

Improving California Children's Participation in the Nutrition Program- CalFresh

Statement of Issue:

In California, CalFresh (federally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP) is a federally mandated, state-supervised, and county-operated government entitlement program that provides monthly food benefits to assist low-income households in purchasing food to maintain adequate nutritional levels. Food and nutrition assistance programs like the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infant, and Children (WIC), and CalFresh, help children gain access to adequate amounts of nutritious foods. However, California's enrollment in CalFresh is lower than the NSLP and WIC programs.

More children participate in free school meals and WIC than CalFresh. In 2015, 24% of California children (0-17) participated in CalFresh. More than twice as many age-eligible children (51%) were enrolled in free school meals, and 44 % of infants and 34% of young children were enrolled in WIC. According to the California Department of Social Services, all children who are U.S. citizens or Legal Permanent Residents may qualify to receive CalFresh benefits, regardless of where their parents were born. Over the past decade, initiatives to provide supplemental benefits (often termed "nutrition incentives") to SNAP (CalFresh) recipients in California and other states have shown that when low-income families have more money for fruits and vegetables, they buy and eat more fruits and vegetables. These programs lower food insecurity and improve the health of children. Low participation rates in the CalFresh program are indicative that California families are not enrolling their children in the program. While the reasons may vary, some challenges may include, perceived stigma around food stamps; residents may be reluctant to apply; some immigrants living in the country legally fear that signing up may affect their chances of becoming citizens in the future; long-standing rules and regulations to enroll in CalFresh.

Policy recommendations:

Reluctance to apply is associated with the tedious application process and devotion it takes to maintain benefits throughout the year. Applicants must be re-interviewed every year and update their information every six months. Unclear guidelines and lack of support from overburdened county officials often deter families living in poverty from pursuing these benefits as they need more flexibility and support to overcome common challenges. These challenges include lack of transportation, lack of time to wait in long lines at county offices and lack of flexibility in setting appointment times during normal business hours. Furthermore, since the CalFresh program is administered at a county level, these families need reassurance from county officials that participating in such program will not affect their legal status.

- Implement data sharing between SSI and CalFresh in order to reduce food insecurity
- Promote collaboration among program services for at risk children to develop data sharing agreements to streamline enrollment into CalFresh.
- Align CalFresh recertification with SSI and Medi-Cal redetermination to lesson recipient and programmatic demands

Rationale:

Most studies have shown that CalFresh participation leads to a significant reduction in food insecurity; receiving CalFresh benefits provides more financial resources to purchase food. During the summer, when school is not in session, food insecurity rises because children are not receiving free or reduced priced lunch and/or breakfast. In a study conducted by the USDA, the prevalence of very low food insecurity was reduced to one third, in a group of children who received an additional \$60 per month. Therefore, expanding CalFresh offers additional benefits, such as reducing food insecurity, when compared to other food assistance programs. Current efforts by the Trump Administration aim to dismantle the plentiful benefits SNAP offers to participants. Earlier this year, President Trump proposed a more than \$213 billion budget cut over the next ten years on SNAP, which would reduce eligibility for at least 4 million people and reduce benefits for participants. The people that would be most affected by this proposal are the unemployed, elderly, and low-income families with children.

Conclusion:

Strong leadership is urgently needed to protect California children from federal threats to cut the social safety net. Congress and the Trump Administration have set clear priorities to make drastic cuts to safety net programs that mitigate poverty, including SNAP/CalFresh. Improving participation requires stronger efforts and focusing on the pieces of the process. Higher enrollment rates equate to more children gaining access to nutritious food to help promote healthy development and to reduce the prevalence of food insecurity in the state of California.

Sources:

Los Angeles County, Department of Social Services

<http://dpss.lacounty.gov/wps/portal/dpss/main/programs-and-services/calfresh/>

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infant, and Children (WIC)

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/women-infants-and-children-wic>

Public Policy Institute of Southern California

<https://www.ppic.org/publication/improving-california-childrens-participation-in-nutrition-programs/>