

Millions of eligible Californians do not receive government food assistance

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An editorial in last Sunday's *Los Angeles Times* highlights the state of California's inadequate utilization of government-provided food assistance services. While the state has the highest overall need for food assistance, the percentage of qualified residents who participate in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program is the second lowest in the country. The number of eligible children who participate in subsidized school lunch and breakfast programs is also at a rate far below the national average.

The editorial refers to a recent report by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) indicating that while 4,215,000 Californians were eligible for food stamp assistance, only 48 percent actually received it.

Additionally, the USDA report found that California had the highest number of working poor people eligible for the program, almost 2.5 million. Among this group, participation was the absolute lowest in the country, at a mere 33 percent. Working poor families are defined as those who maintain regular employment but have a net income at or below the federal poverty line.

A recent letter signed by Kevin Concannon, USDA Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, blames the low participation rates of states such as California on the outsourcing of enrollment processing to outside enterprises, which he describes as "an unwise use of state and federal resources that undermines program accountability."

The low participation rates can also be attributed to unusually restrictive participation requirements enacted by the state itself. In order to receive benefits, potential recipients must become re-certified for eligibility once every three months, as opposed to most other states that have a less stringent six-month requirement. This ensures that thousands of qualified Californians either never receive benefits or have a higher chance of losing them

once they do.

The state also requires that food stamp recipients get their fingerprints taken. Up until October of this year, they also had to be present for an in-person interview at a county welfare office before receiving benefits. A trip to such an agency was, in many cases, a prohibitive prerequisite, particularly in more rural areas of the state where the nearest office is hundreds of miles away.

The state's restrictions serve to strengthen already prohibitive barriers to food stamp usage enacted by the federal government itself. According to these guidelines, a household is not eligible for food stamp assistance if its after-tax income exceeds the federal poverty line, which in 2008-2009 would be a combined annual income of \$22,050 for a family of four.

Additionally, as a result of reforms instituted under the Democratic administration of President Bill Clinton in 1996, working-age single men and women without children are only eligible for food stamps for a maximum of three months out of a 36-month period. Furthermore, these individuals can only receive the benefit if they are either employed for over 20 hours per week or are undergoing job development training. Under conditions in which the state's official unemployment rate is 12.5 percent, this means that many single people out of work have no recourse to government food assistance. Many legal immigrants are also excluded from the program.

Problems with availability of food assistance are not limited to the food stamp program alone, however. A recent report issued by the Washington DC-based Food Research and Action Center found that in 2008-2009 participation in the national school breakfast and lunch programs, which provide inexpensive or no-cost meals to low income kids, increased by 520,000 and 859,000 children respectively.

While the federal government funds the school meals programs, states are themselves responsible for

administering and implementing them. They receive funding from the federal government based on the number of eligible children whom they enroll. If states do not achieve participation rates of at least 60 percent in these programs, then they stand to lose federal funding accordingly. As a result of not meeting this goal, California lost nearly \$98 million in funding in 2008-2009.

The Food Research and Action Center report notes that the low participation rates can be attributed to several different factors. Many low-income families never receive an enrollment application, and out of those who do, many do not speak English as their first language making the enrollment process difficult, if not impossible.

Additionally, nearly 20 percent of K-12 public schools in the state opt to not participate in the breakfast program— participation in the lunch program is required by law—which makes their entire student bodies ineligible for subsidized breakfasts by default. At an 81 percent enrollment rate, California ranked 40th in the nation in terms of schools participating in the subsidized breakfast program.

The onerous participation requirements for government-sponsored programs such as food stamps and subsidized schools meals force many individuals and families to seek food assistance elsewhere. But even those who do get access to these services often find that what they offer is insufficient to meet basic nutritional needs.

Thus, for example, food charity organizations in the populous areas of Los Angeles and Orange Counties reported 30 percent increases in demand this past November over the same period one year ago.

Underscoring the depth of the economic crisis, an estimated 12 percent of the 231,359 people who received assistance from local food banks in the first quarter of 2009 in the Los Angeles area had never been in need of such aid before.



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