



# THE CALFRESH GAP

UNDERSTANDING LOW  
RATES OF PARTICIPATION  
FOR LOS ANGELES COUNTY



# OVERVIEW

**Hunger and food insecurity are challenges facing individuals and communities across the country**, including in Los Angeles (L.A.) County. The Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as “food stamps” and in California now called “CalFresh,” is the nation’s first line of defense against hunger but could be doing even more to address food insecurity in L.A. County.

In an average month, CalFresh reaches over 1 million L.A. County residents in over 500,000 households with \$170 million in federally funded food assistance. CalFresh generates approximately **\$3.6 billion** in economic activity in L.A. County each year.

Without improvements in CalFresh participation, however, L.A. County is still leaving millions more federal dollars on the table. USDA estimates that about 35% of Los Angeles residents—or nearly 500,000 people—are likely eligible but not enrolled in CalFresh. In May of 2017, the L.A. County Board of Supervisors approved a motion to increase the CalFresh participation rate by 20%, with a goal of enrolling an additional 70,000 households into the program. As of April 2018, DPSS has enrolled an additional 15,652 households or 22% of the target goal. DPSS’s success demonstrates that there are opportunities to get CalFresh to more of these eligible L.A. County residents, to help them spend more robust federal benefits locally, and to generate additional economic activity.<sup>1</sup>

Based on research on SNAP across the country, the positive impacts of closing the L.A. CalFresh gap are expected to include: increasing food security for residents; promoting better health outcomes and lowering health care costs; ensuring lower-income students access to school meals; helping seniors afford both food and medicine; spurring demand for food retail stores, especially in underserved neighborhoods; assisting in disaster preparation and disaster recovery; and boosting local economic activity generally.<sup>2</sup>

## CALFRESH STRUCTURE AND FUNDING

CalFresh is a shared federal/state/county partnership. Food benefits are funded 100% by the federal government and administrative expenses are shared among USDA, California and L.A. County. CalFresh is a federal entitlement program, known as SNAP nationally. The funding responds to changes in need, whether due to economic downturns or natural disasters.

USDA also provides SNAP funds to conduct outreach and application assistance on a 50/50 federal/state reimbursement basis, implement nutrition education (known locally as Champions for Change), and offer Employment and Training (E&T) programs.

USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Western Regional Office provides oversight and guidance to California and other states in the region. FNS evaluates California SNAP agencies and other state SNAP agencies on their accuracy in providing correct benefit amounts to participants and correctly handling cases, in processing applications within 30 days, and in serving low-income residents. FNS oversight can include program access reviews of county offices.

Federal eligibility rules provide income and resource limits on eligibility but allow states a variety of options and waivers to vary those rules. Most households in Los Angeles must have a gross income under 200% of the poverty line, or \$3,400/month for a household of three.

The CalFresh administering agency for California is the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and for L.A. County, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS).

## L.A. County CalFresh Snapshot

**Caseload:** 1.1 million

**Eligible but not enrolled:** 500,000

**Enrollment Rate:** 64.9% of Los Angelenos who are eligible for CalFresh participate

## Participant Characteristics

According to the most recent (2016) U.S. Census estimates:

- **62%** of CalFresh participants in L.A. County are children
- About **50,000** CalFresh participants are aged 60 or over
- **35%** of Medi-Cal recipients in L.A. County also receive CalFresh
- **1,500** households completed recertification paperwork online in March 2018

## CALFRESH APPLICATION PROCESS

L.A. County residents can apply for SNAP online via [benefitscal.org](http://benefitscal.org), by filling out and mailing or faxing in a paper application to the County, or by applying in person at your local SNAP office.

## EBT CARD AND RETAILERS

The California Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card is called the Golden State Advantage Card.

Participants obtain their EBT cards either over the counter in person or by mail. Households choose a PIN number for security purposes. They can use this debit-type card to purchase food at SNAP-authorized food retailers. The local FNS field office is responsible for the licensing and monitoring of SNAP retailers.

In addition to allowing benefits to be used at grocery retailers, California and L.A. County have chosen a federal option to allow persons who are elderly, have disabilities, or are homeless to use their CalFresh benefits to purchase hot prepared foods at approved restaurants.<sup>3,4</sup>

In L.A. County and elsewhere in California, SNAP monthly allotments are distributed on household EBT cards on a staggered schedule over the first 10 days of the month, based on the last digit of the client's case number.

## CALFRESH AND DISASTERS

In a disaster's aftermath, people often have new and urgent needs for food and other assistance. This is particularly the case for lower-income people who are less likely to have savings and other resources to draw on during such a difficult time. Advocates can work with federal and state partners to get temporary Disaster SNAP (D-SNAP) to households not already enrolled in SNAP, and replacement and supplemental SNAP benefits to regular program participants adversely affected by the disaster. These resources provide critical support to households struggling to access food during a disaster. Each year by August 15, California provides FNS with an annual CalFresh Disaster Plan. In the wake of wildfires in 2017 and 2018, FNS approved a variety of SNAP waivers so that CalFresh benefits could be provided to Californians who had been adversely impacted by the wildfires in northern and southern California. One month of CalFresh benefits at the maximum household allotment level were provided to those not enrolled on regular CalFresh who applied at D-SNAP sites under slightly eased eligibility criteria; the same benefit levels were provided to CalFresh households through replacement and supplemental benefits loaded automatically onto their EBT cards. FNS also granted waivers to ease SNAP administrative procedures to help CalFresh agencies cope with the additional workload and to allow CalFresh households to use CalFresh benefits to purchase hot prepared food items at SNAP authorized retailers.

## CALFRESH AND SCHOOL MEALS

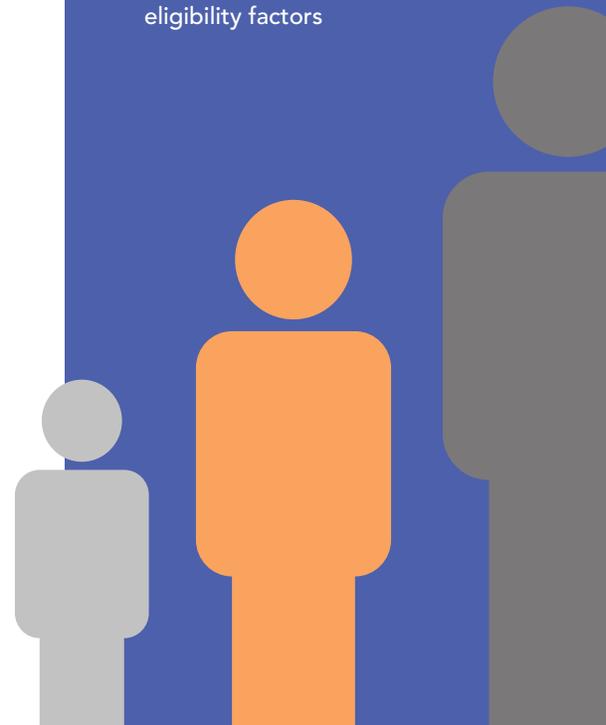
Children in households that receive CalFresh and/or Disaster CalFresh are "directly certified" for free school meals for the remainder of the school year. School districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program match the names of children living in households that receive SNAP benefits with school enrollment records. This match is then used to certify students for free school meals without the need for their families to complete a school meals application. This practice also promotes cost-effectiveness and efficiency for school districts.<sup>5</sup>



### Key Factors in CalFresh Participation Gaps

Among reasons eligible people may not be enrolled on SNAP:

- Lack of information about the benefits and how to apply
- Stigma associated with public assistance
- Difficulty of completing the application process, including submitting documents and having an interview
- Perception that the household is over income guidelines
- Mobility issues
- Concern that participation might undermine immigration status for someone in the household
- Perception that the benefit levels are too low to warrant applying
- Getting cut off after enrollment for procedural reasons
- Lack of proper screening for eligibility factors



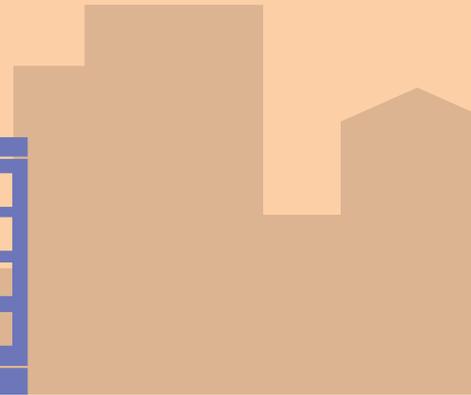
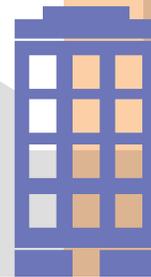
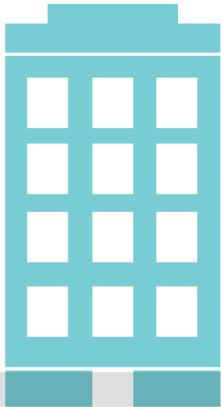
## Initiatives and Opportunities to Build on Progress in Closing L.A. County CalFresh Gaps

**A number of positive initiatives and activities are underway to enroll more eligible L.A. County residents:**

1. L.A. County DPSS has convened a CalFresh Work Group to identify ways to strengthen outreach and to retain participants. This Task Force will build on these recommendations.
2. L.A. County is looking at new ways to enroll students in K–12 schools, as well as community colleges and universities.
3. 52 community organizations assist families with CalFresh applications and paperwork.
4. Technology tools make it easier for households to submit applications and ongoing paperwork online.
6. Market Match is an incentive program that provides \$10 to CalFresh participants to purchase fruits and vegetables at farmers markets.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Full report authored by DPSS 'Reducing the Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Poverty by Increasing CalFresh Participation', April 2018
- 2 For more information on SNAP's positive impacts, <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/frac-facts-snap-strengths.pdf>
- 3 For background, <http://dpss.lacounty.gov/wps/portal/dpss/main/programs-and-services/restaurant-meals>
- 4 For a list of RMPs in L.A. County, [http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/dpss/237774\\_All.pdf](http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/dpss/237774_All.pdf)
- 5 For background, [http://www.frac.org/wp-content/uploads/direct\\_certification\\_update.pdf](http://www.frac.org/wp-content/uploads/direct_certification_update.pdf)



**FRAC**  
Food Research  
& Action Center

  
**The Food Trust**  
THEFOODTRUST.ORG

LOS ANGELES REGIONAL  
**FOOD  
BANK**  
Fighting Hunger. Giving Hope.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was developed by the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), The Food Trust and the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, with generous support from Target Enterprise Inc.