

[COVID-19](#)

Nutrition Programs in COVID-19 Recovery Actions

On Wednesday, March 18, the President signed H.R. 6201, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, a federal relief act aimed at mitigating the economic and public health consequences of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The H.R. 6201 includes several actions related to access to nutrition assistance. The law goes into effect April 3. In this post, we describe the challenges Californian's may face in accessing nutrition assistance as a result of COVID-19, summarize the nutrition-related provisions of the law, describe any associated state actions, and highlight any steps the state may need to take to access the new funding and program flexibility. We are accurate to the best of our ability given the urgent response needed and the rapidly changing situation. We will continuously monitor the situation and provide updates as necessary.

COVID-19 Restricts Many Californians' Access to Food. Although the full economic consequences of the current COVID-19 public health crisis will not be known for some time, many Californians have already experienced at least three changes affecting their access to food. First, some Californians have lost income due to layoffs, temporary business closures, or reduced hours. These Californians may find it difficult to purchase adequate amounts of food for themselves and their families. Second, many sites providing meals to targeted populations have closed during the current crisis, including schools which provide students free or reduced-priced meals and congregate meal sites which serve seniors. Although many of these sites have taken measures to limit associated nutrition effects (for example, by allowing children to pick up meals from school

each day or delivering meals to seniors in their homes), these efforts likely have limits (such as reaching families who lack transportation to and from school or reaching seniors when sufficient volunteers are unavailable). Third, the state and many counties have issued guidance for vulnerable populations such as older adults to remain in their homes. Although the guidance encourages individuals to continue essential activities such as grocery shopping (while taking the necessary precautions), the ability for some older adults to do so safely may be limited (for example, older adults who cannot grocery shop or prepare meals on their own).

Several Existing Federal Programs Increase Californians' Nutrition

Access. Most notably, about 4 million low-income Californians receive more than \$6 billion annually in federally funded monthly cash assistance for purchasing food through CalFresh, California's version of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). About 3.7 million California students are eligible to receive free or reduced-priced meals at school (in most cases, these students are also eligible to receive CalFresh). About 900,000 Californians (consisting of pregnant women, new mothers, and young children) receive a total of more than \$700 million in federally-funded nutrition benefits through the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. These programs are not mutually exclusive, and some individuals may be enrolled in more than one. Other notable federal nutrition programs include the Emergency Food Access Program (TEFAP), which provides food to low-income households through a statewide network of food banks (for a total annual amount of about \$50 million in California), and senior nutrition programs funded by the Older Americans Act (OAA), including home-delivered and congregate meals (benefiting about 200,000 Californians for a total annual amount of about \$90 million). (The state in recent years has provided funding to supplement some of these federal programs.)

Some Existing State-Only Programs Also Increase Californian's Nutrition

Access. Although this post focuses on federal nutrition programs, the state also operates several programs increasing nutrition access for targeted populations. One example is the California Food Access Program (CFAP), which benefits 35,000 legal permanent residents whose immigration status renders them ineligible for SNAP. Other state-only nutrition programs include a variety of one-time grant programs provided through the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

Recently Enacted Federal Legislation Includes Emergency Expansion of Nutrition Programs. The federal COVID-19 relief bill has several important provisions, including the following which directly affect Californians' nutrition access:

- ***Increases Programmatic Flexibility.***
 - Allows states to develop plans increasing SNAP benefits for families with children unable to access free or reduced-priced meals due to COVID-19 school closures.
 - Waives (for the duration of the current public health emergency as declared by the federal Secretary of Health and Human Services) the requirement that certain adults without children work a minimum of 20 hours per week to receive SNAP benefits.
 - Waives (for the duration of the current public health emergency as declared by the federal Secretary of Health and Human Services) the requirement that eligibility assessments for SNAP and WIC be conducted in person and allows states to request waiver of any additional requirements believed to impede recipients during the crisis.
- ***Provides Additional Funding for Certain Existing Programs.***
 - Increases WIC nutrition assistance by \$500 million nationally.
 - Increases TEFAP by \$400 million nationally.
 - Increases OAA senior nutrition program assistance by \$250 million nationally.

The additional funding for WIC, TEFAP, and OAA are intended to support nutrition access for individuals adversely impacted by the current public health crisis, such as those who have recently lost their jobs. Unlike these programs, SNAP is an entitlement program for which funding automatically increases as more people become eligible (for example, during an economic downturn). Consequently, H.R. 6201 does not explicitly increase funding for SNAP, although we anticipate California will receive increased SNAP funding as the economy contracts and caseloads increase. Following the Great Recession, SNAP caseload increased roughly 40 percent.

Federal Government Appears to Have Stopped Short of Providing Disaster Nutrition Assistance to Date. On March 22, 2020, President Trump approved a major disaster declaration for the state of California due to COVID-19. Although other such disaster declarations in recent years (including those for wildfires and widespread power outages) have included expanded nutrition assistance under a program called Disaster-SNAP, at the time of writing this post, it does not appear the current disaster declaration has activated Disaster-SNAP for California. (Our office will update this post as more information becomes available.)

Recent State Actions Also Intended to Increase Nutrition Assistance. Most recently, on March 20, 2020, Governor Newsom mobilized the National Guard to provide logistical support to the state's food banks. On March 17, 2020, Governor Newsom signed Executive Order N-29-20 which, among other actions, suspended for 90 days any state law requiring recertification for access to several social service programs, including CalFresh and CFAP. In addition, the California Department of Social Services—which oversees county-level administration of most federal and state nutrition programs—has issued guidance to counties on how to minimize face-to-face interactions with recipients during the public health crisis.

Still Determining What Steps the State Will Take to Fully Benefit From Increased Flexibility. The federal relief bill allows states to request waivers of any administrative requirement that might prevent recipients from accessing SNAP or WIC benefits during the current public health crisis. It is our understanding that the administration is currently in the process of assessing what steps it will take to fully benefit from the increased flexibility.

Unknown Exactly How Much Emergency Federal Nutrition Funding Will Reach California. On March 24, 2020, we learned that California would receive about \$25 million of the newly available OAA Senior Nutrition funding. We do not yet know how the expanded federal nutrition funding for TEFAP and WIC will be apportioned to individual states. However, if California were to receive its portion of the new funding based on the same share of current WIC and TEFAP program funding, the state could receive more than \$75 million under those expansions. The exact amount of funding and number of additional recipients will be determined by the federal government as it reviews updated economic data. The amount received under the SNAP expansion depends on the specifics of the

state plan for eligibility and benefit levels, which have not yet been decided. We very roughly estimate this figure could also exceed \$100 million. This funding will likely assist both new recipients (by providing some benefits to those not currently enrolled in CalFresh) and existing recipients (by providing increased benefits to some families currently enrolled in CalFresh).