
SENATE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Senator Sasha Renée Pérez, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No:	SB 961	Hearing Date:	April 15, 2026
Author:	Ashby		
Version:	April 8, 2026		
Urgency:	No	Fiscal:	Yes
Consultant:	Olgalilia Ramirez		

Subject: CalFresh: student eligibility.

NOTE: This bill has been referred to the Committees on Education and *Human Services*. A “do pass” motion should include referral to the Committee on *Human Services*.

SUMMARY

This bill (1) requires the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) to amend its Grant Delivery System to ensure students who may be eligible for CalFresh benefits are identified; (2) requires CSAC and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to enter into a data-sharing agreement to ensure identified students are linked to basic needs resources on- and off -campus; (3) deems through CDSS guidance specific student support programs at a public institution of higher education as a state-approved local education program that increases employability and therefore qualifies for the student exemption for CalFresh eligibility as well as authorizes other campus-based programs to apply to CDSS for qualification.

BACKGROUND

Existing law:

CalFresh

- 1) Establishes in 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. Federal regulations establish SNAP eligibility requirements, including adjusted net income that is at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty level and is determined to be a substantial limiting factor in permitting a recipient to obtain a more nutritious diet. (Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Title 7 § 271.1 and § 273.9)
- 2) Establishes the CalFresh program as the state’s program to administer the provisions of federal SNAP benefits to low-income families and individuals meeting specified criteria. (Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) § 18900 et seq.)

College students ineligible for CalFresh without a waiver

- 3) Federal law prohibits an individual who is enrolled at least half-time in an institution of higher education from eligibility for SNAP benefits, unless the student qualifies for an exemption. To be eligible for an exemption, a student must meet at least one of the following criteria:
 - a) Be age 17 or younger, or age 50 or older.
 - b) Be physically or mentally “unfit.”
 - c) Be receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) under Title IV of the federal Social Security Act (known as CalWORKs in California).
 - d) Be employed for a minimum of 20 hours per week.
 - e) Be participating in a state or federally financed work-study program during the regular school year, as specified.
 - f) Be participating in an on-the-job training program, as specified.
 - g) Be responsible for a child under 6.
 - h) Be responsible for the care of a child 6-11 years old when the State agency has determined that adequate child care is not available to enable the student to attend class and comply with the work requirements.
 - i) Be a single parent enrolled in an institution of higher education on a full-time basis (as determined by the institution) and be responsible for the care of a dependent child under age 12.
 - j) Be enrolled in an employment and training or another job-training program, as specified. (7 CFR § 273.5)

CSAC

- 4) Establishes the Cal Grant Program under the administration of CSAC. (Education Code (EC) § 69431 et seq.)
- 5) Requires CSAC to notify, in writing, a recipient of a Cal Grant award if that student’s grant includes any amount of funding that has been derived from the TANF block grant or state match, in order for the student to verify that the student qualifies for the exemption from the CalFresh program student eligibility rules. (EC § 69519.3)
- 6) Requires CSAC to notify students of their exemption from the CalFresh program student eligibility rules and their potential eligibility for CalFresh benefits, to the extent CSAC possesses the pertinent information and is permitted by federal law to use information to determine a student’s CalFresh eligibility. (EC § 69519.3)
- 7) Requires each campus of the California State University (CSU) and each community college district, and requests and each campus of the University of

California (UC), each independent institution of higher education, and each private postsecondary educational institution, to use the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) data to identify students who meet the income qualifications for CalFresh. (EC § 66023.6)

- 8) Requires each CSU campus and each community college district to send an email to the campus-based email account associated with a student identified pursuant to # 7, informing the student that they may qualify for CalFresh if the student can also meet one of the exemptions. The email must encourage the student to contact the local county welfare agency to apply for CalFresh and include the contact information for the local county welfare agency and the designated campus staff who can assist the student in applying for CalFresh. (EC § 66023.6)

ANALYSIS

This bill:

CSAC and Grant Delivery System

- 1) Requires CSAC to, upon entering into a data-sharing agreement, in compliance with state and federal law, amend the Grant Delivery System to ensure all of the following:
 - a) Students that might be eligible for the CalFresh program are identified.
 - b) Students that are identified have the ability to provide consent to have their contact information shared with the CDSS, and for CDSS to further share their contact information with the appropriate county human services agency and public postsecondary educational institutions in which the student is enrolled, for the sole purposes of identifying, supporting, and linking students to on-and off-campus basic needs services and resources, including conducting direct outreach about the CalFresh program.
 - c) Identified students are linked to on-and off-campus basic needs services and resources.
- 2) Requires CSAC, upon amending the Grant Delivery System, to provide CDSS with information for students who consent to have their contact information shared with CDSS under the terms of the data-sharing agreement.
- 3) States that contact information includes legal name, email address, ZIP code or county of residence, and phone number of the student.

CDSS Guidance and Eligible Programs

- 4) Adds students identified by CSAC to the list of student applicants CDSS is required to issue guidance for verifying CalFresh student exemption eligibility to county agencies.

- 5) Requires, by May 31, 2027, CDSS to issue guidance to counties, the California Community College (CCC) Chancellor's Office, the CSU Chancellor's Office, and the UC President that informs them of the changes made by the bill and that does all of the following:
 - a) Clarifies the state and federal eligibility requirements for a campus-based program to be a state-approved local educational program that increases employability that has a component that is equivalent to a component specified in federal law and that qualifies for the student exemption for CalFresh eligibility as described in federal law.
 - b) Makes, to the extent permitted by federal law, a determination that all adult education, career technical education, certificate, and associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree programs at a public institution of higher education be considered as a state-approved local educational program that increases employability.
 - c) Makes, to the extent permitted by federal law, a determination that the specified state-funded financial aid, academic support, and student support service programs are to be considered a state-approved local educational programs that increases employability, including the Cal Grant Program, Educational Opportunity Program, and Disabled Students Programs and Services.
 - d) Clarifies the application and approval process for CDSS approval as a state-approved local educational program that increases employability for programs not listed.
- 6) Authorizes a campus-based program at a CCC, CSU, or UC campus that is not listed to apply to CDSS for approval. CDSS is required to determine whether applicants meet the requirements to be considered a state-approved local educational program that increases employability.
- 7) CDSS is required to work with the Statewide Automated Welfare System to develop and implement the necessary changes to list the specified general categories of state-approved local education programs that increase employability.

Reporting requirements

- 8) Requires, by September 1, 2028, and annually thereafter until 2030, CDSS reports to the relevant Assembly and Senate Committees and posts on its website all of the following:
 - a) The number of state-approved campus-based local educational programs that increase employability that are approved, disaggregated by name and campus.
 - b) The number of pending applications, disaggregated by name and campus.

- c) The number of applications denied, disaggregated by name and campus, and the reason for the denials.
- 9) Requires CDSS to implement and administer the bill's provision on eligible campus-based programs through all-county letters or similar instructions as specified by May 30, 2027.

Data-Sharing Agreement

- 10) Requires CDSS and CSAC to develop a data-sharing agreement meeting the requirements of applicable state and federal law and regulations, under which CSAC is to share the student information with CDSS. The bill authorizes CDSS, as prescribed in the data agreement to share the student information with the appropriate county human services agency and the higher education institutions' systemwide office of the campus in which the student is enrolled for the sole purposes of identifying, supporting, and linking students on-and off-campus basic needs services and resources, including conducting direct outreach to students about the CalFresh program.
- 11) Requires each CCC and CSU and requests each UC campus (if a data-sharing agreement has been entered into), commencing with the 2028-29 academic year, to contact all students who opted in to have their contract information shared with CDSS for the purpose of informing students about on-and off-campus basic needs services and resources, including the CalFresh program.
- 12) Prohibits data shared pursuant to this bill from being shared with any other entity or used for any purpose other than for identifying, supporting, and linking students to on-and off-campus basic needs services and resources, including conducting direct outreach to students about the CalFresh program. The bill further specifies that the sharing of data for purposes of the bill be done in compliance with applicable federal and state privacy laws.

Miscellaneous

- 13) Strikes existing provisions requiring CDSS to issue a guidance letter to counties, the CCC Chancellor's Office, the CSU Chancellor's Office, and the Office of the President of UC relating to the submission of a certification application for programs that increase employability.
- 14) Defines the "public post-secondary education systemwide office" to mean the office of the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges, the Office of the Chancellor of the California State University, or the Office of the President of the University of California.
- 15) States various findings and declarations related to promoting student access to public benefits such as CalFresh.

STAFF COMMENTS

- 1) ***Need for the bill.*** According to the author, “Many college students, especially those from low income backgrounds are unable to access fresh meals. Half of California’s college students experience food insecurity. Students are eligible for CalFresh, but fewer than 25% actually receive benefits.

“SB 961 addresses food access by streamlining access to CalFresh benefits. This bill would require the California Student Aid Commission to notify students of their potential eligibility for CalFresh. SB 961 further addresses the issue of food insecurity for students by broadening the programs of study for an increase in eligibility, for access to food assistance for all levels of students.”

- 2) ***Student eligibility for CalFresh.*** CalFresh is California’s version of the federal SNAP program, which provides monthly food benefits to qualified low-income individuals and families. CalFresh is administered by CDSS at the state level, and California’s 58 counties are responsible for administering CalFresh at the local level. CalFresh benefits are 100 percent federally funded, and national income eligibility standards and benefit levels are established by the federal government.

Student eligibility for CalFresh is constrained based on a number of factors that essentially disqualify most full-time college students from benefits unless they qualify for one of several exemptions. These exemptions include being employed at least 20 hours per week, being approved and anticipating participating in a work-study program, being responsible for the care of a child, attending school as part of an employment and training program or participating in a program to improve employability, or receiving TANF funding. Committee staff notes that existing law directs CSAC to provide recipients of a TANF-funded Cal Grant A or B written notification regarding their potential eligibility for CalFresh. It does not guarantee receipt of CalFresh benefits—it solely notifies the student that they may be eligible.

According to a 2024 report by the California Policy Lab, among students who were estimated to be eligible for CalFresh, 26 percent of community college students received CalFresh benefits in the Fall of 2019, as compared to 22 percent of UC undergraduate students. “This means about 100,600 students received CalFresh benefits, but also that an estimated 297,400 eligible students missed out on benefits that could have paid for their food.”

- 3) ***Sharing of student data.*** This bill requires CSAC to identify and provide a way for students who may be eligible for CalFresh to give permission or opt-in to have their contact information shared with CDSS. This approach appears to be generally modeled on a data-sharing agreement between Compton Community College and the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services. Students enrolled in Compton College who have submitted a FAFSA are asked if they are interested in being evaluated for county services. Consent forms are provided to students who answer in the affirmative. Compton College then provides the county with student data to be matched with county caseload

records to identify CalFresh participation among those students. Compton College uses the results to initiate targeted CalFresh outreach to students. According to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services, of the 1,136 students who signed the consent form from the inception of this project, only 156 students were already receiving CalFresh (980 students were not). Of the 980 students who were not already receiving CalFresh, 470 students have since been connected to CalFresh through this partnership. This bill requires CDSS and CSAC to establish a data-sharing agreement allowing student information to be shared with county human services agencies and higher education institutions solely to connect students with basic needs services and CalFresh outreach. Starting in 2028-29 academic year, CCC, CSU campuses and UC campuses (if participating) must contact opted-in students about these resources. Data use is strictly limited to this purpose and must comply with all applicable privacy laws.

- 4) ***Programs to increase employability.*** One of the criteria for students to be eligible for CalFresh is placement in an employment and training program, including state or local programs for low-income individuals that are equivalent to SNAP Employment and Training components. Federal regulations require an employment and training program to include specified components, including educational programs or activities to improve basic skills, build work readiness, or otherwise improve employability. This includes educational programs determined by a state agency, such as CDSS, to expand the job search abilities or employability of those subject to the program.

According to the federal regulations, allowable educational programs or activities may include, but are not limited to, courses or programs of study that are part of a program of career and technical education, adult basic skills, work readiness training, and instructional programs in English as a second language. The regulations further prescribe that only educational components that directly enhance the employability of the participants are allowable. To gain approval, a component must establish a direct link between education and job readiness.

Currently, campus-based programs that meet these requirements must submit an application to CDSS, which maintains a list of approved programs on its website. Staff notes the list predominantly includes certificate and degree programs. Any newly qualifying programs that meet the eligibility requirements after September 1, 2022, must be identified within six months of the program's formation. After September 1, 2022, the list will be updated monthly to identify new programs, newly qualifying programs, and previously approved programs that no longer meet the criteria. Based on the list of approved programs posted on the CDSS website, there were over 14,000 programs in California institutions of higher education that have been approved by CDSS as containing at least one employment and training component, making students who participate in these programs exempt from the CalFresh student eligibility rule.

<https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/calfresh-resource-center/policy>

This bill directs CDSS to consider *all* adult education, career technical education, certificate, and degree programs, as well as the listed student support programs that have a component equivalent to an employment and training component

(pursuant to federal regulations), as a state-approved local education program that increases employability (to the extent permitted by federal law). In listing and describing specific programs, this change limits CDSS' role in reviewing individual programs to determine which programs have a component equivalent to an employment and training component. Other campus-based programs must seek CDSS approval.

5) ***Prior legislation.***

SB 761 (Ashby, 2025), similar to this bill, would have required the CSAC to amend its Grant Delivery System to ensure students who may be eligible for CalFresh are identified; (2) required CSAC and CDSS to enter into data-sharing agreement; and (3) deemed campus-based programs of study at a public institution of higher education, as specified, as a state-approved local education program that increases employability and therefore qualify for the student exemption for CalFresh eligibility. SB 761 was vetoed by the Governor whose message read, in part:

“I strongly support the author's goal of expanding eligible college student participation in the CalFresh program and applaud the author for her commitment to this issue. However, as drafted, this bill contains significant policy and implementation challenges with respect to the required data-sharing agreements. I encourage the author to work with CDSS on a more implementable solution that reduces both privacy risks and the complexity of creating new data-sharing systems across multiple agencies.”

AB 1514 (Reyes, 2023) would have required CDSS to convene a workgroup of various stakeholders to develop recommendations to allow data from the FAFSA to be released to county welfare departments in order to authorize students to apply to receive public social services based on data collected from their FAFSA application. AB 1514 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

AB 1393 (Calderon, 2023) would have authorized CSAC to establish a food benefit pilot program for the purpose of providing students, who receive financial aid through the California Dream Act, with funding for food. AB 1393 was held in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

SUPPORT

University of California Office of the President (Co-Sponsor)
Advanced Consulting, LLC
Alliance for a Better Community
California Association of Food Banks
California Community Colleges, Chancellor's Office
California Competes: Higher Education for a Strong Economy
California Dental Association
California State Student Association
Center for Healthy Communities at California State University, Chico

Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations
College Access Plan
Communities in Schools of Los Angeles
DIY Girls
Expanded Learning Alliance
First Gen Empower
Fulfillment Fund
Future Leaders of America
Heart of Los Angeles
Journey House
Junior Leagues of California State Public Affairs Committee
Kid City Hope Place
Los Angeles Urban Foundation
Michelson Center for Public Policy
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Project Soar
Puente Learning Center
Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County
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Southern California College Attainment Network
Student Homes Coalition
Swipe Out Hunger
uAspire
University of California Student Association
Young Invincibles

OPPOSITION

None received

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