

## **CalFresh Time Limits 101: What Clients and Service Providers Need to Know**

Many unemployed California adults are now facing strict time limits for assistance under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (CalFresh), commonly known as food stamps. These “able-bodied adults without dependents” – folks who do not live in a CalFresh household with children – will be allowed to receive CalFresh benefits for only three months during a three-year period (resetting Dec. 31, 2020), unless they either meet complex “work requirements” or are found to be exempt from the time limit.

This federal rule was part of the 1996 welfare reform law, but because of the recession, it has not been in effect for nearly a decade. Now that the economy is improving, reinstatement of this rule will deny food assistance for many of the state’s most vulnerable low-income people. California’s 36-month clock started ticking Jan. 1, 2017. Due to the expiration of federal waivers in certain counties some able-bodied adults without dependents receiving CalFresh on September. 1, 2018 may lose benefits on December 1 if they were not working, participating in job training or declared exempt.

### **WHAT CLIENTS NEED TO KNOW TO STAY CONNECTED TO CALFRESH**

**Prior to September 1, 2018 people living in all counties were exempt from work requirements because of the high unemployment rate in those counties. Beginning September 1, 2018, CalFresh recipients in San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara will be subject to the 3-month time limit and may have to meet the 80-hour per month work/volunteer requirement to keep CalFresh benefits more than three months.**

### **Exemptions from the CalFresh time limit**

Some life circumstances will exempt a person from the three-month time limit, a requirement that a recipient register for work, or both. Clients subject to the time limit are ***strongly encouraged*** to contact their county welfare department or CalFresh worker to see if they meet the circumstances for an exemption.

#### **Allowable exemptions include:**

- A person who is “physically or mentally unfit or unable to work 80 hours per month on average.” This does not require that the person receive disability benefits. A person also could be certified by a medical professional (does not have to be a doctor or physician) as having a disability, illness or injury that would make it difficult or impossible to work.
- A person who is under age 18 or over age 49.
- A person who is in school at least half-time (as defined by the school).
- A woman who is pregnant (at any stage of pregnancy).
- A person who is responsible for the care of a child under age 6 or an incapacitated person.

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The child or incapacitated person does not have to live with the caretaker.

- A person who is in a CalFresh assistance unit (household) that also includes a child under 18. It does not matter what the person's relationship is to the child, only that they are in the same CalFresh household.
- A person who is registered for work through the unemployment compensation system.
- A person who receives assistance under CalWORKS.
- A person who is working at least 80 hours a month or working fewer hours but earning at least \$217.50 a week or who has been hired for a job that offers at least 30 hours a week.
- A person who is performing volunteer service of at least 80 hours per month, or some volunteer service combined with paid work, as long as it adds up to at least 80 hours per month.
- A person who participates in an employment and training program that meets CalFresh guidelines. Many, though not all, people who are subject to the three-month time limit will be referred to an approved training program.
- A person who participates regularly in a drug or alcohol treatment program. Participation does not have to total 80 hours per month, and 12-step programs are included in the definition of "treatment program."
- A person who is chronically homeless. This includes people who are living in temporary shelters, halfway houses, domestic violence shelters, or in a place not meant to house someone (such as in a car or under a bridge). People who live with friends or relatives are not considered homeless under this definition. Clients subject to the time limit experiencing any lack of stable housing are ***strongly encouraged*** to contact their county welfare department or CalFresh worker to see if they meet the circumstances for an exemption.
- Counties also are allowed a limited number of "individual" exemptions that can extend the three-month time limit by one or two months or more. Clients at risk of losing benefits (having used all three months of eligibility under the time limit) are ***strongly encouraged*** to contact their county welfare department or CalFresh worker to see if they meet the circumstances for an individual exemption.

If people lose CalFresh benefits because of the time limit, they can become eligible again after 36 months, if they move to a new county where the time limit is not in effect, if they meet one of the above exemptions, or if they meet "work requirements." Clients who have lost eligibility under the time limit are ***strongly encouraged*** to contact their county welfare department or CalFresh worker to see how they can regain eligibility.

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### **WHAT SERVICE PROVIDERS CAN DO TO HELP**

One of the big concerns about reinstatement of the time limits is that people who are exempt will not be properly identified and will lose CalFresh benefits that they should be entitled to receive.

Many people who lose benefits likely will try to get help from community agencies and charities that provide emergency food and other assistance.

Service providers like food banks, soup kitchens, homelessness agencies, health care providers, and substance abuse programs can identify people who might be exempt from time limits and help them document their eligibility with their county welfare department. For example, a homeless shelter could complete a client chronic homelessness verification form from the county or write a letter saying a homeless veteran is staying there. A Meals-on-Wheels program could certify that a CalFresh recipient is taking care of her elderly mother.

### **Programs that offer services to low-income people also can:**

- Tell their clients about time limits, possible exemptions, and how to meet work requirements.
- Screen clients for eligibility for an exemption listed above and then help them verify that eligibility with their county welfare department.
- Help clients who are participating in drug or alcohol treatment verify their regular participation.
- Help clients who are not exempt access employment and training opportunities.
- Provide 80 hours per month volunteer opportunities for non-exempt clients.
- Refer clients who are having their CalFresh benefits terminated to a local Legal Services agency.

### **For more information on the CalFresh time limit, visit:**

<http://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/CalFresh/ABAWD> (for policy updates and state guidance)

<https://cfpa.net/abawd-time-limit/> (for policy updates and partner resources)

<http://www.cafoodbanks.org/abawd> (for community outreach resources and screening forms)