

June 8, 2012

Will Lightbourne, Director of California Department of Social Services
Frank Mecca, Executive Director of California Welfare Directors Association

RE: Increasing CalFresh Participation by Seniors and by Immigrants

Dear Director Lightbourne and Executive Director Mecca,

When Alliance to Transform CalFresh representatives Sue Sigler and Kim McCoy Wade met with you earlier this spring, you both mentioned Seniors and Immigrants as priority communities to target for increased participation in CalFresh. We share those priorities and appreciate your request for input from the five state groups we convene: the California Association of Food Banks, the California Family Resource Association, the California Food Policy Advocates, Catholic Charities of California, and the Western Center on Law and Poverty. We offer the following recommendations for your consideration; we look forward to hearing your respective recommendations. We also request meetings on each of these topics, so we can assist as appropriate in developing and implementing plans to dramatically improve CalFresh participation by these two priority communities.

Seniors

We recommend the following range of actions be pursued by the State and the Counties to increase senior participation in CalFresh.

First, we encourage a comprehensive assessment of the data on seniors and CalFresh, including:

- Senior hunger in California, both quantitatively and qualitatively.
- Senior nutrition programs, including CalFresh and those programs operated by the Department of Aging, e.g. Congregate Nutrition and Meals on Wheels, and other federal programs like the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP).
- Characteristics of seniors both a) who participate in CalFresh and b) who are eligible but don't participate.
- Senior perceptions of CalFresh and senior application experiences with CalFresh.
- Analysis of counties' practices around special rules for seniors, including: (a) waiving of the gross income test; (b) waiving of the shelter deduction cap; (c) deduction of medical expenses; (d) special assistance during application; (e) lengthened certification periods; and, (f) for those households without earnings, change reporting.

Second, we propose that a "Strategic Plan" be developed to increase senior CalFresh participation, informed by the analysis above and by consultations with all stakeholders and including actions such as the following:

1. Simplify the application experience specifically for seniors:
 - Streamline application processes (e.g. shorter application, minimized lobby wait times).
 - Increase on-line and telephonic access for seniors, by monitoring and improving seniors' ease of use, utilization rates, successful completion rates, and customer satisfaction.

- Identify and develop other “doors” that work well for seniors.
2. Create automated “list-matching” and other systemic links with the federal Social Security Administration, the agency connected with the largest number of seniors, and its range of senior-serving programs:
 - Medicare
 - MediCare Extra Help (Low-Income Subsidy)
 - MediCare Prescription Drug Plan (Part D)
 - MediCare Savings Program
 - Social Security, e.g. Combined Application Projects (CAPs)
 3. Assess potential for automated and systemic linkages through other senior-serving programs, including:
 - Senior nutrition programs, such as the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), Meals on Wheels, Congregate Nutrition, Seniors Farmer’s Market Nutrition, and Brown Bag
 - California Prescription Drug Discount
 - Veteran’s Health Care Benefits
 - Senior Community Service Employment Program
 - Housing Choice Vouchers (Sec. 8)
 - Unemployment Insurance Benefits
 - Other
 4. Pursue opportunities to reach seniors with CalFresh through the new California Health Benefit Exchange, CalHEERS and overall ACA implementation.
 5. Ensure SSI Cash-Out policy doesn’t impede CalFresh enrollment of eligible non-SSI recipients:
 - Identify and address consumer education and communications needs.
 - Review county processes to ensure that caseworkers are able to help applicants differentiate between SSI and other SSA benefits when applying for benefits and to encourage households to apply even if one person in the household is an SSI recipient.
 - Monitor and support opportunities to increase SSI recipients’ food security.

Third, we urge you to further maximize partnerships with senior-serving community-based organizations. Community-based organizations’ (CBOs’) marketing, outreach, and application assistance can enhance an easily accessible CalFresh program. Trusted CBOs can be especially effective at reaching underserved populations, such as seniors, immigrants, and people newly in need. We encourage the State and Counties to:

- Expand partnerships with senior-serving CBOs who can serve as trusted messengers for CalFresh.
- Link simplified application experiences and online/telephonic application access for seniors with community-based senior outreach, to fully leverage these improvements.
- Consider marketing, outreach and application assistance strategies for specific sub-populations of seniors (e.g. grandparents raising grandchildren, homebound seniors who may need mobile outreach and application assistance).

Immigrants

We strongly support a range of California's current program elements that better connect qualified immigrants and mixed-status families with CalFresh, including:

- Full language access throughout the CalFresh application, eligibility, enrollment and recertification processes.
- The California Food Assistance Program (CFAP), which seamlessly serves California immigrants who are not eligible for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
- Monitoring of and technical assistance to counties to ensure that immigrant households are appropriately assisted and that special application rules are consistently followed.
- Robust marketing, outreach and application assistance that: relies on trusted community voices and messages in the diversity of California's immigrant communities; leverages local partnerships with community-based organizations, congregations, Consulates, and other stakeholders in immigrant communities to engage this typically hard-to-reach population; is targeted to address sponsor deeming and public charge concerns; and, is linked to a simplified application experience for mixed-status families, discussed below.

We'd recommend one area for increased focus that we believe could dramatically increase participation by immigrants and mixed-status families:

- Streamlining the child-only application processes -- through On-Line, Telephone, County Offices, the Health Exchange, and all doors to CalFresh -- to remove real and perceived barriers for eligible family members in a mixed-status household.

Again, thank you for the invitation to provide input and we look forward to next steps in developing these respective participation plans.

Sincerely,

California Association of Food Banks

California Family Resource Association

California Food Policy Advocates

Catholic Charities of California

Los Angeles Regional Food Bank

San Francisco Food Bank

Western Center on Law and Poverty