

# CalFresh Interview Scheduling: Client Experiences From San Francisco And Marin

A 'Textit.in' Survey With SF-Marin Food Bank CalFresh Clients  
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## Introduction:

The CalFresh interview is a critical step in the overall CalFresh application process. Without the interview, applicants are denied benefits even if they are eligible based on their income and household information. In most counties, these interviews are scheduled by the county administrative staff, and notices are sent to the applicant – by mail or by phone – and the applicant has a choice of whether to complete the interview over the phone or in person at a county office.

Despite the interview being a necessary step in the application process, staff at the SF-Marin Food Bank routinely hear stories of clients missing their scheduled interview. County staff in both San Francisco and Marin have also expressed concern over how frequently clients miss their interviews; Code for America staff has noted that missed interviews are a common reason why applicants don't complete the application process. Given San Francisco and Marin counties' low CalFresh participation rates, improving the CalFresh interview scheduling process could prove to be an effective way of increasing the number of people who complete the application process and thus receive benefits.

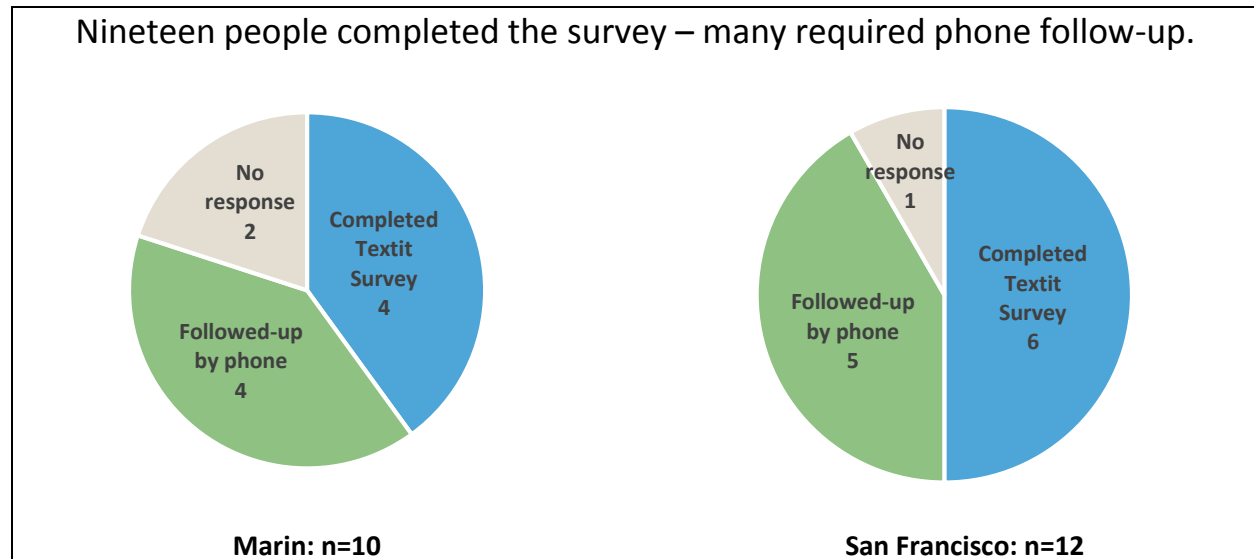
This project is a result of these initial conversations about challenges with CalFresh interview scheduling. Our intent was to gather direct client feedback from applicants that our CalFresh outreach team assists – not to solicit feedback in a way that would enable us to make broad generalizations about the entire CalFresh applicant pool. This project draws on the experiences of just 22 CalFresh applicants in San Francisco and Marin, and admittedly, this project perhaps raises more questions than it answers. However, despite a small sample size this report illuminates specific areas of concern that could be further analyzed in order to find effective solutions.

## Process:

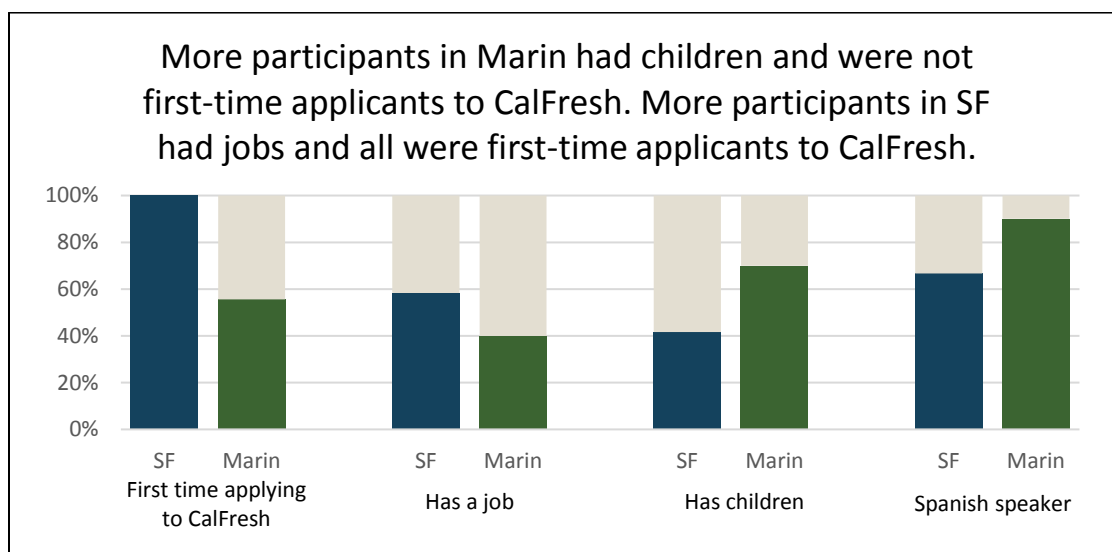
- 1) We developed a text message survey using a free online survey tool called Textit.in.
- 2) We recruited participants via our CalFresh outreach work. During the initial meeting, participants were asked if they would be willing to take a text-based survey, and signed a consent form if they said yes.
- 3) Over a 3-week period, participants were asked questions (over text message) about how their CalFresh interview scheduling process was going.
- 4) If they completed the whole survey, we texted them a \$10 Target gift card.
- 5) If they didn't complete the survey (i.e. stopped responding), our outreach team called them to follow-up on a few key elements of the survey.

## Participants:

Twenty-two people agreed to participate in the survey. Nearly all (19) completed it, but many (9) required phone follow up to do so.<sup>1</sup>



Most participants were Spanish speakers in both counties.<sup>2</sup> There were notable differences between the two counties in terms of whether participants had jobs, whether they had children, and whether it was their first time ever applying for CalFresh.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> All participants were CalFresh applicants that sought assistance from the Food Bank’s CalFresh outreach team.

<sup>2</sup> The survey was also translated into Chinese, but we were not able to recruit any Chinese speakers during this project period.

<sup>3</sup> Although all the participants from San Francisco said that this was their first time ever applying to CalFresh, it is worth noting that typically, only about half of applicants that work with our Food Bank’s CalFresh outreach staff are applying for the first time.

## Results:

### Positive Feedback:

- 1) **Participants all reported that they had excellent experiences working with Food Bank staff.** All participants who were asked “How was your experience working with Food Bank staff?” on a scale of 1-5 gave the highest possible rating of 5.<sup>4</sup>

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*“Fue excelente – el personal muy educado respondio a todas mis preguntas – es mi primera ves que hago esto”*

*“It was excellent – a very educated person answered all my questions – it’s my first time doing this”*

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- 1) **Most participants in SF and Marin thought that the scheduled interview time was convenient, and they did not have to reschedule it.**<sup>5</sup>
  - Of the participants who responded, everyone in Marin thought it was convenient and none had to reschedule it.
  - In San Francisco, only 3 out of the 11 participants who responded thought that the time was inconvenient and had to reschedule it.

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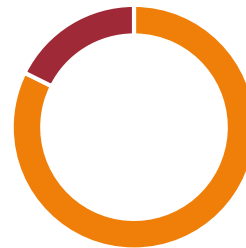
*“Es facil porque todo se hace por telefono”*

*“It’s easy because they do everything over the phone”*

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Most participants thought the interview time was convenient and did not have to reschedule it.

**3 people** answered that they thought the interview time was inconvenient, and they had to reschedule it.



**14 people** answered that they thought the interview time was convenient.

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*“Creo que el servicio es muy bueno y te atienden muy bien. No habia larga lineas de espera.”*

*“I thought the service was very good. I didn’t have to wait in long lines.”*

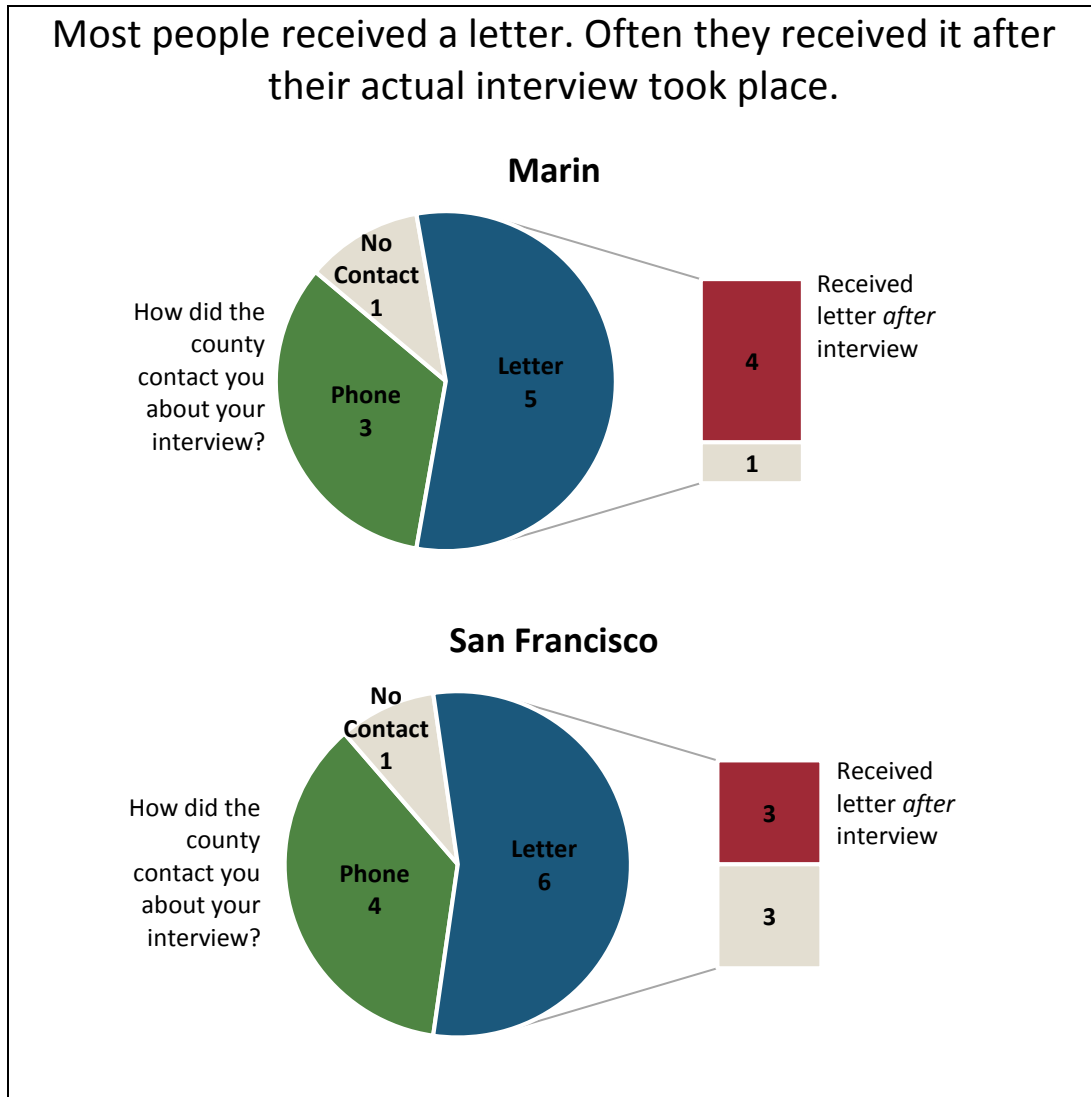
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<sup>4</sup> Only 10 participants answered this question over text message. Participants who received phone follow-up did not get asked this question, because phone follow-up was conducted by Food Bank CalFresh outreach staff themselves, and there was concern that participants would have felt uncomfortable giving negative feedback.

<sup>5</sup> The Food Bank’s CalFresh outreach staff explained the application process extensively and thoroughly to applicants, which could have contributed to more participants in this survey feeling like the interview scheduling process was convenient, compared to the general un-assisted population.

## Opportunities for Improvement:

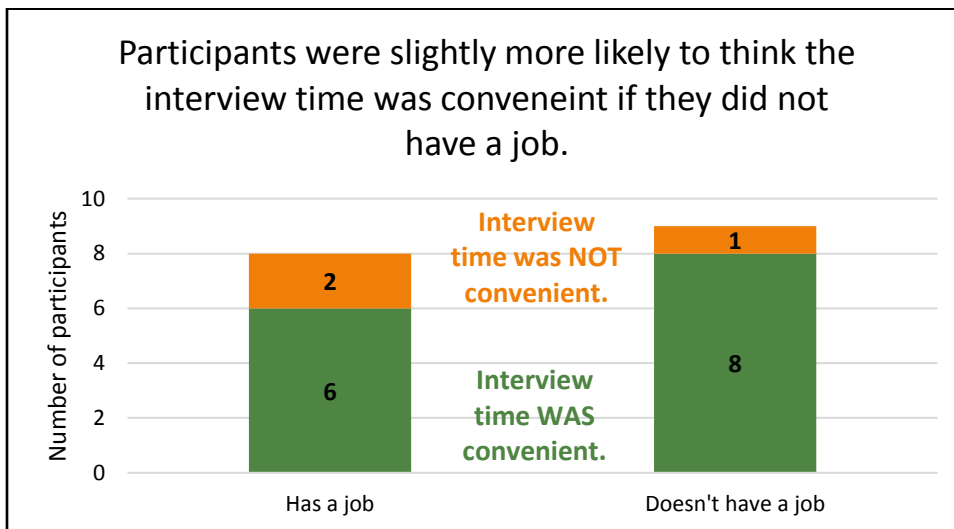
- 2) The majority of respondents said they received a notice of their scheduled interview time from the county by mail. **But, at least half in both counties said that they received the letter *after* they had already had their interview.**<sup>6</sup>



- 3) How can it be that most people got their notice of scheduled interview time *after* they already had their interview, AND that most people thought their interview time was convenient? **From the perspective of the client, this means people were essentially getting a ‘cold call’ from the county.**

<sup>6</sup> Applicants can sometimes get their interview scheduled over the phone with an Eligibility Worker during their first interaction after they submit their paper/electronic application. Therefore, it could be that some participants had already scheduled their interview over the phone and therefore it did not matter that their letter came after their interview took place.

- Our very limited sample size shows that there could be a relationship between participants who found the interview time to be convenient, and participants who did not have a job at the time of application. It would be reasonable to expect that when people do not have a job, it matters less that they received their letter after they already had their interview, because they are more easily able to answer the phone during normal business hours.



## Unanswered Questions:

Given the very small sample size and nature of this survey, several questions surface as areas where both San Francisco and Marin Counties could benefit from further analysis of county-wide data:

- A. Why do applicants so often receive their notice of scheduled interview after the interview date?**
  - a. When are applicants typically sent a letter after their initial application is received? When are they called? Are these processes coordinated?
  - b. How many days typically pass between receiving an application, mailing a notice that their interview time has been scheduled, and their interview actually taking place?
  - c. How many applicants receive their mailed notice after they have already had their interview?
  - d. What proportion of the 'cold calls' are successful? What is the protocol when the 'cold call' is not successful? Do county staff have a protocol for leaving voice messages?
- B. What portion of incomplete (denied) applications are due to missed interviews?**
  - a. How many people, and what percentage of all applicants, miss their scheduled interview in a given month?
  - b. Of the people who missed their interview, how many were sent a letter? Or received a phone call?
  - c. Of the people who missed their interview, what are noticeable characteristics within that group? For example, how many of them had jobs? Or had children? Or are not native English speakers? Are there other important characteristics that would inform possible process improvements?

## Conclusion:

The likelihood that a CalFresh applicant will be able to complete their application successfully and receive CalFresh benefits is dependent on them being able to complete the *entire* process successfully – from application form, to interview, to submission of verification documents. With anecdotal evidence that missed interviews is a noticeable reason why people do not complete the application process, combined with preliminary but telling data from this text-based survey, it is clear that making improvements to the interview scheduling process would be a helpful step towards the goal of increasing enrollment in the program. It is also worth noting that because interviews are also required during the annual recertification process, improvements made to the interview scheduling process could also contribute to reducing churn.

Many questions remain unanswered, and counties will no doubt want to continue to gather client and worker feedback as they work to improve the customer experience with interview scheduling. But at the very least, we hope this report serves as encouraging evidence that making process improvements to how interviews are scheduled is a necessary step in increasing the likelihood that someone will complete their CalFresh application process from start to finish.