

## FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

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## FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY AND HEALTH

### Business Nexus

The Greater Sacramento Region is home to diverse and abundant agricultural assets and an innovative, high-value and globally competitive food economy. Yet despite this rich abundance, food insecurity in the region, already higher than national averages pre-pandemic, skyrocketed during the past two years. The pandemic greatly strained the emergency food system, and increased the need for CalFresh (SNAP – Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) assistance, along with other demands to reach hard-to-serve populations such as seniors, higher education students, and the unhoused. The number of residents served by the region’s food banks increased by more than 50%, with little public funding to support the dramatically increased number of clients served and food and meals stored and distributed. Almost 300,000 residents were estimated to be food insecure in 2021 – more than 12% of residents, with polling research indicating 16%. Higher education institutions such as the University of California, Davis, Sacramento State University and the region’s community colleges, have documented that more than 40% of their students are food insecure.

CalFresh enrollment levels in several counties were low – between 40% and 50% of eligible residents – leaving thousands of residents’ food insecure and leaving behind more than \$146 million in revenue in potential benefits that could support the region’s farmers, food retailers, and farmers markets. There are numerous persistent, structural barriers to enrollment, including complicated regulatory requirements, difficult application process, and lack of staff. Moreover, as noted by the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health, diet-related diseases are some of the leading causes of death and disability in the U.S., including obesity, diabetes, heart disease and stroke. Overall, the pandemic exacerbated food insecurity, diet-related diseases and health disparities.

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Broad and robust federal relief measures, including temporary Emergency Allotments (EAs) increasing SNAP benefits, helped reduce food insecurity and keep millions above the poverty line by the end of 2021, especially children. However, the SNAP EAs ended in March 2023 and are increasing food hardship for many, especially given the impact of food inflation and high cost of living, including housing, in the region. It is estimated that the resulting average monthly reduction per household in California will be \$164. Other important temporary measures, such as expanded eligibility for low-income college students, will end in 2023. Concurrently, food banks are seeing even more demand for services, close to a doubling of need, while contributions are lagging.

A wide network of regional partners – food banks, schools, hospitals, nonprofits, restaurants, grocery stores, local governments, philanthropy, businesses, volunteers, and more - mobilized during the pandemic to address the community's food and nutrition access and health needs. They have pioneered creative and proven solutions that should be invested in as we build a more equitable, health-promoting and resilient food system

## **Requested Actions**

### 2023 Farm Bill Recommendations

During the pandemic, many federal changes expanded critical access to SNAP; with the end of the federal Public Health Emergency, many of these changes will end, but they have been effective and we strongly encourage that they be continued. These and other recommendations include:

- Increase equitable SNAP program access by eliminating or simplifying exclusionary policies for unique populations:
  - Reduce program access barriers for low-income college students by making the temporary COVID-19 administrative flexibilities permanent. Streamlining public access to public benefits is a critical equity strategy for colleges and universities.
  - Repeal the three-month time limit on SNAP benefits within a three-year period for certain working age adults who cannot document sufficient hours of work.
- Combine the application process and delivery of WIC, SNAP (CalFresh), and Free and Subsidized School Lunch Programs, which will increase efficiency, reduce the complexity for the recipient, and reduce overall program costs.
- Support and increase investments in nutrition and food assistance programs to address food insecurity, strengthen local and regional food systems, and increase health:
  - Continue and expand funding for programs that leverage SNAP benefits to make healthy food choices, such as the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP).

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- Maintain mandatory funding for the Farmers' Market and Local Food Promotion Program and increase support for local food systems, including farm to school activities.
- Provide reliable dedicated funding to certified Food Banks, with incentives for local food procurement and to employ food insecure workers.
- Support Nutrition Education, including the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education – SNAP-Ed.
- Provide resources for innovative community feeding programs such as Family Meal and Great Plates that were led by and partner with independent restaurants to provide meals to vulnerable members of the community. These programs also helped keep workers in the industry employed.
- Reduce barriers to food recovery.

## Additional National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health recommendations

- Support legislation to expand Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries' access to "food is medicine" interventions, including medically tailored meals and groceries as well as produce prescriptions for those with diet-related diseases or food insecurity; fully reimburse benefits.
- Support recommendations for robust and tailored nutrition education, including incorporating culinary and nutrition education into schools.

## **Brief Background**

Since November 2022, USDA research shows that pandemic SNAP Emergency Allotments amounted to more than \$500 million per month for low-income family budgets in California, which is a huge amount to backfill, not to mention the benefit the EA provided for local growers and food producers who had lost markets during the pandemic. The temporary removal of barriers to SNAP enrollment and other programs was very effective at reducing food insecurity and hunger and improving nutrition. The region's food banks are already seeing the impacts of continued food security challenges, with the Sacramento Food Bank and Family Services showing their most recent demand for services increasing by more than 80% since the start of the pandemic.

The Sacramento Region's recommendations to the White House on the National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health contain many examples of the innovative and collaborative ways that community partners pulled together to provide food-insecure residents with nutritious, locally grown foods that are fresh and prepared, while supporting local growers and food producers to increase supply chain resiliency. They hold potential solutions to help achieve the national goal to end hunger and increase healthy eating and physical activity by 2030, "so fewer Americans experience diet-related diseases – all while reducing health disparities."

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1. 2021 Sacramento Region Food System Action Plan, by Valley Vision.  
<https://www.valleyvision.org/resources/sacramento-region-food-system-action-plan-2021/>
2. White House Conference – Recommendations from America’s Farm to Fork Capital, Valley Vision, August 2022.  
<https://www.valleyvision.org/resources/wh-conference-recommendations/>
3. Biden-Harris Administration National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, the White House, September, 2022.
4. Temporary Pandemic SNAP Benefits Will End in Remaining 35 States in March 2023, Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, by Dottie Rosenbaum, Katie Bergh, and Lauren Hall, February 6, 2023.
5. “No Light at the other end”: Impending loss of pandemic CalFresh boost could trigger human hunger spike, by Jeanne Kuang, CalMatters, February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023
6. American Farm Bureau Federation 2023 Farm Bill Policy Priorities
7. California 2023 Farm Bill Recommendations, California Dept. of Food and Agriculture, CalEPA, CalHHS, California Natural Resources Agency, California Business, Consumer Services and Housing Agency, February 23, 2023

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