

# **Informational Hearing** **Senate Human Services Committee**

## **Fighting Hunger: Food Assistance for Vulnerable Populations During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**November 17, 2020 – 1:00 p.m.  
State Capitol Room 4203**

### **Background Paper**

#### ***Introduction***

Food is a basic need and, for more and more Californians, it is becoming harder to obtain. The combined effects of COVID-19, record-breaking wildfires, public safety power shutoffs, and other disasters have had a staggering effect on food security across the state. According to the California Association of Food Banks, about 11.7 percent of Californians were food insecure prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that 4.6 million Californians, 1.7 million of which are children, were facing food insecurity. More recent data shows a significant increase in food insecurity. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey about 21.9 percent of California households were food insecure and 27.9 percent of households with children were food insecure in September and October of 2020. Additionally, the Pulse Survey showed that Black and Latino communities are experiencing disproportionate rates and impacts of hunger, as 33.8 percent of Hispanic households and 28.2 percent of Black households with children experienced food insufficiency over the fall.

On March 4, 2020, Governor Newsom declared a statewide State of Emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was followed by a series of executive orders intended to reduce exposure to the coronavirus, including a statewide stay at home order for non-essential workers and implementing social distancing. While the stay at home order has been lifted, less restrictive containment measures that limit exposure to the virus are still in place. The economic repercussions of COVID-19 containment measures were immediate and widespread and applications for public assistance and unemployment benefits spiked. The federal government responded to the unfolding economic crash with Pandemic Unemployment Assistance payments of \$600 per week via the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The CARES Act also included one-time payments for most households — of up to \$1,200 per adult and \$500 per child, which have largely been distributed.

Despite these efforts, poverty and food insecurity are climbing. Over 8 million Californians have submitted initial unemployment claims since March and monthly CalFresh applications jumped from 148,170 in February to 346,492 in April 2020. Similarly, food banks and senior meal programs saw significant increase in need for food assistance. This increased need has been highlighted by various news outlets that published stories on the devastating impact the pandemic and its economic repercussions have had. For one Camptonville family, both parents lost their

jobs as a result of the pandemic. Once federal safety net money ran out, they began living without power. The parents sometimes skip meals, especially at the end of the month when CalFresh benefits run out. The father sold his tools to buy diapers, and the mother tried to sell her eggs to a fertility clinic, but she did not medically qualify.<sup>1</sup> A central valley farmworker currently working in sweet potato fields says her worries for the winter are “*comida, la renta, las facturas.*” (food, rent, bills).<sup>2</sup> Similar stories have been reported about senior citizens with fixed incomes being forced to choose between paying utility bills, addressing medical or dental needs and purchasing food.

Hunger and poor health are connected. People who are food insecure are disproportionately affected by chronic diseases such as heart disease, obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure. Not having enough healthy food can have serious implications for a child’s physical and mental health, academic achievement and future economic prosperity. Research shows an association between food insecurity and: delayed development in young children; risk of chronic illnesses like asthma and anemia; and behavioral problems like hyperactivity, anxiety and aggression in school-age children.

A variety of federal, state and local anti-hunger programs work to meet the nutritional needs of vulnerable populations. Some programs are targeted at school-age children or low-income older adults, while others serve the general population regardless of age or other criteria. All such programs have been significantly affected during COVID-19. They have had to pivot to new delivery models and/or modify program rules. In some cases, new programs have emerged to meet new and increased demands resulting from the pandemic.

This background paper was prepared with assistance from the Senate Education Committee. It provides context for the Senate Human Services Committee hearing on food assistance for vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 pandemic by examining the challenges that resulted from the pandemic’s impact on food assistance programs and how those programs adapted to the challenges.

### ***Budget Actions on Nutrition Programs***

Fighting food insecurity has been a priority for the Legislature, and in recent years, California’s budget has reflected the state’s investment in nutrition programs. The budget for Fiscal Year 2019/20 included:

- Senior Nutrition Programs at the California Department of Aging (CDA). The budget increased funding for senior nutrition programs by \$17.5 million General Fund (GF) annually. This funding will be suspended on December 31, 2021, unless there is sufficient GF revenue to support all programs proposed for suspension in the subsequent two fiscal years, as determined by the Department of Finance.
- CalFresh Expansion Outreach at CDA and the Department of Rehabilitation. The budget included \$1.7 million General Fund to provide outreach and application assistance to Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients and \$2.5 million to allow Independent Living

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/15/us/politics/federal-aid-poverty-levels.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-10-26/central-valley-farmworkers-hunger-evictions-coronavirus-covid19>

Centers to assist with the implementation and outreach related to the CalFresh expansion for those newly eligible SSI recipients.

- CalFood Program (Food Banks). The budget provided \$20 million GF one-time for the CalFood program, and trailer bill language that raises the storage and transportation rate for local food banks to 15 percent.

The budget for Fiscal Year 2020/21 included:

- Senior Nutrition Programs at CDA. The budget rejected the Governor's May Revision proposal to reduce funding for Senior Nutrition programs at CDA by \$8.5 million General Fund.
- CalFresh Simplifications. The budget included \$27.5 million GF and trailer bill language that made simplifications to the CalFresh program to help those who are eligible access the program and those who are enrolled. Simplifications included requiring counties to attempt to make personal contact via telephone or other electronic means before terminating benefits and requiring any discontinuance be rescinded if the necessary information for the semiannual report form is obtained via an acceptable alternative method.
- CalFresh Restaurant Meal Program. The budget included \$826,000 (\$413,000 GF) to administer and expand the Restaurant Meal Program to all 58 counties and 110 community college campuses.
- CalFresh Application Assistance. The budget included \$5 million GF to support GetCalFresh.org, an online CalFresh application assistance tool.
- Emergency Food and Food Banks. The budget included \$639,000 GF to support four permanent positions to address workload related to administering state-funded emergency food programs. The budget also included a total of \$50 million to support food banks in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***CalFresh***

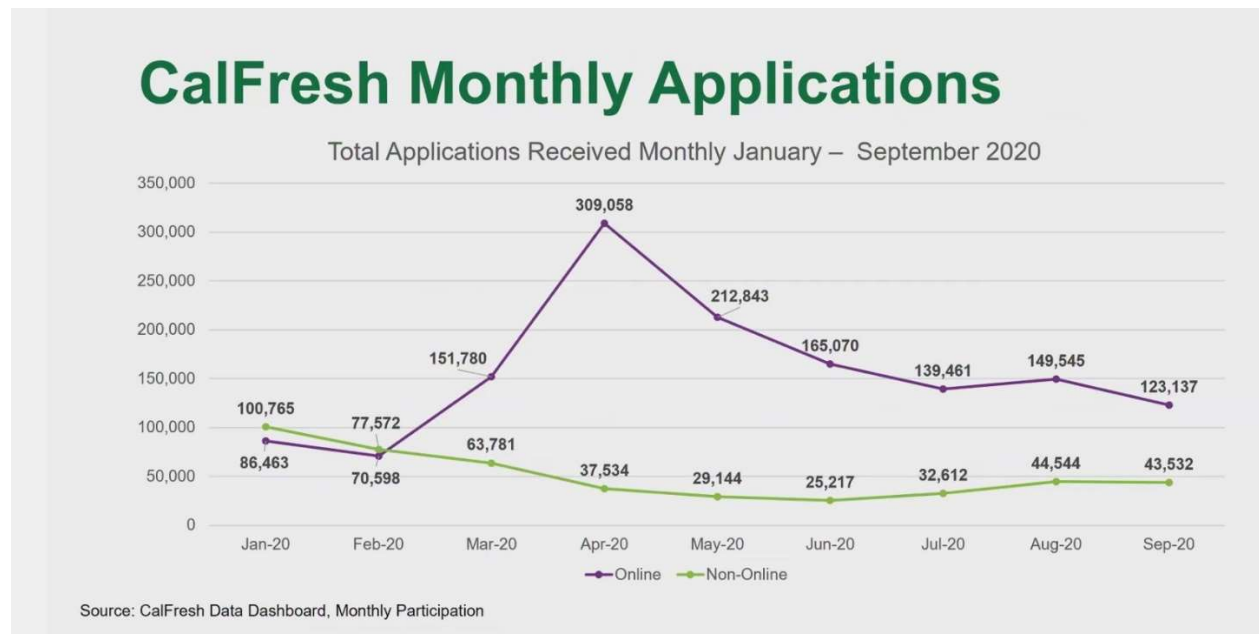
CalFresh, California's version of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), provides monthly food benefits to qualified low-income individuals and families to assist with the purchase of the food needed to maintain adequate nutrition levels. With over 2.5 million households and over 4.6 million people receiving benefits, CalFresh is the largest nutrition assistance program in California. The program is overseen by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) at the state level while California's 58 counties administer CalFresh at the local level. The program issues monthly benefits on Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards, which may be used to purchase food (and seeds or plants that grow food for human consumption) at any grocery store or farmers' market that accepts EBT cards.

CalFresh benefits are 100 percent federally funded and both national income eligibility standards and benefit levels are established by the federal government. For most households in California, in order to be eligible for CalFresh monthly gross income must be at or below 200 percent of federal poverty level (FPL), or \$3,556, for a family of three. An eligible households' adjusted net income must be at or below 100 percent of FPL, or \$1,778, for a family of three. The benefit amount is dependent on household circumstances including size, countable income, and monthly

expenses, such as housing and utilities.

In response to the pandemic and resulting mitigation efforts, county welfare offices have been closed or operating with reduced office hours, while county staff work remotely, since March 2020. This impacted individuals ability to apply for benefits in person at a time when access to CalFresh benefits increased in importance as many Californians felt the economic impacts of the pandemic.

The number of CalFresh applications spiked almost immediately upon the announcement of the stay at home order, jumping from 148,170 in February to 215,561 in March. Monthly applications peaked at 346,492 in April 2020 and remained elevated in May and June. Monthly applications have since leveled off, likely due to those newly eligible having already enrolled. However, there are concerns that another surge in applications could occur in the absence of additional federal support or a spike in COVID-19 cases.



Regardless of these monthly enrollment trends, we know overall CalFresh enrollment is higher than it has ever been. Current CalFresh enrollment shows an increase of 614,878 persons and 383,547 households since September 2019. This means a total of 4.7 million persons and 2.5 million households are currently receiving CalFresh benefits.

In an effort to facilitate continued distribution of CalFresh benefits and processing of new CalFresh applicants, CDSS sought and obtained federal authorization to waive a number of CalFresh application and reauthorization requirements. Generally, these requirements were identified as difficult or impossible to comply with while operating under COVID-19 protocols. The waivers created flexibility within CalFresh and other public assistance programs to allow newly eligible persons to quickly receive benefits and to ease requirements for people already receiving benefits so that services may continue uninterrupted while county offices were closed or operating under reduced hours. For example, implementation of the Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) time limit was suspended; certification periods were extended; use of telephonic signatures was implemented statewide; and telephonic (in lieu of fact-to-face) interviews were

permitted. While each of the waivers has a termination date, there is interest in exploring the feasibility of making some of these flexibilities permanent.

Additionally, Emergency Allotments (EA), which provide CalFresh recipients with the maximum CalFresh benefit based on household size, have been issued every month since March 2020. However, CalFresh households already receiving the maximum allotment are not receiving the augmented CalFresh benefit. For context, in January 2020, the average CalFresh household received about \$300 and the average CalFresh benefit per person was approximately \$123. CDSS reports that the average monthly EA issuance was about \$220, which means households, on average, had \$220 in additional funds to purchase food via CalFresh. Per the EA waiver, all households will receive the maximum benefit amount as shown in the table below.

<b>Maximum Monthly CalFresh Allotment by Household Size</b>		
<b>Number of People in Household</b>	<b>October 1, 1999 Through September 30, 2020</b>	<b>October 1, 2020 Through September 30, 2021</b>
1	\$194	\$204
2	\$355	\$374
3	\$509	\$535
4	\$646	\$680
5	\$768	\$807
6	\$921	\$969
7	\$1,018	\$1,071
8	\$1,164	\$1,224
Each additional person	+\$146	+\$153

Per FNS policy, EAs are authorized on a month-by-month basis. Therefore, CDSS reports it will continue to request EA extensions until the federal emergency declaration or the state of emergency declaration is lifted, whichever comes first.

While the waivers may have reduced certain aspects of the workload on county staff, challenges with operating county offices during new COVID protocols, including setting up staff to work from home and ensuring safe working conditions, coupled with surge in applications impacted application processing timelines. While county offices are adjusting their processes and policies, advocates report that some counties have sporadic and unpredictable office hours, which has made it difficult to contact county workers and impedes access to benefits.

In some counties, application processing timelines have been an issue. On average, CalFresh applications were approved within 30 days of receipt 96 percent of the time over the last year. However, compliance with the 30-day standard slipped with the onset of the pandemic. In June 2020, at least two counties processed only 46 percent of their applications within the 30-day timeframe and the statewide the application approval rate fell to 92 percent. However, timeliness of approvals improved to about 100 percent in September 2020.

Some counties are not meeting timelines for CalFresh's Expedited Services Benefit (ESB), which should be issued within 3 days due to applicants' extreme and immediate need. For instance, in April and May 2020, only 68 percent of ESB were received on time, compared to 86 percent in February 2020. In August 2020, 36,191 applicants were eligible for ESB. Of those eligible, 82.9 percent received their benefits on time, 8.6 percent received benefits within 4 -7 days, and 8.5 percent received their benefits after 7 days. As of September 2020, the statewide timeliness improved to 84 percent.

### *EBT Online*

As of April 28, 2020, CalFresh recipients can use their EBT cards to purchase groceries online at Walmart and Amazon. This allows recipients to have groceries delivered to their homes, thereby avoiding potential exposure to the coronavirus. CalFresh advocates and administrators were working on EBT online well before the COVID-19 outbreak. The launch was expedited post-COVID-19 in recognition that it is a tool that might help CalFresh households to remain COVID-free, rather than just a convenient shopping option. While it is a very desirable option, advocates report that it is not available in every community across the state, due to retailer limitations. For example, Walmart delivery is only available in 62 California cities. CDSS has been working to add additional retailers to EBT online and, as of November 12, 2020, Safeway/Albertson's Group was added to the program.

While CalFresh benefits cannot be used to pay delivery fees, orders of \$35 or more qualify for free delivery. Delivery fees for orders under \$35 vary. For households with limited fund, assessment of a delivery fee can make this service unattainable. In recognition of this, CDSS is also working to create a pick-up service that will allow EBT cardholders to shop online and pick-up their groceries at the store using a mobile point of sale device.

### *Disaster CalFresh*

Disaster CalFresh (D-CalFresh), federally known as the Disaster SNAP, provides temporary assistance to help meet the nutritional needs of survivors following a natural disaster such as a flood, fire, earthquake, or any other natural disaster. D-CalFresh provides a month's worth of CalFresh benefits on an EBT card, which can be used to purchase food at authorized retail stores. If a person is eligible, benefits are issued on the same day or within 72 hours from the time of application. Recipients are not required to repay these benefits.

D-CalFresh is only available if a Presidential Declaration for Individual Assistance has been declared in the affected area; commercial channels of food distribution were disrupted and restored; and the state of California has been approved to operate a D-CalFresh program.

In order to be eligible, the household must have experienced one of the following adverse effects:

- Damage to home or self-employment property;
- Disaster-related expenses;
- A disruption in income; and/or
- Inaccessible liquid resources.

Additionally, in some cases, D-CalFresh approvals may include eligibility for household that lost food, but did not have disaster-related expenses.

In recent months, D-CalFresh has been made available to people affected by wildfires who live or work in Butte, Fresno, Lake, Los Angeles, Madera, Mendocino, Monterey, Napa, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Siskiyou, Solano, Sonoma, and Yolo Counties.

### ***Food Distribution Programs***

Those in need of food assistance can also get help from thousands of food distribution sites. Food banks collect and distribute food to hunger-relief entities, like food pantries or food closets, which in turn distribute the food within their local communities. They distribute bags or boxes of food directly to needy families and individuals. Typically, these food distribution programs do not require clients to demonstrate necessity or eligibility, making these services available to all Californians, including undocumented immigrants.

Food Banks across the state saw an increase in demand for food assistance almost immediately upon announcement of the stay at home order. People waited in line for hours to obtain food assistance and, for at least six months, the National Guard was deployed to help with food distribution, with some deployments still ongoing. Food distribution sites and hours of operation have increased during COVID-19 as programs respond to the needs of their communities. Food banks report a statewide increase of 73 percent in food distributed.

In response to the pandemic, food banks have modified their business practices, entered into new partnerships, and expanded their volunteer corps to replace those who elected to discontinue volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the Central California Food Bank partnered with a local recycling company to keep food distribution going and keep the recycling staff employed while the recycling business was closed as a non-essential business. However, this was a temporary fix, as the recycling business has been allowed to return to normal operations, and the food bank had to find new partnerships to fill the gap.

### ***Farmers to Families Food Boxes***

In May 2020, USDA launched its Farmers to Families Food Box Program, as part of its Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), through which families are given a box containing fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy and meat products. USDA partnered with food distributors, whose workforces were negatively impacted by the closure of restaurants, hotels and other food service businesses and purchased over \$7 billion in fresh produce, dairy, meat and other products from food producers of all sizes.

Food distributors packaged food products into family-sized boxes and transported them to food banks, community and faith-based organizations, and other non-profits who distribute the boxes to families in their local communities. The program is set to continue through December 31, 2020. The USDA reports that over 113 million food boxes have been delivered nationwide under this program.

### ***Federal Food Cliff***

The food banks are facing a significant reduction in federal funding in the coming year, which is referred to as a “federal food cliff.” This is attributed to the fact that two federal programs that provide resources to the food banks will terminate by the end of 2020, the federal trade mitigation program and the Farmers to Families food boxes. Trade mitigation was created to offset

agricultural market losses during international trade disputes. The federal government purchased food commodities from agricultural businesses and provided the commodities to food banks for distribution to local communities. The Farmers to Families food boxes, described in detail above, are a short-term measure to purchase commodities from food producers while also serving need for food during the economic downturn. This federal assistance provided as much as 50 percent of the food distributed by food banks in recent months.

Data from CDSS shows that California food banks operated with \$232 million in 2019. Food bank funding increased to \$333 million in 2020 but is projected to fall to \$267 million in 2021. California recently allocated \$75 million for food banks, which is incorporated into the 2021 budget projection. This additional funding will delay, but not eliminate the looming federal food cliff.

Separately, food banks are anticipating supply chain issues, including a shortage of tin cans that will make it more difficult to obtain the volume of food product needed. Additionally, COVID-19 is preventing food banks from holding traditional food drives and fundraising activities, which further impedes their ability to meet the current need through private donations. These declining resources are occurring while demand has increased by as much as 73 percent.

### ***Nutrition Programs for Children***

The impacts of childhood hunger are well known. Children who live in households experiencing food hardship are at higher risk of health, academic, behavioral, and emotional problems than those who do not. There are a number of nutrition programs targeting children living in low-income homes, some of them are described below.

#### ***School Nutrition Programs (SNP)***

Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) are required to provide meals to students who are eligible for free and reduced price meals under California's education code.

Education Code Section 49550 requires school districts and county offices of education (COE) to provide nutritionally adequate meals to pupils who are eligible for free and reduced-price (F/RP) meals every school day. Education Code Section 47613.5 extends this requirement to charter schools. Charter schools offering nonclassroom-based instruction must also offer at least one nutritionally adequate meal for eligible pupils on any school day that the pupil is scheduled for educational activities lasting two or more hours at a school site, resource center, meeting space, or other satellite facility operated by the charter school.

Additionally, Section 34 of the 2020 Budget Act established Education Code Section 43503 that adds distance learning as an instructional model and requires school districts, COEs, and charter schools to provide nutritionally adequate meals for eligible pupils during schooldays in which those pupils participate in distance learning. This requirement allows flexibility in how food is distributed as long as students eligible for F/RP meals have access to a nutritionally adequate meal during each school day.

A nutritionally adequate meal (breakfast and lunch) must meet the federal meal pattern requirements and qualify for federal reimbursements.



The California Department of Education (CDE) administers school meal programs overseen by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The main programs are as follows:

- National School Lunch Program (NSLP)** – The NSLP is a federally funded program that assists schools and other agencies in providing nutritious lunches to children at reasonable prices. In addition to financial assistance, the program provides donated commodity foods to help reduce lunch program costs. NSLP is operated on a reimbursement basis, with agencies paid on the number of meals served. Agencies that participate in the program are reimbursed from two sources: the USDA and the State of California. State reimbursement is paid for all free and reduced price meals. Federal reimbursement is paid for all free, reduced price, and paid meals. NSLP also offers reimbursement to schools serving nutritious snacks to children participating in after-school care programs.

National School Lunch Program Rates (through June 30, 2021)						
Description	Free	Free+7 cents*	Reduced-Price	Reduced-Price+7 cents*	Paid	Paid+7cents*
Agencies that served less than 60% free/reduced-price lunches in 2017–18	\$3.51	\$3.58	\$3.11	\$3.18	\$0.33	\$0.40
Agencies that served 60% or more free/reduced-price lunches in 2017–18	\$3.53	\$3.60	\$3.13	\$3.20	\$0.35	\$0.42
Commodity Value	\$0.37	\$0.37	\$0.37	\$0.37	\$0.37	\$0.37

\* Certified School Food Authorities are eligible to receive performance-based cash assistance for each reimbursable lunch served beginning October 1, 2012.

- School Breakfast Program** – LEAs may also choose to participate in the School Breakfast Program (SBP), which is a USDA program that assists schools and other agencies in providing nutritious breakfasts to children at reasonable prices. Similar to the NSLP, the SBP must be open to all enrolled children. If a child already qualifies for free or reduced-price lunches, then the child would also qualify for free or reduced-price breakfasts. The SBP is operated on a reimbursement basis, with agencies paid on the number of meals served multiplied by the appropriate reimbursement rate. State reimbursement is paid for all free and reduced price meals. School sites may qualify for higher reimbursement rates if they are designated to be in severe need (if, two years prior, 40 percent or more of the lunches served at the site were free

or reduced-price). Sites must annually re-establish their eligibility for the Severe Need Breakfast Reimbursement.

<b>School Breakfast Program Rates (through June 30, 2021)</b>			
<b>Type of Meal</b>	<b>Free</b>	<b>Reduced-Price</b>	<b>Paid</b>
Basic Breakfast	\$1.89	\$1.59	\$0.32
Especially Needy Breakfast	\$2.26	\$1.96	\$0.32

- Summer Food Service Program** - The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is USDA funded program that reimburses sponsors for administrative and operational costs to provide meals for children 18 years of age and younger during periods when they are out of school for 15 or more consecutive school days. Sponsors may operate the SFSP at one or more sites, which are the actual locations where meals are served and children eat in a supervised setting. Eligible sites are those that serve children in low-income areas or those that serve specific groups of low-income children. Sponsors must provide documentation that proposed sites meet the income eligibility criteria required by law. There are three common types of sites: open sites, camps (residential and nonresidential), and closed enrolled sites. LEAs may also choose to operate a Seamless Summer Option through the NSLP or SBP. School Food Authorities follow the same meal service rules and claiming procedures used during the regular school year. Meals served are reimbursed at the NSLP and/or SBP “free” rates.

<b>Summer Food Service Program Reimbursement Rates (through December 31, 2020)</b>		
<b>Type of Meal</b>	<b>Rural or Self-prep</b>	<b>All Other Site Types</b>
Breakfast	\$2.38	\$2.33
Lunch or Supper	\$4.15	\$4.09
Snacks	\$0.98	\$0.96

Under USDA school meal programs, all school-aged children in income-eligible households are eligible for school meal benefits regardless of a child’s immigration status. The family-size income levels are prescribed annually by the Secretary of Agriculture for determining eligibility for free and reduced price meals and free milk. The free guidelines are 130 percent of the Federal poverty guidelines. The reduced price guidelines are 185 percent of the Federal poverty guidelines.

LEAs may identify eligible children in a few different ways. They must notify all families of free and reduced price meals and provide applications for families to complete. In addition, LEAs may directly certify student eligibility by using information from other means-tested programs,

including CalFresh and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or by determining that a child is eligible due to identification as homeless, runaway, migrant, or foster child, or enrollment in federal Head Start or comparable state program. LEAs must provide households with notification of direct certification or provide an application.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allows high-poverty schools to eliminate the administrative burden of school meal applications and still serve breakfast and lunch at no charge to all students. Schools that have implemented the CEP have experienced striking increases in school meal participation, and many reported improved attendance. The CDE highly encourages participation in the CEP for a school or group of schools with an Identified Student Percentage over 40 percent, and can include directly certified children.

Identification of children for free and reduced price meals is also important as the data is used as a proxy for low income in the state's school funding formula, the Local Control Funding Formula and generates additional education funding.

### *COVID -19 Related Changes to School Nutrition Programs*

Typically, an LEA must operate under specific rules related to the meal programs they are participating in to receive reimbursement. This means that during the school year, LEAs participating in school meals program provide meals at specified times, sites, and settings. During the summer, when school is out of session, LEAs may continue to participate in meal programs that allow for more flexibility in the methods of food distribution as described above.

During the current pandemic, the USDA has issued nationwide waivers, that now extend through June 30, 2021, to allow non-congregate feeding and meal service time flexibility during the school year, consistent with flexibilities typically allowable under summer meal programs.

As reimbursement based programs, school meal programs rely on the scale of meals served to generate revenues to cover program costs, food, labor, and equipment/operations. During the initial shut down of schools starting in mid-March 2020, LEAs reported significant drops in meals served as they struggled to adjust to serving meals to students in new formats. Many LEAs began to serve more meals during the summer and into the fall, but most have not reached the levels served during the regular school year in 2019-20.

In response to the concerns that LEAs' nutrition programs were struggling to cover costs, the 2020-21 budget provides \$192 million in one-time Federal Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief for LEA school meal reimbursements during summer break and COVID-19 school closures through August 30, 2020, at a rate of up to an additional 75 cents per meal. It also allowed state reimbursement funds from 2019-20 to be used for disaster relief for LEAs who did, or attempted to, serve student meals during the school closure period.

### *Pandemic EBT 1.0, P-EBT Extension and P-EBT 2.0*

Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) was authorized under Families First Coronavirus Act of 2020 in order to provide food to children who are eligible for free or reduced priced school meals but unable to access those meals due to school closures during COVID-19. The first round of P-EBT was

available for the months of March, April, May and June 2020. As of September 17, 2020, over 3.7 million children were issued \$365 in P-EBT benefits. Of those, about 2.3 million children were automatically eligible and 1.5 million were eligible based on application.

At the end of September 2020, California was approved to provide additional P-EBT benefits for the months of August and September 2020. This benefit is automatically available, but only to children who had already received P-EBT benefits and were attending school via virtual instruction. This is referred to as the “P-EBT Extension.”

Under the P-EBT Extension, each eligible child will receive a new P-EBT card with up to \$246 in P-EBT benefits. These new P-EBT cards will be mailed directly to families in late October through late December. Eligible families do not need to apply to receive P-EBT Extension benefits. Children who are newly eligible for free or reduced-price school meals for the 2020-21 school year are not eligible for P-EBT Extension benefits but they will be served through the P-EBT 2.0 program, described below.

A second extension of P-EBT, which California is calling P-EBT 2.0, was authorized on September 30, 2020 under H.R. 8337, the Continuing Appropriations Act. P-EBT 2.0 will be available for the entire 2020-21 school year. It will serve children eligible for free or reduced-price meals at school and qualifying child care sites (beginning October 1, 2020). Schools and child care sites must be operating via virtual instruction or have reduced their hours/days of in-person instruction and/or care for children to be eligible.

H.R. 8337 also authorized 100 percent reimbursement of P-EBT administrative costs. This expands California’s capacity to establish program infrastructure and customer service, including coordinated outreach.

The timeline for implementation, method for determining eligibility, and method for issuing benefits has not yet been determined. The expansion of the program to child care sites is significant and will require new administrative protocols. CDSS and CDE are awaiting federal guidance and will be working collaboratively to develop and submit an approvable plan as soon as possible. This lack of direction has generated questions among school administrators and parents as to how to sign up for the benefit.

#### *Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)*

The California Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides supplemental foods, nutrition education and referrals to health care, at no cost, to low-income pregnant, breastfeeding and postpartum women, infants, and children up to age five who are determined to be at nutritional risk. To be eligible for WIC, applicants must be determined by a health professional to be at nutritional risk (i.e., have certain medical-based or diet-based risk conditions).

WIC is a federally-funded health and nutrition program currently operating under many waivers, including remote services via telephone, video and texting. The waivers are operative until the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services rescinds pandemic related flexibilities. The California Department of Public Health administers the WIC program and 83 local WIC agencies provide services at over 600 sites throughout the state.

California recently transitioned from issuing WIC benefits via paper food checks to issuing the benefits on EBT cards, the same type of cards used for CalFresh. This shift provides an easier way to issue food benefits and improves the shopping experience for WIC families and grocers.

From January 2019 to October 2020, WIC benefits were issued to approximately 900,000 participants each month. In October 2020, 952,305 participants were issued benefits.

### *Nutrition Programs for Older Adults*

Older adults and people with certain underlying medical conditions are at increased risk for COVID-19 illness, thus, it is particularly important for these populations to avoid exposure to the virus. The social distancing necessary to keep seniors safe and free from COVID-19 has made obtaining food especially difficult for older adults who are living alone and/or near poverty. According to data provided by CDA, about 1.5 million Californians over the age of 60 lived alone in 2018. Additionally, about 1.2 million adults over 60 were living below 100 percent of the FPL and 2.7 million were living under 200 percent of FPL.

Meeting the nutritional needs of this vulnerable and sometimes isolated population has become even more important as the COVID-19 precautions continue. Numerous nutrition programs provide meals for older adults. These services are typically offered at congregate nutrition sites or through home delivered meals. Both congregate nutrition and home delivered meals serve broad populations, with preference given to those in the greatest economic or social need.

### *Congregate Meals*

Congregate nutrition services provide meals in group settings. Before COVID-19, many older adults received nutrition assistance in congregate settings, such as in senior centers, and through Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), Community-Based Adult Services (CBAS), Adult Day Services, and Multi-Purposes Senior Services Programs. All congregate meal settings also provide important social interaction for the people they serve. In addition to nutrition and socialization, some of these settings provide health services and other community connections. Under the current circumstances, providers of such services have had to close their congregate settings and create new systems for distributing nutrition to older adults within their homes. For example, Community-Based Adult Services operators are providing porch delivery of meals and other programs have created grab and go meals.

### *Meals on Wheels (Home Delivered Nutrition Program)*

Federally funded Home-Delivered Nutrition Programs, commonly referred to as Meals on Wheels, is a longstanding program that delivers healthy meals to older adults who cannot go out and purchase food and/or prepare meals in their homes. Meals on Wheels is primarily funded by the Older Americans Act (OAA) and often administered by local AAAs. Meals on Wheels combats senior hunger and isolation by providing home-delivered meals five days a week. The program helps recipients to continue living independently in their own home and prevents premature institutionalization and its associated costs. Meals on Wheels serves individuals aged 60 or older that are homebound due to illness or disability, or are isolated. In addition to delivering nutritious meals, the program provides nutrition education, nutrition risk screening, and links to other supportive services. A key benefit of the program is reduced social isolation due to contact with the individuals who deliver the meals.

This program relies heavily on volunteers to deliver meals, many of whom are older adults themselves and, therefore, especially susceptible to the coronavirus. When the pandemic first hit, programs struggled to schedule drivers to make food deliveries. Much of this concern resolved over time as new volunteers stepped up to fill the need created by older volunteers who had to step away from their service in order to protect their personal health.

According to data from the Department of Aging, statewide, more than 17 million meals were delivered by AAAs between April 6 and October 11, 2020. During the same timeframe, about 644,000 meals were delivered to over 100,000 individuals on a weekly basis. In Fiscal Year 2018/19, AAAs delivered meals to more than 212,000 older adults. AAAs forecast that over 412,000 older adults will be in need and willing to accept food delivery in the coming fiscal year. Demand for in-home meals has already spiked. According to a survey conducted by Meals on Wheels America, these nutrition programs are now serving an average of 47 percent more seniors than they were on March 1, 2020. Despite this increase, Meals on Wheels America also reports that eight out of ten low-income, food insecure seniors are not receiving the home-delivered or congregate meals they need. Furthermore, the Census Bureau's Household Pulse survey found that 97 percent of local Meals on Wheels programs have seen costs rise, particularly due to the need to acquire safety supplies and deliver meals to more seniors.

### *Great Plates Delivered Program*

On April 24, 2020, Governor Gavin Newsom announced the "Great Plates Delivered" program, a meal delivery service for California's older adults. The program is designed to serve two purposes: providing in-home healthy meals to qualifying older adults and providing economic stimulus to the food and restaurant industries.

Great Plates protects the health of older adults by making it possible for them to avoid exposure to the coronavirus at grocery stores or restaurants while maintaining a healthy diet. The program delivers up to three meals a day, all of which must meet nutrition requirements, including that they be low in sodium and contain no sugary drinks. Additionally, participants may express dietary restrictions and cultural needs so that meals received fit their individual nutritional needs.

In order to qualify for food delivery under Great Plates, individuals must be 65 or older, or 60-64 and at high-risk as defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, including those who are COVID-19 positive, exposed to COVID-19, or have an underlying condition. Additionally, individuals must live alone or with one other program-eligible adult and affirm an inability to prepare or obtain meals. Local administrators are encouraged to conduct community outreach to older adults on how to enroll and to food providers on how to apply to participate. Local administrators are also encouraged to work with their local 2-1-1 program, so that 2-1-1 operators can answer questions from individuals and food providers. While outreach is encouraged, approximately half of the participating local jurisdictions have established caps for individual program participation, which is likely due to fiscal limitations within the local jurisdictions.

Great Plate participants must earn no more than 600 percent of the federal poverty limit, which is significantly higher than the 200 percent set for CalFresh. Importantly, participants must not be currently receiving assistance from other state or federal nutrition assistance programs, including Meals on Wheels and CalFresh. It has been reported that some Meals on Wheels participants have dropped out of that program in order to obtain meals via Great Plates. There are concerns that

these individuals might not experience timely re-entry into Meals on Wheels when Great Plates is no longer operational, as demand for Meals on Wheels exceeds capacity in some communities. Additionally, in some areas the number of individuals who applied for but were ineligible or unable to obtain food assistance via Great Plates have been referred to other senior nutrition programs which has resulted in waiting lists that are two to three times larger than they were before.

Local participation in Great Plates is optional. Currently, 32 cities/counties are operating the program (see attached). The program requires local administrators to partner with local restaurants and food providers to prepare and deliver meals. Program costs are shared between federal, state and local governments as follows: 75 percent paid by FEMA, 18.75 percent paid with state funds, and 6.25 percent paid by the local participating entity. Local administrators are reimbursed for program costs by the federal and state governments. In an effort to make the program more attainable for local jurisdictions that might not have the funds available to absorb upfront costs, local administrators may request expedited funds of up to 50 percent FEMA’s share of the costs. California’s Office of Emergency Services (OES), which administers the program at the state level, is available to work with interested local administrators to obtain expedited funds and about half of the local programs have been approved for expedited funds.

Per FEMA rules, authorization for the program is provided on a month-to-month basis. The program is currently authorized to run until November 8, 2020. OES reports it intends to continue requesting extensions for the Great Plates Delivered program based on need. A list of participating local agencies is attached. Program data provided by OES is shown in the table below.

<b>Great Plates Delivered (as of 10/30/20)</b>	
Meals served	13,787,355
Individuals Served	53,329
Food Providers Contracted	787
Jobs for Food Providers	9,875
Active City/County Participants (Local Administrators)	32
Inactive City/County Participants (Local Administrators)	8

***Nutrition Assistance for Farmworkers***

People who harvest fruits and vegetables all over California are struggling to feed their own families. Although they have been declared essential workers, farmworkers are reportedly experiencing food insecurity at higher rates than other populations. Those who are in California without documentation are some of the hardest hit economically, because they often do not qualify for safety net services, such as unemployment and stimulus aid.

Food insecurity in agricultural communities is increasing. The Central California Food Bank reports a 43 percent jump in food distribution in April 2020 from the year prior. Additionally, 25 percent of people showing up in food lines had never sought emergency food help

before. In California, many farmworkers are Latino and Latino communities are seeing higher rates of COVID-19 positive cases. Statewide, Latinos experienced about 61 percent of coronavirus cases and 49 percent of deaths, while they make up about 39 percent of the population.

Farmworkers often live in rural communities where resources such as grocery stores, food pantries and soup kitchens can be inaccessible, especially when food distributions are scheduled during normal working hours. Farmworkers who live in camps, motels, or who are homeless often lack equipment for food preparation and storage. Some farmworkers avoid enrolling in any nutrition programs because of the belief that participating in public assistance may compromise their immigration or residency status. Poor translation services and misinformation on eligibility have also been identified as barriers to food assistance.

Food distribution sites have been added to accommodate the increasing need of farmworkers. In addition to expanding to locations that are outside of metropolitan areas and expanding hours of operation, food distributors are setting up at farmworkers job sites so that the workers can get otherwise unattainable assistance. For example, one job-site food giveaway that took place outside of Mendota, California, provided to food to more than 3,000 farmworkers in one day.

California has taken steps to provide food assistance to immigrants living in the state. In addition to food distribution sites, some farmworkers may be able to access food benefits via California Food Assistance Program (CFAP). By federal law, CalFresh benefits are not available to undocumented immigrants. However, CFAP is available to qualified non-citizens who are not eligible for federal benefits due to their immigration status. CFAP provides monthly food benefits to legal noncitizens 18 years of age or older who meet all federal SNAP eligibility criteria but have resided in this country for fewer than five years and are therefore not eligible for federal SNAP benefits. Like CalFresh, CFAP benefits are provided via EBT cards and can only be used to purchase authorized food products.

Additionally, on April 15, 2020, the Governor announced the creation of a \$75 million<sup>3</sup> Disaster Relief Assistance for Immigrants (DRAI) program to provide one-time state-funded benefits to undocumented adults who are ineligible for other forms of assistance, including pandemic unemployment benefits provided under the CARES Act, because of their immigration status. An undocumented adult who qualified could receive \$500 in direct assistance, with a maximum of \$1,000 in assistance per household. Eligible individuals were required to provide information showing that they: (1) are an undocumented adult (person over the age of 18); (2) are not eligible for federal COVID-19 related assistance, like the CARES Act tax stimulus payments or pandemic unemployment benefits; and, (3) have experienced a hardship as a result of COVID-19.

By design, this assistance was available until the funding was spent or until June 30, 2020, at the latest. As of July 1, 2020, over 150,000 pre-paid cards were issued under DRAI and the all of allocated funds were disbursed.

As part of the application process, DRAI applicants were asked “What unmet needs do you have?” in an attempt to assess the needs of California’s undocumented community. In response to this

---

<sup>3</sup> This funding was made available by SB 89 (Committee on Budget and Fiscal Review, Chapter 2, Statutes of 2020), which authorized the use of General Fund dollars to be used for any purpose related to the Governor's March 4, 2020, proclamation of a State of Emergency.



question, 86 percent responded they needed assistance with housing, 53 percent responded that food was an unmet need, and 54 percent responded that their utilities needs were unmet. CDSS reports that preliminary data analysis shows that the oldest age group of approved DRAI applicants were more likely to select food as an unmet need compared to younger age groups. While not a nutrition benefit, the overwhelming demand for DRAI reinforces the urgent need for assistance within this population.