
SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES
Senator Becker, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No: SB 961
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Consultant: Naima FordAntal

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Fiscal: Yes

Subject: CalFresh: student eligibility

SUMMARY

This bill would require the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) to amend the application for the financial aid grant delivery system in order to identify students that might be eligible for the CalFresh program. It would also allow students identified as potentially eligible for CalFresh to give consent to have their contact information shared with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). The bill would also permit any associate's, bachelor's, or doctoral degree program at a public institution of higher learning to be considered a local education program that increases employability for the purposes of qualifying for CalFresh if the student is enrolled at least half time.

ABSTRACT

Existing 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 Section 2011 et seq.*)
- 2) Deems, in federal regulations, an individual who is enrolled at least half-time in an institution of higher education as ineligible for participation in SNAP, unless the individual qualifies for an exemption, as specified. (*7 Code of Federal Regulations 273.5(a)*)
- 3) Acknowledges access to sufficient affordable and healthy food as human right and requires state agencies and departments to consider this state policy. (*Welfare and Institutions Code [WIC] 18700*)
- 4) Establishes CalFresh as California's implementation of the federal SNAP program. (*WIC 18900*)

- 5) Requires CDSS to convene a workgroup comprised of the University of California, the California State University, the California Community Colleges, CSAC, representatives from student organizations from all three sectors of public postsecondary educational institutions, the County Welfare Directors Association of California, and representatives from CalFresh eligibility workers and CalFresh advocates to identify the steps necessary to establish a CalFresh application submission process that accommodates the large influx of CalFresh applications during the beginning of a school term in counties where large public postsecondary educational institutions with 10,000 students or more are located. (*WIC 18901.14(a)*)
- 6) Requires CDSS to maintain, regularly update, and post on its website the list of programs identified by the workgroup described above as meeting the federal standards that allow a student to be eligible for an exemption from the CalFresh program if the student's attendance can be described as part of a program to increase the student's employability. (*WIC 18901.11(b)*)
- 7) Requires CDSS to approve a campus-based program if it meets the eligibility requirements to be a state-approved local educational program that increases employability, as provided. (*WIC 18901.12(d)*)
- 8) Requires CDSS to post on its internet website instructions, for county human services agencies, that maximize CalFresh eligibility and minimize the burden for applicants and recipients to verify exemptions to the CalFresh student eligibility rule. Requires the instructions provided include specific guidance for processing applications, reporting, and recertification for all of the following:
 - a. Students who participate in at least one of the programs identified, as provided, because they offer a program component that is equivalent to a CalFresh Employment and Training program component.
 - b. Students who are approved and anticipate participating in state or federal workstudy.
 - c. Students who meet the qualification for an exemption or are receiving tribal Temporary Aid to Needy Families or CalWORKs benefits.
 - d. Students who are employed 20 hours a week or more on a reasonable anticipated monthly average, with instructions for allowing self-certification of employment and number of hours worked.
 - e. Students with children
 - f. Students enrolled in a CalFresh Employment and Training program.
 - g. Students who do not intend to register during the next normal school term.

- h. Students enrolled in a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funded program, Job Opportunities and Basic Skills program, or programs under the Trade Act of 1974.
 - i. Students who are physically or mentally unfit, pursuant to federal law.
 - j. Students who are participating in a program of career and technical education, as defined, designed to be completed in not more than four years at an institution of higher education. (*WIC 18901.11(c)*)
- 9) Requires each campus of the California State University and each community college district to use Free Application for Federal Student Aid data to identify students who meet the income qualifications for the CalFresh program and send an email to the student's campus-based email informing the student that they may qualify for the CalFresh program and encouraging them to contact their county welfare department. (*Education Code [EDC] 66023.6(e)*)
- 10) Encourages each campus of the University of California, independent institution of higher education, and private postsecondary educational institution to use Free Application for Federal Student Aid data to identify students who meet the income qualifications for the CalFresh program and send an email to the student's campus-based email informing the student that they may qualify for the CalFresh program and encouraging them to contact their county welfare department. (*EDC 66023.6(f)*)
- 11) Requires CSAC to notify students of their potential eligibility for CalFresh benefits and of their exemption from the CalFresh program student eligibility rules, to the extent permitted by federal law. (*EDC 69519.3(d)*)

This Bill:

- 1) Makes findings and declarations about college student food insecurity and the importance of CalFresh to the college student population.
- 2) Requires CSAC to amend their grant delivery system to ensure:
 - a. The system identifies students who may qualify for CalFresh; and
 - b. Students that are identified as potentially qualifying for CalFresh are able to give CSAC permission to share their contact information with CDSS for direct outreach about CalFresh.
 - c. Identified students are linked to on- and off-campus basic needs services and supports.
- 3) Requires CSAC to provide CDSS with information for students who have provided separate and distinct consent to have their contact information shared.

- 4) Defines “contact information” to be limited to the legal name, email address, ZIP Code or county of residence, and telephone number of the student.
- 5) Requires CDSS to add, for county human services agencies, specific guidance for processing applications, reporting, and recertification of the students identified by this bill.
- 6) Deletes the statute describing the current process to identify and approve a local educational program that improves employability.
- 7) Requires CDSS, on or before May 31, 2027, to issue a guidance letter to counties, the office of the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges, the office of the Chancellor of the California State University, and the office of the President of the University of California that informs them of the changes made by this bill and includes the following:
 - a. Clarifies the state and federal eligibility requirements for a campus-based program to be approved as a local educational program that increases employability and qualifies a student for CalFresh.
 - b. To the extent permitted by federal law, makes a determination that all adult education, career technical education, certificate, and associate’s, bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degree programs at a public institution of higher education shall be considered a state-approved local educational program that increases employability.
 - c. To the extent permitted by federal law, makes a determination that all of the following state-funded programs shall be considered a state-approved local educational program that increases employability:
 - i. Ortiz-Pacheco-Poochigian-Vasconcellos Cal Grant Program.
 - ii. Extended Opportunity Programs and Services.
 - iii. Educational Opportunity Program.
 - iv. Disabled Students Programs and Services and Student Academic Services.
 - v. Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education Program.
 - vi. McNair Scholars Program.
 - vii. Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement Program.
 - viii. Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program.
 - ix. Guardian Scholars Program.
 - x. Foster Youth Success Initiative.

- xi. Cooperating Agencies Foster Youth Educational Support.
 - xii. Chafee Education and Training Voucher Program.
 - xiii. Extended Foster Care.
- d. Describes the application and approval process for a campus-based program to become a state-approved local educational program that increases employability, including, but not limited to, clarifying the supporting documents required for program approval.
- 8) Allows a campus-based program at a campus of the California Community Colleges, the California State University, or the University of California that is not a state-approved local educational program that increases employability to submit a certification application to CDSS for approval.
- 9) Provides that the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges, the office of the Chancellor of the California State University, and the office of the President of the University of California are not required to submit to CDSS a list of their offered campus-based programs of study if those programs have been approved as a local educational program that increases employability.
- 10) Requires CDSS to work with the Statewide Automated Welfare System to develop and implement the necessary system changes to list general categories of state-approved local educational programs that increase employability.
- 11) Requires CDSS, by September 1, 2028, and annually thereafter until 2030, to report to the legislative committees on Higher Education, Education, and Human Services in both houses, and post on its website, on all the following information:
- 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.
- 12) Requires CDSS to implement and administer these provisions through all-county letters or similar instructions that shall have the same force and effect as regulations, before May 30, 2027.
- 13) Requires CDSS and CSAC to develop a data-sharing agreement meeting the requirements of applicable state and federal law and regulations, under which CSAC shall share the identified student information described in this bill to outreach about CalFresh eligibility and on- and off-campus basic needs services.
- 14) Authorizes CDSS to share student information with the appropriate county human services agency and the appropriate public postsecondary education systemwide office

of the campus in which the student is enrolled for the sole purpose of 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.

- 15) Requires California Community Colleges and the California State University, and requests the University of California, if data has been shared by CDSS, beginning with the 2027–28 academic year, to contact all students who opted in to have their contact information shared with CDSS for the purposes of informing students about on- and off-campus basic needs services and resources, including the CalFresh program.
- 16) Requires data shared pursuant to this section shall be done in compliance with applicable federal and state laws to protect individual privacy, including, but not limited to, the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and Section 1798.24 of the Civil Code.
- 17) 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.
- 18) Defines “public postsecondary 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.

FISCAL IMPACT

This bill has not yet been analyzed by a fiscal committee.

BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION

Purpose of 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.”

CalFresh

CalFresh is California’s version of federal SNAP, an entitlement program that provides eligible households with federally funded monthly benefits to purchase food. 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. Currently, CalFresh food benefits are 100% federally funded, but recent changes in federal law, House Resolution 1, will require states to pay a portion of the benefit. CalFresh administration costs are funded with 50% federal funds, 35% General Fund, and 15% county funds, except for state-mandated program changes. Benefits are delivered through an electronic benefits transfer card which cardholders can use at point-of-sale terminals authorized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. 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 2025–2026 is approximately \$333 a month for all households.

House Resolution 1 makes several changes to the CalFresh program including increasing the administrative funding burden on local governments and requiring work requirements for more CalFresh recipients that are able bodied adults without dependents, which could include college students.

College and University Student Hunger

Students at two- and four-year colleges and universities face unique food insecurity challenges. For those pursuing a degree at a two- or four-year institution, it can be difficult to complete schoolwork and maintain a job that pays enough to cover all of their food needs. For those who cannot rely on family, a spouse, or other financial aid, programs like CalFresh and campus food pantries are a helpful, and sometimes critical, resource. Studies have shown students who are food insecure are more likely to graduate later, have lower grades, and report thoughts of dropping out.¹ Studies have also shown the rates of self-reported food insecurity was higher at community colleges than four-year institutions. Those who report being food insecure are also more likely to be former foster youth, first generation college students or disabled, further exacerbating disparities.

CalFresh Eligibility for College and University Students

In 1977, a federal law was enacted to restrict eligibility to students who are enrolled in higher education at least part-time from accessing CalFresh. This is generally known as the student eligibility rule. The motivation behind the rule was to prevent college students from wealthy families from accessing the social benefit based on the assumption that they can ask their parents for financial support.

The federal definition of “student”, as it applies to CalFresh, requires that an individual must be between the ages of 18 and 49; physically and mentally fit for employment; and, enrolled at least “half time” at an institution of higher education. Institution of higher education is defined to include: a business, trade, technical, or vocation school at the post-high school level, or a junior,

¹ <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/california-college-students-food-insecurity-calfresh>

community, two-year, or four-year college, university or graduate school, regardless of whether a high school diploma or equivalency certificate is required.

Since the student eligibility rule was enacted, numerous exemptions have been adopted in an effort to build pathways for food insecure students to access CalFresh. Today, in order to qualify for CalFresh, students must meet at least one of 10 exemptions which include:

- Being 17 or younger or age 50 or older
- Being physically or mentally unfit for employment
- Receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, which is operated in California as CalWORKs
- Being 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
- Being assigned to, or placed in, an institution of higher education program through or in compliance with certain federal programs, including a CalFresh Education and Training program. These programs are considered Local Programs to Increase Employability and are described in more detail below.

Local Programs to Increase Employability (LPIE)

A student may qualify for an exemption to the CalFresh student eligibility rule if the student's attendance can be described as part of a local program to increase employability. These are programs for students that can be operated by a state or local government, but usually found at a college or university, where at least one component of the program is equivalent to a CalFresh Employment and Training program component. For a state or local government run program to qualify as an CalFresh Employment and Training program, the program must have at least one of the following components: job retention, job search, job search training, work experience, workfare, vocational training, self-employment training, on the job training, or education.

Institutions of higher education are required by state law to submit to CDSS the name and description of on-campus programs that qualify as a local program to increase employability and CDSS is required to maintain the list of local programs to increase employability and post it on its website. As of April 2025, there were over 13,000 approved programs that have been approved by CDSS by containing at least one CalFresh Employment and Training program component, making students who participate in these programs exempt from the CalFresh student eligibility rule. CDSS is also required to give guidance to county welfare departments about how to enroll college students in CalFresh by identifying college student exemptions including local programs to increase employability.

Concerns have been raised by students, institutions, and county workers that navigating the exemptions and local programs to increase employability make the process of applying for and approving CalFresh applications more complicated than applications for the general population. Recertifications are also more difficult. The changes being implemented through House

Resolution 1 may exacerbate those difficulties because counties will need to allocate more funds towards administration for current services and have less resources for the larger workload that enrolling students in CalFresh requires. College students may also face additional hurdles due to the eligibility changes made by House Resolution 1.

In April 2026, CDSS published an All County Letter that changes local program to increase employability guidance to allow enrollment in any associate's or bachelor's degree program, at least half time, at a public college or university to be sufficient to meet local program to increase employability criteria. This means, starting June 1, 2026, college students who meet CalFresh financial guidelines, attend a University of California, California State University, or a California Community College could qualify for a streamlined eligibility process. Colleges and universities can still submit other programs for approval as meeting local program to increase employability criteria, including programs for graduate degrees, certificates, Career and Technical Education, and adult basic education.

This bill would expand the number of programs that are sufficient to meet the local program to increase employability criteria to include all adult education, career technical education, certificates, master's and doctoral programs, and 13 student support programs, in addition to the associate's and bachelor's degree programs CDSS has recently approved.

CalFresh Access for College and University Students

College students and administrators at public higher education institutions have expressed frustration with how challenging it can be for college students who face food insecurity to access CalFresh due to the complexity of the student eligibility rules and the accompanying exemptions. A recent survey of students at six California college campuses found half of the students that knew about CalFresh believed they were ineligible for it or did not know how to apply. Colleges and universities are currently required by state law (if they are a California State University or California Community College) or encouraged (if they are a University of California, independent institution of higher education, or a private postsecondary educational institution) to notify students of their potential eligibility for CalFresh based on their Free Application for Federal Student Aid information and encourage students to reach out to their county welfare office. CSAC is also required to notify students of their potential CalFresh eligibility based on their Free Application for Federal Student Aid.

A few colleges and universities have taken initiative to establish data sharing agreements with their local county human services agencies to facilitate the enrollment process. For example, Compton College and the Department of Public Social Services of the County of Los Angeles have established a data-sharing Memorandum of Understanding. According to the agreement, Compton College shares “data about its students with the Los Angeles Department of Public Social Services [DPSS] to enable DPSS to connect students who may be potentially eligible to receive CalFresh benefits. DPSS will return information about Compton students’ eligibility for and utilization of CalFresh benefits, so that Compton may conduct outreach to its students and analyze the impact of CalFresh benefits upon student success.”²

² [https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/compton/Board.nsf/files/C2VS5L709D1B/\\$file/Compton%20College%20CalFresh%20Data%20Sharing%20MOU%2005.06.21.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/compton/Board.nsf/files/C2VS5L709D1B/$file/Compton%20College%20CalFresh%20Data%20Sharing%20MOU%2005.06.21.pdf)

This bill would require CSAC to identify potentially eligible students and get their consent to allow their contact information to be shared with CDSS and consent to be contacted directly about CalFresh enrollment. It also allows CDSS to share a student's contact information with their local county human services department and the public postsecondary education systemwide office of the campus for direct outreach about CalFresh and on- and off-campus basic needs services. The bill also requires CSAC and CDSS to establish a data sharing agreement that abides by federal and state privacy laws. SB 761 (*Ashby, 2025*), which was very similar to this bill, also required data sharing agreements with CSAC and CDSS. SB 761 was vetoed due to concerns about “privacy risks and the complexity of creating new data-sharing systems across multiple agencies.”³

Related/Prior Legislation:

SB 761 (*Ashby, 2025*) was substantially similar to this bill and would have required the CSAC to amend the application to the grant delivery system to identify students that might be eligible for the CalFresh program and allow students identified as potentially eligible for CalFresh to give consent to have their contact information shared with CDSS. SB 761 would have allowed any campus-based program of study at a public institution of higher learning to be considered a local program to increase employability. SB 761 was vetoed by the Governor.

SB 641 (*Skinner, Chapter 874, Statutes of 2022*) requires the CDSS to convene a workgroup to identify the necessary changes to improve access to CalFresh for college students. The bill also requires CDSS to maintain an undated list of local programs to increase employability online.

AB 132 (*Committee on Budget, Chapter 144, Statutes of 2021*) requires each community college by July 1, 2022, to establish a position of Basic Needs Coordinator to be the point of contact for students experiencing basic need insecurity and establish a basic needs center to provide basic needs services and resources to students.

AB 214 (*Weber, Chapter 134, Statutes of 2017*) made a number of changes to improve college student access to the CalFresh program.

AB 1930 (*Skinner, Chapter 729, Statutes of 2014*) requires CDSS, in consultation with representatives of the office of the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges; Offices of the Chancellor of the California State University; University of California Chancellors' Offices; the California Workforce Development Board; county human services agencies; and advocates for students and clients, establish a protocol to identify and verify all potential exemptions from the student eligibility rule.

COMMENTS

SB 961 would require CSAC and CDSS to work together to increase outreach to college students about CalFresh and streamline the enrollment process. This bill builds upon previous legislation that required CSAC and public colleges and universities to identify students that may benefit

³ SB 761 (2025) Veto Message

from CalFresh and encourage those students to apply. It also increases the number of programs that count as local programs to increase employability that includes, and expands upon, recent guidance from CDSS. In light of the changes in House Resolution 1 and the growing concern about food insecurity for college students, the expansions in this bill could lead to more college students enrolling in CalFresh. The data sharing section of this bill is nearly identical to SB 761 (*Ashby, 2025*), which was vetoed by the Governor. The author may want to consider limiting data sharing to entities CDSS already has a pre-existing data sharing agreement with and only for direct outreach about CalFresh to decrease complexity. Since not all college students that are contacted as a result of this bill meet eligibility standards for CalFresh, the author may want to consider strengthening support for the eligibility determination process within county welfare offices.

PRIOR VOTES

Senate Education Committee:

7 - 0

POSITIONS

Support:

California Competes: Higher Education for a Strong Economy (Sponsor)
 Advanced Consulting, LLC
 Alliance for a Better Community
 California Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
 California Association of Food Banks
 California Community Colleges, Chancellor's Office
 California Dental 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
 Council of Mexican Federations (COFEM)
 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
 Motivating Our Students Through Experience
 New Ways to Work
 Nextgen California

Operation Jump Start
Parent Engagement Academy
Project Soar
Puente Learning Center
Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County
Somos Familia Valle
Southern California College Attainment Network
Swipe Out Hunger
Uaspire
University of California Office of the President
University of California Student Association
Young Invincibles

Oppose:

None Received

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