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Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County offers help with CalFresh applications



Guillemina Rivera, communications manager at the Watsonville Community Action Board, presenting at the CalFresh Forum. (Courtesy Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County)



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Did you know that CalFresh, also known as EBT/SNAP, is available to a wide range of individuals — including those with and without kids, and those who have previously applied and been denied? And that Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County has staff devoted to helping people apply, at no charge? The Food Bank also hosts an annual forum dedicated to CalFresh. Given that May is CalFresh Awareness month, it's the perfect time to explore how CalFresh and the Food Bank help nourish the local community.

Because of assistance from Second Harvest case specialist Marisol Cisneros-Lopez, 36-year-old Santa Cruz County resident Yesenia Hernandez receives monthly CalFresh benefits, which increase the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables she can buy for her family.

"Now that everything is so expensive, this has helped me a lot," says Hernandez. "I came with my husband (from Michoacán, Mexico) for a greater opportunity."

In recent years the family — which includes two kids, both born here — has struggled to make ends meet. Hernandez previously applied to CalFresh but never heard back. Then her aunt mentioned that Cisneros-Lopez had helped her apply successfully. During a visit to Starlight Elementary for its twice-monthly Food Bank food distribution, Hernandez met Cisneros-Lopez and had a positive experience. "Marisol signed me up and the process was quick." Since then, Hernandez has referred other relatives to Second Harvest who have also signed up through the nonprofit's CalFresh Team, which includes Cisneros-Lopez and three other case specialists, plus case specialist manager Rosa Quezada.

Cisneros-Lopez is glad she was able to make a difference in Hernandez's life, "especially knowing that she had two little ones who depend on her. I was able to gain her trust and assist her with the application. Sometimes obtaining trust from a client can be difficult." This is due to the myths associated with CalFresh. "For example, many believe applying for CalFresh will negatively affect them when applying for citizenship. Another untrue myth: if people enroll in CalFresh they are taking benefits from someone else who may need it." Also, that if you apply once and are denied you cannot apply again. "If there are any income changes, loss of a job, or reduction of work hours individuals are more than welcome to re-apply because these are circumstances where CalFresh can be of immense help," adds Cisneros-Lopez.

Second Harvest's team does outreach work about CalFresh applications across Santa Cruz County. "We also try to provide the community with other local resources during outreach," explains Cisneros-Lopez. "For example, if they have questions about CalWORKs or housing, we provide our hotline 831-662-0991 and our hotline coordinator can give them information."

Overseeing the case specialist team, Rosa Quezada leads efforts to increase CalFresh participation in the community through education and direct aid. "We build trusting relationships with our partner agencies and our different community food distribution sites," says Quezada, "so we can disseminate information about CalFresh eligibility requirements, debunk myths, and help those eligible to enroll. We also offer 'CF Buddy' trainings for agencies that would like to collaborate with us in ending hunger and food insecurity. Through this program, agencies can refer their clients to us for assistance with CalFresh enrollment."

Quezada believes CalFresh is "a crucial safety net program and the first line of defense against hunger." She says her role is rewarding for many reasons, including the Food Bank's commitment to ending food insecurity in Santa Cruz County. "I bring my extensive knowledge and experience working with CalFresh to this role. I have provided detailed training to my team so they can make informed eligibility prescreens and serve the public better. This allows us to gain their respect so they become our living testimony of the services we provide and in turn, can help us spread the word about the CalFresh program and encourage others to apply."

Second Harvest CEO Erica Padilla-Chavez said she is proud of what Quezada and her team accomplish, especially as they work with others to make a collective impact. "There is power in a network when addressing food insecurity," says Padilla-Chavez. "When we work with local agency partners, state programs like CalFresh, and others, our ability to nourish our community increases exponentially."

This year's forum, held on May 3 at Twin Lakes Church, brought together 65 individuals from 25 Food Bank partner agencies such as Central California Alliance for Health, Santa Cruz Human Services, Community Bridges, Grey Bears, and Santa Cruz County Office of Education. Topics discussed included nutrition education and community engagement. "The forum allows community partners to come together and not only find out about CalFresh updates and the services we provide here at the Food Bank, but also what other agencies do – so we can all collaborate for the betterment of our community," says Quezada. "Although this event is primarily aimed at our community partners rather than the public, it provides an excellent opportunity for networking and connecting with other leaders dedicated to ending hunger in Santa Cruz County."

Another topic at the forum was Navigating Barriers to Client Connections. Guillermina Rivera, Communications Manager at the Watsonville Community Action Board, facilitated a couple of breakout sessions centered on this. She decided to be a session leader because "as an indigenous woman for me it is important that Second Harvest knows there is a large community of indigenous

Mexicans from the city of Oaxaca that need services,” says Rivera. “We form part of the community and there is a language barrier that prevents them from having good communication.” She is eager to collaborate to help the Mixteco-speaking community.

A new program, Sun Bucks (also known as Summer-EBT benefits), was also briefly discussed at the forum. Similar to CalFresh, it’s specifically for the summertime, a particularly challenging season for families as kids in need aren’t able to get school lunches. The program is automatic for any child who qualifies for free or reduced-price school meals through a school meal application or an Alternative Income Form, or who receives CalFresh, CalWORKs, or Medi-Cal. Families don’t need to sign up. They will receive Sun Bucks on an EBT card in the mail from June through September. These can be used to purchase food at most grocery stores, farmers markets, and online at places like Walmart and Amazon. The Food Bank has been working hard to spread the word about Sun Bucks via social media and flyers in the Watsonville office’s client meeting room and answering any questions that Second Harvest clients have.

Learn more about CalFresh at thefoodbank.org/find-foodcomida/calfresh-program.



Second Harvest Food Bank Programs staff at the May 3 CalFresh Forum. (Courtesy Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County)

[Link to original story.](#)