



**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA**  
Agriculture and Natural Resources

**Capturing Participants' Experiences of the 2019 CalFresh Food Assistance Benefit  
Disruption to Inform Future Policy**

Los Angeles County Focus Group Summary

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## Background

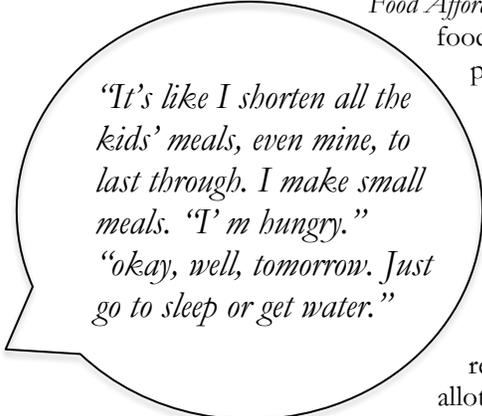
The federal government shutdown from December 22, 2018 – January 25, 2019, the longest in U.S. history, created an unprecedented disruption in issuance of CalFresh (SNAP or Food Stamp) benefits. Likewise, it created an unprecedented and time-sensitive opportunity to gain an understanding of how the level of SNAP benefits available impacts nutrition and food security in low-income households. As such, the Nutrition Policy Institute in partnership with UC Cooperative Extension Advisors in three California counties sought and received an Opportunity Grant from the University of California, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, to conduct focus groups with CalFresh participants during the extended benefit gap in late February and early March. The aim of the study was to capture in real time, the ways in which this disruption affected the diets, health and wellbeing of California’s lowest income and most vulnerable people. The ideas below represent a summary of some of the key ideas that were discussed during the focus group conducted on February 28, 2019 in partnership with a junior high school in South Central Los Angeles. A full analysis of findings from all the groups is forthcoming. This focus group focused on 3 key areas: 1) household food security, 2) participants’ understanding of the 2019 benefit disruption, and 3) the impact of the benefit disruption.

Throughout the course of the conversation, participants touched on their ideas about their experiences with food security, obtaining adequate food to feed themselves and their families, the ways in which SNAP contributes positively, the barriers and challenges they experience with SNAP, and how the 2019 SNAP disruption impacted their food security, diet, stress level, health, and feelings about participating in federal food assistance. These ideas are summarized below:

### Summary of focus group discussion

#### Usual approaches to food security and perceptions of SNAP

Participants focused on challenges that fell into three areas—access to healthy food for their families, meal preparation, and stretching their food dollars.



*“It’s like I shorten all the kids’ meals, even mine, to last through. I make small meals. ‘I’m hungry.’ ‘okay, well, tomorrow. Just go to sleep or get water.’”*

*Food Affordability:* Participants described difficulty affording enough food to feed their families. They emphasized their struggle to purchase healthy food, specifically fresh vegetables and meat. Some participants described purchasing “junk” food for their children because it is inexpensive and lasts the whole month. The high cost of rent was highlighted as a factor contributing to the inadequacy of their food budgets. Most participants felt that their SNAP benefits lasted about 3 weeks and described their benefits as their entire monthly food budget. They discussed being unable to purchase fresh foods later in the month and relying on dried goods until their next SNAP benefit allotment.

The participants were generally hesitant or unable to access the charitable food system (food banks or pantries) to supplement their food budgets. Some stated that there are no food pantries in their area, or that they change dates and locations so frequently that it is hard to know where to find them. Others felt that the quality of food was poor at food pantries, with many products being past their expiration dates.

All participants relied heavily on the school meal programs, both school lunch and afterschool snacks. They described summer vacation as being a particularly challenging time financially because their children are at home all day.

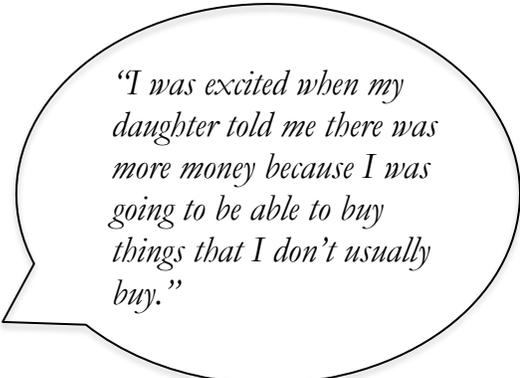
*Making Healthy Meals:* Participants struggled to prepare healthy meals that would be appealing to their children. Many parents reported that their children do not like vegetables or fruits, and that they can't risk their limited food budget trying to buy healthy foods their children might not eat. They try to "hide" vegetables in soups and smoothies or feel they must make multiple meals to please all members of the family. They also described a lack of time to prepare healthy meals, despite a strong desire for their families to eat healthfully.

*Stretching Food Dollars:* SNAP families are resourceful. Participants in this focus group clipped coupons, compared prices, traveled to multiple grocery stores to get the best deals and kept emergency food supplies for when resources ran low. They shared information, food and resources with friends and family. They froze leftovers, bought in bulk when possible and bought frozen food items to save money and reduce waste.

### **Participants' understanding of the 2019 benefit disruption**

Participants were asked to describe their understanding of why the CalFresh benefits were disrupted in January/February and how they received information about the disruption.

*Confusion and misperceptions:* Receiving February's benefit allotment in January caused confusion among participants, who reported a variety of initial perceptions. One participant thought that the government had made a mistake; another, that it was the result of a federal inventory; while others thought that the SNAP program was ending, and January would be their last benefit payment. The extra payment happened to coincide with a large teacher's strike in Los Angeles, and one participant thought the extra allotment was provided to help feed their children while they stayed at home during the strike.



By the time this focus group was held in late February, the participants had learned that the double payment was due to the government shutdown. For a couple of participants this news came too late, after they had spent their February allotment in January. One participant believed the benefit would not roll over if not spent before the end of the month.

*Successful communications:* Facebook posts and phone calls were effective strategies for communicating with the SNAP parents in this group. Most participants reported receiving an official call about their extra January payment, although for some, this call came after they received and spent some of their benefit allotment. Some participants also heard about the double payment on the news or saw a notice at the grocery store; others heard it from their kids. Using multiple channels of communication appeared to be an effective strategy. Because of the variety of misperceptions spreading by word of mouth, receiving the correct message repeatedly in the news, on Facebook, in the grocery store, and by phone, may have been helpful in reassuring participants.

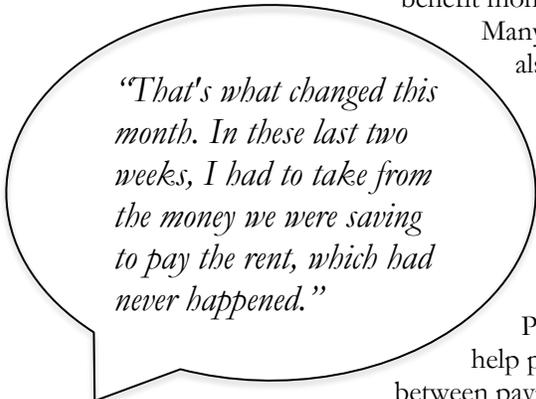
### **Impact of the benefit disruption on participants' food security/diet/stress**

Participants were also asked to describe their experiences of the impact of the benefit disruption on themselves and their families, both positively and negatively.

*How getting a second benefit payment in January supported participants:* Participants were able to purchase foods that they were normally unable to afford because of the extra money they received: "I'm going to eat, I'm going to eat well, healthy and well, first I bought meat, to make roast meat for my children that day." Some described treating their children to special snacks and desserts that they are not normally able to

afford. Most described this with some regret, however, because of the extra pressure it placed on their February food budgets.

*How the long time between benefits was challenging:* The uncertainty about the future of the SNAP program, the confusion over the double January payment, and the realization that they would not receive any benefit money in February, caused participants considerable stress.



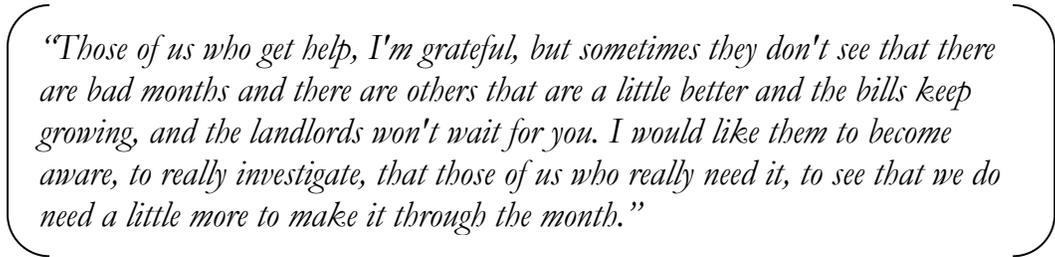
*“That’s what changed this month. In these last two weeks, I had to take from the money we were saving to pay the rent, which had never happened.”*

Many felt anxious and nervous, which in some cases was also felt by their children. One participant quoted her daughter: “...my daughter, the oldest, already notices more or sees things. She said, ‘Mom, did they advance you the money because they’re going to take away your help? Are they going to take away the medical one?’ Because medical help is also included. She said, ‘Mommy, are you not going to be able to take me to the doctor, to the dentist anymore?’ ”

Participants reported relying on parents or siblings for help purchasing food in February or having to choose between paying their rent and grocery shopping. A couple of participants described going into debt using credit cards to buy groceries in February and described the extra stress they felt as a result of their debt.

### **Participants’ recommendations for SNAP**

Consensus among participants was that SNAP should consider the bills, rent and food expenses of a family when determining their benefit allotment. All agreed that an increased amount of food stamp money would be beneficial for them and for the health and wellbeing of their children. Some felt they would need their benefit allotment to double to meet their family’s needs. Others suggested that extra coupons or vouchers to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at places like farmer’s markets would help improve their diet quality.



*“Those of us who get help, I’m grateful, but sometimes they don’t see that there are bad months and there are others that are a little better and the bills keep growing, and the landlords won’t wait for you. I would like them to become aware, to really investigate, that those of us who really need it, to see that we do need a little more to make it through the month.”*

### **Conclusion**

The parents participating in the focus group reported struggling to make ends meet. While the benefit disruption provided some with what they felt was a temporary reprieve from their usual end-of-the-month food insufficiency, that reprieve quickly turned to worry about having enough money for food in February. The disruption was confusing and stressful, and made participants feel less confident that the support they rely upon to feed their children will be there in the future. Participants expressed a strong need for additional resources to be able to provide reliable, healthy foods for their families. Further, they would like SNAP to more fully consider other costs of living when calculating benefits.