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## Increasing Food Stamp Access in California

One of the highest priorities of the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) is to increase access to food stamps for millions of low-income Californians. We are engaged in several outreach efforts that has expanded food stamp participation to more than 2.3 million eligible individuals and families. While statistics of the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) show California among those states with low food stamp participation rates, CDSS contends that FNS underestimates California's food stamp program participation.

*FNS' methodology does not accurately account for California's approximately 1.2 million Supplementary Security Income (SSI) recipients who receive a food supplement "cash-out" benefit instead of actual food stamps. Eighty percent of the SSI population is eligible for food stamp benefits but are not reflected in the FNS tally. If FNS counted the SSI population, California's participation rate would increase by as much as 10 percent, resulting in a participation rate of more than 60 percent – which is in closer alignment with that of other large states such as Florida (62 percent) and New York (63 percent).*

### **Outreach Accomplishments & Ongoing Initiatives:**

- ✚ From 2004 – 2008, there has been a dramatic increase in the non-assistance food stamps (NAFS) caseload, which consists primarily of recipients who do not receive cash assistance. The average monthly number of households increased by 56.3 percent (from 400,116 to 624,417).
- ✚ Enacted new legislation (AB 433) in 2008 to allow 40,000 more income eligible families to qualify for food stamp benefits through expanded categorical eligibility that eases resource restrictions.
- ✚ In 2007, doubled the Food Stamp Access and Improvement program, in partnership with California Department of Public Health, the California Association of Food Banks and the Central Valley Health Network. Sixty subcontractors in 27 counties and a first-time network of health centers are engaged in integrated and existing outreach activities targeted at the most neediest populations. In 2008, 15 new subcontractors were added to program, including agencies that provide a live, toll-free Food Stamp Information Line.
- ✚ In 2007, achieved a food stamp payment error rate below the national average, reinforcing important quality control measures while increasing food stamp participation.
- ✚ California is one of four states allowing the use of an Electronic Benefits Transfer card to purchase prepared meals for homeless, elderly and disabled food stamp recipients through a Food Stamp Restaurant Program. This unique program enables increased access to the poorest individuals who may lack necessary cooking facilities.

- ✚ Implemented a simplification and modernization process that allows certain Food Stamps reporting and recertification interviews to be conducted by phone in lieu of face-to-face, as previously required. CDSS has also requested a waiver from the Food and Nutrition Service to expand the face-to-face exemption to include certain types of households that may experience difficulty in getting to a local office.
- ✚ Streamlined the Food Stamp application process by developing an online application that enables easier, faster access to benefits. Four counties are using this process and others are poised to develop systems in coming months.
- ✚ Seeking to improve eligibility determination and access for an estimated 4,000 foster youth who “age out” of foster care each year. By simplifying the Food Stamp application process, California will become the first state in the nation to employ this process to assist foster youths after waiver approval is received from the Food Nutrition Services.
- ✚ The 2008-09 total Food Stamp Program budget is \$3.7 billion.