



January 11, 2024

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

The Honorable Jesse Gabriel
Chair, Assembly Budget Committee
California State Assembly
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Caroline Menjivar
Chair, Senate Budget Subcommittee 3
California State Senate
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Dr. Corey Jackson
Chair, Assembly Budget Subcommittee 1
California State Assembly
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Continued support for low-income households with unsafe drinking water in the 2024-25 Budget

Dear Budget Leaders:

Nourish California and the undersigned organizations write to express our deep concern about the health, food security, and well-being 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 2024-25 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 Latino, rural, and lower-income communities.¹ While this is a statewide problem, it is felt most acutely in the Central Valley.

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>

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

Impoverished communities cannot afford to wait for long-term solutions to California's drinking water crisis. 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 around 3,000 households in selected Kern County zip codes where residents lack access to safe drinking water. 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 pilot helps cover the extra cost of buying bottled water that these families face. We are grateful to the Legislature and Administration for allocating an additional \$3 million to extend the pilot in the 2023-24 budget. However, it is vital that we continue to extend and expand such successful interventions to help those facing drinking water problems who are at greater risk for hunger.

The pilot is scheduled to sunset in July 2025, and additional funding is needed to ensure the program can continue to provide essential supplemental benefits for those directly impacted beyond that date. We also urge the state to conduct a feasibility study to determine the cost and barriers to implementing a phased expansion of the pilot. Currently, the program is seeing a gradual decline in the number of participating households because of its limitations as a pilot program. Given the uncertainty of future water-related emergencies throughout the state, it is crucial that this program ultimately reaches all Californians who desperately need relief from food and water insecurity.

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.

We therefore respectfully request a one-time allocation of \$1.5 million in the 2024-25 state budget to allow participating households to continue to receive the vital supplemental benefit, and direct the Department of Social Services to conduct a cost and feasibility study for expanding the program to additional communities impacted by unsafe drinking water and food insecurity, and ultimately statewide.

Reliable, safe drinking water is the foundation of food and nutrition security, and a critically vital resource for the health and wellbeing of families across California. We look forward to working with the Legislature and the Administration to continue to ensure families living with unsafe water continue to receive this much-needed relief. 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jared Call". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jared Call
Director of Policy, Nourish California

Cc: Senate President pro Tem
Speaker of the Assembly