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CalFresh: Examining Barriers of Low Participation Rates in Santa Cruz County

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Abstract

SNAP, which federally stands for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, is formerly known as food stamps, and is now recognized as CalFresh in California. CalFresh is a food supplemental assistance program that provides financial assistance for low-income individuals (Feeding America, 2014). In 2013, Santa Cruz County ranked thirty-nine out of fifty-eight counties in CalFresh participation, with 23,355 income-eligible non-participants (CFPA, 2016). By increasing eligible participants for the CalFresh program, low-income individuals could potentially face less stress and financial hardships, since CalFresh could add to an individual's food budget. Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County's department of Community Outreach implemented the project of surveying Santa Cruz County residents with the purpose of identifying barriers to CalFresh participation. Expected outcomes included increased awareness of community thoughts and feelings, regarding CalFresh. In order to determine why CalFresh participation in Santa Cruz County is so low, surveys were conducted at six different sites. Survey results showed that around 11 percent of seniors do not qualify under the income guidelines for CalFresh. 12 percent of Cabrillo College students indicated unawareness of CalFresh as a barrier. Overall, 10 percent of respondents stated they would like to apply for CalFresh. Recommendations for SHFB includes expanding efforts to increase awareness about CalFresh, specifically to college students, seniors, and low-income families, such as conveying messages to Santa Cruz County residents through the radio, television, newspapers, public service announcements, and verbally. Recommendations also includes presenting data of barriers to CalFresh participation at collaborative meetings with Health and Human Services agencies.

Keywords: CalFresh, Barriers, Second Harvest Food Bank, Santa Cruz County, Low-income

Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County

Founded in 1972, Second Harvest Food Bank (SHFB, 2017) Santa Cruz County is the second oldest food bank in the nation and was the first food bank in California, which means they have solidified their presence and reputation within surrounding communities and organizations. Their mission is to eliminate hunger by educating and involving their community. SHFB is recognized as the second healthiest food bank in the nation; more than 60% of food they distribute is fresh produce (SHFB, 2017). According to SHFB, “only with adequate food and nutrition can children learn, adults work, and our community thrive” (2017).

SHFB serves the Santa Cruz County community by distributing more than 8 million pounds of food each year to 100 sites that consist of food pantries, schools, soup kitchens, group homes, youth centers, and other community organizations. SHFB has another 100 food distribution’s that are operated by their programs Food for Children, Passion for Produce, and the Community Outreach department. SHFB collaborates with farms, grocery stores, food manufacturers, distributors, and individuals in order to receive food donations that would all be distributed to Santa Cruz County residents in need.

SNAP, which federally stands for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, is formerly known as food stamps, and is now recognized as CalFresh in California (Feeding America, 2014). The Santa Cruz County Human Services Department partnered with SHFB for CalFresh outreach, education and enrollment assistance. CalFresh is a food supplemental assistance program that provides financial assistance for low-income individuals in California. In order to become eligible for CalFresh, citizen’s gross incomes could only be up to 130 percent above the federal poverty line (Feeding America, 2014).

CalFresh is geared towards providing food assistance for at-risk citizens, specifically households with children, disabled members, or elderly. Almost half of all SNAP participants are children. The goal for SNAP is to assist families who are going hungry, so that individuals could live productive and healthy lives. SHFB states that CalFresh “is the first line of defense against hunger, helping low-income household’s meet their food and nutrition needs” (2017).

Communities served

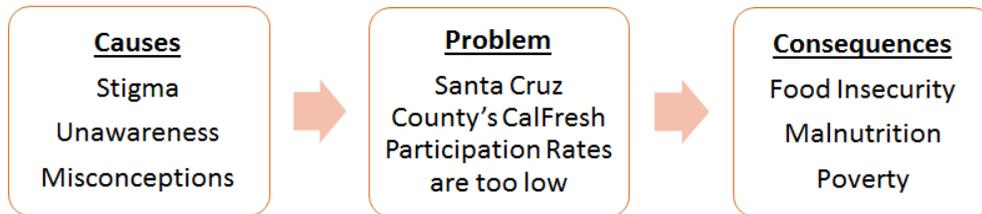
In July 1, 2016, the United States Census Bureau estimated 274,673 residents living in Santa Cruz County with 5.4% under 5 years, 19.7% under 18 years, and 14.9% aged 65 years and over (2017). Around 57.7% of Santa Cruz County residents are White alone compared to 33.5% of Hispanic or Latino race. 4.9% of residents are Asian alone, 1.8 % are American Indian and Alaska Native alone, 1.4% are Black or African American alone, and 0.2% are Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander alone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

Problem

Santa Cruz County’s CalFresh participation rates are too low. CFPA (2016) ranks all 58 counties in California based on SNAP participation rates. In 2013, Santa Cruz County was ranked 39 out of 58 counties in CalFresh participation, with 23,355 income-eligible non-participants (CFPA, 2016). Not only does SNAP help low-income individuals during hardships, but they support the U.S. economy and create jobs. With more money for food budgets, families could potentially spend the money for other necessities. According to Feeding America, “every \$1 billion of added SNAP funding, between 8,900 and 17,000 jobs were created” (Feeding America, 2014).

Problem model

Below, the problem model represents the causes and consequences of low participation rates in Santa Cruz County. The causes of Santa Cruz County's CalFresh low participation rates range from reasons such as the stigma, unawareness and misconceptions of the CalFresh program.



Problem causes

Reasons for low participation rates of the CalFresh program ranges from “inadequate awareness, difficulty signing up or renewing, misinformation, and more” (CFPA, 2016).

Contributing factors of low participation rates may also involve the stigma of applying for the CalFresh program. There is a known fear of applying for the CalFresh program amongst Santa Cruz County residents who do not hold a legal permanent residency. Undocumented immigrants could apply for benefits on behalf of their U.S.-born children (CFPA, 2016). Some families have the fear that “they could lose their immigration status or have to repay their benefits, or be subject to deportation or ineligibility for U.S. citizenship” (CFPA, 2016).

Misconceptions of the CalFresh program may also be a barrier for Santa Cruz County residents. Individuals have the misconception that they could be “taking someone else’s place” in the program if they apply for the CalFresh program. The California Department of Social Services (CDSS, n.d.) provides myths and facts about CalFresh, which includes the myth that if someone enrolls onto the program, they could be taking benefits from an individual who needs it more. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) allocates funds for CalFresh, so that there is enough funds for every income-eligible individuals in the county. CDSS explains that

CalFresh is an entitlement program, meaning that every individual who is eligible and applies will receive benefits (2016, n.d.).

Unawareness of the CalFresh program may be another factor to low participation rates. The California Association of Food Banks (CAFB) report in their article, “New Analysis: Over 20 Percent of California Respondents Unable to Afford Enough Food; Report Exposes Widespread Levels of Food Hardship in California and Nationwide” (2010), more than 20 percent of individuals contacted in California through the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index project, which has been interviewing 1,000 households daily since January 2008, stated being food insecure. This means that at least one out of five respondents were not able to provide food on their table for either themselves or their family around the past 12 months that they were interviewed. The report explains how far too many people in California are struggling against hunger. The CAFB highlights that “increasing participation in CalFresh has the potential to bring billions of federal dollars to California, billions more in economic stimulus, and will help struggling families survive” (2010). It was suggested that the removal of the ineffective practice of fingerprinting CalFresh applicants would increase the participation of CalFresh. This practice was removed, just as the exchange of food stamps or coupons was replaced with an electronic benefits card for purchasing food directly from food stores and farmers markets.

The Food Research and Action Center explains in their report, “Best Practices for Implementing the Telephone Interview to Reduce SNAP Client and Administrative Burdens” (2017), that the U.S. Department of Agriculture allows state agencies to conduct telephonic interviews for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or CalFresh. An interview for the CalFresh program is required for applicants with their county of residency, so that they are informed of the CalFresh program and their rights. During the CalFresh interview, eligibility

case workers obtain client information to determine their household's eligibility for benefits. CFPA surveyed more than forty counties in California and found there was an increase in access to and participation of the CalFresh program with the phone interview compared to the face-to-face interview with the county (2016). SHFB Santa Cruz County conducts telephonic signature interviews for client's CalFresh intake process. Giving clients the option of phone interviews reduces many barriers for working families and elderly, in terms of lack of transportation, time, or the stigma that results from visiting a public assistance office. SHFB's Community Outreach Specialists conduct in-reach and outreach for CalFresh and promote the CalFresh telephonic interview option as a simple and quick way to enroll for benefits.

Problem consequences

The reality is that 1 in four children and 1 in 5 adults face hunger in Santa Cruz County (SHFB, 2017). The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 7.1% of Santa Cruz County residents were unemployed in 2015. According to the statewide policy and advocacy organization, California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA, 2016), 17% of individuals are living in poverty in Santa Cruz County in 2014. 21% of the population of children are living in poverty. Food insecurity is defined as the uncertainty of access to food that is healthy and nutritious, which is showing high trends among low-income households (Vivian, E. M., Le, J., Ikem, P., & Tolson, Y., 2014). CFPA, reports that 38% of low-income households were food insecure in California in 2014, compared to 35% of low-income households in Santa Cruz County (CFPA, 2016).

Low-income households usually "lack environmental such as adequate housing, safe walking paths and working conditions, which can also have a negative impact on their health" (Vivian, E. M., Le, J., Ikem, P., & Tolson, Y., 2014). Low-income families who are under

financial hardships, lacking resources, and facing continuous stress shows to lead to unhealthy lifestyles, such as unhealthy eating habits. By increasing eligible participants for the CalFresh program, they could potentially face less stress and financial hardships, since CalFresh could add to individual's food budget.

Survey Project Description and Justification

Survey Project Purpose

Participation rates in the CalFresh program in Santa Cruz County are too low. Determining barriers to low CalFresh participation rates in Santa Cruz County is crucial. More than twenty-three thousand income-eligible residents of Santa Cruz County are missing out on CalFresh benefits (CFPA, 2016). SHFB's Community Outreach Department is responsible of looking for best practices or strategies to increase CalFresh participation in Santa Cruz County. The Community Outreach Department administered the project of surveying Santa Cruz County residents for the purpose of identifying barriers of the CalFresh program. Expected outcomes of the survey project were to also determine whether Santa Cruz County residents felt they would benefit from the CalFresh program. The Community Outreach Department expected to utilize results of the survey project with the intent of creating innovative ideas to increase CalFresh participation.

Project Implementation

The implementation scope is located in the appendix, which represents the process of the implementation method for the survey project. Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County's Community Outreach Department brainstormed survey questions that could assist in identifying possible barriers to CalFresh participation, as well as reasons current recipients of CalFresh initially applied for.

The survey project was implemented at the following sites: Aptos Pantry, Passion for Produce's Corralitos Creek and Seacliff Highlands, Cabrillo College, Food for Children's Starlight School, and Santa Cruz's Salvation Army. Corralitos Creek and Seacliff Highlands is operated by SHFB's Passion for Produce Program. SHFB's Food for Children program operates Starlight School. Survey implementation sites included some of SHFB's food distribution and pantry sites across Santa Cruz County. Survey implementation sites were decided upon based on the amount of participants that CalFresh Outreach Specialists believed would attend in general.

Student intern read the questionnaire to all participants and documented all answers manually, so that literacy barriers were prevented. After every participant completed the questionnaire, they were asked their age. Their gender was also noted down. Participants who expressed interest in applying for the CalFresh program were referred to CalFresh Outreach Specialists at the Aptos pantry and Cabrillo College. When they were not present, student intern provided pamphlets with CalFresh application information for participants who wished to apply for the CalFresh program. Student intern ended conversations between survey participants by expressing their gratitude.

Analysis of the survey project results consisted of entering data obtained into an excel spreadsheet. Analysis of survey results were presented to the Community Outreach Department. Successes and failures of the survey project were discussed. The survey project was composed as a poster presentation for the Community Outreach Department.

Project Results

Project outcomes

After completion of implementation of the survey project, the total amount of questionnaires collected was 109. One questionnaire was disregarded after implementation at the first site in SHFB's Aptos pantry, since the survey participant did not live in Santa Cruz County. For data analysis to stay concentrated in Santa Cruz County, survey participants who stated that they were not residents of Santa Cruz County were opted out during the remainder of survey implementation.

Assessment of project outcomes

It is necessary to identify reasons or barriers to why community members in Santa Cruz are not participating in the CalFresh program. Through survey implementation, it was anticipated that survey participants could disclose certain reasons to why they are or are not interested in the CalFresh program. Furthermore, after analysis of data collection, student intern expected to learn about barriers that Santa Cruz County residents experience, regarding the CalFresh program. With the presented project survey data, SHFB could determine best practices or strategies to increase CalFresh participation.

Student intern and mentors believed that some reasons that Santa Cruz community members hesitate to apply for CalFresh is due to anti-immigrant sentiment. Other reasons may be due to trust in giving an organization their personal information.

Findings

Results of the questionnaire are shown in the Appendix. Around 26% of survey participants were male, and 74% were female. The largest age ranges of survey participants were

23% for ages 35 to 44. 19% of survey participants were 21 and under and 19% were 22 to 34 years old. 17% of respondents were 55 to 64 years old. 13% of participants were ages 45 to 54. The lowest was 11% for ages 65 and over.

32.41% of survey participants stated that they currently receive CalFresh benefits, whereas 67.59% do not. From the 67.59% of participants who responded that they do not currently receive CalFresh benefits, around 10% stated that they would like to apply for the program and more than 50% stated they did not.

Respondents who did not desire to apply for the CalFresh program were asked why they would not like to apply. No participants stated that it is too difficult to apply or that they did not have time to apply for the CalFresh program. 8% respondents stated that they did not want to take away benefits from someone else. 5% of participants stated that they did not want to apply because nobody in their household is a legal permanent resident. 18% of participants explained that they already applied for CalFresh and did not qualify. 12% of participants stated that their income is too high for them to qualify. They either stated that they worked too much to qualify or received Social Security income, which disqualifies applicants of the CalFresh program. 2% survey participants stated that they were not interested in applying for CalFresh for no reason at all. 12% participants stated that they did not know what CalFresh is. Their ages ranged from 18 to 55 and all attended Cabrillo College. Students expressed that they were not interested in applying in a program they never heard of before. They stated “I am not interested in applying for CalFresh benefits because I do not even know what it is.

One participant explained her barrier to CalFresh enrollment. Her case was delayed due to computer issues when she applied for the CalFresh program. This respondent expressed how she was reluctant to apply for the CalFresh program, since it was “too much of a hassle.”

Survey participants who were either enrolled in CalFresh or showed interest in applying, were asked for their reasoning behind it. 12% of participants showed interest for the CalFresh program so that they could have healthy food for themselves and their children. 4% of participants that were surveyed at the Santa Cruz Salvation Army stated that they are tired of not having enough to eat every day. They also stated that they were homeless. 17% participants stated that healthy food is too expensive for them to afford. 5% of participants explained that they applied for CalFresh in order to save for other necessary resources.

Most reasons for interest or enrollment in the CalFresh program was directly associated with the need that Santa Cruz County residents go up against. 7% of survey participants applied because they were unemployed. 2% of residents shared that they were disabled and could not obtain a job. , Participants explained that with a low-income budget and multiple expenses, they struggled to be able to provide food for themselves or their family.

Successes

Identifying barriers such as misconceptions and unawareness of the CalFresh program through the survey project was a success. 12% of participants stated that they were unaware of the CalFresh program. This barrier was found amongst Cabrillo college students in Aptos. The results also showed that participants had a need for the CalFresh program. Reasoning for interest of the CalFresh program pertained to the lack of financial resources participants had. 17% of participants stated that healthy food was too expensive for them to afford. These participants were aware that the CalFresh program could provide the benefits of food assistance for their household. Other participants shared their hardships. 7% of participant explained that they initially applied for CalFresh 2% of participants stated that their disability prevented their ability to keep a stable job.

Limitations

Implementation at SHFB's Starlight School food distribution site in Watsonville began thirty minutes before surveys were conducted by the Passion for Produce Program. Student intern wanted to avoid the projected conflict of asking participants too many questions altogether. The fast moving pace of food distribution sites affected the ability to obtain additional information from survey participants. It was difficult to initiate conversations with residents who attended SHFB's food distribution sites, since they preferred to receive their food instead. Not only was it difficult to obtain participant information, but it was also difficult to give further information to those who stated that they would like to apply for the CalFresh program.

Student intern created a questionnaire for Community Outreach Director and Community Outreach Specialist, regarding whether they felt that the survey project data was useful for SHFB. Community Outreach Director explained how a higher amount of survey respondents would have benefited their agency more (J. Campos, personal communication, November 15, 2017). CalFresh Outreach Specialist explained how CalFresh is still an unknown subject to some Santa Cruz County residents, including at SHFB's food distribution sites and pantries.

Reflection

Conclusion and Recommendations

Through the identification of CalFresh barriers with the survey project, the Community Outreach Department of Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County could project the next steps in utilizing the data to determine how to increase CalFresh participation rates. It takes a collaborative effort amongst health and human services agencies in order to increase CalFresh participation rates in Santa Cruz County. Recommendations for SHFB includes increasing efforts to increase awareness about CalFresh benefits, specifically to college students, seniors, and low-

income families, such as conveying messages to Santa Cruz County residents through the SHFB could convey messages to residents in Santa Cruz County. Target populations for CalFresh application assistance includes college students, homeless, seniors, and households with children. Since college students were mostly unaware of the CalFresh program and its benefits, student intern suggests conducting additional outreach in college campuses.

Recommendations for Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County includes presenting survey project results, in addition to the barriers of CalFresh participation at the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department Benefit's Collaborative meeting. SHFB's Community Outreach Specialist's attend the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department Benefit's Collaborative meeting monthly. The purpose of these meetings are to ensure access to health coverage, nutrition assistance and other public benefits for all eligible Santa Cruz County residents. Health and human service agencies attend these meetings to become informed of updates, changes, and other essential information needed to collaborate on ending similar issues. Several agencies could provide their input, such as similar experiences that their clients have with CalFresh.

Social significance

Ending hunger, or food insecurity, takes a collaborative effort amongst health and human services. The survey project assisted in identifying misconceptions and unawareness as barriers of the CalFresh program from participants residing in Santa Cruz County. SHFB could utilize the data to project the next steps of reducing these barriers. Food insecurity can be reduced if income-eligible residents apply for the CalFresh program, which ultimately add's to a household's food budget.

The Community Outreach Department are able to project innovative ways of reducing barriers identified through the survey project, such as misconceptions and unawareness of the CalFresh program. Student intern recommendations for SHFB are to utilize the results presented from the survey project and produce a detailed plan on how to increase CalFresh participation in Santa Cruz County.

As discussed in Pamela Myers Kiser's book, *The Human Services Internship: Getting the Most from Your Experience (2011)*, it is important to note that "because no one agency can serve all of the needs of its clients, human service agencies form an interdependent web of support and cooperation with one another." In order to truly work towards ending hunger and malnutrition, I recommend that future capstone students working at SHFB collaborate within the agency, along with other health and human service agencies.

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Appendices

Questionnaire

Disclosure: I am a CSUMB student conducting a survey for my internship class. All responses will be used for research purposes and respondents will remain anonymous.

1. Do you live in Santa Cruz County?

- Yes
- No

2. Do you currently receive CalFresh benefits? (If yes, please skip to Question 5)

- Yes
- No

3. Would you like to apply for the CalFresh program? (If yes, please skip to Question 5)

- Yes
- No

4. If no, why would you not like to apply for the CalFresh program? (Circle all that apply)

- It is too difficult to apply
- I do not have time to apply
- I do not want to take away benefits from someone else
- Nobody in my household is a legal permanent resident
- I already applied and did not qualify
- Other reasons: _____

5. If yes, why did you apply for the CalFresh program or why would you like to apply for the CalFresh program? (Circle all that apply)

- Healthy food for myself and my children
- I am tired of not having enough to eat everyday
- Healthy food is too expensive for me to afford
- To save for other necessary resources
- Other reasons: _____

Cuestionario

Soy un estudiante de CSUMB realizando una encuesta para mi clase de prácticas. Todas las respuestas son para fines de investigación y respuestas permanecerán anónimas.

1. Usted vive en el condado de Santa Cruz?

- Si
- No

2. Esta recientemente recibiendo beneficios de CalFresh? (En caso afirmativo, pase a la pregunta cinco)

- Si
- No

3. Estaría interesado(a) en aplicar para el programa de CalFresh? (En caso afirmativo, pase a la pregunta cinco)

- Si
- No

4. Si no, porque no quisieras aplicar para el programa de CalFresh? (Escoge todas las que aplican)

- Es demasiado difícil de aplicar
- No tengo tiempo para aplicar
- No quiero quitarle los beneficios de otra persona
- Nadie en mi casa es un permanente residente
- Ya aplique y no califique
- Otras razones: _____

5. Y si, porque aplicastes para el programa de CalFresh o porque quisiera's aplicar para el programa de CalFresh? (Escoge todas las que aplican)

- Preparar comida saludable para mí y para mis hijos
- Estoy cansado(a) de no tener suficiente para comer todos los días
- La comida saludable es demasiado costosa para mí
- Para ahorrarar para otros recursos necesarios
- Otras razones: _____

Table 1

Survey Participant Age Ranges	Total	%
21 and Under	20	19%
22 to 34	20	19%
35 to 44	25	23%
45 to 54	13	13%
55 to 64	18	17%
65 and over	12	11%
Total	108	100%

Table 2

Gender of Survey Participants	Total
Male	26%
Female	74%
Grand Total	100%

Table 3

Question # 1 Responses	Total
Yes	99%
No	1%
Grand Total	100%

Table 4

Question # 2 Responses	Total
Yes	32.41%
No	67.59%
Grand Total	100.00%

Table 5

Question # 3 Responses	Total
Blank	32.41%
Yes	10.19%
No	57.41%
Grand Total	100.00%

Table 6

Question # 4(a) Responses	Total
No	100%
Yes	0%
Grand Total	100%

Table 7

Question # 4(b) Responses	Total
No	100%
Yes	0%
Grand Total	100%

Table 8

Question # 4(c) Responses	Total
No	92%
Yes	8%
Grand Total	100%

Table 9

Question # 4(d) Responses	Total
No	95%
Yes	5%
Grand Total	100%

Table 10

Question # 4(e) Responses	Total
No	82%
Yes	18%
Grand Total	100%

Table 11

Question # 5(a) Responses	Total
No	88%
Yes	12%
Grand Total	100%

Table 12

Question # 5(b) Responses	Total
No	96%
Yes	4%
Grand Total	100%

Table 13

Question # 5(c) Responses	Total
No	83%
Yes	17%
Grand Total	100%

Table 14

Question # 5(d) Responses	Total
No	95%
Yes	5%
Grand Total	100%

Project Implementation Scope

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines
Brainstormed Survey Questions	Created a Questionnaire in Spanish and English	09/19/2017
Determined Survey Implementation Sites	Created a list of sites for implementation	09/19/2017-10/03/2017
Obtained Approval of Survey Sites	Emailed and discussed approval of sites for survey implementation	10/03/2017-10/05/2017
Implemented Survey Project	Attended 6 sites in Santa Cruz County to survey residents	10/10/2017-10/17/2017
Analyzed Survey Project	Data was entered into an excel spreadsheet, graphs were created	10/17/2017- 11/03/2017
Surveyed Mentors About Capstone Successes/Challenges	Discussed survey project results with mentors	11/15/2017
Poster Presentation of Project	Final Poster Presentation Format	12/14/2017