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# SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Sabrina Cervantes, Chair  
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

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## SB 961 (Ashby) - CalFresh: student eligibility

**Version:** April 8, 2026

**Urgency:** No

**Hearing Date:** May 4, 2026

**Policy Vote:** ED. 7 - 0, HUMAN S. 4 - 0

**Mandate:** Yes

**Consultant:** Lenin Del Castillo

**Bill Summary:** This bill requires the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) to amend its grant delivery system to identify students who may be eligible for CalFresh and deems specific campus-based student support programs at a public institution of higher education as a state-approved local education program that increases employability for purposes of qualifying for CalFresh. This bill also 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.

### Fiscal Impact:

- This bill could result in ongoing General Fund costs of between \$400,000 to \$600,000 for 2.0 to 3.0 positions at CDSS to: develop methodology for data linkages; establish and implement data sharing agreements; provide data engineering support; create automated pipelines to routinely ingest and transform data from higher education segments; perform data analysis; and support coordination of data-sharing agreements.
- The CDSS indicates that any caseload increases due to the data-sharing agreements is unknown.
- The CSAC estimates General Fund costs of approximately \$414,000 for 2.0 positions to implement the bill's data sharing requirements. This estimate assumes new workload in CSAC's Information Technology Division in the areas of security, coding development, and database application.
- Any costs to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) resulting from this bill are likely to be minor and absorbable.

**Background:** Existing federal law establishes 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.

Existing law 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. 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, as specified.

Existing law 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. The law 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.

**Proposed Law:** This bill requires the CSAC to amend its grant delivery system to ensure that the system identifies students who may qualify for CalFresh and allows these students to provide consent to have their contact information shared with the CDSS, and for CDSS to then 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. The grant delivery system would also be amended to ensure that students are linked to on-can off-campus basic needs services and resources.

This bill 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. It also 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.

This bill requires CDSS, by May 31, 2027, 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, as specified.

This bill authorizes a campus-based program at a CCC, CSU, or UC campus that is not listed to apply to CDSS for approval. CDSS would be required to determine whether applicants meet the requirements to be considered a state-approved local educational program that increases employability and also 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.

This bill requires CDSS, by September 1, 2028, and annually thereafter until 2030, to report to the relevant Assembly and Senate Committees and posts on its website all of the following: the number of state-approved campus-based local educational programs that increase employability that are approved, disaggregated by name and campus, the number of pending applications, disaggregated by name and campus, and the number of applications denied, disaggregated by name and campus, and the reason for the denials. This bill 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.

This bill 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.

This bill requires each CCC and CSU, and requests each UC campus (if a data-sharing agreement has been entered into), 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. The bill prohibits data 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.

This bill strikes existing provisions in law that require 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 submission of a certification application for programs that increase employability.

**Related 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 and for CSAC and CDSS to enter into data-sharing agreement. SB 761 was vetoed by the Governor with the following message:

***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 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 on the Suspense File in this committee.

**Staff Comments:** CalFresh is the state's version of the federal SNAP program, which provides monthly food benefits to qualified low-income individuals and families. The program 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 with national income eligibility standards and benefit levels established by the federal government. Existing law requires each campus of the CSU and each community college district, and requests and each campus of the UC, each

independent institution of higher education, and each private postsecondary educational institution, to use data from the FAFSA to identify students who meet the income qualifications for CalFresh. However, 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.”

**-- END --**