

AWS Helps Code for America Serve Vulnerable Populations

Code for America created the GetCalFresh website to help close the participation gap in California's nutrition assistance program. Code for America works to bring government into the digital age, improving how government serves the people. AWS GovCloud ensures the website is secure and compliant.

Closing the Participation Gap

Imagine needing nutrition assistance, qualifying for it, but not being able to get it. That's a reality for millions of Californians. Many of the state's residents qualify for CalFresh, the state's implementation of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, previously known as the Food Stamp Program), but are not receiving benefits. [Code for America](#) began work in 2014 to address the participation gap, which is the result of eligible people not applying or beginning the application process but failing to complete it.

Bringing Government into the Digital Age

Code for America is a nonprofit that uses technology to improve how governments serve people, starting with vulnerable populations. Its three main program areas are criminal justice, workforce development, and social safety-net programs. When the organization discovers a problem, such as the CalFresh participation gap, it identifies why the problem exists and then creates digital solutions to solve it.

One participation barrier was the state's online application. That application is not mobile-responsive, which limited who could access it, and it proved difficult to complete, requiring up to an hour or more of an applicant's time. That time investment creates obstacles for people with low tech literacy and without consistent access to technology and high-speed networks. The next major hurdle was document delivery. Once an application is started, applicants must often submit supporting documents to move the process forward. CalFresh is administered at the county level, and each county sets its own document submission requirements, including some that request documents to be faxed. Again, barriers included low tech literacy and no access to technology and fax machines. In addition, applicants often lacked an easy way to digitally transmit documents to counties that allowed digital transmissions. Another impediment was the failure of applicants to show up for in-person interviews. Most counties mailed notices of interview times, but vulnerable populations, such as the homeless or those who move frequently, don't have a stable mailing address. For many, mailed notices simply were never received and, without the interview, the application process was stymied.

Implementing Human-Centered Design to Remove Barriers

Code for America created [GetCalFresh](#) in response to these issues, and its developers focused on usability and user-centered design. With GetCalFresh, applicants can complete the streamlined application in 10 minutes or less. Vulnerable populations are more likely to have smartphone access, even if they lack a stable mailing address or reliable computer

Time to complete CalFresh application dropped **from 60+ minutes to 10 minutes or less.**



Company: Code of America
Industry: Nonprofit
Country: United States
Employees: 70
Website: www.codeforamerica.org/

About Code of America

Code for America believes government can work for the people, by the people, in the digital age, starting with the people who need it most. The nonprofit uses technology to improve criminal justice, workforce development, and social safety-net programs.

Benefits

- 37 of California's 58 counties integrate with the GetCalFresh app
- Time to complete application dropped from 60+ minutes to 10 minutes or less
- The GetCalFresh app processes 20,000 new applications monthly
- Since launch, 390,000 people have used the GetCalFresh app
- Application meets U.S. government security and compliance requirements

AWS Services Used

- [Amazon Elastic Compute Cloud \(Amazon EC2\)](#)
- [Amazon Simple Storage Service \(Amazon S3\)](#)
- [Amazon Relational Database Server \(Amazon RDS\)](#)

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Ben Sheldon, Engineering Manager,
Code for America

access. The app also allows use of a smartphone's photo function to submit documents. Additionally, GetCalFresh enables interview notices to be sent by email or text, rather than by mail.

As iterations of the GetCalFresh app matured, the development team recognized the need for security and compliance safeguards. The team turned to Amazon Web Services (AWS) as a way to help developers lower costs and meet U.S. government security and compliance requirements. [Amazon Elastic Compute Cloud](#) (Amazon EC2) provides secure, resizable compute capacity in the cloud and hosts client- and worker-facing versions of the app. “GetCalFresh is hosted using two EC2 instances, one hosting the web applications that a client interacts with,” says Ash Campo, Code for America's engineering lead for GetCalFresh. “The second EC2 instance hosts the backend worker, which runs jobs that send a client's application to their county,” Campo explains. [Amazon Simple Storage Service](#) (Amazon S3) provides storage capacity for the documents that applicants upload during the process. [Amazon Relational Database Server](#) (Amazon RDS) securely stores personal data that applicants provide during the process.

Relying on AWS to Flexibly Test Solutions

“The emphasis on civic engagement that Code for America brings is really important. You're tapping into something in the United States that needs to happen,” notes Leo O'Farrell, former CalFresh program director at the Human Services Agency of San Francisco. AWS enables that engagement.

“AWS allows us to host a reliable, secure application that can be used simultaneously by thousands of applicants daily,” says Ben Sheldon, engineering manager for Code for America. That reliability and security are critical to the organization, which coordinates with local

governments to deliver critical services to serve residents better.

The GetCalFresh website doesn't replace the government's website; instead it serves as a digital assister. “We function similarly to how food banks and other community organizations work,” says Sheldon. A food-bank worker helps people navigate the application process; GetCalFresh provides similar assistance, but digitally.

The GetCalFresh team's guiding principle is closing the GetCalFresh participation gap: reaching people who are eligible for CalFresh but not enrolled, which is approximately 2.3 million people. Measured against that goal, GetCalFresh is positioned for massive impact. The use of the app is gradually expanding across the state. Currently, 37 of California's 58 counties integrate with GetCalFresh, and the program will be integrated statewide by June 1, 2019. Los Angeles, Riverside, San Diego, and San Francisco number among the counties where GetCalFresh is live currently, reaching over 40 percent of the state's population in those counties alone. The website has garnered 390,000 users since its launch and helps 20,000 applicants per month complete the application process.

About the Partner

Code for America is an [AWS Partner Network](#) (APN) [Standard Technology Partner](#). The organization holds a validated qualification as an [AWS Public Sector Partner: Government](#).