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The good news, bad news about helping the hungry

By TIFFANY REVELLE The Daily Journal
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Mendocino County's hungry and the county agency that works to feed them are getting two different messages: the county has done an excellent job, and it hasn't done nearly enough.

The California Food Policy Advocates, a state non-profit that measures food stamp programs' performance, announced last week that Mendocino County is missing out on an estimated \$12.9 million annually in federal food stamp money because not enough eligible people are signed up.

CalFresh -- formerly known as the state's Food Stamp Program -- provides benefits to eligible, low-income families and individuals who can't afford enough to eat.

The CFPA's recently released report, "Lost Dollars, Empty Plates: The Impact of CalFresh Participation on State and Local Economies," found that while economic downturn has pushed enrollment up, Mendocino County still doesn't have enough people enrolled in the program to generate the estimated \$23.1 million of economic activity the benefits could create.

The figure is based on an assumption that each dollar of food stamp money generates \$1.79 in economic activity in the receiving community, according to CFPA Nutrition Policy Advocate Tia Shimada, who authored the report.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers CalFresh, consistently ranks California among the states with the lowest participation rates, according to Shimada. She said her study shows 48 percent of the state's eligible residents receive benefits, based on the most recently-available data, which is from 2007.

A measure that uses U.S. Census Bureau statistics, locally-reported poverty levels and the numbers of people enrolled in programs that render them ineligible for CalFresh uses data from 2008, she said.

Just weeks ago, the county Health and Human Services Agency's food stamp program got one of only two gold awards given to local governments

nationwide for improving its outreach, making it easier for eligible families to sign up for the benefits.

The Hunger Champion award came from the USDA's Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP). The gold award is the highest honor SNAP gives to county agencies for furthering its goal "to increase food security and to reduce hunger by providing children and low-income people with food, a healthy diet and nutrition education."

HHSA's Community Health Services, Employment and Family Assistance Services Program partnered with agencies throughout Mendocino County to make people aware they might be eligible and to make applications available and easier to submit, according to HHSA Director Stacy Cryer.

"CalFresh has been greatly improved. We have a new name, new ways to apply, and several barriers to participation have been removed," said George Manalo-LeClair, senior director of legislation at CFPA. "But some persistent problems remain. We still require more paperwork than every other state in the country. Compared to just about every other state in the nation, we still require more trips, by more family members, to CalFresh offices."

State legislation is expected that would reduce required trips to the offices, implement the "simplified reporting" used in 49 states and would remove the "costly and redundant" requirement that all adult members of eligible households provide fingerprints, the CFPA stated.

In the meantime, Plowshares provides meals for hungry families and seniors at 5:30 p.m., and for the homeless at 6 p.m., Monday through Friday. Lunch is also available at 11:30 p.m. Thanksgiving meals will be served at 11:30 p.m. Thursday and Friday as Plowshares' only meals for those days.

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