



In the midst of a crisis, California needs to improve access to food aid

By Sen. Scott Wiener and Paul Ash
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As the number of new CalFresh applications surges in the wake of COVID-19's devastating impact on our economy and unemployment, now is the time to make permanent improvements to ease access to CalFresh. While our Governor and county administrators have taken incredibly quick action over the last few weeks to make it easier for Californians to get the help they need during this crisis, we can't stop there. These common sense changes need to stay for the long haul. Our legislation proposed earlier this year, SB 882, would permanently streamline the CalFresh process, guaranteeing that Californians in need can quickly receive assistance when they fall on hard times.

As essential service providers during this crisis, the San Francisco-Marín Food Bank is witnessing the daily struggle our communities face in meeting their basic food needs. Beyond the growing lines we see at food pantries, the Food Bank is now fielding ten times as many calls about CalFresh as they were prior to the pandemic. A similar picture can be seen statewide. Data provided by the California Department of Social Services show the skyrocketing demand for nutrition assistance — CalFresh applications are up over 173,000 250% statewide from the same period last year. We are grateful for the temporary fixes that our state and county Administrators so quickly pushed forward, but the economic fallout will last far beyond this public health crisis and we need permanent change.

SB 882 would make three major improvements to the current CalFresh enrollment process. These changes are crucial, as CalFresh currently has among the worst participation rates in the nation, simply because it is so difficult to navigate the application process. SB 882 would require the state to provide counties with simplified CalFresh applications for households solely composed of seniors or people with disabilities and no earned income. It would waive the burdensome annual interim reporting requirements for 500,000 of those households across our state. And, SB 882 would ensure that all applicants and participants can complete the application and recertification process by phone rather than in person, including the required signature — as is being allowed during the crisis.

These are all crucial changes to improving access that we know work — we have seen them successfully tested in other states. CalFresh is the most effective anti-hunger program for those it reaches in California. But, according to the most recent data, only 19 percent of state's eligible older adults are served by the program. This stands in stark contrast with the national average of 42 percent. California can and must do more to reach and ensure access to this critical program for our food insecure. Providing a simplified application and one that can be fully completed over the phone anywhere in the state is the most important way we can increase the accessibility and reach of CalFresh.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen county social service agencies across the state forced to close their doors to the public. Older adults and immuno-compromised individuals have also been told to shelter in place and limit contact with the public. While the Governor has

ensured that these individuals will be able to access the CalFresh telephonically through May 31, this further underscores our need for legislation like SB 882 that continues and makes permanent these emergency policies to help ensure our state's vulnerable are cared for and protected year round.

It shouldn't take a pandemic to make it easier for Californians to receive food benefits, but now we know it's possible. We have an opportunity to build on these recent improvements to CalFresh that are working to increase access to those in need now. We must not lose our momentum.

We will continue to work and prioritize legislation like SB 882 that will permanently remove the physical and technological barriers keeping those who need nutrition assistance from accessing it. It's an important action that we can take now to ensure that those Californians experiencing food insecurity are given every opportunity to access the nutritious food they need, and to better prepare our communities for future emergencies.

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Link: <https://www.sfexaminer.com/opinion/in-the-midst-of-a-crisis-california-needs-to-improve-access-to-food-aid/>