

Date of Hearing: June 30, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

Pilar Schiavo, 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 also 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 CDSS to implement the income exclusion in 1) above within six months of USDA 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 (VA); and,
 - d) Homeless veterans.
- 4) Requires CDSS to implement the ABAWD exceptions within six months after USDA 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) Requires counties to refer veterans applying for CalFresh benefits to the local County Veterans Service Office and to veteran job training agencies if they are required to register for work, regardless of their CalFresh E&T program exemption status. Requires counties to also offer these veterans the option to voluntarily join the CalFresh E&T program.

EXISTING FEDERAL LAW:

- 1) 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)
- 2) 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))
- 3) Requires, unless an individual qualifies for a specified exemption, every SNAP household member to register for work, participate in E&T, and accept suitable employment, as specified. (7 CFR § 273.7)
- 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 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 (specified above);
 - 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)

FISCAL EFFECT: According to the Senate Appropriations Committee:

- 1) The CDSS estimates one-time General Fund costs of \$390,000 for updates to the California Statewide Automated Welfare System.

- 2) 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:

1) **PURPOSE OF THIS BILL.** According to the author, the No Hungry Heroes Act is a necessary response to House Resolution 1, the “Big Beautiful Bill,” 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.

2) **BACKGROUND.**

- a) **CalFresh.** California’s implementation of 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, making it the state’s largest poverty-reduction program.

- b) **HR 1.** On July 4, 2025, the President signed HR 1, which became Public Law 119-21. This law introduces several changes across various policy areas, including agriculture, energy, taxation, and nutrition programs like SNAP (CalFresh in California). Key changes affecting CalFresh include:
 - i) Revised work requirements for ABAWDs, repealed exemptions and created new ones.
 - ii) A freeze on updates to the Thrifty Food Plan by the USDA until October 1, 2027, aside from annual cost-of-living adjustments, which will slow future benefit increases.

- iii) Exclusion of internet bills from the Standard Utility Allowance, impacting eligibility calculations for CalFresh.
 - iv) A requirement for states to contribute a share of CalFresh benefits based on their payment error rates.
 - v) Elimination of funding for the SNAP Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention Grant Program.
 - vi) Termination of CalFresh access for some lawful immigrants.
- c) **Key Policy Impacts Under the Stricter HR 1 Rules.** The intersection of new federal limits and California's legislative response creates distinct changes for safety-net benefits:
- i) **Age and Household Expansion:** The federal mandates expand the ABAWD age bracket upwards to include adults ages 55 to 64. It also lowers the dependent exception threshold, applying work mandates to parents or caretakers whose youngest child is 14 or older (down from the previous threshold of 18).
 - ii) **Targeted Veteran Protections:** This bill responds to these changes by requiring CDSS to formally request a federal waiver to shield specific subgroups of veterans.
 - iii) **The 10% Unemployment Hurdle:** Under the federal framework, geographic waivers are heavily restricted to areas demonstrating an unemployment rate of 10% or higher. This high bar makes state-level carveouts for specific vulnerable populations, like unhoused or recently discharged veterans, an essential tool for state lawmakers looking to maintain benefits.
 - iv) **The Vulnerability Gap:** According to data cited by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, over one million veterans nationwide rely on SNAP benefits. Because re-entry into civilian life often brings high rates of housing instability, delayed disability claims, and erratic employment, standard work-reporting requirements frequently result in an administrative cutoff from nutritional assistance rather than employment.
- d) **Food Insecurity Among Veterans.** Nearly 1.5 million veterans in the U.S. find themselves living below the federal poverty level (FPL), while another 2.4 million are managing to get by on less than 200% of the FPL. Unfortunately, those veterans struggling with poverty face a heightened risk of food insecurity, homelessness, and other forms of material hardship compared to their non-veteran peers. Food insecurity estimates among veterans paint a concerning picture, with figures ranging from 6% to 24%, almost double that of the general population in the U.S. Certain high-risk groups, such as veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan (27%), female veterans (28%), homeless and formerly homeless veterans (49%), and veterans battling serious mental illness (35%), experience even steeper levels of food insecurity. Veterans dealing with homelessness or underemployment encounter extra challenges in finding stable jobs and accessing benefits. Those with pending disability claims at the VA often wait months, and at times much longer, for final decisions and compensation.

Shockingly, even veterans enrolled in federal food assistance programs often struggle to secure nutritionally adequate food. For instance, a study conducted by O'Toole and colleagues, which focused primarily on male homeless and formerly homeless veterans, revealed that nearly half of those experiencing food insecurity were already receiving federal food assistance. Moreover, 22% relied on emergency food resources to get by. Of the households served by Feeding America's food pantries and meal programs, 20% include a member who has served in the U.S. military.

- 3) **SUPPORT.** Veteran organizations, including, the American Legion-Department of California, AMVETS-Department of California, California State Commanders Veterans Council, Military Officers Association of America-California Council of Chapters, and the Vietnam Veterans of America-California State Council, all write in strong support. These supporters argue that California's veteran community faces significant barriers in accessing nutrition assistance through the CalFresh program, despite 90,000-115,000 veterans utilizing SNAP benefits. Many eligible veterans struggle with administrative hurdles that hinder their access to essential food security support. To address these issues, this bill proposes to streamline the CalFresh eligibility process for veterans, recognizing their unique challenges such as employment instability, disabilities, and housing issues. This veteran-specific approach will facilitate easier access to nutrition assistance, which is crucial for their overall well-being and successful reintegration into civilian life. By passing this legislation, California demonstrates its commitment to providing meaningful support to veterans, honoring their service while addressing their immediate needs.
- 4) **DOUBLE REFERRAL.** This bill is double referred; it passed the Assembly Committee on Human Services by a vote of 7-0 on June 16, 2026.
- 5) **PREVIOUS LEGISLATION.**
- 6) 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.
- 7) 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

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 Food Bank
 San Diego; County of
 SEIU California
 Vietnam Veterans of America, California State Council

Opposition

None on file.

Analysis Prepared by: Patty Patten / M. & V.A. / (916) 319-3550