



California Association
of Food Banks

California Family
Resource Association

California Food
Policy Advocates

Catholic Charities
of California

Los Angeles Regional
Food Bank

SF-Marín Food Bank

Western Center on
Law and Poverty

Testimony to National Hunger Commission
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Oakland, CA
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Thank you for the opportunity to propose solutions to hunger in America and advance effective actions by leaders in Congress and the White House. I am Kim McCoy Wade and I coordinate the Alliance to Transform CalFresh. The Alliance was founded in 2011 with the goal of making California a top 10 state for access to SNAP, known here as CalFresh, by 2016. The convener of the Alliance is the California Association of Food Banks and the six other members are the California Family Resource Association, California Food Policy Advocates, Catholic Charities of California, Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, SF-Marín Food Bank, and Western Center on Law and Poverty – many of whom are here with us today. I am honored to be here before you and very pleased to be doing so with my colleague from the County Welfare Directors' Association of California, Cathy Senderling-MacDonald.

We know that SNAP is the #1 defense against hunger in the US and provides essential income and nutrition to children, seniors, disabled people, and adults of all ages and stages. Yet for too long, California has been ranked by USDA as one of the worst states for SNAP access by people in need -- despite our State and county leaders supporting CalFresh and serving 4.4 million people each month in the largest SNAP program in the country. This persistent problem of access to SNAP is what the Alliance has focused on -- and I'm proud to say, seen some progress on -- and I believe bears four lessons for the National Commission.

First, access to SNAP and its approximately \$150 per person per month to purchase food is more critical than ever, in this time of inequality, low wages, underemployment, and a weakened safety net, particularly for children. SNAP's recent expansion in response to the recession is exactly what was needed and what was intended and we are grateful it was there for us. For all these reasons, California advocates have prioritized access to SNAP as one of the key building blocks for opportunity for the people of our State, along with full expansion of health coverage through the Affordable Care Act, good jobs and job training, refundable tax-credits for working people, strong child-care and schools from birth through college, and re-investment in the basic needs of children, seniors, and people with disabilities.

Recommendation #1: We ask our national leaders to strengthen, not undermine, this foundation for the American dream.

Second, we know access to SNAP depends on smart policy choices and savvy outreach in communities. California has done both, in partnership with USDA and with advocates. Nationally, increasing the inadequate level of benefits would improve access, especially for working families and single seniors, who often have the hardest time connecting with SNAP yet receive the lowest benefits. Recommendation #2: We urge Congress and the White House

1) to continue policy choices for nutrition programs that increase access to adequate food resources for people in need, while of course preserving accuracy and integrity, and 2) to continue to support community-based outreach that connects hard-to-serve populations with the nutrition assistance vital to their health and well-being.

Third -- and here's where the Alliance has focused our work these past four years and where the Commission could recommend some low-cost national changes -- access to SNAP often comes down to what actually happens on the ground when you try to apply. True access won't exist for people who need food as long as it takes hours of time in line, on hold, and assembling paperwork, as if it was still 1977 or even 1997.

Poor access on the ground has real and painful impacts on human suffering -- this is not just a late package from Amazon. Imagine your brother finding out he lost his job on Monday morning and immediately filing for unemployment and SNAP that afternoon. As Will Lightbourne, our State Director of Social Services, says, we would want someone facing a crisis on Monday to know that at least they could get help with food by Friday. Here are a handful of real-life stories I've heard from people where that's likely not going to happen:

- *One person seeking food assistance was told they couldn't turn their application in because the person who accepts them in that office was out.*
- *Another person was told that the fax machine in the office where she intended to submit her application was turned off because too many applications and reports were coming in.*
- *Yet another person picked up from an office a paper application that's no longer in use, so when she submitted that application it wasn't processed - but no one told her.*

We can and must do better when it comes to something as basic and as essential to our human existence and dignity as food.

To do that, the Alliance advocates for excellent access and customer service for people seeking food assistance from SNAP/CalFresh -- meaning three specific, measurable things:

1. **Quick** -- Ensure that all applications for food assistance are processed quickly and efficiently within 3-5 days.
Metrics: Average processing times in days.
2. **Consistent** -- Ensure that qualified people aren't losing their food benefits for administrative reasons.
Metrics: Churn rates.
3. **Connected** -- Ensure that families seeking SNAP are easily connected to all other services they need to thrive -- especially Medicaid, School Meals & WIC, child care, and refundable tax credits -- and vice-versa.
Metrics: Dual-enrollment rates between SNAP and other family supports.

Starting this spring, advocates in more than 20 California counties (to date) have signed a new “Pledge for CalFresh Excellence” and are working in partnership with their counties on all three strategies for clients: quick, consistent, connected.

Additionally, the Alliance is now beginning to identify ways to support equitable access to CalFresh among people of all races, cultures, and languages, given the tremendous diversity of our State, CalFresh participants, and the CalFresh workforce. We are seeking relevant quantitative data and qualitative feedback on the status of equitable access and service in California, as well as examples of proven practices advancing equitable access. For example, some counties in California are offering trainings for workers in cultural competency (Marin in the Bay Area) and in trauma-informed services (San Diego in Southern California) -- a particularly promising approach emerging as critical to successfully delivering effective social services.

The good news is that some Western states, like Washington and Oregon, and some California counties, like Tulare (in the Central Valley) and San Bernardino (in the Inland Empire), are leading the way in on-the-ground access. We believe that all states can and must deliver this excellent access to their people, whether through their counties or through their own local offices operating SNAP, by: a) setting ambitious but achievable goals for customer access, b) using newly available data to track progress and challenges, and c) leveraging new technologies and business processes to modernize customer service. USDA currently requires states to report on other key program indicators, like accuracy and participation; those data have helped improve program performance by more quickly and more clearly capturing progress and challenges. Recommendation #3: We recommend that USDA begin requiring all 50 states to report data in these three core areas of operations – quick, consistent, and connected – broken down to the local level where clients apply, in order to drive excellent access to SNAP in every community nationwide.

Most of all, we want to share the Alliance’s data-driven, collaborative, and client-centered approach and our belief that we can reduce hunger in the US, if there is:

- a goal to meaningfully and measurably reduce hunger;
- a strategic plan based on proven and innovative practices;
- an investment of the needed resources, from all sectors; and
- a continuous commitment to accelerate what works and fix what doesn’t.

Our nation and our State have recently succeeded in driving down the number of people without health insurance. Cities across the country are dramatically reducing homelessness, especially among veterans. Increasingly, governments are setting new goals to reduce police-involved shootings and bring equal justice to all communities. Recommendation #4: We encourage this Commission to be bold in the face of the hunger and suffering facing far too many of our families and our neighbors and call for the national commitment, plan, and investment to truly end hunger for all.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you and share these recommendations to increase food security, opportunity, and equality for all people in our nation.