

February 5, 2021

The Honorable Susan Talamantes Eggman
Chair, Senate Budget Subcommittee 3
California State Senate
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Simplified Senior and Disabled CalFresh Application and Telephonic Access in the 2021-2022 Budget Act

Dear Chairperson Eggman:

Nourish California, AARP-CA, California Association of Food Banks, San Francisco-Marín Food Bank, and the undersigned organizations advocate on behalf of low-income Californians and seek to improve their access to sufficient, affordable, nutritious food. We are writing to request a one-time investment to improve access to CalFresh for older adults, people with disabilities, and working families in the 2021-2022 Budget Act.

COVID-19 is exacerbating already high levels of hunger and hardship, particularly among older adults and people with disabilities. Despite federal and state interventions, the most recent data show that overall food insecurity has spiked to more than 25 percent of California households – [that's some 10 million people](#), and 2.5 times higher than [before the COVID-19 crisis began](#). As a proven positive public health intervention and powerful economic stabilizer, CalFresh has a critical dual role to play in California's immediate COVID-19 response and long-term recovery efforts. Yet only 19 percent of eligible older Californians (age 60 or over) are enrolled in the program. In fact, [California ranks last in the nation](#) when it comes to enrolling eligible older adults in CalFresh (or SNAP, as it is known federally).¹ In order to better connect older adults with ongoing federal food assistance, it is critical that we exercise every available option to simplify access to CalFresh.

In order to improve food security, reduce poverty and homelessness, and support California's recovery from the effects of COVID-19, it is critical that we simplify access to CalFresh for older adults and people with disabilities. We applaud the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) for participating in a federal demonstration project called the Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP) since October 2017. The current ESAP package of federal waivers allows CDSS and County Welfare Departments to streamline enrollment, extend recertifications, and reduce the verification burden for ESAP-eligible senior and disabled households, which includes those composed solely of elderly and/or disabled members and who have no earned income. More than 600,000 households have benefitted from ESAP certification, but we estimate that more than one million more are eligible. In the state's most recent annual report to USDA, of the 226,786 new ESAP households, zero were denied CalFresh benefits. The data illustrate these households' need for ongoing food assistance. It also shows that those who are able to navigate the complicated application process are clearly eligible, but others may not be accessing vital benefits due to administrative burdens.

¹ Overall, only about 71 percent of eligible Californians participate, and 57 percent of the working poor. Source, Reaching Those in Need, August 2020, Mathematica Research, available at <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/Reaching2017-1.pdf>

We are asking for two improvements to the CalFresh program in order to ensure that all eligible households can easily access the CalFresh benefits to which they are entitled.

- Shorten and simplify the CalFresh paper application for ESAP households by removing irrelevant questions and using user-centered design principles.
- Ensure that all households can complete required forms over the phone.

The only element of the federal ESAP that CDSS has not implemented is a simplified paper application. The current CalFresh application — the CF 285 — is a complex, 18-page document. It can be challenging and intimidating for anyone. Particularly for older adults and persons with physical or developmental disabilities, it can be a major barrier to participation. Though we applaud the success of online application portals like GetCalFresh.org, we also consistently hear from stakeholders that older adults want the option of completing a paper application. Many low-income older adults lack reliable internet access and/or do not feel comfortable sharing personal information online.

With a modest one-time funding allocation, CDSS can shorten and simplify the paper CalFresh application for ESAP households by removing questions that are irrelevant to those households' circumstances, such as those about earned income. We do not need further federal waiver approval to implement a simplified application — this is already a state option. ESAP projects in other states often make use of a two- to eight-page simplified senior application, and a [recent USDA report](#) indicated that those states saw an increase in applications and participation. Aside from improving food security, increasing participation is an effective economic stimulus. Since CalFresh benefits are 100 percent federally-funded, every dollar in benefits spent [generates \\$1.50 in economic activity](#).

We therefore urgently request a one-time, \$1 million investment for CDSS to design and integrate a user-centered, simplified CalFresh application for older adults and people with disabilities to facilitate CalFresh enrollment among Californians most vulnerable to hunger.

The cost estimate for this user-centered CalFresh application would build upon projects recently led by CDSS. With the expansion of CalFresh to include SSI recipients — along with a growing aging population that can benefit greatly from improved CalFresh access — this is a small investment that can have a meaningful impact. It would complement the projects underway at CDSS and CHHS to utilize user-centered design principles to reduce enrollment burdens and streamline safety net program access.

The second action the state should take to build on what works and ease access to CalFresh is ensuring that all applicants and participants can complete the application and reporting processes by phone, including the required client signature. Pandemic conditions have forced the two-thirds of California counties without telephonic/electronic signature capacity to implement emergency workarounds to provide remote services to communities facing unprecedented need. Those workarounds are possible due to expanded flexibility provided through temporary federal waivers, now being approved by [USDA Food and Nutrition Service on a temporary, month-by-month basis](#).

While telephonic/electronic signature is a critically important capacity for county welfare departments during COVID-19, this has been a long-standing need for many low-income older adults and persons with disabilities without reliable internet access. The recent expansion of CalFresh eligibility to SSI recipients was facilitated by a multi-stakeholder process with counties, CDSS and advocates. That process produced concrete recommendations to improve county business processes to better serve the older adult and disabled populations. The [number one recommendation](#) was to allow for telephonic/electronic signature of the application.

We know that counties are capable of implementing telephonic/electronic signature, as more than 20 counties have already done so without major fiscal cost or disruption to staffing and business processes. In addition, other states, (e.g. Nebraska) have implemented telephonic/electronic signature in a cost-effective manner, which has even allowed the state SNAP agency to provide telephonic signature capacity to a neighboring state (Iowa). Every CalFresh client should have that same level of access and customer service, regardless of where in the state eligible people live.

We therefore urgently request that the 2021-22 State Budget include language ensuring that all CalFresh clients are able complete all forms requiring a client signature entirely by phone upon completion of the CalSAWS consortia consolidation project in each county, respectively.

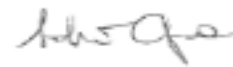
With the COVID-19 crisis worsening hunger and hardship among older adults, we urgently need to implement all effective and efficient strategies to ensure older adults can meet their basic needs and age in place with dignity. Simplified CalFresh enrollment is a proven successful strategy. The changes outlined above enact recommendations in the state's [Master Plan for Aging](#), specifically Goal 5 (Affordable Aging), Strategy C (Protection from Hunger and Poverty), Initiative 131: "Continue to streamline older and disabled adult enrollment, renewal, and online shopping in CalFresh, as allowable."

Implementing a user-centered, simplified CalFresh application and ensuring full telephonic access are critical steps to address hunger in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. We cannot delay action any longer. Now is the time to make permanent improvements to ease access to CalFresh and close the participation gap. No one should go hungry in the great state of California, and older adult and disabled households deserve to live with dignity, free from hunger. It is our collective responsibility to remove long-standing barriers to CalFresh, the most powerful anti-hunger tool at our disposal.

Sincerely,



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Nourish California



Andrew Cheyne
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CC: Members and staff, Senate Budget Subcommittee 3



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