

San Diego County Expanding Food Aid But Still Covers Less Than Half Of Those Eligible

By [Alison St John](#)

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For several years, San Diego had the reputation as the county with the lowest Food Stamp participation rate of any major urban area in the nation. The California Food Policy Advocates has released [a report](#) showing that, in 2008, only 107,000 people - about 26 percent of San Diegans eligible for the food aid - were actually getting it. The report shows San Diego was leaving about \$350 million in federal food aid on the table.

But eighteen months ago, the County Supervisors resolved to do something to get food stamp participation up, and their efforts appear to be bearing fruit.

Dale Fleming of the County's Department of Health and Human Services says 207,000 San Diegans are currently enrolled in the County's Food Stamp program, now known as "CalFresh." It's not easy to estimate the number of people who are eligible, but more than 480,000 San Diegans are living at or below the federal poverty level. That means the number of people enrolled in "CalFresh" has increased from below 30 percent to about 40 percent of people who are eligible.

Fleming says 10,000 San Diegans are now applying for food stamps every month, up from 4,000 a month before the economic downturn. She said the county's partnerships with organizations like the San Diego Food Bank and the [San Diego Hunger Coalition](#) have helped make it easier for people to apply for the benefit. Also, the county has started to let people apply by phone instead of going to an office.

At the same time that applications are way up, the County's Health and Human Services budget has been cut. Fleming says she does not have more staff to deal with the expanded program, but cross training staff in other departments has helped keep up with the growing demand.

San Diego is still behind some other California counties in terms of the effectiveness of its food aid. The California Food Policy Advocates report shows

neighboring Imperial County has close to 60 percent of eligible people enrolled in the CalFresh program. Mitch Mitchell of San Diego's [Food Bank](#) said that's a goal San Diego hopes to meet in the future. Mitchell says the Food Bank is providing food to 340,00 people a month.