



# Guest Opinion | Seniors Are Hungry. SB 285 Cuts the Red Tape to Put Food on Their Plate

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California is witnessing an unprecedented senior upsurge as baby boomers retire in ever-growing numbers. Many of those newly minted seniors, however, are facing growing challenges stretching their fixed and often low incomes to meet basic needs like health care, housing and food. In fact, given Los Angeles' high cost of living, a sizeable number of seniors are too often forced to choose between meals and medications.

Thankfully, the most powerful anti-poverty tool we have, the federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), known in California as CalFresh, can alleviate those budgetary pressures, ensuring that seniors—and others living on the edge—have access to a reliable source of nutritious food.

Why then are 4 out of 5 eligible seniors missing out on this program? Why does California hold the dubious distinction of having the lowest senior CalFresh enrollment rate in the nation?

Sadly, the enrollment process for these benefits—while slowly improving—remains unnecessarily burdensome, confusing and complex. For seniors, especially those facing cognitive issues, navigating the bureaucracy can be overwhelming.

February 2019's CalFresh Monthly Caseload Report shows that, of the 40 percent of all CalFresh applications that were denied enrollment, most were excluded not because of ineligibility but for simple procedural reasons, like typos and missed appointments.

Frustrated seniors who are declined due to an error in their paperwork aren't likely to overcome these roadblocks. And that's criminal. CalFresh benefits are often the only lifeline keeping seniors nourished and healthy. They are a benefit, like Social Security and Medicare, that seniors have paid into with every paycheck they earned.

Transportation and mobility are additional challenges for seniors. Under the present enrollment process, applicants often must come into a CalFresh benefits office to complete an application. In most cases, they need to return home to collect detailed financial information and then return a second time to drop off the application. The final phase requires them to return yet again for an in-depth interview. For a senior challenged with transportation and/or mobility issues, all these trips can be daunting, adding yet another hurdle to an already taxing process.

So, what can be done to correct this tragic situation and help more seniors obtain the CalFresh benefits they desperately need? New "CalFresh Connect" legislation, [SB 285 \(Wiener\)](#), would fundamentally break down the hurdles seniors and other low-income Californians face in applying for these benefits.

[SB 285](#) sets ambitious, but achievable, CalFresh enrollment targets and directs the state to provide more support to county administrators. It would require the development of a simpler application for seniors and those with disabilities, making sure they can avoid complex paperwork and an unnecessary trip. It would also permit them to complete the application process by phone and would ensure accurate translations of all forms and notices.

Finally, it sets an expectation for an online "one-stop shop" where Californians can apply to multiple social service programs all at once, as is already done in many states.

California has made steady improvements in connecting people to CalFresh, especially over the last few years. [SB 285](#) would boost those efforts by providing a continuous improvement framework and oversight for success. Within just a few years, it would significantly reduce hunger in California and bring up to \$3.3 billion in economic activity to the state of California, benefiting us all.

We need systemic reform that translates into concrete improvements. [SB 285](#) provides a realistic and effective roadmap for those efforts.

California's seniors deserve access to CalFresh. Seniors already face enough challenges. SB 285 must become state law so that they—and other low-income Californians—can turn their attention to other pressing issues.

No senior should have to worry about how to put food on their plate.

George Manalo-LeClair is the Executive Director of [California Food Policy Advocates](#), a nonprofit in Los Angeles and Oakland that is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of low-income Californians by increasing access to nutritious, affordable food.