



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

Tuolumne County Focus Group Summary

Prepared by:

University of California, Division of Agriculture & Natural Resources
Cooperative Extension & Nutrition Policy Institute

In Partnership with:

Amador Tuolumne Community Action Agency Food Bank

Authors:

Cathryn Johnson, Nutrition, Family & Consumer Sciences Advisor
University of California Cooperative Extension, Central Sierra
(Tuolumne, Calaveras, Amador and El Dorado Counties)

Wendi Gosliner, Nutrition Policy Institute

June, 2019

Background

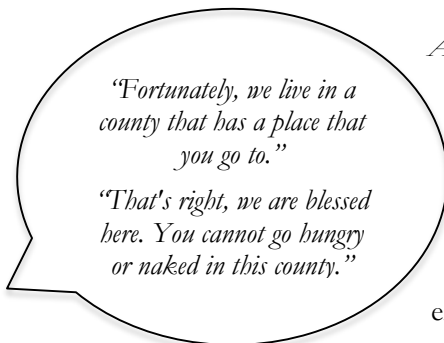
The federal government shutdown from December 22, 2018 – January 25, 2019, the longest in U.S. history, created an unprecedented disruption in issuance of CalFresh benefits, known nationally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or food stamps. Likewise it created an unprecedented and time-sensitive opportunity to gain an understanding of how the level of CalFresh benefits available impacts nutrition and food security in low-income households. As such, the Nutrition Policy Institute in partnership with UC Cooperative Extension Advisors and community agency leaders in four 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. One focus group was held in each of the following counties: Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Tuolumne. 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 Tuolumne County focus group conducted on March 1, 2019 in partnership with the **Amador Tuolumne Community Action Agency Food Bank**. Without the food bank’s significant efforts to support this project, the Tuolumne focus group would not have been possible. A full analysis of findings from all the groups is forthcoming. This focus group focused on three key areas: 1) how participants feed themselves and their families in rural Tuolumne County, 2) perceptions of the CalFresh program, and 3) impacts of the disruption in CalFresh benefits.

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 CalFresh contributes positively, the barriers and challenges they experience with CalFresh, and how the 2019 CalFresh 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 CalFresh

Participants focused on challenges that fell into two areas—access to food and uncertainty about the CalFresh program.



Accessing Sufficient Food

The charitable food network (including the food bank, local food pantries, and soup kitchens) was described as a key part of participants’ food security, critically important to filling gaps that CalFresh benefits did not cover. Some participants relied more heavily on CalFresh benefits than others, but none described their CalFresh benefits as sufficient to ensure they had enough to eat throughout the entire month.

Discussion of food access was closely tied to issues of reliable transportation. The costs of owning a car, paying for gas, and having to navigate snowy roads were the main barriers to physically accessing both the charitable food network and retail grocery stores. Participants did not mention any forms of public transportation as a method they used to access food, and discussed the difficulties of balancing food costs with transportation costs. The group was generally aware of the need to make price comparisons when shopping and to visit different stores to access sales or competitive prices, but they also described careful consideration of the cost of gas to get to and from multiple stores in different areas of the county. Relatedly, while the charitable food network was described very favorably, it was also mentioned that accessing charitable food was difficult for people who live far

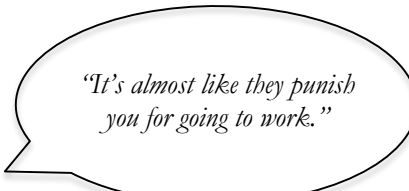
from distributions or who work during the distribution hours. A few participants relied on friends or neighbors for transportation to access food, or to get to work.

Stretching foods to last until the end of month was a common concern, and participants shared a range of strategies including buying in bulk and freezing, using up pantry items, and producing some of their own food to supplement their budgets. One participant described no longer needing to purchase eggs since acquiring laying hens, although another participant mentioned that high water costs had made growing vegetables prohibitive.

Lack of Confidence in the CalFresh Program

Participants expressed multiple issues with the CalFresh program prior to the January/February disruption in benefits. Many described feeling disrespected by the program, and there was a lack of trust that the program considered their best interests.

Specific complaints included not being able to communicate with those who issue benefits, benefit amounts so low that they were not worthwhile (\$15 a month was described as a “slap in the face”), and the fact that the program did not realistically account for the cost of living for employed participants. One participant described the struggle to afford both food and the gas necessary to make it to work and stay employed.



“It’s almost like they punish you for going to work.”

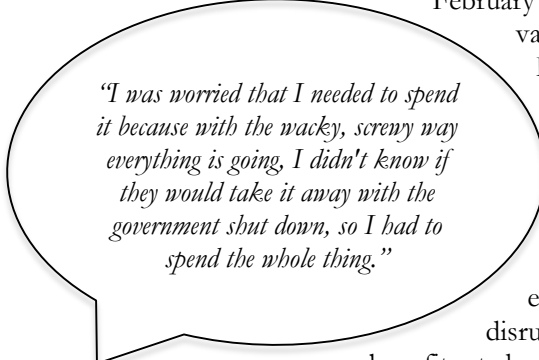
The sentiments of mistrust for the CalFresh program were generally directed towards the government at large, rather than specific governmental entities or representatives. Participants did not distinguish between local case workers, the California CalFresh program, or the federal government. One participant expressed gratitude for the food provided by the CalFresh program, but this gratitude was mixed with fear that benefits would be lost.

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

Most participants had heard the reason for the benefit disruption, but did not trust that benefits would return to normal in the following months. Some participants chose to spend all or part of their



“I was worried that I needed to spend it because with the wacky, screwy way everything is going, I didn’t know if they would take it away with the government shut down, so I had to spend the whole thing.”

February benefits in January, but their reasons for that choice varied. Some understood the benefits were intended for February, but did not trust that the money would not be taken back at a later time. Some had heard of past experiences where extra benefits distributed in error had been taken back and feared that would happen in this case, no matter what the official statements said. As one participant said, “I have also heard that about the food stamp...if you don’t use em, you lose em.” Some misunderstood the purpose of the benefit disruption and thought their recent appeal to increase their

benefit rate had been approved.

It is notable that none of the participants voiced an understanding that without the disrupted schedule, they may not have received February benefits until the shutdown ended.

Successful Communications: Some participants heard the correct reason for the extra benefit distribution from news sources or family members, while multiple participants called the local social services office and heard a message explaining the disruption. The pre-recorded message seemed to be a

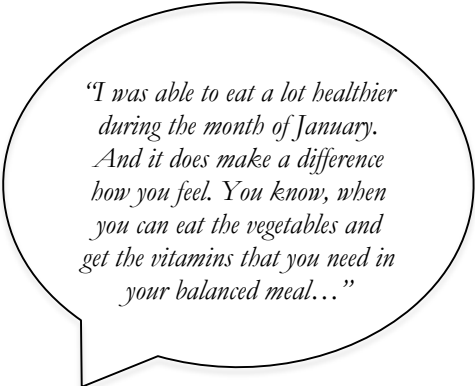
relatively successful way to reach many participants, given that not everyone has reliable internet access and that participants were used to contact with the local social services office via phone.

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:

Some in the group were able to purchase healthier foods, such as vegetables, as a result of using the extra funds distributed in January. They appreciated the impact these foods had on their health and overall wellbeing. Some of the participants also described relief in not having to worry as much about spending in the month of January. They appreciated being able to purchase preferred foods without as much stress.



"I was able to eat a lot healthier during the month of January. And it does make a difference how you feel. You know, when you can eat the vegetables and get the vitamins that you need in your balanced meal..."

How the long time between benefits was challenging:

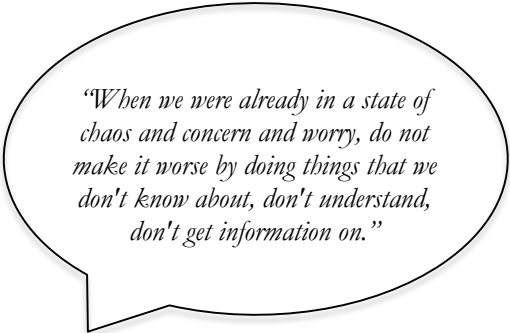
Many in the group described feeling stress from the longer duration without benefits in February, as well as tighter household budgets and the need to stretch their food dollars further than usual. Some participants had to rely more heavily on the charitable food network or other emergency sources of food during that time, and some participants had to purchase foods they considered less healthy. The group also described significant stress and emotional upset resulting from the uncertainty of not knowing when (or if) they would receive benefits again. In the words of a participant, "I was stressed because I didn't know what's going on."

Participants who had to stretch their food dollars for weeks longer than usual during February described a financial "domino effect" put into motion by the benefit disruption. Some used other sources of money in order to be able to afford food during that time, including money set aside for gas, toiletries, and other non-food household essentials. As a result, they were "playing catch up" with their household budgets in March.

Participants' recommendations for CalFresh

Participants overall felt that the CalFresh program could be improved in two key ways:

1. CalFresh beneficiaries could be treated with more dignity by the agencies that fund the benefits, and receive more communication from those that distribute the benefits.
2. The CalFresh program could be more realistic in setting benefit levels that cover household food costs, and more responsive to adjusting benefit levels for households with variable income levels



"When we were already in a state of chaos and concern and worry, do not make it worse by doing things that we don't know about, don't understand, don't get information on."

Overall, the participants of this focus group reported that even small changes in the timing of when CalFresh benefits are distributed may impact them. They felt a need for more open communication when such disturbances occurred, and asked to be treated with consideration given that any changes in the CalFresh program could affect their lives in significant ways. They also described the ways in which they struggled to balance transportation and food costs, and illustrated how food security is related to health and stress among low-income residents of Tuolumne County.