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The Honorable Melissa Hurtado
Chair, Senate Human Services Committee
State Capitol, Room 3070
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Support for SB 107 (Wiener): CalFresh—Simpler for Seniors

Dear Chairperson Hurtado:

SPUR requests your support of SB 107 (Wiener), legislation that will simplify the CalFresh application for many older adults and people with disabilities, and ensure all applicants and participants can complete the application and recertification interview processes by phone, including the required client signature.

COVID-19 is exacerbating already high levels of hunger and hardship, particularly among older adults and people with disabilities. Despite federal and state interventions, the most recent data show that overall food insecurity has spiked to more than 25 percent of California households – [that’s approximately 10 million people](#), and 2.5 times higher than [before the COVID-19 crisis began](#). As a proven positive public health intervention and powerful economic stabilizer, CalFresh has a critical dual role to play in California’s immediate COVID-19 response and long-term recovery efforts. Yet nearly [30 percent of eligible Californians miss out](#) on CalFresh and only 19 percent of eligible older Californians (age 60 or over) are enrolled. In fact, [California ranks last in the nation](#) when it comes to enrolling eligible older adults in CalFresh (or SNAP, as it is known federally). In order to better connect older adults with ongoing federal food assistance, it is critical that we exercise every available option to simplify access to CalFresh.

The current CalFresh application — the CF 285 — is a complex, 18-page document. It can be challenging and intimidating for anyone. It can be a major barrier to participation, particularly for older adults and persons with physical or developmental disabilities. Though we applaud the success of online application portals like GetCalFresh.org, we also consistently hear from stakeholders that older adults want the option of completing a paper application. Many low-income older adults lack reliable internet access and/or do not feel comfortable sharing personal information online.

With the COVID-19 crisis worsening hunger and hardship across the state, we urgently need to implement all effective and efficient strategies that maximize the reach of our most powerful anti-hunger program. That starts with addressing the major participation gap among older Californians. Simplified CalFresh enrollment is a proven successful strategy. SB 107 would enact recommendations in the state’s [Master Plan for Aging](#), specifically Goal 5 (Affordable Aging), Strategy C (Protection from Hunger and Poverty), Initiative 131: “Continue to streamline older and disabled adult enrollment, renewal, and online shopping in CalFresh, as allowable.”

SB 107 would further improve access to CalFresh by ensuring that all applicants and participants can complete the application and reporting processes by phone, including the required client signature. Pandemic conditions have forced the two-thirds of California counties without telephonic/electronic signature capacity to implement emergency workarounds to provide remote services to communities facing unprecedented need. Those workarounds are possible due to expanded flexibility provided through temporary federal waivers, now being approved by [USDA Food and Nutrition Service on a temporary, month-by-month basis](#).

While telephonic/electronic signature is a critically important capacity for county welfare departments during COVID-19, this has been a long-standing need for clients with busy, unpredictable schedules and those without reliable internet access. The recent expansion of CalFresh eligibility to SSI recipients was facilitated by a multi-stakeholder process with counties, CDSS and advocates. That process produced concrete recommendations to improve county business processes to better serve the older adult and disabled populations. The [number one recommendation](#) was to allow for telephonic/electronic signature.

As we noted in our report *Healthy Food Within Reach*, maximizing enrollment in federally funded food assistance programs is one of the best strategies we have available for improving food security for Californians.¹ The CalFresh program is very cost-effective with the federal government providing 100 percent of the benefits. California should maximize this program and improve food security by enrolling as many eligible individuals as possible.

Implementing a user-centered, simplified CalFresh application and ensuring full telephonic access are critical steps to address hunger in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. We cannot delay action any longer. Now is the time to make permanent improvements to simplify CalFresh access and close the participation gap. No one should go hungry in the great state of California, and older adult and disabled households deserve to live with dignity, free from hunger. It is our collective responsibility to remove long-standing barriers to CalFresh, the most powerful anti-hunger tool at our disposal.

For these reasons, we strongly support SB 107 and urge your “aye” vote.

Sincerely,



Jacob Demney
Economic Justice Policy Director



Katie Ettman
Food and Agriculture Policy Associate

¹ SPUR, *Healthy Food Within Reach*, February 2015: www.spur.org/foodaccess

cc: Senator Scott Wiener (SD-11)

Jared Call, Nourish California (sponsor)

Blanca E. Castro-Paszinski, AARP California (co-sponsor)

Andrew Cheyne, California Association of Food Banks (co-sponsor)

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