



CalFresh Newborn Enrollment

Improving Access to Food Assistance at Birth

Background

CalFresh is instrumental in supporting the growth and development of children during their early years. Nearly half of California children utilize CalFresh at some point during the first five years of age. However, around 40 percent of newborn infants face a significant, unnecessary delay in being enrolled for benefits by their third month of life.¹ This means households are being unfairly held back from receiving vital food assistance they are entitled to, at a time of extra stress and vulnerability for the family.

This brief analyzes current policy and regulations to determine potential access barriers for families, and provides recommendations to proactively prevent a delay in newborns receiving benefits.

CalFresh Access During Early Childhood

CalFresh is our largest, most impactful anti-hunger program. Participation in the program prevents poverty for **300,000 children** in California.² Yet CalFresh continues to be heavily underutilized. According to most recent data, though the national participation rate for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (or SNAP, as CalFresh is known federally) was an estimated 82 percent in 2018, California lagged behind the national average with a participation rate of 70 percent among those that were eligible.³ This means roughly **1 in 3 people** who are eligible for benefits are currently not receiving CalFresh. California ranks 45th in the nation in terms of SNAP participation rate, largely due to barriers in access, and this has a significant impact on families with young children.

CalFresh is a critical resource for families with children.

One out of three families face an unnecessary 3-month delay in signing up their newborn child for CalFresh benefits.

Considering how crucial nutrition is for mothers and infants during this stage of life, as well as how much new parents are dealing with in those first three months, county and state administrators must take the necessary steps to ensure that families have the resources to the food they need to thrive.

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According to the Public Policy Institute of California, **49 percent of California children** receive CalFresh at some point in their first five years of life.⁴ Despite its importance in safeguarding families' health and well-being, more than **one in three** families struggle to enroll their newborn children in the program by three months' age. This results in hundreds of dollars in vital food assistance potentially missed out on annually by families who qualify for benefits. Additionally, the majority of newborns that receive CalFresh within their first year are already part of a family's existing case. This indicates that these households' circumstances are known to CalFresh administrators before their newborns join the CalFresh household, yet there is still an enrollment time-lag.

Research shows that nutrition during early childhood is critical. CalFresh helps to improve health, improve academic performance, reduce food insecurity, and reduce childhood poverty.⁵ After the Earned Income Tax Credit, CalFresh lifts more children out of poverty than any other assistance program. CalFresh participation during childhood has long-lasting effects on adults, including lower adult poverty rates, higher rates of educational attainment, higher earnings, and lower mortality.⁶ Earlier exposure to CalFresh, particularly during the crucial period of child development, resulted in better outcomes. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that all young children, including newborn infants, are receiving equitable opportunities to grow, develop, and prosper.

1 in 2

Californian children receive CalFresh at one point in their first five years of life.

1 in 3

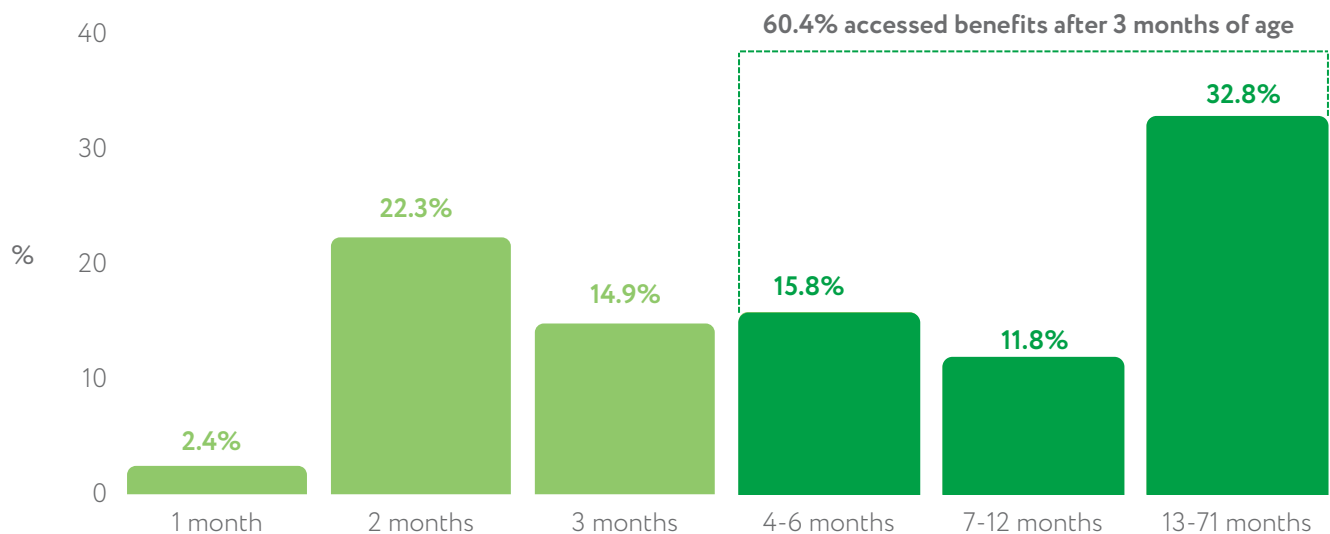
newborns face at least a three month delay in getting added to their family's CalFresh case.

That's up to

\$600 lost

in food assistance benefits the family is entitled to receive.

Percent of children born in 2012 who participated in CalFresh ages 0-5, by age in months of first CalFresh access



Source: Public Policy Institute of California. The Importance of CalFresh and CalWORKs in Children's Early Years, Technical Appendix (Table C2). Number of children born in 2005 and 2012 who participate in CalFresh ages 0-5, by age in months of first CalFresh access. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/the-importance-of-calfresh-and-calworks-in-childrens-early-years/>



Findingsⁱ

Families are asked for more information than necessary.

Federal regulations allow more leeway for families in providing documentation to enroll newly born infants into CalFresh as compared to other household changes. For instance, a new baby's Social Security Number (SSN) is not needed to start receiving benefits.ⁱⁱ However, sometimes families are mistakenly asked by county CalFresh Eligibility Workers to verify unnecessary information, such as an SSN and proof that the baby has been born. This places an additional, unnecessary administrative burden on families to track down and submit information and documents that they aren't required to provide by law. Families should only need to provide the federally mandated documentation to enroll newborns into CalFresh.

Newborn enrollment processes and outcomes differ from county to county.ⁱⁱⁱ

In some counties, there is often a significant gap between when a baby is born and when eligibility workers learn of the birth. This reflects a misconception among some county workers that clients must be the ones to reach out first to enroll their newborns into CalFresh, even if the family is already receiving benefits. Additionally, even if families report a pregnancy, they must reach out again once the baby is born to get the newborn enrolled. In some instances, it's not enough for families to report the birth - **they are expected to proactively request the addition of the newborn to their CalFresh case.**

Though newborn enrollment is straightforward and expedited for Medi-Cal, the enrollment procedures are not aligned with CalFresh.

Through interviews with community partners and county administrators, it was determined that newborn enrollment processes for Medi-Cal are typically well-documented and streamlined. Medi-Cal actively collects information from families, has hospital workers enroll babies at the hospital, and simplifies and expedites the process if the baby's parents are already enrolled in Medi-Cal. These processes don't always happen within CalFresh, but county Eligibility Workers are now required to dually screen and enroll individuals in both CalFresh and Medi-Cal if they qualify for one program or the other.⁷ Though newborns are able to sign up for Medi-Cal coverage relatively quickly, families face additional barriers in adding their newborns to their CalFresh case.

What are County Administrators Across the State Doing?

Some counties have effective systems in place to help families enroll their newborns in CalFresh in a timely manner.

Here's what's happening in **San Bernardino County**:

- Eligibility Workers only ask for the baby's name, date of birth, and gender
- County Eligibility Workers are dually trained in Medi-Cal & CalFresh and make changes for both cases
- Data about newborn enrollment is actively collected to track outcomes and ensure households receive benefits in a timely manner



Families are going through a **stressful time of transition** when a new household member enters into their lives. The onus should not be on families to wade through unnecessary paperwork and navigate a complex process to get food benefits to which they are legally entitled. CalFresh administrators should institute policies and procedures to proactively reach out to families to enroll newborns in CalFresh.

Newborn Enrollment Processes Across Safety Net Programs

Program	What information is needed?	When are benefits received?	What do the policies say?	How are newborns enrolled?
Medi-Cal	Name, Gender, Date of Birth (DOB)	Month of birth	Babies can enroll through: CHDP gateway Deemed eligibility	If mom is on Medi-Cal, babies are added on without an application. Hospital workers often enroll babies right after they're born.
WIC *	Name, Gender, DOB, Income, Address, Identification	Month of enrollment	Families come in-person to the WIC office while mom is pregnant. Once the baby is born, their demographic and nutritional information is collected.	WIC offices follow up with expecting mothers to ensure that babies can start receiving benefits in a timely manner.
CalWORKs	Name, Gender, DOB, SSN, Proof of Birth	Month AFTER enrollment	The newborn's birth must be reported within 10 days of the birth in a child-only case. Otherwise, reports are voluntary.	Similarly to CalFresh, families must notify the county once the baby is born. However, a delay is less common among CalWORKs households.
CalFresh	Name, Gender, DOB	Month AFTER enrollment	Reporting a newborn's birth is voluntary. If the household is unable to provide the SSN, they can still receive up to six months of benefits while waiting for the Social Security card.	Counties report different procedures. One asks for minimal information, such as the baby's name and date of birth. Another asks for a birth certificate and a social security number, or proof of an application for a SSN.

* Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, flexibilities have been allowed for the WIC program, such as remote appointments instead of in-person WIC office visits. Though they are still in place at the time of this brief, these flexibilities will discontinue at the end of the public health emergency.



Myths vs. Facts

1. MYTH: Babies need to be walking and eating solid foods to get CalFresh.

FACT: CalFresh benefits are for the whole household. Babies could be either partially or fully relying on formula, which is expensive. CalFresh benefits can be used to purchase formula, as well as additional food benefits for breastfeeding mothers with increased nutritional needs. Parents who are recovering from birth need consistent access to nutritious foods.

2. MYTH: You need a Social Security Number (SSN) to apply for CalFresh.

FACT: Since it may take some time for families to receive Social Security cards for their newborn, they don't need to provide a SSN until six months after the baby is born or at the time of their next required semi-annual report (SAR-7) or recertification, whichever comes later. Sometimes it can take families up to 4-6 months to receive an SSN card for newborns.

Recommendations

1. Issue clarifying guidance for County Welfare Departments.

Counties report differing verification requirements and business processes in adding newborns to a household's existing CalFresh case. The level of customer service and support should not depend upon in which county a client resides. Instead, policies and procedures should standardize the required verification to enroll newborns at birth, which is solely the baby's name and their date of birth. The baby's SSN is not necessary until 6 months after the baby's birth or the date of their next reporting, whichever comes later. Proof of birth should not be necessary unless questionable, and self-attestation should suffice, yet in some instances verification of birth is required. Due to Nourish California's advocacy efforts, CDSS recently published an All County Information Notice (ACIN) clarifying the recommended guidance above. The ACIN is available here: <https://bit.ly/3JMWBJv>

2. Medi-Cal and CalFresh linkage for newborns.

Medi-Cal has multiple processes in place to enroll newborns. Although county workers are now required to dually enroll individuals into CalFresh if they qualify and are receiving Medi-Cal, and vice versa, there are still delays in CalFresh enrollment. Certain documents that families use to verify Medi-Cal eligibility for their newborns aren't currently being used for CalFresh purposes. There should be a streamlined process to ensure that if there's a change to a household's Medi-Cal case, CalFresh is also updated accordingly.

3. Prospective eligibility for newborns.

For CalFresh, eligibility workers will determine a family's benefit allotment prospectively using available information. For example, they look at income in the month before the family's application and budget that as "reasonably anticipated income" to determine how much a household will receive in monthly CalFresh benefits. A similar mechanism can be used for newborn enrollment eligibility. Counties can create a process for a household composition change using "reasonably anticipated addition to the household," such as the birth of a new child. That way, families will start receiving additional CalFresh benefits without unnecessary and harmful delays. These changes should also become effective for the household the month that they report changes, not the following month.



Technical Appendix

Notes

[i] The findings from this section were synthesized from a policy scan of four safety net programs (SNAP/CalFresh, TANF/CalWORKs, Medicaid/Medi-Cal, WIC) that have newborn enrollment processes. Additionally, interviews were conducted with state and national partners that specialize in newborn enrollment in these four programs.

[ii] According to [7 CFR 273.6\(b\)\(4\)](#), if a household is unable to provide proof of application for an SSN for a newborn, the household must provide the SSN or proof of application for a SSN at their next recertification or within 6 months following the month the baby is born, whichever is later. Households are still eligible to receive CalFresh benefits during this time.

[iii] To better understand newborn enrollment procedures, interviews were conducted with CalFresh administrators from five counties in California. The interviewed counties were large and mainly urban. Though this is not a representative sample of all 58 counties in California, the interviewed counties constitute nearly 50 percent of the CalFresh population.

Citations

[1] Caroline Danielson, Tess Thorman, Sarah Bohn. Public Policy Institute of California. 2020. The Importance of CalFresh and CalWORKs in Children's Early Years. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/the-importance-of-calfresh-and-calworks-in-childrens-early-years/>

[2] Caroline Danielson, Daniel Tan. Public Policy Institute of California. 2020. The CalFresh Food Assistance Program. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/the-calfresh-food-assistance-program/>

[3] Karen Cunyngnam. United States Department of Agriculture. 2021. Reaching Those in Need: Estimates of State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates in 2018. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/Reaching2018.pdf>

[4] Ibid.

[5] Steven Carlson, Dottie Rosenbaum, Brynne Keith-Jennings, Caitlin Nchako. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. 2016. SNAP Works for America's Children. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-works-for-americas-children>

[6] Martha J. Bailey, Hilary Hoynes, Maya Rossin-Slater, Reed Walker. National Bureau of Economic Research. 2020. Is the Social Safety Net a Long-Term Investment? Large-Scale Evidence from the Food Stamp Program. [doi:10.3386/w26942](https://doi.org/10.3386/w26942)

[7] California Department of Social Services. 2021. All County Letter No. 21-52. <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/Portals/9/Additional-Resources/Letters-and-Notices/ACLs/2021/21-52.pdf?ver=2021-05-03-142005-070>