

# The Senior Food Security Act of 2011

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## ►► ISSUE

Good nutrition is especially important for seniors. It can help improve resistance to illness and disease or help manage existing health problems. It can improve mental acuity and increase longevity. And for many seniors relying on prescription medications, nutrition is vital – as many medications must be taken with food.

But many seniors are struggling. According to UCLA, about half a million seniors who live alone are not able to make ends meet. Many struggle to afford nutritious food. According to the California Health Interview Survey, nearly 20% of low-income seniors in California are “food insecure.” While a number of programs exist to increase resources for food, one of the largest remains severely underutilized: only 10% of eligible seniors participate in CalFresh (formerly food stamps).

## ►► NEED

CalFresh participation is low across all populations, but there are clearly some unique barriers to participation among seniors. Despite some special rules for seniors the application process is still challenging for many. Other states have taken steps to make it easier for some seniors to participate. For example, many states operate Combined Application Projects (CAPs) to enroll elderly SSI recipients into SNAP (the federal name for CalFresh). Though SSI recipients in California are ineligible for CalFresh, the approaches used in other states may prove successful if applied to other California senior populations that are indeed eligible.

One population very much in need of action and attention is the Social Security population. Only 5% of eligible households with Social Security recipients over 60 years old in California participate in CalFresh (approximately 444,000 households). Given that the Social Security Administration was the primary partner in the CAP projects in other states, the hope is that they could be enlisted in an effort to test strategies for enrolling Social Security recipients in California into CalFresh.

## ►► REQUEST

CFPA and Catholic Charities of California request that the legislature direct the State Department of Social Services to allow counties to conduct simplified CalFresh enrollment among Social Security recipients by utilizing data maintained by the Social Security Administration. Counties would be permitted to use data sharing, streamlined applications, and simplified enrollment to increase senior participation so long as they do not incur significant computer automation costs in doing so.

## ►► HISTORY

Since the creation of the Food Stamp Program, very few seniors have participated. In the 1970’s, “cashout” was established and seniors on SSI in California have been barred from participating since then. This has meant a large segment of the senior population has been ineligible for quite some time, while some eligible senior populations have gotten confused over their eligibility (especially those receiving other benefits from the Social Security Administration).

Since 1997, the federal government has required the Social Security Administration to give SSI applicants the opportunity to file a food stamp application. This requirement and a general interest in increasing enrollment among seniors has led many states to develop and test the now proven successful strategies that have increased enrollment among SSI recipients. However, no such efforts have occurred to enroll recipients of Social Security.

## ►► OUTCOMES

CalFresh benefits could help reduce senior food insecurity and draw more federal resources into the state and local economies. In addition, the strategies tested in this pilot for Social Security recipients may provide insights and best practice models to inform future action in addressing our state’s unique SSI cashout conundrum.