

County set to push food stamps

Participation in state lags, U.S. officials say

By Kathleen Wilson

Tuesday, February 8, 2011

To boost the number of Ventura County residents receiving food stamps, the Board of Supervisors has OK'd spending almost \$770,000 to recruit and enroll them over the next 12 months.

The allocation is the largest that officials can recall for an outreach effort to enroll more people in the program.

The caseload has increased from 36,000 to 61,000 recipients during the economic slowdown, but Human Services Agency Director Barry Zimmerman said 20,000 more people could qualify.

The board authorized the contract with FOOD Share, the regional food bank based in Oxnard, without going through a public bidding process. Zimmerman said officials determined the charity was a sole source uniquely qualified to fulfill terms of the contract.

"It is a very logical choice," he said.

Agency staff decided to spend the money from a \$25 million budget for administering the federal program.

"The federal food stamp program has told California we have to get our participation rate up," Zimmerman said.

California historically has been among the lowest in rate of participation in the federal program, he said.

Only about half of eligible residents in California were enrolled in the program in 2008, compared with a national average of 66 percent, according to the latest available figures. State officials said that is exaggerated because California applies the benefit monetarily in checks for the aged, blind and disabled.

In Ventura County, 48 percent of eligible residents were enrolled in the program in 2008, up from 39 percent in 2007, according to a report from California Food Policy Advocates.

With the large growth in the county's food stamps caseload since then, the figure is not credible now, county officials said.

The county contract will pay for five outreach workers, a media campaign, equipment

and supplies. Zimmerman said the results will be evaluated, just as with other contracts.

Bonnie Weigel, CEO of FOOD Share, was overjoyed with the board's decision. It was approved as a routine item on the consent agenda without discussion.

The charity will be working with other nonprofit groups, food pantries, school districts, cities and others to spread the word. She said people coming to food pantries can be enrolled on the spot.

"So many people have never had access to the system," she said.

People drawing public assistance are routinely referred to the program, so this effort will target people who don't know about it. They include people living in remote areas and the long-term unemployed, officials said.

Counties around the state are making similar efforts as federal money for outreach efforts has increased. The number of people eligible for the program also has gone up because laws have changed to allow people to qualify even if they have retirement accounts and cars.

State officials are encouraging outreach efforts for the program recently renamed CalFresh.

"Since 2007-08, our caseload in California has gone up 75 percent," said Charr Lee Metsker, deputy director for the state welfare-to-work program.

Melissa Livingston, an administrator in the Human Services Agency, would normally handle the county contract. Livingston had nothing to do with the pact because she is chairwoman of the board of FOOD Share, Zimmerman said.

Ethics laws generally prohibit public employees from being "financially interested" in a contract made by them in their official capacity.

However, state law provides that public employees are deemed not to be financially interested in a contract when they serve as nonsalaried members of a nonprofit corporation as long as the interest is disclosed.

Zimmerman said Livingston appears to fall under this exception. She has removed herself from any involvement in the contract to avoid even the appearance of a conflict, Zimmerman told the board.

The contract takes effect immediately.

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