

# 2002 State Legislative Agenda



## ➤ Support for Short-Changed Seniors and Disabled Californians

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### ➤ Issue

Single people who are elderly or disabled and receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) are currently ineligible to receive food stamps in California. California is the only state in the nation where SSI recipients are allegedly “cashed out” and therefore ineligible for Food Stamps, even though the SSI benefit amount for a single individual in California is well below the maximum income limit to participate in the Food Stamp Program. The SSI recipient group who would benefit from becoming eligible for Food Stamps, SSI recipients who live alone, should be made eligible for federal Food Stamps. As seniors and disabled people have barriers to participation in the Food Stamp Program and historically have low participation rates, these individuals may benefit from a centralized processing system which would automatically send a standardized federal Food Stamp amount to all SSI recipients who live alone. A centralized processing system would ensure that hungry SSI recipients access the nutrition assistance without undue hassle, would be more cost-efficient than making these SSI recipients eligible to apply, and would avoid an influx of cases and paperwork at local food stamp offices.

### ➤ Need

Too many seniors are going hungry. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports that over 1.4 million households with elderly people are food insecure, meaning that they did not have enough of the right types of food needed to maintain their health or simply did not have enough to eat. Low-income seniors on a fixed income typically pay around half their income towards rent alone, face rising utility costs, and often have hefty medical bills as well. Food is the most flexible item in a budget and is often cut, so that housing and medical costs can be met first. Single seniors are especially vulnerable to hunger: nearly one in ten single-person elderly households experience food insecurity. Food Stamps should help. In California a single person getting SSI would receive \$712 per month - over \$200 less than Food Stamps' monthly income limit of \$931 for one person. If this individual lived in any other state, they would not be automatically ineligible for food stamps, but in California they are immediately denied help. National statistics show that 36.2% of all SSI recipients live alone, which means that approximately 395,000 low-income seniors and disabled Californians are being shortchanged and would benefit from a legislative change.

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### ➤ Request

#### **Support for Short-Changed Seniors and Disabled Californians**

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*Enable SSI recipients who live alone to access federally funded Food Stamp benefit. Establish a centralized processing system that would provide a standardized allotment.*

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### ➤ History

In 1992 the California Legislature passed a bill that would have ended cash out for all SSI recipients, but its enactment was contingent on several waivers that weren't granted by USDA. In their response to the waiver requests, USDA indicated that the households in which SSI recipients lived with other members prohibited granting the waivers, as these “mixed households” would not necessarily be eligible for food stamps whereas “pure SSI households” are categorically eligible under federal rules. Targeting this proposal to SSI recipients who live alone will avoid this complication.

### ➤ Outcomes

*This legislation would:*

- Provide about \$40 in federally funded Food Stamp Benefits to 395,000 hungry low-income seniors and disabled Californians each month
- Inject nearly \$190 million in federal dollars to the California economy annually.