

Advocates: Too few accept food stamps, costing Santa Cruz County millions

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Watsonville >> Less than half the people eligible to receive food stamps in Santa Cruz County take advantage of the federal nutrition program.

As a result, millions of dollars that could feed hungry families and grow the local economy are lost to the county annually.

That was the message at a forum Friday on CalFresh, as the state calls the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program commonly known as food stamps.

About 100 people — elected officials and representatives of government agencies, church groups and nonprofits — attended the forum at Our Lady Help of Christians Catholic Church.

"It breaks my heart to see hunger in America," said keynote speaker Assemblyman Mark Stone. "I hope it breaks yours too."

About 44,000 county residents benefitted from CalFresh last year, half of them children.

According to the statewide policy organization, California Food Policy Advocates, more than half of those eligible in the county are not receiving the help.

In 2012, the organization estimated the county lost \$41.4 million in economic activity due to its low participation rate, which ranked Santa Cruz 47th among the state's 58 counties.

George Manalo-LeClair, executive director of the policy group, said when people buy food they are supporting local grocery stores and the farmers who produce the food. The economic benefit ripples out from there. Each \$1 of assistance generates \$1.59 in economic activity, he said. Even governments gain as recipients have more money to spend on taxable items.

"When households get money for food, it frees up money to be spent on other things like clothes and shoes," Manalo-LeClair said.

Lainie Gray, CalFresh analyst for the county Human Services Department, said one of the biggest problems is "churn." The unemployed, for example, find temporary jobs and go off the assistance, and don't return to the program when they find themselves out of work again.

Paperwork also is an issue, she said. Applicants are certified for a year, but must file a report after six months or lose their qualification.

Some simply don't realize they'd qualify.

"It's very easy to apply online or by phone or at Santa Cruz County customer service centers," Gray said.

Benefits can start in as few as three days if certain criteria are met, she said.

Combined with the federal earned income tax credit, CalFresh goes a long way toward alleviating poverty and ensuring children's needs are met, advocates said.

Yet Congress reduced the food stamp budget by more than \$8.7 billion during the next decade, a compromise between Republicans who wanted a heftier cut, and Democrats who wanted less chopped.

To qualify, recipients must have a net income of less than 100 percent of the federal poverty line, \$23,850 for a family of four.

Many people make less than half that, and two-thirds of recipients are children, advocates said.

"It's really targeted at the people who need the benefit," said Jessica Bartholow, a policy analyst with the Western Center on Law and Poverty.

CalFresh

What: California's program to distribute federal food stamp aid.

Eligible: Adults and children in households earning less than 100 percent of the federal poverty line, \$23,850.

Not eligible: Undocumented immigrants, SSI recipients, people with felony drug convictions.

Benefit: Average for household of five is \$506 a month, range is \$15-\$750.

Santa Cruz County: 44,000 recipients in 2013, half children.

Details: 831-662-0991