

Red Tape Removal: Simplifying the Food Stamp Program

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»» Issue

Advocates, administrators, and applicants generally agree: red tape in California’s Food Stamp Program prevents nutrition assistance from reaching families in need. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that 2 million Californians are eligible for Food Stamps, but not receiving them. As a result, California passes up close to \$2 billion a year in federal food stamp benefits. With too many families in California dealing with poor nutrition, we can’t afford to continue to turn away these resources. California must employ the successful simplification strategies used in other states and pilot new strategies to improve the program for our state’s working poor.

»» Need

Since the Food Stamp Program is a federal program, much of the complexity comes from federal law and regulation. However, the 2002 Farm Bill and recent actions by USDA have given states several options to simplify the program. California has not exercised all of these options. One untapped option is simplified reporting, which, in forty-five other states, has reduced the enormous paperwork burden for recipients and administrators. Another missed option is eliminating office trips to maintain food stamp benefits. USDA allows eligible states to use alternatives to the in-office interview at recertification. This means food stamp recipients can recertify by phone, fax, mail, or computer so that they don’t have to miss work to keep their families fed. Finally, while exercising these options will help simplify the program, further simplification efforts are needed at the federal level. California can take the lead by proposing a simplification demonstration project which would test the impact of reducing federally required red tape.

»» Requests

CFPA asks that the legislature take these actions to simplify the program:

Action 1: Simplify Reporting	The legislature shall require the state move to a 6-month reporting system for food stamps and CalWORKS.
Action 2: Remove Office Visit Burdens	The legislature shall require the state Department of Social Services to seek all available federal waivers to remove the office visit requirement at food stamp recertification.
Action 3: Establish a Simplification Demo	The legislature shall require the state Department of Social Services to develop a demonstration project to simplify food stamps.

»» History

In 2002, before the federal government allowed all states to use the six-month reporting option, California policymakers adopted a quarterly reporting system. This system remains in place, making California the only state using quarterly reporting. In 2003, AB 231 became law; one provision was to require that food stamp applicants be screened for eligibility for an alternative to an office visit at *application*. However, California has not moved to allow office alternatives at *recertification*.

»» Outcomes

Taking these actions will:

- ▶ **Reduce Paperwork:** With more than 700,000 food stamp households, a move to 6 month reporting would remove more than 3 million pages of paperwork from the program.
- ▶ **Reduce Errors:** USDA research shows a significant drop in the error rate for states using simplified reporting.
- ▶ **Align Programs:** The MediCAL program already has 6 month reporting and no office requirement at recert.
- ▶ **Put California in a leadership role:** The state has historically been ranked at the bottom for food stamps. A food stamp simplification demo would show that the state is interested in continuing to improve its program.