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Pushing food stamps in tough budget times

By Jennifer Chaussee
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Sacramento — With the state facing a \$15.4 billion budget shortfall, social programs across California are cutting costs by limiting eligibility. So why are state lawmakers voting to enroll more people in CalFresh, the state’s food stamp program, if there’s not enough money to go around?

Lawmakers say an expanded food stamp program may actually help improve the economy at no cost to the state’s ailing general fund — though taxpayers in California and elsewhere will continue to foot the bill for the federally funded program

Emergency food assistance benefits like CalFresh are funded entirely by the federal government, which generally requires changes within the system to be cost-neutral to state governments, making food stamp legislation popular during times of economic downturn. State and local governments bear the costs of administering the program

Advocates for food stamps say government statistics show they have positive impact on the economy as a stimulus. For every \$1 the state spends on the CalFresh program, the California economy gains a \$1.74, according to figures by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

“That’s a higher multiplier effect than any other social program,” said Frances Chacon, a staff consultant for the Assembly Human Services Committee.

Those are among the reasons why Assembly members Jim Beall, D-San Jose; Felipe Fuentes, D- Sylmar; and Nancy Skinner, D-Berkeley, have been pushing to get CalFresh benefits in the hands of more Californians.

Legislation authored by Beall would set up a pilot program in two California cities that would use the Social Security database to seek out and enroll eligible seniors into the CalFresh program who aren’t already receiving benefits.

About this series

State Budget Watch is a project to give readers a deeper understanding of the scope, impact and reasons behind California’s fiscal problems, and to explore the stakes involved in potential solutions. The project includes Sacramento reporters Michael Gardner of The San Diego Union-Tribune and Brian Joseph of the Orange County Register and editor Daniel Weintraub of [California Health Report](#), a website that focuses on health and public policy issues in the state.

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“No other state has done this before, which is kind of amazing,” Chacon said.

The bill, AB 69, passed the Human Services Committee without any opposition and has a long list of support from farmers, grocers, restaurateurs, senior advocates, and legislators.

More than 3 million Californians receive the benefit every month, but California participation has traditionally lagged behind other states. San Diego County in particular has been singled out for low participation rate, though the local program has seen increases as outreach programs have taken hold.

The San Diego County Board of Supervisors, all Republicans, have moved ahead on policies to get more people into CalFresh, but county officials have not yet taken a position on the legislation.

Seniors represent the minority of CalFresh recipients, with only 10 percent of eligible seniors actually receiving benefits. And only 5 percent of seniors receiving Social Security benefits who are also eligible for CalFresh are currently receiving benefits, according to a study by Mathematica Policy Research.

Advocates say seniors are among the most vulnerable demographic when it comes to hunger, because the majority rely on fixed incomes that must be budgeted to cover rising medical costs along with rent and other standard living costs. That means seniors who are eligible for CalFresh but are not enrolled likely have to choose between paying for their medications and buying food every month, said Kerry Birnbach, a nutrition policy advocate California Food Policy Advocates.

Still, social stigmas against relying on food stamps, limited transportation options, and complicated enrollment processes alienate the senior population from the CalFresh program.

“Many of the seniors who need our help have never received government assistance in their lives. They are middle class,” said Shannon Lehey, Executive Director of Catholic Charities of California United. “In Solano County, 80% of seniors we serve rely on us for emergency food assistance every month,” said Lehey.

Part of the pilot program that would seek to enroll more eligible seniors in CalFresh calls for a federal waiver that would permit the state to share data from the Social Security database as a means of finding eligible seniors and simplifying their enrollment process.

Allowing the Department of Social Services, which administers CalFresh, to share existing Social Security data could mean less paperwork and red tape for seniors, said Birnbach. Instead of requiring seniors to verify their monthly income with receipts or pay stubs, the pilot program would verify their income by referencing existing data from the Social Security database.

But there is a risk. Chacon, the committee consultant, said while the federal government would pay to feed additional CalFresh recipients, the pilot project could leave California with a heavier caseload of long after the pilot project has ended.

“This is a double edged sword,” Chacon said.

And the state is still responsible for 35 percent of the costs associated with administering the CalFresh program, with local county governments responsible for an additional 15 percent of administrative costs. If the pilot project were to be successful, however, sharing Social Security data might simplify the application process and lower administrative costs.

But while those administrative costs may be only a small part of the total, increased costs of any kind have become taboo in the current budget crisis culture.

The \$15.4 billion deficit amounts to about 18 percent of next year’s projected \$85 billion state general fund.

That’s why the lawmakers are pushing other initiatives CalFresh initiatives focused on streamlining the enrollment process and increasing caseload.

Assembly Bill 6, authored by Assemblyman Fuentes, would do away with the fingerprinting as a means to verify CalFresh eligibility, and requires counties to report CalFresh statistics on a semi-annual basis instead of a quarterly basis.

Assembly Bill 402, authored by Assemblywoman Skinner, would allow school districts to determine a child's eligibility in CalFresh based off of their school lunch program application.

But while increased caseloads could mean greater administrative burdens for the state, legislators are hoping that enrolling more eligible Californians in the CalFresh program will actually bring in more general fund revenues — through the multiplier effect — than are required to make the changes.

They also say that with low CalFresh enrollment among a growing population of seniors and others, California could actually be missing out on federal funds.

“The state is missing out on an estimated \$4.9 billion in federal benefits per year due to low participation,” stated a 2010 CalFresh report by California Food Policy Advocates.

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