

Invest in Safe Drinking Water & Food Security

Lack of safe drinking water disproportionately affects residents of California’s disadvantaged communities. The State Water Board has previously estimated that roughly 400 disadvantaged communities in the state receive water from a public water system that does not meet drinking water standards. While this is a statewide problem, it is felt most acutely in the Central Valley, Sierra Foothills, and Central Coast. In these communities where water is contaminated, residents must use bottled water for safe drinking and cooking. Families in poverty, including those on CalFresh, must use very limited grocery dollars to buy water in addition to food, which further threatens food security and poses an inequitable hardship. In fact, recent research showed that adults who avoided tap water were 21 percent more likely to be food insecure.¹

Recognizing the need to provide short-term relief to these households, the state authorized in 2018 and launched in March 2022 the CalFresh Safe Drinking Water Pilot. The program provides \$50 per month in supplemental CalFresh benefits to about 4,000 households in selected zip codes that lack access to safe drinking water. Because the CalFresh benefit formula assumes households have safe tap water, these households must get by on what is in effect a reduced benefit allotment for food. The program helps cover the extra cost of buying bottled water that those families face. However, without additional funding, the pilot will sunset in fall 2023.

Given the certainty that water-related emergencies will continue in our state, it is vital that we act now to extend and expand successful interventions to help those facing drinking water problems who are at risk for hunger. Impoverished communities cannot afford to wait for long-term solutions to California’s water crisis. A modest, one-time allocation in the 2023-24 state budget will allow participating households to continue to receive the supplemental benefit, and double the overall number of households receiving this vital relief.

ACTION: Extend and expand the CalFresh Safe Drinking Water Pilot to boost benefits for a greater number of CalFresh households who lack access to safe drinking water.

¹Rosinger AY, Bethancourt HJ, Young SL. Tap Water Avoidance Is Associated with Lower Food Security in the United States: Evidence from NHANES 2005–2018. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2022 Jul 21:S2212-2672(22)00695-5. doi: 10.1016/j.jand.2022.07.011. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 35872245.