

Impact Brief

January 2020



Vulnerable County Residents At Risk of Losing Critical Food Support

Overview

On December 5, 2019, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) published Final Rule changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that will affect Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents (ABAWDs) who receive or apply for food assistance through the CalFresh program. CalFresh, which is the name for SNAP in California, is administered by the Employment & Human Services Department (EHSD) in Contra Costa County. The program helps fight hunger by providing food to low-income households and is considered a key element in preventing more destabilizing and costly problems down the road in health, nutrition, family stability and independence.

Rule Change May Cause 1,500 Low-Income County Residents to Lose CalFresh Benefits

The USDA Rule Change constrains the conditions under which states' requests for ABAWD time-limit waivers will be granted in the future, and it limits the ability of states to bank their allotment of "discretionary exemptions." These exemptions are a critical tool that can be used by counties to help people maintain CalFresh benefits in certain months where they fall just short of the work requirement or experience particular challenges.

We estimate that as many as 1,500 residents may lose benefits when the discretionary exemptions are restricted.

ABAWD CalFresh Recipients Are Already Struggling

Many ABAWD CalFresh recipients face challenges that make it difficult to establish a consistent employment arrangement.

In a 2018 Contra Costa survey of ABAWD CalFresh recipients, respondents reported:

30%
in restaurants and
retail industries

Almost 30% were working in the retail and restaurant industries, which can provide inconsistent hours per week or month.



Half do not own a car.



Nearly a quarter did not have a permanent place to live, were at immediate risk of eviction, or were homeless.

By cutting off benefits, the new rule could harm thousands of Contra Costa residents already struggling to get by. At a time when homelessness is reaching crisis levels, the rule may push those on the edge of losing their housing into hunger, instability and ultimately homelessness. Being hungry and not having a roof over your head make finding employment exponentially more difficult, not less.

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Thousands of ABAWDs Receive CalFresh in Contra Costa County

An ABAWD is an adult CalFresh recipient between the ages of 18 and 49 who is considered able-bodied and does not have dependent children. Current federal law limits SNAP eligibility for ABAWDs (except those who are exempt) to just three months out of every three years, unless they are able to maintain employment or other approved activities for an average of 20 hours a week.

Even with an economy that is improved overall, the ABAWD population remains at risk. Many are working, but the nature of the work and the industries in which they are employed (such as retail and restaurant) can make it difficult to maintain predictable and consistent hours from week to week. Many of these individuals have work hours just on the edge of what may allow them to meet the requirements. County staff have historically used “discretionary exemptions” to help at-risk ABAWDs remain in the CalFresh program.

CalFresh Provides Critical Support to Low-Income Community Members

- In California, 57% of CalFresh participants lived in households with income at or below 50% of poverty level (FY 2017).
- The average CalFresh benefit in Fiscal Year 2018 was less than \$1.50 per person per meal.
- In our county, estimated expenses for an individual’s basic needs are more than \$3,000 per month. Food assistance through CalFresh allows individuals to focus on becoming employed and stable, utilizing their remaining budget to pay rent, utilities or other necessities.

Contra Costa County Opposed the Rule Changes

The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors submitted a Public Comment in OPPOSITION to these rule changes on March 29, 2019. They cited the considerable challenges faced by low-income ABAWD residents as they seek steady employment in order to maintain a sustainable livelihood. The physical and psychological toll of hunger is not a catalyst for work – it has the opposite effect. Depriving these individuals of access to food will only make their lives more difficult.

What Are Discretionary Exemptions?

Based on allocations from the federal government, the state gives counties some flexibility to help individuals who are at risk of losing CalFresh benefits. Reasons can include:

- Seasonally employed
- Inconsistent work schedules
- Hours just short of requirements
- Youth aging out of Foster Care

These are at risk under new Final Rule

What We’re Doing to Help

The Employment and Human Services Department is committed to ensuring that community members have access to resources that support, protect and empower individuals and families to achieve self-sufficiency. We have reached out directly to CalFresh recipients who may be affected by the work requirements: staff have been trained on screening for qualifying work, on federal exemptions, on verifications that are required, and the resources that are available for individuals who need help in finding additional work. We are collaborating closely with our community partners in these efforts.

When Will The New Rule Take Effect?

The new rule is scheduled to take effect on April 1, 2020. On January 16, 2020, several states filed a lawsuit to prevent its implementation.

What You Can Do

Organizations and community members can contact advocacy groups or their elected representatives at any time to express concern about issues of interest to them. For more information, visit the [CalFresh page](#) on the EHSD website.



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