

Study: Californians leave billions in federal food stamp funds unclaimed

Beau Yarbrough, Staff Writer Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

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Database: [Unclaimed food stamp - CalFresh - benefits in California](#)

If every Californian eligible for federal food stamp programs signed up for them, they would generate an additional \$8.3 billion in economic activity each year, according to a new study.

The California Food Policy Advocates on Wednesday released its annual Program Access Index, which measures the portion of people who can receive food stamps in each of the state's 58 counties and actually sign up for them.

Only 55 percent of Californians eligible for the federal food aid program enroll, according to the study by the Oakland-based nutrition policy and advocacy organization.

This gap leaves an estimated \$4.7 billion in federally funded nutrition benefits unclaimed.

"In the greater economy, you've got people going to the store and buying food, which means they're hiring checkers, and hiring truckers," said Lynda Rush, who is the chairwoman of the Economics Department at Cal Poly Pomona.

In Los Angeles County, less than two-thirds of those eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - known as CalFresh in California - participate.

The nonprofit can only estimate the number of low-income residents eligible for the CalFresh program, based on several criteria, including the number of residents with income less than 125 percent of the [poverty](#) threshold - \$11,170 for a single person and \$23,050 for a family of four.

[How the federal government defines poverty](#)

That puts Los Angeles County at No. 37 out of 58 counties in terms of participation.

The nonprofit said the unclaimed \$4.7 billion in federal funds means a loss of \$8.3 billion in economic activity in Los Angeles County each year.

"We are very well aware that there are more people who potentially qualify for CalFresh who are not receiving it and we have a multi-pronged approach to letting people know that they may have that eligibility," said Shirley Christensen, the spokeswoman for the county's Department of Social Services.

The county evaluates all residents applying for MediCal for eligibility in CalFresh and promotes the program through a variety of means, including an annual CalFresh Awareness Month in May.

The number of participants grew by about 68,000 people in Los Angeles County in 2012, an uptick from about 1.06 million in January to 1.13 million by December.

"It's not huge, but it's going up," Christensen said. "Every month we go up."

The program is more popular in neighboring San Bernardino County, where about 92 percent of eligible residents are enrolled in CalFresh, which places it at third in the state.

Still, the county's residents are leaving \$31.5 million on the table, for an estimated loss of \$56.4 million in economic activity, according to the nonprofit.

"We have a very active outreach program to get them to take advantage of those benefits," San Bernardino County

spokesman David Wert said.

"The idea is to not have those people go hungry, if options are available."

Only Del Norte and Calaveras counties have a higher percentage of participation than San Bernardino County

"San Bernardino County's doing a good job with outreach," Rush said. "The word is out there that people can get these benefits they're entitled to."

State officials have pushed counties to increase participation among eligible residents, said Steve Couchot, assistant to the director of the county's Transitional Assistance Department.

The department has raised awareness in a variety of ways, including pushing the state's www.C4Yourself.com website, where residents can see if they qualify for the program and enroll. The website results in 30 percent of San Bernardino County's CalFresh applications.

"Yes, our county is proud of the third (place) ranking, increased CalFresh participation in this nutrition based program, and, of course, the economic impacts for the county," Couchot said by email on Wednesday.

San Bernardino County has about 120,500 CalFresh cases, which can cover an entire family, and 28,400 CalFresh cases where families also receive some type of cash assistance.

The economic impact of CalFresh isn't an incidental bonus of the program, Rush said: It was the entire point, originally.

"Food stamps were originally set up as a farm subsidy program, with a secondary benefit to help the poor," she said.

"That's why you can really only use it to buy food items."

And the economic benefits flow from food stores out through the community more broadly.

"It doesn't just help the people who get the food stamps: It trickles through the entire economy," Rush said.

And, of course, it helps those struggling to pay their bills.

"There's a lot of political baggage with it, but it's really a win-win as I see it," Rush said.

"It's a win for businesses ... and it's a win for people who are able to feed their families."

Some of that recession may be starting to dissipate, said Elsa Valdez, a professor of sociology at Cal State San Bernardino.

"If you look at what's happened since the 2007 recession, prior to that, it was primarily families living below the poverty level that were using programs like CalFresh."

That all changed when middle class families found themselves struggling to hold onto their houses with work harder and harder to come by.

"Once you have more low-income and middle-income families (using it) who are viewed as more honest and hard-working, somehow it makes it more acceptable and less stigmatizing," Valdez said.

And as a result, more businesses around Southern California have posted signs saying they take the Electronic Benefit Transfer cards that participants use to access CalFresh funds.

"Business owners know we need to cater to all families, because, therefore, they're willing to put those signs in the window," Valdez said.

The dramatic disparity between participation rates in Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties isn't necessarily just about what each county government has done to encourage participation, according to Valdez: It may also have its roots in who lives in each county.

"L.A. County has a huge Latino immigrant population and you have a lot of legal residents, first generation," Valdez said.

"In those communities, one of the worst things you can do is rely on public assistance."

When first-generation Latino immigrants have trouble making ends meet, she said, they tend to get extra jobs before asking the government for assistance.

"You see them standing on the off-ramps, and so forth, or selling tamales in parking lots," Valdez said. "If you're a first-generation immigrant, they're less likely to get food stamps than those who are native-born."

And there's also the concern in some quarters that the program might come back to haunt participants.

"One of the barriers in L.A. County is that we have a lot of aliens, both documented and undocumented," Christensen said.

"For aliens that are illegally in the county, there's always been the concern that it will be held against them once they're eligible for citizenship."

Los Angeles County has been working to clear up that misconception, she said.

Beau.Yarbrough@InlandNewspapers.com

909-483-9376

@InlandEd