

Heat and Eat Initiative

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Note: AB 6 was amended before coming out of the Senate Committee on Appropriations and heading to the Senate Floor. The following fact sheet has been updated to reflect these amendments (Updated: 8.30.11).

» ISSUE

As advocates we are continuously on the lookout for new strategies that promote access to CalFresh and increase benefits for eligible and participating households. The implementation of a Heat and Eat initiative is one such strategy. A Heat and Eat initiative has the potential to increase CalFresh benefits for a significant number of CalFresh households and simplify the verification process for all CalFresh households. Combined with recent efforts to modernize CalFresh, a Heat and Eat initiative will streamline the application process and maximize critical nutrition assistance.

» NEED

The negative effects of the recession continue to prove a hardship for many California families. By implementing program improvements that improve access to and increase federal benefits, California can maximize critical nutrition assistance for needy families and draw down additional federal funds to stimulate local economies.

» REQUEST

CFPA requests that the legislature implement a Heat and Eat initiative which would increase CalFresh benefits and simplify the verification process. In so doing the legislature would, among other things, maximize federal nutrition benefits, helping to mitigate the effects of the recession and high housing and utility costs among needy California families.

» HISTORY & BACKGROUND

A Heat and Eat initiative is based on a partnership between the Department of Social Services (DSS), which administers CalFresh, and the Department of Community Services and Development, which administers the state Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). All CalFresh households would receive an annual nominal LIHEAP benefit qualifying them to receive the SUA for the purpose of calculating CalFresh benefits. The nominal benefit would be delivered through a non-paper driven system, such as Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) and would not require any additional paperwork or verification on behalf of the CalFresh applicant. The resulting change in benefit calculations would increase benefits for some households and remove the verification requirements associated with utility costs for all households. Thus simplifying the application process and leveraging additional federal nutrition benefits for CalFresh households.

This proposal is new to California and has come to our attention based on the positive experiences in a number of other states, including Massachusetts, Vermont, Maine, Washington, New York, Rhode Island, Oregon and Wisconsin, which have all implemented similar initiatives. Though each program varies to some degree, the basic premise is the same. Guidance for this initiative is provided by the USDA which states that “an individual household is entitled to use the standard utility allowance (SUA) if the household receives or expects to receive a LIHEAP payment for its current residence”¹.

» OUTCOMES

A Heat and Eat initiative will increase federally funded CalFresh benefits for approximately 130,000 households (estimates based on the 2008 caseload data), simplify the verification process for all households, reduce the opportunity for utility related errors, and draw down federal funding to stimulate local economies.

¹ USDA Quality Control Handbook 310, Section 1160, page 11-16