

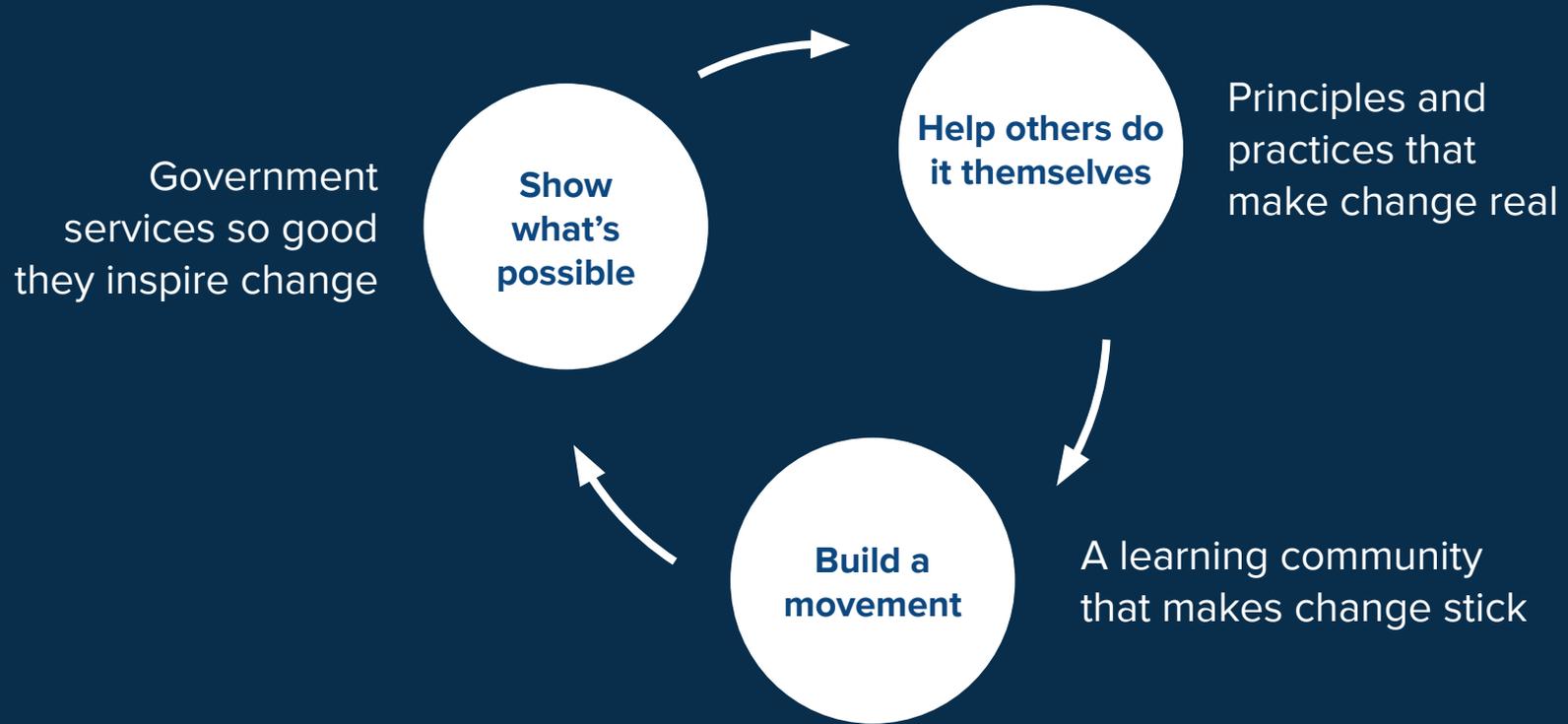
# Overcoming Barriers

**How research & human-centered design  
can support student access to CalFresh**

Francesca Costa, Sr. Program Manager  
Taranamol Kaur, Design Researcher  
Gwen Rino, Data Scientist

# Introductions

# Code for America partners with government to strengthen the delivery of public services through human-centered tech:



# What is CalFresh?

- CalFresh, formerly known as food stamps and known nationally as SNAP, is the state's largest and most effective anti-hunger program.
- With only 70% of eligible households enrolled, California has one of the lowest SNAP participation rates in the nation.
  - An estimated 1.7 million eligible Californians are not receiving the benefits, amounting to \$2.5 billion in unused federal funds.
- CalFresh has been linked to higher student retention rates, particularly among first-year socioeconomically disadvantaged students ([PPIC](#))

# What is GetCalFresh?

- A service provided by Code for America that acts as an **application assister**, available at: [www.getcalfresh.org](http://www.getcalfresh.org) ([demo here](#))
- It allows anyone to apply for CalFresh **using a mobile phone**, and guides them through the eligibility process using **email, text, and live chat support**
- Like an assister, it works **on top of existing systems**, translating required questions to plain language, and submitting them via MyBCW, C4Yourself, or YBN.

Code for America is a state outreach contractor

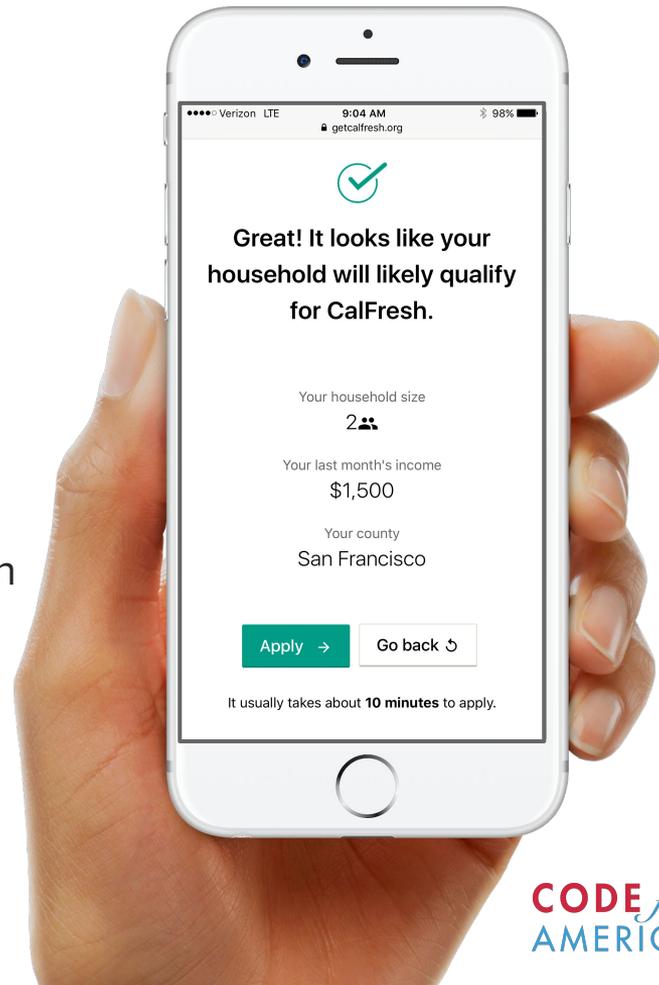


that focuses on digital community outreach and application assistance for CalFresh benefits

**How many people in the room have direct experience applying for CalFresh, either for yourself or helping others?**

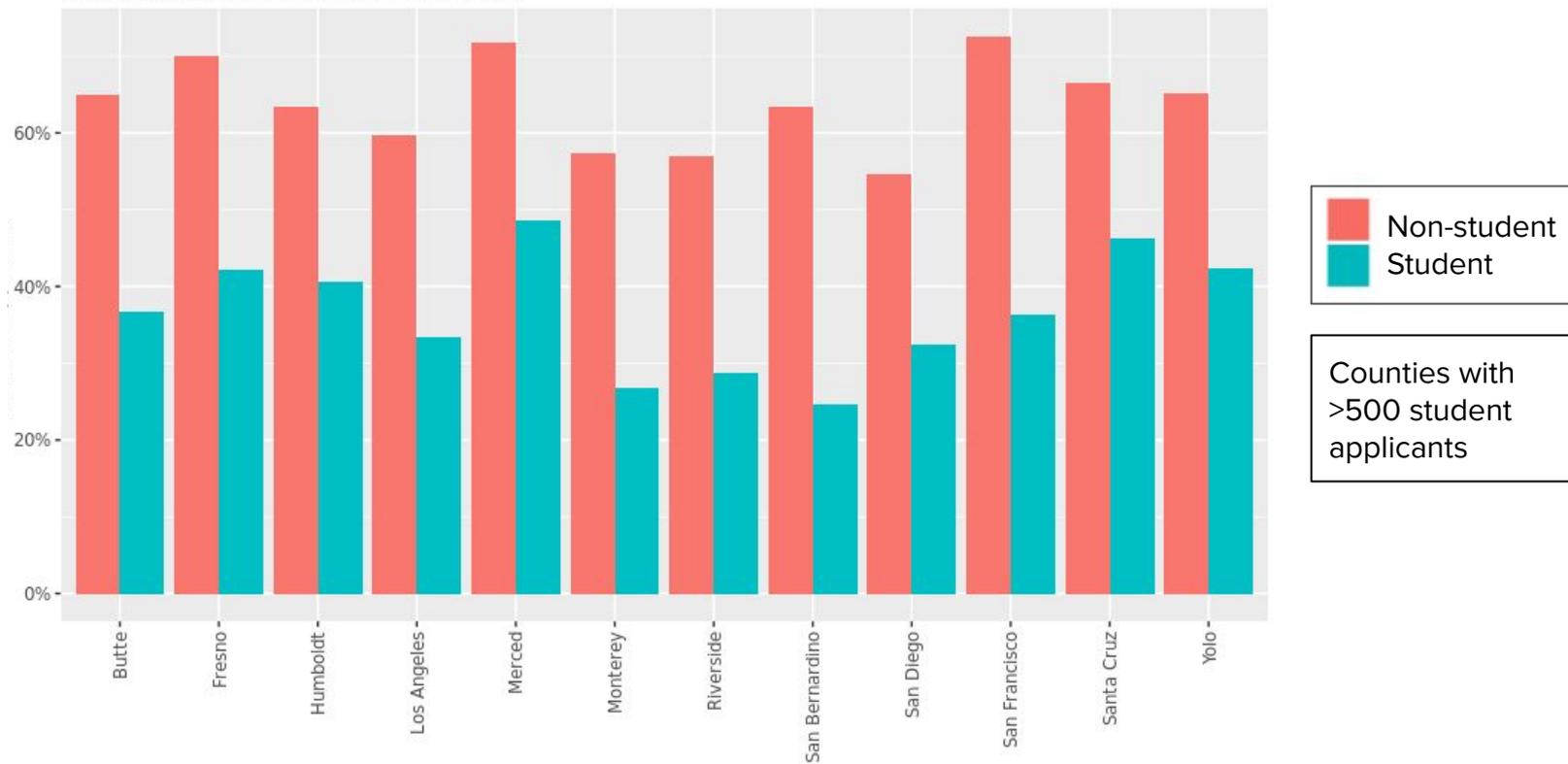
# We are constantly working to improve the client experience

- 12 minutes to complete
- Works on any device, no download
  - 60%+ of clients use mobile
- Considerate of limited data plans
- Available in English, Spanish, and Cantonese/Mandarin
- Student landing page addresses common concerns: [getcalfresh.org/students](https://getcalfresh.org/students)



“ I am a full-time, first-generation college student who just moved to San Luis Obispo to pursue an education at Cal Poly SLO. I have just enough money to pay for my rent this month with the money I have in my savings account. Even though I get some government aid to pay for my classes that doesn't include my books and other resources I need for school. I just found a job here and all the money I earn will go towards paying my rent. ”

# Comparison of CalFresh Approval Rates of Students and Non-students



**Why are student applicants for CalFresh approved at such a lower rate than non-students?**

# How to tackle a big problem

1. Understand the landscape
2. Learn from the data
3. Learn from our clients
4. Make a change
5. (Repeat)

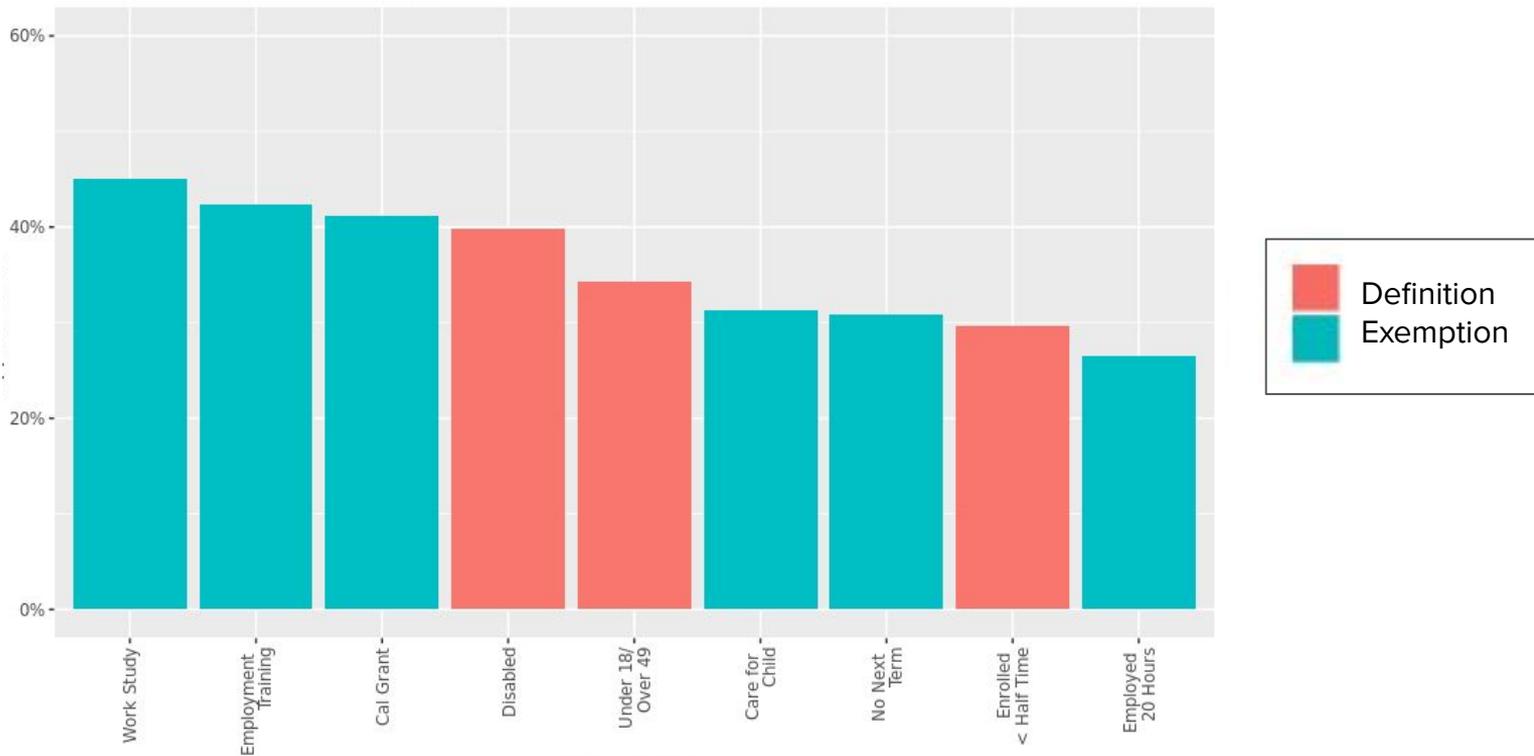
# Understanding the landscape

- People considered students to CalFresh are essentially ineligible unless proven otherwise.
- To be considered a student:
  - Enrolled half time or more, not disabled, between 18-49
- To be exempt as a student:
  - EOPS, parent of a young child, working 20 hours a week on average, approved for work-study...etc.
- Bottom line: Students must prove regular eligibility for CalFresh **and** their eligibility as a student.

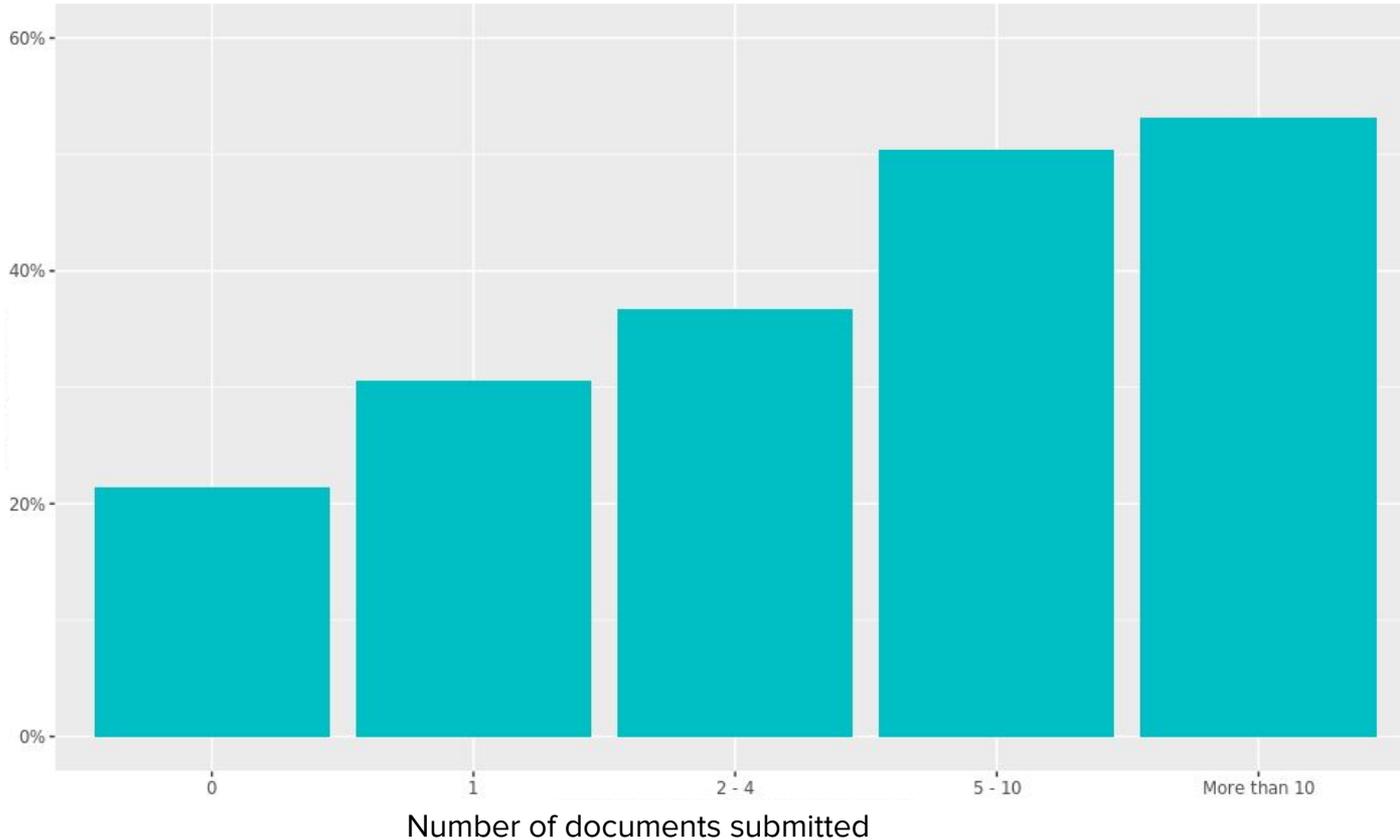
# How to tackle a big problem

1. Understand the landscape
2. Learn from the data
3. Learn from our clients
4. Make a change
5. (Repeat)

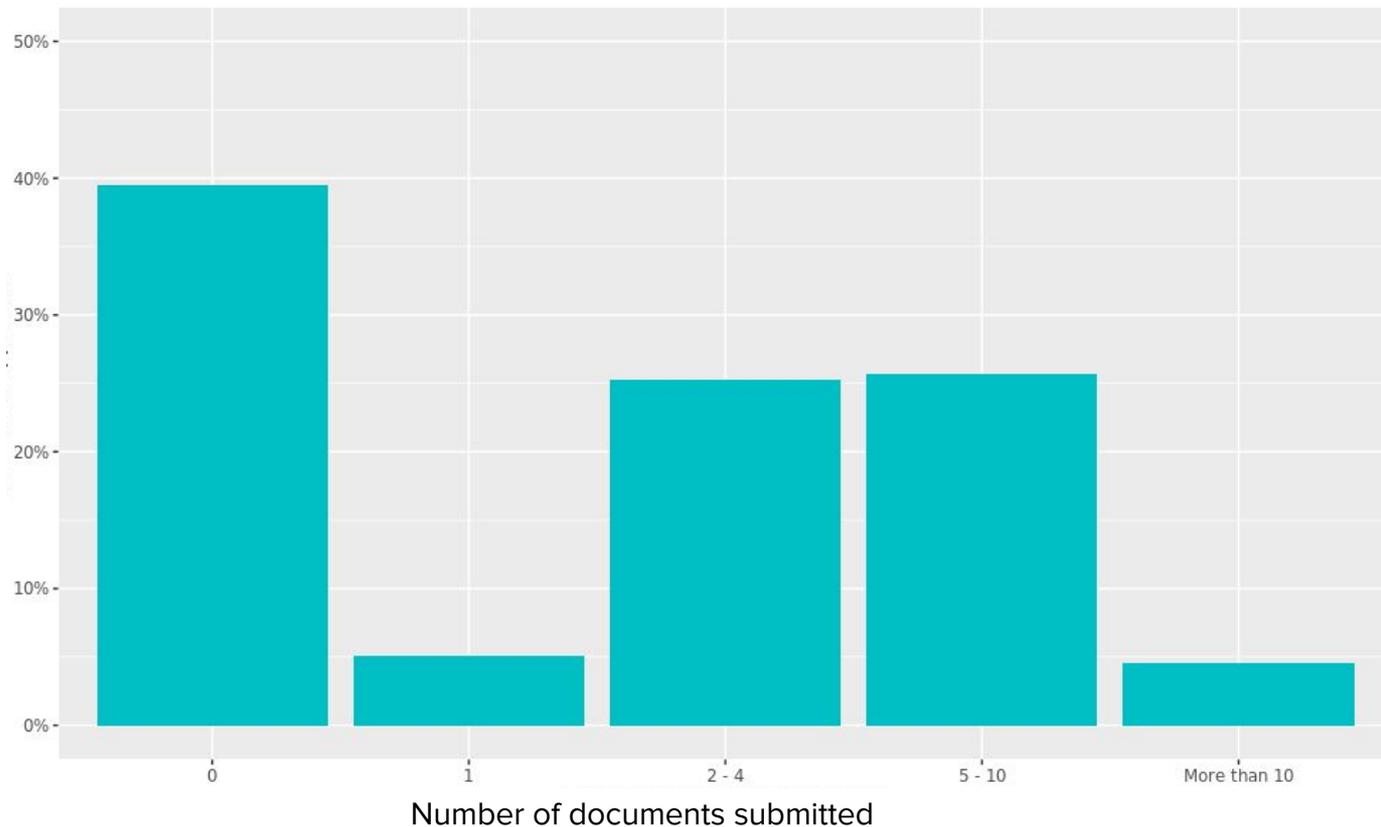
# Student CalFresh Approval Rates by Student Characteristic



# Student CalFresh Approval Rates by Number of Documents Submitted



# Percent of Student CalFresh Applicants Submitting Verification Documents



# How to tackle a big problem

1. Understand the landscape
2. Learn from the data
3. Learn from our clients
4. Make a change
5. (Repeat)

# Learning from our clients through a diary study

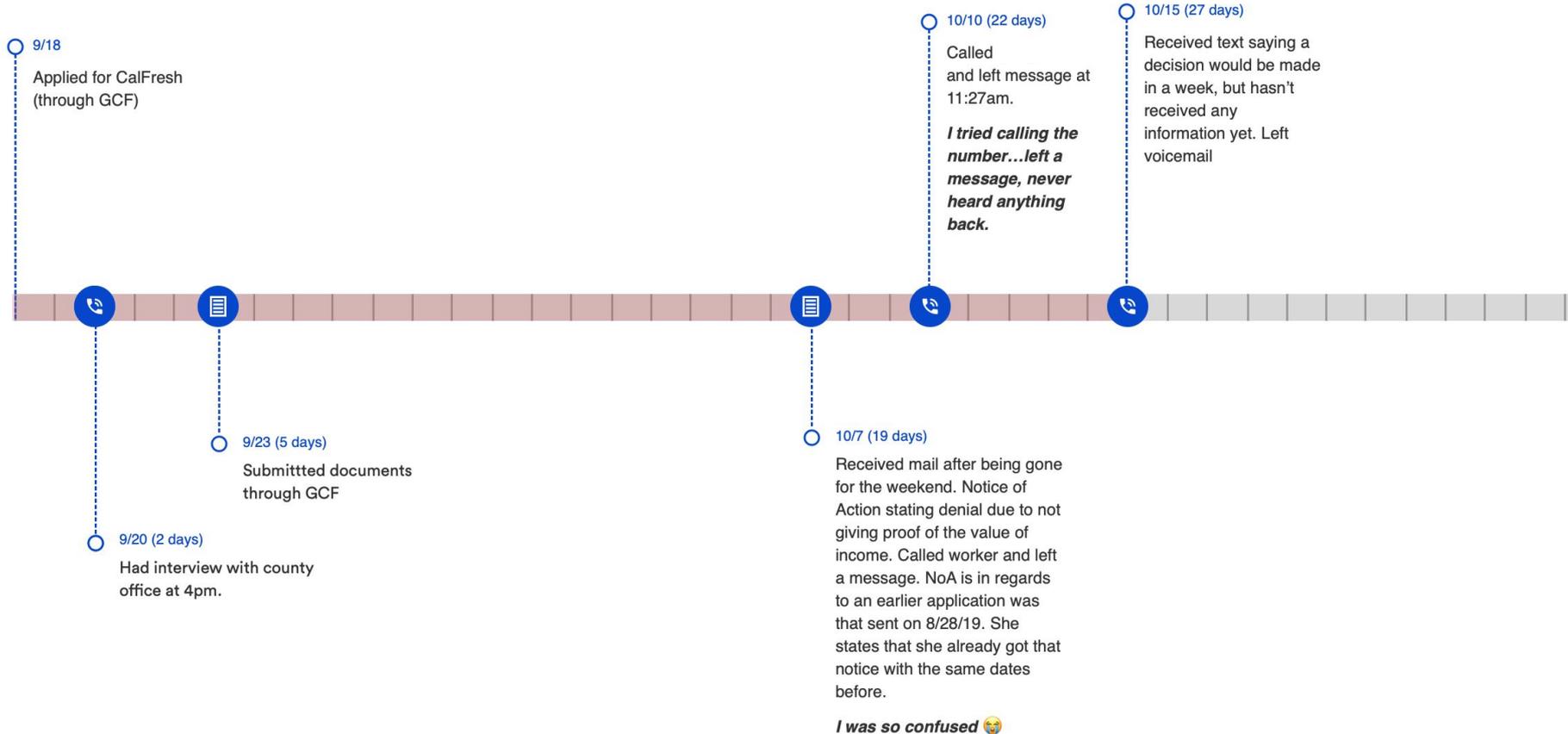
- Goal of the diary study: understand the behaviors, activities, and end-to-end experience of students applying to CalFresh.
- This method allows us to follow their journey through the benefits process, understand how they communicated with their case workers, how they found documents, and how they filled out the application.

# Learning from our clients through a diary study

- We spoke to 5 students in 2 different community colleges
- We sat with them and observed them applying through GetCalFresh
- Students texted or emailed us every time they had contact with the county
- Once they got their final determination, we had a closing interview about their process

# P02

 = open-ended periods of waiting



# How to tackle a big problem

1. Understand the landscape
2. Learn from the data
3. Learn from our clients
4. Make a change
5. (Repeat)

# Insight: Verification burden can be mitigated

- We observed that getting financial aid status verified was the first, most crucial step to getting approved for CalFresh
- Staff working in the student resource center shared that the hardest documents for her students to get were related to proving participation in programs that exempted students
- Clients told us during the diary study that they later had to upload a class schedule to show how many units they were taking

“ I can pull up the financial aid  
award letter on my laptop - I can  
screenshot it. ”

# New guidance for student status verification



## A copy of your financial aid award letter

This helps the county understand your financial situation.

 Pick a file from this computer

 Use your smartphone camera

Nothing to submit now



## A copy of your class schedule

This helps the county verify your enrollment status.

 Pick a file from this computer

 Use your smartphone camera

Nothing to submit now

Now we provide student-specific verification guidance so students know which extra documents they have to submit as soon as possible.

# Insight: Concept of a household is confusing

- We observed students starting the prescreener by including everyone in their home, and going back to change their answers once they realized that CalFresh households share meals and food budgets
- One client asked us for clarification because he thought he had to include anyone who lived at his address:
  - *“How many people live in your household? The number of people who live there total?”*
- Staff working in the student resource center shared that students often included people in the household unnecessarily, causing confusion between clients and county staff

“ Like one student, his family became homeless and he moved in with his best friend's family and his best friend was in Korea. This kid was 22, or 24 or something, and the part that is so confusing is ‘tell me about who is in their household.’ He tried to apply with all of them and I had to back him up and tell him he didn’t need their info. ”

# Guidance on household

Now we provide better guidance about when to include or exclude roommates early in the application.



## How many people do you regularly purchase and prepare food with, including yourself?

If you live with them, you must include children under 22, spouses, and parents.

Not sure who counts? ▾

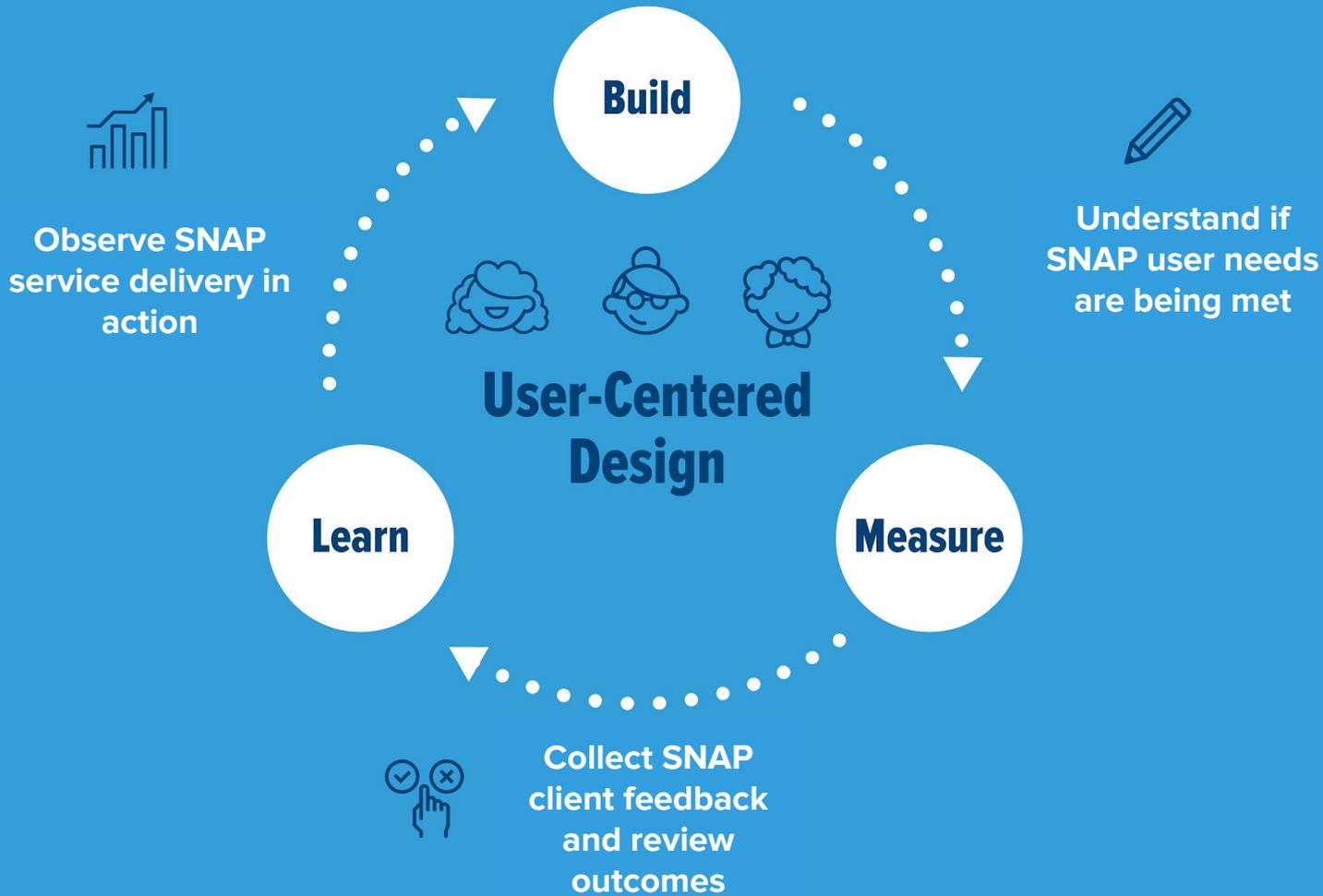
- **Roommates:** Do not include roommates unless you buy and prepare more than half of your meals together.
- **60+/disabled:** People who are 60+/disabled and live with others can choose to apply separately.
- **Immigrants:** Any immigrant can choose to opt-out and will not be asked about their immigration status. They still need to be included on this application.
- **Separation/divorce:** In cases of separation or divorce, only include the other person if they live with you. Include your children if they eat most of their meals with you. Children cannot be on multiple cases at once.
- **Pregnant mothers:** Do not include unborn children on this application.

3 people ▾

Continue →

# How to tackle a big problem

1. Understand the landscape
2. Learn from the data
3. Learn from our clients
4. Make a change
5. (Repeat)



# Q&A

# Thank you!

---

Francesca Costa, Sr. Program Manager | [fcosta@codeforamerica.org](mailto:fcosta@codeforamerica.org)  
Taranamol Kaur, Design Researcher | [taranamol@codeforamerica.org](mailto:taranamol@codeforamerica.org)  
Gwen Rino, Data Scientist | [gwen@codeforamerica.org](mailto:gwen@codeforamerica.org)