
SENATE COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

Senator Bob Archuleta, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No:	SB 1201	Hearing Date:	4/20/26
Author:	McNerney		
Version:	2/19/26		
Urgency:	No	Fiscal:	Yes
Consultant:	Diego Nelson		

Subject: CalFresh: veteran eligibility

DESCRIPTION

Summary:

This bill requires California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to seek federal approval for two CalFresh waivers for veterans: one to exclude verified job-search costs from countable income, and another to exempt specified veterans from federal time limits and work requirements.

Existing law:

- 1) Establishes the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), administered in California as CalFresh, under Chapter 10 (commencing with Section 18900) of Part 6 of Division 9 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, through which federally funded nutrition assistance benefits are distributed by counties to eligible households. Federal law governs core eligibility rules, including income standards, work registration requirements, time limits for certain able-bodied adults without dependents, and rules governing countable income for purposes of determining eligibility and benefit levels.
- 2) Provides that counties administer CalFresh under the supervision of the State Department of Social Services (CDSS) and authorizes counties to participate in the CalFresh Employment and Training (CalFresh E&T) program. Welfare and Institutions Code Section 18926.5 establishes CalFresh E&T in participating counties and requires counties to screen CalFresh work registrants to determine whether they will participate in, or be deferred from, the program.
- 3) Provides that an individual shall be deferred from mandatory placement in CalFresh E&T if the individual meets specified exemption criteria, resides in a federally determined work surplus area, or is a veteran honorably discharged from the United States Armed Forces. Existing law also permits a deferred individual to participate in CalFresh E&T on a voluntary basis. (WIC § 18926.5.)
- 4) Requires, in a county that elects to participate in CalFresh E&T, that a veteran applying for CalFresh benefits who is required to register to work, but who is exempt from mandatory placement in CalFresh E&T, be given the opportunity to participate as a volunteer in the program and be provided specified referrals. Those referrals include a referral to the local county veterans service office and a referral to veterans' assistance and job-training agencies known to the county. (WIC § 18926.6.)

- 5) Provides procedures for reimbursement of state-mandated local costs when required by the Commission on State Mandates. (Gov. Code § 17500 et seq.)

This bill:

- 1) Requires CDSS, on or before April 1, 2027, to request a waiver from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to exclude veterans' job-search-related costs from countable income for purposes of determining CalFresh eligibility and benefit levels.
- 2) Requires CDSS to request a waiver exempting the following categories of veterans from applicable CalFresh time limits and work requirements:
 - a) veterans discharged within the preceding year,
 - b) veterans with children in the home,
 - c) veterans with pending VA disability claims
 - d) homeless veterans.
- 3) Requires any federally approved waiver to be implemented within six months of approval.
- 4) Expands county obligations in E&T-participating counties by requiring referrals to the county veteran service officers (CVSO) and veterans' assistance or job-training agencies for all veteran applicants required to register for work, regardless of exemption status.
- 5) Provides that, if the Commission on State Mandates determines the bill imposes reimbursable state-mandated local costs, reimbursement shall be made pursuant to existing law.

BACKGROUND

Veterans can experience acute food insecurity during the transition from military to civilian life, particularly when separation from service is followed by unemployment, unstable housing, delayed disability determinations, or increased household expenses. Recently discharged veterans may be searching for work while taking on new housing, transportation, and family costs. Veterans experiencing homelessness or underemployment may face additional barriers to stable employment and consistent access to benefits. Veterans with pending disability claims before the United States Department of Veterans Affairs can also wait months, and sometimes substantially longer, before receiving a final determination and any resulting compensation.

CalFresh is California's primary food assistance program, but participation and retention are heavily shaped by federal SNAP rules. Those rules already include work registration requirements, time limits for certain able-bodied adults without dependents, and countable-income standards that may not fully reflect the instability many veterans face during transition. In 2025, Congress enacted H.R. 1, later signed as Public Law 119-21, which tightened SNAP work-related rules and removed prior exemptions from those work requirements for veterans, as well as for people experiencing homelessness and certain former foster youth. State and local implementation materials issued after enactment describe H.R. 1 as eliminating the veteran exemption and expanding the population subject to SNAP work requirements.

SB 1201 is intended to maximize available federal waiver authority so that veterans facing transition-related hardship are less likely to lose access to food assistance while searching for employment, awaiting disability determinations, or attempting to stabilize their housing situation. The bill is aimed in part at mitigating the effect of recent federal changes that no longer categorically exempt veterans from SNAP work requirements, while also preserving access to supportive referrals and nutrition assistance during periods of economic instability.

COMMENT

According to the author: “SB 1201, the No Hungry Heroes Act, is a necessary response to HR 1, which eliminated long-standing protections for veterans facing hunger. California is home to more veterans than any other state, and with approximately 115,000 of them relying on CalFresh, the impact of these federal policies will be devastating. This bill seeks to protect our veterans and their families by requesting the removal of unnecessary barriers to food assistance and ensuring that those who sacrificed for our country are not penalized while they look for work or recover from service-connected disabilities. By seeking federal waivers to bypass strict work requirements for our most vulnerable heroes, California is standing up to ensure that no veteran is left without a meal”.

This bill is set up as a waiver request rather than a direct change to CalFresh under state law, which reflects the fact that SNAP is mostly governed by federal rules and many of the proposed changes would need federal approval. It directs the California Department of Social Services to seek waivers that would make CalFresh more accessible to veterans who may face extra barriers to stability or employment, including recently discharged veterans, veterans with children, homeless veterans, and veterans with pending disability claims. The bill also proposes excluding certain job-search expenses from countable income, which could help some veterans qualify for benefits or receive more assistance while they look for work.

If the waivers are approved, the bill could provide meaningful support for veterans, but federal approval is far from guaranteed. USDA has broad discretion over waiver requests, and that discretion may be more limited when a request would conflict with requirements set directly in federal law rather than regulation. The bill also raises several practical questions, including how counties would verify pending VA disability claims and job-search expenses, whether veteran-specific exemptions from work rules would be approved, and whether similar requests might later be made for other groups facing hardship. At the same time, the county referral requirements could help connect veterans earlier to CVSOs, employment programs, housing resources, and benefits assistance, though they could also add administrative responsibilities for counties and the state.

The findings section may raise some concerns when the state later seeks federal approval for these waivers. Several findings use language that may read as more political than necessary, including references to partisan voting, tax cuts for wealthy individuals and corporations, immigration raids, tariffs, and phrases such as “cruel new federal policy.” While that language appears intended to reflect the author’s broader concerns, it may make the waiver request seem more focused on criticizing federal policy than on addressing veterans’ access to food assistance. A more neutral findings section centered on veteran food insecurity, barriers to employment, homelessness, family stability, and the administrative basis for the waiver request may help present the request more clearly and strengthen it for federal review.

Previous legislation

AB 276 (Hueso, 2013) would have deferred active-duty service members and honorably discharged veterans from mandatory participation in the CalFresh Employment and Training program and required referrals to veterans’ assistance and job-training resources; died pursuant to Article IV.

SB 134 (Hueso, 2013) required participating counties to defer honorably discharged veterans from mandatory CalFresh E&T participation and provide referrals to county veterans service

offices and other veterans' assistance and job-training agencies; chaptered as Chapter 283, Statutes of 2013.

SB 43 (Senator Liu, 2011) restructured the CalFresh Employment and Training program by requiring participating counties to screen work registrants for participation or deferral and allowing deferred individuals to participate voluntarily; chaptered as Chapter 507, Statutes of 2011.

POSITIONS

Sponsor: Author.

Support: American Legion, Department of California
AMVETS, Department of California
California Association of County Veterans Service Officers
California Association of Food Banks
California State Commanders Veterans Council
Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank
Military Officers Association of America, California Council of Chapters
SEIU California
Vietnam Veterans of America, California State Council

Oppose: None

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