

RECOMMENDATIONS ON NUTRITION

CALIFORNIA WORKING FAMILIES POLICY SUMMIT JANUARY 24, 2003

Introduction

Far too many families in California struggle to put adequate, nutritious food on the table. The recent California Health Interview Survey (CHIS 2001), conducted by the University of California at Los Angeles, found that more than 2.2 million low-income adults in California cannot always afford enough food. About one out of every three of these adults experiences episodes of hunger. Hunger has devastating consequences for children and adults. Without adequate, nutritious food, Californians suffer from poor physical and emotional health, as well as a diminished capacity to learn and succeed in the workplace. Californians, along with the rest of the nation, are also facing an epidemic of obesity and overweight among adults and children. Federally funded food assistance programs are California's first line of defense against hunger—and they provide significant opportunities to reduce obesity—but several state-level barriers hinder these programs' effectiveness. These state-level recommendations provide fiscally sensitive ways to remove these barriers and ensure better nutrition for California's families.

I. Make the Food Stamp Program Work for Working Families

Background

The federal Food Stamp Program is an essential, cost-effective tool in preventing hunger among hard-working families, including families making the transition from welfare to work. As a federally funded benefits program, it provides over \$1.5 billion in food purchasing dollars to stimulate local economies throughout California. Yet the USDA has found that *only half of eligible people* are participating in the Food Stamp Program. Red tape and bureaucracy limit participation among eligible Californians—particularly working families, who represent 71 percent of eligible households—from receiving federally funded benefits. These barriers lead to an unacceptable result. According to UCLA, 80 percent of adults who are income-eligible for food stamps and experiencing the actual pains of hunger are *not* receiving food stamps.

Recommendations

A. Eliminate the Statewide Fingerprint Imaging System.

California is just one of a handful of states that requires all adult members of food stamp households to provide a finger and photo image in order to get benefits. This requirement is aimed at preventing people from getting food stamps in more than one county or under different names—but it costs \$11 million each year and adds a major hassle to the already lengthy and intimidating food stamp application process. A recent audit by the Bureau of State Audits shows that given the miniscule amount of multiple-aid fraud, the state cannot justify the tens of millions of dollars it spends on the implementation and annual operation of this system.

- B. *Extend five months of transitional food stamp benefits to families leaving cash assistance.* Families moving from welfare to work receive 12 months of transitional Medi-Cal benefits to ensure access to health care during their transition. Yet most families leaving welfare have no support at all when it comes to putting adequate, healthy food on the table. Only one in five people leaving CalWORKs continue to receive federally funded food stamp benefits. Last spring, Congress gave states the opportunity to draw down millions of federal dollars by providing five months of transitional food stamp benefits for people leaving welfare—without any administrative hassles for the county or the client. These benefits will go a long way toward helping California’s families make a successful transition from welfare to work.

- C. *Direct counties to expand alternatives to their use of face-to-face interviews for applicants who have jobs, limited transportation, or other difficulty in getting to the food stamp office.* The face-to-face interview, which is a standard requirement for food stamp applications, almost always takes place during regular business hours—a time when many clients must be at work. Policymakers have already removed this barrier from other programs for low-income working families. Medi-Cal, for example, no longer requires face-to-face interviews. Providing clear procedures for counties to enroll applicants by phone, mail or other means will help working families keep their jobs *and* put food on the table.

- D. *Allow hungry Californians to get food stamps and own a reliable car by changing the state’s auto resource rule for food stamps and CalWORKs.* California is one of only 11 states that continues to use the most restrictive limit of \$4,650 for the value of a food stamp applicant’s car. Especially in rural parts of the state—where UCLA researchers found as many as 40 percent of lower-income adults struggling to put food on the table—a car is a critical resource for getting and keeping a job. California’s outdated rule gives working families an impossible choice: give up the car you need for work, or become ineligible for food stamps.

II. Invest in Healthier School Meals for Our Children by Implementing the Pupil Nutrition, Health, and Achievement Act of 2001

Background

The National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program serve 2.7 million and 900,000 California children, respectively, each day. The Pupil Nutrition, Health, and Achievement Act of 2001, signed by Governor Davis, will improve schools’ ability to promote good nutrition by strengthening nutritional standards in elementary schools and eliminating meal-time sodas in middle schools. However, the law requires an increase in the state’s allocation for school meals before the agreed-upon standards can be put into practice. Given the state’s fiscal crisis, legislators and the Governor will be challenged to determine how best to follow through on their commitment to strong nutritional standards for schools even with fewer opportunities for funding expansions.

Recommendations

- A. Provide full funding for the state’s Pupil Nutrition, Health and Achievement Act, which would increase state funding for school meals by 10 cents per meal.
- B. Eliminate competitive foods and sodas from elementary schools and limit soda sales at middle schools.