

County of Orange Social Services Agency (SSA) Optimizes Public Assistance Benefits Operations During COVID-19

Overview: SSA serves over one in four Orange County residents, providing public assistance benefits, aid programs, public health insurance, and protective/supportive services for children and adults.

Challenge: In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and statewide Stay-at-Home Order, SSA closed its offices to the public on March 17, 2020 to mitigate the spread of illness. As a result, the agency was faced with the following challenges: How do we optimize delivery of critical safety net benefits [**CalFresh**, **Medi-Cal**, **General Relief** and the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (**CalWORKs**) program] to Orange County's vulnerable populations and meet our mandates when in-person visits are not an option? Also, how can SSA pivot operations to address anticipated spikes in new applications for public assistance benefits? Further, when SSA public offices re-open to the public, what measures should be implemented to balance the needs of the public, continue to meet program mandates, and ensure the safety of all?

Solution: On March 16, SSA mobilized its Department Operations Center (DOC) to focus on (1) deploying crucial safety measures to slow the spread of illness among our over 4,000 staff and the community; and (2), modifying SSA's operational processes to achieve program mandates and provide responsive, accessible services to a growing, vulnerable population requiring critical benefits. The DOC structure ensured optimum collaboration across the agency to leverage and maximize alternate access points for new benefits applications and ensure a pathway to check on existing cases. These points of access include the SSA Call Center and online portal, MyBCW (www.mybenefitscalwin.org). Prior to the pandemic, plans were made to enhance SSA Call Center support for the community; however, COVID-19 presented a new sense of urgency, accelerating a previously anticipated four-month project timeline into a critical 72-hour implementation window. Initial SSA efforts entailed shifting staff to meet increased call volumes. Approximately 84 in-office eligibility professionals were moved to remote call agent positions, bringing total call center staff to 264 employees, a more than 45% increase. This shift required the rapid acquisition of additional call agent licenses and deployment of equipment to enable staff to provide services remotely. This effort occurred while the agency was simultaneously transitioning over 45% of its workforce (~1,800 staff) into telework positions for safety, a herculean task on its own. The call agent augmentation allowed SSA to extend service hours from 6:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. on weekdays and add Saturday hours from 7 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. for increased public accessibility. In addition, both the MyBCW portal and SSA Call Center were expanded to include General Relief and CalWORKs benefits, not previously handled by either access point.

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Innovation: SSA added new solutions to ensure service continuity and safety. First, a novel drive-through benefits issuance solution was established to allow clients (including those without phone / internet access) to expedite curbside pick-up of their new or replacement Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) and Medi-Cal Benefit Identification Cards (BIC) cards. In addition, over and above outfitting our facilities with safety barriers, adjusting lobby configurations for physical distancing, adding touchless sanitizing stations, enhanced cleaning protocols and provision of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and supplies for staff, SSA activated a new triage system to reduce in-office lobby traffic when our offices re-opened in mid-June with limited hours. SSA triage teams are stationed outside building entrances to conduct health screenings and heavily encourage clients to use alternative access points (phone/online) safely from home to reduce exposure to illness.

Results: From March to August of this year, SSA saw an increase of approximately 25,000 calls per month on average to the SSA Call Center. By shifting staff to call center agent positions, the agency has met this increased demand and enabled extended call hours. SSA's call abandonment rate saw a reduction from roughly 15% in 2019 to 6-8% on average each month from April to August of 2020. Greater numbers of calls were answered, meaning increased responsiveness and access to benefits for vulnerable OC populations. More than 10,000 customers have been served through our new drive-through benefits service, enabling nearly 2,000 new Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) and Medi-Cal Benefits Identification (BIC) cards to be issued, roughly 6,400 replacement cards issued, almost 90 received homeless assistance and over 1,700 received expedited services and/or had their immediate needs met through this channel thus far. Our triage process has reduced in-office lobby traffic by 60% on average each month. With the transition of approximately 45% of our SSA staff into telework positions, implementing physical distancing, modifying office configurations, and provisioning PPE and cleaning/hygiene products, SSA is doing its part to ensure the safety of all.

Replicability: SSA's DOC structure ensured integrated and aligned decision making, increased collaboration and the rapid mobilization of staff and resources. As this was a pandemic response, CARES monies helped fund staff overtime, new equipment purchases and supplies.

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