

# Untangling the Lines

## Increasing Access to Food Stamps Through Phone-Based Assistance

### Missing Out on Benefits

- Nearly 2 million people in California, or 50% of those eligible, did not receive food stamp benefits to which they were entitled in 2005.<sup>1</sup>
- As a result, California's economy lost out on \$1.6 billion federal dollars, which would have added \$37 million to the state budget in sales tax revenue.<sup>2</sup>
- Difficult application and recertification requirements prevent many from receiving benefits.

### Telephone-Based Food Stamp Assistance Can Improve Access to Food Stamps

- Telephone-based food stamp services can reduce potential barriers for those who work during food stamp office hours, lack transportation, or lack child care services.
- Phone based services include:
  - Statewide Food Stamp Information Line
  - Call centers staffed by eligibility workers
  - Interactive Voice Response (IVR) systems
  - Over the phone recertifications
  - Complete applications using telephonic signatures

### Recommendations for Improving Phone-Based Food Stamp Access

1. Establish on-demand call centers operated by eligibility staff. Call centers operated by eligibility staff make it possible for clients to check the status of documents, report changes, schedule interviews, complete recertification requirements, complete initial application interviews, and potentially complete initial applications.
2. Develop an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system linked to call centers. IVR systems allow clients to manage their cases and use staff time effectively.
3. Decrease client and staff burden by not requiring documentation beyond that mandated by USDA.
4. Maintain low caseloads to contribute to better customer service.
5. Explore options for completing entire applications over the phone using telephonic signatures.

For the full report, please visit [www.networkforahealthcalifornia.net/outreach](http://www.networkforahealthcalifornia.net/outreach)



**Rachel Winch**

Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow

[rwinch@hungercenter.org](mailto:rwinch@hungercenter.org)

Field Placement: California Department of Public Health



<sup>1</sup> Cunnyngham, Karen et al. USDA FNS. "Reaching Those in Need: State Food Stamp Participation Rates in 2005." October 2007. Accessed on January 29, 2008 at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/FSP/FILES/Participation/Reaching2005.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> California Food Policy Advocates. "Lost Dollars, Empty Plates. The Impact of Food Stamps on State and Local Budgets." Accessed on February 6, 2008 at [www.cfpa.net](http://www.cfpa.net).