

To: CalSAWS Project, Joint Powers Authority, and Project Steering Committee

From: CalSAWS Advocates Group

Re: Recommendations for BenefitsCal Soft Launch.

Date: November 23, 2020

At the November JPA and PSC meetings, CalSAWS shared that the timeline and scope for the initial launch of BenefitsCal is being reconsidered. We heard the concerns from counties about how to manage the risks of two significant changes – launching both the new portal (BenefitsCal) and migrating counties to CalSAWS – at the same time.

We want to raise again our recommendation to follow a common practice in User Centered Design, which is to have a soft launch or pilot launch of a new website before it is shared with the broader audience. This is generally an accepted practice in the California administration of public social services: piloting new reporting requirements and other changes are often tested in a small, medium and large counties to identify flaws and fix them before going “live”; CalWIN Counties have been provided a “sandbox environment” to use before going live with CalSAWS.

A soft launch for the BenefitsCal portal could work in different ways:

One option could be to start with one or two counties providing the opportunity to use BenefitsCal for the first month. Other counties would continue to use their existing benefits portals until it's clear the BenefitsCal is ready for them to transition.

Another option could be to have BenefitsCal run concurrently with the existing systems. Then people be given the option to try it, but if it is not working for what they need, they can still go back to their respective account on an existing portal.

With these approaches, the counties and consumers could provide feedback, and if the BenefitsCal system was not usable there would still be options for consumers until the issues are resolved.

By having a soft launch, risks and problems can be identified in advance before LA and other counties move over to the new system. Workers can get familiar with the software and consumer needs and share their learning with others.

Without a soft launch or pilot, millions of consumers would be in the hands of a system that has not been fully vetted and proven by their peers. Low income people cannot afford to have experimentation with their access to vital services. Additionally, thousands of workers from LA and CIV counties would need to support people in accessing services with two new systems (CalSAWS and BenefitsCal) all at once.

A soft launch is the ultimate proof of concept and we owe it to Californians to ensure that the products we provide for them work as intended and reduce barriers to services.

In addition, we urge CalSAWS Project and the BenefitsCal vendor, Deloitte, to work with Code for America and GetCalFresh to test the new BenefitsCal system before it goes live.

GetCalFresh could, for example, submit sample data (not from real clients) to the system in order to develop feedback that would help improve the website before it formally launches.

We strongly encourage CalSAWS to consider a soft launch and partnership with Code for America as part of the Risk management strategies for the new online portal.

Sincerely,

On behalf of the CalSAWS Advocates Group,

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