

FRESH IDEAS for CalFresh



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Letter from the Executive Director

I grew up in a CalFresh household in Los Angeles County.

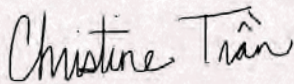
CalFresh can be a lifeline for many, like my family. My refugee parents worked very hard in sweatshops and on construction sites, yet their low-wage jobs were not enough to make ends meet. Programs like CalFresh eased the burden on my parents to not have to choose between feeding ourselves, affording gas, and paying rent. You are reading this because I would not be where I am today without supplemental food programs.

Economic hardship can happen to any one of us in our lifetime. Programs like CalFresh are there to support those who need additional food money, but they are not the easiest to apply to or navigate once enrolled. This must be changed.

Though important, CalFresh is only a part of the solution to food insecurity. We also need to change the conditions connected to food access like improving the availability of fresh produce in our local neighborhoods. Effective improvements require a systemic and cultural shift, coupled with local economic development. This is important because how we grow, buy, and eat food are all part of an ecosystem. The following report is an example of how these issues are connected.

From project leaders to funders, this report was shaped by those with lived CalFresh experiences. It also spans a timeframe (May 2019-February 2022) that includes a global pandemic, unstable food supply chains, and major policy changes to CalFresh. Through it all, we include the perspectives of over 400 community residents across Los Angeles County as well as over 20 organizational partners committed to improving CalFresh access. Together, we tell a community-informed and centered story that addresses program barriers.

It's up to all of us to champion a just and equitable food system. As you read this report, we hope it can provide more nuance, spark dialogues, and facilitate meaningful changes to improve local food access for all.



Sincerely,

Christine Tran
Executive Director
Los Angeles Food Policy Council



How to Read this Report

- **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.** A two-page brief that provides the reader with a snapshot of the entire report. This may be a useful tool to engage stakeholders.
- **FULL REPORT.** There are four core areas to this report:
 - **Project Overview.** A summary of the project's background, literature on public assistance, and local data to better understand CalFresh issues.
 - **Methodology.** A journey map of how we did the work.
 - **Community Food Ecosystem.** A framework that shows how food is connected to consumers, communities, and policy decisions.
 - **Findings & Recommendations.** A summary of the project's findings and recommendations along with information to better understand community realities.
- **FRESH IDEAS FOR CALFRESH IN ACTION.** Examples of existing community-led and informed solutions developed to address CalFresh issues.

Land Acknowledgement

We reside, work, and cultivate food on unceded Indigenous homelands. We acknowledge and honor the descendants of the Tongva, Kizh, and Gabrieleño peoples as the traditional land caretakers of Tovaangar (the Los Angeles Basin and the Southern Channel Islands). We pay our respects to the Honuukvetam (Ancestors), 'Ahihirom (Elders) and 'Eyoohiinkem (our relatives/relations) past, present and emerging. As part of a greater foodshed, we would also like to pay respect to and honor the Chumash, Tataviam, Serrano, Kitanemuk, ?ivi?uqaletem, Acjachemen, Payómkawichum, and any other tribal group possibly not mentioned. We recognize this land acknowledgment is limited and engagement is an ongoing process of learning and accountability. To learn more about tribal lands, [visit here](#).

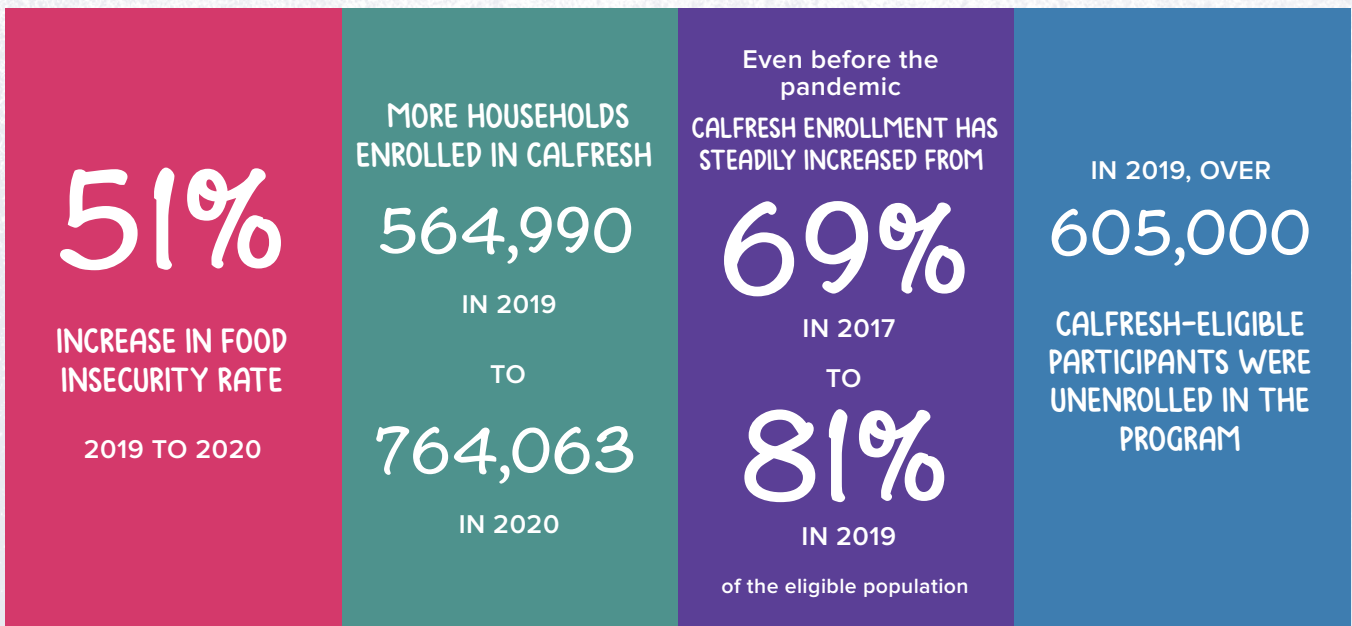
Executive Summary

Public assistance programs are crucial to the health and stability of millions of families. The CalFresh Program, federally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; formerly Food Stamps), supports low-income individuals and households with additional food dollars. Yet, navigating systems to access benefits can be challenging and stigmatizing. These issues are not uncommon in a large and diverse region like Los Angeles County, where even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity has been on the rise.

Hunger negatively impacts the health and well-being of different populations in various ways. Among advocates and researchers, CalFresh is considered one of the most important lines of defense against food insecurity. Given this, why are so many people who may be eligible for CalFresh not enrolled? There are several factors that make CalFresh enrollment and participation challenging: stigma, misinformation, and administrative burdens — to name a few.



LA COUNTY SNAPSHOT



Sources: Feeding America¹, California Department of Public Social Services², U.S. Census³

PROJECT OVERVIEW & HIGHLIGHTS

The *Fresh Ideas for CalFresh* project focused on better understanding CalFresh access and participation barriers in Los Angeles County. This project was conducted in two-phases spanning May 2019 through February 2022:

- First, a **Community Listening Tour** that engaged with over 400 LA County residents in low-income neighborhoods with high CalFresh enrollment opportunities.
- Second, **over 20 organizations** strategized to identify ways to collectively improve the CalFresh culture in Los Angeles County.

Across both phases, those with lived CalFresh experiences engaged with diverse stakeholders including community residents, government program administrators, policy advocates, and community-serving nonprofits.

This report offers a window of opportunity to meet the needs of CalFresh-eligible populations with dignity by addressing their needs through increased cultural knowledge and use of familiar language. Below are summaries of the report's community findings and recommendations:

COMMUNITY FINDINGS

1. ***Stigma & Misinformation***
Community members need more trusted messengers to support CalFresh enrollment and program navigation. Many may have negative past experiences or misinformed perceptions of CalFresh, which fuels mistrust towards the program. Many seek coordinated approaches and more community-friendly environments found in programs like Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Supplemental Nutrition Program.
2. ***Cultural & Linguistic Capacity***
Community members need linguistic and culturally-appropriate CalFresh services. Many have had negative experiences or fear stigma and poor services, causing mistrust towards program providers and confusion about applying to CalFresh.
3. ***Application Process & Program Navigation***
Community members need an easier way to apply and maintain benefits for CalFresh. Many expressed that the program application process can be complicated with confusing paperwork, long wait times, and poor customer service. During the interview, applicants are asked personal household details, which many may find intrusive.

4. ***Food Quality, Availability, & Accessibility***

Community members need better access to local food options. Comparing their lower-income neighborhoods to more affluent areas, many expressed a lack of quality foods in their local communities. Some CalFresh vendors may have varying understanding of eligible items, which can confuse consumers when using benefits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ***Ensure psychological safety throughout the CalFresh experience.***
Dignity for those seeking food support should be core to the program at every level including outreach, enrollment, participation, and recertification. Streamlined services coupled with consistent and long-term community outreach can improve trust between the community and the CalFresh program.
2. ***Develop a skilled workforce to better serve Hard-to-Reach populations.***
CalFresh-eligible populations need a qualified workforce to meet their cultural and linguistic needs. This can be achieved through professional development and targeted hiring efforts to better facilitate effective communication between program providers and participants.
3. ***Reduce administrative and emotional burdens on CalFresh participants and program administrators.***
CalFresh-eligible populations and their caseworkers would benefit from more direct support for program enrollment and recertification. This includes adopting new and emerging technologies, streamlining systems and processes, and applying human-centered design. There are also many lessons to be learned from recent programmatic changes related to COVID-19 and wildfire responses.
4. ***Invest in CalFresh vendors and the local food supply chain.***
Once qualified, many community members have a hard time finding vendors that take CalFresh benefits and provide healthy food options. Proper food supply chains and government authorizations are critical to both local food access and economic development. Local businesses need more support to purchase and refrigerate quality food options for their communities. Businesses also need to qualify as CalFresh vendors, this includes having an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) machine to process CalFresh benefits. Improving consumer options can also incentivize those who qualify to apply to the program.

Introduction

Launched in May 2019, the Fresh Ideas for CalFresh project spanned over two and a half years with the Los Angeles Food Policy Council (LAFPC), First 5 LA, and the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS; the local administrators of CalFresh). The project aimed to (1) better understand the first-hand experiences of community members navigating CalFresh, and (2) identify ways to improve enrollment and access to the program.

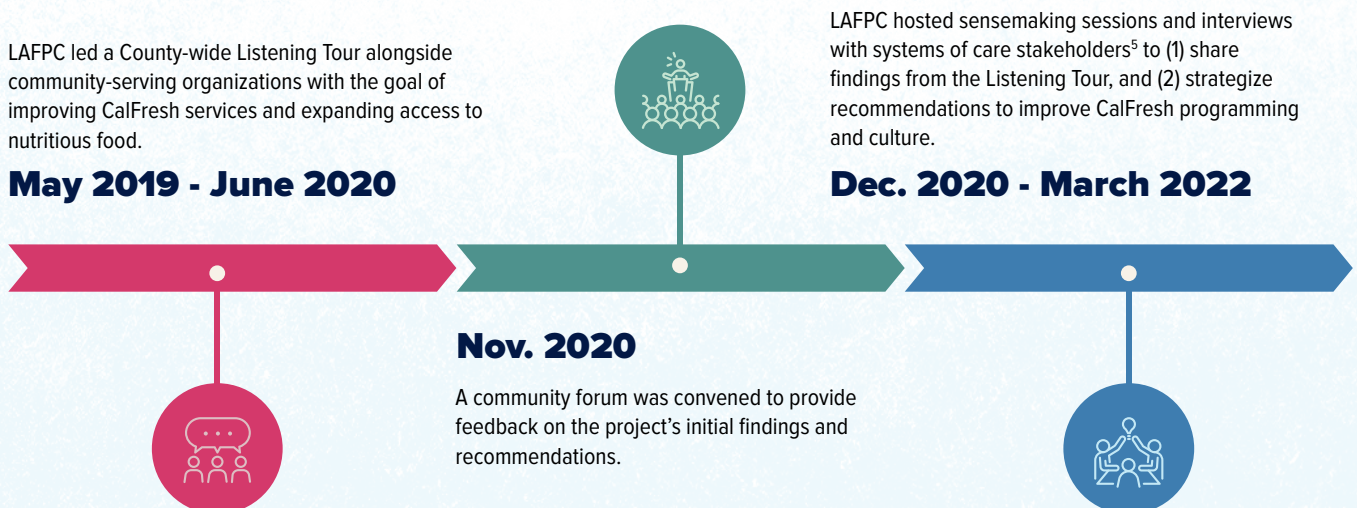
Listening sessions were hosted across each of the five Best Start regions, First 5 LA's supported geographic areas (See pp. 8-9). The communities within the regions face historical and ongoing socioeconomic inequities and environmental challenges. They have:

- High CalFresh enrollment opportunities due to significant poverty rates. In most regions, there is a higher concentration of families with young children who experience poverty (30% - 35%), compared to the County average of 27%.⁴
- Lower access to healthy food and experience disproportionate rates of poor nutrition and food-related diseases.
- High populations of essential workers, who are a significant part of Los Angeles County's workforce and economy.

Best Start regions are a good sample of Los Angeles County because they include:

- All five Supervisorial Districts. The County is divided into a five-member governing body that represents a population of 10 million. Each supervisor represents approximately two million people.
- Seven out of eight Service Planning Areas (SPAs). The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health divides the county into eight regions to provide more targeted health and community services to meet population needs.

PROJECT TIMELINE



Reasons Why People Don't Apply

CalFresh can be a critical lifeline for low-income individuals and families to put food on the table. However, many who qualify for CalFresh may not feel comfortable applying to the program or using benefits in public.

In 2017, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors passed a motion to increase the CalFresh participation rate by 20% and address disparities in access particularly among students and young children, citing: “Studies show that adults who received CalFresh as children have greater high school completion rates and lower rates of stunted growth, obesity, and heart disease than non-CalFresh counterparts.”⁶ The political will behind this motion led to the steady increase of CalFresh participation. By 2019, 81% of all eligible CalFresh recipients (or 3.1 million Angelenos) were enrolled in the program, a 12% increase from 69% in 2017.⁷

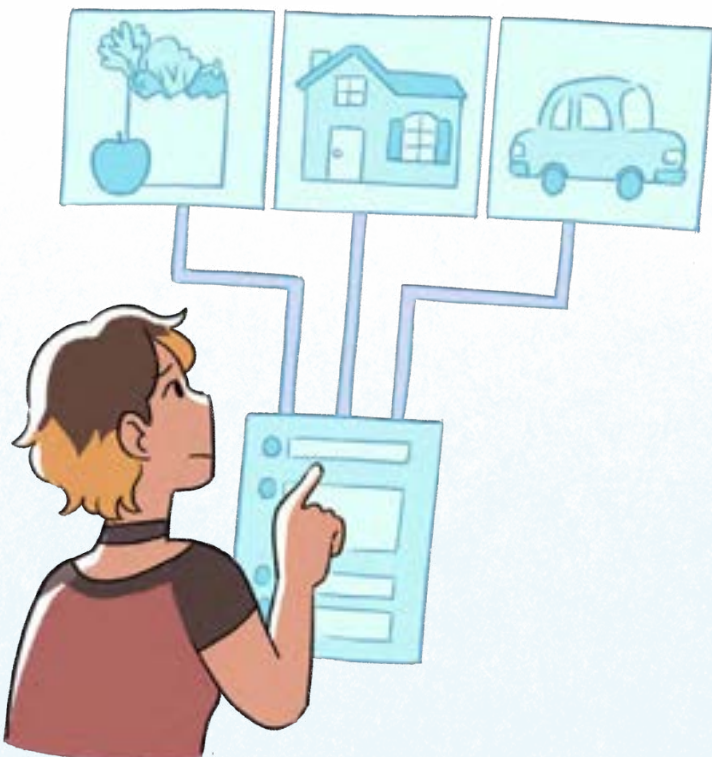
Those that qualify but do not enroll make up a “participation gap.” To close this gap and improve these numbers, DPSS and community-based partners

increased enrollment through a series of outreach strategies. Although CalFresh participation has increased over time, there are still over 605,000 eligible Angelenos not enrolled.⁸ Eligible populations may not enroll in the program for many reasons, this includes⁹:

- Not knowing how the benefits work and how to apply to the program
- Stigma and shame towards receiving help from the government
- Difficulty completing the complicated application
- Perception that the household income exceeds eligibility limits
- Mobility issues such as inadequate transportation
- Concern that participation might impact immigration status for self and/or someone in the household
- Perception that the benefit levels are too low to go through the burden of applying
- Prior experience with benefit termination due to procedural reasons
- Program eligibility screening requires a lot of documentation

In addition, negative feelings towards CalFresh enrollment in local communities relate to the disconnections between levels of government. Federal-level requirements do not always match up with state and local-level realities. Program infrastructure challenges in communities may include lack of resources, a qualified workforce, and meeting federal documentation requirements.

Program administrators and advocates have sought to close the CalFresh participation gap by providing states with more options to streamline and coordinate to meet the needs of local populations.¹⁰ Partners of this project have worked towards closing the CalFresh participation gap in Los Angeles County. Some strategies include supporting applicants in the community at outreach events and creating partnerships with organizations like Code for America, a nonprofit that works with the state to enroll participants in CalFresh. For more examples, see *Improving CalFresh Culture* (See pp. 32-33).



LA County Communities: Best Start Profiles

The following are snapshots of each of the five Best Start regions. With the COVID-19 pandemic, we moved from in-person to virtual platforms. Each profile below indicates the type of listening tour conducted along with major themes found.

REGION 1 - CENTRAL EAST

- Prior to COVID-19, 36% of CalFresh-eligible residents were not receiving benefits.¹¹
- Community members' top concerns with accessing CalFresh included **application processes** and **cultural & linguistic capacity**. Many expressed the hard to **navigate application** questions and processes.
- This region's listening session was conducted virtually, and occurred earlier on in the COVID-19 pandemic. Community members described notable changes they experienced as CalFresh application processes shifted to accommodate pandemic relief. During this time, there were more virtual outreach, online application services, and streamlined administrative processes.



REGION 2 - SOUTH LOS ANGELES

- Prior to COVID-19, 23% of CalFresh-eligible residents were not receiving benefits.¹²
- Community members' top concerns included **misinformation** and **access to services**. Some examples shared: not knowing what information to believe, not knowing how to use CalFresh benefits at the store, having negative experiences when attempting to enroll, and fear of public charge (See page 17).
- This region's listening session was conducted in-person and had on-site enrollment to CalFresh.



REGION 3 - SAN FERNANDO VALLEY

- Prior to COVID-19, 38% of CalFresh-eligible residents were not receiving benefits.¹³
- Community members' top concerns included **misinformation** and **access to services**. Many expressed fear of asking for help, feeling judged when trying to apply, and hard to understand Spanish translations on materials. They shared their desire to see more community-friendly approaches to CalFresh.
- This region's listening session was conducted in-person and had on-site enrollment to CalFresh.



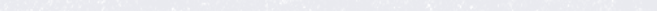
REGION 4 - PORT CITIES

- Prior to COVID-19, 45% of CalFresh-eligible residents were not receiving benefits.¹⁴
- Community members' top concerns included **access to services, cultural & linguistic capacity, and transportation**. They cited confusion over different governmental programs, eligibility standards, and documentation requirements. In addition, language access was critical as several community members expressed a belief that non-English speakers were at a disadvantage. Many found it hard to travel to application sites. Some expressed difficulties in finding family-friendly services.
- This region's listening session was conducted in-person and had on-site enrollment to CalFresh.



REGION 5 - ANTELOPE VALLEY

- Prior to COVID-19, 22% of CalFresh-eligible residents were not receiving benefits.¹⁵
- Community members' top concerns included the **application process, accessibility, and food quality & availability**. Community members expressed it took a long time to complete an application and gather the documentation required. Several shared positive experiences as they had help along the way from DPSS workers as well as other community-based resources at hospitals and community-based agencies. Many also cited the frustration of not having enough quality produce in their community. They discussed their desires to decrease fast food and create more community gardens and food banks.
- This region's listening session was conducted virtually due to COVID-19. Community members described the changes they experienced as CalFresh application processes shifted to accommodate pandemic relief. A majority of community members who were not previously enrolled in CalFresh were very interested in applying, being adversely impacted by the pandemic recession. Those that had started the application process reported mixed experiences, some were able to apply quickly, while others expressed frustration with the online process and agency responsiveness. Several community members expressed other COVID-19 related issues including price increases of some foods, less availability of other foods, and fear of shopping with people who weren't following the appropriate distancing and mask guidelines.



REGION 1

East LA
Metro LA
Southeast LA
South El Monte/El Monte

REGION 2

Broadway-Manchester
Compton
Watts-Willowbrook
West Athens

REGION 3

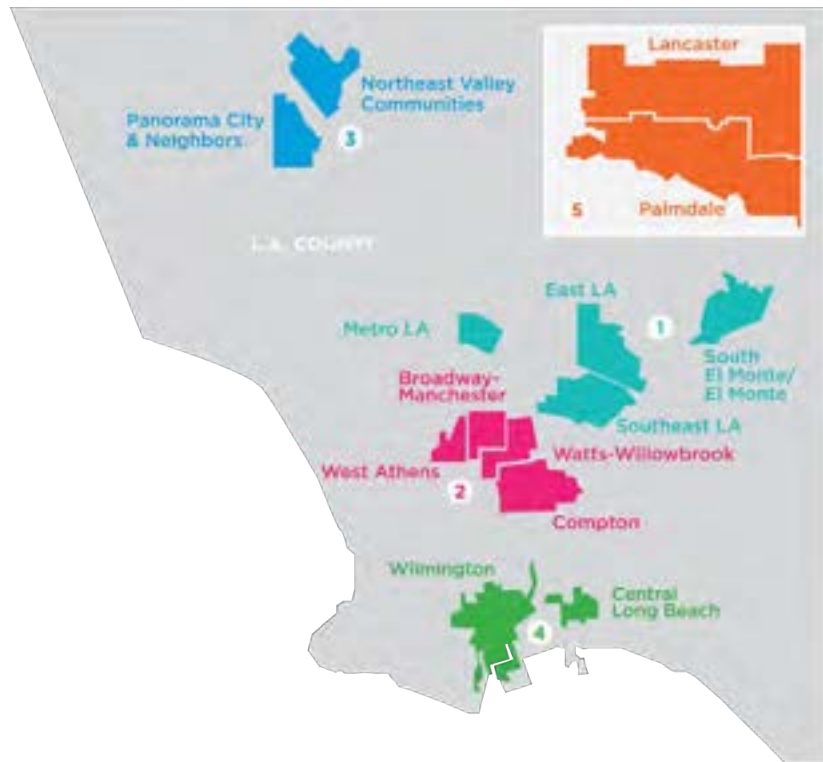
Northeast Valley Communities
Panorama City & Neighbors

REGION 4

Central Long Beach
Wilmington

REGION 5

Lancaster
Palmdale



COMMUNITY VOICES

“Food stamps don’t help with health or other expenses; many stores don’t know they should take food stamps; you can’t pay for vitamins or electrolytes with food stamps.”

“We feel belittled by the staff at the CalFresh office; I know the process, and I am not afraid to say that I have a right. But there are people who are not going to do that [when] they are afraid.”

“I have six children, so it’s difficult to see the social worker with my children when I’m breastfeeding. Can you have a corner at the office for breastfeeding and for children, like there is at the malls?”

“Will getting food stamps affect immigration status? A lot of people won’t apply because they are scared it will impact their status.”

Changes to CalFresh During COVID-19

While COVID-19 is not the initial focus of the report or project, the pandemic has significantly impacted the data collection process and elevated the importance of this report. The economic fallout from the pandemic resulted in more people needing safety net programs like CalFresh. During the timeframe of the Listening Tour, Angelenos accessing CalFresh jumped by 33% from 628,409 in July 2019 to 834,828 in June 2020.¹⁶

Due to the diversity of our region, Angelenos have been impacted by the pandemic in unique ways. Those who have been hit the hardest with food access challenges include low-income women, Latinx¹⁷, and populations between 18 to 40 year olds¹⁸. They make up a large portion of our essential worker population with fluctuating work conditions that have been negatively impacted during the pandemic. “Right now we are seeing a lot of folks who have never applied for anything before — folks who are bartenders, hair stylists, folks who make decent money but still live paycheck to paycheck. And when that evaporates, they don’t have savings,” said Tracey Patterson, Senior Director at Code for America.¹⁹

To address the growing need for CalFresh benefits, technologies and temporary federal waivers have been adopted to make the program more accessible. For instance, telephonic signatures²⁰ have streamlined enrollment. In addition, technological partnerships have

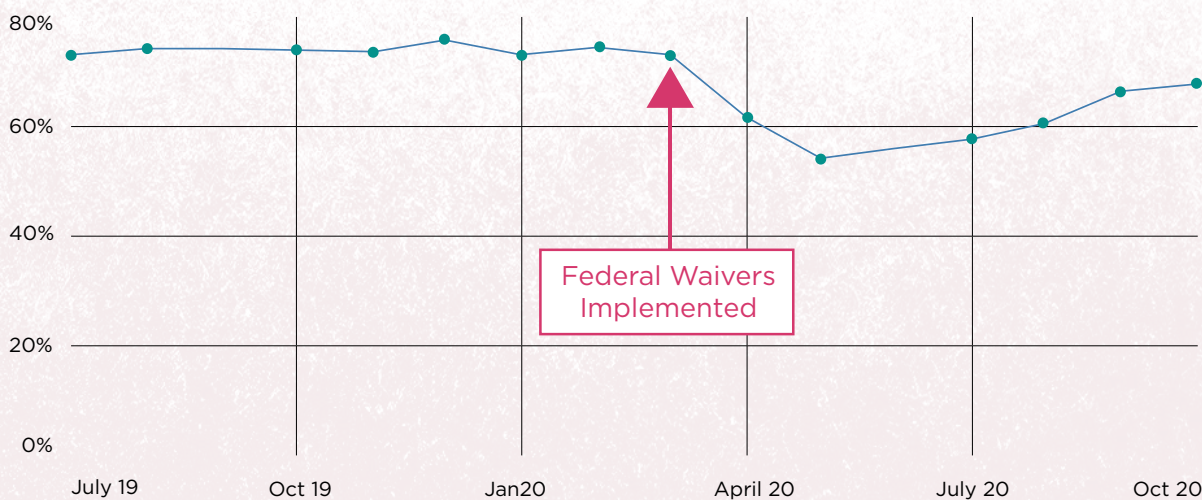
facilitated online shopping pilots. CalFresh benefits can now be used online to purchase groceries through select stores like ALDI, Amazon, Food 4 Less, FoodMaxx, Lucky Supermarkets, and Walmart.²¹

The pandemic has made it clear that safety net programs like CalFresh are essential to our public health and well-being. This also means, the systems that support our programs must be prepared to respond quickly. Earlier on in the pandemic, the federal government enacted a series of waivers to temporarily modify application requirements and expedite enrollment. When the federal waivers were implemented, the County-wide rate of denied applications due to procedural reasons decreased significantly from 71% in February 2020 to 51% in May 2020.²² This decrease in procedural denials was also experienced across California, dropping from 75% in March 2020 to 55% in May 2020 (See Figure 1). Ultimately, this increased enrollment rates.

CalFresh modernization like these show that program reform and improvements are possible. Yet, change is not always easy at the local level due to dated processes, under-resourced services, and lack of streamlined governmental systems. This report also provides community considerations for program improvement from those with lived CalFresh experiences, paving the way for a more equitable food system.

FIGURE 1. GOVERNMENT PROCESS CHANGES IMPROVE ACCESS TO CALFRESH

Share of Denied CalFresh Applications Denied for Procedural Reasons, July 2019 - October 2020 (Source: Nourish California, 2020)



Food Access Stimulates Local Economies

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, two million Angelenos were food insecure, meaning people were unable to get enough food to meet their basic nutritional needs.^{23 24} Of those who are food insecure, low-income households and communities of color are often the most impacted. Between April and December of 2020, one in three Los Angeles County households experienced food insecurity.²⁵ Within these numbers, Latinx and Black Angelenos experienced the highest rates of food insecurity.²⁶

In low-income communities of color, food insecurity is directly tied to a long history of structural racism. Geographical areas such as these often lack grocery stores and are home to high numbers of fast food restaurants. In recent years, community leaders have shifted their language to describe these conditions not as “food deserts” or “food swamps,” but instead use the term “food apartheid” to include deeper issues of inequities like generational disinvestments. The term was coined by farmer and activist Karen Washington who says, “People in the ‘hood have never used [the term food desert]. It’s an outsider term. ‘Desert’ also makes us think of an empty, absolutely desolate place. But when we’re talking about these places, there is so much life and vibrancy and potential. Using that word runs the risk of preventing us from seeing all of those things.”²⁷

Food apartheid is connected to other disparities. Not only is food out of reach, but quality health, education, and job opportunities are too.²⁸ In addition, hunger influences a person’s social, physical, and mental health. For children specifically, they will carry on these challenges into their adulthood. Compared to their food secure peers, children who experience hunger have higher risk for diet-related illnesses, mental health issues, and often miss more school days.²⁹ As they grow up, this can lead to poor health and financial outcomes. All of this fuels a cycle of poverty across multiple generations that can be prevented if we ensure all have access to fresh produce and other healthier food options.



FIGURE 2. CALFRESH PURCHASING POWER

This graphic represents the purchasing power of food assistance programs like CalFresh. When shoppers buy food with their benefits, they support local businesses as well as food chain workers and their families.

CALFRESH IS LOCAL PURCHASING POWER

People who seek public assistance are often stereotyped as an economic drain to society. This feeds into the stigma that prevents those who are seeking help from applying or using public dollars. The economic reality is that programs like CalFresh stimulate the local economy. In fact, when unemployment goes up and the economy is weak, every SNAP/CalFresh dollar spent increases the local gross domestic product by \$1.54.³⁰

CalFresh strengthens the economy by supporting farmers, food retailers, food processors, and food distributors. Every dollar received in CalFresh benefits is spent locally. If all eligible Angelenos participated in CalFresh at 100%, Los Angeles County would:

- Receive \$541 million in additional CalFresh federal funding annually;
- Support 6,200 food retailers and farmers’ markets;
- And circulate an additional \$833 million in the local economy.³¹

Methodology

The following section provides details for the two main phases of the project, Community Listening Tour and Sensemaking with Systems of Care Stakeholders, as well as the project's limitations and significance for future opportunities.

PHASE 1

Community Listening Tour

The following approaches were used to organize community listening sessions on CalFresh:

- **Recruitment:** Participants were recruited from all 5 Best Start regions through partner organizations. This helped create a trusted cultural brokered space for both community members and entities like DPSS.
- **Listening Sessions:** All five listening sessions followed the same structure. First, a community presentation about food security and CalFresh where participants asked additional questions about the program. Then, participants were separated into focus groups and/or interviews to discuss their experiences with CalFresh.
- **Community Forum:** Initial findings and recommendations of this report were vetted with the community to verify alignment with their experiences and perspectives.



Transforming CalFresh Culture

Common ground was established with community voices and stakeholder perspectives. Conversations helped build context, create information, and develop unique findings and recommendations found in this document.

PHASE 2

Systems of Care Stakeholder Engagement

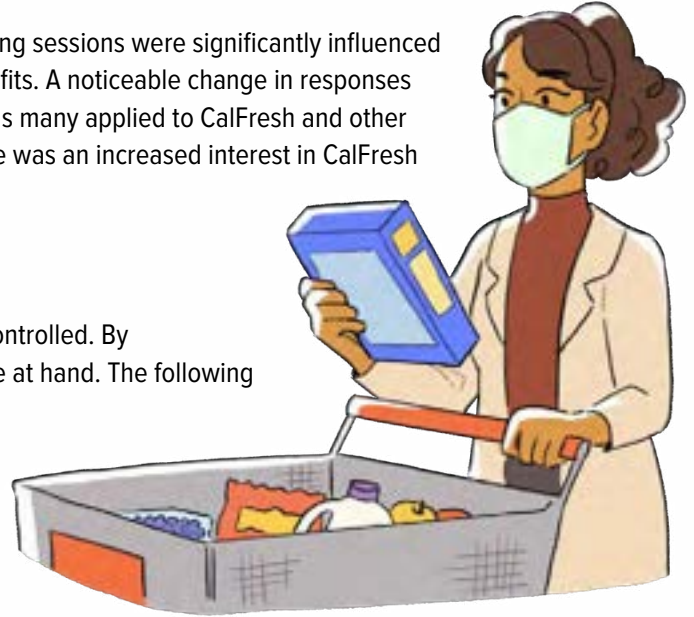
Over 20 stakeholders were engaged during this project to capture the diversity of the CalFresh ecosystem. Stakeholders included CalFresh administrators, government agencies, policy and advocacy groups, food banks, small business owners, and philanthropy.

We engaged in sensemaking sessions to “make sense” of community findings and understand the capacities of governmental systems and community service providers. This helped facilitate strategic conversations around best practices and improvements that could be implemented in LA County.

Impact of COVID-19 on Project

As previously mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted this project in a number of ways. The data collection process, for instance, shifted in order to meet public health guidelines and community needs.

- **Changes in listening session format.** In-person meetings were changed to virtual meetings. During the in-person format, community residents were able to apply for CalFresh on-site. For virtual participation, enrollment was not available. More community residents expressed greater flexibility in attending the listening session virtually.
- **A shift from focus groups to interviews.** Listen Sessions were designed with a focus group component. This changed into follow-up individual interviews during the virtual format. Although the in-person focus group format allowed for more in-depth conversations among participants, individual interviews facilitated more intimate dialogues.
- **An increase in community food insecurity.** The virtual listening sessions were significantly influenced by the changing economy and streamlined government benefits. A noticeable change in responses from participants occurred in the last two listening sessions as many applied to CalFresh and other assistance programs at higher rates. With greater need, there was an increased interest in CalFresh enrollment and the newer Pandemic-EBT program.



Limitations

In research, limitations are areas of the project that cannot be controlled. By understanding this, we can better focus on and explore the issue at hand. The following are some limitations to the data collected in this project:

- **Project sample.** The listening tours were conducted in Best Start Regions to represent as much of the LA County region as possible. However, each region has unique community outreach challenges. We engaged with Black, Asian and Pacific Islander (API), and Latinx communities. Yet, disproportionately sampled the Latinx community. This provided valuable perspectives, but did not encompass a diverse population sample. We hope that future engagement strategies will build on lessons learned from this report, while sampling more hard-to-reach populations and include more participation from Black, API, and Indigenous communities.
- **Disaggregated data.** In research, data can be presented at a larger scale (aggregated) or it can be presented into smaller groupings (disaggregated). Aggregated data for instance is the API population as a whole. If we disaggregate the data we can see information for particular ethnic groups like Bhutanese, Cambodian, Korean, or Japanese. There is an overall lack of disaggregated data in this report due to sampling challenges.

Findings & Recommendations

From the Listening Tour, the following are major themes that map onto a Community Food Ecosystem that connects the dots between individuals, our communities, and the systems that serve us (See page 14):

1. Stigma and misinformation;
2. Cultural and linguistic capacity;
3. Application process and program navigation; and
4. Food quality, availability, and accessibility.

Community Food Ecosystem & Improving CalFresh Culture

Uncertainty can happen to anyone, public food assistance programs should be a universal priority. We all play a role in improving our community food culture, especially for programs like CalFresh. Below is an ecosystem visual that shows the “big picture” of our relationship with food and the society we live in. It provides an intersectional (or multi-layered) view of how we as everyday people are connected to our communities and our public policies.³² It also helps articulate the report’s themes by emphasizing a systems change approach to improve “CalFresh Culture” (See page 32-33). CalFresh Culture is the result of influences at multiple levels, as pictured:

FIGURE 3. COMMUNITY FOOD ECOSYSTEM



INDIVIDUAL

Personal realities that influence the ways we select, purchase, and eat food

.....

RELATIONSHIPS

Learned attitudes and behaviors about food from family and friends

.....

COMMUNITY

Social norms, publicly understood values, and practices within groups

.....

INSTITUTIONAL

Organizational conditions and practices that interprets food assistance from policies into programs (i.e., program administrators and community-serving organizations)

.....

PUBLIC POLICY

Laws that define food assistance program eligibility and participation requirements, and the roles and responsibilities across jurisdictions (i.e., local, state, and federal)

.....

ACHIEVING EQUITABLE SERVICES

When community data is applied to ecosystem models like this one, we can scale and improve services to meet the needs of our communities. For instance, approximately 93% of CalFresh recipients are also on Medi-Cal, yet not all Medi-Cal recipients are on CalFresh.^{33 34} This means there may be a significant food insecure population not being served. Table 1 shows a list of Medi-Cal recipients likely eligible for CalFresh, but not enrolled. When we look at this population by language groups, there are clear disparities. In fact, due to the cultural and linguistic diversity of our region, Angelenos make up a significant portion of these numbers.

At 3.5 million, one out of three residents in Los Angeles County is an immigrant.³⁵ Of this population, about half are lawful permanent residents, and 22% are undocumented.³⁶ In the City of Los Angeles alone, nearly 72% of the essential service workers are immigrants and generate nearly \$40 billion to the local economy.³⁷ With data such as this and confusing rules like Public Charge, it's important to explore ways to better support our diverse populations (See page 17). In November 2021, the [Benefits Access for Immigrants Los Angeles \(BAILA Network\)](#) formed to provide free services to connect community outreach workers (or promotores), benefits enrollers, attorneys and legal clinics to reach immigrant families, address their needs and fears, and enroll them in much-needed benefits like cash assistance, free/subsidized health insurance, WIC, and CalFresh if they are eligible. Known as a “no-wrong door network,”³⁸ they respond to the multiple needs of anyone who is looking for help.

As this report will show, we can meet the needs of our diverse populations by ensuring that our systems are accessible in their languages. Those seeking services and those providing services should be able to communicate through a shared language. Creating a CalFresh culture fosters responsive systems that treat those in need with dignity as they seek the food and care they need to thrive.

The following report utilizes this Community Food Ecosystem Framework to:

- Further our understanding of systemic issues faced by communities at the individual-level
- Transform the capacity of systems’ to be more accountable to the needs of the populations they serve

TABLE 1. CALFRESH ENROLLMENT OPPORTUNITIES BY LANGUAGE

Medi-Cal Recipients Likely Eligible For CalFresh But Not Enrolled, By Language (2017)³⁹

Preferred Language	Unenrolled in California	% who lives in Los Angeles County
English	3,295,395	28.4%
Spanish	1,392,490	35.6%
Vietnamese	100,648	15.2%
Cantonese	74,780	31.2%
Mandarin	49,899	55.1%
Korean	28,410	63.6%
Tagalog	23,821	20.9%
Armenian	17,031	94.9%
Farsi	15,084	33.6%
Russian	14,484	22.4%
Arabic	13,094	15.6%
Hmong	6,366	0.2%
Khmer	5,775	52.9%

THEME

Stigma & Misinformation

Stigma and misinformation are very common themes for public assistance. Negative views towards programs like CalFresh can discourage enrollment and participation. Those seeking help may feel shame or have inaccurate information. In 2016, the Hospital Association of San Diego and Imperial County found that 60% of households participating in CalFresh felt stigma or embarrassment for receiving the benefits.⁴⁰

Community members need more dignified support and trusted messengers in order to enroll into and navigate CalFresh programming. Many may have negative past experiences or misinformed views, which fuels mistrust towards the program.

“ I’ve never asked for help because one lady told me about her experience. She didn’t qualify even though she had a disabled son. [I thought,] if she didn’t qualify, then how could I qualify and I never wanted to go back.”

– REGION 2, SOUTH LOS ANGELES

WHAT IS...

STIGMA?

People seeking help may feel judged or looked down upon for accessing public benefits like CalFresh. This negative perception is considered a stigma.

Trust building in communities that have endured generational trauma require services to meet their psychological safety. For the communities that participated in this project, these experiences may include geopolitical events like Khmer Rouge genocide and Salvadoran Civil Wars. Many experience fear and trauma from United States-based policies such as public charge and family separation. For people seeking help, trauma-informed services are mindful of their needs and unique situations.

MISINFORMATION?

It can be dangerous when false or inaccurate information is spread. This is known as misinformation, which may discredit community support services and programs.



WHAT IS “PUBLIC CHARGE”?

Changes to immigration rules can cause confusion and spread misinformation. This is particularly true with the public charge rule between the Trump and Biden administrations. Public charge is a “test” used by immigration officials to determine a person’s likelihood of primarily depending on government assistance. Eligible immigrants can get public benefits without failing the public charge test. Yet, many still fear it may impact their pathway to citizenship or a green card and/or harm someone in their mixed status household. As of March 2021, the public charge rule was updated. Programs like CalFresh, WIC, Medi-Cal, and Head Start do not affect the public charge test. Even though this is good news, changes like these require a rebuilding of trust between communities and public assistance programs.

FINDINGS

STIGMA

Community members expressed a wide-range of reasons for feeling uncomfortable about applying for and using CalFresh benefits. When service providers cannot culturally and linguistically support you, it's difficult to ask for help with enrollment. This can also lead to misunderstandings and increase anxiety. Some may also feel shame towards needing food assistance and asking for help.

MISINFORMATION

There are many stories shared at the community level that circulates negative or false information about qualifying for CalFresh. A top concern for many community members is the belief that accessing CalFresh impacts immigration statuses. Some are also hesitant to receive benefits because they have heard stories like the loss (or reduction) of benefits if children are of a certain age. Another major fear is having to pay benefits back after they have been dispersed, which is especially concerning when these households are already low-income.

COMPARISON TO WIC

Many community members compared CalFresh to other existing nutrition programs like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Community members shared that they experience WIC as a friendlier program in comparison to CalFresh because they felt WIC staff have more empathy towards their clients. WIC is one of the highest enrolled public service programs in LA County, with over 100,000 more enrolled than CalFresh in 2019.⁴¹ In addition, WIC offices are often smaller in size, located in community settings (i.e., strip malls, medical clinics, etc.), and they often hire former WIC participants as staff.

“ At first [CalFresh] would confuse me. Many years ago I used to get food stamps, but I stopped because I was scared of public charge.”

– REGION 1, CENTRAL EAST

“ Right now I feel like the message [is that the program] is ‘for poor people’ and ‘leeches.’ I think that the real message [should instead be] more friendly, or nice, be like WIC because they are more helpful... approachable”

– REGION 5, ANTELOPE VALLEY



RECOMMENDATIONS

COORDINATE TO MEET THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY OF PARTICIPANTS BY DEVELOPING TRUST.

Currently, CalFresh enrollment is available in a number of ways including where DPSS is jointly or co-located with a community-serving organization. However, many community members may not be aware of these locations or opportunities, which is why long-term and consistent community engagement is critical. The ability for community members to learn and ask questions about CalFresh is an important step in the enrollment process. This was demonstrated even in the listening sessions of this project as some participants were able to enroll on the same day. Participants enjoyed the opportunity to discuss CalFresh with one another as well as the opportunity to talk with DPSS staff directly. Non-stigmatizing settings may include schools, community centers, and faith-based organizations. These are spaces that families trust and where they may receive other services.

DEVELOP LONG-TERM COMMUNITY OUTREACH STRATEGIES TO COMBAT DEEPLY ROOTED STIGMA TOWARDS CALFRESH.

DPSS should continue working closely with community-serving organizations. These partnerships can offer DPSS the unique opportunity to leverage the informal networks that already exist throughout communities. Working alongside community-based organizations helps dispel stigma by sharing accurate information and resources to CalFresh-eligible populations. Promising practices may include more co-locations where DPSS staff can work with other programs in community-based settings to engage CalFresh-eligible populations.

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?

People may feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, or fear being punished when seeking help from others or government systems.⁴² Psychological safety is supporting people where they are at so they are comfortable expressing their needs and seeking services. Since people experience stigma differently, resources and support systems must serve each community's needs appropriately.

LEARN FROM WIC'S COMMUNITY-FRIENDLY APPROACHES.

WIC was specifically named by community members as being less stigmatizing than CalFresh. This provides an opportunity for CalFresh to be more community-friendly. Comparing participant experiences of each program can generate more engaging practices.



THE MOST TRUSTED MESSENGERS GO WHERE COMMUNITIES:

1. **Learn.** School settings have teachers, nurses, and social workers to help students and their families.
2. **Receive Services.** There are many service providers in neighborhoods including libraries, nonprofits, and clinics.
3. **Play.** There are many fun opportunities where neighbors get together at parks, recreation centers, and public events.
4. **Worship.** Faith-based centers in communities provide services to help congregations and their community-at-large, such as hosting food pantries and meal services.
5. **Shop.** Community members can be reached where they purchase food such as grocery stores, corner stores, farmers' markets, and restaurants.

THEME

Cultural & Linguistic Capacity

While this diversity is one of the greatest assets of Los Angeles County, linguistically this may pose some challenges to providing services. Meeting the needs of our diverse communities is an opportunity to better serve all Angelenos. There is a significant number of underserved Angelenos such as Black⁴³, Asian and Pacific Islander,⁴⁴ and Indigenous Latinx immigrants.⁴⁵ More than half of the county speaks a language other than English at home.⁴⁶ Adding to that, over 2.5 million Angelenos are Limited English Proficient (LEP).⁴⁷ Five of eight Service Planning Areas (SPAs) countywide are majority non-English speaking.⁴⁸ This issue isn't unique to our region. Other diverse counties, like San Francisco and San Mateo, have trouble engaging their Spanish, Cantonese, and Mandarin speaking communities despite the population's eligibility for CalFresh.⁴⁹

Community members voiced the need for more cultural and linguistic support services. This ties in with the previously stated theme in providing more direct support to meet the needs and safety of CalFresh-eligible populations. Improved cultural and linguistic support services may result in increased trust and participation.

DID YOU KNOW...

THERE ARE AT LEAST 185 LANGUAGES SPOKEN IN HOMES ACROSS LOS ANGELES.

There are civil rights policies that require language support services; however, this only covers dominant languages such as English, Spanish, Mandarin, Korean, and Farsi.⁵⁰

Language justice means creating multilingual and culturally appropriate spaces where everyone's voices are heard and valued.⁵¹ This can include organizational practices, advocating for equitable policies, and building social movements. Some important components to language justice include:

INTERPRETATION VS. TRANSLATION.

Interpretation is the spoken process of delivering messages from one language into another (i.e., at live events or on the phone). Whereas, translation is the written process of developing documents from one language into another (i.e., legal documents, websites, etc.).

NON-DOMINANT LANGUAGES.

Translating or interpreting language is not always straightforward. For instance, a number of indigenous languages may require intermediary support, such as Mam (a Mayan dialect) to Spanish to English. Known as “lingua franca,” a bridging language is needed to connect information between people who do not have a shared common language.

NON-WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS.

Some populations do not use written languages and there are also individuals who have a hard time understanding written documents. Service providers have addressed this by using a combination of interpretation with telephonic signatures, a person's recorded verbal agreement in place of a signature.



FINDINGS

LACK OF CULTURAL AND LANGUAGE SUPPORT

Community members felt staff capacity to respond to their cultural and linguistic needs varied. Depending on which staff members served them and which DPSS office they went to, some compared connecting with the right staff members to the lottery. They never knew who they would get. It would be off-putting and uncomfortable if they were matched with someone who did not understand them.

MISTRUST

Community members shared it was difficult to trust service providers due to a perceived lack of cultural and linguistic fluency. The lack of bilingual staff in some offices made some Latinx participants feel discriminated against, disrespected, judged, and misunderstood. This adds to poor and frustrating participant-provider interactions.

“ Services are good, but when we have to go to the office it’s very different. People don’t attend to us properly because we don’t speak the language.”

– REGION 2, SOUTH LOS ANGELES

HOW CAN PROGRAM SERVICES MATCH UP WITH COMMUNITY NEEDS?

For service seekers and service providers, it’s important for everyone to mutually understand each other. If there is a misunderstanding or lack of trust, it makes it harder to understand needs and available services. Here are some solutions:

- Hire and place staff in communities that reflect the background of and are qualified to serve the populations
- Expand services, such as call center hours, to provide on-the-spot or same-day support
- Evaluate current operations and program staff performance, to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement

“ Although the application is in Spanish [and I speak Spanish], sometimes I don’t understand it because of the way it’s written.”

– REGION 1, CENTRAL EAST

WORDING AND TRANSLATION ISSUES

Many experienced challenges in understanding the wording or phrases on applications. Certain translated phrases may be extremely wordy and lack culturally-appropriate translations. For instance, among the participants in this project, Spanish translations were requested most often. Some participants may not understand the application due to dialect differences and/or literacy-level challenges. One example is Ecuadorian Spanish is different from Honduran Spanish. Even worse, despite not being Spanish speakers, some indigenous Latinx applicants are often given Spanish translations.



RECOMMENDATIONS

CULTIVATE A RESILIENT SYSTEMS OF CARE WORKFORCE TO BETTER RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF CALFRESH-ELIGIBLE POPULATIONS.

To provide culturally and linguistically relevant services, DPSS direct service staff should reflect the demographics they serve. Hiring practices and professional development for staff should help match service capacity with population needs and address disparities.

SUPPORT EXISTING DPSS STAFF WITH TRAINING TO IMPROVE PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES.

DPSS staff must be better supported to address information gaps experienced by service seekers. Each person navigating CalFresh has unique challenges and needs. Useful training topics for service providers include implicit bias, trauma-informed care, cultural humility, and other equity skill building.

INCREASE THE AVAILABILITY OF QUALIFIED LANGUAGE-SUPPORT SERVICES.

Though the project has a strong representation of Spanish and English speakers, the most frequently spoken languages countywide also include: Mandarin, Tagalog, Korean, Armenian, Vietnamese, Farsi, Japanese, and Russian. These are known as threshold languages. Public assistance programs must provide support in these languages as part of the public's civil rights.⁵² Services include qualified interpreters as well as vetted written translations and signage. Those who speak threshold languages need improved access and awareness of services available to them. DPSS and other systems of care stakeholders should expand outreach to other groups not represented by threshold requirements to ensure more equitable access to CalFresh.



WHAT IS A CULTURAL BROKER?

Someone who bridges, links, connects, or mediates between people of different backgrounds is a cultural broker.⁵³ They are valuable to individuals seeking support and community-serving systems. Cultural brokers can be existing members of the community or organizational staff trained in culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices (i.e., application supporters, promotora/es, teachers).

HOW CAN CULTURAL BROKERS CREATE TRUST?

Cultural brokers help bridge the gap between people and the systems they are trying to navigate. They instill confidence in people seeking help, while providing a reliable source of information. They also ease “historical and inherent distrust that many racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse communities have toward [people-serving] organizations.”⁵⁴

THEME

Application Process & Program Navigation

Applying for government programs like CalFresh is not easy. Those who are in search of food assistance may also experience housing insecurity, unemployment, and other hardships. In addition to these challenges, applicants also face the burden of proving they qualify. An eligible applicant may not have the emotional bandwidth to endure the administrative burdens of navigating programs like CalFresh.⁵⁵ Even after enrolling, there are reporting and recertification requirements. To better support CalFresh participants, program administration needs to be more streamlined and responsive.⁵⁶ Studies have shown that when administrative services are more efficient, clients feel more dignified and their time feels respected.⁵⁷

Community members voiced their challenges with the administrative burden of CalFresh, specifically understanding the program requirements even before applying, utilizing the program, and maintaining eligibility.

WHAT IS...

EMOTIONAL BURDEN?

When we feel stressed, anxious and depressed, this is known as “emotional burden.” These feelings may be magnified, especially among populations who are already struggling.

ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN?

Applying to CalFresh is complex and preparing information for the application is not easy.⁵⁸ Once qualified, there is additional paperwork to maintain benefits. When we don’t have enough mental energy and time to keep track of these things, this is known as an “administrative burden.”

The emotional and administrative burdens of clients may also be felt by the service providers who are supporting them. This is known as “secondary trauma,” when individuals like service providers hear about the firsthand stress and traumatic experiences from the populations they serve.

The complex requirements at federal and state levels often trickle down to local administrators of programs, which has an emotional and administrative impact on both participants and service providers. By streamlining requirements at higher levels of government, it can reduce the already stressful situations communities face at the local levels.



FINDINGS

SOMEONE TO TALK TO

Many felt the application was so complicated to the point where CalFresh benefits were not worth the difficulty of going through the process. Those who were able to get someone to help them in person appreciated the support they received in walking through the requirements and technical language. Ultimately, many just wanted someone to talk to and help them to navigate the application and program.

VARIATION OF SERVICES

For participants already carrying a level of uncertainty and stigma, navigating the enrollment process and interacting with DPSS workers is often an unpleasant experience. Many felt that their interaction with DPSS staff lacked consistency because each encounter is often different. A culturally-responsive person may not always be available to support them. This can further add to their emotional burden as they try to navigate public assistance.

DPSS OFFICE ENVIRONMENT

Community members discussed the differences in the quality of DPSS enrollment services and what they experience when interacting with schools, health facilities, faith-based and community-based organizations. The best service-providing elements includesupportive staff, a welcoming environment, and consistency of what to expect.

“ Well, the truth is I find it easier to apply in person, with a representative. Give me the option to fill out the application with a representative so they can help explain the questions.”

– REGION 2, SOUTH LOS ANGELES

POWER OF LIVED EXPERIENCES

First-hand knowledge is a powerful tool to inform practices, improve programs, and change systems. From applying to navigating the program, CalFresh participants are experts in making the program better and ultimately more just.

“ [We need] more places to apply and help with answering questions. It would be easier if they had more locations available. Sometimes when we go to the office and have kids [with us] it’s hard to wait a long time to see a worker that does not want to help us.”

– REGION 1, CENTRAL EAST



RECOMMENDATIONS

PROVIDE DIRECT SUPPORT FOR ENROLLMENT AND RECERTIFICATION.

An easier way to ask questions, such as a hotline was discussed. Preferably, a quick way to connect with a live person without long wait times or complicated phone options. Many expressed frustration across different platforms (i.e. in-person, online, etc.). To better support clients navigating application processes, it is important to provide options to connect, troubleshoot, or ask questions. For example, community members may start online applications and not follow through due to complex requirements or technological issues. Starting a CalFresh application indicates a need, so there should be a support system in place to help complete them.

STREAMLINE ENROLLMENT AND SERVICES.

Low-income households such as the community members of this project already qualify for other programs and receive additional services from various County departments. To help minimize the different systems they have to navigate, having a more streamlined approach such as a common application or central database to pull existing information that other departments have already collected can minimize unnecessary and duplicative processes. Infrastructurally, this may look like cross-sector data-sharing that includes child-serving partners. In the long run, this will increase accessibility and promote health equity.

APPLY HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN.

It's a design process that starts with the people programs and experiences are intended for and ends with solutions that are tailor made to suit their needs. An example of this is User Experience (UX) research, a best practice in the technology industry used to examine a person's emotions and attitudes about using a particular product, system, or service. In order to better understand the frustrations of applicants, working with the community to address application usability issues will help improve participant experiences. Moreover, doing the same across the languages available will support health equity issues that may arise when populations are left out.

LEARN FROM CHANGES RELATED TO COVID-19 AND WILDFIRE RESPONSE.

During COVID-19 and recent wildfires, federal and state waivers were enacted to make the application process easier. Due to these changes, some community members experienced a reduction in administrative requirements and a more straightforward process. For instance, as of October 28, 2020, initial certification and recertification interviews are not required if certain requirements are fulfilled.⁵⁹ It is worth exploring the necessary steps to make some of the changes available beyond the emergency period.



SIMPLIFYING CALFRESH

- **Help with applying.** Whether it is a warm person or a clear roadmap, those seeking CalFresh need help applying. Some existing resources include [GetCalFresh.org](https://www.getcalfresh.org) or the [National Hunger Hotline](https://www.nationalhungerhotline.org): 1-866-3-HUNGRY or 1-877-8-HAMBRE (for Spanish). These options may better serve those seeking immediate food assistance by using easy to understand application language and providing someone to talk to (See page 15 for the [BAILA Network](#)).
- **Check Benefit Balance.** Although Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards are intended to make CalFresh easier for shoppers, knowing how much benefits you have access to may be difficult. Balances are printed on receipts or they can be checked at www.ebt.ca.gov or through third party applications like [Fresh EBT \(by Propel\)](#).

THEME

Food Quality, Availability, & Accessibility

For CalFresh populations, not only do they face challenges enrolling into and maintaining benefits, they also may not have access to a grocery store. Food quality and availability are neither guaranteed nor consistent in low-income communities.⁶⁰ The availability of quality food plays an important role in CalFresh participation. In a nationwide study, SNAP participants who lived far from a grocery store consumed significantly less fruit than those who lived within a mile of one.⁶¹

Community members voiced frustration with the lack of nutritious food at CalFresh vendors and challenges in understanding how to use benefits. They also expressed interest in nutrition education.

DID YOU KNOW...

THERE ARE MORE LIQUOR STORES THAN GROCERY STORES IN SOUTH LA?

“South LA is the only neighborhood that has seen an increase in the number of liquor stores over the past several years, at a rate of over 10%. South LA is also the only neighborhood that has more liquor stores than grocery stores, meaning it is easier for community members to access a convenience store than a supermarket. The saturation of liquor stores poses a health risk for residents, as these stores rarely offer fresh or healthy food at affordable prices; instead, liquor stores and convenience stores sell alcohol, cigarettes, and heavily processed foods.” (Los Angeles Food Policy Council, 2020 Food Systems Dashboard)

In communities like South L.A., food apartheid speaks to the racial injustice of our food system (See page 11). Disproportionate rates of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and chronic illnesses in communities of color are just a few of the outcomes of food apartheid.

WHAT IS A FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN?

The journey of food, from how it is grown to how we eat it, is known as the supply chain. A lack of availability of quality food directly impacts the motivation that local businesses have to purchase

fresh produce. Communities that experience food injustices need better food supply chains by increasing the availability of fresh produce (supply) to meet the existing needs of communities (demand). This can improve local food options, create jobs, and promote healthier eating!



FINDINGS

QUALITY & AVAILABILITY.

Many raised concerns about inconsistent quality and availability of fresh produce, as well as a lack of organic options, at local participating CalFresh stores. Some community members have noticed lower quality foods in their local stores, while more affluent communities have better produce selection. Some expressed wanting a farmers' markets in the neighborhood.

INCONSISTENCY AMONG CALFRESH VENDORS.

Community members expressed seeing different requirements at stores accepting CalFresh, which influenced what they can and cannot purchase. They also voiced that some vendors with multiple locations across different neighborhoods had different rules at each location.

ACCESSIBILITY.

Some community members face challenges when trying to find CalFresh vendors to purchase food from. Given the diversity of the region, community members faced different and unique barriers depending on where they live. For instance, participants in the Antelope Valley (more rural) and South Los Angeles (more urban) both face similar challenges like the overabundance of fast food and limited grocery store options. Yet, the Antelope Valley is more geographically spread out and does not have the same public transportation infrastructure of South Los Angeles.

“ The food price is too high. I'd like to see a farmers' market because I only see them in rich areas, I would also like to plant around our community so things can grow and the community can eat the fruit.”

– REGION 1, CENTRAL EAST

“ The food is too expensive and only people with high incomes can afford to buy good quality food. Even with food stamps...it's not enough to get good food.”

– REGION 3, SAN FERNANDO VALLEY

USING CALFRESH FOR GARDENING.

Community members expressed interest in using CalFresh benefits to purchase seeds for home and community gardens. Many community members were unaware of this eligible item until it was discussed during the listening sessions.



RECOMMENDATIONS

INVEST IN TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FOR CALFRESH VENDORS.

To improve the ease of CalFresh participation in the community, CalFresh vendors need more support to address misinformation and create a more welcoming shopping experience for consumers. These interactions may include better marketing practices, cooking demonstrations, and procurement relationships with sources for fresh produce.

SUPPORT CALFRESH PARTICIPANTS WITH QUALITY FOOD OPTIONS.

Once enrolled in CalFresh, it is important to support participants as shoppers in stores and farmers' markets. Participants need support in knowing what foods they can purchase and how to prepare foods. Support for CalFresh participants may include signage with clear information, cooking demonstrations, and having nutritionists well-versed in CalFresh at stores. Other services can include promoting the purchase of healthier options and locally grown produce, and even increasing available dollars through programs known as "nutrition incentive programs."⁶²



ENGAGE WITH LOCAL GROWERS AND PRODUCERS TO STRENGTHEN THE SUPPLY CHAIN WITH HIGHER FOOD QUALITY OPTIONS.

Community members expressed interest in seeing more farmers' markets in their neighborhoods. There is an opportunity to engage the supply chain at sources like wholesalers, produce aggregators, and direct farmer relationships. If participants have issues regarding the quality and cost of produce, supporting local growers and producers can help improve the supply chain.

NUTRITION INCENTIVE PROGRAMS

Extra food dollars can be accessed through "nutrition incentive programs" to help CalFresh participants include more healthy fruits and vegetables in their diet. One such program is Market Match, California's healthy food incentive program that increases CalFresh and WIC dollars at participating farmers' markets. Many farmers' markets accept CalFresh benefits, and those that participate in Market Match provide additional CalFresh or WIC dollars to spend on produce. For every \$10 of "nutrition incentive" benefits spent on farm-direct sales (such as farmers' markets), generates between \$24-\$30 in the local economy.

“ I like to see more farmers' markets in the LA area. We need more fresh and local food because we do not have transportation.”

– REGION 5, ANTELOPE VALLEY

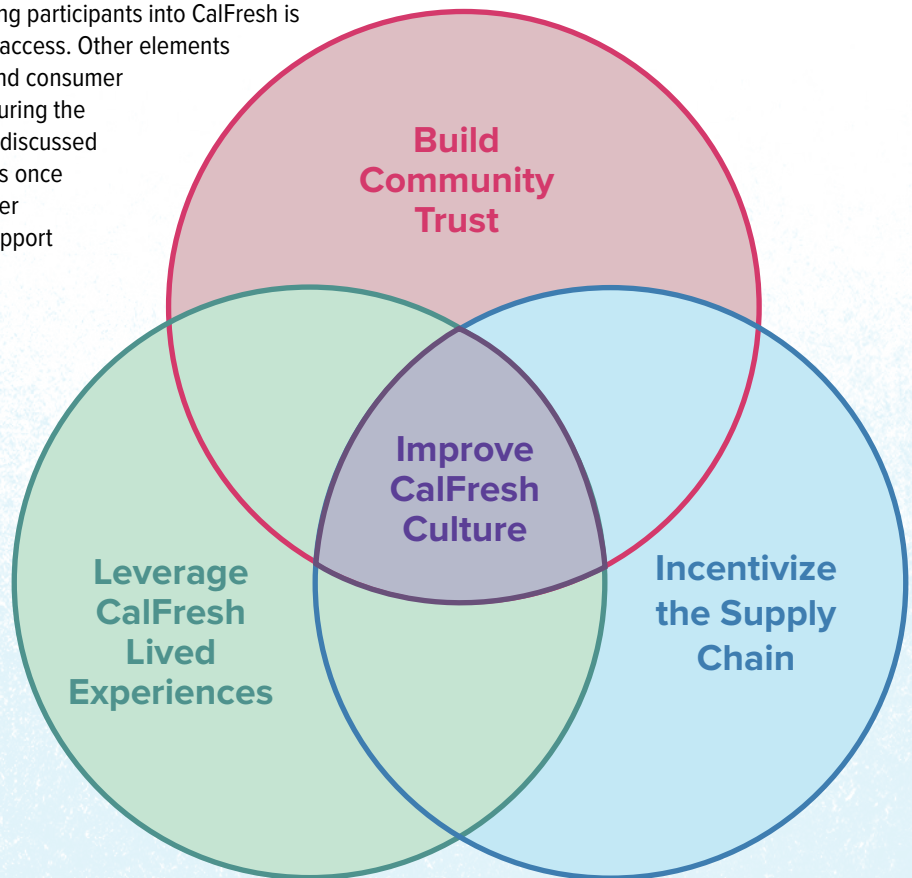
Improving CalFresh Culture

Culture is a pattern of shared behavior by society. As this report has shown, many different things make up our understanding of CalFresh and food access. Together, we can reimagine a CalFresh culture that is inclusive and equitable. Improving CalFresh culture requires bridging systems and people as well as developing solutions alongside hard-to-reach populations.

BRIDGE SYSTEMS & PEOPLE

Cultivating better relationships within the community food ecosystem can foster respect and a sense of safety (See page 15). To make this happen, a reciprocal (two-way) process of trust building is essential. We can improve CalFresh culture by:

1. **Build Community Trust.** “Buy-in” is when someone is on board with an idea or concept that is not their own but it appeals to them. This is connected to building trust, which is important for food support programs like CalFresh. During the Listening Tour, community members who had on-site interactions with DPSS appreciated the direct connection in a safe community-based space. For people who are already in very vulnerable situations, asking strangers for help can be difficult. It is important to connect communities with resources in a dignified and safe way. This includes culturally and linguistically responsive approaches. Trust building may reduce stigma and spread trustworthy information in the community (See Themes 1 and 2 on pp. 16-19 and pp. 20-23, respectively).
2. **Leverage CalFresh lived experiences.** For community-serving programs to achieve equitable outcomes, feedback from the population it serves is essential. During the Listening Tour, community members with positive comments about WIC reflect on trusting staff who were once WIC participants too. There are ways to connect program administrators with participants to jointly improve programming. In public health, Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) is an approach that identifies problems, implements change, and studies effectiveness by asking questions like: “How are we doing?” “Can we do it better?” “How are you feeling?” “Do you understand this?”⁶³ This can be achieved when program navigation is improved (See Theme 3 on pp. 24- 27).
3. **Incentivize the supply chain.** Enrolling participants into CalFresh is just one part of the equation in food access. Other elements include more quality food retailers and consumer education on using fresh produce. During the Listening Tour, community members discussed the challenges with CalFresh benefits once enrolled. Food retailers such as corner stores and farmers’ markets need support to qualify as CalFresh vendors and develop CalFresh business models. By incentivizing and motivating the supply chain we can increase food access, innovate healthy food retail, and support local economies. Supporting the consumer-side of CalFresh is as important as enrolling participants in the program (See Theme 4 pp. 28-31).



INCREASE TARGETED OUTREACH

The idea of “meeting people where they are at” means to support populations in a relatable and approachable way. This type of outreach is difficult for many community-serving programs due to lack of infrastructure and qualified labor. To address this, many populations are self-organizing to navigate CalFresh and other critical services. The following are just a few groups working towards more responsive support and visibility:

- **College Students.** College students living off of packaged ramen is a common stereotype in pop culture. The idea that college students struggle to find food is a very real and common reality. In fact, more than 127,000 California college students receive CalFresh.⁶⁴ Yet, the true number of students eligible for CalFresh is much higher, ranging between 416,000 and nearly 700,000.⁶⁵ From the application processes to learning about healthier eating options, students are leading peer-to-peer networks to create safe community spaces to discuss needs and concerns⁶⁶. Some existing programs include the [UCLA CalFresh Initiative](#), a team of students who assist undergraduate and graduate students apply for CalFresh. Los Angeles Community College offers the [Fresh Success Program](#), which offers a wide range of help like support with the CalFresh application as well as academic, personal, and career advice.
- **Unhoused Populations.** Although those who are unhoused are more likely to be eligible for certain exceptions and emergency services through programs like CalFresh, navigating systems is not easy for those who are chronically and newly unhoused. Not having access to a kitchen to cook or refrigerate food or a mailing address for paperwork are just some examples of unique challenges. The combination of historic community disinvestments, institutional racism, income inequality, gentrification, and inadequate housing supply are drivers in the increase of homelessness in Los Angeles.⁶⁷ In 2020, 66,436 people in the county experienced homelessness.⁶⁸ From CalFresh enrollment to free meals, across the region nonprofits and mutual aid providers organize to provide critical services. At the frontlines of these efforts are groups like Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN), Hunger Action Los Angeles, Polo’s Pantry, Eayikes, Miss Rodgers’ Neighborhood, Los Angeles Community Fridges, and Skid Row People’s Market.
- **Black immigrant and U.S. born communities.** A recent study by the [Center for the Advancement of Racial Equity at Work](#) at the UCLA Labor Center found that many Black workers have challenges accessing and navigating social safety net programs, like CalFresh.⁶⁹ This is the case despite the fact that Black Angelenos are disproportionately represented in the economic and food insecure population. In part due to the

Black jobs crisis, which is characterized by chronic and disproportionate unemployment, underemployment, and systemic racism. For Black immigrants these issues are further compounded by the challenges unique to the immigrant experience of language and cultural barriers. Organizations like the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI Network) work to make services more accessible to the Black immigrant community. In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, one-in-ten Black people living in the United States are immigrants.⁷⁰

- **Indigenous Latin American Migrants.** New data is emerging from indigenous migrants who are self-organizing to be seen and heard. Often, they are underserved and miscategorized into linguistic groups like Spanish-speaking even though they might not speak Spanish at all. [Comunidades Indigenas en Liderazgo \(CIELO\)](#), an Indigenous women-led non-profit organization works jointly with Indigenous communities residing in Los Angeles. CIELO provides critical services to Indigenous migrant communities across the region. They are also collecting their own data highlighting the realities that are often missed by government programs and researchers.
- **API immigrant & U.S. born communities.** There is a lot of diversity in the API community. 23% of API Angelenos live in food insecure households, but only about 6% of CalFresh recipients in LA County are API. This data allows for a better understanding of the needs and challenges within the community. Organizations like API Forward Movement work alongside the community and academic researchers to connect the dots between API needs and by developing tools like [mapping API grocery stores](#) that accept CalFresh or WIC.



Fresh Ideas for CalFresh in Action

Addressing neighborhood-level barriers in finding food requires innovations at natural points where all shoppers buy food, including those with CalFresh benefits. Communities are seeking ways to achieve food sovereignty, the right for people to have access to healthy and culturally appropriate foods. This includes being able to grow their own food, purchase food grown locally, as well as determine neighborhood investments like grocery stores and farmers' markets. The following are examples of ways we can better support community food supply chains for all.



MARKET MATCH: LOCAL GOVERNMENT INVESTING IN EXTRA FOOD MONEY.

An extra \$10 in food money can go a long way. In August 2021, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved \$2 million towards Market Match, a program that gives CalFresh shoppers \$10 extra dollars to spend every time they go to a participating farmers' markets. This two-year intense advocacy and community engagement campaign was led by Hunger Action Los Angeles, the American Heart Association, along with the Boys and Girls Club, Sustainable Economic Enterprises of Los Angeles (SEE-LA), Urban and Environmental Policy Institute, and United Parents and Students. "These vital programs help the county's most vulnerable residents gain access to additional healthy foods and promote local economic growth by partnering with growers, farmers' markets, grocery stores, corner stores and other retailers and small businesses," explained Ana-Alicia Carr, Community Advocacy Director at the American Heart Association in Los Angeles. "In fact, every \$5 spent using [CalFresh] generates as much as \$9 in economic activity."

Photo Credits: Jaqueline Fuller (page 34) , United Parents and Students (page 35, top), Linus Shentu (page 35, bottom right), Christopher Temblador (page 35, bottom left)



UNITED PARENTS AND STUDENTS: COMMUNITY-LED TRANSFORMATIONS.

In addition to advocating for programs like Market Match, United Parents and Students (UPAS) also organized on other food access fronts. UPAS is a community action organization that supports students, parents, and community members in amplifying their collective voice. One area is to improve the quality of existing grocery stores to increase healthy and affordable food options. This includes diversifying options such as locating larger scale, high-quality grocery stores in neighborhoods across South LA, East LA, and Southeast LA. UPAS members elevated their lived experiences and concerns about food scarcity by speaking at City Council and County Board of Supervisors meetings. In July 2021, their efforts led the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to allocate \$5 million towards increasing the number of high-quality grocery stores located and expanding in low-income areas. The Board also allocated an additional \$10 million to grocery vouchers to support families facing food insecurity due to the pandemic.



FARM FRESH LA: (URBAN) FARM TO CORNER STORE SUPPLY CHAINS.

Even with CalFresh benefits, many community members may not have access to food if they do not live near grocery stores. For under-resourced neighborhoods, the closest locations for food are often unhealthy choices at local liquor and convenience stores. In April 2021, LAFPC developed and piloted a program called Farm Fresh LA, a food supply chain, for and by Angelenos. For just \$1 CalFresh shoppers can pick up a 5 lb. produce bundle from their local corner stores every two weeks. Through this network of relationships, second-generation corner store owners of color are sourcing locally grown produce from immigrant growers of color to collectively support their communities. Together, we are combatting food apartheid by providing access to fresh produce for CalFresh households, all while supporting the local economy. The program is funded by the California Department of Food & Agriculture in partnership with local corner store partners Sam's Corner (Westlake/MacArthur Park), El Principio (South Los Angeles), and Skid Row People's Market (Downtown). Additionally, partners include API-Forward Movement, With Love Market & Café, Los Angeles Community Action Network, TRUST South LA, National Health Foundation, and local growers like South Central Farmers Cooperative. Between April 2021 through February 2022, this program generated approximately \$177,000 into the local economy. A future version of this program is to connect corner stores to local urban growers for produce procurement as well as build farm stands.

Conclusion

CalFresh is an essential resource. Navigating CalFresh should not be a burden for participants. This project allowed us to listen to the community about the barriers they face with CalFresh and develop ways to overcome them. By integrating the recommendations with important context, this report provides an in-depth and innovative understanding of how CalFresh works and illustrates opportunities to improve the CalFresh experience. To implement these improvements, local administrators and stakeholders must meet the needs, conditions, cultures, and languages of our diverse communities.

This report is intended to use community-informed recommendations as a common starting point between CalFresh and the populations it serves. Together, DPSS, systems of care stakeholders, and community members can engage collaboratively. We can create a responsive community food ecosystem with universal access to fresh and nutritious foods in local neighborhoods across Los Angeles County.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic, this is an urgent matter as disasters disproportionately increase the need for food and other assistance for already vulnerable populations. Improved relationships between the community and the systems intended to support them can mean the difference between life and death. Since the very beginning of the pandemic, advocates worked closely with federal and state partners to ensure appropriate waivers were passed and that services were streamlined. This project captured the positive impact of these changes, yet more is needed to further improve the experiences of those seeking food assistance. Ultimately, these improvements will enable us to create a more resilient food system—one that is both responsive and equitable to the needs of our diverse and vibrant region.

“ We would like there to be more signs in the streets [about CalFresh]. We need more outreach in the community and schools when there are parent meetings. At the laundromats, at fairs, at the park.”

– REGION 2, SOUTH LOS ANGELES

“ Service providers need to have more empathy.”

– REGION 3, SAN FERNANDO VALLEY



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ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERS

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Nourish California
Sam's Corner
Skid Row People's Market
South Central Farmers Cooperative
TRUST South LA
United Parents and Students
Western Center on Law and Poverty
With Love Market & Café

BEST START PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Para Los Niños for Region 1: Central East (East LA, South El Monte/El Monte, Southeast LA, and Metro LA)

Community Health Councils for Best Start Region 2: South Los Angeles (Compton, Broadway-Manchester, Watts-Willowbrook, West Athens)

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ABOUT US

The Los Angeles Food Policy Council (LAFPC) works to ensure food is healthy, affordable, fair and sustainable for all. We believe Good Food for All is possible and that all communities deserve access to good food, grown in a way that respects people and the planet. We work to create a local food system free from hunger, rooted in equity and access, supportive of farmers and food workers, and guided by principles of environmental stewardship and regeneration. To accomplish our vision of Good Food for All, we catalyze, coordinate and connect people across the LA region, including government, business and community groups working on food.



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