

INTERVIEWING SKILLS: AN OVERVIEW

Interviewing skills come into play in all CalFresh outreach encounters— whether explaining the CalFresh Program, how to apply, eligibility rules and procedures, applicant and recipient rights. Exchanging clear, relevant information in a limited amount of time is the hallmark of an effective outreach worker.

Reading this overview should help you acquire *knowledge* of interviewing skills — the ability to get and give appropriate information. Training and sustained practice will help you *master* them.

In actual interviews, skills do not come into play in a linear sequence. We've isolated, linked and described skills in a step-by-step procedure to speed up the learning process. In real-life, skilled interviewers integrate these skills in different patterns, using judgment, making choices, and improvising to meet unique situations, requirements, and conditions. Regardless of how they are sequenced and the relative weight they carry in different interviews, the behaviors described here are always present to some degree regardless of interviewee, interviewer, or interview conditions.

The skills and strategies described here take limited interview time into account. They are intended to help you obtain optimum results within severe time limits. Compensating for inadequate interviewing skills wastes time. *Correcting inaccurate information, adjusting unrealistic expectations or explaining away confusion takes more time than incorporating these behaviors into your skills repertoire.*

Learning these skills takes time, but once mastered, you will be able to interview more efficiently in a limited amount of time.

The Outreach Interview

The CalFresh outreach interview's purpose — like the legal, medical, and the social services interview — is to gather and exchange information. Although it seems simple,

pursuing this purpose in the outreach interview can become complex. Not only are different kinds of information exchanged, but the needs of the interviewee and interviewer may differ as well.

Interviewees need to:

- Gain understanding about your organization and how it can help them get or keep CalFresh benefits.
- Get answers to their questions about CalFresh benefits.
- Present their situation in their own way.

As the interviewer, you need to:

- Inform people of the kind and extent of help that they can expect from you, your organization and others
- Get accurate, complete information about the presented problem
- Further their understanding of possible solutions
- Enlist their participation in resolving the problem.

The interviewer's role and responsibilities flow directly from what is required to meet these needs and the interview's purpose.

Interviewer's Responsibilities

Your overall responsibility as an interviewer is to *create the conditions that promote an effective interview or one-on-one contact*. Interviewees experience these conditions as a climate of support, trust, and competence. The interviewer's knowledge and skill is the base from which these conditions must be built. The skills with which the interviewer creates these conditions are the subject of this overview.

Support and Trust

Conditions of support and trust are highly related to the purpose of exchanging clear, relevant information. Anything that contributes to feelings of insecurity or threat reduces the

interview's effectiveness by causing interviewees to protect and defend themselves.

Providing emotional support enhances feelings of importance and self-worth. Emotional support leads to trust and tends to reduce the general discomfort one may feel about talking to an outreach worker and about specific problems such as those which arise from memory lapses and communication difficulties. With a sense of support and trust the person interviewed is likely to become more cooperative, speak more freely and openly, and respond more positively to interviewer limits and to requests for assistance.

A climate of support and trust includes, but is not limited to, simple demonstrations of respect. Showing respect is sometimes equated with good manners, such as being courteous, being on time, being careful to keep commitments, etc. These "manners" are important but peripheral to the interview itself. Your behavior in conducting the interview has a more profound impact on interviewee's sense that they are respected than do common courtesies. The critical behaviors in creating conditions of support and trust are explored later in this narrative as specific skills.

Content and Process

Interviewer responsibilities are related to two aspects of the interview: *content* (what the interview is about, what is said, the information exchanged) and *process* (how the interview proceeds, how it is guided and managed to achieve specific objectives).

Your responsibility for interview content and process varies according to interview objectives. For example, in an initial outreach encounter, you are responsible for providing content like information about CalFresh eligibility requirements and explanations about how CalFresh works. In helping people complete application forms, their situation, however, is the primary interview content.

You are always responsible for the interview *process*. How you respond to the interviewee, focus the interview, and question the interviewee will affect its content. You must listen carefully

to the interviewee's statements, mark off areas of inquiry that are relevant, and elicit the information needed in those areas. The process — including the sequencing of questions, pacing, and tone of the interview — is mostly within your control. With specific objectives in mind, you are responsible for guiding the interview in ways designed to promote an open exchange and to get the information needed.

You as the outreach worker maintain responsibility for an interview's process regardless of how much responsibility interviewees take for its content. Responsibility for the content and process of the interview — like responsibility for creating conditions of support and trust — is carried out through mastery of certain skills.

Interviewing Skills

Creating the conditions that promote an effective interview is largely a matter of increased awareness and mastery of these five foundation skills:

1. *Attending the interviewee*
2. *Focusing the interview and questioning the interviewee*
3. *Reflecting the interviewee's statements and feelings*
4. *Expressing facts, opinions, and feelings*
5. *Interpreting the interviewee's situation*

These skills are woven in different patterns and take on more or less importance in different interviews, but they are always present to some degree in good interviewing.

Attending the Interviewee

Attending the speaker is the most basic skill in interviewing. *Attending consists of all behaviors, verbal and non-verbal, which demonstrate that the worker is paying attention and cares about hearing the speaker's message.* Attending puts interviewees at ease and encourages them to tell their story.

Good attending is important throughout the interview, but essential in the initial phases. People react immediately to an interviewer's behavior. Based on that reaction, they then decide how open they will be. Attending assumes great importance in the outreach interview because people always bring more than a factual account of their problem.

The behaviors involved in attending include:

Good eye contact

Looking directly at interviewees lets them know that you are interested in and following what they are saying. It also serves a monitoring function when you are speaking. By looking at the interviewee you get nonverbal signals that tell you whether they are listening and understanding what is being said.

Attentive body posture

Facing the interviewee and leaning forward slightly in a relaxed, open posture connotes interest and involvement. Facing away from the interviewee or leaning away may connote distance or disinterest. Crossed arms and other closed body postures may connote defensiveness. Moving toward the interviewee too much or too abruptly, however, can be felt as pressure or invasion.

Encouragements to talk

Direct verbal and nonverbal responses to something the interviewee has said can convey that you would like to know more. Verbal encouragements are "...tell me more about that..." or "...and after that?" Other invitations to talk include nodding one's head, supportive voice tone and tentative voice inflections. Ending sentences in a higher inflection, as in a question, invites more talk while ending them in a lower inflection suggests that this is the last word, cutting off discussion.

Relevant note-taking

Jotting down information that is important shows that you are not only listening but are also recording relevant information. Too much note-taking, on the other hand, can distract the interviewee and reduce the information flow.

Intentional silence

Allowing people to proceed at their own pace with you listening silently is important because it gives them time to sort out feelings, to think, and to decide whether to continue. Silence on your part communicates that you're listening and giving folks time to tell their story in their own way. Excessive talking by an interviewer is usually a sign of insecurity and affects the interview adversely.

Focusing the Interview and Questioning the Interviewee

Skilled interviewers actively guide and direct the interviewee to give needed information through focusing and questioning behaviors. These skills help you get and clarify information, make implicit information explicit, and help stimulate the interviewee's memory.

Responding to relevant statements and paying less attention to what is not relevant

allows you to guide the person to useful information *indirectly*. For example, the events that have led up to the situation of needing CalFresh benefits are of equal importance in people's subjective experience. They are not all of equal importance for a successful CalFresh application, however. The interviewee must be directed to those areas that yield useful information and away from those areas that do not.

You can provide unobtrusive guidance by responding verbally and non-verbally to statements that are useful and by withholding responses to irrelevant information. This allows interviewees to direct and focus themselves in relation to your expressed interest. This kind of guidance tends to be indirect and permissive.

Some interviewees, however, require clearer, more explicit direction.

Tactful interrupting is called for when the interviewee wanders from the subject, is inclined to describe events in too much detail, or begins to dwell on aspects of her situation which are not relevant. In cases where self-direction, facilitated by your responses, is not sufficient, you must firmly guide by interrupting and re-

directing the interview. Interrupting directs the interviewee's attention away from something that is important to the interviewee and toward something that is important to you. Because the information is important to the interviewee, before interrupting, acknowledge what he is trying to express and then move on to what you want to know.

For example, when a person is caught up in retelling the personal hurts which led her to get a divorce and need food assistance, "...and then he...and then he...and then he..." you might tactfully interrupt by saying, "I know from what you say that your relationship with your husband has been very difficult, and I think you were justified in seeking a divorce. To apply for CalFresh, however, I need to know about...Can you tell me about that?"

Focusing and directing the interview is carried out by skillfully using questions. Questions are the most direct devices for getting and clarifying information, making implicit information explicit, and stimulating the interviewee's memory.

Asking open-ended questions allows interviewees to direct their own response. They are appropriate when you are uncertain what specific information you need, when you want the person to elaborate a point, or when you want the interviewee to talk freely. Open-ended questions impose no limits on the interviewee's response: "How has it been since I saw you last?" or "What do you think about applying for CalFresh today?" or "Could you tell me about....?"

Open-ended questions yield a great deal of varied information and can give you a better understanding of the interviewee's motivation, feelings, attitudes, and experiences. They also lay the groundwork for more directive and pointed questions.

Asking closed-ended questions limits the response. They can usually be answered with a "yes" or "no" or in a few words. The closed-ended question is most often used to get concrete facts. Examples are: "Do you receive

Social Security benefits?" or "Are you married?" or "How old are your children?"

Interviews are commonly thought of as nothing more than questioning someone, the hidden assumption being that if interviewers ask the right questions they will get the information needed.

If people were simple, rational creatures programmed like computers to give correct answers to appropriate questions, this view would be justified. Few interviews, however, proceed effectively on questions alone. When you rely heavily or exclusively on questions, people may feel they are being interrogated, become defensive, and limit their responses to information needed to satisfy you. Many people will withhold cooperation if you do nothing more than question them.

Questions, if they are to elicit information, must be accompanied by other behaviors that acknowledge the interviewee as a person. By doing so, you demonstrate that the interviewee has thoughts and feelings that are important to understanding the problem and pursuing a resolution.

Reflecting the Interviewee's Thoughts and Feelings

Reflecting thoughts and feelings involves demonstrating verbally and explicitly that the interviewee's message, concerns, and feelings have been heard and understood. All speakers want assurance that the person to whom they are speaking is listening. If you do not comment on what the interviewee has said and simply move to another question, the interviewee does not know whether his statements are heard or valued. With no acknowledgement, people may be discouraged from giving more information or, conversely, repeat themselves unnecessarily to insure that they are heard.

You can assure people that they are heard by reflecting — restating or summarizing — their statements. In an effective interview two kinds of statements should be reflected: content and feelings.

Reflecting content is repeating the information the person has given by restating, paraphrasing, or summarizing their message. The objective is to reflect the essence of what is said. Reflecting content reassures people that they have been heard and reassures you that you are interpreting what has been said accurately. Reflecting content allows for correcting error and clarifying confusing aspects of the message. It may also highlight and emphasize important information.

In reflecting by restating, the interviewer repeats the interviewee's ideas and words:

Interviewee: They've stopped my benefits. I don't have any food except what I get from them. I don't know what I'm going to do.

Interviewer: They've stopped your benefits. You don't have any food, and you don't know what you're going to do....

In reflecting by paraphrasing, the interviewer uses your own words to express the interviewee's idea:

Interviewee: I don't like to tell people about that.

Interviewer: It's hard for you to talk about it.

In reflecting the message by summarizing, the interviewer expresses the person's idea in fewer words.

Interviewee: You have to understand. Billy isn't like Mike. Mike's got a temper, but Billy, he'll kill me and the kids. And even if he didn't, I'd be scared all the time he was going to.

Interviewer: You're not afraid of Mike, but you think Billy is really dangerous.

Reflecting content is most effective when stated tentatively or as a question and has the same objective and is expressed in the same ways the interviewer reflects content. *What* is reflected, however, is different. Here you are reflecting what you perceive to be the interviewee's *feelings* about what he is describing.

Reflecting feelings is important in an interview because it acknowledges the interviewee as a whole person. Rather than a fact and information reporter, you are treating the interviewee as personally involved in the problem with strong feelings about it.

People may express feelings verbally. More likely, they will reveal feelings non-verbally. Even with careful attention to what they say and how they say it, you can only guess what other people are feeling. Strive to convey in words and manner that your thoughts are tentative guesses that the interviewee must confirm or correct.

Interviewee: It's all too much. It's been six months since he died, but when I try to think about what I am going to do or even try to sort out his things, I just start crying.

Interviewer: I imagine that you're still grieving deeply over your husband's death and feel overwhelmed and in great distress when you try to make plans or go through his things.

Acknowledging a person's feelings is one way of conveying your concern for the person and can increase the person's trust and cooperation.

Reflecting feelings may cause the interviewee to explain them, revealing more useful information.

Interviewee: Food is so expensive. And my landlord keeps raising the rent. I can't use food benefits to pay rent. He's trying to make it so expensive we can't stay there. Then he can change the building to condos or something.

Interviewer: Your landlord is increasing your rent again, and you think he may be trying to get rid of you. I imagine that makes you very angry — and scared.

Interviewee: Yeah, it makes me angry, but I'm scared that if I don't pay he'll evict me. I'm already a month behind, and he's threatening to kick me out. But I really need food first. That's why I came here, because I was told that you could help me get more food.

Reflecting the feelings suggested by nonverbal clues of “quiet” people can help them begin talking. For example, when people move restlessly in their chairs and speak only to answer questions in a few words, you may say, “I imagine that you find it uncomfortable being here and it is hard for you to talk about what’s going on right now.”

When reflecting *negative* statements, you should express the negative feelings which have been expressed explicitly and the implicit need or want which underlies the feelings.

Interviewee: Will this thing ever be over? I can’t stand it if it goes on much longer. It takes too long. Doing what you are saying will take forever.

Interviewer: I know from what you have said that this problem is very troubling to you and you don’t want it to drag on. You want things to get settled quickly.

When reflecting *negative* statements, expressing the negative feelings along with the implicit need or want which underlies the feelings is a powerful strategy.

The other side is what people need or want. Expressing what they need or want shifts attention from a complaint about the way things are to a desire for how people want things to be. It allows the possibility of a psychological shift from feelings of helplessness and powerlessness in the face of the conditions they are complaining about to feelings of personal power in pursuing what they want. If the dialogue above continues the worker can describe some of the constraints in the situation and some of the things the interviewee can do to bring a speedier resolution.

Reflecting feelings can help people see, acknowledge, and manage their feelings better. Reflecting feelings primary purpose, however, is to affirm people. It’s like saying, “I am with you. I can sense and I *think* I understand your feelings about this.”

Expressing Facts and Feelings

In addition to being responsible for the interview *process*, you are also responsible for some of its *content*: giving information about the organization, eligibility for services, and how the rules impacts on the interviewee’s situation.

Skills of expression come into play when you inform the person about the nature and extent of services provided, eligibility requirements and procedures. Skills of expression are also used when you explain the regulations, define terms, and describe alternatives for resolving a problem. You also must develop the ability to express your feelings and opinions.

Expressing facts Giving information involves making clear, simple statements which the interviewee can easily understand and pacing the information flow in relation to how quickly or slowly the interviewee grasps what has been said.

Sometimes you may not know whether you are being understood or not. Some people will say they understand when they don’t for fear of appearing stupid. Try to reduce potential embarrassment by asking people to let you know whenever you aren’t being clear or are talking too fast. This tells people directly that it’s all right to interrupt, to ask questions, to ask for a clearer explanation, or to ask for a slower pace.

Expressing feelings Sometimes you need to express your feelings: “I am very happy to tell you...” or “I felt angry and frustrated when I couldn’t get the information from your caseworker, but I don’t intend to let my feelings jeopardize your relationship with her or stall your hearing.” or “It saddens me to see what this has caused you.”

Simple expressions of feeling enhance the climate of openness and trust and serve as a model.

Expressing feelings increases trust and cooperation by reassuring the person that you are relating to this situation as a full human being, not as a robot devoid of feelings. Such expressions should be limited, however, to those

that achieve this purpose. It is counter-productive for you to use people to ventilate your negative feelings and frustrations.

Sometimes expressing feelings serves another purpose. Over time people may learn how better to express and handle their own feelings. When you acknowledge your feelings simply, directly, and objectively, you're modeling how to handle feelings effectively. By showing that feelings will not adversely affect your performance, interviewees may begin imitating your behavior.

Interpreting the Interviewee's Situation

Interpreting is a complex skill that involves some of the skills described above, particularly attending, reflecting, and expressing.

Interpreting consists of listening to and reflecting what interviewees are saying and expressing ideas or a frame of reference to help them see their situation more clearly or see it differently. The function of interpreting another's situation is to increase their understanding of it and prepare them to deal with it more effectively.

Interpreting involves taking the essence of what the interviewee has said, confirming what is useful to a resolution, correcting or recasting what is not, and adding new information and perspective. It may include describing options available to the person for resolving the problem. In some cases interpreting involves connecting events or ideas that lead to a conclusion or a path of action.