

Too many Californians left without food stamps

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Stacks of paperwork await members of the House Agriculture Committee, on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, May 15, 2013, as it meets to consider proposals to the 2013 Farm Bill, including small cuts to the \$80 billion-a-year food stamp program in an effort to appease conservatives who say the food aid has become too expensive. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite) Photo: J. Scott Applewhite, Associated Press

The House of Representatives jolted the country in June when it refused to renew the nation's food stamp program as part of the Farm Bill. Passage of the Farm Bill is usually a bipartisan, uncontroversial matter, but little is bipartisan or uncontroversial in today's Washington - and now, the nutrition needs of 46.6 million Americans are at risk. It's a

shocking number, but what's just as unsettling is how many eligible people aren't getting the food stamps they could use, especially in California.

According to a U.S. Department of Agriculture study this year, California has the lowest

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rate of food stamp participation in the country. Nearly half of those eligible for food assistance don't get it.

This is bad for our state's health, and it's not even saving the state much money - since the food stamp program is funded almost exclusively by the federal government, it means that California is depriving its poor at little savings to itself.

The good news is that California has made important changes to its program that will probably result in greater participation very soon.

Gov. [Jerry Brown](#) has pushed to ease the state's onerous rules around food stamps, signing legislation that eliminated a humiliating fingerprinting requirement in fall 2011 that was depressing participation rates by about 7 percent, according to a report from the [Public Policy Institute of California](#). The governor also signed legislation that would reduce the number of times per year that participants must prove that they qualify for assistance to two, from four. Making this requirement less taxing for recipients isn't likely to increase the number of people in the program, but it might free up some of the state's resources to be used more efficiently.

"California is on the road to making a lot of important changes - we're doing it later than other states, but we are doing it, so it'll take a while for the data to catch up," said [Caroline Danielson](#), a research fellow at the Public Policy Institute.

That's the good news. What would make this news even better would be if California decides to take full advantage of an important opportunity that's going to come via health care reform.

"Because California is only reaching 55 percent of (eligible food stamp recipients), there's a huge opportunity to reach more people when they come to sign up for [Medi-Cal](#) under health care reform," said [Kerry Birnbach](#), a nutrition policy advocate for the nonprofit [California Food Policy Advocates](#). "Expectations are for a million-plus number of people who will be eligible for Medi-Cal and may be eligible for (food stamps), because there's enormous overlap between the eligibility requirements for these two programs."

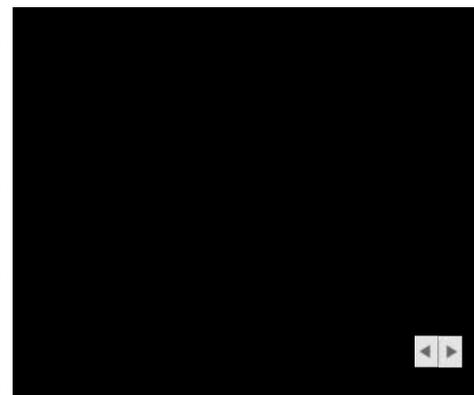
The federal government is encouraging this sort of integration - California just needs to step up.

In this high-tech state, it should be easy enough to allow Medi-Cal applicants to apply for food stamps at the same time and with the same application.

Same-day application for food stamps, wherein applicants are allowed to interview at the time of their application, would be another helpful way to streamline the process.

The need is there. All that's required is the political will.

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