

Date of Hearing: April 8, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES
Alex Lee, Chair
AB 1211 (Sharp-Collins) – As Introduced February 21, 2025

SUBJECT: CalFresh: maintenance of benefit level

SUMMARY: Requires the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), if the federal government reduces Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, to ensure that CalFresh benefits remain at current levels, and to use state funds if federal funding is insufficient. Requires CDSS to conduct a feasibility study on increasing eligibility and benefits of the CalFresh program. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires CDSS, if the federal government makes reductions in benefits under SNAP that would result in the level of CalFresh benefits being lower than the level of CalFresh benefits that was in effect on January 20, 2025, under the Thrifty Food Plan (Thrifty), to ensure that the level of CalFresh benefits remain at least at that level that was in effect on January 20, 2025.
- 2) Requires CDSS, if federal funding is insufficient, when combined with the nonfederal share, to maintain the level of CalFresh benefits as described in 1) above, to implement these provisions using state funds subject to an appropriation made by the Legislature for this purpose.
- 3) Defines “Thrifty Food Plan” as the lowest cost among the food plans designed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to determine SNAP benefit amounts.
- 4) Requires CDSS to conduct a feasibility study on increasing the eligibility and benefits of the CalFresh program.
- 5) Requires CDSS to prepare a one-time report containing findings from the study described in 4) above and, and to submit the report to the relevant policy committees of the Legislature and the Joint Legislative Budget Committee by January 1, 2027.
- 6) Requires 4) and 5) above to remain in effect only until January 1, 2031, and as of that date, be repealed.
- 7) Makes legislative findings and declarations emphasizing that no person should face hunger in a state like California with a robust agricultural economy, highlighting CalFresh as a vital anti-hunger program serving millions and is currently facing threats by the Trump Administration and the United States (U.S.) Congress with proposed cuts to benefit amounts to fund the tax credits for the billionaire class.

EXISTING LAW:

State law:

- 1) Establishes the CalFresh program to administer the provision of federal SNAP benefits to families and individuals meeting certain criteria, as specified. (Welfare and Institutions Code [WIC] §§ 18900 *et seq.*)
- 2) Requires CDSS, subject to an appropriation by the Legislature in the annual Budget Act or another statute for this purpose, to administer the CalFresh Minimum Nutrition Benefit (MNB) Pilot Program to provide 12 months of additional state-funded nutrition benefits to ensure eligible households receive a supplement that, when added together with the federal allotment, totals no less than \$50. (WIC § 18901.26(a))
- 3) Requires CDSS to use funds appropriate for the CalFresh MNB Pilot Program to provide eligible households a state-funded monthly minimum nutrition benefit that is no less than the difference between the household's monthly CalFresh allotment and the minimum monthly benefit threshold of \$50. (WIC § 18901.26(b)(1))
- 4) Requires benefits granted pursuant to the CalFresh MNB Pilot Program to be through the electronic benefits transfer (EBT) system and, to the extent permitted by federal law, shall not be considered income for any means-tested program. (WIC § 18901.26(d)(2))
- 5) Requires CDSS to use state funds appropriated for the Supplemental Security Income/State Supplementary Payment (SSI/SSP) Cash-In Supplemental Nutrition Benefit (SNB) Program to provide nutrition benefits to continuing CalFresh households that were eligible for and receiving CalFresh benefits as of June 1, 2019, but for whom the household's monthly CalFresh benefit was reduced when a previously excluded individual was added to the household. (WIC §§ 18900.6 *et seq.*)
- 6) Requires CDSS to use state funds appropriated for the SSI/SSP Cash-In Transitional Nutrition Benefit (TNB) Program to provide benefits to former CalFresh households that were eligible for and receiving CalFresh benefits as of June 1, 2019, but became ineligible for CalFresh benefits when a previously excluded individual receiving SSI/SSP Program benefits was added to the household. (WIC §§ 18900.7 *et seq.*)
- 7) States legislative intent to maximize food access for all CalFresh recipients. (WIC § 18919.1(a))

Federal law:

- 1) Establishes SNAP pursuant to the Food Stamp Act of 1964. (7 United States Code § 2011 *et seq.*)
- 2) Establishes the maximum SNAP allotment level and requires SNAP allotments to be based on the Thrifty to be uniform by household size throughout the 48 contiguous States and the District of Columbia as provided, and for the Thrifty amounts and maximum allotments in each area to be adjusted annually as prescribed. (7 Code of Federal Regulations § 273.10(e)(4))

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown, this bill has not been analyzed by a fiscal committee.

COMMENTS:

Background: *Food Insecurity.* The USDA, which monitors food insecurity and oversees the nation’s largest food aid programs, defines food security as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.” It categorizes food security into four levels:

Ranges of Food Security

	LEVEL OF SECURITY	DEFINITION
Food Secure	High Food Security	Households had no problems, or anxiety about, consistently accessing adequate food
	Marginal Food Security	Households had problems or anxiety at times about accessing adequate food, but the quality, variety and quantity of food were not substantially reduced
Food Insecure	Low Food Security	Households reduced the quality, variety and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted
	Very Low Food Security	At times during the year, eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money or other resources for food

Sources: Feeding America, What is Food Insecurity? <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/understand-food-insecurity/> (Accessed March 1, 2020)

While California declared food as a human right in 2023 [SB 628 (Hurtado) Chapter 879, Statutes of 2023], and produces nearly half of the nation’s fruits and vegetables, data from the U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey show that as of September 2024, 22% of California households are food insecure and 27% of households with children are food insecure, with deep disparities for Black, Latino, and Native households. Factors contributing to food insecurity include socioeconomic disparities and geographic barriers, among other causes. For individuals who face food insecurity, the choice is often between nurturing their physical health or maintaining other aspects of their lives, such as purchasing necessary medications or paying rent to maintain housing.

CalFresh. SNAP (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) is the largest federal food safety-net program that serves as the first line of defense against hunger and food insecurity for low-income households. In California, \$12.6 billion of federal SNAP funds are administered through the CalFresh program, serving approximately 5.4 million CalFresh participants and covering 100% of the program’s benefit costs.

Overseen by CDSS and administered locally by county human services departments, CalFresh serves a large and diverse caseload, comprising low-income working families with children, elderly and disabled people, and very low-income individuals with substantial barriers to employment. Participants use EBT cards to purchase eligible food items such as fruits and vegetables, meat, dairy products, and seeds and plants that produce food at authorized retailers, including grocery stores, supermarkets, and farmers’ markets. Individuals can complete the CalFresh application online, over the phone, in-person at their county CalFresh office, or through the mail.

The USDA establishes the gross and net income requirements for CalFresh eligibility, limiting California's flexibility in setting its own criteria. Currently, the maximum allowable gross income is 200% of the federal poverty level, although households with elderly members or members with disabilities are not subject to gross income criteria. Effective October 1, 2024, through September 30, 2025, the maximum annual gross income for a household size of three is \$33,576.

In early 2023, participation in CalFresh helped keep approximately 1.1 million Californians out of poverty. Research also shows that SNAP benefits significantly reduce food insecurity among participating households. Specifically, SNAP reduces overall food insecurity by about 20% and reduces food insecurity among children by approximately 33%. In addition to reducing poverty and food insecurity, access to CalFresh benefits have been shown to improve long-term health, economic, and social outcomes for individuals and families across different stages of life.

CalFresh Benefit Levels. As of September 2024, the minimum CalFresh benefit in California was \$23 per month for a household of one or two. The USDA's Thrifty, which estimates the cost of purchasing a nutritious diet at a minimal cost, determines the maximum monthly SNAP benefit. The Thrifty annually adjusts the benefit amount to reflect changes in food prices. The most recent major update occurred in 2021, resulting in a 21% increase in benefit amounts – the first major revision since 2006. Effective October 1, 2024, to September 30, 2025, the maximum CalFresh benefit for a household of one is \$292 per month, while a household of three could receive up to \$768 per month. However, most households do not receive the maximum benefit. In 2024, the average monthly benefit in California was \$189 per person.

The figure below shows the relationship between a family's income, SNAP benefits, and food spending. The horizontal axis represents a family's income, while the vertical axis shows both SNAP benefits and total food spending. Families with no income receive the maximum SNAP benefit for their household size. However, as income increases, SNAP benefits gradually decrease due to a 30% benefit reduction rate. This means that for every \$1 increase in net income, SNAP benefits decrease by \$0.30. For example, in 2022, a three-person household with no income would receive approximately \$658 per month in SNAP benefits. If the same household had \$1,000 in income, their monthly SNAP benefit would decrease to around \$358.

The graph also shows that as a household's income increases, total food spending – including both SNAP benefits and out-of-pocket expenses – tends to increase. Most families spend more on food than their SNAP benefits alone, supplementing their grocery budget with personal funds. While some families fully utilize their SNAP benefits each month, others report spending less than the maximum benefit amount. As income grows, SNAP benefits accounts for a smaller proportion of a family's total food spending because benefits decline while food spending increases. This reflects the program's design to provide greater assistance to families with the greatest financial need while gradually reducing support as household income rises.

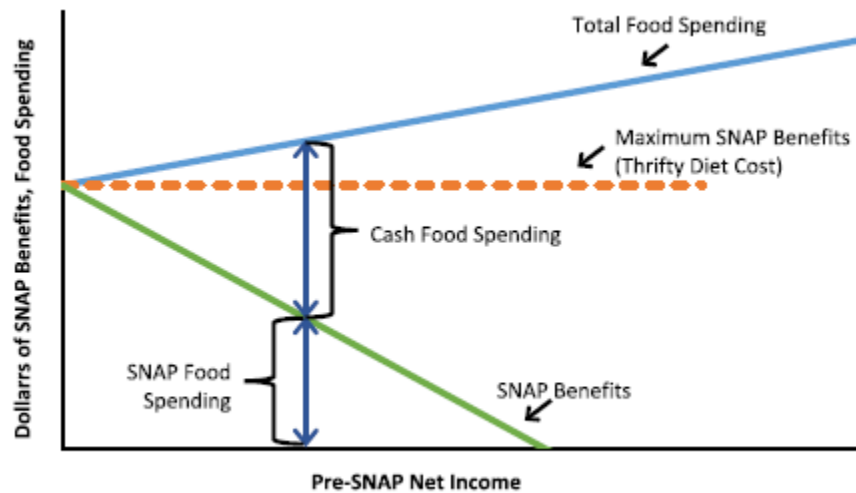


Fig. 2. Stylized Relationship Among Income, SNAP and Food Spending. Notes: Adapted from Hoynes et al. (2016).

However, while CalFresh provides critical support, research has shown that the purchasing power of SNAP benefits is often inadequate to fully meet household food needs throughout the entire month. Any reductions in SNAP benefits would lower SNAP food spending, increasing the amount of cash spending required to meet food needs.

State-Funded CalFresh Benefits. California has taken steps to provide state-funded CalFresh benefits to assess the benefits of increasing minimum benefit levels and enable SSI/SSP recipients to continue being eligible for CalFresh.

- *California MNB Pilot Program.* Recognizing the inadequacy of the current CalFresh minimum benefit of \$23, the 2023 Budget Act allocated \$15 million one-time funding to establish the California MNB Pilot Program. Under this pilot, beginning January 1, 2026, eligible CalFresh households will receive a state-funded supplement to increase their minimum benefit to \$60 for a 12-month period.
- *SSI/SSP Cash-In SNB Program & TNB Program.* AB 1811 (Committee on Budget), Chapter 35, Statutes of 2018, reversed the CalFresh eligibility policy known as “cash out” under which SSI/SSP recipients, which is a cash assistance program that benefits low-income people who are 65 or older, blind or disabled, are ineligible for CalFresh. Additionally, AB 1811 created the SNB and TNB programs, which allowed individuals receiving or authorized to receive SSI/SSP to become eligible for CalFresh starting June 1, 2019, provided all other eligibility criteria are met. The SNB and TNB program specifically provide nutrition benefits to CalFresh households that had its benefits reduced or became ineligible when a previously excluded SSI/SSP recipient was added to the household under the new eligibility provisions, as provided. According to a September 2024 factsheet by the California Food Bank Association, 725,501 SSI recipients (64%) are enrolled in CalFresh, with an average of \$154 per month and about \$1.4 billion in annual food benefits. The SNB and TNB program benefits would only be granted to the extent funding is appropriated in the annual Budget Act.

Potential SNAP Benefit Cuts. In February 2025, House Republicans proposed cutting \$230 billion from SNAP funding through 2034, aiming to offset tax cuts for the ultra-wealthy. Even small cuts in SNAP would lead to a loss of essential food assistance for low-income households, worsening food insecurity and hardship across the nation.

Proposed cuts could include:

- Rolling back the 2021 Thrifty update, thereby reducing benefits by \$1.40 per person per day from the current \$6.20 per person per day average;
- Eliminating broad-based categorical eligibility, which enables more low-income households to qualify for benefits;
- Converting SNAP into a block grant, which would make funding unpredictable and potentially inadequate to meet demand; or,
- Shifting partial or full costs to states, which would force states to reduce benefits or eligibility or make SNAP accessibility more difficult, and force states to each come up with millions or billions of dollars every year necessary to pay recipients.

Such proposals would abandon the national commitment to provide low-income individuals, including 1 in 5 children, a SNAP benefit that is sufficient to afford an adequate diet. If the \$230 billion reduction occurs, California could lose up to \$30 billion in federal SNAP funding between 2026 and 2034. These cuts would harm millions of Californians and force state policymakers to make difficult decisions on how to mitigate the funding gaps to prevent further erosion of essential public services that help promote economic security.

This bill aims to protect CalFresh recipients against potential federal benefit reductions by using appropriated state funds to maintain benefits at the levels established on January 20, 2025. *This bill* further requires CDSS to study the feasibility of increasing eligibility and benefits for CalFresh and to report on it by January 1, 2027.

Author’s Statement: According to the Author, “While the federal government threatens long-standing programs that successfully uplift working families, California will continue to support our residents and combat food insecurity. By proactively protecting the amount of CalFresh assistance families receive, [this bill] creates a more inclusive and effective food assistance system that supports the well-being of all Californians and ensures no step backward fighting poverty-related hunger.”

Equity Implications: *This bill* promotes the maintenance of existing CalFresh benefits. Federal reductions in SNAP benefits would disproportionately harm low-income families and individuals who rely heavily on CalFresh to purchase food. Vulnerable populations, including seniors, college students, disabled individuals, single-parent households, and unemployed persons, would experience heightened food insecurity if benefits are cut. Reduced benefits can lead to detrimental health impacts, particularly for children, who may experience developmental issues due to inadequate nutrition. Moreover, financial stress on low-income individuals, particularly among Black and Latino communities, could intensify, potentially leading to higher incidences of homelessness, malnutrition, and reliance on other social services. Maintaining CalFresh benefits at current levels would provide a safety net that helps prevent these negative outcomes.

RELATED AND PRIOR LEGISLATION:

AB 553 (Caloza) of the current legislative session, would require CDSS to maximize all available food choices for CalFresh recipients pursuant to the federal Food and Nutrition Act of 2008. *AB 553 is pending before the Assembly Appropriations Committee.*

SB 600 (Menjivar) of 2023, would have established the California CalFresh Minimum Benefit Adequacy Act of 2023 and would have required CDSS, upon the receipt of an appropriation, to create the CalFresh Minimum Benefit Program to provide additional state-funded CalFresh nutrition benefits to all eligible households who receive a minimum CalFresh monthly benefit, as provided. *SB 600 was set to be heard in the Assembly Human Services Committee and was canceled at the request of the author.*

SB 120 (Skinner) of 2023, would have required CDSS, subject to an appropriation, to administer the CalFresh MNB Pilot Program to provide an eligible household receiving a monthly CalFresh allotment of less than a minimum monthly benefit, to be \$50, with an additional 12 months of state-funded nutrition benefits that when added together with the federal allotment, totals no less than \$50 per month. *SB 120 was referred to the Committee on Budget without further action.*

SB 348 (Skinner), Chapter 600, Statutes of 2023, required CDSS, subject to an appropriation, to issue an additional \$80 in the form of EBT benefits to pupils who qualify for the federal Summer EBT program.

AB 1811 (Committee on Budget), Chapter 35, Statutes of 2018, see comments above.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**Support**

California State Council of Service Employees International Union (SEIU California) (Co-Sponsor)

Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations (Co-Sponsor)

GRACE Institute - End Child Poverty in CA (Co-Sponsor)

California Association of Food Banks

California Immigrant Policy Center

Info Line of San Diego dba 211 San Diego

San Diego Hunger Coalition

Western Center on Law & Poverty

Opposition

None on file.

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