



A woman protested a proposal to cut food stamp funding in 2013. Kevork Djansezian/Getty Images

1/3 of Angelenos who qualify for food stamps don't get them

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About a third of people who qualify for food stamps don't receive them in L.A. County, and officials are trying to figure out why.

Only an estimated 66 percent of people who qualify for CalFresh actually enroll in the program in L.A. County, which is below the state average and well below San Bernardino County's 93 percent participation rate.

"I think people underestimate the amount of hunger in the county – it's really stunning," said Supervisor Sheila Kuehl. "So I think it's a really important program and we're going to do everything we can to sign up more people."

Kuehl, along with Supervisor Janice Hahn, have introduced a motion that would instruct the Department of Public Social Services to specifically devote resources to signing up residents, with the goal of reaching, at minimum, an 86 percent participation rate in the next two years. The full Board of Supervisors is scheduled to vote on the motion Tuesday.

Jared Call of California Food Policy Advocates said one thing L.A. County could do is enroll people in CalFresh when they sign up for health care under Medicaid — a strategy, he said, that's been quite successful in San Bernardino and other counties with high participation rates.

"We're really good at enrolling people in health care in California, but not in CalFresh," Call said.

But the last few months have brought additional hurdles to signing up qualified people for all kinds of public benefits, Kuehl said—specifically, immigrants worried about jeopardizing their legal status or their prospects for citizenship by enrolling.

Kuehl said the anti-immigrant rhetoric emerging from the White House is causing a climate of fear. The county has seen a drop in use of its health clinics as a result, she said.

"We're very concerned about it," she said. "This is jeopardizing people's lives."

Claire Nicolson, a spokesperson for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, said receiving a public benefit does not automatically harm a person's chances of gaining residency or citizenship.

Use of food stamps — which the federal government calls the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) — specifically appears on the list of benefits that does not qualify a person as a "public charge," meaning a person likely to become dependent on the government. Participation in some income programs, like cash welfare, can, in some cases, jeopardize permanent residency, according to the [USCIS website](#).

"It's important that people educate themselves about public charge," Nicolson said in a statement, "before seeking out a public benefit to ensure they do not jeopardize their eligibility for a green card or citizenship."

A spokesperson for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, meanwhile, said the agency does not use information from databases of public assistance recipients to identify people for deportation. They may use such information for criminal investigations.

Privacy laws prevent the government from using personal information collected during benefits applications for anything besides determining whether or not a person is eligible, said Jenny Rejeske, senior health policy analyst for the National Immigration Law Center.

"We're encouraging people to continue to use these services that they're eligible for," she said.