

Date of Hearing: June 16, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Alex Lee, Chair

SB 1201 (McNerney) – As Amended May 14, 2026

SENATE VOTE: 29-0

SUBJECT: CalFresh: veteran eligibility

SUMMARY: Requires the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to submit waiver requests to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) 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. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires CDSS, on or before April 1, 2027, to submit a waiver to the USDA to waive provisions of the federal code regarding the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (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.
- 2) Requires the income exclusion to be implemented within six months of approval of the waiver.
- 3) Requires CDSS, on or before April 1, 2027, to submit a request to the USDA to waive applicable provisions of federal House Resolution 1 (Public Law 119-21) to exempt the following veterans from the Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (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.
- 4) Requires the ABAWD exceptions to be implemented six months after approval of the waiver.
- 5) Defines “Armed Forces of the United States” to mean the United States Air Force, Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Space Force, or Coast Guard.
- 6) Defines “veteran” to mean a person who served in the Armed Forces of the United States and who was discharged or released.
- 7) Requires counties that participate in the CalFresh Employment and Training (E&T) program to give all veterans the opportunity to participate in the CalFresh E&T program.

- 8) Repeal the condition that a referral be provided to the local county veterans service office and a referral to veterans' assistance and job training only if veterans' assistance and job training agencies are known to the county.

EXISTING LAW:

State law:

- 1) Establishes access to sufficient, affordable, and healthy food as a human right and requires state agencies and departments to consider this state policy when it is pertinent to the distribution of sufficient, affordable food. (Welfare and Institutions Code [WIC] § 18700)
- 2) Establishes the CalFresh program to administer the provision of federal SNAP benefits to families and individuals meeting certain criteria, as specified. (WIC § 18900 *et seq.*)
- 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 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)

Federal law:

- 5) Requires 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)
- 6) 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))
- 7) 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))

FISCAL EFFECT: According to the Senate Committee on Appropriations, “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.”

COMMENTS:

Background: *CalFresh*, California’s implementation of the federal SNAP, is the state’s largest food assistance program and primary lifeline for residents struggling with food insecurity. Administered by CDSS and county human services agencies, CalFresh provides monthly food benefits via an electronic benefits transfer card that can be used to purchase eligible food such as fruits and vegetables, meat, dairy products, and seeds at authorized retailers, including grocery stores and farmers’ markets.

Eligibility is primarily based on household income, assets, and household composition. Households may be categorically eligible if they receive or are eligible for programs such as the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids, General Assistance/General Relief, Social Security Income/State Supplementary Payment, Cash Assistance for Immigrants, or Tribal TANF. Because CalFresh is largely governed by federal law, the state has limited authority to modify eligibility rules.

In 2024-25, about 5.5 million Californians received over \$12.5 billion in federally funded CalFresh benefits, with an average monthly benefit of about \$192 per person, or \$6.46 per day. Research shows SNAP reduces food insecurity by about 20% overall and by 33% among children. The Public Policy Institute of California estimates CalFresh kept approximately 856,000 Californians out of poverty in 2023, including 312,000 children,¹ making it the state’s largest poverty-reduction program.

CalFresh/SNAP Changes in H.R. 1: ABAWD Time Limits. On July 4, 2025, H.R. 1 was signed into law and made significant changes to ABAWD time-limit rules by expanding the age range subject to the time limit, narrowing exemption criteria, and limiting state and county waiver eligibility. These changes took effect June 1, 2026, and are expected to increase the number of individuals subject to the time limit and at risk of losing CalFresh benefits unless they qualify for an exemption or meet work requirements.

Under CalFresh rules, ABAWDs are generally limited to three months of benefits within a 36-month period unless they qualify for an exemption, meet work requirements, which is an average of 20 hours per week or 80 hours per month, live in an area with a time-limit waiver, qualify for an additional three-month eligibility period, or receive a discretionary exemption. While H.R. 1 does not change the overall structure of the ABAWD time-limit policy, it significantly changes who is subject to the time limit and who qualifies for exemptions.

According to All County Letter 25-93,² federal law previously defined ABAWDs as individuals 18 through 49 years of age without dependents who did not qualify for an exemption. The Fiscal

¹ <https://www.ppic.org/publication/poverty-in-california/>

² <https://cdss.ca.gov/Portals/9/Additional-Resources/Letters-and-Notices/ACLs/2025/25-93.pdf?ver=Ib9riEMEV474i6-xtntg4g%3d%3d>

Responsibility Act of 2023 increased the upper age limit to 54 years of age, and H.R. 1 further increased the upper age limit to 64 years of age. Individuals 60 through 64 years of age remain exempt from general work requirements due to age but may still be subject to the ABAWD time limit unless they qualify for another exemption. Individuals are no longer considered ABAWDs beginning the month they turn 65 years of age.

H.R. 1 also made significant changes to ABAWD exemptions by adding a new exemption for individuals who meet the definition of Indian, Urban Indian, or California Indian under federal law and eliminating temporary exemptions for veterans, individuals experiencing homelessness, and former foster youth under 25 years of age. H.R. 1 modified the dependent child exemption by limiting it to individuals responsible for the care of a dependent child under 14 years of age, rather than individuals living with a child under 18 years of age.

Research shows that when time limits are imposed, program participation drops significantly, largely because individuals are cut off from assistance rather than because they obtain employment.³ Studies also show time limits do not significantly increase employment or earnings, and most individuals subject to time limits already work at some point before or after receiving food assistance, often in low-wage jobs with unstable hours. When food benefits are cut off, individuals often struggle to afford food, housing, and healthcare, increasing hardship without improving employment outcomes.

CDSS estimates that the expanded ABAWD definition will increase the affected population from about 345,400 to 954,800 individuals, with approximately 665,500 individuals expected to be subject to the time limit and potentially lose CalFresh eligibility, including 250,000 individuals who have been identified as homeless. The remaining 289,000 individuals are expected to either meet work requirements or qualify for an exemption. CDSS expects these discontinuances to occur gradually over 12 months during annual recertifications.

According to the USDA, every \$1 in federally funded CalFresh benefits generates approximately \$1.50 in economic activity, and every \$1 billion in CalFresh benefits generates over 10,000 jobs across sectors such as agriculture, transportation, and retail, resulting in an estimated \$5.3 billion in total annual economic activity. If the California Food Assistance Program is expanded to cover individuals who lose CalFresh eligibility, the state could lose an estimated \$1.6 billion in annual economic activity. Additionally, hunger costs the U.S. economy at least \$77.5 billion annually in health care costs alone. Expanding access to food assistance could reduce healthcare costs by an estimated \$1,400 per low-income adult per year and generate savings for state Medicaid programs by preventing avoidable hospitalizations and chronic health conditions.

Veterans CalFresh Eligibility. H.R. 1 will have profound impacts on veterans. “[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

³ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/worsening-snaps-harsh-work-requirement-would-take-food-assistance-away#:~:text=SNAP's%20Harsh%20Work%20Requirement%20Takes,that%20year%2C%20Census%20data%20show.&text=Work%20rates%20among%20SNAP%20households,at%20some%20point%20during%202023.>

challenges that make them vulnerable to experiencing food insecurity which include lower employment rates, health conditions, and homelessness.”⁴

This bill requires 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.

A smaller share of veterans are working compared to non-veterans because veterans tend to have more health conditions and lower educational attainment.⁵ These issues can make the job search longer and therefore more expensive. There are a number of costs associated with job 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.

Author’s Statement: According to the Author, “[This bill], 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.”

Double referral: Should this bill pass out of this committee, it will be referred to the Assembly Committee on Military and Veterans.

Arguments in Support: SEIU writes, This bill “will protect California's veterans and their families from H.R. 1 cuts to CalFresh by requesting federal waivers to exempt veterans from work requirements and time limits if they are homeless, newly discharged, awaiting a disability determination, or if they have children; requiring counties to give every veteran who applies for benefits a direct referral to county Veteran Service Officers; and excluding job search costs from a veteran’s countable income, ensuring that the money they spend trying to find employment does not disqualify them from receiving food assistance.”

Arguments in Opposition: None on file.

⁴ 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

⁵ 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/>.

RELATED AND PRIOR LEGISLATION:

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.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**Support**

California Association of County Veterans Service Officers
County of San Diego
San Diego Food Bank
SEIU California

Opposition

None on file.

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