

Eligible residents not getting benefits

Andrew Creasey/Appeal-Democrat | Posted: Sunday, October 18, 2015 11:41 pm

Yuba-Sutter is missing out on \$14 million in federal benefits due to almost 14,000 residents not participating in food stamps programs for which they are eligible, according to a recent report.

The report, released annually by California Food Policy Advocates, calculated the area does not receive about \$25 million in total economic impacts as a result of this gap. It also highlighted concerns about the impact the lack of these benefits can have on family health.

In Sutter County, there are 12,300 individuals participating in CalFresh, known federally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. But there are 21,100 who are eligible, leaving a gap of about 8,800 residents without the benefits they are entitled to receive, according to the report.

In Yuba County, there are about 12,800 participating in CalFresh, while almost 18,000 are eligible — a gap of about 5,100.

The question then becomes: Why aren't these individuals receiving these benefits?

"There could be a number of reasons why people don't participate, but there is a great deal of effort to get information out to those people," said Russ Brown, Yuba County spokesman. "It's hard to imagine that people don't know about the availability of the services, but it is a possibility. Some may not want to (participate in CalFresh) and want to stand up and do it on their own."

Language could also be a barrier, said Joanne Ellis, chief executive officer of the Yuba-Sutter Food Bank.

"Some people don't understand our language and can't go out and (get CalFresh)," Ellis said. "There's no program that I'm aware of to help them. They see the paperwork required, and they don't want to do it."

Brown said the county has translators on hand to assist non-native speakers applying for food stamps.

Families lacking these benefits could see impacts to their health, particularly for children, said Amerjit Bhattal, assistant director of human services for Sutter County.

"Families who aren't making ends meet, if they're not taking advantage of applying for CalFresh, they may not have food available for children," Bhattal said. "That food insecurity can affect children's growth and development, so it definitely makes a negative impact if they're not getting adequate nutrition."

The good news is a number of local programs supply food to needy families, Ellis said.

The Yuba-Sutter Food Bank hands out about 80 pounds of food each week through its brown bag program and another program through the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

There are also 32 food closets in the area that provide food to anyone that needs it, Ellis said.

In all, the food bank serves about 8,000 people in the area.

"With all that food available, I think sometimes they don't need food stamps," Ellis said.

There are several programs specifically designed to provide food for the homeless.

"The homeless will probably not apply for food stamps because they have their own programs to get food," Ellis said.

There is also a small impact to the local government tax rolls when people do not participate in CalFresh. Receiving those benefits allow households to redistribute income and spend money normally budgeted for food on taxable goods, according to the report.

But the loss is minor in both counties. Yuba County misses out on \$24,000 in local taxes. Sutter County misses out on about \$39,000, according to the report.

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