



Ending Hunger Through The CalFresh Restaurant Meals Program

A Program Factsheet

CalFresh, the state's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps), is a federally-funded safety net program that helps more than 3.5 million low-income Californians to meet their food needs. Though many are working hard to reach more eligible households, under-participation continues to be a challenge for California. Regrettably, California has the worst participation rate in the country among seniors and people with disabilities, and the program nationally continues to under-enroll people who are homeless.

Federal law has long recognized that certain populations lack access to cooking facilities, making the standard program poorly suited for them. In 1978, the Restaurant Meals Program was created to give states the option to allow food stamp households containing recipients who are elderly or have disabilities to use food stamps (now SNAP) in authorized restaurants. In 1996, the program was expanded to include homeless food stamp households. Under the program, prepared foods at participating restaurants and grocery stores can be purchased with an EBT card. Participating restaurants must meet program requirements including be authorized to process food stamp transactions as a restaurant. Restaurants are prohibited from charging a sales tax or meal tax on prepared foods purchased with food stamp benefits.¹

Seniors, people with disabilities, and homeless people often lack the facilities or the ability to store, prepare, or cook meals at home for themselves. This can discourage participation in the traditional CalFresh program, which is one reason why the CalFresh participation rate among eligible individuals within these groups frequently is below average.

Although the Restaurant Meals Program has been operating in California for nearly a decade,² some counties have yet to implement this option. As of June, 2011, the program is currently in place in several metropolitan counties across the state including San Francisco, Los Angeles³ and Sacramento, and some counties have recently chosen to adopt this option. The Restaurant Meals Program provides an important alternative that broadens food options for vulnerable groups, and can boost CalFresh participation levels by making it easier for them to use their benefits. Increased participation not only helps to address hunger among those most at risk, but also provides an important source of federal dollars for the community. USDA research documents that each one dollar federal SNAP benefits generates \$1.79 in economic activity.

Program Eligibility and Logistical Basics

Only CalFresh recipients who are **homeless, elderly**, or have disabilities are eligible to participate in the Restaurant Meals Program. Eligibility is programmed onto the plastic EBT card used to distribute SNAP benefits in California, the Golden State Advantage card. In order to use the CalFresh participants must first present their card to the server at the participating restaurant so that their eligibility for the Restaurant Meals Program can be electronically verified.

¹ 7 Code of Federal Regulations § 274.10

² Restaurant Meal Program Regulations: MPP §63-102(e)(2)(H); ACIN I-31-04

³ http://www.ladpss.org/dpss/restaurant_meals/RMP_FAQ.cfm

Not all CalFresh recipients who are homeless, elderly or have disabilities are eligible to participate in the Restaurant Meals Program; they must also live in a participating county. A county must apply to the state Department of Social Services if it wants to participate.⁴ Once it elects to participate in the program, the county is responsible for:

- Certifying recipients who are homeless, elderly or have disabilities as eligible to purchase low cost meals with food stamp benefits in restaurants. This is done electronically.
- Soliciting participation by eligible restaurants and entering into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for each of them.
- Informing recipients of the names and addresses of participating restaurants.

Rules for Participating Restaurants

The Restaurant Meals Program rules pertaining to restaurant selection are outlined in federal law.⁵ Each restaurant must sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and complete the federal certification process in order to participate. In order to be certified, a restaurant must:

- Be willing to welcome all those eligible for the Restaurant Meals Program. For example, it cannot choose to serve only seniors and people with disabilities but exclude homeless recipients.
- Offer a low-cost menu for program participants and agree to SNAP rules prohibiting the charge of sales tax, meal tax or gratuities on prepared foods purchased with the Golden State Advantage Card.
- Agree to post signage stating: Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) or California Advantage Cards Accepted Here.

In addition to restaurants, certain meal delivery sites, drug and alcohol recovery homes and senior centers or residences can participate in the program to offset the cost of meals for SNAP eligible populations.

Addressing Nutritional Needs Through the Restaurant Meals Program

The Restaurant Meals Program rules are meant to ensure equal access to low-cost prepared food for select populations who have limited ability to prepare hot meals. Most participating counties have worked to ensure that participating restaurants include those located in low-income neighborhoods. Within these parameters, CalFresh recipients purchasing meals through this program have the ability to select nutritious items available to all customers. Soon, restaurant meal participants and the general public will have more information available to help them in make more nutritional choices at restaurants due to a new federal restaurant meal labeling laws. In California, the Department of Social Services (DSS) and community partners hope to develop nutrition education materials specifically for Restaurant Meal Program participants.

About Western Center on Law and Poverty

Western Center on Law and Poverty (WCLP) serves as a support center for California's legal aid community and leads the way in large-scale impact litigation, administrative advocacy, budget advocacy and legislative advocacy in an effort to ensure that low-income Californians can easily access safe and affordable housing, adequate health care, and a broad spectrum of safety net services. www.wclp.org

Contact Us:

Jessica Bartholow, Legislative Advocate

Email: jbartholow@wclp.org

⁴ http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/getinfo/acin04/pdf/I-31_04.pdf

⁵ 7 Code of Federal Regulations § 272.9 and 278.1; See also Form FNS-252-2 posted online at <http://tinyurl.com/RestaurantMealApplication>