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Sacramento food stamps: lost supper

California leaves billions of unused federal food-stamp dollars on the table each year. Meanwhile, the state's red-tape labyrinth lets millions go hungry.

By [Hugh Biggar](#)

One day last month, Monica Turner received a notice in the mail that tested her usually upbeat personality. Out of work since October and supporting two children, she was about to be evicted.

Unsure what to do next, and with the end of the month rapidly approaching, Turner reluctantly turned to two sources for help. For the rent, her parents agreed to lend a hand. For food and other basic needs, Turner, like 192,000 others in Sacramento County, turned to public assistance known as CalFresh, or food stamps.

Turner paid her rent and wasn't kicked out. But for food and necessities, she entered a bureaucratic labyrinth, one from which she has yet to emerge. It's truly a maze, but those who stick it out win a prize of roughly \$4.50 per person, or about \$31 a week, or \$325 monthly for a household.

But Turner was hindered by the food stamp process's web of appointments and paperwork. Many Californians give up or don't bother. As a result, the state leaves \$4.9 billion in benefits on the table each year, money that could juice the economy by \$8.7 billion in related activity.

Here in Sacramento County, this means \$57.5 million in untouched benefits and \$103 million in lost economic impact.

Forces here and in the nation's capital are now working hard to change the way people participate in the federal food-stamps program, known nationally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. Improving California's participation could provide a potent injection for a sick economy, a booster shot that California could mainline straight into its corroded veins. At the same time, this elixir would also help people in need, people such as Turner, and provide a jackpot return on the investment.



At the moment, California faces some embarrassing statistics. Despite need, the state ranks next to last nationally in food-stamp participation. Less than half of those eligible in California enroll, compared to a national average of 75 percent.

Numbers are stronger in Sacramento County, which ranks fourth among California counties. In contrast, 90 percent of those eligible in Oregon take part.

For certain populations in California, these numbers are even lower. Roughly 10 percent of seniors (defined as those older than 60) sign up for CalFresh. Individuals convicted of a nonviolent drug offense are not allowed to enroll. In Sacramento County schools, only 30 percent of children who qualify for federally subsidized free lunches, or 35,624 students, take part. Nearly one in five children in Sacramento County lives in poverty.

In Yolo and El Dorado counties, the number of students participating in the National School Lunch Program is even lower, hovering around 25 percent.

At the same time, the need for help has grown in the past three years due to unemployment rates between 11 and 15 percent. "It is amazing how much the CalFresh caseload has increased," said Kerri Aiello, a spokeswoman for Sacramento County's Department of Human Assistance, who noted that participation has doubled in the county since 2006.

Applications for CalFresh in Sacramento County have jumped from 59,326 in 2008 to 80,765 in 2010. Sacramento County also currently has 84,429 CalFresh cases for a staff of 208 (see "What's for dinner?" SN&R Feature, January 6).

Such uneven access to food, known in official circles as food insecurity, is happening in a region renowned for its agriculture and produce. "The fact people are not getting enough to eat, especially when we live in such a fertile area, is a crime," said Yolo County Supervisor Don Saylor, who added that about half of those eligible in Yolo participate.

The dismal participation rates and lack of access to good nutrition also come with long-term social consequences, affecting such things as school performance, life span and susceptibility to diseases, and even obesity. Instead of food stamps, residents look to fast food and high-sugar, high-calorie eats.

In Sacramento County, for instance, 61 percent of adults are classified as obese.

Red tape: it's what's for dinner



Daniel Berger helps out at the River City Food Bank, whose CalFresh coordinator, Edith Martinez, says the food-stamp application process is "excessive."

Photo By JEROME LOVE

CalFresh is an obstacle course requiring stamina and will, one with a paper trail that only half bother to complete.

Take the case of Monica Turner.

Formerly a phlebotomist, Turner lost her job at Kaiser Permanente last fall. She then relied on financial aid from her classes at Sacramento City College to help support her 12-year-old daughter and 18-year-old son. But by May, with the onset of summer and the end of classes, that aid was set to expire.

"I didn't know what to do," said Turner, 40. "I looked everywhere, even food-service jobs, but nothing turned up. I have worked and paid taxes since 1994 and hadn't considered food stamps before, because I figured people that needed it were worse off than me, but by then I didn't have any choice."

The last week in May, Turner visited Sacramento County's

social-services office a block from her home in Midtown.

There, she learned she in fact had to go to a different office in north Sacramento, a considerable distance for her since she didn't have a car.

After initial appointments—filling out multiple documents, undergoing a face-to-face interview with a caseworker, traveling to her daughter's middle school to have forms signed—she also had to be fingerprinted, a requirement in California and just two other states. After borrowing a car to drive to the north Sacramento county office for fingerprinting, she then had to drive an hour to pick up her son at school and bring him to the office for fingerprinting, too.

All adult members of households applying for CalFresh must be fingerprinted and photographed.

Her process remains unfinished. This summer, she has to take part in a seven-week jobs program in order to receive CalFresh, requiring more trips to north Sacramento and adding the challenge of figuring out child care while she is there.

“It seems a little unnecessary for me, because I already know how to write a résumé,” she said. “It is supposed to help with networking, but I would rather be out knocking on doors.”

Audelia Ortega knows what Turner is going through. Originally from Durango, Mexico, Ortega moved to the Sacramento area, became a citizen—a requirement for CalFresh in most cases, although those in the country for humanitarian reasons or approved as permanent residents are also eligible—and worked 25 years at fruit canneries before retiring.

She applied for CalFresh a year ago, at a time when her husband was sick and his pension wasn't making ends meet. His illness, however, demanded around-the-clock attention, making it difficult for her to leave his side to visit social-services offices and wait in line. She also has diabetes, which makes walking difficult and requires frequent insulin shots.

Further complicating matters for Ortega was her limited ability to speak English and limited reading skills.

In order to fill out the mandatory reports for CalFresh every three months—another unusual and costly California requirement; most states only request reports semiannually, or every six months—she had her niece help out. But the forms were sent in Spanish, a language unfamiliar to her niece, who then had to translate back and forth between the forms and her aunt. When she has questions, Ortega also has had trouble finding staff who speak Spanish.

“It is very difficult,” said Ortega, 79, through a translator. “I can't hear very well and have a hard time understanding and responding in English.”

“The barriers she faces are pretty representative of the many barriers [people] face in applying for CalFresh,” added Edith Martinez, CalFresh outreach coordinator for the River City Food Bank. “And many don't make it through the process because of the excessive verification requirements, difficulty attaining out-of-office appointments, complicated forms ... lack of linguistically competent workers, all of which can make it a difficult process.”

In addition to people going hungry, the economic consequences for California are also significant. The Oakland-based California Food Policy Advocates, for instance, have found that raising the state's food-stamp participation levels would also add \$131 million in sales-tax revenue, with \$27 million for non-general-fund expenditures. Full participation would also yield \$40 million for California's cash-strapped county budgets.

“If we set the bar at 75 percent of all eligible individuals participating, the state would gain an estimated \$4.5 billion in economic activity,” argued Tia Shimada, a nutrition policy advocate for CFPA. To put it another way, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, this “economic multiplier effect” breaks down as follows: Every \$5 spent through CalFresh trickles up as \$9 to the general economy.

Studies show that Sacramento County, which is in the top five in the state for enrollment, still loses out an estimated \$57.5 million and \$103 million in related economic activity annually in federal food-stamp benefits.

Yolo County, among the bottom 10 counties in the state in participation, loses out on roughly \$30.4 million a year.

California's barriers are getting in the way of tapping into these funds. And politicians and civic leaders, finally, have taken notice.

Political food fight

This year, more changes to CalFresh system are in play and gaining momentum. Three state Assembly bills and one Senate bill are now under consideration in the Legislature, bills that address some of the significant hurdles in the way of signing up for CalFresh.

Assembly Bill 6 aims to eliminate the fingerprint-imaging requirement and switch to semiannual reporting. The bill would also help people with receiving a stipend for utility bills through an initiative known as "Heat and Eat."

"Fingerprinting aims to cut down on fraud, but a lot of people don't understand [the purpose] of it," said Alexis Fernandez, a nutrition policy specialist with CFPA. "The system is already a challenge for folks to navigate and extensive compared to other states, and you [already] have to provide a series of verifications for your household and residence."



Looking for work and supporting a family, Monica Turner hopes her meal ticket comes in soon.

Photo By JEROME LOVE

As part of this, the USDA also estimates the fingerprint-imaging requirement deters enrollment in food stamps by as much as 7 percent.

"There is also mistrust around [fingerprint imaging], particularly for immigrants, and [requiring] every adult in the household [to do so] is a challenge and a step in the wrong direction," Fernandez said.

Critics of SNAP point to fingerprint imaging as way of deterring fraud, particularly through selling benefits for cash, alcohol or narcotics, or through filing multiple applications in different locations.

But the CFPA has found less than 1 percent of food-stamp investigations nationally are due to multiple-aid fraud. Additionally, the state auditor has determined that the fingerprinting requirement is unnecessary, thought it costs the state about \$17 million annually.

Another bill, Assembly Bill 69, would increase access to CalFresh for seniors, allowing counties to establish a county opt-in through the Department of Social Services.

"[The bill] provides a simplified application process," explained Kerry Birnbach, a nutrition policy advocate with CFPA. "Social Security recipients can indicate their interest in CalFresh eligibility, and the Department of Social Services could then reuse the information seniors gave to the Social Security Administration for retirement benefits. This approach utilizes data sharing to make the process less duplicative."

Birnbach adds that a complicated program for seniors in California, known as "cash out," also makes the process confusing. Intended for seniors with disabilities, "cash out" supplements seniors' incomes with about \$10 monthly, but makes them ineligible for CalFresh.

A third Assembly bill, A.B. 828, would end the lifetime ban on CalFresh for former nonviolent drug offenders.

“Fifteen states have already removed this law,” noted Jessica Bartholow, a legislative advocate for Western Center on Law and Poverty in Sacramento. “It was enacted under President [Bill] Clinton, but there hasn’t been any research showing it is a good idea. Although the numbers are low, about 890 people, it costs a lot to administer and doesn’t recognize people have done their time and instead imposes a lifetime sentence of hunger. It also makes it difficult for their families and for them to successfully reintegrate into the community.”

Lastly, Senate Bill 43 aims to streamline the minimum work requirements for participation in CalFresh.

Some changes to the system have already occurred.

“Three years ago, we began to see a huge increase in the number of people at food banks because of the economic downturn, and it was an irony because we are in place that grows food,” said Chet Hewitt, president of Sacramento’s Sierra Health Foundation and a former county welfare director in Alameda County. “I was part of a coalition that tried to get the state to use [Department of Motor Vehicles] records for food-stamp applications, but that didn’t go through. But one success we had was allowing intercounty transfers, so if you lived in Natomas and moved to West Sacramento you didn’t have to go through the application process again.

“There are more things to be done, but clearly these [new bills] are steps in the right direction,” Hewitt said.

Solving the labyrinth

In the meantime, the federal government is also pushing hard for California to make changes.

USDA Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services Kevin Concannon stresses that changing the system is vital. “By incorporating key changes to their processes, California could reduce burdens on their staff and improve access at the same time, ultimately simplifying the program for everyone,” he explained in an email. He adds that it is essential vulnerable populations have access to a healthy diet.

In particular, Concannon highlighted several possible changes, including eliminating fingerprint imaging, converting to simplified reporting, expanding the use of telephone interviews and reducing verification requirements. Such changes would also help California slash the high costs of administrating CalFresh. (California ranks third in the amount it spends on administrative expenses, just above the Virgin Islands.) The federal government funds 50 percent of the administrative costs, with the state and counties picking up 35 and 15 percent of the remaining costs.

“Some might argue about the costs to change the system,” said CFPA’s Fernandez, “but changing to a semiannual reporting system would generate \$75 million in savings over the long term.”

“More importantly, these improvements will help feed more hungry people who could be our friends, neighbors, or co-workers in this difficult economic climate.” Concannon said.

Locally, Yolo County Supervisor Saylor said he would also like to see a more simplified application process, one that uses one application for multiple programs. He also hopes that all of the county’s farmers markets eventually agree to take CalFresh benefits.

“It is not a tolerable circumstance that 13,000 people, families, seniors [and] children in such a fertile area are going hungry,” Saylor said.

In Sacramento, Martinez, who is on the front line of hunger daily at the River City Food Bank, also advocates for cutting down on the number of face-to-face interviews and using more phone interviews instead.

Reducing the level of red tape would also help, she said. “I have seen situations where people who have applied later discover that some of their information never got put into the system. It would be also helpful if some social-service offices stayed open in the evening, say from 5 to 7 [p.m.], since an increasing number of

CalFresh recipients also work.”

And for Monica Turner, all the discussions and legislation around hunger in California are more urgent and closer to home.

“I need a job, but nobody is hiring, even when you know people like I do in phlebotomy,” she said. “I’ll even work for tips.”

In the meantime, she is depending on her parents and CalFresh, and hoping some work-study opportunities this summer at Sacramento City College will come through. Through a friend, she has also helped her son find a one-day-a-week job at a fast-food restaurant.

Even so, the maze that is California’s safety net at a time of shrinking state budgets is still out there.

Said Turner, “I am worried that when do I get my get my degree and CalFresh is up, I am going to have nowhere to go.”