

April 28, 2023

The Honorable Phil Ting, Chair
Assembly Budget Committee
1021 O Street, Suite 8230
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Nancy Skinner
Chair, Senate Budget & Fiscal Committee
California State Senate
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Support for low-income households with unsafe drinking water in the 2023-24 Budget

Dear Chairs Ting and Skinner:

Nourish California and the undersigned organizations write to express our deep concern about the health and food security of low-income households in our state that lack access to safe drinking water. While past state investments and recent rains have brought significant relief to the state's water crisis, there are still many communities in the state where a permanent solution for unsafe drinking water is not yet in place. We therefore respectfully submit this urgent request to invest in extending and expanding the CalFresh Safe Drinking Water EBT Pilot to bring supplemental nutrition benefits to these families in the 2023-24 budget.

According to the Legislative Analyst's Office, over one million Californians currently lack access to safe drinking water, and such drinking water problems disproportionately affect Latinx, rural, and lower-income communities.¹ While this is a statewide problem, it is felt most acutely in the Central Valley.

In 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

¹ Legislative Analyst's Office, "Expanding Access to Safe and Affordable Drinking Water in California—A Status Update," November 2020, available at <https://lao.ca.gov/reports/2020/4294/drinking-water-access-111020.pdf>

inequitable hardship. In fact, recent research showed that adults who avoided tap water were 21 percent more likely to be food insecure.²

Recognizing the need to provide short-term relief to these households, the state wisely allocated \$5 million in the 2017-18 state budget to design and implement the *CalFresh Safe Drinking Water EBT Pilot*. The pilot was originally intended to serve impacted communities in Fresno, Tulare, and Kern Counties, but due to unforeseen complications related to the CalSAWS statewide consolidation project, was limited to Kern County only.

This innovative pilot launched in March 2022 and currently provides \$50 per month in supplemental CalFresh benefits to over 4,000 households in selected Kern County zip codes where residents lack access to safe water. Given the current CalFresh benefits cliff due to the abrupt expiration of Emergency Allotments, and the certainty that water-related emergencies will continue in our state, it is vital that we act now to extend and expand such successful interventions to help those facing drinking water problems who are at greater risk for hunger.

Impoverished communities cannot afford to wait for long-term solutions to California's drinking water crisis. Because the CalFresh benefit formula assumes households have safe and reliable 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 October 2023.

We therefore respectfully request a one-time allocation of \$10 million in the 2023-24 state budget to allow participating households to continue to receive the vital supplemental benefit, and expand the program to additional communities impacted by unsafe drinking water and food insecurity.

We look forward to working with both Budget Committees and the Administration to bring this critical relief to families living with unsafe water. Reliable, safe drinking water is the foundation of food and nutrition security, and a critically vital resource for the health and wellbeing of

²Rosinger 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.

families across California. Thank you for your consideration of this request, and please don't hesitate to reach out to me at jared@nourishca.org should you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Jared Call
Senior Advocate, Nourish California

Cc: Senate President pro Tem
Speaker of the Assembly
Senate Budget Subcommittee 3
Assembly Budget Subcommittee 1
Department of Social Services
Department of Finance
Governor Gavin Newsom
Assemblymember Dr. Joaquin Arambula (AD-31)
Senator Melissa Hurtado (SD-16)

