

Food stamp program gets a new name: CalFresh

It's an effort to increase participation by reducing stigma and focusing on nutrition.

October 24, 2010|By Alexandra Zavis, Los Angeles Times

California's food stamp program has a new name, which officials hope will encourage more people to apply for the nutrition benefit: CalFresh.

The new name and logo — an abstract representation of the diverse produce available in California — was launched Saturday at an event in Long Beach sponsored by first lady Maria Shriver to provide free medical, financial and educational services to low-income women.

"This rebranding campaign will go a long way in helping to erase the unfortunate stigma associated with this program and encourage families to seek CalFresh as a resource for putting healthy meals on their table," Shriver said in a statement.

The rebranding of food stamps is the latest in a series of efforts to increase participation in the federal program, which offers qualifying families an average of \$200 per month of food benefits in California.

More than 3 million Californians receive the benefit every month. However, participation has typically lagged behind most other states. In 2007, the most recent year for which federal estimates are available, fewer than half of the eligible California residents were receiving the benefit. Only Wyoming had a lower participation rate.

In California, the program used the term "food stamps" for more than 40 years. However, the paper coupons that inspired it were replaced years ago with a card, which looks and functions like a debit card.

In 2008, Congress decided to rename the program the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. States were given the option to come up with their own names and branding.

The state Legislature assigned the task to the California Department of Social Services, which officials said conducted consultations, research and testing that included many current and potential beneficiaries.

Department Director John Wagner said the name chosen by Congress did not test well in local focus groups because it suggested a welfare program rather than a health and nutrition program.

"I think that CalFresh better captures the goals of the program as well as conveys the rich tradition of our great state as a leader in agribusiness," Wagner said.

The California Endowment provided \$150,000 for development of the name and branding. The printing and distribution of new brochures were paid for with \$5,000 in federal funds. Officials said no additional funding will be sought to promote the new name, which is to be included in outreach efforts already funded by the federal government.

Advocates for low-income families welcomed the rebranding.

"We really needed something to capture how the program has changed," said George Manalo-LeClair, senior director of legislation for California Food Policy Advocates. "There are new ways to apply, new rules to improve access for working folks and a wonderful EBT [electronic benefit transfer] card to deliver benefits."

The federal government pays for the benefit and for half the cost of administering the program. The state and counties pay the rest.

Federal officials estimate that every \$1 in benefits generates as much as \$1.84 in economic activity by increasing business for grocery stores, farms, transportation companies and other firms. The benefit also boosts state revenue by freeing up income that would otherwise be spent on food, enabling beneficiaries to spend more on purchases that are subject to sales tax.

alexandra.zavis@latimes.com