

Notice of major policy updates

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Changes to SNAP affect low-income college students

Changes to federal policy make it harder for college students to get food;
California takes steps to make it easier.

San Diego, CA, June 2026 – Starting on June 1, 2026, low-income Californians facing hunger may find it more difficult to get food through the federal SNAP program, known locally as CalFresh. Policy changes at the federal level went into effect last November that ended a work requirement waiver for Able-bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDS), which California has used since 2008 to make it easier for low-income adults to get food assistance through the federal government. Starting June 1st, all adults between the ages of 18 and 64 must work or volunteer a minimum of 80 hours per month to receive CalFresh benefits. If the work requirement is not met, benefits will be capped at a total of 3 months within a 3-year period. The ABAWD rule does not apply to the following:

- Individuals under the age of 18 or over the age of 64.
- Those caring for a dependent child under the age of 14.
- An individual with a physical or mental disability that makes them unfit for employment.
- Pregnant mothers.
- Persons who identify as Indian, Urban Indian, or California Indian under the Indian Health Care Improvement Act.

What the experts are saying: Experts are concerned that this rule change will put over 665,000 Californians at risk of losing CalFresh benefits. For reference, **1 in 4 San Diegans** report experiencing food insecurity and **43% of community college students** report not having enough to eat. Critics label work requirements as *red tape traps* that disproportionately affect low-wage workers, seasonal farmworkers, gig workers, parents, post-secondary students, seniors, and those who are unsheltered, many of whom may have irregular or limited work hours or lack access to work opportunities.

The reassertion of work requirements and time limits for CalFresh will not erase the need for food assistance. CalFresh currently accounts for 52% of all food assistance in San Diego. The disenrollment resulting from this rule change will burden local food banks and food pantries, which are already overtaxed and currently account for only 15% of all food assistance in the region.

What California is doing for students: An existing federal waiver for campus-based Programs that Increase Employability (LPIEs) makes it easier for post-secondary students to be exempt from CalFresh/SNAP work requirements. Any accredited college or university may apply for one of their majors or programs to be considered for this waiver. Students in approved programs are automatically exempt from the work requirement if they are enrolled at least part-time.

California is making the process even easier for students and institutions. Effective June 1st, *all associate and bachelor's programs offered at any California Community College, California State University, or University of California are considered LPIEs*, effectively making all students enrolled at least part-time eligible for CalFresh without a time limit if they meet the financial requirements for the program.

What is CalFresh?

CalFresh, known nationally as SNAP, is a federal food assistance program that provides monthly benefits to low-income individuals and families to purchase nontaxable food from grocery stores. Recipients receive an EBT card, similar to a debit card, which is preloaded with a monthly allotment of funds that may be swiped at a participating retailer's checkout and may only be used to purchase food. In special cases such as homelessness or disability, recipients may be able to use their benefits to purchase meals at participating restaurants.

CalFresh/SNAP is the most effective tool available for fighting hunger. In the San Diego region, the program provides an estimated 15 million meals per year to food-insecure San Diegans.

The program is authorized by the United States Congress through the Farm Bill and administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

About Wesley House Student Residence

Wesley House Student Residence aims to break the cycle of poverty and build strong communities by supporting access to higher education through affordable housing and support services. The organization breaks barriers to higher education experienced by low-income post-secondary students by ensuring their basic needs are met and providing access to resources designed to encourage self-sufficiency. Wesley House operates the only post-secondary student food pantry in San Diego that is not attached to an educational institution. Wesley House also provides CalFresh application assistance specifically for post-secondary students.

Many Wesley House students have experienced one or more of the following: homelessness, incarceration, transition out of foster care, and/or being the first in their families to attend a college or university. Wesley House provides these students with a safe place to live and study, and access to a wide array of housing and support services designed to ensure they can focus on their studies and persist in their education.

Wesley House currently serves over 2,000 students.

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Sources: Hope Center for Student Basic Needs; San Diego Hunger Coalition, Western Center on Law & Poverty, California Legislative Analyst's Office, Live Well San Diego.

Please contact Joe Shumate at joseph@sdwesleyhouse.org or 619-616-7600 for more information or to arrange for interviews. Photos available at sdwesleyhouse.org/press-room.

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