

Larry Sly: Provide incentives, but let them make their own decisions

By Larry Sly

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Debates over what food and beverages are good for us and what are not seems like a worthwhile discussion when what we consume impacts the overall public health.

The truth is we are capable of making our own decisions based on available public knowledge. Since I have spent most of my life providing food to low-income people, I have some emotional feelings about what people say when they propose that CalFresh benefits (Food Stamps) cannot be used to buy soda.

I saw a recent plan that talks about incentivizing CalFresh recipients to buy fresh fruit and vegetable by providing a rebate if they use their benefits to buy fresh produce. The same plan also says however, that people will not be able to use their benefits to buy soda.

My lack of comfort is that instead of focusing on providing low-income people an incentive to spend their benefits on "good food", people want to prohibit others from buying "bad food."

The feeling is this is OK because CalFresh recipients are receiving benefits we as tax payers help provide.

I think there is an assumption that people who are poor are somehow less than those of us who are not, so they need to meet the standards we set for their behavior. We already say CalFresh benefits can only be used to purchase food, not soap or toilet paper (two fairly essential parts of a healthy life I think) so taking it much further becomes an issue of judgment.

Part of the reason CalFresh benefits were changed from Food Stamp coupons to an ATM-like card was to diminish the stigma recipients felt as they went through the grocery line.

We have all heard the theoretical story from someone who saw a Food Stamp recipient in a grocery line buying food "I could never afford" with their CalFresh benefits. Part of this

judgment may not even be based on reality. A CalFresh benefit of just \$100 won't go very far to buy groceries for the month. Careful planning becomes essential and many recipients are actually making do with affordable basics like dry beans, frozen vegetables and pasta.

Because people are poor, we somehow feel it is their fault and we somehow assume it is because of the bad decisions they make. In reality, we hear stories every day of losing work to disability, the economy, or the added financial burden of taking care of an aging parent.

I encourage you to try it for yourself. Take the Hunger Challenge to live on just \$4.50 of groceries a day to see how challenging it is to nourish yourself. Find the guidelines at www.foodbankccs.org/hungerchallenge and let me know how it goes.

I have a support system that saves me if I fall on hard luck, but for some the Food Bank and CalFresh may be the safety net keeping their family from going hungry.

We can, and do inform the public about healthy eating and offer nutritious choices and education in our Food Bank programs, but believe that our clients should be treated with the dignity to make their own decisions.

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