

## Item 9

### (Information Item)

#### Leveraging CalFresh to support student basic needs

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**SUMMARY:**

Alexis Fernández is Branch Chief of the CalFresh and Nutrition Branch at the California Department of Social Services. In this role, she is responsible for the largest SNAP program in the country, SNAP Outreach, Nutrition Education, Employment & Training, and Disaster-SNAP programs. Fernandez is tasked with advancing the Department’s vision to improve program access and overall health and well-being, streamline benefit delivery, expand work opportunities, and increase CalFresh participation. She has been with the Department for nearly four years, most recently serving as the Chief of the CalFresh Policy Bureau. Previously, she was the Policy Director at the First 5 Association of California and the Director of Legislation at California Food Policy Advocates. She received her Master of Social Work with an emphasis on management and planning from UC Berkeley and a BA in Ethnic Studies from UC San Diego.

Ms. Fernández will present information on the Cal Fresh food and nutrition programs and how these resources can be utilized by qualifying college students. The discussion will include how the California Student Aid Commission (Commission) currently leverages the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) data to help identify eligible students and how we can further facilitate and expedite their access to CalFresh resources.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

This is an information item; no action is required.

**KEY QUESTIONS**

1. What actions (legislative or administrative) can the State of California take to eliminate barriers for college students to access CalFresh benefits to reduce food insecurity?
2. How can the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) leverage data from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to help facilitate access to CalFresh resources?

**BACKGROUND:**

The CalFresh Program, formerly known as Food Stamps, is a part of a federal government food and nutrition program known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), can add to your food budget to put healthy and nutritious food on the table. The program issues monthly electronic benefits that can be used to buy most foods, as well as plants and seeds to grow food, at many markets and food stores. This program provides eligible recipients up to \$194 per month in food assistance.<sup>1</sup> However, there are limitations on college students’ ability to access CalFresh:

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<sup>1</sup> Apply for California Food Stamps Online. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.getcalfresh.org/>

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1. **Work requirement:** Federal rules require students to be employed a minimum of 20 hours per week to receive SNAP. This significantly exceeds the 10-15 hour maximum recommended by most researchers in order to allow full-time studies to focus on their studies. Furthermore, with the State now entering a major economic recession, finding work may be much more difficult for college student.

*Effective April 1, 2020, CalFresh recipients between the ages of 18-49 without a child in the home are temporarily NOT required to meet federal work requirements. This federal rule is known as Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD).<sup>2</sup>*

2. **County requirement:** Most counties require CalFresh applicants to attend an in-person interview, typically at the county Social Services office, as part of their application process.<sup>3</sup> Taking the time to do this may be cumbersome for full-time students, especially low-income individuals who may have limited access to transportation. Students in geographically large counties may find themselves hundreds of miles from the county Social Services office.
3. **Application requirement:** California students can only qualify for CalFresh if they meet the following criteria<sup>4</sup>:
  - a. Age 18-49 and is physically and mentally “fit” for employment. If the person has a disability, they are not considered a student.
  - b. Enrolled at least half-time in regular curriculum at an institution of higher education in which the regular curriculum meets the standard requirements for graduation or certification in a particular field of study.

### POLICY SOLUTIONS TO CONSIDER

The State’s ability to reduce or eliminate some of these barriers may be limited, given that the program is **federally funded but locally administered**. State laws cannot override federal rules or regulations, and most state statutory changes creating new mandates for local governments are subject to the requirement that these mandates be reimbursed by state funds. However, the State could at least explore and analyze further solutions such as:

1. **Expanding TANF access:** Enacted in 1996, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, colloquially known as the federal “welfare” program, provides large block grants to states to fund anti-poverty programs.<sup>5</sup> California uses approximately \$1 billion of the federal TANF block grant to fund Cal Grants for low-income students. SNAP rules allow for college students to be exempted from the 20-hour work requirement if they are receiving other federal benefits such as TANF. However, current rules do not allow community college students to benefit from this exemption, as these rules do not allow for TANF to fund non-tuition financial aid such as the Cal Grant B Access Award.

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<sup>2</sup> CalFresh Work Rules. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.sfhsa.org/calfresh/keeping-calfresh-benefits/CalFresh-work-rules>

<sup>3</sup> LSNAC Guide to CalFresh Benefits CalFresh = Food Stamps = SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://calfresh.guide/the-interview-process/>

<sup>4</sup> CalFresh - Students . (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://mycalfresh.org/students/>

<sup>5</sup> Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.benefits.gov/benefit/613>

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2. **Streamlining the interview process:** Some counties, such as Yolo and Butte, have worked with local community colleges and universities to streamline the CalFresh interview process to reduce the burden on college students. For example, Yolo County maintains a CalFresh officer at UC Davis full time. Others allow applicants to conduct their interview over the phone rather than in person. **How can the State streamline the application and interview process for students applying for CalFresh, by either incentivizing or requiring counties to make changes?**
  
3. **Sharing of data to reduce the number of applications:** Much of the financial and personal information a student must provide when applying for CalFresh is identical to information they may have already provided when submitting a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Currently, there are federal privacy laws that limit agencies' and campuses' from sharing FAFSA data.

### RESPONSIBLE PERSON(S):

Alexis Fernández, Chief  
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Catalina Mistler  
Interim Chief Deputy Director  
Executive Office

### ATTACHMENT(S):