

Barnidge: With CalFresh resources available, Contra Costa families shouldn't go hungry

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The Contra Costa Civil grand jury released a report not long ago that came as something of a surprise. It said the CalFresh program -- the latest iteration of food stamps -- is severely underutilized, with 40 percent or more of eligible county households not claiming benefits to which they are entitled.

Not only does this finding poke holes in tales of rampant welfare abuse -- please take note, Fox News -- it means many low-income families are missing out on a federally funded service intended especially for them.

"California has one of the lowest participation rates in the country," said Rebecca Darnell, who oversees the program as deputy director of the county's Work Force Services department. "I think part of that is lack of knowledge of the program."

She explains that it is open to all American citizens -- individuals and families -- who meet screening criteria for income and assets. For a single individual, that means a gross monthly income of \$1,900 or less; the greater the number of dependents, the higher the income threshold.

The Contra Costa program now is serving about 35,000 households -- an average of 2.3 persons in each -- that receive benefits of about \$250-\$300 per month. ("It's not meant to pay for all of a family's nutritional needs," Darnell said. "It's meant as a supplement.") Census and income data, however, indicate that at least another 20,000 eligible households have not applied.

The reasons span the gamut: the stigma attached to food stamps; confusion about how to apply; misinformation about eligibility; fear of government officials.

"There are undocumented families whose children, as citizens, would be eligible," Darnell said, "but the parents are scared to apply because they think it might lead to deportation. That's not how the program works."

It shouldn't be so hard to give money away, but officials are not about to give up. If applicants won't come to them, they'll go to applicants. The county's Employment and Human Services Department recently staged an event in San Pablo to help eligible applicants with paperwork, and there are plans to distribute informational fliers to schools in low-income neighborhoods. Yet to be launched is a spread-the-word campaign, in partnership with the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano counties and the Multi-Faith ACTION Coalition.

According to the food bank's Larry Sly, that effort will include an outreach into Latino communities with Spanish-speaking representatives and a communitywide education campaign, funded by a \$500,000 grant from the Thomas J. Long Foundation.

"So many people -- senior citizens especially -- don't think they're eligible," Sly said, "or they think they don't want to take the money because someone else needs it more. The money is there to provide good nutrition for all."

Sly, whose organization distributes about 20 million pounds of food per year, knows there's plenty of need, and Food Banks can't answer it all.

That brings us back to CalFresh and some myths Darnell wants to put to rest.

"People think food stamp recipients are on aid forever," she said. "They think they're eating lobster tails. For most of them, this is a stopgap while they get their lives together. There are people out there just trying to put food on the table for their kids."

The challenge is getting them on the program.