



Stanford eCorner

Gaining Experience to Empathize

Jennifer Pahlka, *Code for America*

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Code for America Founder and Executive Director Jennifer Pahlka explains how fellows in her organization enrolled in California's food-stamp program to understand what recipients actually go through. Pahlka also says user data revealed the human dimension of the problem being addressed.



Transcript

But I also was on this journey of understanding what it's like for folks who are less privileged in our society to work with government and that's really where I started with the San Francisco team who worked with Mayor Ed Lee on a problem. Again, that most of us probably don't have enough access to which is the problem of enrolling in food stamps. This is the application process or part of the application process for CalFresh, our state's nutrition assistance program. There are over 50 screens and at the end of it, you can print it. It's - at the end, you will get a call and still have an interview and that - so this is part of the problem that they identified. But the problem they were actually looking at is that once you, if, you make it through all of those several hundred questions and actually get enrolled in a program and start receiving these benefits, you will get an EBT card that looks a lot like a credit card. And typically, you will be on it for about a month and a half and then you will fall off the rolls. And this is extremely expensive for government because this is not easy on the user but it's also not easy on the government bureaucrat who is processing these forms. So when you've spent all the energy to get someone enrolled and they fall right off and have to do it all over again, it's a very inefficient process, they said can you help us with this problem of churn and we say great, do you know why there is this problem of churn and they said, well, we don't exactly know but the fellows actually enrolled in the program so that they could experience what, food stamp recipients were experiencing and the first thing they found is that you start to get letters in the mail from the Food Stamps Office that read something like this. And I like torturing people, forgive me.

I am going to read this to you for a minute. Your food stamp benefits in this quarter did not change as a result of the documents/information that we received because it would not have resulted in an increase in benefits. Your food stamp benefits in this quarter did not change as a result of the documents/information that we received because the new rule says that when you report some changes, the county cannot lower your food stamps until the next quarter. The county has reconfigured your food stamps using information you reported and the food stamp amounts - it goes on and on like this there's pages of these things and you get them really often. Now, somewhere embedded in one of these letters is the notice that you're supposed to send them some additional piece of documentation or they are going to drop you from the rolls and no one reads the letters. And if you do read the letters, you don't know that that's what they're asking for. And this is why people were falling off the rolls. Did I torture you enough? Do you want me to keep reading? So we got a lot of letters like this. It was super fun. So what happens when you don't read that letter and you don't comply is that you have this lovely EBT card and you go to the check-out counter to get your food and you're the first person.

You finally get to the front of the line and your groceries are all bagged up at this point and they slide your card and you are not going home with those groceries and the people behind you in line are going what's wrong with the welfare mom in front of me. So you are both humiliated and hungry and the data show that a significant proportion of Food Stamp benefits are spent at midnight on Wednesdays, because that's when the food - the EBT cards are recharged. Who goes shopping at midnight? Well,

probably college students, other than you. People who are hungry go shopping at midnight. So these are people. Again, this is another time where you can see - you're looking at the data and what you're seeing is a person in need who can't get what they need because of bad government interfaces.