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Alameda County loses \$72.3 million in food stamps program, new study finds



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As many communities brace themselves for the economic fallout of the worst drought in California's recorded history, and the state continues a struggling recovery from the "great recession" — with an unemployment rate fluctuating 1-2 percentage points above the national average — recent reports released from [California Food Policy Advocates \(CFPA\)](#) find that low-income Californians don't take nearly enough advantage of federal support programs, like food stamps and other benefits available to eligible residents, and Alameda County's numbers are even worse.

CFPA, an independent policy and advocacy group founded in 1992, has several initiatives aimed at improving the health and well-being of low-income Californians. Perhaps most notably is their work on CalFresh enrollment, which they monitor through their annual [Program Access Index \(PAI\)](#) and [Lost Dollars, Empty Plates](#) reports.

Most people interact with CalFresh — California's arm of the federal [Supplemental Nutrition](#)



Assistance Program (SNAP) – to apply for food assistance benefits, more commonly known as food stamps.

The PAI estimates CalFresh enrollment among eligible residents by county, and *Lost Dollars, Empty Plates* details the impacts of CalFresh utilization on local economies. The 2014 reports, released on February 27th, paint a grim picture for Alameda County’s participation.

According to a 2011 USDA report, California consistently ranks among the lowest for participation with the federal SNAP program. With only 57% of eligible Californians participating in food stamps and other benefits, California ties with Wyoming among all 50 states for the lowest participation rate among all eligible residents.

Looking at the real figures, the CFPA reports that California loses an estimated \$3.5 billion in federal nutrition benefits each year, which, if there was full enrollment in the food stamps program, could potentially generate an estimated \$6.3 billion in additional economic activity across the state.

Within California, Alameda County is doing even worse – literally among the lowest of the low in terms of SNAP enrollment. Among California’s 58 counties, Alameda County ranks 27th for participation – meaning nearly half of California’s 58 counties are better utilizing the federal assistance program.

According to the findings of the most recent *Lost Dollars, Empty Plates* report, if every potentially eligible Alameda resident was signed up for the federally funded CalFresh benefits, new participants would receive an estimated \$72.3 million in nutritional support., which could mean an additional \$129 million in economic activity for Alameda County.

To be eligible for the CalFresh nutritional benefits program, you need to be a U.S. citizen or legal resident and initially have a gross income that does not exceed 130% of the national poverty level (or, your gross income for a household of one cannot exceed \$1,245 a month).

To determine the amount of monthly benefits an eligible resident receives, successive tests are run that deduct some monthly expenses from the gross income. The average amount of benefits received per household per month is about \$200, and with CalFresh food stamps benefits, you can buy food for human consumption, as well as seeds and plants to grow food for household use. What keeps individuals from participating in the food support program is multifaceted. Social stigma associated with receiving federal welfare benefits and a potentially confusing application process are two key factors advocates are looking at closely. Kerry Birnbach, a nutrition policy advocate with CFPA, explained that California has been slow to adopt some basic policies that make enrollment in CalFresh easier, like no longer requiring fingerprinting and reducing the amount of reporting required to maintain benefits.

“We want to leverage technology so when someone goes to the county to enroll for benefits, they are told about multiple programs and they can enroll in multiple programs at the same time, seamlessly,” Birnbach said.

State and local lawmakers are taking steps to increase participation in the program, strengthening connections between CalFresh and Medi-Cal, along with efforts to establish and meet performance goals and customer service standards – and with that customer service, they hope to distribute the \$72.3 million in nutritional benefits left unclaimed by Alameda residents.

“It’s a slow incremental process,” Birnbach said. “Just because you change a policy doesn’t mean that everyone is going to know about it the next day and come and enroll. But we’re hopeful these changes will pay off.”

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