VOICE of OC

HEALTH & WELLNESS

Millions of Californians Are About to Lose COVID Food Benefits; OC Braces for ‘Food Cliff’

BY **HOSAM ELATTAR** 4 hours ago Why you can trust Voice of OC

Residents pick up food during a food pantry drive in Huntington Beach during the summer of 2020. Credit: JULIE LEOPO, Voice of OC

Officials at food banks and pantries throughout California are worried about what they say is an incoming wave of residents in desperate need of food when additional federal benefits dry up in a couple months.

It comes after the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted what many community advocates and groups already knew: the hardest hit populations were already struggling to meet basic needs – rent, medical care and food.

And the pandemic increased demand for those basic needs throughout the Golden State – especially for food after the virus shutdowns caused millions of people to lose their jobs.

“Some households will go from receiving $281 to $23 – many of them are older adults,” Lauren Lathan Reid, communications director the California Association of Food Banks, wrote in a Monday email. “The California Department of Social Services has said that, on average, households will lose $261 per month”

By the end of March, millions of Californians will lose the increased amount of CalFresh benefits – food assistance for low income families – that helped them buy the groceries they need amid the COVID pandemic.

And the loss is coming amid high inflation costs.

Groups that work to combat hunger and increase food accessibility across the state like the California Association of Food Banks and Nourish California are ringing alarm bells about the incoming spike in food demand for 5 million Californians who depend on the assistance.

“We’re extremely concerned about the end of emergency allotments, states that have already ended theirs saw increased hunger and longer lines at food banks,” Reid said.

“Most food banks have been serving an increase in demand since the onset of the pandemic.”

The end of the COVID allotments will result in a $500 million cut to food assistance statewide every month – money, Reid said, that would have supported community markets and boosted local economies.

Orange County’s Impending ‘Food Cliff’

Orange County is heading towards what experts call a “Food Cliff.”

“Families are going to lose their enhanced benefit, they’re going to lose their buying power for food right at a moment where food is more expensive than it ever has been,” Claudia Keller, CEO of the Second Harvest Food Bank, said in a Thursday phone interview .

“The confluence of those two things – we’re referring to it in our space as a food cliff.”

Local food bank leaders say about a quarter of a million Orange County residents will lose roughly $100 in increased benefits even as inflation and the local need for food continues to remain significantly high.

“That’s a huge number of people,” Mark Lowry, director of the OC Food Bank said in a phone interview last Thursday.

“At a time where you are experiencing the highest inflation in 40 years and the cost of food is tracking higher than the inflationary cost of other consumer goods so it’s really a one two punch for many, many more extended families.”

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People line up for food at the Santa Ana Unified School District office on Nov. 19, 2022. Credit: HOSAM ELATTAR, Voice of OC

Food bank leaders like Lowry and Keller say the impending cuts means Orange County’s neediest residents will lose about $30 million in food spending a month.

And the need could be so great, there’s not much the food banks can do.

“The hole is so big that there is nothing that we can possibly do to fill it,” Lowry said.

He added they would like to turn to the government to fix the problem, but are also sensitive to the fact that the state is looking at a $25 billion deficit.

Local food banks and their network of food pantries were forced to adapt to the COVID pandemic and the skyrocketed need for food that came with it. They started up drive-thru pantries and the food banks transitioned to buying and growing their own food.

This was possible through donations from the community and the government support, which now seems to be tapering off.

People looking to donate to or volunteer with local organizations like Second Harvest Food Bank and the OC Food Bank can do so at the links provided here.

For food assistance options, visit 211 OC.

Cars lined up at the Seva Collective food distribution in Santa Ana on Nov. 19, 2022. Credit: HOSAM ELATTAR, Voice of OC

The end of the enhanced benefits led the Orange County Social Services Agency to set up a call with local food banks and groups that work to end hunger in OC, Lowry said.

He added that together they are drafting a letter to the people impacted by the change and nonprofits on the ground to warn them and point them to resources that might help them.

Officials from the Orange County's Social Services Agency did not respond to questions from the Voice of OC.

In California, 8 million people are food insecure with Black and Latino communities experiencing greater levels of hunger, according to the California Association of Food Banks.

In November 2022, there were 5,011,579 Californians receiving CalFresh benefits, according to data from the State's Social Services Department.

And 300,376 of them were Orange County residents.

OC has a population of about 3.2 million people, according to census data.

End of CalFresh COVID Benefits

Groups like Lowry's across the country had hoped for a gradual percentage decrease in enhanced federal COVID benefits for families on food stamps over time so people could adjust.

Since March 2020, households on food stamps got at least an extra $95 in benefits every month after Congress approved increased emergency allotments because of the COVID-19 pandemic

But the passage of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023, those enhanced benefits are coming to an end in February with the last increased benefits being issued in March, according to the California Department of Social Services.

That means by April, the extra money OC residents who receive CalFresh benefits were getting in the past three years will stop rolling in.

"It will go back to pre-pandemic levels," Keller said. "That's a steep, steep reduction so we anticipate the need will go up."

The end of the increased benefits isn't the only factor food bank leaders point to as causing the expected increase in the need for food.

They also point to food inflation, increased gas prices, heating bills going up amid the cold weather and housing costs. People are also experiencing an increase in benefits theft like EBT skimming.

"Our most vulnerable families are having their budgets squeezed literally from all sides," Keller said. "You can't pay 80% of your rent, you can't pay 70% of your car payment, but you can scrimp on your food budget."

Simultaneously, the outpour of financial support food banks received in the beginning of the pandemic from philanthropists as well as millions in government aid is drying up while the need for food in the county remains higher than pre-pandemic levels.

[***Read:*** Orange County’s Food Demand Remains High Two Years Into Pandemic]

“People aren’t wearing masks like they did two years ago, they’re not wearing gloves like they were two and a half years ago and they’re not using hand sanitizer like they were two and a half years ago,” Lowry said.

“And to some degree, people, the general public, private philanthropy, the county, the state, the federal government, believe that this crisis has diminished – that it is over.”

Volunteers from The Power of One Foundation direct traffic and load groceries during the drive through food pantry at Santa Ana College on April 11, 2020. Credit: JULIE LEOPO, Voice of OC

Bracing For the Food Cliff

Reid said her association is advocating at the state level to ensure food banks get the resources needed to meet the looming increase in need.

“We’re asking the State to continue to support the CalFood program which provides money for food banks to purchase California produced foods. This not only helps keep warehouses stocked, it allows food banks to choose the foods that meet their community’s needs and supports California farmers and food economy,” she wrote.

Local food bank leaders are calling on people to donate.

Meanwhile, Keller said they’re looking to buy more food and to grow more food.

“We are working on a 90-day food plan that includes things like produce and milk and eggs to make sure that we are as prepared as we can be for the increased needs that we anticipate will see in the spring,” she said.

“We hope we are wrong.”

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