



To:

CalSAWS Project

John Boule, Executive Director
 Diane Alexander
 Thomas J. Hartman
 June Hutchison
 Michele Peterson
 Karen J. Rapponotti
 Lynn Bridwell
 Anna Chia

Cc:

California Department of Social Services

Kim Johnson
 Jennifer Troia
 Salena Chow
 Kat Yang
 Natasha Nicolai
 Raquel Givon
 Emily Caruso

California Department of Healthcare Services

Will Lightbourne
 Rene Mollow
 Yingjia Huang

Office of Systems Integration

Dan Kalamaras
 Brandon Hansard
 Stephen Zaretsky

County Welfare Directors Association

Christiana Smith

Deloitte

Rachel Frey
 Gabrielle Otis
 Brook Sinclair

California State Senate

Mareva Brown, Office of the Senate President
 Pro Tempore
 Renita Polk, Senate Budget and Fiscal Review
 Subcommittee 3
 Jessica Bartholow, Office of Senator Skinner

California State Assembly

Kelsy Castillo, Office of the Speaker of the
 Assembly
 Nicole Vazquez, Assembly Committee on
 Budget Subcommittee 1

October 20, 2021

Dear Partners,

Thank you for the opportunities to review the BenefitsCal Release 1.0 design as part of User Acceptance Testing in the lead up to the launch of the website and the migration of CIV Counties to CalSAWS. We appreciated the responsiveness to the concerns we elevated in August in public comment and with [our letter](#). The time spent workshopping the BenefitsCal website and application flow in the lead up to the BenefitsCal go-live was an encouraging model of collaboration.

We understand that teams were working “around the clock” to get changes made to the BenefitsCal system in time for launch. These herculean efforts to ensure that consumers could have a positive experience, in alignment with policy, with the new BenefitsCal website are deeply appreciated by the advocate community.

The opportunities to meet since then, especially the daily meetings in the two weeks after the launch have also been very helpful. We greatly appreciate the time and effort that went into developing the content for those meetings as issues are tracked and resolved. These efforts reflect CalSAWS’s commitment to make sure BenefitsCal works for Californians across the state. Thank you!

As we look ahead to the future releases, advocates have reviewed our priorities based on the changes made in Release 1.0, and what has been shared about Releases 1.1 and 1.2 which are planned for October 2021.

The priorities we are elevating today specifically relate to the needs of Community Based Organizations (CBO) and the application assister community.

Priority Requests for BenefitsCal Improvements

1. Develop, test, and implement an integrated Release of Information for CBO assisters, preferably before Los Angeles County joins BenefitsCal in November.
2. Add functionality necessary for college students and their CBO assisters:
 - a. Add the list of student exemptions to the application flow so that exemptions are easily identifiable for students and eligibility workers;
 - b. College campus name drop down as a data field for college students;
 - c. URL referral link for CBOs/Campuses that meets or exceeds the functionality that currently exists with GetCalFresh.
3. Enhance the CBO data dashboard, in partnership with key CBOs (as part of the ROI integration), to reflect the contracting needs of these important partners, including

demographics and data specific to their local, state, and federal funding.

4. Partner with the advocates group and application assisters to develop a complete journey map for the CBO/Client experience, including both the application and post-application experience.
5. Work with stakeholders to assess existing prioritization of functionality and re-prioritize together to include vital assister functionality,
6. Share updates on the status of outstanding requests made by stakeholders, such as issues identified in August as part of UAT review, and the enhancements list. Specifically: items resolved, items currently scheduled for resolution, and items not currently scheduled for resolution (with additional information about why the issue is still pending).

At this time, only an estimated 20% of assister organizations in CIV counties have chosen to use BenefitsCal for their CalFresh applications because of the lack of functionality to support their work and the consumers they serve. Many CBOs, including college campuses representing millions of consumers, want to transition to BenefitsCal but cannot do so until the above features are available.

As we have shared before, **CBO assister functionality is *critical* for consumers to access benefits.** While the shared focus expressed by all stakeholders is to center the needs of consumers, we know that assister support makes a significant difference in access to benefits. For example, data from student outreach shows that without assister support, students have a 30% chance of benefits being approved. In contrast, **assister support brings approval rates up to 80%-90%.**

CBO assisters and advocates have contributed their own organizational time to review the design of the application flow, identifying key issues that would have put BenefitsCal out of alignment with policy if they were not fixed before launch. When supported to do so, assisters used their own organizational time to recruit consumers to participate in User Centered Design sessions so that BenefitsCal could be more successful in meeting the needs of consumers.

As we approach the expansion of BenefitsCal to Los Angeles County, we are holding the dual concerns that delaying the expansion has serious consequences, while adding more customers to the BenefitsCal service area without the necessary functionality for assisters also has serious consequences. Assister needs should be prioritized and included in the design and functionality of the website as soon as possible. To delay these important functionalities, or have no timeline at all, puts consumer access at risk.

We value the efforts that have been made to ensure BenefitsCal was in better alignment with policy before launch, and the workshopping sessions that illustrated how collaborative

partnerships can effectively elevate our diverse stakeholder strengths to meet our shared values of consumer access to services. We look forward to opportunities to continue to collaborate closely in this way to ensure the CBO communities can support consumers as they apply for and work to maintain benefits.

As we have shared previously, we believe in BenefitsCal, we believe we can make it the best platform that our state has ever had, and we believe we can do this together by working in partnership towards our shared goals.

We request a response to this letter by October 29, 2021.

Sincerely,

Advocate co-leads on behalf of the CalSAWS Advocates Group and these sign-on organizations.

CalFresh Outreach Higher Ed & Far North Project
California Association of Food Banks
California Coalition of Welfare Rights Organizations
Community Health Councils
Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund
Legal Services of Northern California
Los Angeles LGBT Center
National Health Law Program
Redwood Coast Medical Services (RCMS)
River City Food Bank
San Diego Hunger Coalition
San Francisco-Marin Food Bank
Western Center on Law & Poverty