

# Connecting the Dots

**Reducing Child Hunger in California by Connecting  
the Programs That Serve Them**



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**Jessica Bartholow and Amy Garfinkle  
Western Center on Law and Poverty**



Western Center on Law and Poverty leads the fight in the courts, counties, and capital to secure housing, health care and a strong safety net for low-income Californians. Learn more at: [www.wclp.org](http://www.wclp.org)

One of Government's most important roles is to prevent harm to children. Still, 1 in 4 children in California are in danger of going hungry on any given day. Hunger experienced by a child doesn't only cause physical discomfort, but has long lasting physical, emotional and developmental impacts. While long-term solutions to child poverty appear out-of-reach for California Law makers, solutions to address the consequences of poverty, like hunger, are right at hand and require a relatively small investment by the state. The Western Center on Law and Poverty has been advocating for policies to mitigate the likelihood of childhood hunger in California by better connecting how families with children are served by multiple federally funded programs.<sup>i</sup>

This paper details the current practice of County Human Services Agencies to refer families with children to child nutrition programs when they apply for CalFresh and the potential benefit of reduced child hunger with improved coordination between CalFresh and child nutrition programs administered by the State Department of Education and the Department of Public Health. It includes the outcome of a brief survey with several county agencies and research showing the profound impact that child hunger can have on the long-term success of children and the economy they live in. We hope that this information will encourage policy makers to identify and implement policies aimed at leveraging the impact of existing programs by maximizing opportunities for families with children to access federally funded, hunger fighting benefits they are eligible to receive.

### **California's Child Hunger Rates are Disgraceful and Dangerous**

According to a report released by the Food Research and Action Center, the number of children living in food-insecure households, though greatly improved in recent years, remains at too high, with 13.1 million children experiencing food insecurity. In California, about 1 in 5 children in California go hungry. This rate of insecurity is higher among children and among children in Black and Latino families.<sup>ii</sup>

The immensely damaging and long-term consequences of childhood hunger are numerous. Children who suffer from chronic hunger and inadequate nutrition are: more prone to sickness, more likely to endure extended recovery periods, increasingly susceptible to becoming obese, more likely to struggle cognitively in school, and at greater risk of behavioral, emotional, and academic problems.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Federal Funds to Prevent Child Hunger Going Unused in California While Children Go Hungry**

Fifty years ago President Kennedy proposed the establishment of the Food Stamp Program, now known nationally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), to confront hunger and malnutrition in the United States. In California, this program is known as CalFresh and is our state's first line of defense against hunger. Despite the deep commitment and breadth of our state's emergency food bag and soup kitchen programs, there is no program with the reach of CalFresh which, responding to the recession, now serves just over 4 million Californians, 79% of whom are families with children.<sup>iv</sup>

According to the Institute of Medicine (IOM),<sup>v</sup> SNAP recipients are less likely to be food insecure than eligible non-recipients; in other words, the program meets the central goal of alleviating

hunger. By both improving dietary intake and reducing food insecurity, participation in SNAP is a childhood obesity prevention strategy according to the IOM and the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity.<sup>vi</sup> Still, CalFresh alone cannot prevent childhood hunger for several reasons.

First, the benefits are not enough to close the food gap for low-income families with children, especially with a rental market that is as expensive as California's. The maximum monthly allotment for FFY 2016-17 is \$194 for a single person and \$649 for a family of four.<sup>vii</sup> Nationally, only 41 percent of households receive the maximum allotment and 23 percent of households receive less than half of the maximum allotment.<sup>viii</sup> In all cases, CalFresh benefits are only expected to supplement the food budgets of participating households, that is, CalFresh recipients are expected to use other income or other food assistance programs to make up the difference in their food budget. For some families, transportation to food pantries is not available and neither are the additional dollars to make up the gap in their food budget.

Second, CalFresh doesn't serve everyone who is eligible. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, only 63% of Californians who are eligible are receiving CalFresh. Participation among low-income working families is even lower, 53%. Many of these families have applied for the program, but been denied eligibility due to the onerous verification process required by federal administrators.<sup>ix</sup> This makes the point of application a perfect place for a referral to other child hunger programs with less difficult eligibility processes, because it ensures that all families with children experiencing enough hunger to apply for CalFresh will receive a referral to child nutrition programs.<sup>x</sup>

Third, not all families that experience hunger or food insecurity are eligible for CalFresh. It shouldn't be surprising that, in California, families are struggling to meet their basic needs even when they have incomes that put them above the federal poverty line.<sup>xi</sup> This is especially the case since federal law requires the state to cap the shelter cost deduction at \$517 per month, regardless of family size. As a result, many families who are experiencing food insecurity and apply for CalFresh are denied because they are over income. These families may still be eligible for summer lunch programs, WIC and even school meals, but will never benefit from direct certification rules that connect them to school meal programs.

For families whose food insecurity cannot be addressed or fully addressed by CalFresh, referrals to child nutrition program at the point of application for CalFresh may be their only way to connect to these programs. While there are currently no policies that prevent counties from providing information and referrals to these programs, there is no commitment from the state to ensure they do. We believe this is a missed opportunity to prevent child hunger and draw down more federal dollars.

### **Referral to Child Nutrition Programs Vary Dramatically Throughout the State**

To better make the case for a more standardized child nutrition referral for CalFresh applicants, Western Center recently completed an analysis of California county promising practices to connect CalFresh applicant households with child nutrition programs when a child is present in the home.<sup>xii</sup> What we learned was, while some CalFresh applicant families with children receive

a very thorough referral to all the child nutrition programs, most do not and the experience varies *dramatically* from county to county. Below is a description of the two inventories that we conducted and attached are charts with county-by-county details.

***Inventory 1:*** We conducted an inventory of each of the 58 California County Human Services Websites and the referrals to child nutrition programs published on each. We found that although nearly all of the County Human Service Agencies have websites containing information about the CalFresh program, only a handful provide additional, easily accessible information about child nutrition programs such as school meals, WIC and child summer feeding programs. *Appendix One.*

***Inventory 2:*** We conducted a voluntary survey of CalFresh programs, asking them to share their policies, materials, best practices and suggestions for connecting CalFresh applicant households with children with food pantries, soup kitchens and child nutrition programs. Twenty-three County CalFresh programs participated. We found that the information provided to CalFresh applicant households varied dramatically between counties. Some of the variance was as a result of the dramatic difference between services available from one county to another. For example, there are five counties in California that have no summer lunch sites whatsoever, so a referral to a summer lunch site would not be helpful in those counties. Sometimes, however, the variation seemed to depend more on a lack of information about what programs are available or how to access those resources or staff time available to maintain updated information. *Appendix Two.*

These inventories, coupled with the severe short and long term consequences of childhood hunger in California, suggest that statewide interventions are merited. The intervention we propose is that all County Human Services Agencies and the California Department of Social Services provide CalFresh applicant households with children information provided by the California Department of Education, the California Department of Public Health or the local implementing entities about available child nutrition programs and instructions to enroll children in these programs. Additionally, they should annually provide all recipient households with information about the Summer Lunch Program and how to locate a program in their community.

### **Conclusion: Connect the Dots for Hungry Children**

While we understand and appreciate the vision held by some policy makers that local elected officials and community leaders are best positioned to address local problems, Western Center believes there are some standards that ought to be established across the state, if not across the country. Maximizing the reach of federally funded child anti-hunger programs should be one of those policy goals that receive direction and funding from state and federal governments, because the consequences of not doing so are both cruel, costly and have grave national and statewide implications. County Human Services Agencies see more hungry families each month than any other entity in our state and are therefore aptly situated to make the most difference. We are hopeful the information provided here inspires both state and county actors to seek statewide policy changes that opens new opportunities to connect the dots for California's hungry children.

## Acknowledgments

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## For More Information

For more information about our anti-hunger advocacy or legislative priorities, visit our website or contact:

Jessica Bartholow, Legislative Advocate

Email: [jbartholow@wclp.org](mailto:jbartholow@wclp.org)

Phone: (916) 282-5119

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Food Research and Action Center: <http://frac.org/reports-and-resources/hunger-obesity-and-health/>

<sup>ii</sup> Food Research and Action Center: <http://frac.org/number-of-u-s-households-experiencing-food-insecurity-declines-significantly-in-2015/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/2011-childhood-hunger-facts.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: [http://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap\\_factsheet\\_california.pdf](http://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_california.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> Consensus Report released January 17, 2013, "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Examining the Evidence to Determine Benefit Adequacy," available at <http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2013/Supplemental-Nutrition-Assistance-Program-Examining-the-Evidence-to-Define-Benefit-Adequacy.aspx>

<sup>vi</sup> Institute of Medicine, 2009; Institute of Medicine, 2011a; White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity, 2010. Reports found at: <http://www.iom.edu/Activities/Nutrition/SNAPadequacy.aspx> and <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/childhood-obesity-task-force-unveils-action-plan-solving-problem-childhood-obesity->

<sup>vii</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2016-17). Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Eligibility. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/snap/SNAP-Fiscal-Year-2017-Cost-of-Living-Adjustments.pdf>

<sup>viii</sup> Strayer, M., Leftin, J., & Eslami, E. (2012). *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2011*. Report No. SNAP-12-CHAR. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis.

<sup>ix</sup> California Department of Social Services has requested a federal waiver to simplify verification processes for CalFresh by utilizing the federal data hub available for Medi-Cal, but was denied by federal administrators.

<sup>x</sup> The National School Lunch Program gross income test is at 185% FPL. Summer Lunch Program has no income test, but serves only in low-income communities. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infant and Children (WIC) serves families up to 250% of the FPL and directly certifies families receiving Medi-Cal.

<sup>xi</sup> The CalFresh program requires household gross income under 200% of poverty, but the adjusted net income below 100% of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL) for families to receive a benefit.

<sup>xii</sup> We appreciate the review of CWDA of our survey tool and completion by County Human Services Agencies.

## Appendix One: Inventory of California County Human Services Websites

\*All 58 counties; review performed on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015

Information provided, *and easily accessible*, about each of these programs? **X** = Yes

County	WIC	School Meals	Summer Lunch	211 Resource
Alameda	X		X	X
Alpine				
Amador				
Butte	X			X
Calaveras				
Colusa				
Contra Costa				
Del Norte	X			
El Dorado	X			
Fresno			X	
Glenn	X			
Humboldt	X			
Imperial				
Inyo				
Kern				X
Kings	X			
Lake	X			
Lassen	X	X	X	
Los Angeles	X			X
Madera	X			
Marin	X			
Mariposa				
Mendocino	X			X
Merced				
Modoc				
Mono	X			
Monterey	X		X	X
Napa	X			X
Nevada	X			X
Orange	X			X
Placer	X			
Plumas				
Riverside				X
Sacramento	X			X
San Benito				
San Bernardino	X		X	X
San Diego	X			X
San Francisco	X	X		
San Joaquin				X
San Luis Obispo	X		X	X

**Appendix One: Continued**  
**Inventory of California County Human Services Websites**

Information provided, *and easily accessible*, about each of these programs? **X** = Yes

County	County	County	County	County
San Mateo	X			X
Santa Barbara	X	X		X
Santa Clara	X			X
Santa Cruz		X	X	X
Shasta	X			X
Sierra	X			
Siskiyou	X			
Solano	X			X
Sonoma	X			X
Stanislaus	X			
Sutter	X			
Tehama	X			X
Trinity	X			
Tulare	X			
Tuolumne	X			
Ventura	X		X	X
Yolo	X			X
Yuba				

**Conclusion:** The majority of California counties DO NOT have information about and/or links to the National School Lunch Program and the Summer Food Service Program on their human services/social services website.

## Appendix Two: Inventory of California County CalFresh Agencies' Practices

Based on survey responses from participating counties. X = Yes

County	Provide applicant with information about available soup kitchens and food pantries	Provide applicant with information about the School Lunch Program, without request	Provide applicant with information about the Summer Lunch Program without request	Provide applicant with information about WIC, without request	Suggested that to improve nutrition program referrals, helpful for CDSS/CDE provide a referral list	Refer applicants to local 211 resource for additional food assistance resources
Amador	X			X		
Calaveras	X			X		
Contra Costa	X			X	X	X
Del Norte	X		X	X		
El Dorado	X	X	X	X	X	
Inyo	X					
Kings	X			X	X	X
Merced	X		X	X		
Monterey	X					X
Orange	X	X	X	X		X
Placer	X	X	X			
Riverside	X					X
San Bernardino	X		X	X		X
San Francisco	X					X
San Joaquin	X					X
San Luis Obispo	X		X	X		
San Mateo	X	X		X	X	
Santa Barbara	X		X	X		
Santa Clara	X		X	X	X	
Santa Cruz	X			X		X
Shasta	X	X	X	X	X	X
Stanislaus	X	X		X		X
Ventura	X		X	X		
<b>Conclusion:</b> The majority of counties DO NOT automatically inform CalFresh applicants about the National School Lunch Program and Summer Food Service Program without request.						