



Student volunteer Yongjie He restocks shelves with canned goods at the UC Berkeley campus food pantry. PHOTO BY ANNE WERNIKOFF/CALMATTERS

Alexis Fernandez, acting chief of the California Department of Social Services CalFresh branch, said increasing participation among students, working people and seniors is a priority for the state. Some progress already has been made: The state has dropped requirements for fingerprints, a test of financial assets and a lifetime ban on people with drug-related felonies.

The court battle hasn't made a difference on the ground. Maria Lewis, a San Diego Food Bank CalFresh outreach coordinator, estimates that she talks to about 10 people each week who worry applying for CalFresh would harm their or a family member's green card application.

Across the state, social services providers have reported that even those, like Castaneda, who would be unaffected by the federal rule increasingly are avoiding safety net programs because of uncertainty and confusion.

The fear has made it harder to get CalFresh to immigrants. But the puzzle of federal eligibility requirements for non-citizens has long been difficult for county workers to explain in English, let alone in other languages.

Among U.S. citizens who fall below the income limit for the program, the rate of immigrants who reported participating in CalFresh is 70 percent of that of people born in the U.S., according to 2018 California Health Interview Survey data.

Counties can fight the chilling effect by ensuring that all paperwork is well-translated into locally spoken languages, said Almas Sayeed, deputy director of the California Immigrant Policy Center. She said county offices dedicated to providing immigrants with a welcoming space in Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara provide a model.

Castaneda also didn't want to accept food stamps because she

thought it should go to needier people, a belief common among seniors. "These programs are good, but I feel that this program is not for me anymore because I'm healthy," said Castaneda. "I don't want to take advantage."

Limited knowledge of the program and the intimidating amount of paperwork also are significant barriers for seniors, said Lorena Carranza, CalFresh outreach manager at the Sacramento Food Bank.

One recent policy change may help educate seniors and dispel myths. Until June of this year, low-income seniors and disabled people receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) were barred from getting CalFresh. But California lawmakers voted last year to expand the program to SSI recipients, so counties and food banks mobilized a statewide enrollment campaign. As of Oct. 1, nearly 243,000 SSI recipients had enrolled.

Lessons learned

There are common themes among these tales of Californians—college students, immigrants, seniors, people working long hours and those without homes—who are not getting the food they need.

Misconceptions about who's entitled to food stamps abound. Getting and staying on the program requires a lot of time, diligent record-keeping and comfort navigating bureaucracy. Many need the support of food banks and non-profits to guide them through the program.

Allowing people to apply and be approved for the program all in the same day, as Washington state has done, would greatly reduce barriers, said policy advocate Bartholow. Some California counties have moved toward this model by checking state databases rather than requiring people to track down documents, offering applications entirely over the phone and letting people do the interview on-demand.

But the roll-out hasn't been uniform across the state's 58 counties, which each run the program separately. State leaders have clashed over how much improvement can be gained by pressuring counties to be more efficient and how much depends on the state providing more funding for workers and outreach.

The stakes are high as populations that are vulnerable to hunger swell. Seniors, who are increasingly poor and immigrant, are the fastest growing age group in the state. More low-income students are attending California colleges than in the past. And homelessness is rising rapidly amid a housing affordability crisis.

But closing the gap between those who need food stamps and those who aren't getting them is doable, Bartholow said.

"It's not as complicated as being hungry and trying to go to school, or being hungry and trying to find housing, or being hungry and trying to care for your kids, or being hungry and needing to take medication with your meals," Bartholow said.

"There's a meal with their name on it." □

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