

Date of Hearing: March 28, 2023

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Corey A. Jackson, Chair

AB 94 (Davies) – As Introduced January 9, 2023

SUBJECT: Administration of public social services: blocked telephone calls

SUMMARY: Prohibits blocked caller identification from all calls made by, or on behalf of, a county for applicants or recipients of public social service benefits.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Declares that the administration of public social services is a county function and responsibility; requires each county to establish a department or agency to administer and promote public understanding of the public services. (Welfare and Institutions Code Section [WIC] 10800)
- 2) Requires county departments to abide by statute and regulations within the Department of Social Services (CDSS) and the Department of Health Services to administer specified public social services. (WIC 10809)
- 3) Permits county departments to participate and administer federal programs. (WIC 10812)
- 4) Requires every person administering aid under any public assistance program to conduct themselves with courtesy, consideration, and respect toward applicants for, and recipients of, aid under that program. (WIC 10500)
- 5) Prohibits a person concerned with the administration of a public assistance program from dictating how any recipient shall expend the aid granted to him. (WIC 10501)

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

COMMENTS:

Background: California administers a number of public assistance programs to uplift those in poverty. Many of those programs are housed within CDSS and then administered by each county. When counties are determining eligibility to administer the public assistance, a county representative must communicate with the applicant or recipient which likely includes a telephone call. If there is a question of eligibility, an applicant must give the needed information or eligibility could be denied.

At the county level, California administers three federally funded safety net or public assistance programs: CalFresh (federally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP), CalWORKs (federally known as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF), and Medi-Cal (federally known as Medicaid). Each county works to determine eligibility set forth by federal and state standards and then helps disburse the aide.

CalFresh uses federal funds to provide a nutrition benefit to individuals and families with low incomes. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responsible for setting specific eligibility requirements for programs like CalFresh including a gross and net income test, work

requirements, and other documentation requirements. The maximum allowable gross income is 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Households with elderly or disabled members are not subject to gross income criteria but must have a net monthly income at or below 100% of the FPL. Other households must meet both gross and net monthly income tests. CalFresh is administered locally by county human services agencies, and the federal, state, and county governments share in the cost of administration of the program. Individuals can complete the CalFresh application online, over the phone, in-person at their county CalFresh office, or through the mail.

CalFresh benefits are distributed through monthly electronic benefits for food purchase through an ATM-like electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card. CalFresh receipts cannot access CalFresh funds through withdrawal at point-of-sale terminals or at ATM machines. Instead, CalFresh benefits can only be used to purchase food items to be prepared and consumed at home, as well as seeds and plants that can be grown at home and produce food.

The USDA reports that only 70% of eligible Californians are enrolled in SNAP (or CalFresh) benefits compared to the national average of 82% of eligible persons in the country that are enrolled.

CalWORKs is also administered at the local level through counties. CalWORKs is funded in part by the federal TANF block grant and aims to help children and families meet basic needs and move out of poverty. Families receive cash assistance and have access to a variety of services, including, where applicable, child care, as well as services aimed at addressing mental health needs, substance use disorders, instances of domestic violence, and learning disabilities, among other issues. Parents are required to develop and participate in a welfare-to-work plan, unless otherwise exempted.

Medi-Cal is known as Medicaid at the federal level and offers free and low-cost healthcare to everyone eligible in California, including undocumented individuals. The Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) oversees Medi-Cal, but counties are responsible for administration. Medi-Cal offers general health, vision, dental, and long-term care benefits for those that meet eligibility requirements.

Author's Statement: According to the Author, "Californians from every walk of life have been hit hard by the recent spike in inflation that has swept our country and state. Now more than ever we need to ensure state programs designed to help those struggling the most are given a fair and equal opportunity to access our public social services. AB 94 is a common-sense measure to ensure that when an applicant or recipient is contacted about their eligibility for programs, like CalFresh or CalWORKs, they have a recognizable number to answer to or call back from. This increases transparency and accountability in our government process."

Need for this bill: Currently, 30% of eligible Californians are not receiving access to the CalFresh benefits that they are entitled. This bill seeks to address this discrepancy by removing possible barriers for income eligibility by requiring counties who are calling to verify eligibility, to display their number so the recipient may call back and complete their application. For various reasons, county departments are using blocked or unknown numbers to call applicants which is causing hesitation for applicants to pick up the phone or to be able to call the county back, and is ultimately leading to counties not being able to verify eligibility.

Equity Implications: Communities and persons such as immigrants, elderly, and domestic violence survivors can be fearful and weary of blocked and unknown numbers. Blocked and unknown numbers are concerning for these communities because the unknown caller has the potential to cause harm, locate, or disrupt their lives. The individuals seeking public assistance programs are already a part of a vulnerable population and the services requested are typically urgent and necessary. When an individual misses a call because of their suspicion of answering an unknown caller, this delays services and, in some cases, causes the denial of much-needed benefits.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations (Co-Sponsor)
Western Center on Law & Poverty (Co-Sponsor)
California Association of Food Banks
California OneCare
Educate. Advocate.
Grace Institute - End Child Poverty in CA
Law Foundation of Silicon Valley

Opposition

None on file

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