2004 State Legislative Agenda

Save Money, Fight Hunger, Reduce Government Waste: End Finger Imaging

Contact: Kami Kruckenberg at (415) 777.4422 ext. 107 or kami@cfpa.net

▶ Issue

California spends $8.5 million each year on a statewide system that requires all adult household members to give their fingerprint and photo in order to receive food stamp benefits or CalWORKs cash assistance. The only purpose of this system is to prevent individuals from receiving benefits in more than one county, known as "multiple-aid fraud." Fraud within the food stamp and CalWORKs programs doesn't happen very often, and multiple-aid fraud is especially rare. In an average month, fewer than 70 households are even suspected of multiple-aid fraud, a miniscule percentage of the 660,000 households that receive food stamps. Especially given the pressures of our state's fiscal crisis, we can't afford such a costly and ineffective system.

▶ Need

In addition to wasting taxpayer dollars, California's finger imaging system deters far too many hungry, eligible Californians from receiving food stamps. According to USDA, only about half of eligible people in California are getting food stamp benefits, meaning hundreds of millions of federal dollars needed in the fight to end hunger are going unused.

The finger-imaging system adds one more layer of bureaucracy to an already complex and burdensome application process. At a time when more working families are struggling to make ends meet, finger imaging prevents these families from getting the help they need.

▶ Request

Eliminate California's Finger Imaging Requirement ....A savings of $8.5 million

Ending finger imaging will save the state a significant amount of money. The state should use less costly, less intrusive methods of preventing multiple-aid fraud, such as Social Security Number matches.

▶ History

The finger-imaging requirement, which was legislated before major state and federal welfare reform, is obsolete. Under welfare reform, stringent work requirements for CalWORKs and Food Stamps act as a natural deterrent to seeking aid in multiple counties. A person receiving aid in two counties would almost certainly be unable to meet the work requirements required to receive benefits in both counties. Additionally, the state has other anti-fraud measures in place, such as the Income and Employment Verification System (IEVS). Anti-fraud efforts in California have been vastly improved with the recent move to a secure credit-card-type system for issuing food stamp benefits called Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT), which are in place in 40 counties as of January 1, 2004.

In January 2003, the California State Auditor released an audit of the Statewide Fingerprint Imaging System that shed doubt on the value of SFIS and confirmed that its high cost can't be justified.

▶ Outcomes

Ending finger imaging will save the state $8.5 million at a time of tremendous budget deficits. In doing so, it will also remove one of the most difficult barriers to food stamp participation, especially for working families and legal immigrants.