



County's food stamp service reaches few

JAMES NOONAN | Posted: Sunday, November 21, 2010 12:00 am

As families across the state prepare for their holiday feasts, more than 3.3 million Californians are struggling with hunger, costing agencies across the state billions in federal entitlement dollars.

The California Food Policy Advocates released a report recently that suggests nearly 52 percent of the 7 million state residents eligible for the CalFresh program — California's recently renamed supplemental nutrition or "food stamp" system — are not receiving the federally funded benefits to which they are entitled.

The report uses methodology adopted from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to tabulate the number of eligible residents not enrolled in the entitlement program — as well as the amount of federal dollars not received — on a county-by-county level.

The figures included in the report are reached using data from the 2008 reporting period.

In Napa County, of the 15,812 residents eligible for the CalFresh program, only 3,192 — roughly 20 percent — are enrolled in "self-sufficiency services" offered by the county's Health and Human Services Agency.

According to the report, Napa County ranks 56th out of California's 58 counties in terms of percentage of the eligible population served by the CalFresh program.

Napa County's low-income residents are losing out on nearly \$17 million in federal funds each year that would be collected if the entire eligible population was participating in the program.

While such figures may seem relevant only to those benefiting directly from federal entitlement programs, the USDA estimates that each dollar of federal food stamp generates \$1.79 in economic activity, meaning that Napa County is potentially missing out on \$30.2 million.

For the county officials operating the supplemental nutrition program, the report draws attention to a years-old problem.

"We recognize we have work to do in increasing our participation rate," said Teresa Zimny, deputy director of Health & Human Services for self-sufficiency programs.

While admitting that there are no unique challenges to those seeking nutrition assistance present in Napa County, Zimny said that her office is struggling with many of the same issues responsible for making California the lowest performing state in the nation in terms of providing nutritional services.

Tia Shimada, author of the CalFresh report, attributes California's lackluster performance to its stringent application requirements, which include a fingerprint scan to confirm the identity of the applicant and quarterly reports that must be filed to stay eligible.

Shimada said the fingerprint scan is a barrier to those who may work long hours and lack the time needed to submit to a fingerprint scan at the Department of Motor Vehicles.

The quarterly reporting requirement means participants must sift through stacks of paperwork four times a year just to maintain their enrollment.

"It's something that makes it really easy to fall off the program and have to go through the whole process of getting back on," Shimada said. Only California and Wyoming have yet to switch to the simplified semi-annual reporting process, she said.

Mark Diel, executive director of the Napa Children's Health Initiative, said the state's requirements are partially to blame for the low enrollment numbers here in Napa.

"Going through the steps is a pretty onerous process," said Diel, whose office tries to boost enrollment in the CalFresh program.

While a daunting application process may dissuade some, Diel said there are other factors at play.

"I think a lot of it is that (people) don't know they're eligible," he said. "In Napa County, we haven't had a concerted effort on finding eligible people."

Hoping to address this, Diel's office has recently rolled out a screening process that will help locate students eligible for the CalFresh program in Napa County's schools.

The Napa Children's Health Initiative screens 20,000 students a year for health care coverage.

"Now when we screen them for health insurance, we will also be screening them for food stamp eligibility," Diel said. That effort should "dramatically" increase CalFresh enrollment for students and their families, he said.

Over the past few years, Napa County's Health and Human Services Agency has also rolled out some aggressive education campaigns targeting the county's immigrant population, families impacted by the recent economic downturn, low-income individuals who rely on the county for vital services and the homeless, Zimny said.

Only 3,527 Napa County residents were enrolled in the CalFresh program in December 2008, according to Zimny's office. By June 2010, that number had grown to 5,865, marking a 66 percent increase in less than two years.

Both Zimny and Diel agree that, as the aggressive education continues, fewer and fewer people will struggle with hunger issues across the county.

"Right now, we're leaving \$17 million on the table," Diel said. "That could be going toward providing highly nutritious food to people in need."