

Working the Poor: Barriers to CalFresh Participation and Enrollment
Exploring client experiences and the role of community-based organizations in outreach

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Abstract

In this thesis, I draw on qualitative research collected through a California food bank's CalFresh outreach program to examine barriers to SNAP participation. Drawing on ethnographic methodology, I conducted participant observation, semi-structured interviews, phone surveys and numerous informal interviews in order to develop a client narrative around the application process. Through this research I explored the obstacles and barriers clients must overcome to enroll and maintain enrollment in CalFresh. My research findings revealed there are numerous barriers to participation. Some barriers are a result of being a vulnerable low-income individual or household, while others are a result of program administration or service delivery. My research also revealed that having a community based advocate or CBO intermediary significantly improved the client experience. Having assistance and an advocate throughout the application process improved the application experience as well as retention in the program.

Keywords: *Keywords:* CalFresh Participation, SNAP, food stamps, CalFresh outreach, food bank outreach

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Introduction

At first glance, California seems to be overflowing with food. Driving through the Central Valley one sees acres of strawberries, artichokes, almonds, tomatoes and a cornucopia of other crops. The Golden State, also referred to as “America’s salad bowl,” produces a significant portion of the food consumed in the US, dominating the market for greens, citrus and other fruits (Philpott 2011). In Northern California, a walk through cities such as Sacramento reveals an abundance of fruit trees, many of which produce hundreds of pounds of fruit that go un-harvested and uneaten. The Davis farmers’ market is famous throughout the United States, and San Francisco is considered a foodie’s paradise. Unfortunately, there are a lot of communities that do not get to share in this bounty, and many don’t even have access to a grocery store. Food insecurity¹ remains a real and serious challenge in the state of California. Between 2001 and 2009, the number of food insecure individuals doubled from 1 in 12 to 1 in 6 people (Chapparo et al. 2012).

Food insecurity is not unique to the state of California, but what is unique to California is the low participation rate in federal food insecurity relief programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). SNAP, which was formerly titled Food Stamps, is called CalFresh in California. Food stamps have been an essential part of the social safety net in the U.S. since their implementation during

¹ Food Insecurity: The USDA defines food insecurity as “a household-level economic and social

the “anti-hunger” movement of the 1970’s, and participation in the program has surged since the beginning of the Great Recession (DeParle and Gebenoff 2009). The number of participants in CalFresh has increased by approximately one million individuals since the beginning of the economic downturn (CFPA, 2013). Although 4.2 million people are currently enrolled in the program, an additional estimated 4 million are eligible, but do not receive benefits because they are not enrolled (Shimada 2013).

In fact, California is the lowest ranking state in terms of participation, (Shimada 2013). California’s low participation rates are alarming, and reveal the need to further investigate why such a high proportion of eligible households do not enroll in CalFresh. Interestingly enough, the areas of California with the highest density of food insecurity are also the most productive agricultural regions (Chapparo et al.2012, see Appendix I figure 1: Map of food insecurity in CA). California counties are ranked using a Program Access Index (PAI) that measures eligible individuals and households against the number that are enrolled and participating (see Appendix 1 figure 2: Calculating Participation Versus Eligibility), ranking the 58 counties from highest participation rate to lowest. In the Central Valley, the performance of counties varies greatly. For example, Sacramento County performs well in this measure, ranking number 4, whereas neighboring Yolo County currently holds the 56th position with around a 50% participation rate. Yolo County consistently ranks very low in terms of participation (CFPA 2011), despite being a county with a university world-renowned for its agricultural and food programs as well as the headquarters for several major agriculture industry corporations.

It is unacceptable that a state known for its agricultural production has high rates of food insecurity in its growing regions. It is also surprising that California has very low rates of CalFresh participation. It is difficult to pinpoint why California is always at the bottom (#50) of the state participation rankings despite its progressive reputation and abundance of food. This food production versus food security paradox was the initial inspiration for my research project, which later developed into a deeper examination of federal food insecurity relief programs.

My research project takes an ethnographic approach, examining the work of the department of social services and community-based organizations such as food banks through the lens and experiences of their clients in need of assistance. The research will examine the application process as well as the client experience in maintaining enrollment in the CalFresh program. By documenting the client perspective and experience I hope to gain insight into what specific parts of enrollment and the program challenge clients. I will use my ethnographic account of client experiences to evaluate outreach and examine the efficacy and utility of community-based advocates. By examining the work advocates do in aiding clients with the application process I can begin to understand what appropriate models for outreach and client support look like. In addition to exploring outreach, evaluation, participation and food insecurity, through my ethnographic research I hope to create a local narrative of the application process and attitudes towards CalFresh. This narrative can provide insight into what current barriers exist to participation in food subsidy programs, while aiding in the re-framing of enrollment and outreach efforts.

There are many hypotheses regarding reasons for non-participation and low application volume. Negative attitudes towards welfare due to social stigma or a perceived lack of eligibility are commonly hypothesized deterrents. Much of the literature on SNAP participation focuses on the post-welfare reform years of the 90's and the subsequent debate about the success of the reduced caseloads and "welfare to work" strategies. The majority of this literature does not focus on participation in terms of access and attitude, but primarily emphasize the effects of welfare reform, therefore I used only a small selection of this body of literature (Allen 1999, Blank 1996 et al., Daponte 1999 et al. and Pruitt 2007) in the development of my project. Although the post-welfare reform policies and attitudes have likely contributed to reduced accessibility and participation, my research and reading incorporates a broader literature base. I focused on research pertaining to barriers to participation in SNAP and efforts to connect low-income households and individuals to fresh and healthy produce through outreach, incentives, and subsidy programs. I chose to also focus on literature such as case studies that evaluate EBT farmers' markets (farmers' markets that accept SNAP benefits) and the feasibility of connecting low-income households to farmer's markets because they are useful in evaluating outreach to food insecure households. There were very few studies and articles that use qualitative methods rather than quantitative to examine accessibility and participation (Algert and Colasanti), but the case studies and EBT farmer's market articles often used ethnographic methods similar to my research approach rather than the quantitative approach used in most of the post-welfare reform literature.

Literature Review

The literature exploring the subject reveals several underlying causes of non-participation that can be divided into two main categories: attitudinal and structural. Attitudinal barriers refer to socio-political attitudes as well as individual level perceptions and decisions, such as fear or feelings of stigmatization. Structural barriers refer to not only the particular structural barriers that limit participation, but also geographic and spatial reasons. In addition to exploring these two causes of non-participation, this literature review analyzes the case studies and ethnographic research regarding the outreach aimed at connecting low-income consumers with fresh and healthy foods, which may be useful in evaluating and designing outreach programming. My study uses this literature as a foundation for exploring possible barriers to access, but will expand into a more local and focused study.

Socio-political attitudes towards welfare

Even though “securing adequate food is one of the oldest problems confronting political institutions,” food assistance programs resembling the current model in the US only date back to the 1960’s and 1970’s (Allen 1999). In the 1960’s and 1970’s a growing hunger lobby pressured the government. This brought media² and social attention to the issue of hunger in America, eventually inspiring the 1970’s legislation that granted qualified individuals and households free food

² A 1968 television documentary revealing the dire and widespread issue of malnutrition and starvation galvanized members of congress and the American public to act on the issue. This increased awareness is one of the causes of Nixon’s expansion of the food stamp program. (Katz 1996).

stamps (DeVault 1984³). In the 1970's approximately 70% of the population were in favor of government supporting those in need (Macleod et al., 1999). Eventually, the political rhetoric shifted, especially during the Reagan and Clinton administrations, and public support for the program lessened as welfare programs became subject to criticism, particularly those that are characterized as "entitlement programs," rather than safety nets. Current negative attitudes towards welfare programs and SNAP can be tied to this shift in social and political support for welfare programs (Macleod et al. 1999).

The current criticism and general negative attitude towards welfare programs are shared by many recipients of SNAP and deter individuals from using the program. This deterrent is particularly pronounced in the literature focusing on rural areas. Dolan et al. (2012) found "rural residents have been found to attach a very real stigma to being poor and relying on any type of welfare benefit, (p. 3) " and found repeated perceptions of laziness, bad character, low morals and living off of taxpayer's money when they interviewed rural women (2012). A study of rural residents in Minnesota communities revealed "negative social norms were pervasive...members believed that poor people were not welcome, and if they were already there then they should keep quiet and accept their lot in life" (Smith and Morton 2009 p. 181). However, Dolan (2012) also found that recipients of welfare maintained negative attitudes towards others who receive benefits. Dolan describes the coping mechanism employed by those who receive and criticize welfare as

³ The program underwent several iterations before becoming the program we know today. Initially, food stamps were purchased below cost by low-income families and used to purchase groceries. The program eventually evolved from a discount program into an entitlement program with its establishment in 1974.

redployment of attention. Women “stated that they were different from other mothers who were reliant on welfare...These mothers did not see themselves as taking advantage of the system,” like the typical welfare recipient they describe, but instead “saw themselves, and their friends, as getting the help they needed to sustain their families” (p 10. 2012). The stigma against rural welfare recipients is so great that impoverished women felt the need to justify themselves and make exception for their own needs and behaviors. In addition to redeploing attention, many of the interviewed welfare clients reported feeling stigmatized and judged by caseworkers, their community and store staff. Rural communities often lack anonymity, which contributes to feelings of embarrassment and shame when individuals use their benefits (Pruitt 2007). Many of the rural mothers reported driving to another town to do their grocery shopping and protect their identities (Dolan 2012) when paying with food stamps.

Colasanti et al. (2010) conducted an ethnographic research project in Michigan that documented barriers to farmer’s market patronage, and focused on the perspective of the low-income consumer. It is important to note that all study participants were participating in a farmers’ market coupon incentive program, thus it was apparent to the farmers and vendors that these customers were low-income and receiving food subsidies by virtue of their payment with the coupons. The consumers reported experiences that echo the barriers SNAP participants report in accessing food subsidy programs and emergency food services. Many shoppers felt discriminated against in a mixed market setting due to their low-income status or usage of coupons. Sometimes this discrimination was more subtle, other times it

was direct such as when Latina women “were asked to purchase items that their kids had touched,” (2010 p. 331) these women revealed white parents were not made to purchase produce their children touched. The women in this group reported being disrespected by the vendors and found the vendors and farmers unfriendly. They also reported a language barrier that made interactions more challenging (2010). This study exemplifies the type of attitudinal barriers that affect consumers’ abilities to participate in farmer’s markets and other low-income targeting healthy food access projects. This study also reported other challenges listed by coupon users such as shopping with children, language barriers, limited market hours, inaccessible location and perceived non-acceptance of EBT. These are some of the same challenges low-income households face in the SNAP application process that often dissuade people from applying. Discrimination at the vendor point is just one of the many challenges participants face when using SNAP and similar to the negative experiences clients had with caseworkers that were documented in other studies.

A California study, conducted by Gee et. al, (2007) examined how emergency food service recipients⁴ characterized their experiences and how their encounters with discrimination affected their well-being. Interviewees reported frequent experiences of discrimination based on their welfare eligibility, these experiences often led individuals to avoid these situations and not seek services, which is

⁴ Applicants whose bills exceed their income the month they apply, have no income, have less than 100\$ or are a destitute seasonal/migrant farm worker receive expedited service and are guaranteed to have their applications processed in 1-3 business days

counter to their self-interest as it further distances them from achieving food security. One parent described the experience as dehumanizing:

it's just these welfare people, you know, are so high and mighty, you know, they make you feel like you're there begging them, for the food stamps, and so you'd rather...go hungry than to go begging for it (2007, p. 13).

The participants' experiences with discrimination were so frequent that "participants identified specific institutions," such as the department of social services, "among the sources of unfair treatment" (2007, p. 14). The authors then conclude, "these findings suggest that discrimination is not merely an abstraction 'out there' but may be rooted in public and private institutions" (2007, p. 14). The institutionalized discrimination that mirrors public rhetoric against low-income individuals and families manifests as a structural barrier and deterrent for those who are eligible for food relief programs, such as SNAP. Many individuals who are eligible do not apply for services. The lack of application and participation is not only limited to the chronically poor, but also includes the working poor, elderly and students. Other studies, such as the research conducted by Blank and Ruggles (1999), indicate that a significant portion of households that are eligible, even for short durations during times of economic duress, do not apply for services (1999). Negative stigma and politicization of welfare has a direct link to participation. This is key to understanding some of the non-infrastructure related barriers; by being aware of the attitudinal barriers held by those who engage with the program as well as pervasive public attitudes towards SNAP, we can create more effective discourse and outreach programs as well as more effective surveys and research questions. This area of the literature was particularly useful in developing a sensitive approach

in my research protocol, particularly around questions of client perception of the SNAP program.

Perceptions and misconceptions about eligibility

In addition to citing negative stigma of receiving food stamps as a primary reason for not applying for the program, another common explanation was “perceived ineligibility” or “confusion”. Various studies revealed that misinformation and confusion are the greatest underlying causes for lack of participation among eligible groups (Daponte et al. 1999). Upon closer examination and analysis of data, researchers repeatedly found no correlation between perceived ineligibility and actual household eligibility (Daponte et al. 1999). This perception of eligibility and non-eligibility is the second significant component of attitudinal barriers. Some of these misconceptions about eligibility for SNAP aid can be connected to public attitudes towards welfare.

The increased portrayal of welfare recipients as unemployed, lazy and moochers (Dolan et al. 2012) that became more commonplace in the 1980’s may give those who are eligible for benefits the idea that because they are employed they do not qualify for aid. Unfortunately, this is one of the greatest SNAP myths. In fact, there is a minimum work requirement of 20 hours per week for all non-exempt and able-bodied persons to receive SNAP. Because the process of applying for SNAP is complicated and frequently changes, many applicants or eligible households are simply unaware of possible deductions and exemptions (such as medical expenses), thus leading them to conclude they are ineligible and discouraging them from applying. Many of the working poor believe they do not qualify because they are

employed or make too much money (Daponte et al. 1999). One Pennsylvania study found that households that would qualify for fewer benefits, or small amounts of financial assistance, were less likely to participate (1999). These households may not be aware that they still qualify for some benefits despite a higher income that is still below the federal poverty level. These households may also qualify due to deductions and exemptions that may not be aware of. This perception of ineligibility correlates directly to another theme in the literature on reasons for participation and non-participation: perception of unavailability of services.

Geographic and Societal barriers: *Perceived unavailability of services*

Geographic and social factors have a strong influence on perceptions of availability of SNAP services that affect individual and household level decisions regarding participation in SNAP. An individual's or household's ability to use SNAP benefits is entirely dependent upon the number of SNAP and EBT accepting vendors they can access. This spatial, or environmental, barrier is frequently cited as the main barrier to food access and EBT effectiveness in studies of both rural and urban areas. Low-income households and individuals often live in areas where there is limited food access. Rose and Rogers (2004) used a nationally representative sample of SNAP recipients to examine the specific issue of locality in their study of the relationship between food-store access, EBT retailers and fruit and vegetable consumption. They found that SNAP participants who lived greater than five miles from their main grocery store consumed significantly less fruit than those living within a mile (2004). One limitation of their study is that they did not define what they meant by principal grocery store and if there was a measurement of grocery

store quality or ranking. Yet, the most striking findings in this study highlight the importance of accessibility; 25% of their representative sample had no access to any grocery stores (2004). A geographic information systems mapping project in California found that 41% of food pantry users did not live within walking distance to any stores carrying a variety of fresh produce; food pantry clients often share similar demographics to those who are eligible for SNAP (Algert et al. 2006). This project provides county specific data regarding larger trends of spatial and geographic barriers to access in the U.S. A study across 21 cities found that urban areas with higher proportions of people receiving public assistance had fewer grocery stores and fewer food choices than middle-income neighborhoods (Algert et al. 2006). Fewer grocery stores and markets indicates that the likelihood of consumers being able to use SNAP benefits, particularly those with limited transportation, is low. Lack of access, transportation and retailers that carry a variety of products—in addition to accepting SNAP and EBT benefits—all serve as infrastructure-related barriers to participation in CalFresh.

The division between rural and urban is highlighted in this category of barriers to participation. Smith and Morton (2009) point out that “residence in a rural community, first and foremost, shaped the food system infrastructure and therefore limited access to food resources,” and participants in focus groups revealed the greatest challenge for food security had to do with access and availability of food (Smith and Morton 2009). Mader and Busse contend, “rural communities are disproportionately affected by unhealthy food environments,” due to the fact that “food deserts are highly concentrated and prevalent in rural areas of

the United States...” (2011). Rural America is often forgotten in the food desert discussion, in part because many Americans associate rural areas with farming (Pruitt 2007). This is problematic because “rural farm families who have historically grown their own food or purchased staples from local grocery stores are now increasingly reliant on alternative food sources including fast-food outlets, liquor stores, and gas stations” (Mader and Busse 2011). While Mader and Busse’s research focuses on the public health impacts of food deserts in rural areas, their research reveals the prevalence of a lack of access which in turn affects rural residents ability to use SNAP benefits and the subsequent willingness to utilize these types of programs. The problem of limited food access and places where one can use SNAP benefits in rural areas is compounded by the fact that rural residents believe they receive less food assistance benefits than their urban counterparts (Smith and Morton 2009). This misconception is particularly damaging, as rural residents are less motivated to apply for food assistance programs due to reduced access to a variety of affordable food choices (Smith and Morton 2009).

Similar to their rural counterparts, many of the barriers created by misconceptions about the application process and benefits are also found in urban areas. Additionally, there are other structural barriers that are unique to urban households. In urban areas, these barriers can be more clearly characterized by the structural label as they are related to levels of economic hardship and marginalization. A study conducted in Los Angeles evaluating barriers to fresh produce access found that homelessness and lack of competency in English prevented individuals from participating in the food stamp program (Algert et

al.2006). Even though individuals may perceive themselves as eligible, a lack of physical address, lack of telephone and illiteracy all prevent the completion of the application process and subsequent receiving of benefits. California has a high proportion of homeless individuals and households as well as ESL speakers or non-English speaking migrants. Without assistance or support in the application process, these individuals are left to suffer from food insecurity or make use of charitable programs such as food banks (Algert et al. 2006).

Limitations in the literature

Although the literature provides many examples of studies that examine barriers to access within the EBT program and evaluate efforts to target low-income consumers through EBT accepting markets and outreach, these studies are still limited. While there is a great deal of analysis of perceptions and attitudes towards welfare, recipients' feelings, and barriers to access at farmers' markets, there often is no overlap in the examination of these three issues. This issue of lack of context is frequently found in the studies and literature regarding EBT usage at farmers' markets and low-income markets. Only two of the studies (Colasanti et al. and Gilbert et al.) I read mentioned racism and discrimination as factors or examined questions of access in a historical context. These two articles also did not make mention of any issues regarding access to the EBT program as a possible barrier for EBT use at markets.

Additionally, the studies were extremely limited in scope; many of the studies focused on particular regions or markets with unique population

demographics. It cannot be assumed that Philadelphia or New York study would have the same results if replicated in a California city or a rural town. Not only are these studies place and demographic specific, but also many of them are dated. A large portion of the literature was published or based on research conducted in the 1990's, the era of welfare reform, a time that produced significant changes in the structure of welfare and subsidy programs such as SNAP. These studies do not take into account the effects of the global recession, which expanded the diversity and needs of SNAP applicants and recipients significantly. Only one of the articles I used mentioned the recession as a possible causality in reduced farmers' market sales.

Lessons and Recommendations from the Literature

Overall, the literature I surveyed revealed that attitudinal barriers and infrastructure related barriers are the greatest obstacles to overcome in increasing SNAP participation. SNAP eligible interviewees frequently report the perceptions of unavailability of services as well as perceptions of discrimination. The issue of discrimination manifests in the majority of literature regarding reasons for not participating in SNAP in both urban and rural studies. Location and transportation played a significant role in deterring individuals from using SNAP services. Literature and case studies surrounding low-income market access revealed the reasons behind non-participation despite eligibility are the same issues that preclude low-income consumers from participating in markets designed to benefit them, despite outreach and efforts. Many of these programs are not designed practically to include low-income consumers, nor do they enable them to overcome

the barriers living in a food insecure household creates. These weaknesses are useful in examining outreach efforts by social service departments aimed at increasing participation in SNAP. In order to address the case of California's low participation rates further studies ought to be conducted that are specific to California and situate the barriers in a geographic as well as political context, primarily focusing on the details and narrative of the situation situated within the framework of Yolo County. When the barriers are understood on a local level then local-level solutions can be implemented.

Statement of Focus

The literature reveals a variety of studies have been conducted throughout the US to examine the eligibility versus participation SNAP benefits phenomenon. The aforementioned studies focused primarily on reasons for non-participation based on the amount households were eligible to receive, income, housing knowledge of application and many of the studies cited the perception of a negative stigma of receiving foods stamps as a prime reason for not applying. The most frequently cited reasons for not applying was "perceived ineligibility" or "confusion" regarding the application process. Misinformation and confusion are the greatest underlying causes for lack of participation among eligible groups (Daponte et al.1999). It is important to note that studies found no correlation between perceived ineligibility and actual household eligibility (Berner and Obrien 2004). The existing studies examine highly urban areas such as Los Angeles with very different demographics than Yolo or Sacramento County, often taking a very broad approach, without looking at the issue in the context of the local food system. My research

examines the issue of participation and accessibility in Yolo and Sacramento counties specifically while analyzing the potential role of local community-based organizations in CalFresh outreach programs.

During a preliminary interview, employees who administer CalFresh benefits at the Departments of Human Services in Yolo County shared that despite these studies and instances, they are still unsure as to why many eligible individuals and households in the county do not participate.⁵ They referenced similar counties such as Fresno and Sacramento with high participation rates that utilize the same outreach techniques and methodology. They are left to “guess” why individuals and households are not participating based loosely on these types of studies and public perception. In Yolo county the “working poor⁶” and senior citizens are the two main demographics that are extremely underserved. The county administration would like to increase participation and reach these two populations, but do not fully understand why people do not participate.

My research focuses on this question of non-participation as well as examines the application process itself. My overarching research question is: what are the barriers to participation in CalFresh? In an attempt to narrow my focus I am also focusing on the following questions: What types of barriers are there? Can these barriers be characterized by the same language I used to describe the barriers found in the literature such as attitudinal and structural? To what extent do these barriers

⁵Interview Department of Social Services 2013

⁶ The term “working poor” was used during two out of three Yolo County interviews to describe low-income households and individuals who are employed. These may be people working part time, low wage jobs, temp jobs or seasonally.

prevent or discourage participation? What types of challenges exist for those currently enrolled? How do applicants and participants perceive the program and process? Is there something unique to Yolo County that can be attributed to low participation and applications? Does the application process itself present or mirror barriers to participation in social programs? If so, what is specifically problematic and how can this be addressed? What are the essential elements of a successful CalFresh outreach or advocacy program? In examining these questions I aim to see if the same barriers that I found in the literature are consistent with what I found in the community upon completion of my research.

Methodology: Setting

My research took place at multiple settings. The majority of my research took place at a community-based Organization (CBO) in Sacramento County. I worked with a local food bank, which has dedicated staff members for their CalFresh Outreach Program. The food bank is located downtown and is near the Department of Social Services, where I also observed. I have conducted some interviews and briefly observed at the Departments of Human and Social Services in Yolo County as well as spoke with staff at a Yolo county-based NGO. In total, I visited three departments of social and human services across the two counties.

County Offices

Within the offices I conducted observations in the lobbies and waiting areas where clients wait between stages of the application process, such as before interviews or before receiving their EBT cards. These offices serve as the main entry

point for any resident seeking social or welfare services. These offices manage applicants and clients participating in programs such as Calworks, foster care, child welfare, CalFresh, MediCal and employment services. As a result, there are many different types of staff and people entering and exiting the buildings. Many of the people who enter through the doors may not be seeking CalFresh assistance. However, some facilities are composed of multiple buildings that are organized by service type, so many of the people entering the area I observed were CalFresh applicants or clients.

The Sacramento Department of Social Services is a very busy space with different buildings for different services within a fenced in block or gated “compound.” The main building is where clients and applicants submit paperwork, get their EBT cards, get benefits such as General Assistance and undergo their interviews and meetings with caseworkers. Within the compound is another building where clients create PIN numbers and activate their EBT cards, get their county mail if they do not have a mailbox and can make phone calls. The main building is very busy, has television monitors and various numbered and lettered windows everywhere. The setup is similar to a department of motor vehicles, with clients being called by last name over a loudspeaker and given directions via television monitors while people wait either seated or standing. There are also separate rooms for fingerprinting and taking pictures of clients. The police have a station where they observe and there are always three to four officers on site, monitoring the building and activity. This building is overwhelmingly loud and crowded. It is also confusing to navigate as the signs are not prominently displayed

and clients are expected to check in on computers behind the information desk. Each time I have been inside it has been very warm, crowded and stressful. Fortunately, interviews and meetings with caseworkers are conducted in private rooms that are much quieter.

Local CBO

The food bank is a small building located on the corner of a downtown intersection. It has a gated parking lot and waiting area in front, a small lobby, cubicles in the back and then a distribution area with commercial refrigerators behind that. The entire building is one open space with cubicles, desks and signs used to divide spaces. As a result, when it is busy it is also very loud. Clients seem to come in bursts, making the environment alternate between loud and bustling then quiet and empty. I work exclusively with the CalFresh outreach staff and enter through the volunteer side entrance to skip the lobby's crowd. There is a separate waiting area for those waiting for CalFresh assistance near the end of the food distribution line. The first few times I visited the food bank I found it as overwhelming as the Department of Social Services. It is very loud, warm and smells like a doctor's office mixed with the inside of a communal refrigerator. It is busy with volunteers and clients; because they are frequently stolen from out front, a bicycle usually occupies any extra space in the back. There are shelves and stacked boxes of food everywhere in the back. The small lobby, which can usually accommodate the crowd surges, has signs advertising a variety of services and social programs aimed at low-income and vulnerable populations. Most of my

research and work took place in the CalFresh waiting area as well as the outreach staff cubicles. These cubicles offer more privacy, but no sound barrier, and are located near the beginning of the food line near the bread racks. As a result, all of my recorded interviews feature a substantive amount of background noise.

Methodology: *Positionality*

I originally thought I would find my research project more uncomfortable and intrusive than it turned out to be. Initially, I was most comfortable talking to state employees and found the DSS waiting areas to be the most uncomfortable for me personally. After several months of research I still found the DSS offices, especially the one in Sacramento to be uncomfortable and unsettling. Loud and busy spaces are often overwhelming; it is uncomfortable to spend time in such a crowded place, that is very loud, while under the surveillance of the police there, let alone take any notes. Even the small, but busy food bank presented a personal challenge for me. I also felt very invasive and was nervous about conducting observations in the waiting areas. I frequently wrestled with issues surrounding invasiveness. Another moral question that I struggled with frequently was: to what degree can I ethically use the community as the basis for my research? Particularly when I am an outsider in a community or county such as Yolo and will ultimately benefit upon completion of the project when I receive my degree⁷. In addition to being fair during

⁷ I originally wrote a PAR research proposal and wanted to hire community members to do most of my research to avoid situating myself in the typical researcher role. However, the timeline of a Master's degree, as well as the fact that I did not receive enough funding to commit to such a project, was not conducive to this type of study. Instead, I compromised by offering interviewees gift cards to local grocery stores. However, this created further issues and dilemmas. I had to develop an additional protocol around the distribution of these resources so that I got unbiased information.

the process, I wanted to be sure that my research is useful and beneficial to the community. Therefore, it is essential that my research be helpful and useable for the offices that administer CalFresh, which is why I chose to complete an ethnographic research project as opposed to a quantitative one.

Another area where I struggled was the concept of the “working poor” and the questions surrounding migrant farm workers or those whose citizenship status deters them from using services. My research and data would have benefited from using migrant worker housing centers and service centers as resources for finding interview participants. Despite coming from a background and family of farmers and having a personal understanding of how much the agriculture industry impacts families and individuals, I am still extremely uncomfortable with the idea of visiting these sites. My family owns a large farm and therefore I did not grow up in the type of vulnerable farmworker situation many of the people I could interview live in. My Spanish is limited and I am very much an outsider in these communities. My status as a privileged white woman in academia limits my ability to interact with these marginalized communities and laborers in a neutral way. Academics are privileged and bound by power structures that often cause researchers to neglect to question both their position and their own assumptions (Villenas p 713). In order to avoid this I must constantly check my assumptions, conclusions and research queries, using reflexivity and a critical lens to evaluate my own bias, privilege and power

Interview participants were not informed in advance that they would be receiving a gift card. Upon completion of the research project the food bank helped me re-connect with clients and distribute the gift cards.

while still using my own personal experience as a former CalFresh client to connect and build rapport with interviewees.⁸

My experience as a former CalFresh client impacted my ability to be neutral or unbiased researcher greatly. I was on CalFresh for approximately 10 months before starting graduate school. I worked at a CSA and was not paid well. I found the process of applying for and maintaining my enrollment in CalFresh to be very challenging and confusing. There were times, such as when I visited the Sacramento DSS, that the experience was somewhat traumatizing. I encountered very few caseworkers who were helpful and often had trouble resolving my issues over the phone. I also did not get my paperwork from the county in a timely fashion. Notices would arrive that needed to be signed and returned after their due date. While these experiences have helped me connect with interviewees and food bank clients, they have also biased my perception of CalFresh and the local department of social services. Some of my interview protocol questions and original inquiries about service experience were grounded in my own negative experience.

Methodology: *Data Collection*

I began my research by visiting the local social service offices in Yolo and Sacramento County and conducting preliminary interviews with staff. These unstructured interviews with state employees lasted approximately 30 minutes each and I took notes (which I later expanded) during the interviews and recorded

⁸ However, I have found clients, especially those at the food bank, willing to speak openly about their experiences and share their stories. They often appreciate having someone listen and ask questions about their individual experience.

the sessions. The interviews all took place during operational hours at the county offices during weekdays with different level departmental staff. These staff were mostly supervisors, and I was unable to speak with any case managers because they were busy. In addition to the interviews I took notes on the office settings and waiting areas when I visited. My goal was to supplement my interview with setting notes, similar to the field journal mentioned by Carspekin in *Stage One: Building a Primary Record* (1996). Once I returned to do my intensive observations, I took more detailed notes to create a “thick description” (1996). My original data was less thick and also contained “impressions gathered during info observation periods and conversations” (Carspekin 1996, p. 45). During some of my interviews as well as follow up correspondence with staff I have been able to gather more information about outreach and perceived barriers that I incorporated into my research as well as accessed more detailed data. These email exchanges, have proved very useful in gathering information and following up on my research.

In order to develop a community-based narrative and ethnographic account of the CalFresh experience from the applicant and client end I used a mixed method approach at the food bank, utilizing participant observation as my main research method. I began collecting data at the food bank January 31st and visited the site twice a week and continued collecting data through May. I utilized the following approaches:

- i. A follow up phone survey with clients who enrolled or applied for CalFresh in 2013 through the phone bank

- ii. Pre-screening in the lobby to find out if food bank clients may be eligible for and wish to apply for CalFresh
- iii. Shadowing the CalFresh outreach staff as they assist clients with applications or work with them to resolve case issues
- iv. Helping clients apply for CalFresh and answering their general questions about CalFresh
- v. Interviewing willing or interested clients about their experience and perceptions towards CalFresh individually

I: The Survey

The CalFresh outreach manager initially positioned the phone survey project to me as a way to follow up with the clients as well as help me answer some of my own research questions. The food bank used to have staff follow up with clients post-application and gathered a lot of the information I was seeking, but unfortunately did not have the resources to do so regularly. The aim of the survey was to determine if clients are still enrolled or if their applications were approved, as well as determine why they are not enrolled if they are no longer in the program. In addition to finding out if they are not enrolled and the duration of their enrollment I asked clients about their application experience, both at the food bank and at the county office. Through this survey I was able to hear about client experiences with CalFresh after they leave the food bank. I used a script (see Figure 1 Appendix II: Food Bank Phone Survey Script) I developed with the CalFresh outreach staff that I used when calling. The survey was very structured and lasted

approximately 5 to 10 minutes. After introducing myself as an intern over the phone and asking if they would be able to answer some questions I documented the client's responses on a form on my laptop. I called only from the food bank's phones and did not attach client names to the survey. These responses were aggregated in a secure file that I shared with the CalFresh staff upon completion of my research. I conducted 22 complete surveys. However, if there were particular clients having problems or wishing to re-apply I noted their name, phone number and issue and referred the case to the staff for follow-up. I also asked clients if they still return to the food bank and would be interested in participating in a more in depth interview.

II: *Pre-screening*

The CalFresh outreach staff as well as myself conduct pre-screening⁹ in the lobby. Pre-screening entails finding out if clients are eligible for CalFresh, emergency CalFresh, and if they are interested in applying. Asking individuals and showing them the income thresholds for eligibility (see Appendix I Figure 3: Income Threshold Tables For Determining Eligibility) as well as asking them questions such as the source of their income, if they are homeless and if their current bills are greater than their income this month helped us determine if they were likely to be eligible for CalFresh. This fast question and answer session also provided an opportunity to hear about perceptions towards CalFresh and eligibility. I did not take notes during the pre-screening and noted responses or trends when I wrote memos or wrote my expanded field notes for the day on my computer at home.

⁹ Pre-screening entails asking clients if they are currently enrolled in CalFresh, are familiar with the program and would like to apply. CalFresh outreach staff also ask questions regarding household status, income levels, disability etc. to help determine if they should apply.

Often, these notes were not accompanied by any personal or situational details unless they turned into a shadowing session.

III: *Shadowing*

I gathered the majority of my data through participant observation when shadowing the CalFresh outreach assistant as clients received assistance with applications and case issues. We asked if clients were comfortable with me observing them and told them about my project, alerting them to the fact that I will be taking notes. Once clients gave verbal consent I observed the staff as they help clients. When clients came with case problems I recorded how long the session lasted, for example if the time on the phone with the department of social services lasted 30 minutes, and what the issue was regarding. I also noted the resolution or lack thereof, documenting any questions clients asked, how they described the issue in their own words and any information they gave regarding their experience or personal perceptions. When clients applied for CalFresh I wrote down general background information that is unique such as homelessness, age, employment status and any unusual circumstances such as a disability. I also wrote down questions they asked, concerns they had and how the staff addressed these. I spent at least 2 to 3 hours shadowing per week, and often observed between two and five client interactions. I shadowed the CalFresh assistant at the food bank and outreach events 12 times during my research project. Occasionally, I followed outreach staff to the Department of Social Services to support clients or submit paperwork. During my observation sessions I took notes in a dedicated field notes journal that I also

used when conducting interviews. In the interest of being unobtrusive and personable I did not use my laptop for note taking purposes while I shadowed. I later typed up these field notes and expanded them, noting areas where I may have questions or ideas to follow up on, modeling on the method by Carspecken et al. (Carspecken, 1996; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973).

IV: Assisting with Applications

When clients who had taken home applications to fill out turned them back in I went over the application with them and got additional paperwork such as copies of their IDs and paystubs or leases. I also helped clients fill out applications as the workers would (usually with supervision or assistance). This entails going through the application page-by-page and question-by-question with the client. While this process gave me no time to take notes on individual clients, it did allow me to learn the application and the process. If a particular case was interesting or reflected the themes I was examining I included it in my expanded field notes, but generally used this time as a learning experience to be reflected upon in later memos.

V: Individual Interviews:

I found that the best time to negotiate an interview was when a client was getting help with a case from the outreach worker. I interviewed only those who were already enrolled in the program, not those applying for the first time. My interviews usually lasted between 10 and 25 minutes and took place at the food bank. Some interviews took place right after appointments with CalFresh outreach

staff and others were scheduled at other times. Sometimes, staff would refer a particularly interesting client's case to me as a possible interview candidate and I would contact these individuals I often followed up with some of the same questions asked in the survey, but generally asked clients to expand and describe their experiences with CalFresh more. In these interviews I documented their experience in great detail, noting how many times they had problems, what the problems were and what they did to resolve them. I also asked them to characterize their feelings about CalFresh in general and find out how they learned about it. I recorded these interviews (with the client's permission) and took notes. Later, I transcribed these interviews and expanded my notes while listening to the audio. I also made notes about possible follow up questions. Some clients were very approachable and when we built a rapport I ask them if they would mind being followed up with at a later time or consider participating in further interviews.

Methodology: *Data Analysis*

Although my note taking took a mixed method approach I streamlined and unified once I turned the field notes into expanded documents with personal notes, questions, and expanded descriptions. Once I finished transferring and expanding these notes I began coding them. I based my strategy loosely on Schatzman, Leonard and Strauss's article *Strategies for Recording* (1973). Schatzman et al. recommend indicating which notes are observational, theoretical and methodological when coding (1973 p. 73). However, I adapted these instructions and began color-coding my notes (as well as indexing them) with several categories (see Appendix II Figure

2: Field Note Samples). These categories are: physical space/spatial observations, personal reflection and reflexive, barriers/possible response to my research questions, and provider resources. I developed a subset of categories within the broader categories. For example, under barriers I have categories such as: mail, ID cards, paperwork, renewal, language barrier, confusion etc. I also inserted comments and possible further questions to ask in future interviews into these notes. Descriptive notes and setting descriptions are written in italics throughout the documents. I also indexed my notes manually, noting which interviews and days my codes appeared in my notes.

Findings

I chose the departments of social services in addition to the community-based organizations I used for several reasons. Due to my interest in the barriers to participation and the application process it made sense to conduct some of my research at these locations. I also wanted to engage with both ends of the process, not just the client experience. The employees who manage caseloads and process applications were my initial targets as I thought they would have a lot of their own insights and be able to generalize these observations in interviews that might reveal useful data. I did not plan on collaborating with management, but this happened through luck and unplanned circumstances. A faculty member at UC Davis encouraged me to attend a regional food access meeting, where I met a CalFresh supervisor and the county executive, both of whom expressed interest in my research and encouraged me to contact the offices. The CalFresh supervisor

eventually connected me with a Division Manager, who happened to be spearheading a new outreach initiative. My research was timely as it coincided with this initiative. They were receptive as my research may contribute to their own mission and if it proves useful, could facilitate outreach that would increase their enrollment and subsequently their funding in the coming years. However, I was primarily interested in exploring and documenting the client experience to see if my preliminary research and literature review mirrored the client experience and perspective.

Early Findings: Preliminary and Background Research in Yolo County

During my interviews with several managers at the Yolo County Departments of Employment and Social Services I learned more about the application process and got up to date numbers and statistics for Yolo County participation. Twenty-five percent of applicants in Yolo County are rejected for a variety of reasons¹⁰. According to the managers these reasons include, but are not limited to: applicants are in fact ineligible, failure to complete the application, improper documentation and “pending verification¹¹.”¹² In Yolo County approximately 17,000 individuals are enrolled in CalFresh. This represents less than half of the population (an estimated 35,000) who are eligible for CalFresh.

The word *churn* was used to describe people who enroll, but do not fulfill the requirements to maintain benefits and are subsequently removed from the

¹⁰ Division Manager Interview 11.8.13, Yolo Department of Social Services, Field Notes

¹¹ Pending Verification refers to when the office is waiting for documentation or verification of information such as employment status or other confirmations required to process paperwork

¹² Manager Interviews 11.8.13 Yolo Department of Social Services, Field Notes

program, and who then re-apply. *Churn* is highly problematic not only because it represents interruption in services on the client end, but also because it wastes resources when staff members re-process this individual. In addition to deepening my understanding of the application process and terminology and gathering statistics not available online, I was able to learn more about the low participation rate. In attempting to identify possible causes I created three categories for organizing my findings during my preliminary and background research process at the county offices and local CBOs: Outreach, Resources and Hypotheses.

Outreach

Outreach refers to reasons for non-participation attributable to low enrollment due to a lack of marketing or awareness. Most of the preliminary interview content and questions I posed focused on the theme of outreach. I initially framed my research question and project explanation during interviews as a study with a focus on the application process itself. However, I was informed during my first interview with the ETS Division Manager, in November of 2013, that the application isn't the main problem.

The Division Manager also indicated that the program does very little outreach, and that they are planning on launching a new outreach initiative soon that will involve partnering with local CBOs and is modeled on a successful food bank outreach program in Sacramento. The staff caseworkers have heavy caseloads that prevent them from doing more outreach. The Division Manager also stated that when they send staff out into the community they don't usually get a lot of

applicants, so their time is better spent in house. Contrasting this, another manager indicated having staff do outreach was useful and increased enrollment¹³. In regard to outreach, the Division Manager acknowledged that they do not reach the working poor, and would like to find out how to reach them effectively. The outreach manager characterized the greatest outreach problem as “getting people to apply and follow through with the application”. In April of 2013 during an interview with the assistant director at a Yolo Department of Social and Employment Services, I learned that Yolo County replicates the outreach activities of other successful counties such as Fresno, but without the same success¹⁴. Many counties have similar protocol and outreach design, but they do not have time or staff in the office to inquire and explore in detail what other counties do that might be useful locally. Lack of outreach and a lack of access to documented best practices is a one possible attributable factor to the lack of participation and low volume of applications in Yolo County. However, the county is aware of this and plans to move forward with new plans to address the issue.

Resources

In addition to my outreach-related findings, my notes revealed repeated discussion of resources. The resource discussion can be characterized by time and financial constraints that affect the application and outreach process. The majority of these resource-related constraints are due to financial limitations of the DSS. The Division Manager pointed out that even though they are not reaching more than half

¹³ Interviews 11.8.13 West Sacramento Department of Social Services, Field Notes

¹⁴ Interview, April 2013, Field Notes Woodland Department of Social and Human Services

of the eligible population, the workers are already overloaded with cases. This caseload burden prevents staff from doing more outreach effectively. In order to remedy this Yolo County DSS is launching a new initiative where staff members from local CBOs are trained to help clients and applicants with their paperwork. The organizations will be paid for each application that is submitted to the department.

Stakeholder Hypotheses

I have a number of hypotheses regarding reasons for low participation rates in Yolo County, but was interested in exploring what theories some of the county and local CBO staff had. The county staff I interviewed shared several theories they developed from their observations at work that are grounded in their encounters with applicants. I discussed the possibility that the migrant farm worker population might be affecting participation rates with Department of Social Service managers in November, 2013. The Division Manager said that in general, people often think they are ineligible, but this is particularly complicated when someone isn't a permanent resident or a citizen. He stated that he believes misconceptions about eligibility relating to citizenship and employment status deter individuals from applying. There are a number of common myths that need to be dispelled, such as, if you use CalFresh you can be denied citizen status later or deported if you are undocumented. These misconceptions deter people from applying as individuals or on behalf of their dependents—even when their children are qualifying US citizens.

In addition to county offices I visited a Yolo County-based NGO that worked with food insecure families and spoke with several staff about their own

experiences working with CalFresh clients. I spoke with two Community Research Specialists about their own experiences helping clients with CalFresh. This organization serves several hundred low-income families by providing food and other services such as CalFresh application assistance. When I shared with them my experience at the Department of Social Services as well as some of the staffs' hypotheses about what deterred applicants, they agreed that misconceptions and citizenship played a role¹⁵. However, one of the resource specialists disagreed with the hypothesis that outreach, negative feelings towards CalFresh or lack of awareness are the main issues, stating, "outreach is not the issue...families can get over the idea of being on assistance. It's the application process,¹⁶" that is the primary barrier. Clients "get discouraged throughout the application process¹⁷," and report "feeling questioned¹⁸" due to the comprehensive paperwork they must submit when applying. While both county staff and local CBO staff acknowledge there are a variety of barriers clients must overcome when applying, they disagree on the degree to which the application process itself presents as a deterrent.

Researcher Observations

Despite the District Manager's assertion that the greatest challenge is "getting people to apply and follow through," based on my research I believe the application process itself is a barrier eligible individuals must overcome. While the process has been streamlined, during my tour with a supervisor, who walked me

¹⁵ Staff Interviews, Yolo CBO 2.6.14 Field Notes

¹⁶ Staff Interview, Yolo CBO 2.6.14 Field Notes

¹⁷ Staff Interview, Yolo CBO 2.6.14 Field Notes

¹⁸ Staff Interview, Yolo CBO 2.6.14 Field Notes

through the various steps of enrolling, and showed me the paperwork, it became apparent that this is a complex process. There are extensive forms to fill out (at least 4 pages, but more in some counties) and applicants must provide sufficient documentation including pay stubs, lease agreements, utility bills etc. to prove they qualify. Applicants can come to the office in person or apply online¹⁹, mail an application, and then come in for an interview or complete the process with a phone interview. Even though the entire process may only take an hour and half²⁰, a drastic reduction when compared to previous years according to the manager, this is still a significant amount of time and the office is only open during workday hours. The process is actually simpler and faster if you are homeless because there is less paperwork required.

In addition to the multi-step and paperwork intensive process applicants who apply in person must navigate the physical space. After visiting the offices I developed some additional theories based on my observations of the office spaces themselves. In one Yolo county office the DSS was small and there was someone available at the front desk to direct me to the appropriate office. However, in another local DSS there was no clear information desk and I ended up wandering into a different department and having an employee look up the manager's extension so she could come get me for our meeting. There is some signage in both offices indicating generally where you should go for what services, but the labels are not helpful if you cannot read or do not read English. There is no documentation or

¹⁹ I did not examine or evaluate the online application process or any related outreach targeting potential online applicants. I was informed by the food bank that it is very difficult for them to provide support for applicants once they have applied.

²⁰ Manager Interview 11.8.13 in Yolo County

visual presentation of the application process available in the waiting area for applicants, they find out the next steps of the process from employees during the individual stages of the application process²¹. Overall, the application process is never visually presented to applicants, nor is there much information available to help those who might be visually impaired, illiterate or who speak and read a language other than English or Spanish. The application forms themselves are available in many other languages, but a person must successfully navigate to the back area of the office where interviews are conducted in order to get this paperwork. Interpreters and special caseworkers are available for those who do not speak English or who may be visually or hearing impaired, but these staff must be requested in advance by indicating on the application paperwork initially.

Ethnographic Findings

Community-Based Research: Client experiences and challenges as barriers to access

I divided my findings from the food bank into two main categories: *Spatial and Personal Encounters* and *Experiences with Access*. Spatial and personal encounters are composed of clients' impressions and experiences of the department of social services in Sacramento and the phone support hotline at the office that constitute a barrier or deterrent to access and participation in CalFresh. The second category, *experiences with access*, details the accessibility issues that arise due to inconsistencies with caseworkers and bureaucratic barriers such as paperwork related problems, identification cards and appointment scheduling.

²¹ Expanded Field Notes from 11.8.13 and 4.19.13 visits to Department of Social Services and Employment offices in Yolo County

Spatial and Personal Encounters: Inside the compound and on the phones

“The likelihood of me being helped is not good.”

Inside the compound: experiences inside the Department of Social Services in Sacramento

During each survey and interview I asked clients to describe their experience either applying for CalFresh or visiting the Department of Social Services for their interviews or to resolve issues with their case. No client has ever described the experience of going into the building as a pleasant or easy one; in fact, most clients would prefer not to go there. When I asked David, a client who was at the food bank in order to get help re-applying for CalFresh to describe his experience going there the first time he tried to apply on his own this is the story he told me:

“It was just like a line, it was astounding how long and how slow the line was moving. Then it was just like so many people and it was crowded, just the time it took for things to get accomplished—it took forever. You know I’m patient, but I was like I can’t stand—it came to a point where my name didn’t get called and I was supposed to come back. I was like no, I don’t have time, it’s not in my schedule to be able to come back. I was actually walking and I came to this place and it said food something-something and then I saw the CalFresh sign and I was like alright lets check this out. I came in here and knocked it out in like half and hour and was like never again will I ever go over there. What was the point?²²

David went on to say that he was surprised by his experience, “It’s an environment where you just don’t like imagine that being like that when you go there and then its like damn ok.²³” David’s experience of slow chaos, and the possibility of having to return, drove him to leave and decide not to return. He was fortunate to get help at the food bank on his way home; without the outreach advocates he may have never finished the application process or would have waited much longer before trying

²² David *food bank* Interview 3.7.14

²³ David *food bank* Interview 3.7.14

again. Other clients I interviewed shared similar stories of being unable to get benefits when they went to the department of social services such as Daniel, who spent three days trying to navigate the DSS before getting his application processed. According to Daniel his problems began, “when I got there...people were walking all around and seemed kind of confused about what to do.²⁴” He initially didn’t use the kiosk to check in, which set up a chain of events that created problems during each subsequent step of the process. He believes the DSS staff were unable to help him due to problems ²⁵with the application process itself. This slows the client experience tremendously and creates problems because,

“When I talk to a representative my assumption is they know where I’m at, but each area is clueless to the other areas. They have no way of knowing where you are at in the process. I think that’s my biggest complaint. You (the caseworkers and staff) should be able to see where someone’s at so you can re-direct them...so they don’t get a letter in the mail saying they got cancelled because you didn’t do something²⁶.”

Daniel and David’s experiences were not anomalies, and DSS staff and security guards even told them that this happens to clients sometimes.²⁷ Thus, it is not surprising that many clients characterize their DSS experiences as confusing and problematic. Some of the food bank clients cannot go into the building at all, they have either been banned for acting out, or have stress induced reactions.

One particular client like this is Thomas. Thomas cannot go inside the building because he has stress-induced seizures and trying to solve issues with his

²⁴ Daniel, *food bank*, Interview Transcript and Field Notes 4.28.14

²⁵ There is one dedicated caseworker for home visits at the Sacramento DSS. This caseworker goes to the homes of the elderly and disabled clients who cannot go to the DSS. The food bank staff were able to arrange for this caseworker to do occasional visits to the food bank to meet with clients.

²⁶ Daniel, *food bank*, Interview Transcript and Field Notes 4.28.14

²⁷ Daniel, *food bank*, Interview Transcript and Field Notes 4.28.14

case or meeting with caseworkers in the building can cause him to have a seizure. When he applied for CalFresh, the CalFresh outreach assistant was able to arrange for a DSS CalFresh caseworker to come to the food bank and complete his interview and intake²⁸. Thomas is homeless and has no income, and thus little access to medical care; he is a particularly vulnerable individual who cannot easily access the services designed to help him. One particular day Thomas had to go the DSS so we went with him and even sat in with him while he met with a worker. As he is homeless Thomas has to bring all of his possessions with him wherever he goes, which can make maneuvering in a public space like the DSS very challenging. It was raining when I helped him stow his bike and some of his bags in the lockers outside the building; as I watched him struggle with his damp lock it occurred to me that a combination or small padlock is probably an essential item for a typical homeless person. Thomas's struggle with his belongings is similar to the challenge any other homeless person coming in for support or an appointment would face, or a single parent traveling with children to the DSS²⁹. Later, after helping Thomas, the CalFresh outreach assistant and I were discussing his case and I ask her about him not being able to go the DSS. She told me that it is common and they have many clients who are banned or cannot go³⁰ for a variety of reasons relating to disability or mental health.

²⁸ Participant Observation *food bank* 2.28.14

²⁹ This is similar to the challenges low-income women families reported in Colasanti et al.'s Michigan study documenting the experiences of low-income shoppers with coupons at farmers' markets that is detailed in the literature review on page 8.

³⁰ Field Notes, *food bank*, 2.28.14

However, despite the unpleasant experience some clients have, some clients prefer in-person appointments and using the physical office instead of mailing documents or using the phone support. A young woman I interviewed, Martina, told me that she prefers to go to the DSS because it is “easier” to get your problem fixed if you go in. To her, the application process was the hardest part and the best way to resolve issues with her case was to go to the building and talk to a caseworker. However, she “dislikes that it is an all day affair,³¹” and takes a long time, but unlike some clients, she is ready and emotionally prepared for this type of experience each time she goes. Martina’s case is particularly interesting as it reflects the issues clients frequently must address when applying or reporting their income. The following excerpt is from my field notes on February 28th:

“She did tell me that the hardest part is the application process and that many employees at the DHS show an “unwillingness to help.” Her application was denied the first time and she has submitted paperwork that has gone missing on several occasions. When I inquired further she said that she was supposed to be contacted by a worker and get a follow up packet in the mail and she got neither. Calling the phone line is harder and often less successful than going in person she told me. When I asked her how many time she had to go in to address a problem with her account she told me 6 or 7 times, usually related to missing paperwork, that she had submitted. She also said she had been in the program 2 years. *This means that 3 or 4 times per year she must address or resolve some problem with her account, I wonder if this coincided with the quarterly reporting schedule.* I ask her if the new 6 month reporting is easier and she says it is.”

Martina’s case brings up several important issues that many clients face such as missing paperwork and inconsistent experiences with caseworkers that will be discussed further in the following sections.

³¹ Interview and Participant Observation *food bank* Martina, 2.28.14

One the phones: the automated help line

“I wait in line and I wait in line,
people wouldn’t get off the phones because they were afraid to get off
even though they weren’t getting service”

In order to reduce wait time and make the application and filing processes more efficient the county has shifted focus and the client experience to an IVR (interactive voice response) system. Clients now can complete their interviews via telephone and can call and navigate the automated menu to find out information about their account and benefits status. They also must use this menu to get ahold of a caseworker. This menu is often difficult for clients to use successfully. David prefers to come to the food bank because, “I’ve called the county before, but its like you don’t get through as fast as her (*referring to CalFresh outreach assistant*) for some reason. I don’t understand that. My wait is always like ten minutes or so and here its like wow!³²”

Daniel had a similar experience when trying to use the phones³³ for support at the Department of Social Services rather than wait in line. He initially tried to use the phones in the building, but the line was very long and ““when they get ahold of someone on the phones in there they keep getting put on hold, it sounds like they weren’t getting service.³⁴” Another client, Jessica, wanted to make a change to her case and report a change in number of persons in her household, but was unable to successfully use the phone line, “I just kept calling and calling and I left messages

³² David *food bank* Interview 3.7.14

³³ There is a row of phones available for clients to use at the Department of Social Services. These phones are free to use and are intended for low-income individuals without phone access. Clients can use these phones to re-schedule appointments and speak with workers about their cases. There is often a line of clients waiting to use the phones.

³⁴ Daniel, *food bank*, Interview Transcript and Field Notes 4.28.14

and no one calls me back. I'm supposed to them know within ten days of any changes, but if I can't get ahold of them how can I?³⁵" This case highlights the challenges of navigating the phone menu as well as the paperwork misplacement issues many clients experience. The CalFresh outreach assistant called on behalf of Jessica and once she got a caseworker on the phone was informed that she was not an authorized representative, "The CalFresh outreach assistant is clearly used to hearing this—she tells the caseworker which document he needs to open on the computer to verify that she can inquire and speak on behalf of Jessica... *I am impressed that the CalFresh outreach assistant knows where they misfile her paperwork in the computer system and can talk CalFresh workers through their own software over the phone.*³⁶" If the CalFresh outreach assistant did not spend the majority of her time advocating for her clients and their cases over the phone she would not have figured out where they consistently misfile her authorization forms. The average client does not possess the ability to tell a worker where their misplaced forms may have been filed and is likely to hang up the phone without having their issue resolved or having to resubmit paperwork before their case progresses.

Although the phones are designed to help clients who do not want to come into the DSS or who have mobility issues, clients like Martina and Bill prefer not to use them, either because of previous experiences on the phone or because the phone is not appealing. Bill is an older man who was recently laid off from a

³⁵ Jessica *food bank* Participant Observation 2.28.14

³⁶ Jessica *food bank* Participant Observation 2.28.14

janitorial position. He has health problems, walks slowly and limps, he tells me this is why he is “having a hard time finding a new job.³⁷” Bill took an application home from the food bank and returned to have us file it and finish completing it, when I ask him if he would prefer a telephone interview or a face-to-face appointment he replies, “Face-to-face is easier. I get frustrated on the telephone.” Frustration is a common experience found throughout my research and interview notes. Frustration and confusion are two of the most common clients expressed to me in interviews and during their appointments with the outreach workers at the food bank. Often, their frustration and confusion was not only due to their experiences navigating the phone system and DSS, but also due to their experiences with caseworkers.

Experiences with Access: Experiences with caseworkers, discrimination and inconsistency

“She sounded busy, like she was doing other things,
she wasn’t tuned in at all. She was asking questions and forgetting things,
and she even said, “oh it doesn’t matter, you don’t need this, you don’t need that”
and she seemed really nonchalant..”

Martina characterized some caseworkers as unwilling to help during her interview and she is not alone in this experience. Another client, named Gina, called everyday to ask the CalFresh outreach staff about her case when she had problems with her case. The CalFresh outreach assistant recommended I travel to Folsom to interview this client because her case was particularly interesting³⁸. Gina was receiving \$297 per month until February, when her benefits decreased to \$47, and

³⁷ Bill *food bank* Participant Observation 3.7.14

³⁸ *food bank* Participant Observation 3.14.14

then again to \$45 in March. She did not know why her benefits decreased and was struggling to feed her family. She is a single and working mother with a teenaged son who also works. This family fits the description of “the working poor” that the Yolo County staff encouraged me to find. However, Gina revealed that the county staff were not helpful on the phone, and that she believes they were discriminating against her. I looked at Gina’s forms and noted that her language is Farsi, I told the outreach worker that she is probably of middle-eastern descent if she speaks Farsi, and maybe from Israel, but more likely countries like Iran or Afghanistan. She believes she was being discriminated against because of her heritage and that the county staff were intentionally unhelpful. She called everyday because she is desperate for help and her cupboards were almost empty. Although we cannot be certain that she was being discriminated against because of her ethnicity, it is important to note that this feeling of being discriminated against is not an uncommon one among clients.

Gee et. al, (2007) found in their study four out of five focus groups’ respondents reported feeling discriminated against by providers of social services. These feelings were often associated with feelings of depression and worthlessness. Many respondents also reported that their treatment discouraged them from going back to these providers. Participants reported feeling blatantly discriminated against while others reported incidences of more subtle micro-aggressions. Gee at al found, “food insecurity is associated with reports of discrimination. Being acutely deprived of basic necessities (i.e. food) may force individuals into situations where they may be more likely to encounter discrimination. Although all individuals in our

study were in need of emergency food supplies, those who had greater needs reported more discrimination” (2007 p. 13). I also found incidences of clients feeling discriminated against or treated negatively by caseworkers for a variety of reasons while completing my research. During his interview Daniel shared the experience his fiancée had when she applied for CalFresh at the Rancho Cordova office. She characterized her experience as very negative and Daniel was very upset by what transpired during her CalFresh interview. During the interview the worker found out that she had a child, but wasn’t married and was not receiving formal child support payments, even though they shared parental responsibilities. The worker then became very “aggressive and pushy³⁹” with her, insisting she file for child support and fill out additional paperwork before she could complete her CalFresh application. This upset Daniel because he felt as though the worker was treating her poorly because of her “situation,” which wasn’t relevant to the application and CalFresh eligibility determination. Even though they are not married yet he supports their daughter and contributes to the costs of raising the child. However, because he was not making traditional child support payments he felt as though the worker was implying he wasn’t a supportive father. The worker only needs to know about a client’s income, number of children and expenses such as a mortgage to process the application. His fiancée felt judged and manipulated, as though the worker was withholding services to pressure her to file for child support. Unfortunately, this was not the only incident I witnessed when DSS caseworkers

³⁹ Daniel interview, *food bank*, Field Notes 4.28.14

attempted to delay processing CalFresh paperwork in order to get clients to agree to other services.

Another similar incident was with Jane, a homeless high school student. The outreach worker spent a great deal of time helping over the phone during the course of several days I shadowed at the food bank. Normally, someone under the age of 18 would apply through their parents, but when youth are homeless they are eligible for their own household accounts. Jane had runaway from home and her school counselor helped with her account and her took her to her appointments at the DSS. Jane made four trips to the DSS and was still unable to get her benefits. The worker at the office would not permit the school counselor to sit in the interview room with Jane and informed Jane that she would have to sign an affidavit citing child abuse so that CPS could get involved in order to process her paperwork. Jane did not want to get involved with CPS and reported that the worker “was aggressive⁴⁰” in trying to push her to sign the affidavit. The counselor called the food bank to get assistance with the case and the staff connected her with a lawyer who specializes in these types of cases because withholding benefits from eligible clients is illegal. These situations illustrate the types of challenges and negative experiences clients may encounter when dealing with caseworkers at the DSS. These types of negative interactions are not limited to in-person experiences; many clients reported negative experiences and feeling as though they were not getting fair service when they used the phone support system.

⁴⁰ Participant Observation, *food bank*, Field Notes 4.11.14

I observed that the food bank's CalFresh outreach staff were much more successful than clients are in getting issues resolved when speaking with DSS caseworkers over the phone. The CalFresh outreach staff know the policies and regulations surrounding the program. While clients were sometimes confused, or slow to respond to caseworker questions, the food bank staff speak authoritatively with CalFresh caseworkers and know when to be persistent and tell them that they are wrong. This knowledge helps in navigating what can often be difficult and inconsistent situations. Also, the fact that the calls come from the food bank, which has a contract and relationship with the county, commands the attention of the workers. The outreach worker has a level of authority and power that the average individual client does not, and can leverage this in order to advocate for clients, who often feel helpless or less effective than the food bank staff. Clients were aware of the difference in treatment the workers gave the outreach assistants and therefore would utilize the workers when they had questions or problems instead. Clients made statements such as, "they more listen to social worker—not me⁴¹" and "I think maybe they make a mistake, but then when I get third letter and I'm here getting food I say I will talk to (the CalFresh outreach staff)⁴²" during their appointments. This power dynamic is important to note as utilizing services such as CalFresh can further marginalize individuals by making them feel incapable.

Additionally, I have observed many instances of inconsistency while shadowing the outreach assistant during phone calls made on behalf of clients. I

⁴¹ Participant Observation, *food bank*, Field Notes 2.21.14

⁴² Participant Observation, *food bank*, Field Notes 3.7.14

witnessed DSS caseworkers hanging up on the assistant, something that clients reported happening to them when they are taking too long or agitating the CalFresh caseworker. On occasion, when we get a worker was not being helpful the outreach assistant tried calling again to speak to someone else and sometimes this was successful. Some workers are more lenient than others and more helpful. An example of this took place while the CalFresh outreach assistant worked with a client named Judy. Judy is a regular at the food bank and has been working with the CalFresh outreach assistant for years with her CalFresh case. Judy had not checked her mail recently and it was returned to the county, therefore they suspended her account and her benefits. When Judy came in the CalFresh outreach assistant called the DSS and was able to speak to a very helpful caseworker. Judy verified her information over the phone and informed her that she just hadn't checked her mail. The worker restored Judy's benefits for the entire month, rather than pro-rating them from the 14th onward. The CalFresh outreach assistant told Judy that she is very lucky that we got that particular worker because they often won't restore your entire month's benefits⁴³. Judy was ecstatic to have her benefits restored, and thanked the CalFresh outreach assistant, telling her that she is always able to fix her problems, adding "you are famous in McKinley!" Judy is referring to the homeless community that lives in and around the McKinley neighborhood of Sacramento. A lot of the outreach and advertising for their services comes by word of mouth in the community; the CalFresh outreach assistant is well known throughout many different communities as the person to go find when you have problems with your

⁴³ Field Notes *food bank* Participant Observation 2.14.14

CalFresh case. Experiences with caseworkers vary greatly, and clients feel that they will have a better outcome if someone like the CalFresh outreach assistant is helping them. There is little that clients can do to address or overcome the inconsistencies of dealing with caseworkers, as this is probably due to individual caseworker personalities, their moods, levels and training and work-related constraints. Soss et al. discuss this issue at length in their book, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent power of Race*, stating,

“...the caseworker’s role has changed in recent years. Case managers occupy a role that blends conventional features of the street-level bureaucrat with a more therapeutic role...Case managers get little training and have few tools at their disposal. They use their discretion mainly to ration time and resources, offer small favors, control their caseloads, and make decisions about whom to penalize or “cut some slack.” (2011 p 233).

In addition to dealing with budget cuts and the heavy work and caseload that comes along with this, these “agents of the state” are more than just employees, their work is affected by their own social identities and experience which cannot be controlled for outcome or responses (Soss et al. 2011 p 234) with clients.

Bureaucratic Barriers: Mail, Paperwork, Documentation and Appointments

“I’m overwhelmed,
I didn’t know I need all of this paperwork.”

Many of the clients whose experiences I documented have problems with their accounts because of not receiving or checking their mail. Critical paperwork, for example the letters that clients receive notifying them of their appointment times, frequently arrive late. This happens so commonly that the CalFresh outreach advocates tell each applicant who is eligible for emergency 3-day processing of their application that their appointment letter will arrive after their intake appointment.

These clients rely on the food bank staff to call them and notify them of when their appointments will take place so they don't miss them due to the mail lag. In addition to delayed paperwork, many clients do not have access to consistent mail service.

The county of Sacramento has a special service at the Department of Social Services for the homeless; you can get a "mailbox" in your name that is designated for county mail. This way, people who are homeless can still get all of their important paperwork to keep their cases active and current. However, in order to check this mailbox clients have to go to the DSS during its open hours, which is often a challenge. Judy reported not checking her mail because it was "out of her area." Judy and her husband live more "encampment" style so they have to leave their possessions, pack everything up or travel separately—leaving one of them to stay with their belongings to run errands or move around the city. While David simply admitted to not checking it as often as he ought to, "I just forget. I don't know why. I really need to make more of an effort to remember to do that,⁴⁴" other clients such as Rosa report not receiving their mail at all.

Rosa came to the food bank on March 7th to get help from the CalFresh outreach assistant because she kept getting letters from the county. She had applied in August of 2013 for CalFresh and received a rejection letter denying her benefits due to her citizenship status. Rosa is a permanent resident, which means that she should be eligible. However, she was denied. Later, she received several letters stating that she had not submitted her reporting paperwork and then later received

⁴⁴ Judy *food bank* Participant Observation 2.14.14

a letter stating they were de-activating her account due to inactivity. Upon receiving this she came to the food bank for help. When the CalFresh outreach assistant asked her what happened she said she had ignored previous letters because she had been denied and thought, “maybe they make a mistake, but then when I get third and I’m here getting food I say I will talk to the CalFresh outreach assistant.”⁴⁵ Rosa received a denial letter, never got an EBT card in the mail, but then received letters saying she had not submitted her SAR 7 paperwork and her account was inactive. When the CalFresh outreach assistant called the DSS she was informed that Rosa did have an account and a card with almost 800\$ in unused benefits on it. The county had records of sending her various documents in the mail, but offered no explanation as to why she had gotten a rejection letter. In order to resolve her account Rosa had to fill out several reporting documents, call the EBT card company, report her card stolen and then go to the DSS for a new card and activate it there. This multistep process took almost an hour to complete and the CalFresh outreach assistant spent 40 minutes on the phone with the CalFresh caseworker while trying to find the source of the problem. Rosa is not a native speaker of English and found the system confusing and her irregular mail perplexing. This case highlights the level of confusion and conflicting information clients get from the county and the challenging process of understanding and resolving problems that poses a great barrier to clients solving their case issues without help.

Not understanding the application forms, necessary documentation and official letters that come in the mail is very common. Clients come to the food bank

⁴⁵ Rosa *food bank* Participant Observation

for help, making statements such as, “I got a thing in the mail and I didn’t quite understand it,⁴⁶” or when speaking about blanks they left on their applications, ““I wasn’t sure what to put there.⁴⁷” The application itself is made up of multiple forms. The first is a Federal Form and the second is a County Form. Both forms ask for the same information, but in different ways. Each application only has three to four pages to fill out, but includes at least ten other pages of information. All of the forms and pages use the same small font on white paper. There is no way to easily discern which pages are the most important and which contain information pertaining to CalFresh without reading the entire document. The application packets also include information about other programs that clients may be eligible for such as Medical. Once clients have filled out their application, they receive another packet in the mail. This packet is also large and filled with many documents, none of which require any action by the applicant. The packet includes more information about CalFresh, other social programs, and a blank application for CalFresh. Clients frequently return to the food bank with these packets or try to fill out the forms in them⁴⁸. The onerous and confusing succession of packets is a barrier to participation for many eligible applicants because they are unable to complete it correctly or don’t know how to fill out the forms. In addition to issues relating to the paperwork the county sends applicants and clients there are number of problems related to providing documentation that affect applicants’ ability to enroll in the program quickly and easily.

⁴⁶ Jessica *food bank* Participant Observation 2.28.14

⁴⁷ Bill *food bank* Participant Observation 3.7.14

⁴⁸ Meeting with the CalFresh outreach assistant, food bank 3.4.14

Often, applicants are denied benefits because they didn't provide all the required documentation. During my preliminary research I learned that in Yolo county approximately 25% of applicants are denied due to pending verification, this is troubling because it means if the 18,000 people currently not enrolled in the program were to apply, up to 4,500 people could be rejected despite eligibility. Applicants must possess a photo ID in order to apply; in fact, a photo identification card is essential for participating in any county program, including drug and alcohol rehabilitation. This requirement poses a barrier for a many individuals, particularly those who are homeless or those who live in situations where they are frequently robbed. Fortunately, in Sacramento there are organizations that offer homeless and low-income individuals DMV vouchers so they can get free or low-cost ID cards. Providing documentation such as lease agreement, medical receipts, and paystubs etc. can pose a challenge as well. A number of young women I encountered during my participant observation sessions at the food bank appeared to be recent runaways who had recently arrived in via greyhound. They did not have copies of paperwork, but we were able to classify them as homeless and because they had no income to report were eligible for emergency assistance. However, should these women be asked to procure documentation or additional identification verification they will be unable to do so and may lose their benefits at a later point in time. The CalFresh outreach staff aid clients by making copies of their paperwork and IDs before their appointments, they also give clients lists of the documentation they are need to bring to their appointments. Very few clients bring all of the required paperwork to the initial appointment at the food bank, particularly seniors. Seniors

are unique because they can deduct medical expenses from their income, which raises the amount of benefits they qualify for, but they must fill out an additional form and submit receipts in order to do so. They often have to return to pharmacies to get copies of prescription receipts or call their doctors office to get records of co-pays, all tasks that can be more difficult for seniors who are often less mobile. In addition to providing a lot of paperwork that is not easy for clients to prepare at their appointments, scheduling the interviews can also be difficult for clients.

Appointment scheduling proved extremely problematic for clients, especially those with limited transportation. During my research I witnessed repeated incidents of clients showing up for appointments they could verify with notification letters, but were told at the DSS that they did not have their appointment in the system. When this happens clients frequently call the food bank and try to have the CalFresh outreach staff resolve the issue over the phone⁴⁹. The staff could then double-check their computer and emails from the county scheduling staff to verify the appointment time. The missed appointments and scheduling problems would delay receipt of benefits, which increased their likelihood of being food-insecure, but was particularly problematic for clients who could not afford the transportation to a rescheduled appointment.

This issue of transportation came up repeatedly throughout my research at the food bank. Many of the clients arrived on foot or with their low-fuel lights on in their cars. Some clients, like Thomas, would arrive by bike and leave balancing a box

⁴⁹ Participant Observation, *food bank*, Expanded Field Notes 4.23.14

of food on their handlebars. Clients shared the fact that they “used the last of their money to buy enough gas to get here⁵⁰,” and wouldn’t be able to return to the DSS or the food bank until their next paycheck. Many of the clients who came to the food bank were extremely vulnerable financially, and the end of the month was the busiest time at the food bank. The food bank was extremely crowded, had long lines, full waiting areas and many CalFresh support appointments during my visits at the end of each month. Clients living paycheck to paycheck or on unemployment income struggled to avoid food insecurity towards the end of each month. The lack of financial security contributed directly to their reduced access or difficulty maintaining utilities and phone service.

Access to and maintaining phone service proved to be a serious issue for many clients. When conducting my phone survey I found that many of the phone numbers clients had given the food bank had been disconnected. Clients who did not have phones had to wait for the DSS to notify the food bank of their appointment time and then would find out when their appointment was when they returned to the food bank in-person to inquire. An example of the precarious situations that many clients faced was Jean and her monthly struggle. Jean was a personable senior who talked about her cats and her life during her appointment. She told me, “I don’t mind when my cats waste food at the beginning of the month, but at the end of the month I can’t afford it⁵¹.” She didn’t have a phone and explained to us that she goes to the capitol building to use a payphone when she needs to make a phone call

⁵⁰ Participant Observation, *food bank*, Expanded Field Notes 3.28.14 and 4.23.14

⁵¹ Field Notes *food bank* Participant Observation 2.14.14

because they no longer have pay phones around the city. When the outreach assistant informed her she would have to return to the food bank to find out her appointment time because they had no way to contact her she said, “well I have to go pay my bill on Monday, so they don’t shut off my power. I will be near here and can take the light rail—I can get here easily on Monday.⁵²” Jean’s social security income did not cover her monthly expenses and she had to come to the food bank regularly. As a senior without a phone or transportation she was particularly vulnerable. She also mentioned that on the way to the food bank a man asked her for money and when she explained she didn’t have any he grabbed her arm, but then a person on the street intervened and he left her alone. Jean was one of many clients who struggled to keep their monthly services turned on or connected.

When the outreach assistant asked Judy, another senior, who is homeless, if she and her husband currently have a cell phone she replied, “I don’t know how we still have it, but we do⁵³.” Without transportation or a cell phone clients struggled to maintain their CalFresh accounts or get enrolled in the program. Without a phone clients cannot take calls from the county, call if they have issues, nor re-schedule appointments easily. All of these amount to often-insurmountable obstacles, and reduce the program’s accessibility and ability to combat food insecurity. The application process both highlights and magnifies the vulnerability of these clients.

⁵² Field Notes *food bank* Participant Observation 2.14.14

⁵³ Field Notes *Food Bank* Participant Observation 2.14.14

Conclusion and Recommendations: The role of the community-based advocate in CalFresh outreach

“Sounds like you need an advocate!” -CalFresh Outreach Assistant

“I learned that word when I was in jail—advocate.” -Client

It is clear that there are a multitude of difficulties that serve as barriers to enrollment and continued participation in CalFresh. In fact, an eligible applicant may complete all steps of the application process perfectly, but still never get enrolled in the program due to the multitude of issues and barriers that have been revealed in my research (see Appendix I Figure 4: Diagram of Application Process). Many of these barriers are results of circumstances at the county level, such as the layout and customer experience in a particular Department of Social Services building. However, some of these barriers are the results of federal mandates, such as the exhaustive questionnaire, eligibility guidelines and reporting guidelines. There are also a host of obstacles that are related to living in poverty, such as economic discrimination, transportation difficulties, and not having a cell phone, that make the application process even more challenging to negotiate.

Additionally, every single case I documented in my research was unique. Some clients may share attributes, such as being homeless, but each one has a very unique situation. Despite this variety, each individual is expected to use the same form and complete the same process in order to apply for benefits. Food insecurity is a problem that stems from many factors and there is no standardized approach that can be taken to resolve it, so I am not surprised that many clients report

struggling with the standardized forms and county correspondence. The system is not designed to accommodate the diversity of qualifying individuals.

In the face of these barriers and diverse circumstances, my research clearly shows that having advocates in the community such as the food bank's CalFresh Outreach workers that are used to dealing with the diverse food insecure populations can improve the client experience significantly. These advocates fill a critical gap between food-insecure populations and the administering agencies that can aid them. These advocates can meet the community need for a variety of reasons, the most essential of which is the fact that clients are willing to utilize their services. That clients speak positively about their experience at the food bank shows how important the CalFresh Outreach workers are in filling the gap between need for food and agency help.

I initially set out to examine the barriers of access to CalFresh and determine if the type of discourse and barriers discussed in the literature would accurately reflect what I found in the community during my research. The literature and its major themes mirror many of my findings. Clients encountered a number of barriers related to experiencing discrimination, inconsistency, caseworker treatment, bureaucracy, etc. I expected to encounter some negative attitudes towards the program or at least some internalization of the negative public attitudes and social rhetoric towards welfare, which has been shown in much of the literature. A few clients did express feelings of embarrassment or shame that deterred them from

visiting the DSS⁵⁴. For example, when I asked a client if she has ever tried calling the county for help with her case she responded, “I could have called, they said we got it, but then we got a letter in the mail saying we didn’t, but its embarrassing so we didn’t do anything about it.⁵⁵” Instead of using the DSS case support this client used the food bank’s outreach services, and stated, “I’m just thankful they are there.” Another client revealed during a phone interview that she eventually came to the food bank after a friend told her to set aside her pride and accept help, and when I asked if she got help, she replied, “I have really had a good experience, they helped me, I was desperate of hunger.⁵⁶” In contrast with literature and clients’ negative characterization of caseworkers and service agencies, all of the clients who expressed feeling ashamed also indicated they had positive experiences at the food bank.

Importantly, none of the clients I interviewed, observed or surveyed revealed any negative attitudes towards the CalFresh program itself. Instead they characterized it as a good “way to help people who really need it” that allows them to “eat more healthy food.” Clients frequently drew on their own personal experiences with CalFresh and the food bank’s CalFresh outreach program to extoll its merits. Clients revealed their own struggles, such as running out of food before they got next month’s benefits, or the fact that “for a while I wasn’t eating and it made me sick.” They consistently characterized the food bank outreach staff as helpful, making statements such as, “I think they are doing a great service, I like that

⁵⁴ Participant Observation, *food bank*, Field Notes 3.28.14, 4.2.14, 4.28.14

⁵⁵ Survey, *food bank*, 5.2.14

⁵⁶ Survey, *food bank* 4.4.14

I see a lot of people getting service.” They often expressed their gratitude, “I’m just thankful they are there,” and believed the success they had was a result of working with food bank staff: “probably because I went to the food bank that is why everything was smooth sailing.” The positive response to the CalFresh outreach program reveals that there is potential to increase and improve California’s participation rate, and working with local CBOs to help them administrate applications and do outreach in their own communities is an adaptive response to California’s low participation rates.

In addition to finding a surprising amount of gratitude and positive feedback regarding CalFresh and the food bank’s outreach efforts overall, clients all spoke very highly of the food bank staff. In each phone survey I asked clients about their experience at the food bank and all of the clients reported a positive experience. Many of the clients went beyond this, naming the staff members they worked with and expressing that they were extremely grateful. Many of them asked me to thank the staff and to tell them how much they helped the clients, and that they could not have completed the process without them. Their positive experience in a busy food bank contrasted starkly against clients’ narratives of their DSS experience. Despite both being places where vulnerable individuals could seek assistance, clients clearly felt as though the food bank and its outreach staff were more accessible than the DSS. It is also worth noting that no client’s questions went unanswered at the food bank.

In all of the cases I documented the food bank staff always managed to get some sort of resolution, even if that meant re-enrolling a client or submitting extensive paperwork. Without the food bank CalFresh outreach assistants I doubt that all of the clients would have been successful in addressing their issues or applying because of the multitude of challenges associated with the application. The CalFresh outreach staff also played the role of an advocate for clients as well as intermediary between the clients and the DSS, which is extremely beneficial for the clients who were the most vulnerable.

It is worth noting that the CalFresh outreach program was the result of state funding. Previously, the CalFresh outreach program was funded by the food bank and grants, but the state and DSS partnered with the food bank for one year to pay for this advocacy work. The food bank was compensated for each application and the clients they helped. However, during my last visit to the food bank the staff informed me that this program did not receive funding again and they would have to return to finding their own funding for the work. The CalFresh outreach assistant I worked with might go back to part-time and their outreach capacity would be reduced. This saddened me greatly as I observed through my research that this program proved to be very successful in helping many clients overcome the barriers to participation and offered an alternative path to enrollment in CalFresh.

This program, and its unstable position, reveal the importance of collaboration between state agencies and community-based organizations, and their potential for improved effectiveness of service delivery and retention. It also raises

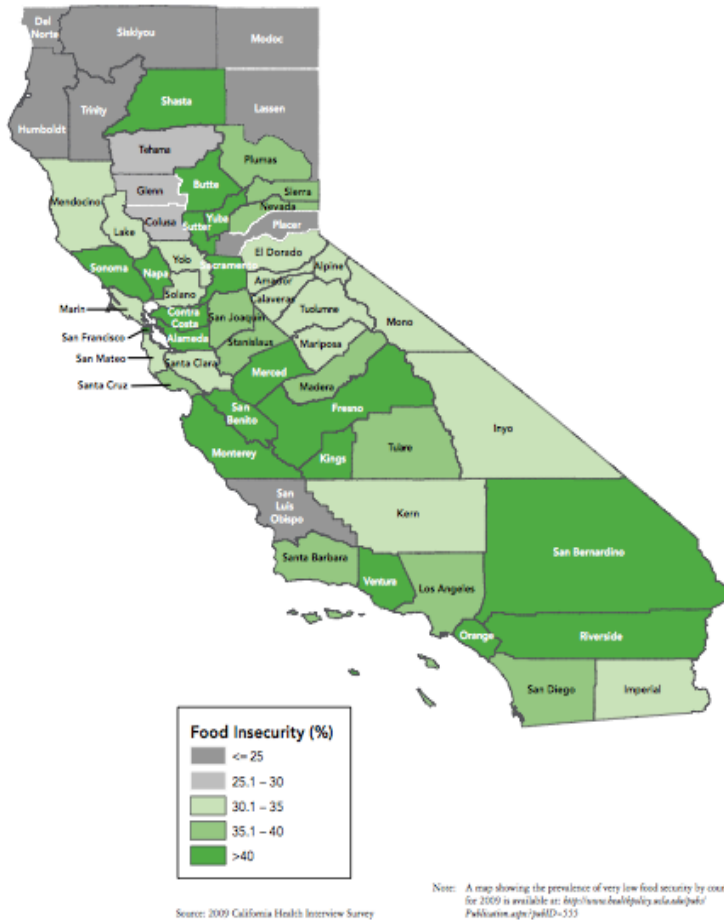
questions about the ability of underfunded, understaffed and/or overloaded agencies to address the individual needs of clients. There are many issues that should be resolved internally, such as scheduling issues and paperwork mix-ups. However, the CalFresh application and enrollment system is not designed to address the needs of the diversity of clients it serves, especially the most vulnerable ones.

After conducting this research, my recommendation is to encourage the types of partnerships I observed between agencies in charge of delivering and administering services and community-based organizations. Although these agencies cannot rely on non-profits and dedicated individuals to compensate for all areas where they should be making their own improvements and performing well, they can make both short- and long-term investments in areas that would significantly improve the client experience and reduce the barriers to participation. I strongly recommend improving and re-evaluating intake office design and flow, appointment scheduling, processing paperwork, and dealing with clients sensitively. Addressing these issues will be helpful, but by themselves they are not enough to substantially improve CalFresh enrollment and participation — partnership with community-based organizations is key. An effective organization has a capacity that is simply beyond the scope of an agency bound by state and federal policies and regulations. An organization that works exclusively and daily with low-income and food insecure populations, and that has a dedicated CalFresh staff member, is empowered to help eligible individuals and capable of working with them to overcome the many barriers throughout the application process. Service agencies must learn to strike a balance between relying on community-based organizations

and improving their own performance while bearing in mind that no two cases are alike, therefore each case and issue needs to be examined fully and treated as such.

Appendix I:

Figure 1: Map of Food Insecurity in CA



source: UCLA Health Policy Revised Food Brief November 2011

<http://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/publications/Documents/PDF/FoodPBrevised7-11-12.pdf>

Figure 2: Calculating Participation Versus Eligibility

$$PAI = \frac{(\text{CalFresh Participants}) - (\text{Disaster CalFresh Program Participants})}{(\text{Individuals with Income} < 125\% \text{ Poverty Threshold}) - (\text{FDPIR Participants}) - (\text{SSI Recipients})}$$

Source: Shimada, Tia. "Lost dollars, Empty Plates: The Impact of Food Stamp Participation on State and Local Economies." *California Food Policy Advocates* (2013).

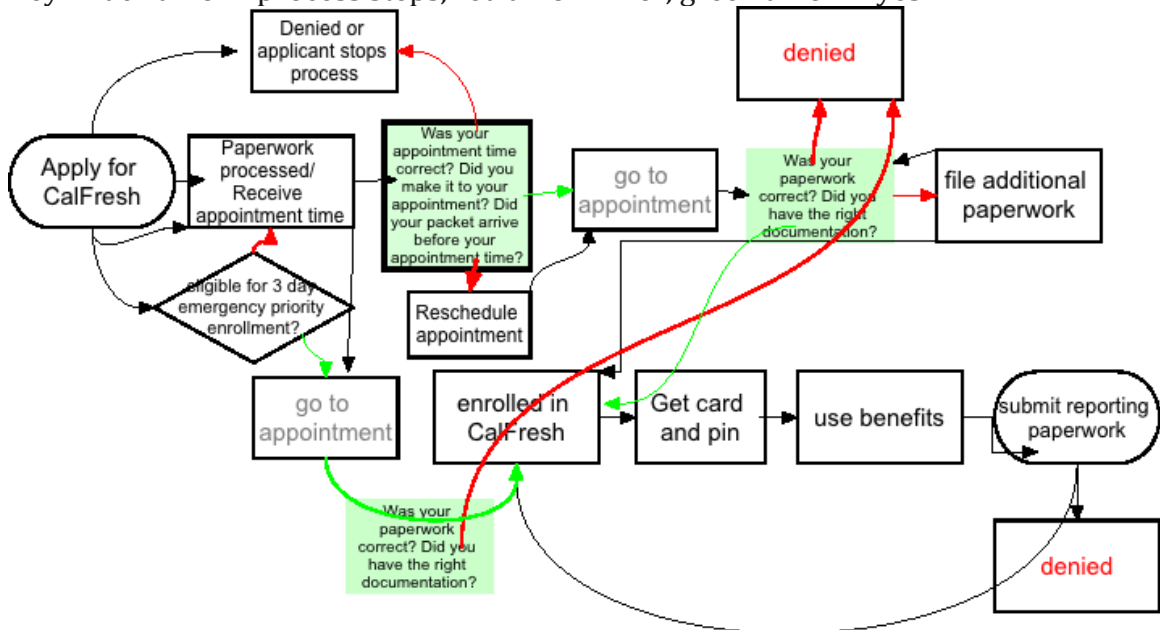
Figure 3: Income Threshold Tables for Determining Eligibility

| Household Size | Gross monthly income (130 percent of poverty) | Net monthly income (100 percent of poverty) |
|------------------------|--|--|
| 1 | \$1,245 | \$ 958 |
| 2 | 1,681 | 1,293 |
| 3 | 2,116 | 1,628 |
| 4 | 2,552 | 1,963 |
| 5 | 2,987 | 2,298 |
| 6 | 3,423 | 2,633 |
| 7 | 3,858 | 2,968 |
| 8 | 4,294 | 3,303 |
| Each additional member | +436 | +335 |

Source: United States Food and Nutrition Service <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/eligibility#Income>

Figure 4: Diagram of application process illustrating some potential places for client loss and reduced retention

Key: Black arrow: process steps, red arrow: "no", green arrow: "yes"



APPENDIX II

Figure 1: Food Bank Phone Survey Script

Hello, my name is Sarah and I am calling from _____ Food Bank. I work with the CalFresh outreach staff and am conducting a follow up survey with clients who have gotten help applying for CalFresh. We would like to know more about your experience with CalFresh. Are you willing to take a few minutes to answer some questions about your CalFresh experience and application process?

1) Are you currently enrolled in SNAP/CalFresh?

Yes:

- How long have you been receiving benefits?
- How long did the application process take?
- Did you have to apply more than once?
- Have you ever had any issues such as not receiving benefits one month?
- Have you returned to the food bank for help or support with your benefits?
 - o If yes, for what issue? What did the staff do to help?
- Have you used the county for help with your case? For example, have you called the county phone number if you had a problem?
 - o If yes, what was that like? If no, why not?
- Is there anything that you dislike about the CalFresh program or think should be changed?
- What do you like about the program?

No:

- When did you stop receiving benefits? How long were you enrolled in the program?
- Do you know why you stopped receiving benefits?
- Have you returned to the food bank for help or support with your benefits?
 - o If yes, for what issue? What did the staff do to help?
- Have you used the county phone number or gone to the office for help with your account?
 - o If yes, what was that like? If no, why not?
- Have you tried to re-apply? If no—why? If yes—what happened?
- Are you interested in getting help re-applying?

Other questions to ask:

- How did you find out about CalFresh?
- How did you find out that the Food Bank provides CalFresh help?

Figure 2: Field Note Samples

Field Notes

11/8/13

Key

Green: physical space/observation notes, italics: my own reflection, yellow: possible barriers? Blue: in-house/provider end resources discussion

Meeting with Nolan Ryan and Julie Conwell at Dept. of Social Services in West Sacramento

Physical location notes:

- office is small, there is not a lot of signage, but there is someone at the front desk right in the office who can direct you (unlike woodland office—where there is no one to ask for help upon entry)
- not very busy, not a lot of people in the waiting room, just a few women and one family
- not very much signage throughout—signs only in English

hg also says they don't have enough time to get detailed info on what other counties are doing and that could be a project for me or an area where I could get more data

Churn: keeping people enrolled, people who fall off and then re-apply
To improve their rates they are trying a new outreach program: modeling the river city food bank outreach
Will be training people who work at various organizations to help people with their applications and paying organizations per application they submit

Before leaving Nolan passed me off to another manager named Julie who is the ESS Program supervisor

Meeting with Julie

-I ask her what she thinks are some of the greatest challenges/causes for low enrollment/25% rejection rate, her response: pending verification (waiting for confirmation of applicants info that they don't always get), homeless population, only income based, failure to provide info

Sarah Camp... 11/21/13 5:20 PM
Comment [1]: Trend I'm noticing upon later reading: lack of resources in house affects prioritization and outreach significantly, issues such as caseload and funding should also be examined (might be useful data)

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