

Problem:

After earthquakes, fires, floods, mudslides, storms, pandemics, and other calamities – **people need access to public benefits and health coverage more than ever before.** Survivors focus on life and safety needs, like medical care, food, water, and shelter, immediately after disasters. Within days, they enter a complicated web of utility shutoffs, landlord-tenant disputes, insurance claims, FEMA applications, price gouging, document replacement, and more.

Meanwhile, California’s public benefits programs are programmed to terminate eligibility if people do not submit required documentation within certain timeframes, typically 30 days. This is regardless of whether disaster survivors have access to mail or vital documents to prove they and their family remain eligible.

Unfortunately, California is prone to natural disasters as seen from FEMA [data](#) that shows California has declared the most disasters over the past decade with fires, severe storms, and flooding topping the list.

Background:

During ordinary times, people can check their mail and return information needed to keep their benefits active. But during and after disasters, these rules penalize survivors at the most vulnerable time of their lives.

During the recent fires in LA County, thousands of homes were destroyed and the LA County Department of Public Social Services office in Pasadena shuttered. With mailboxes incinerated or inaccessible due to restricted evacuation zones, mail service stopped.

This means that survivors did not receive notifications to keep their benefits and could not access in-person assistance at their local office. Public benefit programs provide life-saving health care that keep older adults and persons with disabilities in the community, ensure families have a way to meet basic needs, and provide food benefits to prevent hunger through CalWORKs, CalFresh, CAPI, IHSS, and Medi-Cal.

In January, the Administration swiftly released guidance to counties to immediately restore Medi-Cal eligibility that terminated after the fires. The state has also extended eligibility renewal deadlines for CalFresh, CalWORKs, and Medi-Cal, but not for any other benefit program. These emergency protections require manual workarounds and emergency systems programming, which has highlighted the need for both IT systems and processes to be in place to allow for continued eligibility of all public benefit programs during the next disasters.

Solution:

This legislative proposal would ensure low-income Californians impacted by disasters have access to CalWORKs, CalFresh, CAPI, IHSS, and Medi-Cal, through:

- Continuous public benefit eligibility for at least 90 days starting with the declaration of a disaster or public health emergency;
- Immediate restoration of eligibility for terminated benefits;
- Notification to recipients informing them of these protections and any changes in reporting or other due dates; and
- Automation of these protections in public benefit IT systems so that counties are ready to protect eligibility whenever a disaster strikes.