

Subcommittee on Department Operations,  
Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry

Public Hearing: Monday, January 25, 2010

Chairman Baca and Committee Members,

Thank you for bringing together this panel to discuss federal nutrition programs in California. My name is Christine Webb-Curtis and I am the Chief of the Food Stamp Branch in the California Department of Social Services (CDSS.)

I will briefly summarize for the committee, the programs and some of the initiatives undertaken by my department and our county and stakeholder partners to address the food needs of low-income individuals and families in California. Currently, the federal nutrition programs for which CDSS has oversight responsibilities are the Food Stamp Program (FSP) and the Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP).

**FOOD STAMP PROGRAM:**

The FSP is a federal entitlement program that provides monthly benefits to assist low-income households in purchasing the food they need to maintain adequate nutritional levels. The California Food Stamp program is the second largest in the country, serving approximately three million persons and providing about three billion dollars in food benefits over the course of a year.

The most recent report on FSP participation, for Federal Fiscal Year 2007, released in November of 2009, by the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) indicates that based on federal methodology, California still ranks among those states with low program participation rates at 48 percent. Although we acknowledge that we have much work to do to increase participation, the data is two years old and doesn't reflect the many state and county efforts to improve program access that have occurred over the past couple of years. Additionally, California's "cash-out" of approximately 1.2 million persons receiving SSI/SSP is a significant factor in our low program participation rate as we are the only such "cash-out" state and these families are not included in the participation rate calculation.

Well before the recent rise in food prices and the economic slowdown, CDSS and the California Office of Systems integration had undertaken steps to increase public awareness about the FSP and improve the access of eligible individuals and families to these benefits. CDSS and the County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) also pursued policy and operational changes to simplify and streamline the application process and the administration of the FSP. Recently, CDSS has pursued several changes to enhance access to and participation in this important program with the assistance of our many partners. I'd like to highlight some of these changes.

- The expansion of categorical eligibility, pursuant to AB 433 in 2008, makes households with minor children no longer subject to the resource test for purposes of determining FSP eligibility. This option ensures that low-income families are not denied critical food benefits simply because they may have too many assets. Implementation was completed by January 1, 2010, for applicant households. The Governor's Budget proposal, released on January 8, includes funding to expand this policy so it will apply to all Food Stamp households, not just families. This proposal would add an estimated 45,000 households to California's Food Stamp Program.
- In 2008, CDSS received a federal waiver to exempt most Food Stamp households from the face-to-face interview requirement at recertification, and for elderly and disabled households at both intake and recertification. These interviews will be conducted by telephone.
- In 2009, just this past year, we received a federal waiver to exempt all households from the face-to-face interview requirement. This waiver was recently implemented and is available at county option. In counties where face-to-face waivers are implemented, counties can also postpone the fingerprint imaging requirement for up to one year.
- CDSS provided instructions to counties this past year to develop a simplified process that ensures that emancipating foster youth will be given the opportunity to apply for the FSP prior to "aging out" of the Foster Care system. Food stamps at exit from Foster Care provide a critical benefit that helps stabilize foster youth at this critical juncture in their lives. Annually, about 4,000 foster youth statewide go through the emancipation process.
- California is one of only four states in the nation that provides counties the option to operate a Food Stamp Restaurant Meal Allowance Program for homeless, elderly, and disabled food stamp recipients who may not have easy access to cooking facilities. This option allows these household to have access to hot cooked meals at approved locations throughout the county. Five counties, accounting for 42 percent of caseload, have implemented this option.
- A federally-approved restoration of eligibility waiver is in the process of being implemented to allow discontinued households to have benefits restored quickly and easily without the need for a new application and interview if the reason for discontinuance is "cured" at any time in the month following termination.
- The Department collaborates with US Department of Agriculture (USDA) on a regular basis across the spectrum of Food Stamp activities. As an example, CDSS partnered with the USDA Western Region Office and four counties (Los Angeles, San Diego, Fresno, and Tulare counties) to implement a strategic planning process to increase Food Stamp participation. This plan utilizes a partnership with these counties, local community-based organizations, along with CDSS and USDA, to increase public awareness of the FSP and encourage eligible low-income working families to access FSP benefits.

- Finally, we are working with critical stakeholders, including California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA), the California Department of Public Health, and the counties, to develop a new name for California's FSP. We are very appreciative that CFPA was able to secure funding through The California Endowment to employ research and marketing specialists to assist with development of the new name for the FSP. It is our hope that the new name will go a long way toward eliminating some of the stigma associated with the FSP and will provide a great opportunity to outreach to potentially eligible families through the marketing campaign that will support the launching of the new name.

All these efforts have played an important role in increasing California's Food Stamp participation over the past few years. From Federal Fiscal Year 2007 to 2009, California's program participation has increased 31 percent or four (4) percent higher than the increase nationally

### **Future Policy Efforts**

In addition to the above efforts, CDSS continues to explore ways to streamline the Food Stamp application process and also enhance access to the program.

- Our phase two with Foster Youth would provide emancipated foster youth with FSP eligibility without regard to income or resources for a defined period of time to ensure their stability. Individuals eligible for this program will receive the maximum benefits for their initial certification period (up to 12 months). As a result of enacted state legislation (AB 719), CDSS is currently in the process of drafting a demonstration project proposal to be submitted to FNS no later than March of this year to put this proposal in place.
- CDSS is exploring options through a pilot for leveraging Department of Motor Vehicle information to assist in establishing identity for individuals in the food stamp program. This partnership may help to decrease administrative costs with counties and may provide a more public-friendly mechanism for detecting duplicate aid. Most states have a single automated eligibility determination system and can more easily identify duplicate aid fraud. However in California, there are four (soon to be three) automated welfare systems that do not talk to each other. California is one of five states that have a biometric system for duplicate aid detection. While there are several statewide automated systems that support our welfare programs, the Statewide Fingerprint Imaging System (SFIS) is the only *statewide* system that detects and prevents duplicate aid within our multiple eligibility systems; and having a statewide duplicate aid detection and prevention system is a federal mandate. The only other state that has multiple automated welfare systems is New York. New York City requires fingerprint imaging and is on a different automated welfare system from the rest of the state.

- California received more than \$22 million in administrative funding for the Food Stamp Program from the federal FNS under the Economic Stimulus package. The Governor's Budget contains modernization proposals for additional administrative efficiencies and enhancements, including an expansion/creation of on-line applications in all three automation systems as well as installation of document imaging capability in one automation system and Interactive Voice Response systems in the other two automation systems. These automation enhancements will benefit recipients and county welfare departments by expediting the application process and providing quicker handling on Food Stamp cases.
- Recent legislation in 2009, AB X4 7, directed the Department and the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) to develop a comprehensive plan for a single eligibility process for the departments' programs—Food Stamps, Medi-Cal, and CalWORKs which is California's Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) program. The stakeholder workgroup includes representatives of advocacy organizations, county employees, county human services agencies, the California State Association of Counties, and legislative staff. The work of the stakeholder group has only recently begun, holding its first full meeting on last Thursday, January 21.
- Additionally, over the last two years, we have greatly expanded our outreach efforts in the Food Stamp Program. The Food Stamp Outreach Project involves partnering with the California Association of Food Banks, the Central Valley Health Network and other community-based organizations. These organizations are much closer to those families who are potentially eligible for the Food Stamp Program. They are able to reach out to them, explain the benefits of the program and assist them to apply.
  - For 2010, the FS Outreach Project doubled and includes 82 subcontractors operating in 43 counties with a total budget of over \$13 million.

**THE EMERGENCY FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (EFAP):**

- The second food-related program administered by CDSS is the Emergency Food Assistance Program, or EFAP. In FFY 2009, EFAP provided 109.5 million pounds of donated food to 49 local county food banks and over 2,300 distribution sites. The program serves approximately one million needy individuals monthly in low-income households. EFAP also provides a portion of the food used in soup kitchens throughout the state that daily serve thousands of homeless individuals. The food comes from two sources:
  - 1) USDA provides the bulk of the food distributed by EFAP. In FFY 2009, USDA allocated \$27.7 million in "entitlement" commodities to California (45.8 million pounds). In the same year, USDA also provided California with free bonus food comprised of surplus agricultural commodities valued at approximately \$40 million and weighing 49.6 million pounds.

- 2) In addition to these federal commodities, the California Donate/Don't Dump Program was established in 1995 to salvage fresh fruit and vegetables from farmers and growers throughout California and distribute them to needy Californians. EFAP collects and distributes to local county food banks over 14 million pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables annually.
- Over the past several years, food banks have been reporting a steady increase in participation.
    - Food banks are reporting an increase of more than 20 percent in participation rates. The food banks report that many of the new participants have lost their jobs and do not have enough money for food in addition to their bills.
    - Soup kitchens that provide hot meals to the homeless have also cited a 12 percent increase in meals served.
  - Fortunately the 2007 Farm Bill increased funding for the EFAP Program. In FFY 2007 EFAP was provided \$15.6 million for the purchase of food. In FFY 2009, this was increased to \$27.7 million. In addition, that same year, bonus commodities increased from less than \$6 million to over \$40 million.

#### **EFAP – American Recovery and Reinvestment Act:**

- In FFY 2009, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, or ARRA, provided approximately \$12 million dollars to EFAP for the purchase of food. In addition, ARRA provided approximately \$3.1 million for administrative funds in FFY 2009 for California food banks, and California will receive an additional \$3.1 million in FFY 2010.

#### **Fresno Drought Disaster Relief :**

- During 2009, Governor Schwarzenegger provided approximately \$7.8 million to purchase and distribute food to provide relief to victims of the drought disaster in Fresno County. Distribution began in August 2009 and to date EFAP has provided food assistance to over 150,000 individuals and families. Disaster food commodities will continue through February 2010.

Thank you for the opportunity to share some of the many positive things that are happening in California to enhance access to this vital food and nutrition assistance program. California is moving in the right direction and many of the reforms and initiatives I have highlighted today will go a long way toward improving California's Food Stamp participation. We have more to do, but we have a solid basis for moving forward. We are open to other ideas and opportunities, and will continue to do everything possible to ensure California's needy households have access to these critical programs.

Thank you.