

THIRD READING

Bill No: SB 1201
Author: McNerney (D), et al.
Amended: 5/14/26
Vote: 21

SENATE HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE: 4-0, 4/6/26
AYES: Becker, Laird, Pérez, Weber Pierson
NO VOTE RECORDED: Ochoa Bogh

SENATE MILITARY & VETERANS COMMITTEE: 3-0, 4/20/26
AYES: Archuleta, McNerney, Umberg
NO VOTE RECORDED: Grove, Menjivar

SENATE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE: 5-0, 5/14/26
AYES: Cervantes, Cabaldon, Grayson, Richardson, Wahab
NO VOTE RECORDED: Seyarto, Dahle

SUBJECT: CalFresh: veteran eligibility

SOURCE: Author

DIGEST: This bill requires the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to submit waiver requests to the federal Department of Agriculture to allow costs incurred by veterans during a job search to be excluded from CalFresh income eligibility determinations and to exempt certain veterans from CalFresh work requirements.

ANALYSIS:

Existing federal law:

- 1) Establishes under federal law the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to promote the general welfare and to safeguard the health and wellbeing of the nation's population by raising the levels of nutrition among low-income households. (7 United States Code 2011 et seq.)

- 2) Requires able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) to only be eligible for SNAP for three months during a three-year period unless they qualify for an exemption. (7 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 273.24)
- 3) Allows a state agency to waive the ABAWD time limit requirements for a group of individuals if it is determined that the area the individuals live in has:
 - a) An unemployment rate of 10% or more; or
 - b) Does not have enough jobs to provide employment for the individuals. (7 CFR 273.24(f))
- 4) Restricts participation in SNAP to households whose incomes are determined to be a substantial limiting factor in permitting them to have a more nutritious diet and defines the income limits and exclusions needed to qualify for SNAP. (7 CFR 273.9(a))

Existing state law:

- 1) Establishes CalFresh as California's implementation of the federal SNAP program. (Welfare and Institutions Code [WIC] 18900)
- 2) Declares that every human being has the right to access sufficient affordable and healthy food. (WIC 18700(a)(1))
- 3) Requires the CDSS to annually seek a federal waiver for all counties to be exempt from the requirements of the SNAP provision that requires ABAWDs to be limited to three months of CalFresh benefits in a three-year period unless that participant has met the work participation requirement. (WIC 18926)
- 4) Requires a county that elects to participate in the CalFresh Employment and Training (CalFresh E&T) program to screen CalFresh work registrants to determine whether they will participate in, or be exempt from, CalFresh E&T. An individual can be exempt from CalFresh E&T if they:
 - a) Satisfy the criteria in Sections 273.7 and 273.24 of Title 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations,
 - b) Reside in a federally determined work surplus area,
 - c) Are a veteran who has been honorably discharged from the United States Armed Forces,
 - d) Are a victim of domestic violence, or

e) Are subject to the ABAWD time limit. (WIC 18926.5)

This bill:

- 1) Makes findings and declarations about the impact of federal House Resolution 1 (Public Law 119-21) on veterans.
- 2) Requires CDSS, on or before April 1, 2027, to submit a waiver to the federal Department of Agriculture to waive provisions of the federal code regarding SNAP income exclusions to exclude the costs incurred by a veteran associated with a job search from countable income when determining their eligibility and benefit level of CalFresh benefits.
- 3) Requires the income exclusion to be implemented within six months of approval of the waiver.
- 4) Requires CDSS, on or before April 1, 2027, to submit a request to the federal Department of Agriculture to waive applicable provisions of federal House Resolution 1 (Public Law 119-21) to exempt the following veterans from the ABAWD time limit and associated work requirements:
 - a) Veterans discharged for less than one year.
 - b) Veterans with children in their home.
 - c) Veterans who have a pending disability claim with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.
 - d) Homeless veterans.
- 5) Requires the ABAWD exceptions to be implemented six months after approval of the waiver.
- 6) Defines “Armed Forces of the United States” to mean the United States Air Force, Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Space Force, or Coast Guard.
- 7) Defines “veteran” to mean a person who served in the Armed Forces of the United States and who was discharged or released.
- 8) Requires counties that participate in the CalFresh E&T program to give all veterans the opportunity to participate in the CalFresh E&T program.

Comments

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.”

CalFresh. CalFresh is California’s version of federal SNAP, an entitlement program that provides eligible households with federally funded monthly benefits to purchase food. Currently, CalFresh is one of the programs where the food benefits are 100% federally funded. CalFresh administration costs are currently funded with 50% federal funds, 35% General Fund, and 15% county funds, except for state-mandated program changes. CalFresh food benefits are issued through an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card which cardholders can use at point-of-sale terminals authorized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. 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 benefit in 2024 was \$279 a month for all households, \$496 for households with children, and \$166 for households with older adults.

CalFresh is the state’s largest anti-hunger program. According to a study by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), approximately 4.8 million Californians are on CalFresh. In their study on income instability, PPIC found that CalFresh helped families get through times of economic instability by providing a stable resource that was most impactful for families when their income first becomes unstable versus when they access CalFresh after a time of longer unemployment and had used up other resources.

House Resolution 1 (Public Law 119-21). On July 4, 2025, the President signed House Resolution 1 (H.R. 1) which became Public Law 119-21. The law makes several changes to many policy areas including agriculture, energy, taxation, and

nutrition programs, specifically SNAP (CalFresh in California). The major provisions affecting CalFresh include:

- Modifications to the work requirements for ABAWDs: Prior to H.R. 1, certain groups were exempt from ABAWD work requirements. H.R. 1 repealed those exemptions and created new ones. A more detailed discussion of this change is below.
- Prohibiting the U.S. Department of Agriculture from updating the Thrifty Food Plan until October 1, 2027, outside of annual cost-of-living adjustments, slowing future increases of CalFresh benefit payments to families.
- Prohibits internet bills from being included in the Standard Utility Allowance which would have excluded them from a CalFresh recipient's income when determining eligibility.
- Requires states to pay a share of the CalFresh benefit to recipients. The state share is determined by a formula based on the state's CalFresh payment error rates.
- Eliminates funding for the SNAP Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention Grant Program.
- Ends access to CalFresh for some immigrants with lawful status.

Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents (ABAWD). Since the 1996 Federal Welfare Reform Act, an adult receiving CalFresh who is determined to be an ABAWD is only allowed three months of CalFresh within a 36-month period and is subject to work requirements unless they meet an exception. Before H.R. 1, a person who was 18 to 54 years old, able to work, and did not have any dependents but otherwise met CalFresh income requirements was considered an ABAWD. California has had a statewide ABAWD waiver in place allowing more exception flexibility and more ABAWDs to receive CalFresh benefits longer than three months without work requirements. The waiver expired on October 31, 2025.

Under H.R. 1, the exceptions will decrease, and the number of people required to work to receive CalFresh benefits will increase. The work requirements will increase in most cases to include those 55 to 64 years old. Work requirements will also apply to parents and caretakers with children 14 and older, whereas previously those with children under 18 were excluded. Additionally, exceptions for veterans, people experiencing homelessness, and former foster youth will be eliminated.

States can apply for new waivers to pause these rules, but only in areas with 10% or higher unemployment, as described in H.R. 1. The new law adds a new exception for indigenous peoples if the person falls under one of the federal definitions for “Indian”, “Urban Indian” or “California Indian”.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, the new ABAWD rules may cause a significant reduction of participation among the affected groups nationally. “[These] provisions will reduce participation in SNAP by roughly 2.4 million people in an average month over the 2025–2034 period. According to the Center on Budget and Policy, approximately 1.2 million veterans nationally live in households that receive SNAP. Veterans face unique challenges that make them vulnerable to experiencing food insecurity which include lower employment rates, health conditions, and homelessness.”¹

This bill would require CDSS to apply for a waiver that reinstates the ABAWD work requirement waiver for veterans who are recently discharged, have children in their home, have a pending disability claim, or are homeless. Nationally, a significant number of veterans on SNAP fall into these categories.

CalFresh and Employment. ABAWDs are required to work in order to remain eligible for benefits but there are still programs to help any unemployed CalFresh recipient find work. To help CalFresh participants find employment, whether they are required to work or not, counties can choose to participate in the CalFresh Employment and Training Program (CalFresh E&T). Participants in the program are given case management and supportive services that help them find and interview for jobs. Currently, 35 counties participate in the program. This bill requires participating counties to inform veterans about the opportunities available through CalFresh E&T.

Veterans face a unique set of challenges that can lead them to being unemployed and needing CalFresh. For example, a smaller share of veterans are working compared to non-veterans because veterans tend to have more health conditions and lower educational attainment.² These issues can make the job search longer and therefore more expensive. There are a number of costs associated with job

¹ Nunez, Luis. “SNAP Helps 1.2 Million Veterans With Low Incomes, Including Thousands in Every State.” CBPP, April 2, 2025. [SNAP Helps 1.2 Million Veterans With Low Incomes, Including Thousands in Every State | Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#)

² Rajashri Chakrabarti, Dan Garcia, and Maxim Pinkovskiy, “Do Veterans Face Disparities in the Labor Market—And What Accounts for Them?” Federal Reserve Bank of New York, May 25, 2023, <https://libertystreeteconomics.newyorkfed.org/2023/05/do-veterans-face-disparities-in-the-labor-market-and-what-accounts-for-them/>.

searching and securing employment. According to the IRS, some job search costs can be deducted from your taxes. These costs included fees paid to employment and placement agencies, resume preparation and postage, and travel expenses. Other expenses could include subscriptions to online job search platforms and buying interview appropriate clothing. This bill requires CDSS to submit a waiver to the federal government requesting that the amount of personal income spent on job search activities by veterans is not counted as countable income for purposes of evaluating their CalFresh eligibility and benefit levels.

Related/Prior Legislation

AB 2299 (Calderon, 2026) would require CDSS to establish the California Antihunger Response and Employment Training, a state-funded program to provide benefits to a person who has been determined ineligible for CalFresh benefits, or for whom CalFresh benefits have been discontinued, as a result of the ABAWD time limit, and who also is ineligible for a percentage exemption. The bill is pending on the Assembly Floor.

SB 950 (Archuleta, Chapter 877, Statutes of 2022) required CDSS, on or before July 1, 2023, and annually thereafter, to submit a request for a federal waiver to exclude the basic allowance for housing provided to specified uniformed service members from countable income in the determination of eligibility and benefit level for purposes of receiving CalFresh benefits.

SB 134 (Hueso, Chapter 283, Statutes of 2013) required participating counties to defer from the CalFresh E&T program a veteran who has honorably discharged from the United States Armed Forces.

FISCAL EFFECT: Appropriation: No Fiscal Com.: Yes Local: Yes

According to the Senate Appropriations Committee: “CDSS estimates one-time General Fund costs of \$390,000 for updates to the California Statewide Automated Welfare System (CalSAWS). Unknown potential costs to counties for CalFresh administration. Costs would be potentially reimbursable by the state, subject to a determination by the Commission on State Mandates.”

SUPPORT: (Verified 5/15/26)

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
San Diego; County of
Seiu California
Vietnam Veterans of America, California State Council

OPPOSITION: (Verified 5/15/26)

None received

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**** **END** ****