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Report: Merced County 16th among California's 58 counties for food aid

State's CalFresh program was formerly known as food stamps

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Merced County is one of the counties with the highest use of CalFresh, formerly the state's Food Stamp Program.

The county ranked 16th among 58 counties in using CalFresh, according to a report released Wednesday by California Food Policy Advocates, an Oakland-based anti-poverty advocacy group. Fresno County was ranked No. 1, with the highest CalFresh use relative to the number of people who are eligible based on income.

CalFresh helps improve the health and well-being of families and individuals by providing them the means to meet their nutritional needs, according to its website.

The ranking of counties' CalFresh usage was based on information from 2009. Nicole Pollack, deputy director for the Merced County Human Services Agency, said there has been a 46 percent increase in people receiving food aid over the past two years.

Pollack said the study is correct, based on the 2009 information. "But since then we are doing a much better job of outreaching to clients," she added. "We've made improvements in reaching out to those who might be eligible."

During December, there were 48,452 county residents receiving CalFresh benefits, Pollack said. The county's population is a little less than 255,000.

Officials have made it easier to apply. Pollack said people can apply online in English or Spanish by going to www.C4yourself.com.

Pollack said officials also have improved the effort to educate families about the value of supplementing nutrition. For example, people from the agency attend health fairs, where they conduct healthy cooking demonstrations.

Typically, CalFresh cannot be used to purchase hot food such as precooked pizza, hamburgers or meals at a restaurant, Pollack said. The benefits are to buy groceries rather than meals. "It can't be a hot meal, it has to be fresh healthy food that they can prepare for their family," she said.

However, the county has grocery stores carrying hot foods that accept Electronic Benefit Transfer cards. An EBT card is like a debit card onto which CalFresh benefits, CalWORKS benefits and benefits from other assistance programs are transferred.

Pollack said officials don't mandate how clients can spend their CalFresh benefits. Still, she said, scanners at venues where EBT cards are accepted will automatically detect items that are not qualified.

There are no restaurants on the list of venues that accept CalFresh benefits, Pollack said.

She said EBT cards are accepted at fast-food restaurants, but CalFresh benefits cannot be used. On Tuesday, the Fresno County Board of Supervisors rejected a proposal by the California Restaurant Association to start a restaurant-meals program that would have allowed elderly, disabled and homeless CalFresh recipients to use their benefits at a restaurant.

Amalia Chamorro, director of local government affairs for the California Restaurant Association, said the program is endorsed by the state, but only five counties have adopted it. "We thought there was an interest in the Central Valley," she said.

Chamorro said the program in Fresno was not framed positively because fast-food places would have been among the participating restaurants. Still, she said, fast-food venues now offer healthier options as well.

Chamorro said some people don't have a kitchen or room to store groceries, so the program would have made it easier for them, because they would have been able to buy meals instead. The benefits of the program go beyond the CalFresh recipients, she said.

"(The program) can bring in another access to food for the (clients) and also help stimulate the local economy," she said.

She said the association is interested in seeing other counties adopt the plan. Merced County hasn't been approached for this program.

As of June 2010, more than 3.2 million Californians were receiving CalFresh benefits, according to the report.

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