

Three Connections to Healthy Eating – AB 2205

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▶▶ Issue

Public assistance programs often have separate yet duplicative application processes. Families frequently provide one government entity with lots of information and verification, only later to be compelled to provide the same information and verification for another program. The federal government has recognized how unconnected, complex application processes limit access to food stamps and school meals and have offered states two powerful options to connect government human service programs. One tool has already been put in place in California, and now Assembly Member Evans has introduced new legislation to take advantage of the second. The result will be better nutrition for California’s low-income children.

▶▶ Need

California’s Food Stamp Program is severely underutilized: an estimated 2 million eligible Californians do not participate. School meals are also severely underutilized, with only half the kids eating school lunch. Experience in other states shows that participation in both programs will rise, if a state implements two federal options. California already took the first step in 2005, when Governor Schwarzenegger signed AB 1385. This law, called “Direct Certification,” automatically enrolls children living in food stamp households into the free school meal program. Obviously, the more families enroll in food stamps, the more power Direct Certification will have to connect kids to free school meals. A second federal tool can help, too. As more than 30 states have found, “expanded categorical eligibility” makes it easier for recipients of various social service programs to enroll in food stamps. California has not yet joined this group, even though categorical eligibility would be a powerful tool for increasing food stamp and (via Direct Certification) school meal participation. Building a connection between health care programs and nutrition programs offers the most promise, since California has already devoted significant resources to Medi-Cal and Healthy Families outreach and enrollment. By connecting these programs to food stamps and school meals, the state will get the most for our investment and more children will receive the full range of health and nutrition services they need.

▶▶ Request

Assembly Member Evans’ legislation would establish the needed connection between MediCAL and Food Stamps:

Action:	The legislature shall require the Department of Social Services to create a program of categorical eligibility for food stamps for recipients of MediCAL.
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▶▶ History

Legislation to establish expanded categorical eligibility in California was previously introduced. However, this proposal was withdrawn, since Congress was considering removing this option to save federal benefits. Since Congress *rejected* removing the option, it remains available to California and other states.

▶▶ Outcomes

Taking these actions will:

- ▶ **Improve Participation in nutrition programs:** Participation in both food stamps and school meals will increase.
- ▶ **Reduce Red Tape:** MediCAL recipients will skip two – complicated steps in the food stamp application process, helping to reduce hassles for applicants and administrators.
- ▶ **Bring in Federal Money:** This action will bring into California more federal food stamp benefits and more in federal school meal reimbursement.
- ▶ **Help Position the Food Stamp Program:** The Food Stamp Program should be seen as a health and nutrition program. Connecting it more closely with MediCAL moves the program toward that goal.