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L.A. County's needy residents urged to apply for food stamps

More than 1.7 million county residents were at risk of hunger in 2009. An outreach campaign and an online application are aimed at boosting the number of those who get food stamps.

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With many families struggling to feed themselves, Los Angeles County officials announced new efforts Tuesday to encourage eligible residents to apply for federal nutrition benefits.

The efforts include an outreach campaign next month and a new online application form, Philip L. Browning, director of the Department of Public Social Services, said at a Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors meeting.

More than 1.7 million L.A. County residents were at risk of hunger in 2009, more than in any other county in America, according to research published recently by Feeding America, the country's largest network of food banks.

Nearly 1 million county residents receive food stamps, but participation in California has lagged behind most other states. Just half the eligible Californians were receiving the benefit in 2008, the most recent year for which federal estimates are available. The national average is 66%.

"What we're trying to do is to make sure that everyone knows the benefits to which they're entitled," Browning told the board. "If we increase the participation to what we think it should be, there would be an additional 1 million individuals in Los Angeles County that would get close to \$2 billion [annually] to bring into the economy."

The federal government pays for the benefit and for half the administration costs, with the rest shared by the state and counties. Qualifying families in California receive an average of \$200 a month in food benefits.

The steps announced Tuesday are the latest in a series of state and local efforts to increase participation in the program, which was recently given a new name in California: CalFresh.

The board declared May "CalFresh Awareness Month." The campaign, organized with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the California Department of Social Services and about 25 local organizations, aims to reduce the stigma associated with food stamps and promote the program's health benefits. It includes public service announcements and events at dozens of schools, farmers markets, food pantries and other sites.

A May 4 public forum at Salt Lake Park farmers market in Huntington Park is intended to address common misconceptions about the program among immigrant communities. Many immigrants don't realize they can apply once they have lived in the U.S. legally for five years, community advocates say. Others are put off by rumors that receiving the benefit could hurt their chances of becoming citizens.

The online application is intended to provide an alternative to people who can't get time off work to visit a county welfare office or who are discouraged by the long lines. A van containing a mobile welfare office is also being dispatched to community sites to collect applications, Browning said.

Matthew Sharp, a senior advocate with California Food Policy Advocates who worked on the May campaign, welcomed the county's initiatives but said the state needs to do more to reduce red tape.

California is the only state that requires most recipients to report their income every three months. Former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed bills that would have reduced the reporting requirements to twice a year and eliminated a requirement that recipients be fingerprinted, citing fraud concerns.

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