

Protocol for Phone-Based Food Stamp Assistance

A. Call Center Operator or Information and Referral Specialist's role

- a. Provide friendly service and accurate local information about the Food Stamp Program;
- b. Encourage callers to find out if they might be eligible for food stamps; and
- c. Encourage potentially eligible callers to contact their county food stamp office, designated Food Stamp Outreach partner, or on-line tool to complete an application.

B. Greeting the caller

- a. Speak clearly and slowly when greeting the caller.
- b. Tell the caller that she has reached the California Food Stamp Information Line. Sample Greeting: "Good morning. Thank you for calling the California Food Stamp Information Line. My name is _____. How can I help you today?"
- c. If the caller is unsure of what kind of assistance she needs, inform her that you can help her do the following:
 - i. Learn more about food stamps, a nutrition assistance program to help households purchase the food they need;
 - ii. Learn where to apply;
 - iii. Find out if the household is likely eligible for food stamps; and
 - iv. Find a local organization, such as a food pantry, where the caller can obtain food today.
- d. If you are unsure about the answer to a question, refer the caller to the county food stamp office.

C. Provide supportive and patient service

- a. Sensitive care can:
 - i. Reduce the callers' stress and anxiety; and
 - ii. Encourage the caller to apply for food stamps.

D. Promote the Food Stamp Program

- a. The Food Stamp Program, our nation's first line of defense against hunger and malnutrition, can be an effective way to increase households' ability to purchase healthy food.
- b. By providing callers with friendly service and accurate information, you can help alleviate hunger in California.
- c. The Food Stamp Program is a nutrition assistance entitlement program. Everyone who is eligible can receive food stamps; there is no maximum participation.
- d. Many people in California who are eligible for food stamps are not receiving them. By competently prescreening callers for potential food stamp eligibility, you encourage people who are likely eligible for food stamps to apply.
- e. In addition to benefiting individual households, increasing food stamp participation will help local economies by providing people with grocery money to spend at stores within their communities.

E. Maintaining Privacy

- a. During the course of some calls to the Food Stamp Information Line, callers may disclose confidential information, such as names of household members, financial information, medical or employment history.
- b. When dealing with any personal confidential information, abide by all rules and regulations regarding confidential data.
- c. Do not ask more information than necessary.
 - i. Prescreening can be completed anonymously.
 - ii. Do not ask for a last name, social security number, address, or other personal or identifying information that is not directly required for determining potential food stamp eligibility.

F. Referrals to county food stamp office

- a. In California, the Food Stamp Program is administrated by the county.
- b. All callers have the right to speak with an eligibility worker and file a food stamp application, regardless of the prescreening results.
- c. Every caller must be informed that only an eligibility worker in a county food stamp office can make a final decision about whether or not a person is eligible for food stamps.
- d. Counties may request that calls in their county are handled according to their standards. While many counties will use this Statewide Protocol as their standard for handling calls, check with your county food stamp office to see whether they have a protocol they would prefer you use or have special instructions for callers who are Limited English Proficient.

G. General information about prescreening for potential food stamp eligibility

- a. Callers do not need to be prescreened in order to apply for the Food Stamp Program.
- b. The caller should be informed that by being prescreened, she is not applying for food stamps.
- c. All callers have the right to speak with an eligibility worker and file a food stamp application, regardless of prescreening results.
- d. Prescreening is a process during which callers answer a few questions regarding major criteria for food stamp eligibility. This process is referred to as “prescreening” to reinforce that it is not a process to determine eligibility and it does not “screen out” potential applicants. All callers maintain the right to apply for food stamps, regardless of the results.
- e. Prescreening only determines whether the caller *may* be eligible for food stamps. There are many factors that go into determining food stamp eligibility that this quick assessment does not take into account.
- f. Prescreening encourages people who are potentially eligible to apply for food stamps.
- g. Prescreening saves people time and effort if they are likely not eligible for food stamps.

- h. Every caller must be informed that only an eligibility worker in a county food stamp office can make a final decision about whether a household is eligible for food stamps.

H. Before Beginning Prescreening

- a. Attend a training session on food stamp outreach and prescreening. Contact your county food stamp office or food bank to find a training session in your area.
- b. In order to conduct prescreening most accurately and effectively, use a tool to assist in prescreening. SuperFAST (Food stamp Application and Screening Tool), a computer program that assists in prescreening for potential eligibility, is available at no cost. It can be downloaded at <http://www.myfoodstamps.org/fastinstallation.html>.

I. Prescreening Process

While there are many factors that go into determining food stamp eligibility, prescreening generally touches upon the following eligibility requirements:

- Citizenship: At least one US citizen or legal permanent resident in the household
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI): At least one person in the household not receiving SSI
- Income: Below gross monthly limits, unless elderly or disabled. The income of SSI recipients is not included.
- Resources: Less than \$2000 in resources or \$3000 if someone in the family is over 60 or permanently disabled

Note: Many organizations “prescreen” based solely on income eligibility. Attempting to determine potential food stamp eligibility by asking only about household size and income can lead to inaccurate recommendations and **does not fit within the guidelines of this protocol**.

Inaccuracies associated with prescreening only by referring to income eligibility chart include:

- Households in which *all* members are receiving cash welfare, such as CalWORKs or General Assistance / General Relief (not including SSI) are eligible regardless of income.
- Households with an elderly person or person receiving certain types of disability payments may be over the gross income (income before deductions) limits. These households must only meet net income (income after deductions) requirements. Although these households may have gross incomes over the limit, high costs associated with medical expenses, housing and dependent care may make them eligible for food stamps.
- Mixed-status households, or households in which some members are citizens or legal residents and some are not, may have incomes over the gross income limit and still be eligible. The income of household members who are ineligible for food stamps and not receiving SSI is prorated, or divided among the eligible household members.

Below are sample prescreening questions that are endorsed by the Network for a Healthy California, County Welfare Directors Association, California Department of Social Services, and California Association of Food Banks.

Sample Prescreening Questions:

1. Is anyone in your household a citizen, refugee, asylee, or legal permanent resident?

If yes, continue the screening.

If no, tell the caller that at least one person in the household must be a citizen, refugee, asylee, legal permanent resident, or Cuban/Haitian entrant in order to be eligible for food stamps. There are a few exceptions, such as victims of domestic violence or trafficking, American Indians born abroad, and Hmong or Laotian immigrants. The caller can contact her county food stamp office for more details.

Remind the caller that a person who is not a citizen may apply on behalf of people who are. For example, a parent who is not a citizen can apply for a citizen child. Applying for food stamps will not hurt a person's citizenship status. Food stamps are not counted against an immigrant in the "public charge" decision and food stamp agencies are not required to verify the status of household members who are not applying. Food stamp agencies should not deny benefits to other household members if some members have not disclosed their immigration status. For more information, refer to the Comprehensive Guide to California Food Stamp Program, available at <http://www.myfoodstamps.org/lenc/index.html>.

2. How many people in your household are citizens, legal permanent residents, or refugees/asylees and do not receive SSI benefits?

This number will determine the number of eligible people in the household. Under food stamp rules, "a household is a person living alone or a group of people living together who purchase food and prepare meals together." If a client is having trouble figuring out who is considered a member of his or her household, ask:

"Whom do you eat and prepare (or share) meals with?"

The people indicated would be considered part of the food stamp household, even if they only share food "sometimes." Spouses and children under age 22 (and their dependents) who live in the house must also be considered part of the household even if they do not purchase or prepare food together. Persons who are both elderly and disabled and can't purchase and prepare food separately can be a separate household.

Why can't I receive food stamps if I receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI)?

People who receive SSI/SSP in California are not eligible for food stamps. That is because a portion for food is already included in their CA SSI check each month, so in a way they are already getting food stamps. However, if there are other people in the household, those other

people may be eligible. This applies to SSI recipients in California only; in other states people may be eligible to receive food stamps even if they receive SSI, and people who have recently moved to CA and are still receiving SSI from another state may be eligible. **Note:** People who receive Social Security or Disability payments, including SSDI (Social Security Disability Insurance), SDI (State Disability Insurance), and Social Security Retirement Benefits may still be eligible for food stamps.

3. Does your household include anyone who is...

- **60 or more years old?**
- **A Veteran receiving VA benefits?**
- **Disabled and receiving SSA disability benefits?**

If yes, proceed to question 5B.

If no, proceed to question 4.

4. What is the total monthly income of all eligible people in your household (eligible household members are determined in question 2)? Include only the pre-tax income of household members who are food stamp eligible (do not count the income of SSI recipients or non-citizens).

In order to qualify for food stamps, a caller's *gross income* (total income before deductions) must be below certain monthly limits [see Table 1: FFY 2008 Gross Monthly Income Limits]. Households in which *all* members are receiving cash welfare, such as CalWORKs or General Assistance / General Relief (not including SSI), and households with an elderly person or person receiving certain types of disability payments are excluded from the gross income limits.

The income of SSI recipients is not counted toward a household's income. Household members who are ineligible for food stamps because of their citizenship status must still report their incomes. This income counts as part of the household's income, but it is *prorated*, or divided among the eligible members.

Certain prescreening tools (including SuperFAST, the computer-based tool developed by the California Association of Food Banks) calculate prorated income.

Because of prorating, some households, such as mixed-status households, may be eligible for food stamps even if their household income is **over** the monthly income limits.

Unless specifically trained to calculate prorated incomes, if a household is over the monthly gross income limit but has members who are ineligible, refer the caller to the county food stamp office.

Table 1: FFY 2008* Gross Monthly Income Limits

People in Household	Gross Monthly Income Limits (130% FPL)
1	\$1,107
2	1,484
3	1,861
4	2,238
5	2,615
6	2,992
7	3,369
8	3,746
Each additional person	+377
*Federal Fiscal Year 2008 runs from October 1, 2007 through September 30, 2008. Gross monthly income limits are updated every fiscal year. Refer to http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/applicant_recipients/eligibility.htm for the most up to date information.	

[Source: United States Department of Agriculture: Food and Nutrition Service. "Food Stamp Program Eligibility." Available at http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/applicant_recipients/eligibility.htm. Accessed on October 12, 2007]

5A. Does your household have more than \$2000 in resources like cash, bank accounts, stocks, and/or retirement accounts other than Social Security?

If yes, explain that in order to be eligible for food stamps, a household must have less than \$2000 in resources. A resource includes cash on hand or in the bank, stocks or bonds, money from insurance settlements, paid personal injury claims, tax refunds, and inheritances. Money in a trust fund, a house and most land, most vehicles, household goods and the security deposit on a house do not count as resources [see list of included and excluded resources]. Remind the caller that there are many rules about what is counted as a resource and what is not counted. If the caller is unsure whether her household is over the resource limit, she should contact an eligibility worker in a county food stamp office.

If no, recommend that the household apply for food stamps. Proceed to Section J: Recommendations and Referrals for information on documents to bring to food stamp office and other information on applying.

5B. [For households that include a member who is over 60, a veteran receiving VA benefits, or a member who is permanently disabled] Does your household have more than \$3000 in resources like cash, bank accounts, stocks, retirement accounts other than Social Security?

If yes, explain that in order to be eligible for food stamps, a household that includes a member who is over 60, a veteran receiving VA benefits, or a member who is permanently disabled must have less than \$3000 in resources. A resource includes cash on hand or in the bank, stocks or bonds, money from insurance settlements, paid personal injury claims, tax refunds, and inheritances. Money in a trust fund, a house and most land, most vehicles, household goods and the security deposit on a house do not count as resources [see list of included and excluded resources]. Remind the caller that there are many rules about what is counted as a resource and what is not counted. If the caller is unsure whether her household is over the resource limit, she should contact an eligibility worker in a county food stamp office.

If no, recommend that the household apply for food stamps. Proceed to Section J: Recommendations and Referrals for information on documents to bring to food stamp office and other information on applying.

Included and Excluded Resources

Included Resources **(count as a resource toward \$2000 or \$3000 limit)**

- Cash on hand
- Bank accounts (checking, savings, credit union)
- Savings certificates
- Trust deeds and notes receivable
- Stocks or bonds
- Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs)*
- Funds held in an accessible Keogh plan (self-employed retirement plan)*
- Income tax refunds
- Money from insurance settlements or paid personal injury claims
- Inheritance
- Recreational property

(*Note: In counting the resources of households with IRAs or accessible Keogh plans, the countable value would be the total cash value of the account **minus** the amount of the penalty, if any, for early withdrawal of the entire amount in the plan

Excluded Resources **(do not count as a resource toward \$2000 or \$3000 limit)**

- House or land in which the household lives or plans to live
- Personal items, furniture, household goods
- Anything owned by a household member receiving CalWORKs benefits or Public Assistance (PA). If a PA member and a non-PA member jointly own the resource, exclude the amount used to determine PA eligibility.
- Money from Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)
- Life insurance policy or pension fund
- Cars, trucks, vans, and motorcycles
- Pell grants, work-study, and other federal student aid that is provided under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 or by the Bureau of Indian Affairs
- Anything that federal law says cannot be counted against your food stamps, such as WIC benefits, Work Experience (WEX), DWI, Independent Living Program (ILP) payments, some payments under other laws, and court settlements for Native Americans
- Energy assistance payments made under federal law
- The income of self-employed people that is averaged over six months or a year and counted as income
- Payments from the government to help repair your house after a disaster
- Property that is essential for employment of a household member, such as farm land and tools

J. Recommendations and Referrals

- a. If a caller does not meet a requirement for food stamp eligibility, explain the criteria and explain why the household is likely not eligible.
 - i. Remind the caller that only an eligibility worker can determine whether a household receives food stamps.
 - ii. Refer the caller to other community resources, such as a local food bank. To help a caller find a food bank, visit <http://www.cafoodbanks.org/find.htm> or <http://www.efap.net/efap.html>.

- b. If a caller does meet the basic requirements for food stamp eligibility determined during prescreening, encourage her to contact her county food stamp office to complete an application.
 - i. Remind the caller that only an eligibility worker can determine whether a household is eligible for food stamps.
 - ii. Explain that to save time, she should bring proof of income, identity, expenses, and resources. The following are examples of documents to the food stamp office:
 1. Proof of income: Pay stubs for the past 30 days, earning statements
 2. Identity: Driver's license, alien status card, social security numbers for every household member
 3. Expenses: Rent or mortgage payment, utility bills (heat, electricity, water/sewage/garbage, telephone)
 4. Resources: Bank statements for checking accounts, savings accounts, certificates of deposit, credit union accounts, retirement accounts, stocks, bonds, dividends
 - iii. Refer the caller to other community resources, such as your local food bank. To help a caller find a food bank, visit <http://www.cafoodbanks.org/find.htm> or <http://www.efap.net/efap.html>.

If you have any comments or questions regarding this protocol, please contact:

Stephanie Nishio
California Department of Public Health
Network for a Healthy California
E-mail: Stephanie.Nishio@cdph.ca.gov
Phone: 916-449-5318
Fax: 916-449-5415

Acknowledgements: Special thanks to William Vaughn and Teri McKinney of the County Welfare Directors Association, Stephanie Nishio (Network for a Healthy California), Jessica Bartholow (California Association of Food Banks), and Elizabeth Gomez (Alameda County Community Food Bank) for their input in writing and editing this document. This Protocol was written by Rachel Winch, Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow at the Network for a Healthy California (*Network*).

