

# **An Opportunity to Boost Senior Participation in CalFresh**

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## **The Potential of Targeted Enrollment among Social Security Recipients**

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### **Executive Summary**

Low-income seniors have limited food budgets, and those who experience food insecurity have lower nutrient intakes, less energy, and higher rates of hospitalization and mortality. In California, only one in ten eligible seniors participates in CalFresh (known federally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - SNAP). Even more troubling, only five percent of eligible Social Security recipients (those receiving retirement benefits) participate in CalFresh.

Low income seniors are missing out on critical federal nutrition benefits that could improve health and boost the economy. There are 444,000 eligible households with Social Security recipients over 60 years old who could, on average, receive nearly \$1,000 per year in benefits.

CalFresh participation is low for several reasons, including the isolation some seniors experience, misinformation about eligibility for benefits, stigma associated with public assistance, and a burdensome application process. Because seniors have specific dietary needs and many are not adequately served by nutrition assistance programs, this paper explores strategies for senior enrollment in SNAP/CalFresh, and proposes a model to improve CalFresh enrollment among low-income seniors.

Although Social Security recipients have not been the focus of previous enrollment strategies, they are a logical target group: retirement benefits are widely used among the senior population, and the Social Security Administration, which has experience in enrolling SSI recipients in nutrition assistance programs, holds key enrollment information.

A review of successful senior enrollment strategies in other states suggests that the following strategies should be combined into a model for improving participation by Social Security recipients in CalFresh:

- *Data sharing between social services agencies and agencies that administer other benefits for seniors (such as the Social Security Administration).* This can reduce the amount of paperwork required for a CalFresh application because a recipient's information from one agency can be used to inform another application for benefits from another agency.
- *Utilization of standardized benefits, telephonic signatures, and self-verification of shelter, medical, and income expenses.* These approaches can reduce the paperwork required of senior applicants, simplify benefit calculations, and expedite the application process.
- *Waiver of face-to-face interactions.* Replacing in-person contact in favor of mail or telephone correspondence can reduce travel burdens and excessive paperwork.

On October 6, 2011, Governor Brown signed California Assembly Bill 69 into law, authorizing counties to utilize data from the Social Security Administration in order to make Social Security recipients aware of CalFresh and, with their consent, initiate an application for assistance. AB 69 provides a special opportunity to implement the model and best practices outlined in this paper.