still an issue as are problems reaching caseworkers. But since there has been so little customer service analysis done, hearing from recipients is a critical first step.

What do eligible non-participants think about customer service in the food stamp program?

Less is known about the perspective of eligible non-participants. What is known is that over 70% of them work. This population would likely benefit from alternatives to food stamp office interviews, such as mail-in applications and phone interviews. As with participants, it is critical to hear from non-participants when designing a customer service improvement strategy.

Are't office visits required in the food stamp program?

Elderly and disabled individuals do not have to come into the food stamp office. Other applicants can avoid the office, if:

- Their work or job training schedule conflicts with food stamp office hours.
- They live far from the office or don't have transportation.
- They are ill or have to take care of a household member.
- They can't come into the office because of bad weather.

Since most non-participants are working, it is very likely that a significant number could be served by mail-in applications and phone interviews.

How long does it really take to get food stamps in California?

National figures put the average food stamp application as requiring 5 hours in the office and close to three trips to complete the process. Here in California the times vary from county to county, from a low of 1.5 hours to almost six hours. There are clearly several counties that have customer service best practices that could inform others in California.

Is the bill trying to legislate specific standards?

The bill requires the Department of Social Services to work with county administrators and advocates to develop standards. These standards would not bestow any new rights for applicants to faster or better service, but instead would be used in improving performance and service delivery.