

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON NUTRITION ASSISTANCE AND OBESITY PREVENTION

CALIFORNIA WORKING FAMILIES POLICY SUMMIT
JANUARY 7, 2005

INTRODUCTION

It is no longer news that California, like every other state, is experiencing a full-blown and accelerating epidemic of obesity. But it may be news that the well-known federal nutrition programs, which have worked so well to reduce hunger and food insecurity, also can play a central role in preventing obesity.

The obesity numbers are bleak, and the trends are sobering:

- Fifty-seven percent of all Californians are overweight.¹
- Obesity costs an average-sized California school district \$160,000 per year.²
- The medical costs of obesity in California in 2003 were \$7.7 billion.³

Fortunately, the federal nutrition programs represent an existing infrastructure that can help fight obesity, while continuing their still-needed role of alleviating hunger and food insecurity. These programs, which include the School Breakfast Program and the Food Stamp Program,⁴ are a particularly apt resource because the programs' principal beneficiaries, low-income children, are at high risk for obesity and likely to be hardest hit by its consequences. Moreover, because most of the nutrition program costs are supported through federal dollars, maximizing their use is an important strategy when our state's budget is already so stretched.

Unfortunately, the nutrition programs are severely underutilized and are failing to fulfill their promise. Consider these statistics:

- Only 16 percent of California schoolchildren participate in the School Breakfast Program, and only 40 percent of low-income California students who eat school lunch also participate in the School Breakfast Program.⁵
- California ranks last in the United States for participation in the Food Stamp Program.⁶

CFPA's policy recommendations are designed to remove key barriers that prevent the nutrition programs from achieving their purpose. The specific recommendations that follow develop three distinct but interrelated themes:

- Preventing obesity,
- Capturing available federal funds to support state policy priorities, and
- Strengthening the programs' capacity to serve the people who most need them.

California's nutrition and physical activity environments have jointly contributed to the rise in obesity; our state must implement policy changes in both arenas to stem this epidemic. More robust federal food programs can contribute to a new environment that promotes good health and well-being for all Californians.

POLICY OBJECTIVE #1

Strengthen nutrition at schools to prevent childhood obesity.

Background

Schools present a special opportunity for prevention of childhood obesity, given the state's insistence that children attend school, the number of hours, days and years they spend at school, the credibility and influence that schools are accorded and, particularly, the evidence documenting the strong link between good nutrition and academic success. In addition, the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program remain critical for all students, particularly those who are low-income who depend upon school meals for vital nutrition—sometimes more than half of the food they receive in a day.⁷ There are two equally important elements to improving school nutrition: strengthening the USDA reimbursable meal programs, which benefit from federal nutrition standards, and strenuously regulating all the other (competitive) foods sold on campus.

Recommended Actions

- A. The Legislature should adopt strong nutrition standards that apply to all foods sold on school campuses. USDA has proposed excellent nutrition standards, called HealthierUS, that begin with current federal requirements and incorporate stronger provisions that address both obesity prevention and food insecurity. The standards improve the nutrition of the reimbursable meals, restrict competitive foods, and, in recognition that obesity prevention requires a comprehensive set of solutions, call for stronger nutrition education and physical activity at school. CFPA recommends that these HealthierUS standards, which initially have been issued as a voluntary challenge to elementary schools, be made a minimum requirement for all California schools, grades K through 12, and include school breakfasts as well as lunches.
- B. The Legislature should require—and fund—schools to serve fresh fruit and vegetables in all their meals. Studies confirm the nutrition and obesity-prevention benefits of fresh fruit and vegetables. Studies also show how little fresh fruit (as opposed to fruit juices) and vegetables California children consume. Fresh fruit and vegetables will improve school meals' nutrition, increase the meals' appeal to students and facilitate effective nutrition education. In addition, by encouraging schools to “Buy California,” the Legislature will build the market for local agriculture.
- C. The Legislature should require all California schools to provide breakfast. Despite the well-established benefits of the School Breakfast Program in preventing obesity, nutrition, health and academic performance, about 1,400 of the state's 9,000 schools fail to operate a breakfast program. Given the availability of federal funding for the School Breakfast Program, it is a cost-effective way to improve academic performance and test scores.
- D. The Legislature should take other steps to promote the School Breakfast Program, such as encouraging schools to implement classroom breakfast, second chance breakfast (served during a brief nutrition break, for instance) and other options that dramatically increase participation.
- E. The Legislature should require nutrition audits for the School Breakfast Program just as it does for the National School Lunch Program.

POLICY OBJECTIVE #2

Maximize the infusion of federal funds into California by removing barriers to participation in the nutrition programs.

Background

California loses out on very considerable federal funding because most of the food programs in the state are extremely underutilized. Food Stamp Program benefits, for example, are entirely funded by federal dollars (while modest administrative expenses are shared by the federal government, the state and the counties). Yet California ranks last among the states in program participation and loses an estimated \$1.6 billion of federal dollars annually. Nearly another \$500,000,000 is lost every year because participation in the School Breakfast Program is so meager—only about 16 percent of public school students.⁸ Relatively small state expenditures to improve and market the programs, to prime the pump, rapidly will more than pay for themselves, as more local school districts will adopt the School Breakfast Program and increase their draw-down of federal dollars. More steps need to be taken to decrease the red tape and increase outreach to bring more eligible children and adults into California's federal food programs.

Recommended Actions

- A. Federal law requires school districts to “directly certify” all children enrolled in the Food Stamp Program for free school meals. The Legislature should require that the state use a computerized electronic matching system to implement the federal requirement. Direct certification by electronic match is the most effective method, will yield the largest increase of low-income students for free meals (those whose meals receive the highest federal reimbursement) and will offer school districts and families the greatest relief from administrative burdens.
- B. The Legislature should make all Medi-Cal children categorically eligible for the Food Stamp Program and therefore automatically certified for free school meals. It makes sense, of course, to provide the health benefits of nutritious school meals to children enrolled in the health care program. It also makes sense to expand participation for those whose meals are most highly reimbursed.
- C. The Legislature should require all schools with 85 percent or more low-income students (185 percent FPL or below) to take advantage of the federal option (known as Provision 2) to serve all children free meals. This option maximizes participation and therefore federal reimbursement while it saves on administrative costs.
- D. The Legislature should require the Department of Social Services to seek a statewide waiver from the customary three-month time limits on food stamp benefits for unemployed single adults (known as able-bodied adults without dependents or ABAWDs). California's high unemployment rate enables these federal resources to keep flowing for the benefit of this nutritionally very vulnerable population – and for the state's economy.

POLICY OBJECTIVE #3

Improve customer service to maximize participation in the nutrition programs.

Background

The California Performance Review underlines the need for government to put “customers first” and to go the “extra mile” in delivering services. The state’s nutrition programs, like most other low-income public assistance programs, can benefit, costs can be saved and participation can be expanded through a comprehensive approach to improving customer service. A key approach for such a retooling would include aligning different benefit programs with one another by, for example, implementing new technologies and simplifying and standardizing applications, eligibility criteria, and administrative requirements. Government services must recognize that the nutrition programs increasingly serve as essential work supports for working families and tailor service delivery to meet recipients’ needs.

Recommended Actions

- A. The Legislature should follow the lead of many other states by adopting semi-annual reporting for food stamp recipients. This would align the program with Medi-Cal, relieving both administrators and clients of two sets of administrative burdens. Alignment also can be established at other points in the programs’ administrative processes, such as in setting limitations on allowable assets. In fact, there would be significant benefits to both clients and administrators if the health and nutrition programs were clustered together as much as possible.
- B. Building on the recent implementation of AB 231 (2003), which took some steps to streamline California’s Food Stamp Program, the Legislature should continue to reduce the number of time-consuming office visits by eliminating the ineffective and costly finger-imaging requirement. The Legislature also can increase the use of mail, phone and electronic processes to avoid office visits.
- C. The Legislature should follow the lead of many other states by developing and supporting new technology to simplify and streamline nutrition program processes.
- D. The Legislature should establish statewide customer service standards for all the nutrition programs. Such measurements should include office locations and hours, frequency and length of office visits, use of appointments, facilities, worker attitudes and cultivation of a family-friendly environment. Measurement of program performance in meeting these customer-service standards should be included in current program reviews to ensure client satisfaction and strong participation growth.

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.dhs.ca.gov/ps/cdic/copi/html/problem.htm>

² <http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/docs/specialreports/Learning%20Connection%20Executive%20Summary%20BW.pdf>

³ <http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/docs/specialreports/Learning%20Connection%20Executive%20Summary%20BW.pdf>

⁴ Other federal food programs include WIC, the After-School Snack Program and the Child and Adult Care Food Program. See www.fns.usda.gov.

⁵ <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sh/sn/documents/coproschool0203.pdf>

⁶ http://www.frac.org/html/federal_food_programs/FSP/Participation_Rates_03.html

⁷ The School Breakfast Program, according to USDA standards, provides one quarter of the RDA for calories and specific nutrients. The National School Lunch Program is required to provide one third of the RDA. See <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/>.

⁸ <http://www.cfpa.net/press/>