
SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Anna Caballero, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

AB 777 (Celeste Rodriguez) - Food assistance: disasters: utilities

Version: July 2, 2025

Urgency: No

Hearing Date: August 25, 2025

Policy Vote: E,U&C. 16-0, HUMAN S. 5-0

Mandate: Yes

Consultant: Ashley Ames

Bill Summary: This bill would require the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) to establish any memoranda of understanding (MOU) or other data sharing agreements necessary to direct utilities to provide data to the Department of Social Services (CDSS) to maximize the food assistance available pursuant to state law.

Fiscal Impact:

- Unknown but potentially significant ongoing cost pressures (General Fund, federal funds, and local funds) due to an increased probability that eligible recipients will utilize available food assistance benefits as a result of the MOU or other data sharing agreements promulgated as a result of this bill.
- Unknown but potentially significant one-time and ongoing costs to CDSS to establish and participate in any data sharing agreements, maintain dedicated points of contact with utilities, and submit the required report to the Legislature.
- The CPUC anticipates any costs would be minor and absorbable.

Background:

CalFresh. CalFresh is California's version of the federal SNAP, an entitlement program that provides eligible households with federally funded monthly benefits to purchase food. CalFresh food benefits are 100 percent federally funded. CalFresh administration costs are funded with 50 percent federal funds, 35 percent General Fund, and 15 percent county funds, except for state-mandated program changes. CalFresh food benefits are issued through an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card which cardholders can use at point-of-sale terminals authorized by the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Recipients can buy groceries but are not allowed to purchase "hot foods" or nonfood items. Grocers and other retailers are paid directly by the federal government for the dollar value of purchases made with CalFresh food benefits. Monthly benefits per household vary based on household size, income, and deductible living expenses—with larger households generally receiving more benefits than smaller households and relatively higher-income households generally receiving fewer benefits than lower-income households. The average benefits in 2024 was \$279 a month for all households, \$496 for households with children, and \$166 for households with older adults.

In addition to standard CalFresh there are also pilot programs and related programs to help Californians in similar positions. For example, SUNBucks, is a program that provides an eligible family with additional cash aid for groceries in the summer months when children are out of school. Families are eligible for \$120 per child per summer. All of these funds are accessible with an EBT card for recipients that qualify.

Disaster CalFresh. Disaster CalFresh is the state specific version of the federal Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. The program can be enabled after a natural or human-made disaster to help victims purchase food. Before California can offer Disaster CalFresh to victims, a Presidential Major Disaster Declaration for Individual Assistance must be declared, commercial food distribution channels must have been disrupted and restored, and the state must be approved by the federal government to provide it. Disaster areas are defined by the Presidential Declaration.

Disaster CalFresh provides disaster victims with a month's worth of benefits on an EBT card if they are not eligible for the regular CalFresh. For a household to be eligible, a person in that household must (1) live or work in the disaster area, (2) planned to have purchase food during the time of the disaster, (3) have experienced an adverse effect like loss of income or inaccessible resources, (4) and meet the disaster gross income limit which is set by the federal government. Households can receive up to \$292 for a month and do not need to be CalFresh recipients before the disaster.

State law says CDSS must apply for other federal waivers when they request Disaster CalFresh authorization such as the Timely Reporting Waiver, which extends the 10-day deadline for CalFresh recipients to report food loss; the Automated Mass Replacement Waiver, which allows CDSS to replace a certain percentage of a households benefit allotment if they live in the affected area without the recipient applying for a replacement; and the Hot Foods Waiver, which allows victims to temporarily purchase "hot foods" in the affected zip codes. Recent implementation of this law happened during the Los Angeles fires of January 2025. After an emergency declaration was made, CDSS was authorized for Disaster CalFresh and was approved for all of these waivers for 19 zip codes for wildfire impacts and two zip codes for qualifying power outages.

If there is a disaster event but there is not Presidential Declaration with Individual Assistance, mass replacement benefits can still be provided. For example in the event of a power outage or public safety power shutoff. According to CDSS, "food loss may be assumed in situations where the impact of a disaster is widespread, such as major flooding or extensive power outages. Power outages are a very common cause of food loss resulting from a disaster. To assume food loss due to power loss, a majority (50% of more) of residents in a given area must experience a power outage of four hours or more." In the case of a power outage, CDSS or the county human services agency must contact the local utility company directly to learn the zip codes where residents lost power and how long they did not have power.

Proposed Law: This bill would:

1. Require the CPUC and the governing board of local publicly owned electric utilities to establish any MOU or other data sharing agreements necessary to direct electrical corporations, gas corporations, water corporations, and local publicly owned electric utilities to provide data to CDSS to maximize food assistance, as provided. ‘
2. Require CDSS to maximize the amount of assistance requested and received through D-SNAP and all other federally funded nutrition assistance, including

utilizing that provided utility data, in order to timely seek automated mass replacement of specified federally funded nutrition assistance programs.

3. Require CDSS, on or before December 31, 2026, to submit a report to the Legislature related to food assistance, as specified.
4. Require electrical corporations, gas corporations, water corporations, and local publicly owned electric utilities to timely respond to a request for data by the department, to have a dedicated point of contact for CDSS, and to establish any MOU or other data sharing agreements necessary to provide the requested data.
5. Require the CPUC to provide technical assistance to the department, including technical assistance to support the above-described report.
6. Because a violation of a CPUC action implementing the bill's requirements would be a crime, and by imposing additional duties on local publicly owned electric utilities, the bill would impose a state-mandated local program.
 - a. Provide that no reimbursement would be required due to specified reasons.

Related Legislation:

SB 739 (Arreguin, 2025) would require the department to inquire of the ability of each county facility that serves CalFresh participants in the impacted area to provide timely and adequate service.

AB 607 (Gloria, Chapter 501, Statutes of 2017) created the Community Resiliency and Disaster Preparedness Act of 2017 which, among other things, requires CDSS and the county human services agencies, if the President of the United States issues a major disaster declaration for individual assistance, to request to operate a federal D-SNAP for the regions affected by the major disaster. The bill would require the department to offer training on Disaster CalFresh to county human services agencies and others. The bill would require county human services agencies to annually submit to the department a disaster plan, as specified, to ensure there are sufficient resources necessary to continue adequate access to benefits during a disaster.

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