

## Study says county missing out on millions in food benefits

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Posted: 11/18/2010 08:52:49 PM PST

San Bernardino County is missing out on an estimated \$160 million a year in food stamp benefits due to underutilization, according to a recently released study.

As a result, the county forgoes as much as \$286 million in annual economic activity because of low participation in the state CalFresh program, formerly the California Food Stamp Program, according to the study "Lost Dollars, Empty Plates: The Impact of CalFresh Participation on State and Local Economics," released Wednesday by the Oakland-based California Food Policy Advocates, or CFPA, a nonprofit public policy and advocacy organization.

Every dollar in CalFresh benefits generates \$1.79 in economic activity, said Tia Shimada, nutrition policy advocate for CFPA.

"Leaving these federal funds untapped doesn't just hurt struggling households, it hurts our economy as well," Shimada said.

San Bernardino County actually fares better than most counties in the state in terms of the

number of people utilizing the CalFresh program, ranking 13th out of the state's 58 counties, Shimada said.

There are currently 124,747 pending CalFresh cases in San Bernardino County with 315,265 people receiving benefits. The county promotes the program via the online application system "C4Yourself" at [www.c4yourself.com/c4yourself/](http://www.c4yourself.com/c4yourself/), county spokesman David Wert said.

In addition, the county promotes the program through community outreach events

and health fairs. In the last year, county staff attended more than 30 such events, where CalFresh eligibility was explained and applications or referrals to the online application system were made available, Wert said.

To ensure use of the program continues to grow, the county will expand its outreach efforts by targeting senior populations in coordination with the county Department of Aging and Adult Services. In addition, the county may install self-service kiosks in various locations of the county, Wert said.

Wert said 18 percent of the county's food stamp applications are now received online, and annual increases in food stamp caseloads are between 40 percent and 45 percent.

California has some of the most stringent requirements for CalFresh participation, including mandatory finger imaging for eligible participants, burdensome paperwork and a

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quarterly reporting system. Shimada said that contributes to the state's low participation rate of 48 percent.

"Those are all barriers we can work to eliminate," she said. "We are the only state in the nation that requires a quarterly reporting system."

At the county level, ways to bolster use of the program include waiving face-to-face interviews in exchange for telephone interviews, offering applications online and launching various outreach efforts, Shimada said.

The study suggests how CalFresh participation can stimulate economic activity in budget-challenged California. It says that if 100 percent of eligible individuals participated in CalFresh, California would receive an estimated \$4.9 billion in additional federal benefits each year. Those benefits would generate an estimated \$8.7 billion in additional economic activity per year.

In addition, CalFresh participants would have more dollars to spend on taxable goods if they applied CalFresh benefits to their household food costs. Those dollars would result in an estimated \$131 million of additional sales tax revenue for the state general fund, and an estimated \$27 million of additional sales tax revenue would be generated for the state's non-general fund expenditures, according to the study.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has

consistently ranked California among the states with the worst participation in federal nutrition assistance. Less than half of all Californians who are eligible for CalFresh actually participate.

In January, Rep. Joe Baca, D-San Bernardino, hosted a hearing at Arrowhead Regional Medical Center in Colton to learn more about Californians' low participation in the CalFresh program and explore ways of increasing participation. He too believes that many of California's barriers that thwart accessibility to food stamps could be lifted.

Assemblyman Felipe Fuentes, D-Sylmar, plans to introduce legislation to remove excess paperwork and the finger-imaging requirement as barriers. The move is aimed at simplifying reporting rules that would make California more in step with other states.

Fuentes plans to introduce his proposed legislation on Dec. 6, the first day of the new legislative session, said Greg Wesley, Fuentes' Capitol director.

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