

# MyFoodStamps.org: A United Outreach Effort in California



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## Welcome to myfoodstamps.org!

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California Association of Food Banks and the Congressional Hunger Center present [www.myfoodstamps.org](http://www.myfoodstamps.org), a comprehensive resource for Food Stamp outreach workers, food assistance advocates, and potential program clients in California.

The Food Stamp Program is a federal nutrition assistance program, administered through California's counties. Individuals may be eligible to receive program benefits regardless of their work or family status; the average household monthly benefit amount is over \$200. In California, recipients use the Golden State Advantage Card (shown below), which functions much like a debit card.



<< Click Here: To Find Out How to Apply

*Anyu Fang  
Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow  
Congressional Hunger Center  
Washington, DC*

*Field Placement (Sept. 4, 2006 – Feb. 9, 2007):  
Sacramento Hunger Coalition  
California Association of Food Banks  
Sacramento, CA*

This report explains the broader goals of several projects at CAFB that aim to unite the food stamp outreach efforts in California, and was written in collaboration with Anyu Fang's fellowship supervisor and project mentor Jessica Bartholow.

## Introduction

To break down barriers of Food Stamp access, the California Association of Food Banks (CAFB) funds 27 nonprofit partner organizations in their Food Stamp Outreach and Nutrition Education activities. Until now, CAFB has depended on an annual training and teleconferences to share ideas and promising practices. As many state and federal policies are flexible, CAFB wished to empower outreach coordinators to become advocates in helping counties implement client-friendly practices. The idea of the website was conceived in light of the need for a readily accessible resource to highlight such strategies to improve access. As California's Food Stamp Program is administered in differing ways by the 58 counties, it is all the more important to have a unified approach in which outreach workers are in dialogue with each other to improve their collective work.

To that end, [Myfoodstamps.org](http://Myfoodstamps.org) aims to be a comprehensive resource for outreach workers, food assistance advocates, and potential program clients in California. It offers outreach strategies, guidance on eligibility rules, statistics and trends about food insecurity, explanations of the anti-hunger efforts of local organizations and governments, and advice on how individual citizens can help end hunger in California.

The co-authors of the website content are Anyu Fang and Jessica Bartholow, Statewide Food Stamp Outreach and Nutrition Education Program Manager for CAFB. The website is also generously sponsored by the following organizations: California Wellness Foundation; California Nutrition Network for Healthy, Active Living; United States Department of Agriculture; and CAFB's partner organizations.

## Info line

To streamline statewide media advertisements statewide, CAFB participated in the process to create the Food Stamp Information Line (1-877-847-3663 (FOOD)), a statewide line offering callers information about application procedures in each of the 58 counties. This pilot information line is a result of a partnership between the California Department of Social Services, the California Department of Health Services, the California Nutrition Network for Healthy, Active Living, the California Association of Food Banks and their partner organizations, Professional Exchange Corporation, various 2-1-1 organizations and county food stamp offices. The Food Stamp Information Line was launched as a limited pilot in March 2006.

We offer counties the opportunity to update, through MyFoodStamps.org, the information they wish to provide to callers from their counties.

## **Outreach Guide**

Along with sections guiding new food stamp outreach partners in setting up an outreach program and learning other partners' promising practices, the online Outreach Guide features several key components: a regulations guide, explanations of program access issues, and an explanation of the screening tool that CAFB promotes.

### *Regulations*

Along with other guides to California's food stamp regulations, this section presents the Comprehensive Guide to Food Stamp Regulations, created by Legal Services of Northern California and Benchmark Institute. This guide features twice-yearly updates of all changes in food stamp regulations for California, along with a searchable and categorized database of regulations for outreach workers and potential clients alike.

### *Access issues*

To empower outreach workers and potential program clients to advocate for changes in county administration of the FSP, we have identified some key issues that they should be aware of. Some examples are highlighted here.

- Face-to-face interview waiver. The CAFB promotes the use of a Hardship Card (a request for a waiver that is attached to the application itself), easy for applicants to fill out and mail to their county office. This standardizes the procedure for giving applicants flexibility in the application process.
- Language barriers. The Counties can both promote the acceptance of the application in multiple languages and print outreach materials in multiple languages. Although California counties now generally accept applications in languages other than Spanish and English, outreach materials are printed often only in English and Spanish.
- Mail-in procedures. It might help to clarify with counties that applicants do not need to make a visit to the county office if the only purpose of such a visit would be to obtain a finger image. More and more counties are adopting policies that will help families with hardships to apply by mail and complete their interviews over the phone.
- Customer service. There are many facets of customer service that may be improved, from the speed of service to the convenience and appearance of the place of service. All of these impact client experience.
- Reaching more potential applicants. Coordinators might consider working with other outreach coordinators and social workers for other programs, such as: Earned Income Tax Credit; Women and Infant Care (WIC) Program; Summer Food programs; and the Congregate Nutrition Services program.
- Finger Imaging. As a protection against fraud, California State Legislature passed in 1996 a requirement that adult recipients of food stamps must have their finger images scanned as a "condition of issuance": eligible households

must go through the scanning process before obtaining food stamps. Advocates should familiarize themselves with finger imaging policies.

### *Food Stamp Application and Screening Tool (F.A.S.T.)*

We have seen the effectiveness of our partner organizations' efforts: food stamp participation rates increase in counties where our partners' outreach coordinators provide assistance. Despite our contributions, we realize the need to improve our services, as California still has a low participation rate amongst eligible people. Applicants' usual obstacles, such as transportation, continue to affect progress. We seek to improve the success rate of the households we assist by strengthening the case management aspects of our outreach efforts.

With this in mind, CAFB has completed a new set of improvements on F.A.S.T., originally designed by the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank in collaboration with Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties and the Alameda County Community Food Bank. In just 5-7 minutes, a client is screened and a printable California Form DFA-1 Food Stamp application pre-filled with the client's information is generated. The current tool also prints a confidentiality waiver and a Next Steps flyer based on information provided by the county. The Next Steps flyer currently directs the client to the closest Food Stamp office based on the client's ZIP code or offers instructions on applying over the phone; the flyer tailors these details to each county's regulations. F.A.S.T. would also be able to scan supporting documents (I.D., pay stubs, etc.) to be sent with the application. This tool is currently loaded on computers linked to a secured server or on encryption-protected laptops, which allow outreach workers to move between food pantries, soup kitchens, WIC offices, health clinics, supermarkets, schools, outside festivals, and other neighborhood locations. Alameda County Community Food Bank has been using this tool for over a year now, resulting in the submission of 2,300 applications in Alameda County that are complete and accurate.

If implemented in Counties, it will be the first program of its kind: an online application system that simultaneously uses knowledgeable staff in assisting applicants, prescreens applicants for eligibility, sends electronic applications to county offices, and schedules interviews with county offices. A step-by-step Guide for F.A.S.T. is currently available at [MyFoodStamps.org](http://MyFoodStamps.org). As use of the program requires technical knowledge, CAFB will be developing a certification program for persons interested in using FAST.

F.A.S.T. could work in well with counties' plans to move to an electronic application and is ready to generate electronic applications. In order to enable F.A.S.T. to generate these applications, the county welfare director's office need only to create an interface with their computer system and provide the data transmission protocol. With many municipalities across the country developing online applications, the electronic submission of applications is not a new idea. Traditionally, electronic Food Stamp application systems have failed to achieve desired outcomes because they rely on clients to (a) have access to a secure, private computer and (b) fully comprehend a complicated application. California's high cost of living, SSI Cash-out Rule, and large immigrant population increases the possibility that a household, despite poverty, is ineligible. Without a screening component, an efficient electronic application system

may entice many ineligible households into applying; this would create an unfortunate burden for both the applicant and the county office. Using a tool like F.A.S.T. to complement an Electronic Application eliminates these problems while also offering applicants the additional benefit of F.A.S.T.'s case management components, which help the outreach workers and the clients keep in contact.

### **Outreach Essentials and Research/Statistics**

Two more sections of the website feature toolkits, documents, and recommended resources – including explanations of different ways of calculating the food stamp participation rate, reports from US Department of Agriculture, hunger studies by food banks, and bibliographies of academic papers on hunger.

### **Conclusion**

This website will function as a common portal for food stamp outreach organizations to share ideas and promising practices. We hope it to be an evolving website that will provide a comprehensive guide for potential clients statewide and a laboratory of ideas for anti-hunger activists.