

Policy At A Glance:

Policy Changes to Improve and Expand CalFresh

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated food insecurity issues impacting vulnerable populations in the United States. This brief will focus on how the United States and California are using policy as a tool to expand and increase access to food assistance for individuals and families in need.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and exacerbated food insecurity issues that disproportionately impact vulnerable populations in the United States. As a result, policymakers, political leaders, and other pivotal decision-makers sought to address and mitigate this issue through federal and states policies that improve access to and expand food assistance benefits for millions of Americans.

In the United States, more than 42 million individuals—1 in 8—use Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which was formally known as the Food Stamp Program, to feed their families each month.¹ SNAP (known as CalFresh in California) is one of the largest hunger safety net food programs in the United States.² Furthermore, SNAP increases food security among the most vulnerable populations that have been disproportionately impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

This brief will cover state and federal policies that aim to help Californians recover from the devastating food insecurity impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Relevant History

- 1964 Food Stamp Act**
The Food Stamp Program becomes permanent.³
- 2020 Consolidated Appropriations Act 2021**
This act temporarily expands Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) eligibility for certain types of students.⁴
- 2021 SB 129**
This law aims to simplify the CalFresh application and provide telephonic access to seniors and individuals with disabilities.⁵

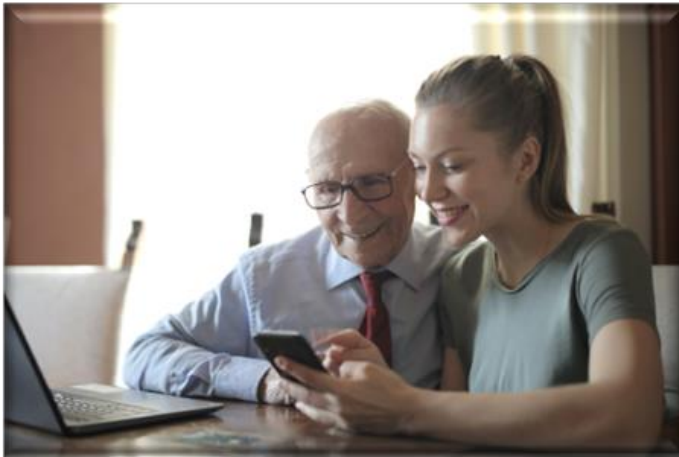
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Improving Access to CalFresh for Vulnerable Populations



CalFresh Application Updates

Governor Gavin Newsom signed Senate Bill 129 (SB 129) into law on July 12, 2021. SB 129 is a voluminous law that makes numerous educational, child care, energy, transportation, health, and food assistance changes to the Budget Act of 2021.⁵ Under SB 129, \$100,000 was allocated to fund the following changes to the CalFresh Program:⁵

1. Simplify the CalFresh application for older adults and people with disabilities.
2. Allow all CalFresh participants to complete the application and other forms that require a signature by phone.

The Impetus for a Simpler CalFresh Application and Telephonic Access

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the issue of food insecurity in the United States, especially for older adults and people with disabilities.⁶ However, only 19 percent of eligible older Californians (60 years or older) participate in the CalFresh program – which is the lowest SNAP participation rate of any state.⁷ California has made progress in simplifying the enrollment process for older adults and people with disabilities, and this provision takes it a step further by creating a simpler and shorter application.⁶

This provision aims to improve the ease of access to CalFresh and close the participation gap. More eligible seniors and persons with disabilities should enroll in CalFresh to mitigate the negative health outcomes associated with food insecurity.

Increasing access to CalFresh can lead to improved food security, improved health, better nutrition, and better medication adherence.⁷ Of note, Alabama, Florida, South Carolina, and other states have implemented similar policies to simplify the application process for older adults and people with disabilities who may face unique barriers when applying for SNAP.⁸

SNAP Matters for Seniors

The Food Research and Action Center of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) Foundation proposed the following three-pronged approach states and anti-hunger advocates can adopt to get more seniors participating in SNAP: 1. Educate policymakers about the critical nature of using SNAP to address senior hunger. 2. Partner with senior centers, health care providers, faith-based organizations, and other community partners to provide application assistance and to counsel seniors on SNAP benefits. 3. Adopt state policies and practices that dismantle barriers to SNAP enrollment and maximize SNAP benefits available to seniors.⁷



SNAP Benefit Updates and Eligibility Expansion

SNAP Eligibility Expansion for Students

The Consolidated Appropriations Act 2021 (CAA) is a piece of COVID-19 legislation that aims to expand and enhance certain components of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.⁹ Of note, CAA temporarily expands SNAP eligibility for certain types of students by authorizing two essential SNAP eligibility exemptions for students. Students enrolled at least half-time in an institution of higher education are eligible for SNAP if they meet the following criteria:¹⁰

1. Have an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) of zero dollars.
2. Are eligible to participate in federally or state financed work study.

These exemptions are important given the disproportionately high rates of food insecurity among university students in the United States.¹¹ To learn more about food insecurity among university students, please refer to the [February 2021 Issue At A Glance](#).

Increasing Student Access to CalFresh

Governor Newsom signed Assembly Bill (AB) 543 into law on October 6, 2021. AB 543 requires college campuses across California to provide all incoming students with educational information regarding the CalFresh program during student orientation. This bill aims to build awareness about CalFresh benefits available to students to reduce food insecurity and increase uptake of available federal funding.¹²



The Revised USDA Thrifty Food Plan

Beginning October 1, 2021, food assistance benefits under SNAP increased by more than 25 % with the modernization of the Thrifty Food Plan.¹ The Thrifty Food Plan is one of four food plans developed by the USDA to estimate the cost of a nutritious diet at varying cost levels, and the Thrifty Food Plan is the lowest cost level of the four plans.¹³ President Biden's Executive Order coupled with the 2018 Farm Bill instructing the USDA to reevaluate the Thrifty Food Plan led to the first major update to this food plan in more than 45 years.¹ The impetus for this update was to ensure that food assistance reflects the cost realities and nutritional needs of American families in need. To find out more about the revised USDA Thrifty Food Plan that increased SNAP benefits for millions of Americans, please refer to the Health Policy Connection blog post entitled [The Revised USDA Thrifty Food Plan Increases SNAP Benefits for Millions of Americans](#).

Conclusion

Federal and state legislature are ramping up efforts to address the food insecurity problem impacting Americans nationwide. Advocates for food security are interested in providing underserved populations with appropriate food assistance that reflects their cost realities and nutritional needs. In tandem with addressing the food security issue, the California legislature has implemented policies that address the employment and training component of CalFresh (i.e., AB 396 and SB 609). The CalFresh employment and training program aims to assist members of CalFresh households in obtaining skills, work, training, or experience that will increase their ability to obtain regular employment and earning capacity.¹⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic ignited the creation of temporary and permanent policy changes to address deep-rooted food insecurity issues. More permanent policy solutions and initiatives are needed to fully address the food security issues faced by many Americans.

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Did you know?

In wealthy countries like the United States, up to 50% of university students suffer from food insecurity.¹¹



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