VOICE of OC

HEALTH & WELLNESS

Orange County Seniors Are Expected to Be Hit Hardest by Incoming Food Cliff

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

People line up hours before a food distribution starts on Feb. 10, 2023. Credit: JULIE LEOPO, Voice of OC

In about a month's time, a looming food cliff is expected to rock Orange County and the rest of the state – driven by a decrease in food benefits and historic inflation costs – making it harder for millions of Californinans to feed themselves.

And some of the residents most at risk are seniors – a population that is expected to surge in OC in the upcoming decades.

"The expectation is that it's seniors that are going to be most dramatically impacted by this and they're probably the least resilient and capable of weathering the storm," Mark Lowry, director of the OC Food Bank, said in a Monday phone interview.

After the increased federal funding ends, some households across the state will go from getting $281 in food assistance every month to $23 and many of them will be older adults – a group that received one of the biggest boosts in benefits, according to food bank leaders across the state.

It comes after the COVID-19 pandemic greatly limited food access for older adults, he added.

“With COVID, there were, of course, health risks associated with people leaving their homes. And it was often seniors that were most at risk,” he said.

“What an ethical dilemma to be faced with when you’re listening to doctors saying, don’t leave the comfort of your home. And oftentimes, to get the food that you need to stay healthy. You need to leave the comfort of your home.”

Meals on Wheels OC and their volunteers stepped up during the pandemic to deliver prepared nutritionally balanced meals to adults 60 years and older stuck at home in 20 cities in north and central OC.

Holly Hagler, Meals on Wheel OC president and CEO, said in a Tuesday phone interview that prior to the pandemic they were feeding an estimated 10,000 people annually through home deliveries and at senior centers. At the height of the pandemic, it shot up to 15,000 people.

“It will be very hard on older adults who have lower incomes and who live on fixed incomes,” Hagler said about the decrease in benefits. “We’re very concerned about the impact – the loss of these benefits. We’re concerned about the food cliff.”

The food pantry brings a diverse crowd to the distribution in Santa Ana on Feb. 10, 2023. Credit: JULIE LEOPO, Voice of OC

Heading Towards the Food Cliff

Officials from food banks across California have been ringing alarm bells about the wave of residents in desperate need of food when additional federal COVID food benefits dry up by the end of March.

This means millions of California residents are expected to lose their increased COVID allocation of CalFresh food stamp money – food benefits for low income families – that they've received for the past three years in order to be able to get groceries.

[***Read:*** Millions of Californians Are About to Lose COVID Food Benefits; OC Braces for 'Food Cliff]

Lowry said senior enrollment in the CalFresh program substantially grew in the last two years by 42% from June 2021 to January 2023 with help from a public awareness campaign aimed at increasing participation.

"In June 2021, there were 54,404 seniors enrolled in CalFresh in Orange County and on January 1 of this year, that number had grown to 77,367," he said reviewing data.

Claudia Keller, CEO of the Second Harvest Food Bank, said in a Monday interview that seniors are a critical population when it comes to food and nutritional security.

"They're often limited not only in their budget, but in their mobility and their ability to get out to food pantries or supermarkets," she said.

There are other factors as well.

"Many of them have medical conditions that constrain what they can and cannot eat. Many of them may have medical prescriptions that dictate what they can and cannot eat. And those foods are not always readily available in the emergency food system," Keller said.

"If you layer in cultural food preferences, geography, mobility and the fixed income, your lane becomes very narrow."

She said the food cliff will only make things worse.

"Their budget is being cut for food, basically and we know that food is the most fungible part of a budget," Keller said. "That's usually what ends up happening to folks that are food insecure, but for seniors on a very fixed income, it can be very acute."

Volunteers work a prep line and bag groceries for the public lined up outside the gates of Latino Health Access on Feb. 10, 2023. Credit: JULIE LEOPO, Voice of OC

Jim McAleer, co-chair of the Orange County Aging Services Collaborative, also said in a Monday phone interview the decrease in food benefits and the inflation costs will hit the county's seniors hard.

"When you talk about taking enhancements away, particularly food related, it's not just that, 'gosh, I can't buy as much at the grocery store,' seniors have trouble getting to and from the grocery store," McAleer said.

"It has many hidden impacts beyond just reducing the amount that you can spend on food. And the overall rise in cost in general has hit seniors so much harder than anyone else."

According to the county's strategic plan for aging, the food insecurity rate for low income adults aged 65 and older pre-pandemic was roughly 30% – with Black and Latino households experiencing two to three times the nutrition insecurity compared to white households.

Between 113,000 to 200,000 older OC adults may not be getting enough to eat due to economic reasons, according to the Report on Aging in Orange County 2022.

Currently, about 16% of OC's 3.2 million population are residents 65-years and older, according to the census.

Resources for Seniors

The Community Action Partnership of OC, which oversees the OC Food Bank, runs a senior food box program that serves about 24,000 people every month in the county as well as parts of Riverside and Los Angeles counties.

"We provide nutritionally balanced food boxes, designed by nutritionists, gerontologists and dietitians specifically to meet the nutritional needs of vulnerable seniors," Lowry said.

The boxes come from the U.S Department of Agriculture through the California Social Services Agency to Orange County.

The residents enrolled in the program, ages 60-years and older, can pick up the boxes at over 70 sites in the county, Lowry said.

Click here to see Community Action Partnership of OC resources & 211 OC.

But not every senior in need can pick up food.

For seniors that are homebound, groups like Meals On Wheels OC and their counterpart in South County, Age Well Services will bring food to their door.

Currently, Meals On Wheels are delivering three meals a day Monday through Friday to 1,000 people. There are 300 older adults on the waitlist, according to Hagler.

Beyond providing balanced meals, Hagler said they also have case managers who can connect with the seniors they serve – many of whom may be isolated or lonely. Drivers also check-in with the seniors.

Both groups also partner with senior centers around the county to provide hot meals allowing older adults to break bread with others.

Click here to see the centers in North & Central OC and here for participating centers in South County.

Volunteers prep grocery bags for the Feb. 10, 2023 Latino Health Access food drive in Santa Ana. Credit: JULIE LEOPO, Voice of OC

Local pantries are also serving older adults.

About a third of the people that pick up food at the weekly distribution held by Latino Health Access are seniors, according to a Tuesday email from the group's spokeswoman Maria Cervantes.

They served over 1,000 seniors aged 62-years and older last year.

"Many live by themselves, and the food distribution provides an easy and accessible option for them to access healthy produce. We also know that seniors are low-income and have very little disposable income," Cervantes wrote.

Leaders with Latino Health Access's food distribution have said that without additional funding they are unsure of how long they'll be able to keep doing their pantry.

[***Read:*** Latino Health Access' Weekly Distribution Feels the Squeeze Ahead of California's Food Cliff]

They are not the only ones feeling the squeeze ahead of the food cliff.

The Meals on Wheels program, which is funded in part by a grant from the California Department on Aging allocated by the Orange County Board of Supervisors, partnering cities and community donations, is not seeing the level of funding they saw at the beginning of the pandemic.

"It is insufficient to meet the needs of Orange County at-risk older adults due to the impacts of inflation, growth in the senior population, the looming food cliff, and the number of older adults who needed our services previously and found them during the pandemic," Hagler wrote in a Tuesday email about the funding.

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