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Second Harvest Food Bank | CalFresh: First line of defense in fighting hunger

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Submitted by Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County

CalFresh is the name used in California for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). CalFresh's monthly, electronically provided benefits are used to buy most foods at many groceries stores in the Santa Cruz County. The program's main goal is improving the health and well-being of qualified households and individuals. It provides greater means for meeting their nutritional needs.

Food Banks, are our second food safety net, while CalFresh is the first line of defense against hunger. Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County, assists residents with successfully applying for CalFresh Benefits. More than 80% of those applying for assistance, with the help of Second Harvest's team, qualify. Even given the county's cost of living (51% above our national average), according to Forbes, approximately 40% of residents who would qualify for CalFresh support are not applying. There are several reasons.

Why aren't people applying?



There's a mix of personal pride, enrollment complexity and fear; specifically, among our immigrant communities. A general distrust of the government by some also complicates the matter.

Success Example: In January, a senior citizen ashamed of needing to apply for CalFresh, spoke to an outreach coordinator at Second Harvest. She was assisted and approved. She is grateful for CalFresh benefits and mentioned how she had been ashamed of getting food stamps when she was younger. Back then, when paying at the store with food stamps, others would stare. Now, with the EBT card the county issues to recipients, her benefits are discrete. She was also excited learning she would receive an additional 15% due to the pandemic relief measures.

Many people don't realize they'd qualify. A good example is a working family of four may be earning a living but might still satisfy requirements for CalFresh. For help applying for CalFresh, contact the food bank to learn more.

Another reason is that mixed-status families, meaning families with both undocumented people and citizens in the household, don't realize they can qualify. The restrictive "Public Charge" policy enforced by the previous administration was canceled shortly after the new administration took office. They should take another look at applying for CalFresh.

"People should feel more comfortable about applying with us," explained Joel Campos, Community Outreach director at Second Harvest. "We want to humanize enrollment. There are friendly, local people ready to assist."

Another reason for reduced number of applicants is that many SSI recipients don't know about an important Social Security Insurance (SSI) rule change, made nearly two years ago. It allows SSI recipients to apply for CalFresh, which hasn't been well communicated due to the pandemic. Promotional actions for SSI participants were halted during this period.

Experiencing positive change

When people apply and qualify, the outcomes are what's needed.



Success Example: During the pandemic, a local man attended a Food Bank mass distribution at the Boardwalk. When an outreach coordinator spoke with him, the man mentioned that he was going through dialysis and his only source of income was SSI. He explained while paying \$1,100 in rent, he couldn't afford food for himself or his family. He didn't think he'd qualify because he was already receiving SSI benefits. The outreach team member helped him apply for CalFresh on the spot and connected him to an interview with the County. He was approved and is happy about his family's additional food purchasing resources.

"We're here to help," reminds Campos. "Each person connected to CalFresh and approved is a win for all of us. Every dollar that comes to the county in the form of CalFresh benefits, has an economic multiplier. For example, last fiscal year our food bank outreach team helped families receive \$5 million in federal benefits in Santa Cruz County, which multiplies to over \$8.5 million for our local economy. Every day we're seeing that getting a financial lift makes positive differences throughout our community."

For more information about Second Harvest Food Bank or CalFresh, email foodhotline@thefoodbank.org or call 831-662-0991.



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