

San Mateo County ranks low for food stamp use

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San Mateo County ranked second to last in a new assessment of food stamp use statewide but local officials say the numbers leave out key considerations such as how many undocumented residents can't qualify.

If all San Mateo County residents who meet the income requirements participated in CalFresh — the official name for the food stamp program — they would receive an estimated \$59.3 million in extra federal nutritional benefits annually, according to the report by California Food Policy Advocates.

Statewide, the estimated loss is \$4.9 billion in benefits.

“Leaving these federal funds untapped doesn't just hurt struggling households, it hurts our economy as well,” said report author Tia Shimada in a prepared statement.

CFPA is a statewide public policy organization focused on increasing the access of low-income residents to healthy and affordable food. The group compiled a report on state underutilization last fall and honored counties that ranked high at a forum in Sacramento yesterday.

The report and its rankings points out the great need for food which is important, said Amanda Kim, spokeswoman for the San Mateo County Human Services Agency.

“We don't object to their data,” Kim said. “We just want to ask who is the population?”

CFPA uses what it calls the Program Access Index which calculates food stamp use with data on individuals with an income below 125 percent of the federal poverty level and no receipt of other Social Security benefits. The data is culled from 2008.

The index does not take into account citizen/immigration status — included in the federal assessment of use — which Kim said makes a huge difference in ranking San Mateo County.

For instance, the undocumented population is included in census numbers for those in need of food but can't qualify for programs. The difference leaves a wide gap between the two points that legally can't be filled.

“[CFPA]'s numbers are just a part of the story,” Kim said.

CFPA's place Yuba County at the top and Mono County last, just above San Mateo County.

Kim said she and other HSA officials are looking at the variables between Mono and San Mateo counties and the factors used to determine rankings because those two locales "couldn't be more different."

Even if CFPA's data doesn't highlight every factor in the county's food stamp eligibility placement, there is no dispute there are eligible residents not enrolled.

Part of the reason may be the fingerprinting requirement mandated not by the federal government, but California. Opponents say it turns off some eligible individuals who worry the database will be used to search their names for other matters, like warrants.

Kim said San Mateo County's equipment, which is funded locally, takes up staff time and has flagged very few cases of food stamp fraud.

Stigma is also a barrier, particularly in the current economic environment when former software engineers, managers and college graduates find themselves needing a hand.

The county, like some others, also finds itself with a backlog of cases due to increased need and staff that has either stayed flat or even reduced. The state Legislature has not increased more funding, leaving HSA's staff of 770 serving 92,000 residents. By the end of the year, the expectation is 95,000 to 96,000 clients with a staff of 80 fewer due to vacancies and a hiring freeze, Kim said.

Despite the hurdles, the county has seen a sharp increase in enrollment between June 2008 and June 2010. Some of the largest changes were on the coast, such as El Granada and Pescadero which saw a 750 percent and 488.89 percent leap, respectively. Montara's 17 cases in June 2010 represent a 750 percent increase.

Kim pointed out surprising changes in some communities like Millbrae which jumped 198.73 percent to 236 cases, Belmont which increased 180.81 percent to 278 cases, Burlingame which went up 169.17 percent to 323 cases and Foster City whose 165.15 percent increase meant 175 cases.

Other urban areas showed pretty consistent rates of increase, ranging between 25 percent in Woodside to 100 percent in Hillsborough. The majority of the others hovered in the 90s. San Gregorio showed the only decrease, a drop of 50 percent to two cases.

A 2011 CalFresh numbers update — the published figures used in local health reports and presentations — also show enrollment figures nearly tripled over a four-year span.

In December 2006, the county had 8,836 participants. In December 2010, the figure was 21,602.