



June 18, 2019

The Honorable Scott Wiener
1020 N Street, Room 521
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Senator Wiener,

California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA), San Francisco-Marin Food Bank, AARP California, and the California Association of Food Banks are proud to co-sponsor SB 285, legislation to ensure that all low-income Californians have efficient and equitable access to CalFresh—by phone, online, and in person—in a dignified way that supports their health and well-being. SB 285 sets ambitious yet achievable goals to make CalFresh a central part of an integrated social safety net.

Despite California's wealth and agricultural riches, more than [4.1 million low-income households are food insecure](#). CalFresh plays a major role in mitigating poverty, as our state's largest and [most effective anti-poverty program](#). Yet, this impact is limited due to the fact that three in ten eligible households don't gain access to CalFresh. While California has been slowly and steadily improving, we are still persistently among the [lowest-performing states](#) at connecting our residents to federal food assistance. We must do better to realize the full potential of CalFresh to alleviate poverty.

This year's expansion of CalFresh eligibility to Social Security Income (SSI) recipients is a pivotal opportunity to improve CalFresh enrollment, as [nearly 500,000 SSI clients \(older adults & people with disabilities\) will become CalFresh-eligible](#) for the first time. Getting this expansion right is key, as we will struggle to achieve the [75% enrollment target](#) without a critical look at the systems and processes that impact CalFresh enrollment. We must maximize the opportunity to provide long-sought assistance to our state's most vulnerable. SB 285 seeks to build upon the successful multi-stakeholder process that has identified [several customer service solutions proven to enhance enrollment and retention](#) not just for SSI recipients, but for all Californians eligible for CalFresh.

SB 285 will improve the reach of CalFresh through increased county-state collaboration aimed at successful enrollment outcomes. [A large body of evidence](#) suggests that the failure of CalFresh to reach eligible people is due to administrative design that does not consider the cognitive, emotional, and attentional costs that people with financial instability face. All eligible Californians, regardless of where they live or their life circumstances, should be able to access CalFresh with ease.

[CalFresh applicants overwhelmingly seek help in response to a recent stressful event](#). Life decisions are being made under strain, with a focus on multiple immediate crises, including putting food on the table. With respect to those strains, SB 285 would simplify applications for elderly and disabled households; improve linguistic access; and ensure that ongoing data- including CalFresh applicants' experiences- inform targeted program improvements. The need for SB 285 is clear:

Access to CalFresh varies significantly across the state, leading to serious inequities.

Enrollment is often unnecessarily burdensome, especially for older adults, non-English speakers, and the working poor. [Regardless of where they live](#) or their individual circumstances, all eligible Californians should have excellent access to vital food assistance for healthy, productive lives.

California persistently lags behind the nation at connecting older adults to CalFresh. [Only 20 percent of eligible low-income older adults receive CalFresh](#)- the lowest rate among all states. This dangerously low enrollment rate does not yet include the SSI recipients becoming newly eligible for CalFresh in 2019—it reflects our enrollment gap among [older adults who are currently eligible](#). In order to seize the pressing opportunity to enroll SSI recipients into CalFresh, and to reduce stigma and improve access among all older adults, we must simplify older adults' access to CalFresh in order to do effective outreach that destigmatizes CalFresh along with SSI 'cashout' reversal.

California's Medi-Cal expansion success can be replicated in CalFresh. California has the most successful Medicaid expansion in the nation, by far. However, [many Medi-Cal recipients are eligible for CalFresh but don't get food assistance](#), even though the same departments administer both programs. This disparity undermines the health of low-income Californians, and shortchanges the potential of an integrated safety net to break the cycle of poverty, hunger, and poor health.

CalFresh helps our communities thrive. Over 1.7 million Californians miss out on the nutrition benefits of CalFresh. [If all those eligible were enrolled, the state would garner nearly \\$2 billion more in federal dollars annually, generating over \\$3 billion in economic activity annually.](#)

No one should go hungry in the great state of California, and it is our collective responsibility to remove long-standing barriers to CalFresh, the most powerful anti-poverty tool at our disposal. We thank you for your leadership on SB 285, and strongly support this important legislation.

Sincerely,



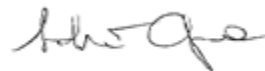
Tracey Patterson
Director of Legislation
California Food Policy Advocates



Meg Davidson
Associate Director, Policy & Advocacy
San Francisco-Marín Food Bank



Nancy McPherson
AARP CA State Director
AARP California



Andrew Cheyne
Director of Government Affairs
California Association of Food Banks

cc: Assemblymember Eloise Gomez Reyes, Chair, Assembly Human Services
Members of Assembly Human Services Committee