

Many OC families reaching ‘food cliff’ as pandemic assistance with buying food ends



Laura Perez of Lake Forest shops for groceries at South County Outreach, a food distribution center, in Irvine on Friday, February 24, 2023. The additional emergency money CalFresh recipients were receiving as part of pandemic assistance is ending, meaning many OC residents will have less money to spend on feeding families. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By **HEATHER MCREA** | hmcrea@scng.com and **ERIKA I. RITCHIE** | eritchie@scng.com | Orange County Register
 PUBLISHED: February 24, 2023 at 5:14 p.m. | UPDATED: February 24, 2023 at 6:23 p.m.

Nearly 300,000 Orange County households will no longer see a pandemic bump in benefits that has been helping with buying food for nearly three years.

In March, federal funds added in response to the declared coronavirus emergency will end, reducing the benefits provided through the state’s CalFresh program by at least \$95 – and for many families, the estimated loss will be about \$170.

No recipients will lose their [CalFresh benefits](#), only the extra bump that was delivered in a separate payment in the second half of the month. In Orange County, it had been an extra infusion of about \$30 million a month.

CalFresh, the food assistance program, is based on income and other factors and is open to families and individuals, including many seniors, who rely on supplemental aid to purchase food. Some older adults could see their benefits falling from \$281 to \$23.

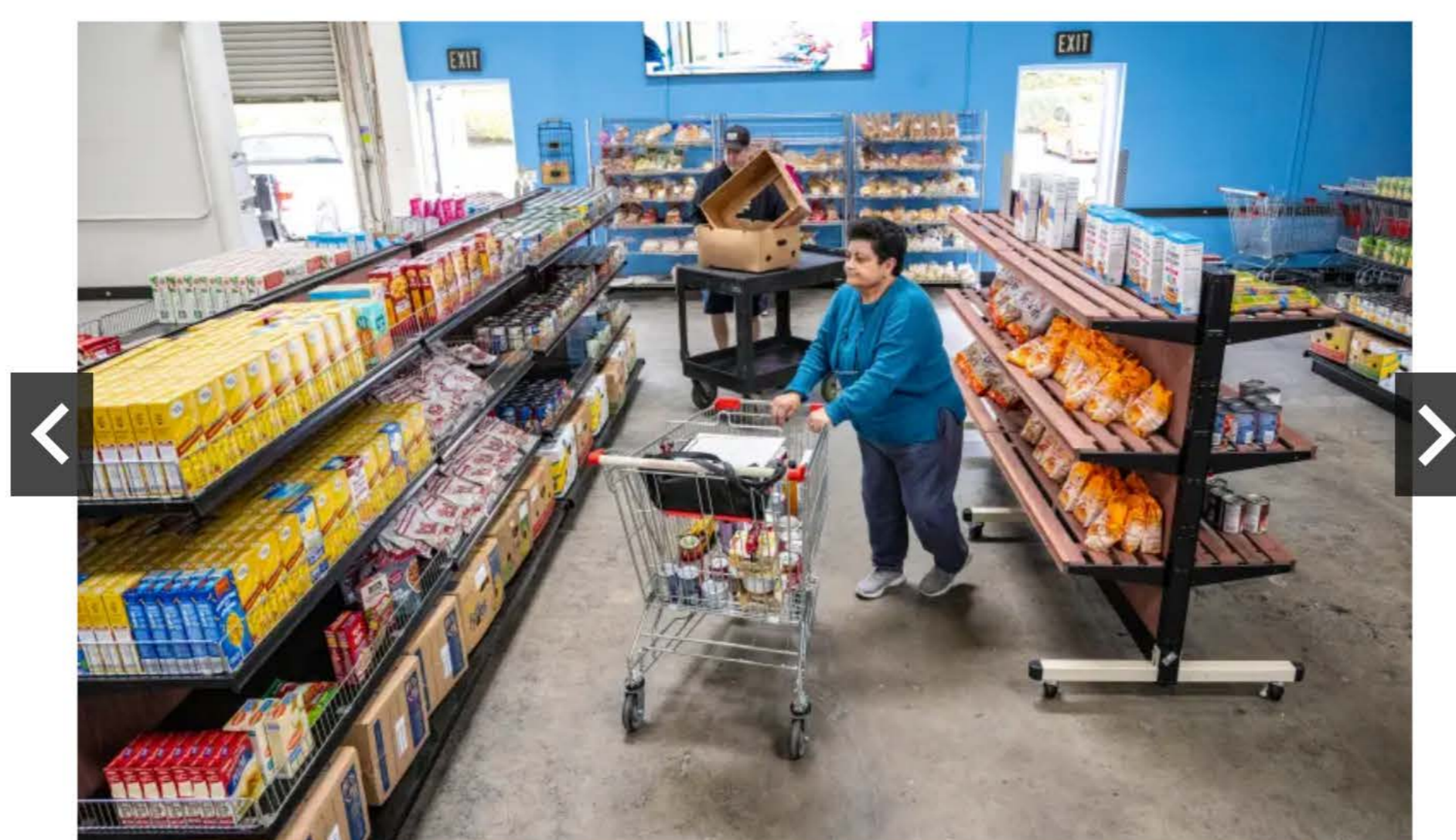
The pending reduction in benefits has been dubbed a “food cliff” by some, and Orange County agencies and food banks have been preparing to help soften the landing. Though they knew it was coming, officials only learned after December’s congressional vote on its next spending bill that the payments would stop in March.

And then it was go-time to get the word out so county residents know the other help that might be out there for them, said Jamie Cargo, spokesperson for the county’s Social Services Agency, which [administers the CalFresh program](#) locally for the state. The agency, along with CalOptima, which provides health insurance to OC residents most in need, and nonprofits fighting hunger in the county have participated in the outreach.

“We can acknowledge this is a tough time for folks especially to lose these benefits,” Cargo said. “It is not the best time for this to be happening. We are all trying to come together and support the best we can with what we have.”

Cargo said SSA is encouraging recipients to call its offices to review their incomes and expenses because people might be eligible for other options for additional benefits – that goes for any residents who might be struggling in the current economy.

“Call us, tell us your situation. Let’s see if you are eligible,” Cargo said. “We see the need, we want to do the best to help folks.”



1 of 5

Laura Perez of Lake Forest shops for groceries at South County Outreach, a food distribution center, in Irvine on Friday, February 24, 2023. The additional emergency money CalFresh recipients were receiving as part of pandemic assistance is ending, meaning many OC residents will have less money to spend on feeding families. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)

The reduction in benefits comes amid rising food costs from inflation and lingering impacts on families from the pandemic, officials said.

“The increased costs of groceries, gas and rents, to name a few areas that have seen prices go up, strain the budgets of the average family. For families receiving assistance benefits, those increases cause further struggles,” SSA Director An Tran said. “Our vulnerable populations will feel the loss of the emergency allotments more acutely now.”

At the Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County, its leaders are hearing from the food pantries they supply that the amount of people looking for food has already been increasing.

“Some are already reporting double the amount of people,” said Claudia Keller, CEO of Second Harvest, which supplies about 300 pantries on a weekly or monthly basis. “We started seeing the need creep up in January.”

Before the pandemic, about 249,000 people countywide were seeking help with getting enough food, Keller said. During the pandemic, the number went up to 650,000. Once impacts from the pandemic began to wane and people were getting jobs back, the numbers dipped down toward 300,000 again.

“What we didn’t plan for was food inflation, increased gas and housing prices,” Keller said, adding that present numbers are up to 371,000 a month looking for food at the pantries. “When these enhanced benefits go away, it will make it worse again.”

With the inflation and food supply chain tightening, Keller said Second Harvest turned to buying 60% of its food. Instead of just buying cases of cans, the food bank is now buying pallets of food. But it has also been able to grow a lot more of its own produce on its farm in Irvine. It is buying milk and eggs from dairies and farms in Chino.

“We’re also stocking up on non-perishable products,” Keller said. “We’re not going to be able to food bank our way out of this, but we’ll be as ready as we can be.”

“We’ll need people to step up – manufacturers and donors,” she said.

Helping people afford fresh, quality food helps improve their health outcomes, said Michael Hunn, CEO of CalOptima, which administers health insurance for about 973,000 county residents. “The food you eat is connected to your health.”

With reduced benefits and rising inflation, people might have to make the decision between paying rent and what food they buy, he said. So the agency has programs offered in various languages and geared toward different cultures on how to choose healthy but economical food items and stretch purchases with recipes and cooking lessons.

The agency is also partnering with the county SSA office to coordinate outreach because they serve many of the same people. Many residents who receive health insurance through CalOptima are also CalFresh beneficiaries – or could be – so the two agencies have created a system for transferring people calling in for services between the two as needed with a “warm handoff” so they reach the right people, Hunn said.

The Laguna Food Pantry in Laguna Beach, which used to serve people in a sort of mom-and-pop general store setting, now hands out food in its parking lot where people drive up to receive boxes full of nutritious items.

“We do anticipate it will be a huge blow to the families we serve,” said Anne Belyea, executive director. “If the reduction is as much as anticipated, it’s a double whammy when people are already hurting from the pandemic and inflation has prices high. When their funds are cut, it’s detrimental. It’s a huge amount of money they’ve grown accustomed to.”

The pantry used to serve about 80-100 families; now, that’s gone up to more than 200 a day.

“Last month we were at 216 families a day; now, it’s up to 234 families,” Belyea said. “We’re seeing a wide range of people from different backgrounds. People who never needed help in their lives.

“We’ll continue to do all we can in looking for donations, purchasing opportunities, or vendors who can give us discounts,” she said.

Belyea also this week submitted her request for grant assistance to the city of Laguna Beach. The pantry leases the land it’s on from the city, and in past years, it was among those groups awarded a community assistance grant. Belyea this year asked for \$25,000. Last year, the city gave the pantry \$12,000.

“We’ve been very blessed we’ve been so embraced by the community,” she said. “It’s such a basic need to have food.”

Find resources and help at findhelp.org. Reach SSA’s call center at 800-281-9799 or find out more at mybenefitscalwin.org.