

# Translating Practice into Policy: Solutions from Single Stop Site Coordinators



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Single Stop USA  
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## Executive Summary

Single Stop USA is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to alleviate poverty by helping families access all of the supports for which they are eligible at once, and as simply as possible. We work through the Single Stop program model, our strategic initiatives, and public policy. In an effort to translate our direct service work into policy solutions, Single Stop USA conducted a survey of Single Stop site coordinators to learn more about the barriers clients face and solicit ideas about how they could be addressed. Site coordinators serve as benefit counselors, who screen clients for benefits, see them through the application process and track their results. Their expertise in the field of benefits access makes site coordinators highly qualified respondents to this survey. Below is a summary of the key findings, followed by a set of policy recommendations.

### Key Findings

- Technology helps simplify benefits enrollment.  
Respondents strongly believe that utilizing technology, such as online applications or the Paperless Office System (POS) (online enrollment for food stamps and Medicaid available through a Human Resources Administration pilot program in NYC), to simplify the application and recertification process increases access to benefits for clients.
- Nonprofit organizations play an important role in benefits access.  
Technology helps, but it's not enough. Whether it is providing outreach, assisting with enrollment, or following up with government offices, nonprofit organizations that provide dedicated staff play an intermediary role that is critical to helping individuals access and maintain benefits.
- Documenting clients' income and identity is burdensome.  
It is difficult for clients to gather all of the identification and income documentation required to apply for benefits, particularly because many lack stable jobs or homes. Site coordinators agreed that birth certificate requirements are one of the main documentation barriers applicants face.
- The culture of government offices often negatively affects benefits access.  
Site coordinators believe that there are many opportunities for offices to adopt a more client-centered and welcoming approach to service delivery.

## Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations are based on the findings and the feedback of site coordinators:

1. Support Funding Opportunities that Promote Benefits Access:

- Provide funding opportunities for nonprofits to engage in all aspects of benefits access and maintenance.
- Invest in technology that allows people to receive benefits without going to government offices, and explore technological innovations that would use data matches to conduct automatic enrollment and simplify the verification process.

2. Simplify Verification and Re-enrollment Processes

- Use information already collected by the government to verify eligibility criteria to reduce documentation required by applicants, where possible.
- Encourage states to waive face-to-face interview and finger imaging requirements for benefit programs, where relevant.
- Establish a federal law that requires agencies to remind clients about benefit expirations with adequate time for clients to recertify.

3. Promote a Client-Centered Service Delivery System

- Provide federal investments in technical assistance and/or funding to states, to promote customer service in government offices.
- Create incentives for government offices to be more customer-friendly and consumer-centric.

## **Introduction**

Work supports and public benefits keep millions of families out of poverty every year, and accessing multiple supports at once can significantly improve the likelihood of economic security and mobility. Yet, the process of successfully obtaining public benefits is complex. First, individuals must acquire knowledge of the benefits available to them. Once they determine they might be eligible to receive benefits, they must go through a complicated application process, provide documentation to verify their eligibility and subsequently (within six months to a year), be recertified in order to continue receiving benefits. Along the way, clients face many barriers that threaten their ability to access and maintain benefits.

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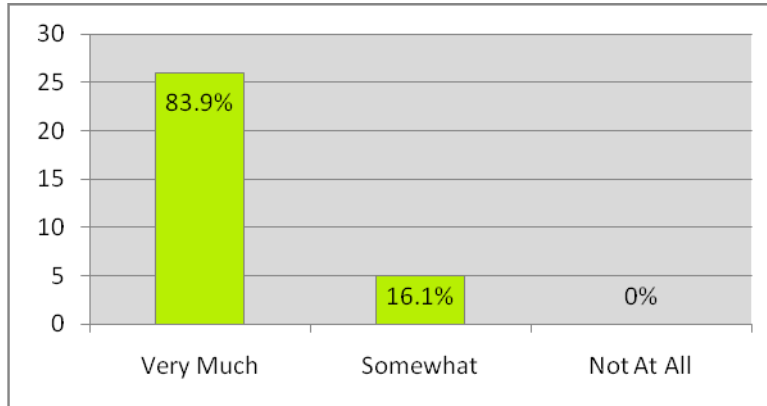
## **Survey Methodology**

Thirty-three site coordinators in New York and California completed the survey. The questions focused on the barriers clients face when trying to access public benefits, and what policy solutions would simplify processes and create a more client-friendly approach to service delivery. Specifically, respondents were asked to what degree—very much, somewhat, or not at all—various policy changes would increase knowledge of available benefits and reduce barriers to both application and recertification. Each section included a space for respondents to comment, and to discuss additional challenges their clients face when trying to obtain benefits.

### **Section I— Knowledge of Benefits**

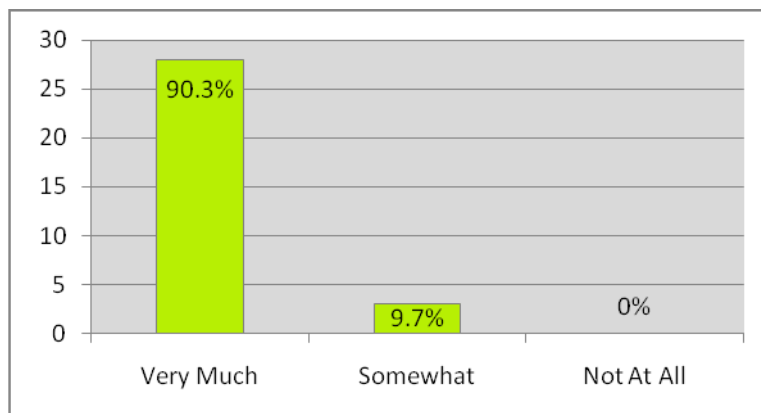
The first step to accessing benefits is knowledge. Many individuals do not know that they are eligible for the multiple benefits that could help lift them out of poverty. Almost 84% of respondents said that expanding community education and outreach would increase individuals' awareness of benefits and encourage them to apply. Specifically, site coordinators said that information should be available in multiple languages and there should be more information about the rights of immigrants who want to obtain benefits.

*Chart 1: Expanding community education and outreach (e.g. ensuring that information is available about the effect of immigration status on benefits eligibility and ensuring information available in multiple languages) would increase individuals' knowledge of benefits available to them and encourage them to apply.*



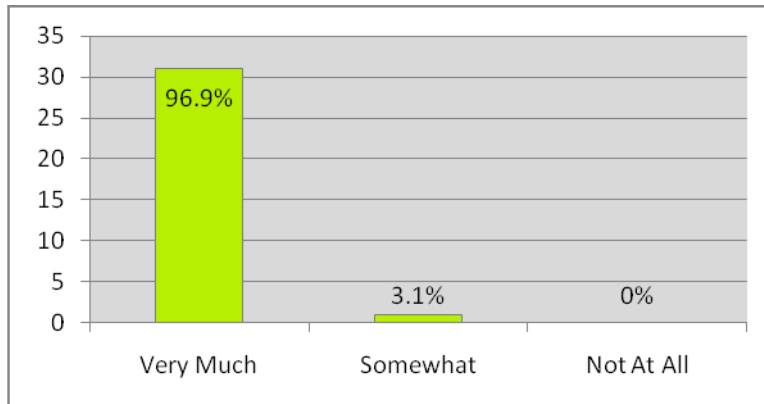
Similarly, 90.3% of respondents indicated that providing information about benefits in places that low-income families live, work, and go to school would increase individuals' knowledge of benefits available to them. Some suggested locations included local unemployment offices, libraries, and religious organizations, as well as links to benefits information on online applications, such as FAFSA and unemployment insurance applications.

*Chart 2: Providing information about benefits in places that low-income families live, work, and go to school would increase individuals' knowledge of benefits available to them and encourage them to apply.*



Almost all of the respondents (96.9%) agreed that it was important to support public-private partnerships because of the crucial role they can play in helping people access benefits. Community-based organizations (CBOs) and other service providers have direct access to individuals who might be eligible for benefits and are in a unique position to increase awareness about these programs.

Chart 3: Ensuring a role for local nonprofits to assist in benefits knowledge, access, and enrollment (like Single Stop or facilitated enrollment practices) would increase individuals' knowledge of benefits and encourage them to apply.



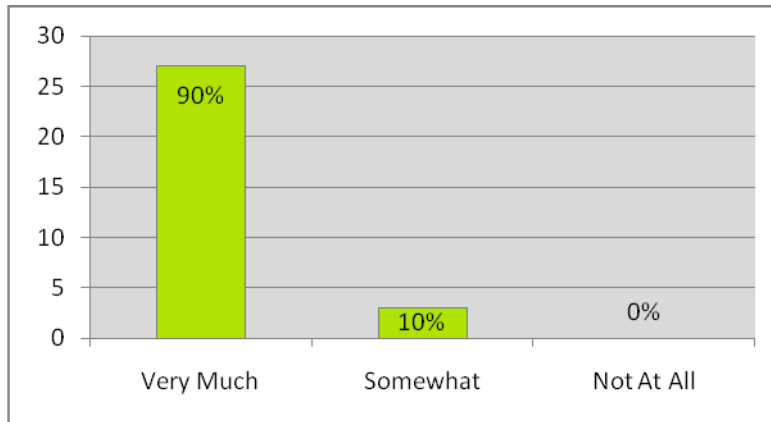
## Section II—Barriers to Application

Once clients establish that they are eligible to receive benefits, they must go through a complicated and time-consuming application process. A USDA study of food stamp applicants who failed to complete the application process found that over a quarter of applicants reported dropping out because of some aspect of the process, such as the need to acquire verification documents, long waits in the food stamp office, or general confusion.<sup>1</sup>

One application barrier frequently cited by site coordinators is the experiences that clients have in government offices. Twenty-seven out of thirty respondents (90%) believe that making government offices more customer-service oriented by providing incentives for workers to connect clients with benefits would significantly increase individuals' access. As one site coordinator remarked, "Customer service is definitely an issue. Many clients feel humiliated and embarrassed to ask for help and looked down upon by the government offices." Site coordinators also expressed the need to train government workers to better understand the application requirements, so that eligible individuals are not turned away unnecessarily.

<sup>1</sup> Bartlett, Susan and Nancy Burstein. "Food Stamp Program Access Study." *USDA Economic Research Service*. Nov. 2004. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan03013/efan03013-3/efan03013-3fm.pdf>.

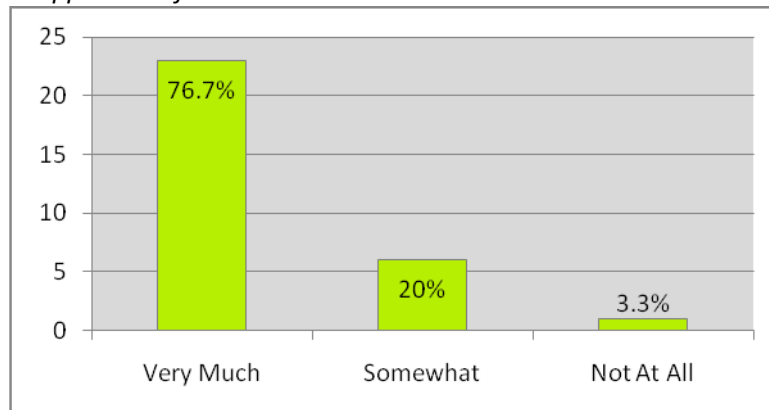
*Chart 4: Finding ways to make government offices more client-friendly, such as providing staff training and creating incentives for staff to be more customer oriented and serve more eligible families, would reduce barriers to application for clients.*



In recent years, many states have adopted technology that allows clients to apply for benefits online or on the telephone. Some states, however, still require that clients go a government office to have a face-to-face interview. In New York City and California, clients need to be finger printed in order to receive food stamps.

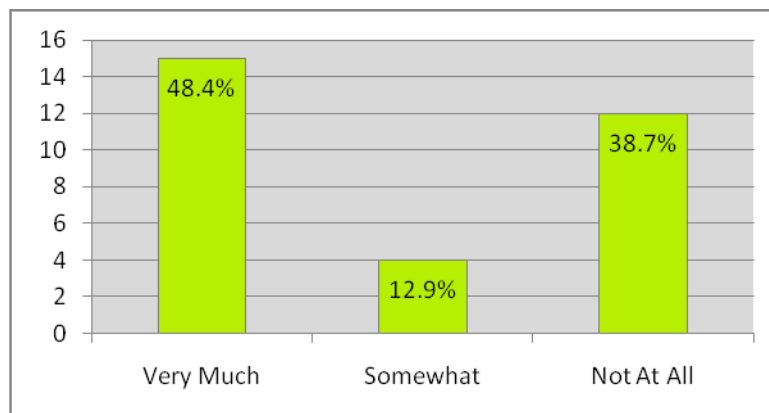
About 77% of respondents said that using technology, such as POS or online and telephone applications, to apply for benefits would *very much* reduce barriers to application for clients. One respondent said, “Getting down to offices to apply is a huge hindrance, especially for students. These folks are working, going to school, and raising children.” Another client pointed out that “while it is not relevant for all benefits nor applicable in all states, finger imaging and photographing requirements are enormous barriers to public benefits access.” Specifically, site coordinators suggested increasing the number of POS sites and making sure that opportunities to apply for benefits online and over the telephone are well-publicized.

*Chart 5: Using online/telephone applications that do not require in-person office visits would reduce barriers to application for clients.*



Federal law requires non-citizens to verify their immigration status when applying for benefits. States, however, have flexibility in determining other verification requirements for almost all benefit programs.<sup>2</sup> Most states require clients to also verify their income, identity and residency. The task of gathering this information can be quite challenging for clients, especially because many of them do not have stable jobs or homes. Indeed, simply requesting the necessary documentation can prove to be arduous. In one study, a cook in a Chinese restaurant in New York asked his boss for a letter verifying his employment to apply for public health insurance and was fired a day later.<sup>3</sup> According to an Urban Justice Center survey of food stamp outreach clients (who were pre-screened as eligible), 35% of applicants were rejected because of a documentation problem.<sup>4</sup> Although site coordinators agreed that documentation requirements make it difficult for clients to access benefits, there was little consensus on how the issue should be addressed. Almost half (48.4%) of the respondents said that requiring a social security number and no other pieces of documentation for all benefits programs would significantly reduce barriers to application clients, while 38.7% said that this would not be effective at all. Some worried that modifying the documentation requirements would increase the risk of fraud.

*Chart 6: Requiring only a Social Security number and no other documentation from applicants for all benefit programs would reduce barriers to application for clients.*



When asked about the main documentation barriers, site coordinators frequently mentioned birth certificates. Federal law requires U.S. citizens who are applying for Medicaid or renewing their coverage to submit either a birth certificate or a passport to prove their citizenship. Clients often misplace their birth certificates when moving, and

<sup>2</sup> Under federal law, food stamp applicants are required to provide social security numbers and verify their identity, income, and residency.

<sup>3</sup> Lawler, Kate. "Reality Check: A View from the Front Lines of Public Health Insurance Enrollment." *The Children's Aid Society*. Mar. 2003. <http://www.kff.org/medicaid/2174-index.cfm>.

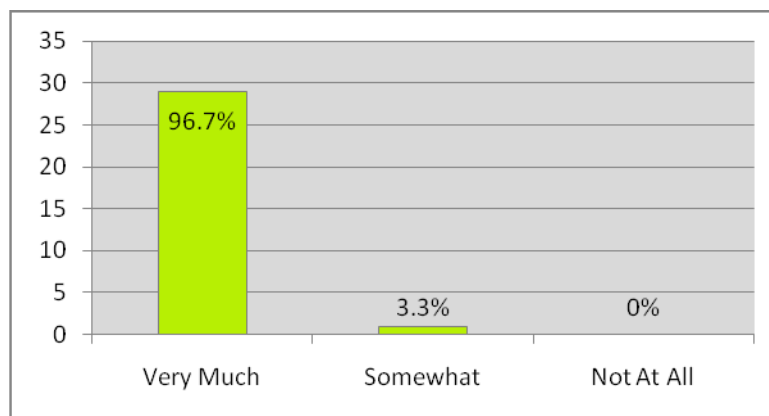
<sup>4</sup> Widom, Rebecca and Ella Ewart. "A Better Recipe for New York City: Less Red Tape, More Food on the Table." *Urban Justice Center*. Jan. 2006. [http://www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/publications/better\\_recipe\\_full\\_rpt.pdf](http://www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/publications/better_recipe_full_rpt.pdf).

it is time-consuming and costly to obtain a new one because they have to get it from the county in which they were born. Under the Children’s Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act, states now have the option to conduct data matches with the Social Security Administration’s (SSA) database to verify applicants’ citizenship, instead of requiring that individuals submit their own documentation. California, which uses the SSA’s database to meet citizenship documentation requirements for Medi-Cal applicants, estimates that it will save the state \$26 million annually in administrative costs.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, it is difficult for clients to verify their income because many work informal jobs and do not receive a regular paycheck. Respondents suggested that there should be more flexible verification requirements for people with no income, for people with informal jobs, and for the self-employed.

Coordinators overwhelmingly agreed that having nonprofit organizations help clients apply for benefits and follow up with government agencies increases access to benefits for clients. Public-private partnerships should be formed in order to ensure that nonprofits can effectively assist with the application process.

*Chart 7: Ensuring that non-profits can assist in enrollment and follow-up with government agencies would reduce barriers to application for clients.*

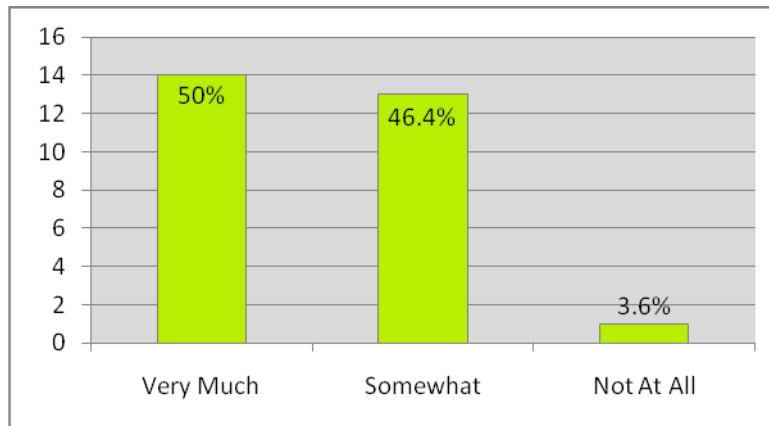


A number of benefit programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), have federal rules that require recipients to engage in work activities. Half of the survey respondents believed that changing the work requirements would *very much* improve access to benefits for clients, while 46.4% felt that it would *somewhat* improve access. Site coordinators suggested that it is not necessarily the requirements themselves that should be modified, but rather the quality of job training and placement services that need to be

<sup>5</sup> Ross, Donna Cohen. “New Citizenship Documentation Option for Medicaid and Chip is Up and Running.” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*. <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=3159>.

improved. As one site coordinator said, “I have seen too often that work activities actually de-motivate clients because they are ‘warehoused’ in rooms without the support or resources to find gainful employment.” Respondents also noted that clients who do not have adequate childcare have trouble meeting the work requirements and, therefore, do not apply for benefits.

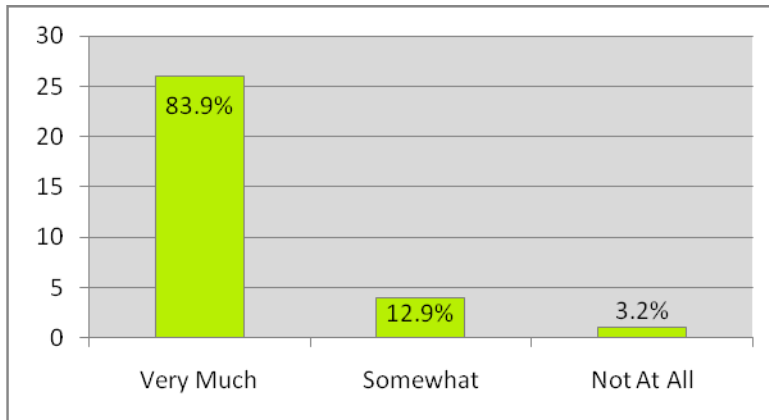
*Chart 8: Modifying work requirements would reduce barriers to application for clients.*



### **Section III—Barriers to Recertification**

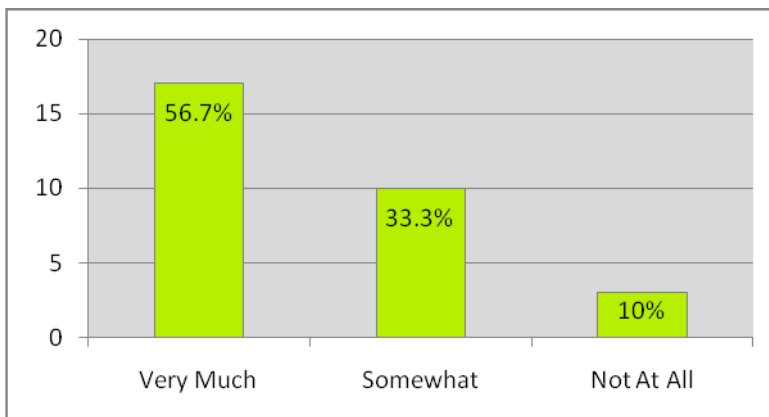
Once households successfully apply for and receive benefits, they must be recertified anywhere from six months to one year later. The recertification process can be as complex and onerous as the application process itself. Respondents called the recertification paperwork for many benefits “overbearing” and “confusing.” Eighty-four percent said that implementing web-based or telephone recertification methods that reduce the need to go to government offices would greatly increase access to benefits for clients. Many counties do, in fact, waive the face-to-face interview and allow clients to be recertified over the telephone. Although this has helped improve access to benefits for clients, many do not trust that they were successfully recertified over the phone and end up going to the government office anyway. Site coordinators suggested providing clients with a tracking number, so that they can confirm their recertification.

Chart 9: Implementing methods, such as web-based or telephone recertification, that allow clients to be recertified without having to go to a government office would reduce barriers to recertification for clients.



Additionally, more than half of respondents believe that increasing the amount of time a person has to complete the recertification process would *very much* reduce barriers to recertification. Thirty-three percent said that it would *somewhat* reduce barriers and almost 10% said it would do nothing to increase access to benefits. According to some site coordinators, the real problem is that government agencies do not send out the recertification information in a timely manner. By the time many clients actually receive a notice of benefits expiration in the mail, they have very little time to meet the recertification deadline. A federal law requiring government agencies to send out recertification packets a specified amount of time prior to the recertification deadline should be established in order to ensure that individuals continue to receive benefits.

Chart 10: Increasing the length of the recertification period would reduce barriers to recertification for clients.



## **Section IV – Policy Recommendations**

The process of successfully obtaining benefits, from knowledge to application to recertification, is complex and time-consuming. Although individuals face significant barriers, survey responses from site coordinators indicate that there are many opportunities for policy changes and investments at the local, state, and federal levels that have the potential to help clients to access and maintain benefits.

### **1. Support Funding Opportunities that Promote Benefits Access:**

- Provide funding opportunities for nonprofits to engage in all aspects of benefits access and maintenance.
- Invest in technology that allows people to receive benefits without going to government offices, and explore technological innovations that would use data matches to conduct automatic enrollment and simplify the verification process.

### **2. Simplify Verification and Re-enrollment Processes**

- Use information already collected by the government to verify eligibility criteria to reduce documentation required by applicants, where possible.
- Encourage states to waive face-to-face interview and finger imaging requirements for benefit programs, where relevant.
- Establish a federal law that requires agencies to remind clients about benefit expirations with adequate time for clients to recertify.

### **3. Promote a Client-Centered Service Delivery System**

- Provide federal investments in technical assistance and/or funding to states, to promote customer service in government.
- Create incentives for government offices to be more customer-friendly and consumer-centric.

## **Conclusion**

Work supports and public benefits keep millions of families out of poverty every year, and accessing multiple supports at once can significantly improve the likelihood of economic security and mobility. Yet, people face many obstacles when trying to obtain benefits. Single Stop site coordinators have direct knowledge of these obstacles, and therefore, are in a unique position to suggest policy changes that would allow individuals to access and maintain multiple benefits as simply as possible.

## Appendix

### Survey Results

*Question 1: To what degree do you believe the following would increase individuals' knowledge of benefits available to them and encourage them to apply?*

	Very Much	Somewhat	Not At All
<b>Community education &amp; outreach: For example, investments from government to ensure that information is available about the effect of immigration status on benefits eligibility/information about benefits available in multiple languages.</b>	<b>83.9% (26)</b>	16.1% (5)	0.0% (0)
<b>Public-private partnerships: Ensuring a role for local non-profits to assist in benefits knowledge access &amp; enrollment (like Single Stop or facilitated enrollment practices).</b>	<b>96.9% (31)</b>	3.1% (1)	0.0% (0)
<b>Providing information about benefits in places that low-income families live, work, and go to school.</b>	<b>90.3% (28)</b>	9.7% (3)	0.0% (0)

*Question 2: To what degree do you believe the following would reduce barriers to application for clients?*

	Very Much	Somewhat	Not At All
<b>Using online/telephone applications that do not require in-person office visits.</b>	<b>76.7% (23)</b>	20.0% (6)	3.3% (1)
<b>Subsidizing transportation to enrollment offices.</b>	<b>53.3% (16)</b>	40.0% (12)	6.7% (2)
<b>Ensuring that non-profits can assist in enrollment and follow-up with the agency.</b>	<b>96.7% (29)</b>	3.3% (1)	0.0% (0)
<b>Extending enrollment site office hours to accommodate applicant schedules.</b>	<b>60.0% (18)</b>	40.0% (12)	0.0% (0)
<b>Finding ways to make government offices more client-friendly, such as requiring staff training and providing incentives for staff to be more customer oriented and serve more eligible families.</b>	<b>90.0% (27)</b>	10.0% (3)	0.0% (0)
<b>Require student ID numbers in place of Social Security numbers for identification.</b>	13.8% (4)	41.4% (12)	<b>44.8% (13)</b>
<b>Require only a Social Security number and no other documentation from applicants for all benefit programs.</b>	<b>48.4% (15)</b>	12.9% (4)	38.7% (12)
<b>Modify work activity requirements.</b>	<b>50.0% (14)</b>	46.4% (13)	3.6% (1)

*Question 3: To what degree do you believe the following would reduce barriers to reapplication for clients?*

	<b>Very Much</b>	<b>Somewhat</b>	<b>Not At All</b>
<b>Increasing the length of recertification periods.</b>	<b>56.7% (17)</b>	33.3% (10)	10.0% (3)
<b>Implementing methods, such as web-based or telephone recertification, that allow clients to be recertified without having to go to a government office.</b>	<b>83.9% (26)</b>	12.9% (4)	3.2% (1)
<b>Automatic recertification conducted by government offices.</b>	<b>60.0% (18)</b>	33.3% (10)	6.7% (2)