



To: Congressman Salud Carbajal

Date: 9/20/2021

Re: Hunger Tour Testimony - Follow-up to ***Hunger Holistically – Systems Level Interventions to Combat Hunger***

Dear Congressman Carbajal,

Thank you for the opportunity to listen to others and to share successes and gaps in hunger prevention in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties. Please see a re-cap of what I spoke about at the September 16th roundtable along with other points that I didn't have time to mention related to local successes and gaps in services.

Successes locally:

- **EBT at Farmers Market Workgroup in SLO County:** by bringing together client-serving organizations and farmers and market managers we have seen a 90% increase in CalFresh and Market Match redemption from 2017-2020 for a total of \$265,000 in direct payments to local farmers at 7 farmers markets. Results [here](#). More information [here](#). [Article](#) about support for markets during COVID-19 in the Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development.
- **GusNIP Funding:** An additional win that impacted our work locally was the increase in GusNIP funding to cover the increased redemption in Market Match in CA. That infusion of federal dollars helped bring Market Match to two additional markets in SLO and has made it so that all participating markets from Lompoc to Paso offer a consistent \$15 match. This is a huge win, thank you. In focus groups with consumers, they reiterated that they needed to know what the match would be. Having one consistent match across our region makes information and education about this program much more manageable and feasible for low-income shoppers who are planning their food budgets.
- **Increase in SNAP benefits:** Due to increased allocations, P-EBT, and the recent update to the Thrifty Food Plan, SNAP customers are able to purchase more healthy, local food. Farmers market partners reported that customers began asking for increased money per transaction. Where they once asked for \$15 on their card and then received an addition \$15 in Market Match, they were now asking for \$30-\$50 on their card. People want to buy healthy food and if they have the resources and access to be able to do that, they will.

Quote from low-income focus group participant (2019, SLO COUNTY): *When I go to the store to buy produce, I tend to purchase cookies, sodas, etc. and I spent more money. When I go to the farmer's market, I leave with my basket full of fruits and vegetables and I spend 20 to 30 dollars at the most, everything is healthy.*

Gaps that still exist:

Program administration and use is challenging – Market Managers incur administrative costs to take on each USDA program (CalFresh, Market Martch, WIC, SFMNP). Each program has different requirements and farmers do not always have the time to keep up. Additionally, programs are confusing to customers. Each program has a different token, to be used on slightly different foods. This can create stress for customers and a fear that they will not be able to buy the foods they have selected with the currency they have.

Why this matters: Inconsistent and inequitable access to government resources. There are 0 farmers markets that accept CalFresh between the cities of SLO and Lompoc. The Market Match program, though increasing in popularity, is still not used by most CalFresh customers. UPDATE: We now have 1 market in Arroyo Grande that started accepting CalFresh in March 2022.

Recommendations:

- 1) Streamline USDA programs – Congressman McGovern discussed this issue of thinking holistically about hunger. Streamlining anti-hunger programs within USDA would be a great place to start. What if customers could use one card that included all WIC, SNAP, P-EBT, Nutrition Incentives? What if farmers only needed one application and one reporting system to be able to offer and access all applicable programs?
- 2) Offer administrative support to farmers market managers at least in the first year until they start to see economic benefit. See journal article: [Evaluating barriers to SNAP/EBT Acceptance in Farmers Markets: A survey of farmers](#)
- 3) Expand the GusNIP/SNAP Incentives to all retailers and grocers so that CalFresh customers have sufficient money and a financial incentive to buy local fruits and vegetables where they shop. See this [2016 study looking at the Healthy Index Scores for participants that received nutrition incentives in the form of a rebate](#).

Insecure funding for nutrition incentives – Before the recent increase in GusNIP funding, partners were very concerned that we were building a strong clientele base without reliable access to Market Match incentives.

Why this matters: If there is insecure funding for Market Match, low-income customers will not have confidence in their ability to purchase high quality, local foods. UPDATE: due to the popularity of the Market Match program, at least one of our markets has decreased the market incentive down to \$10 while others are looking at doing the same unless they get more funding for their Market Match incentives. This creates a lack of trust and consistency. People shopping on a budget need to know what they can and cannot afford. Also, market incentives are a win-win as reported in the [study by the Fair Food Network](#) showing that nutrition incentives in California have an economic multiplier effect of 3 (compared to 1.5 – 1.79 for SNAP alone).

Recommendation: GusNIP should be a robust and permanent part of the SNAP program available at all retail outlets (i.e nutrition incentives widely available at food outlets for customers to purchase local fruits and vegetables).

- Nutrition Incentives enhance healthy options, increase food security, and generate economic activity. See a full report from the [Fair Food Network on the economic impact of nutrition incentives and projections if these were expanded](#).

Low CalFresh program reach – CA ranks 46 out of 51 states plus DC in the nation for participation in SNAP. Of the 58 counties in CA, Santa Barbara ranks 38th and SLO ranks 55th as reported by the CA Dept of Social Services Program Reach Index (2018).

Why this matters: Only 60.9% and 41.2% of likely eligible people are receiving CalFresh in SB and SLO counties respectively. This creates an increased burden on our local food banks and is a missed opportunity to utilize the single most important tool we have in the US for alleviating hunger and food insecurity.

Recommendations:

1. Provide support and encourage accountability for CalFresh. Currently there is no incentive to increase CalFresh enrollment or to monitor program access. Offices should be provided support and accountability for updated and efficient business practices, same day service, call and text notifications, and culturally appropriate customer service. See this [2020 Report which includes Best Practices for Increasing CalFresh](#).
2. Ensure timely participation data is publicly available – the data quoted above is from the CDSS [CalFresh Data Dashboard](#) last updated in 2018. See *Program Reach Index*
3. Develop coordinated, strategic, culturally competent CalFresh outreach campaigns and leverage community-based organizations to problem solve across sectors.
4. Extend waivers that made it more feasible for the lowest resource Californians to apply for CalFresh during COVID-19. [Studies from the CA Policy Lab](#) have shown that CalFresh program exits coincide with reporting schedules and that nearly half of new entrants leave CalFresh by their first eligibility screen at 6 months even though a large majority of households appear income eligible in the months before and after exit. Further, researchers find that limited retention is a significant source of non-participation among eligible households and retention is low largely due to the burdens associated with reporting requirements and a majority of households who exit are income eligible.
5. Create multilingual and accessible websites for CalFresh. [Moon et al \(2019\)](#) examined equity and language access for CalFresh and estimate that if enrollment rates for all languages were equivalent to the English rate, then an additional 1.037 million individuals in CA would be enrolled and participating in CalFresh. An overwhelming majority of those 1.037 million potential enrollees are Spanish-speaking individuals. They recommend policy actions to increase enrollment for non-English speakers, such as: adding Spanish to the CDSS website, investing in more culturally aware outreach activities, making public charge information more accessible on the CDSS website, and using a community validation process for translation of materials.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter of hunger, food, and nutrition security.

Sincerely,

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