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Increasing CalFresh Access and Participation for Seniors: Benchmarking CalFresh Strategies Within Selected Coastal Agricultural Counties Against Santa Cruz County

Mayra Rocha
San Jose State University

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**Increasing CalFresh Access and Participation for Seniors:
Benchmarking CalFresh Strategies Within Selected Coastal Agricultural Counties Against
Santa Cruz County**

by

Mayra Rocha

A Thesis Quality Research Project
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the
Master's Degree
in
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Professor Frances Edwards, Ph.D.

Adviser

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ACRONYM AND ABBREVIATION LIST

| | |
|----------|---|
| AFDC | Aid to Families with Dependent Children |
| CAFB | California Association of Food Banks |
| CalFresh | California version of SNAP |
| CDC | Centers for Disease Control and Prevention |
| CFPA | California Food Policy Advocates |
| CBOs | Community Based Organizations |
| CDA | California Department of Aging |
| CDPH | California Department of Public health |
| CDSS | California Department of Social Services |
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus 2019 |
| CWDA | County Welfare Directors Association |
| EBT | Electronic Benefit Transfer |
| EFC | Expected Family Contribution |
| ESAP | Elderly Simplified Application Program |
| FBOs | Faith-Based Organizations |
| FPL | Federal Poverty Level |
| FSA | Food Stamp Act |
| FSCC | Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation |
| FSP | Food Stamp Program |
| IHSS | In Home Support Service |
| IRB | Institutional Review Board |
| MCDSS | Monterey County Department of Social Services |

| | |
|----------|---|
| PRWORA | Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act |
| SBCDSS | Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services |
| SBCHSA | San Benito County Health and Human Services Agency |
| SCCHSA | Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency |
| SCCHSD | Santa Cruz County Human Services Department |
| SHFB | Second Harvest Food Bank |
| SLOCSS | San Luis Obispo County Department of Social Services |
| SMCHSD | San Mateo County Human Services Department |
| SNB | Supplemental Nutrition Benefits |
| Salud | Salud Para La Gente |
| SNAP | Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program |
| SSA | Social Security Administration |
| SSI | Supplemental Security Income |
| SSP | State Supplementary Payment |
| SSI/SSP | Supplemental Security Income/State Supplementary Payment administered jointly |
| TANF | Temporary Aid for Needy Families |
| TNB | Transitional Nutrition Benefits |
| USDA | United States Department of Agriculture |
| USDA FNS | United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services |
| WIC | Women, Infant, and Children |

BACKGROUND

Statement of the Problem

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps, and called CalFresh in California, is the largest federally funded food assistance program in the United States. The program aims to reduce food insecurity and poverty by increasing access to nutritious food for low income eligible individuals (California Department of Social Services [CDSS], 2021a). The program is administered by county offices that are responsible for ensuring that the program is accessible, and that eligible individuals participate. Reports from the United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FNS) indicate that eligible seniors in California had the lowest participation rates when compared to the levels in other states (USDA FNS, 2021; Gorman & Rowan, 2018). Thus, California seniors are not taking advantage of programs geared to reduce food insecurity and poverty and are at a disadvantage, as a collective group, then seniors in other states.

Research Question

This research explores how coastal, agricultural counties in California have enhanced senior citizen participation in CalFresh as compared to participation rates for seniors in Santa Cruz County. Studies addressing county administering agencies' best practices in CalFresh outreach and administration are needed to analyze the ways that counties can increase their senior CalFresh access and participation in California.

Scope

Each county in California is responsible for administering CalFresh benefits to eligible seniors. This study analyzed and compared Santa Cruz County to five coastal agricultural counties to find the most effective strategies to increase CalFresh access and participation among

seniors. The counties are San Mateo, San Benito, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara, which are situated on the coast of California, and all have an agricultural economic base. The findings will be used to discover best practices to increase senior CalFresh access and participation that Santa Cruz County and other counties can adopt.

Importance of CalFresh/SNAP Among Seniors

According Danielson and Tan (2020), CalFresh keeps nearly 700,000 Californians out of poverty. CalFresh is an entitlement program that guarantees benefits to individuals who meet the program requirements. It is estimated that on average, eligible seniors receive \$114 in monthly benefits (Fried & Bauer, 2016). When CalFresh is combined with other benefits, seniors who often rely on a fixed income, have a greater chance of economic security and better overall health (Fried & Bauer, 2016). This is important, because as the senior population continues to increase, ensuring adequate nutrition to achieve better overall health is a goal that California is working towards (California Department of Aging [CDA], 2019).

CalFresh History

CalFresh, federally known as SNAP, has had different names throughout its history. The names in chronological order are the Food Stamp Program (FSP), SNAP, and CalFresh as it is known in California today. The origins of the FSP can be traced back to the Great Depression of the 1930's. According to Klein (2019), "the economic collapse limited consumers' purchasing power that resulted in an excess of agricultural commodities causing prices to plummet" (para. 1). Furthermore, according to Klein (2019):

The USDA under President Franklin D. Roosevelt initially paid farmers to plow under their fields and slaughter their pigs. The destruction of food at a time when so many stomachs rumbled sparked an outcry that prompted the Federal Surplus Commodities

Corporation (FSCC), a New Deal agency established in 1933, to instead purchase excess food and distribute it directly to the needy at little or no cost. (para. 2).

This initiative was not well accepted by grocers and wholesalers who complained that the initiative was creating unfair competition that negatively affected them.

In 1939, the FSCC implemented a second solution: a government-run pilot program known as the FSP. “Instead of commodities, participants gained the opportunity to buy vouchers, or stamps, for food purchases that were accepted as cash in grocery stores” (Wiseman, 2019, p. 95). The stamps came in two colors, orange and blue. Individuals would purchase the orange stamps as an incentive to receive free blue stamps. The orange stamps could be used for any food item, while the blue stamps were used to purchase surplus commodities as determined by the USDA (Wiseman, 2019). The program debuted in Rochester, New York and over 1,200 grocers participated in the program. Grocers would exchange the food stamps for money at commercial banks and FSCC offices (Klein, 2019).

The FSP assisted approximately 20 million people in the first four years, but the program was halted in 1943 when World War II eased unemployment and crop surpluses (Klein, 2019). Efforts to restore the FSP continued throughout the 1950’s but without success. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Food Stamp Act (FSA) of 1964 as part of Johnson’s “War on Poverty”, and made the program permanent (Wiseman, 2019, p. 99). “Among the official purposes of the FSA of 1964, were strengthening the agricultural economy and providing improved levels of nutrition among low-income households” (USDA, 2018, para. 1).

Program Changes

In 1977, the FSA eliminated the entire stamp purchase requirement. The FSP benefits were delivered in coupons, and the cash-out continued the gradual shift in FSP operation from

targeting food consumption to more general income support (Wiseman, 2019). One of the changes included in the FSA was giving states permission to increase their State Supplementary Payment (SSP) instead of administering food stamps to individuals receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI). SSI and SSP are federally funded programs that provides income support to eligible individuals who are aged 65 or older, blind or disabled (CDSS, 2021b). The programs are administered jointly as SSI/SSP by the Social Security Administration (SSA). California opted for the cash-out; policy (this policy provides direct cash payments to individuals) and increased its monthly SSI/SSP grant by \$10 (Arnold & Marinacci, 2003). During that time, SSI/SSP recipients benefitted from the direct cash payments; however, the recipient's \$10 cash-out policy gradually stopped keeping up with inflation, resulting in the reduced purchasing power of these benefits (Arnold & Marinacci, 2003).

Additional administrative changes occurred throughout the 1980's and 1990's that affected FSP participation. The first change was that instead of distributing food stamps, the government authorized an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) system for FSP benefit delivery (Wiseman, 2019). "The EBT system was meant to lead to cessation of coupon use and reduce the social stigma that resulted from people in line observing others paying with food stamps instead of their own money" (Wiseman, 2019, p. 104). The EBT card gave food stamp recipients privacy when paying for their goods. The checkout process was easier and faster, which encouraged people to participate in the FSP.

A third major change that occurred in the 1990's was the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) signed by President Bill Clinton. The PRWORA consisted of various changes including a work first approach to cash assistance and a focus on federal funding for childcare. The PRWORA established a new program known

as Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) and replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The new changes however, caused a decline in FSP participation that lasted until the Great Recession of 2008. During the 2008 Great Recession, CalFresh participation rates increased by 76% (Zedlewsky, 2011). Individuals who had lost their jobs relied on SNAP as a safety net that kept them from being food insecure and reaching poverty levels. Seniors however, had one of the lowest CalFresh participation rates during the recession (Zedlewsky, 2011). In an effort to fight stigma, and increase CalFresh participation during the 2008 Great Recession, the Farm Bill changed the name of the FSP to SNAP. The Farm Bill encouraged states to adopt the new name, but also allowed them to create their own name. California chose to rename SNAP to CalFresh in 2010 (Wiseman, 2019). Outreach was optional for the states under the new Farm Bill; however, outreach in California was necessary due to the low CalFresh participation rates.

In 2018, California ranked as one of the lowest in the nation for CalFresh/SNAP participation and ranked the lowest for senior participation. According to data from the USDA FNS (2021), seniors had a participation rate of 19% in 2018, far below the national average of 42%. The state made it their goal to “increase the number of eligible households participating in CalFresh and educate people with low incomes and other stakeholders about CalFresh” (CDSS, 2021, para. 1). The CalFresh Outreach team partnered with Prime Contractors and their community subcontractors to provide and deliver outreach materials, training, and program enhancements (CDSS, 2021). The CDSS, California Department of Public Health (CDPH), and the California Association of Food Banks (CAFB) collaborated and created the California Food Stamp Access Improvement Plan. The plan is known today as the CalFresh Outreach Plan and it is submitted annually by each county to the state (CDSS, 2021).

In addition, California also passed various pieces of legislation in an effort to expand and facilitate CalFresh access and participation. One such piece of legislation was Assembly Bill 1811 (AB 1811), Human Services Omnibus Trailer Bill, passed in 2019. The bill reversed the CalFresh eligibility policy known as cash-out under which SSI/SSP recipients were ineligible for CalFresh. As previously stated, the cash-out policy dates back to 1974 when California opted for the cash-out policy and increased the monthly SSP/SSI grant by \$10 (Arnold & Marinacci, 2003). The reversal of the cash-out policy allowed SSI/SSP recipients which include people 65 and older, people living with access and functional needs, and blind individuals, to apply for CalFresh.

The CDSS CalFresh and Nutrition Branch was responsible for implementing the new policy changes and ensuring that all counties and stakeholders were prepared for the upcoming expansion of CalFresh to seniors and people with access and functional needs receiving SSI/SSP (CDSS, 2019a). The CDSS, the County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) and the Californians for Social Supplemental Income Coalition partnered and developed the State Readiness Plan to prepare for the upcoming changes. The plan outlined the steps and planning process for counties and stakeholders to implement; however, counties had to implement their own outreach strategies, which resulted in varied results (CDSS, 2019b).

The CDSS estimated that nearly 369,000 SSI/SSP recipients would be eligible for CalFresh starting in June of 2019 (CDSS, 2019a). There were also an additional 125,100 SSI/SSP recipients who were excluded members of CalFresh households that could also become eligible (CDSS, 2019a). However, the CDSS expected that for these individuals the increase in net income could result in a decrease in CalFresh benefits or disqualification for the household. In order to mitigate any loss of CalFresh benefits, the CDSS created two new programs, the

Supplemental Nutrition Benefits (SNB) and Transitional Nutrition Benefits (TNB) (CDSS, 2019a).

In addition to the new programs, the CDSS partnered with the SSA to assist SSI/SSP recipients to register for CalFresh. This strategy was meant to increase access to CalFresh for SSI/SSP recipients and make the application process more efficient. Many counties also partnered with intergovernmental departments such as In-Home Support Services (IHSS) to reach out to potentially eligible SSI/SSP recipients. Within the first three months after the policy was reversed, the state enrolled 45% of eligible SSI/SSP recipients in CalFresh (CDSS, 2019c). The applications were submitted through three main sources: The Code for America non-profit (this organization seeks to enhance the delivery of services using information technology), various Community Based Organizations (CBOs), and the SSA (CDSS, 2019c).

The CDSS measured their outreach efforts by creating the CalFresh Data Dashboard which tracked expansion data by county and demographics. The data is public, which can increase efficiencies for agencies and organizations that work with CalFresh. It can also be used to measure performance, track trends, and improve any inconsistencies (CDSS, 2022). Assembly Bill 1811 has proved to be one of the biggest policy changes aimed at increasing senior access and participation in CalFresh. It set the path for a higher level of nutritional care for seniors, people living with access and functional needs, and people with visual disabilities

After AB 1811, Governor Gavin Newsom signed Executive Order N-14-19 as a call to create California's Master Plan for Aging. "The Executive Order affirmed the priority of the health and well-being of older Californians and the need for policies that promote healthy aging" (CDA, 2019, para. 2). According to the plan, California expects a demographic shift that will increase the senior population to 10.8 million, or one-fourth of the population by the year 2030

(CDA, 2019). The plan encourages counties to prepare by establishing effective strategies to help seniors live nutritionally healthy lives.

Senior CalFresh/SNAP Eligibility

To be eligible for CalFresh/ SNAP, senior households must meet special requirements based on age and income. In order to be considered a senior, an individual must be 60 years of age or older. Additionally, senior households must meet the net income test, which is 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). The same income eligibility applies to SSI/SSP recipients.

Net income is defined as gross income minus allowable deductions. For SNAP purposes, “income includes both earned income, such as wages, and unearned income such as SSI, veterans, disability, and death benefits” (Wiseman, 2019, p.109).

According to the USDA FNS, (2021), net income is calculated using a formula that subtracts the SNAP standard deduction of \$177, excess medical expenses over \$35 a month, and excess shelter costs. Seniors are allowed to bypass the gross income test, which is defined as a household's total, non-excluded income before any deductions have been made. An example of how to calculate net income is provided in Table 1.

Table 1*How to Calculate SNAP Net Income for Elderly/Disabled Household*

| Elderly/ Disabled Households Income Computation | Example |
|---|---|
| Determine household size | 2 people who are elderly or disabled |
| Add gross monthly income | \$1,000 Social Security + \$200 pension = \$1,200 gross income |
| Subtract 20% earned income deduction | \$0 earned income |
| Subtract standard deduction | \$1,200 - \$177 standard deduction for a 2 person household = \$1,023 |
| Subtract dependent care deduction | 0 |
| Subtract child support deduction | 0 |
| Subtract medical costs over \$35 for elderly and \$1,023 - \$300 excess medical expenses = \$723 disabled | |
| Excess shelter deduction | |
| Determine half of adjusted income | \$723 adjusted income/2 = \$361.50 |
| Determine if shelter costs are more than half of adjusted income | \$600 total shelter cost - \$361.50 (half of income) = \$238.50 excess shelter costs |
| Subtract excess amount, but not more than the limit, from adjusted income | \$723 - \$238.50 = \$484.50 net monthly income |
| Apply the net income test | Since the net monthly income is less than \$1,452 allowed for 2-person household, the household has met the income test |

Note: Adapted from “SNAP special rules for the Elderly or Disabled,”

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/eligibility/elderly-disabled-special-rules> Copyright 2021, by

USDA FNS.

For fiscal years 2021/2022, seniors must be at or below the 100% FPL to be eligible for CalFresh. For example, a household size of one must be at or below 100% of the FPL of \$1,074 per month in net income. In a household of two, 100% poverty is \$1,452 per month in net income. For each additional senior household member, \$379 is added to the net income. The same income eligibility applies to SSI/SSP recipients. Table 2 shows the income eligibility limits for seniors in 2021/2022.

Table 2

SNAP Income Eligibility Limits Oct. 1, 2021 - Sept. 30, 2022

| Household Size | Gross monthly income (130 percent of poverty) | Net monthly income (100 percent of poverty) |
|------------------------|--|--|
| 1 | \$1,369 | \$1,074 |
| 2 | \$1,888 | \$1,452 |
| 3 | \$2,379 | \$1,830 |
| 4 | \$2,871 | \$2,209 |
| 5 | \$3,363 | \$2,587 |
| 6 | \$3,855 | \$2,965 |
| 7 | \$4,347 | \$3,344 |
| 8 | \$4,839 | \$3,722 |
| Each additional member | +\$492 | +\$379 |

Note: Adapted from “SNAP special rules for the Elderly or Disabled,”

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/eligibility/elderly-disabled-special-rules> Copyright 2021, by

USDA FNS.

Beginning in June of 2019, seniors receiving SSI/SSP benefits could be eligible for CalFresh. Individuals trying to apply for CalFresh would fall in one of two categories. The first category is for SSI/SSP recipients living in households with individuals already receiving

CalFresh. The second category is for SSI/SSP recipients living in a household where no one in the household receives CalFresh. If individuals fall into the first category, they do not have to complete a new CalFresh application; the administering office would automatically add the SSI/SSP recipient at the household's next CalFresh reporting deadline (Justice in Aging, 2019). If individuals fall into the second category, they need to complete a new CalFresh application.

One of the concerns of reversing the cash-out policy was that households that were currently receiving CalFresh could lose their benefit due to SSI/SSP counting as income. To prevent individuals from losing their CalFresh benefits, AB 1811 created the SSI/SSP SNB Program and the SSI/SSP TNB Program. Additionally, households receiving government assistance, such as TANF may automatically qualify for CalFresh under AB 1811. Individuals could also receive CalFresh even if they currently receive meals from other services.

After meeting the net income limits, the SNAP benefit formula is applied to determine the monthly benefit amount for seniors. The formula is dependent on various factors, including maximum allotments, deductions, and income eligibility standards that are based on changes in the cost of living. The Expected Family Contribution (EFC), or 30%, is subtracted from the net income. The maximum allotment per household is then subtracted from the EFC to determine the CalFresh/SNAP maximum monthly allotment. Table 3 shows the maximum monthly allotments.

Table 3*Maximum Monthly Allotment Oct. 1, 2021- Sept. 30, 2022*

| People in Household | Maximum Monthly Allotment |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | \$250 |
| 2 | \$459 |
| 3 | \$658 |
| 4 | \$835 |
| 5 | \$992 |
| 6 | \$1,190 |
| 7 | \$1,316 |
| 8 | \$1,504 |
| Each additional person | +\$188 |

Note: Adapted from “SNAP special rules for the Elderly or Disabled,”

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/eligibility/elderly-disabled-special-rules> Copyright 2021 by

USDA FNS.

Barriers to CalFresh/SNAP for Seniors

Misinformation

Various reports have shown that seniors experience various barriers to CalFresh participation; the most common barriers are misinformation and the application process (Call, n.d; CDSS, n.d). Misinformation about income requirements holds many seniors back from applying for CalFresh. They have a misconception that they will not qualify because they own property and/or have a savings account (Call, n.d). However, in most cases, there is no resource limit for CalFresh; seniors may be eligible even if they have money in savings and retirement accounts (CDSS, n.d).

A second misconception that primarily affects senior immigrants is the belief that they will be ineligible due to immigration status. The PRWORA eliminated assistance to most legal immigrants (Wiseman, 2019). The policy was later reversed, but immigrants remained hesitant to apply due to the fear of deportation (Fricke, Hughes, Schober, Pinard, Bertmann, Smith, & Yaroch, 2017). California has more immigrants than any other state, many of whom may be eligible for CalFresh (Danielson and Tan (2020), It is important for the state to provide educational material that targets immigrant families to inform them that they could be eligible for CalFresh.

Application Process

The application process is another barrier to CalFresh participation. Seniors have described the application and recertification process as lengthy and time consuming and having to do it in person is cited as the biggest challenge (Symon, 2020). State Senator, Scott Wiener, presented a solution to this issue in Senate Bill 882. The intent of SB 882, or the Elderly Simplified Application Process (ESAP) as it is now formerly known, was to simplify the CalFresh application process and increase access for seniors from home. ESAP would allow seniors to complete or certify over the phone without having to go in person. Additionally, ESAP would allow seniors to recertify every three years rather than annually. This would ensure that older adults and people with access and functional needs could keep their benefits for a longer period of time and recertify from home without needing to go in person.

During the coronavirus 2019 (COVID- 19) pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the CDPH advised seniors and immunocompromised individuals to shelter in place to prevent contracting the virus. Various county offices had their employees working from home and encouraged residents that needed assistance to call the county office or

visit the county website. Seniors that wanted to apply for CalFresh or recertify were asked to complete the CalFresh application online or through the phone. The shelter in place order demonstrated the need to increase CalFresh access over the phone and online. This ultimately aligned with ESAP and its intent to improve CalFresh access for seniors and allow them to recertify from home without needing to complete burdensome paperwork and going in person.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is academic literature that addresses how to increase SNAP participation on a national level; however, there is limited literature that addresses how to increase senior CalFresh (SNAP) participation in California where CalFresh participation is the lowest. Hammond, Li, McKinnon, and Munoz (2020), discussed possible strategies to increase senior CalFresh participation after the passage of AB 1811, but the research did not go into detail on the research method that was used to obtain the results.

The program is one of the closest approximations to a universal safety net that the United States has (Hammonds et al., 2020). The benefits have continuously helped keep people out of poverty and gain food security especially during challenging economic times. However, studies have found that eligible seniors in California are the least likely to participate in CalFresh in part due to social service hesitancy and barriers (Call, n.d; Hammon et al., 2020; O'Dare Wilson, 2017).

Social Service Hesitancy and Stigma

Studies have found that PRWORA created SNAP hesitancy among eligible individuals due to the new immigration status rules in that program (Fricke, Hughes, Schober, Pinard, Bertmann, Smith, & Yaroch 2015; Pinard, Bertmann, Byker Shanks, Schober, Smith, Carpenter, & Yaroch, 2017). In 1996, PRWORA modified the FSP eligibility requirements and excluded immigrants and recent permanent residents from the program (Rivera-Ottenberg & Werby, 2007). The changes were made to get food stamp recipients back to work and decrease social service spending. After PRWORA went into effect, reports indicated that the percentage of eligible participants that used SNAP had declined twice as fast as the percentage of eligible participants between 1996 and 2002 (Rivera-Ottenberg & Werby, 2007). Furthermore, studies

showed that the changes disproportionately affected Latinos. It was estimated that Latino participation in FSP declined 22% between 1996 and 2002 (Rivera-Ottenberg & Werby, 2007). Children, the elderly, the disabled, and refugees were the most affected by the changes (Rivera-Ottenberg & Werby, 2007).

In an effort to revamp national FSP participation, Congress passed The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (2002 Farm Act). The 2002 Farm Act restored benefits to most legal immigrants and simplified income requirements, all while expanding options to reduce barriers. The 2002 Farm Act also allocated funds for improving program access, participation, and outreach (Andrews & Smallwood, 2012). The 2002 Farm Act intended to simplify and streamline the FSP process, but immigrants continued to fall behind in participation (Rivera-Ottenberg & Werby, 2007).

Medel- Herrero and Leigh (2017), found that Latino agricultural labor workers, both documented and undocumented, were the least likely to request public assistance, even though they had some of the highest poverty and unemployment rates. The authors believed that agricultural workers may not apply due to fear of being deported, or that the request for assistance might harm an undocumented family member (Medel-Herrero & Leigh, 2017). Households with mixed immigration statuses may be reluctant to apply due to fear of revealing the immigration status of those undocumented household members and having their family separated (Pinard et al., 2017; Rivera-Ottenberg & Werby, 2007). They may also hesitate due to the perception that asking for public benefits may be considered a “public charge”, which could endanger eligibility for permanent resident status or American citizenship in the future (Pinard et al., 2017; Hammond et al., 2020).

Some SNAP eligible individuals have negative perceptions about SNAP, which make them hesitant to apply. The participants in one study stated that the reason they chose not to apply for food assistance was because they did not want to receive “government handouts” even though they met the poverty eligibility criteria (Fricke et al., 2015). According to (Rivera-Ottenberg & Werby (2007) “this perception can be linked to a deep-rooted prejudice that the poor who require assistance are viewed as a public charge” (p. 23). Consequently, eligible individuals who chose not to participate for this reason are more likely to struggle with food insecurity and proper nutrition (Rivera-Ottenberg & Werby, 2007).

Misinformation as a Barrier

Additional research discusses how one of the most common barriers to SNAP participation is misinformation (O’Dare Wilson, 2017; Magana, 2015; Hammond et al., 2020). Hammond et al., (2020), conducted a study that looked at SNAP accessibility for SSI recipients. Their study found that – “some of the eligible population had elected not to apply because they believed they would receive only a small benefit, such as the minimum of \$15/month” (p. 20). Individuals who did not apply mentioned that the small amount was not worth the time and effort they must go through to enroll (Hammond et al., 2020). Counties have struggled with this myth even though the average allotment is \$150 per month. Counties are working on overcoming this myth by giving eligible applicants the maximum allotment possible (Hammonds et al., 2020). Furthermore, this study shows the need for CalFresh to debunk myths and educate seniors about CalFresh benefits to increase senior CalFresh participation.

Application Process and Application Administration as a Barrier

A study conducted by Fricke et al., (2017) examined SNAP outreach efforts among organization employees and program participants across 27 states. The SNAP application

process and administration procedures are discussed in Fricke et al., (2017) as being a barrier to SNAP participation. Participants in the study “expressed a desire for an improved application process in terms of ease and application processing times” (Fricke et al., 2017, p. 277).

Participants who applied through a community organization cited that the application process was time consuming and inefficient because most organizations could not assist with the entire application process. “Individuals had to submit their own supporting documentation and conduct a follow-up interview with a state caseworker” (Fricke et al., 2017, p.279). This resulted in frustration with the amount of required paperwork and long delays to receive SNAP benefits. Caseworkers in this study suggested that administering agencies could streamline the application process to allow CBOs to submit applications and required documentation for individuals, which would decrease application processing delays and help individuals receive their benefits sooner (Fricke et al., 2017).

Solutions to Increase Senior CalFresh Participation

Research, although limited, has focused on finding strategies to increase CalFresh participation among seniors. Hammonds et al., (2020) reported that the best practices to increase CalFresh participation among seniors were

1. Use Strategic Communication
2. Reduce Barriers to Enrollment
3. Leverage Partnerships
4. Build Trust in Government (p. 5).

The recommended strategic communication plan to increase CalFresh access included print and media messaging tailored to subpopulations, in person outreach, application assistance, and use data when available (Hammonds et al., 2020; Fricke et al., 2017). To reduce barriers to

enrollment, the research recommended the promotion of using GetCalFresh.org and improving interview scheduling. For seniors without internet access or knowledge of technology, applying online may be a challenge. A different approach could be to improve telephonic services by having a team trained to assist seniors applying for CalFresh (Hammons et al., 2020).

As a means to leverage partnerships, the authors recommended that counties partner with CBOs and provide them with resources and tools to support applicants (Hammons et al., 2020). Common partnerships that have been created are with Faith-Based Organizations and (FBOs) and CBOs. Building partnerships with them is important because individuals usually trust these organizations as sources of information and services. This provides individuals with various places to find out about CalFresh and apply for benefits. Lastly, the authors recommended that counties build back trust in government by managing misinformation. Counties can try to get applicants the maximum benefits possible; applicants will then be more likely to reapply when needed and spread the word to friends and family (Hammons et al., 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The research method that was used for this report is benchmarking. Passos and Haddad (2013) describes benchmarking as an improvement tool that is based on the principle of measuring the performance of an organization against a standard or benchmark. When using benchmarks, metrics need to be established to compare the organizational operation strategies of various organizations and find the organizational standards (Passos & Haddad, 2013). Benchmarks compare the various organizations, and the highest performing organization is used as the standard. The results are analyzed to determine any gaps between current performance and superior performance (Passos & Haddad, 2013). Benchmarking looks at the current strategies used and determines the best practices and goals to improve organizational operations.

In this thesis-quality project, strategies used for increasing senior CalFresh participation in select coastal agricultural counties were benchmarked against the strategies used by the County of Santa Cruz. The County of Santa Cruz was chosen as the benchmark because over the years, the county has been focused on establishing effective strategies to increase their CalFresh ranking, and has increased their CalFresh participation over the years (Call & Shimada, 2018; Shimada & Birnbach, 2014)

The counties that were analyzed for this report are San Mateo, San Benito, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara. These counties were chosen because they have many common features, for example, they are coastal counties with an agricultural economic base and have a significant Latino population. County strategies and data were analyzed from the years 2017-2020 to compare CalFresh participation rates among the selected counties, and to assess whether AB 1811 increased participation among seniors. It is hypothesized that Santa Cruz County has

the highest senior CalFresh participation rates when compared to the selected coastal agricultural counties because of the senior focused strategies the county has in place.

Data for this report came from public sources. This report used California's CalFresh Data Dashboard which includes monthly data on CalFresh enrollment by county and by age group. The CalFresh Data Dashboard also includes data on SSI/SSP CalFresh enrollment. Other data sources that were used are county reports, budget reports, government websites, literature review, and data from CBOs. When possible, interviews with county employees and CBOs were conducted to obtain general information about senior access to CalFresh, possible barriers, trends over the years, and effective strategies that increased senior CalFresh participation. This research qualifies for an Institutional Review Board (IRB) exclusion because there are no human subjects, and people interviewed were only asked for facts about their programs that are not readily available elsewhere.

FINDINGS

Context

This project was written during the COVID-19 pandemic when the Delta variant and later the Omicron variant were surging in California. As a result of these challenges, there is data pertaining to this report that is either incomplete or was unavailable. The data that was available online is what was used for this project. Additionally, San Mateo County did not participate in the telephone interview. The information that was acquired for San Mateo County was through their county website and through telephone interviews with CBOs in the county.

Santa Cruz County

Santa Cruz County is situated at the northern rim of Monterey Bay and as of 2020 had a population of 273,213 (Santa Cruz County, 2022). It is estimated that seniors over the age of 60 made up 25% of the overall county population (CDSS, 2020). The county includes four incorporated cities: The City of Santa Cruz, the City of Watsonville, the City of Scotts Valley, and the City of Capitola (Santa Cruz County, 2022). The county's population is 56% White, 34% Hispanic or Latino, 5% Asian, and 1% Black or African American (U.S Census Bureau, 2021a). The county's economy relies on technology, agriculture, and tourism. As of 2018, the county's median household income was \$70,088. In South County, which includes the City of Watsonville and most of the agricultural areas, the median household income was \$55,470, which is, 25% less than the county average. This disparity is said to be attributable to the high number of farm workers who live in the city and a higher rate of unemployment (City of Watsonville, 2020).

Data indicated that the City of Watsonville had the highest CalFresh participation in the county; however, many eligible individuals, most noticeably, seniors did not participate

(Statistical Atlas, 2018a). Santa Cruz County ranked 35th out of California's 58 counties in overall CalFresh participation, and an estimated 5% of seniors over the age of 60 received CalFresh benefits in 2018 (California Food Policy Advocates [CFPA], 2015; Statistical Atlas, 2018a). Santa Cruz County Human Services Department (SCCHSD) is responsible for administering CalFresh to eligible individuals in the county. The SCCHSD has been looking for ways to increase CalFresh participation but has encountered barriers. Some of the common barriers include:

- Misinformation on qualification requirements
- Stigma associated with receiving CalFresh benefits
- Public charge misinformation
- Application process being too lengthy and/or complicated
- Low benefit amounts (G. Davidson, personal communication, March 4, 2022; R. Ortiz, personal communication, Feb 24, 2022; L. Rocha, personal communication, Feb. 21, 2022).

To combat these barriers, SCCHSD and CBOs in the county have used several strategies including:

- Provide access to the CalFresh application through several avenues, such as over the phone, in person, online, mail, or at home visit
- Collaborate with other county departments, such as IHSS and Santa Cruz County Human Services Agency
- Cross-train county staff in CalFresh to reduce the time it takes for seniors to receive their benefits
- Hire bilingual staff and provide interpretation services

- Partner and collaborate with CBOs
- Use technology for electronic verification purposes and social media as a CalFresh marketing tool
- Tailor outreach strategies such as messaging and flyers for seniors
- Conduct community engagement through farmers markets and farm visit in rural areas
- Provide ongoing training for CBOs (G. Davidson, personal communication, March 4, 2022; R. Ortiz, personal communication, Feb 24, 2022; L. Rocha, personal communication, Feb. 21, 2022).

The SCCHSD partners with the Second Harvest Food Bank (SHFB) to conduct CalFresh outreach and increase CalFresh access for county residents. Outreach efforts include in-person outreach at low-income communities and farms, targeted outreach such as flyers, and collaboration with other CBOs (G. Davidson, personal communication, March 4, 2022). One of SHFB's close partners is Salud Para La Gente (Salud) "a non-profit healthcare organization serving a unique community that includes farmworkers and their families" (Salud, 2022, para. 1). Primary care providers and care coordinators at Salud play a big role in referring patients in need of food to the clinic's community outreach team. The team is trained and certified to help patients apply for various programs including CalFresh (Salud, 2022). The clinic hosts food distribution once a week, and while individuals are waiting in line outreach specialists from SHFB pass out flyers and inform them about CalFresh (L. Rocha, personal communication, Feb. 21, 2022). Salud also sets up information booths at local farmer's markets where community outreach workers pass out flyers and answer questions (L. Rocha, personal communication, Feb. 21, 2022; G. Davidson, personal communication, March 4, 2022).

In June 2019, CalFresh was expanded to include SSI/SSP recipients. The SCCHSD anticipated the number of newly eligible CalFresh households to be 2,187 (CDSS, 2019d). The SCCHSD submitted their county plan to the state indicating how it planned to mitigate barriers and expand CalFresh access and participation to newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients.

The SCCHSD continued to use the strategies they had been using, but also incorporated new strategies such as the state's "Call, Click, Come In" model. The county's priorities were to train county staff on strategies such as outreach and collaboration with CBOs (CDSS, 2019d). To increase access, the SCCHSD hired seven benefit representative trainees and used the call back functionality for customers when call wait times were too high (CDSS, 2019d). In addition, the county created a triage station to expedite service application appointments for in-person or over the phone applications (CDSS, 2019d). This was beneficial for seniors because it shortened the amount of time they had to wait for their benefits to be approved (R. Ortiz, personal communication, Feb 24, 2022).

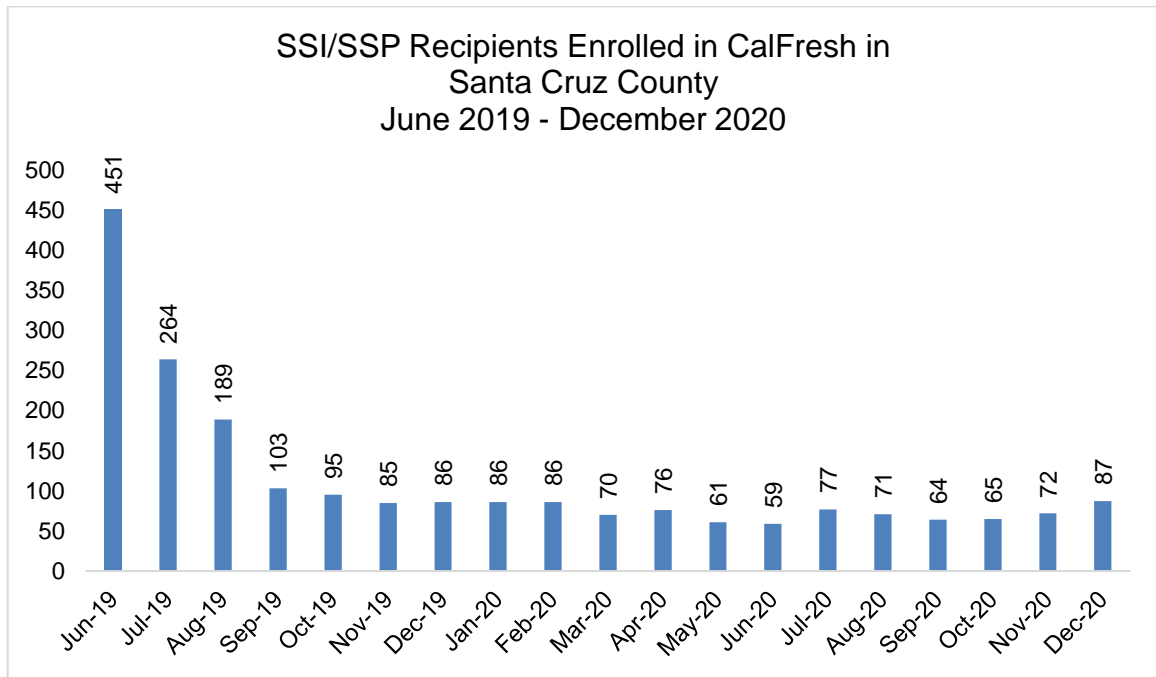
The SCCHSD cross trained staff so that all eligibility specialists could complete and approve CalFresh applications (R. Ortiz, personal communication, Feb 24, 2022). The SCCHSD also collaborated with IHSS and Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency (SCCHSA). They trained the outreach team from SHFB and other CBOs to ensure that they were up to date with the new regulations (G. Davidson, personal communication, March 4, 2022).

The number of seniors and people with disabilities who received CalFresh benefits grew as individuals with SSI/SSP became eligible for the program. During the first 18 months after the expansion, June 2019 through December 2020, the SCCHSD provided access to CalFresh benefits to 2,147 individuals as shown in Figure 1 (CDSS, 2022) Figure 2 compares the annual

senior CalFresh participation rates from 2017-2020 demonstrating an increase in participation after the SSI/SSP expansion.

Figure 1

SSI/SSP Recipients Enrolled in CalFresh in Santa Cruz County June 2019 - December 2020



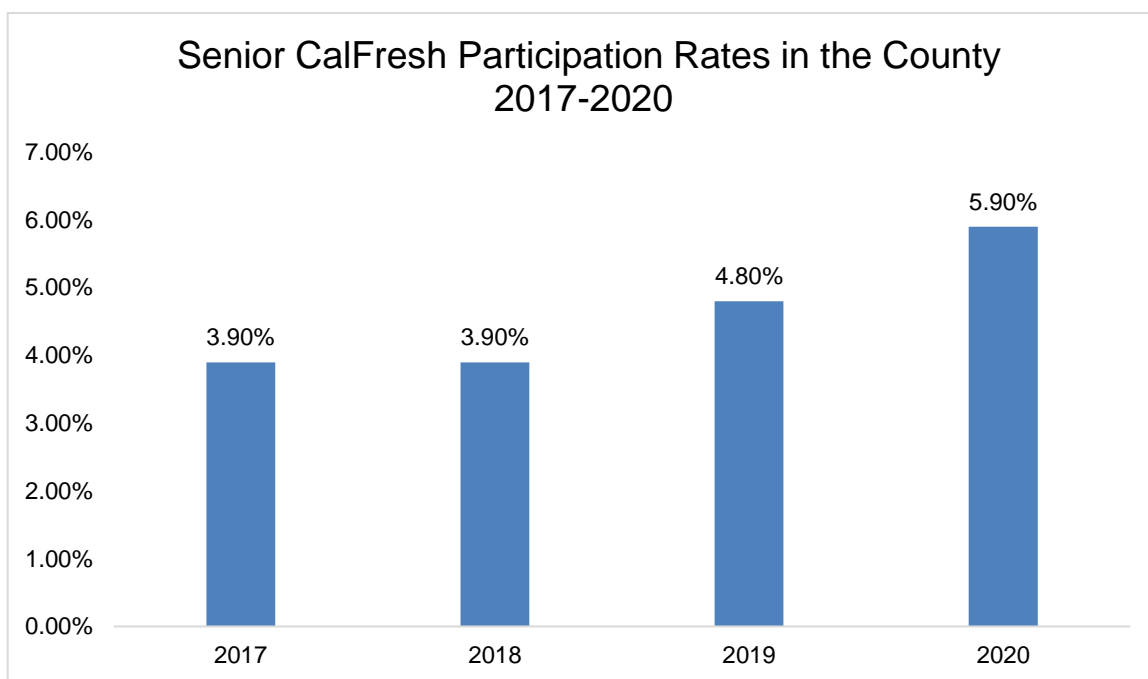
Note: Santa Cruz County information adapted from CalFresh Data Dashboard

<https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/data-portal/research-and-data/calfresh-data-dashboard>

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Figure 2

Santa Cruz County Senior CalFresh Participation Rates 2017-2020



Note: Santa Cruz County information adapted from CalFresh Data Dashboard

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Unfortunately, in March 2020 CalFresh outreach efforts were put on hold after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. Seniors who wanted to apply for CalFresh were encouraged to apply for benefits over the phone or online. Many seniors however did not have the resources or computer knowledge to complete and submit a CalFresh application and therefore preferred to apply over the phone (R. Ortiz, personal communication, Feb 24, 2022). The Senior Center in Watsonville tried addressing the technology issue by offering computer workshops to seniors, however the effectiveness of this effort is unknown (G. Davidson, personal communication, Feb. 21, 2022).

The SHFB continued to create targeted educational flyers for seniors and placed them in food bags that were distributed to seniors through Gray Bears, a nonprofit that is focused on senior health through food and meal deliveries (G. Davidson, personal communication, Feb. 21, 2022). County offices distributed maximum emergency allotments to CalFresh recipients during COVID-19. Seniors that received the minimum of \$15 a month were eligible to receive up to \$246 a month. As a result of the increase in benefits senior CalFresh participation increased, although the exact number is unknown (G. Davidson, personal communication, Feb. 21, 2022). When permitted by the state, the SCCHSD and CBOs will continue their outreach efforts to assist seniors apply for CalFresh.

San Mateo County

San Mateo County contains 20 cities on a peninsula by the City and County of San Francisco to the north and Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties to the south (San Mateo County, 2021). The three most populous cities in the county are Daly City, the City of San Mateo, and Redwood City (San Mateo Local Agency Formation Commission [LAFCO] (n.d). In 2020, the county had a population of 766,573 inhabitants (CDSS, 2022). It is estimated that seniors over the age of 60 made up 26% of the county's population (CDSS, 2022). The demographics in San Mateo County are 39% White, 28% Asian, 24% Hispanic or Latino, 2% Black or African American, and 4% two or more races (U.S Census Bureau, 2021b; San Mateo County, 2021). San Mateo County is one of the most diverse counties in California and in the United States (San Mateo County, 2021)

San Mateo County's economy relies heavily on technology, biomedical research, food service, and agriculture (San Mateo County, 2021). Most of the county's agriculture businesses can be found in the Town of Pescadero, the City of Half Moon Bay, the City of Pacifica and the

unincorporated areas (San Mateo County, 2021; Statistical Atlas, 2018b). Some of the crops grown include floral, nursery crops, vegetables, livestock, fruit, and nuts (San Mateo County, 2020). When compared to San Mateo County's median household income of \$122,641 the Town of Pescadero and the City of Pacifica, where most of the county's agriculture is found, had the lowest median annual household income in the county at \$58,500 (Statistical Atlas, 2018b).

The CFPA reported that San Mateo County ranked 55th out of the 58 counties in overall CalFresh utilization (CFPA, 2018). Data also found that only 3% of seniors over the age of 60 used the program in the county in 2018 (Statistical Atlas, 2018b). San Mateo County Human Services Department (SMCHSD) is responsible for administering CalFresh to eligible individuals. For the past several years SMCHSD has been trying to increase their CalFresh participation rates; however, the SMCHSD has experienced several barriers that have affected CalFresh participation. Unfortunately, attempts to communicate with staff from SMCHSD during the pandemic were not successful. The information that was gathered was through the county website and previous county case reports as well as through CBOs communication.

Common barriers that the SMCHSD has encountered over the years are:

- Language barriers
- Lack of awareness
- Myths and misinformation
- Social stigma
- Perception of a complex application process
- Lack of trust in government (Chen, 2013; M. Huerta, personal communication, March 3, 2022)

Several strategies have been put in place to counter some of the barriers and increase senior CalFresh participation. These strategies include:

- Increase access to the CalFresh application such as in person, online, phone, and through the Outreach Mobile Van
- Cross-train county employees
- Tailor outreach strategies such as messaging and flyers
- Use technology for electronic verification and for social media
- Collaborate with CBOs and other county departments (M. Huerta, personal communication, March 3, 2022)

In June 2019, CalFresh was expanded to include SSI/SSP recipients. The SMCHSD projected that 4,199 SSI/SSP recipients would be eligible for CalFresh through the expansion (CDSS, 2019d). As part of the expansion, the SMCHSD submitted their county plan that outlined how it planned to expand CalFresh access and participation to newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients.

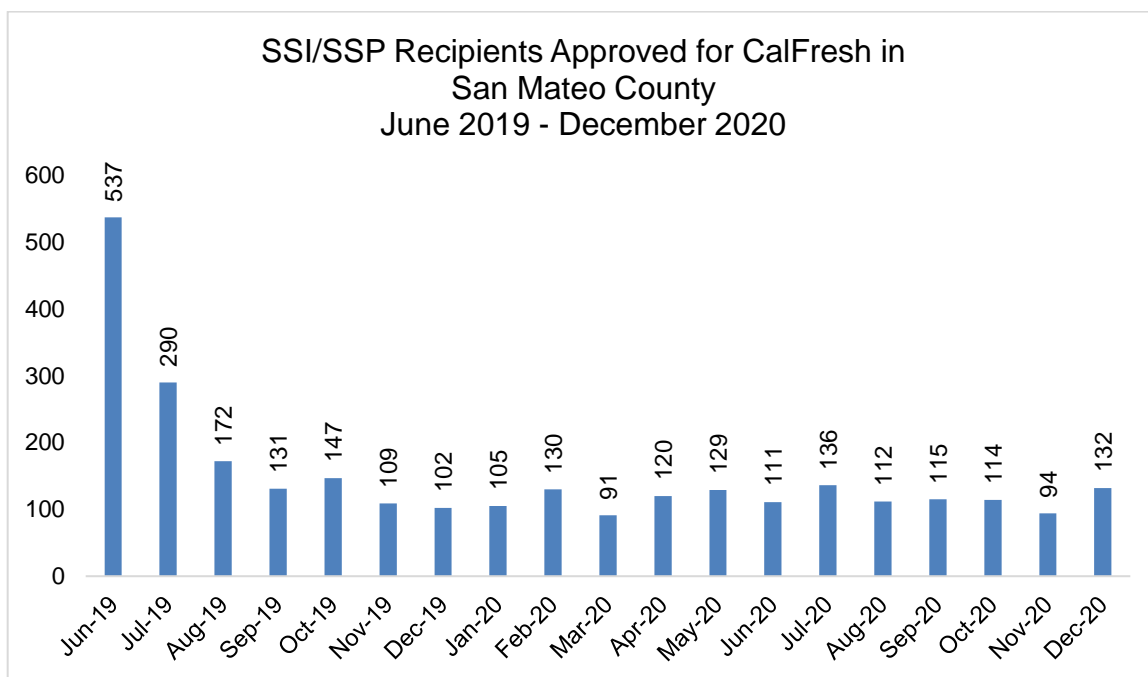
The SMCHSD continued to use the strategies mentioned above, but also incorporated new strategies. According to their plan, the SMCHSD continued to accept CalFresh applications via phone using the telephone signature process and realigned staff as needed to meet the increase in application processing (CDSS, 2019d). In addition, SMCHSD collaborated with CBOs, and used the CalFresh Mobile Outreach Van to enroll customers. Flyers, geo data, the county website, and social media were used to inform and encourage SSI/SSP recipients to apply (CDSS, 2019d).

After the SSI/SSP expansion and outreach efforts were put in place, senior CalFresh participation increased. During the first 18 months after the expansion, the SMCHSD

administered CalFresh benefits to 2,877 newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients between June 2019 through December 2020 as shown in Figure 3 (CDSS, 2022). Figure 4 compares the annual senior CalFresh participation rates from 2017-2020 demonstrating an increase in participation after the SSI/SSP expansion.

Figure 3

SSI/SSP Recipients Enrolled for CalFresh in San Mateo County June 2019 - December 2020



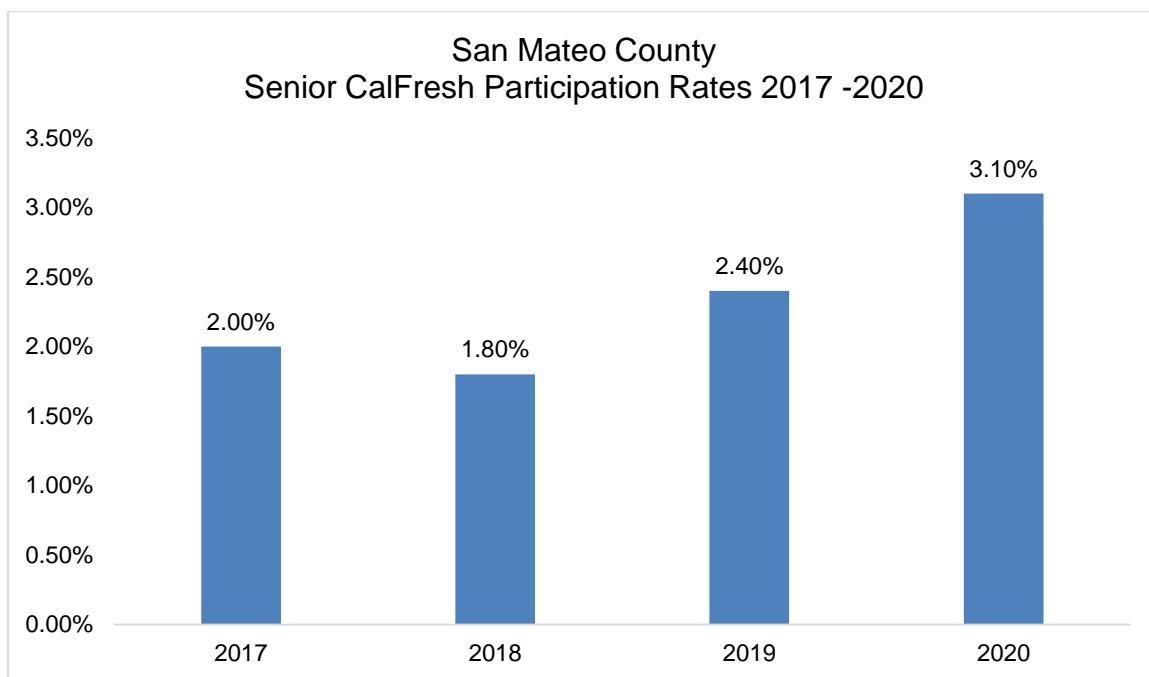
Note: San Mateo County information adapted from CalFresh Data Dashboard

<https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/data-portal/research-and-data/calfresh-data-dashboard>

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Figure 4

San Mateo County Senior CalFresh Participation Rates 2017-2020



Note: San Mateo County information adapted from CalFresh Data Dashboard

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Outreach efforts were cut short in March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Shelter in place orders and social distancing guidelines resulted in an increase in over the phone and online applications for eligibility specialists. The SMCHSD and CBOs saw an increase in senior CalFresh participation (M. Huerta, personal communication, March 3, 2022). Counties were allowed to issue maximum allotments to CalFresh recipients, which may have encouraged many seniors to apply (M. Huerta, personal communication, March 3, 2022). CBOs expect to continue to conduct more outreach when it is safe and permissible.

San Benito County

San Benito County is located east of Monterey County and south of Santa Cruz and Santa Clara Counties. Hollister and San Juan Bautista are the largest cities, with a few smaller communities such as Tres Pinos and Paicines also located within San Benito County (County of San Benito, 2022). San Benito County has a population of 62,789 inhabitants; of those, 21% are seniors over the age of 60 (Data USA, 2019). The population is 47% Hispanic or Latino, 34% White, 8% Other, and 3% Multiracial (Data USA, San Benito County, 2019). Nearly 20% of the population is foreign born (U.S Census Bureau, 2021c).

The median household income in the county in 2019 was \$86,958 (Data USA, 2019). San Benito County's economy primarily relies on manufacturing, health services, and agriculture (Data USA, 2019). According to data, residents that work in agriculture have a median household income of \$23,700 and are typically employed seasonally (Statistical Atlas, 2018c). They are also most likely to request assistance. This demographic is the most likely, in San Benito County, to request and use assistance such as CalFresh.

Reports from the CFPA showed that San Benito County ranked 17th out of the 58 counties in overall County CalFresh participation in 2015 (CFPA, 2018). Data from 2018 shows that 9% of individuals in San Benito County over the age of 60 participated in CalFresh (Statistical Atlas, 2018c). The San Benito County Health and Human Services Agency (SBCHHSA) is responsible for administering CalFresh to eligible individuals. The SBCHHSA recognizes common barriers that affect senior CalFresh participation in the county. The most common barriers include:

- Language barriers
- CalFresh eligibility requirements (R. Garcia, personal communication, Feb. 22, 2022).

San Benito County has used several strategies to counter some of the barriers and increase senior CalFresh participation. These strategies include:

- Increase Access to CalFresh application such as in person, online, over the phone and at home visits
- Cross-train county employees in CalFresh
- Tailor outreach strategies, for example messaging and flyers
- Use technology for electronic verification
- Collaborate with CBOs and other county departments

(R. Garcia, personal communication, Feb. 22, 2022).

In June 2019, CalFresh was expanded to include SSI/SSP recipients. The SBCHHSA projected that 356 SSI/SSP recipients would be eligible for CalFresh under the expansion. As part of the expansion, the SBCHHSA submitted their county plan that outlined how it would expand CalFresh access and participation to newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients.

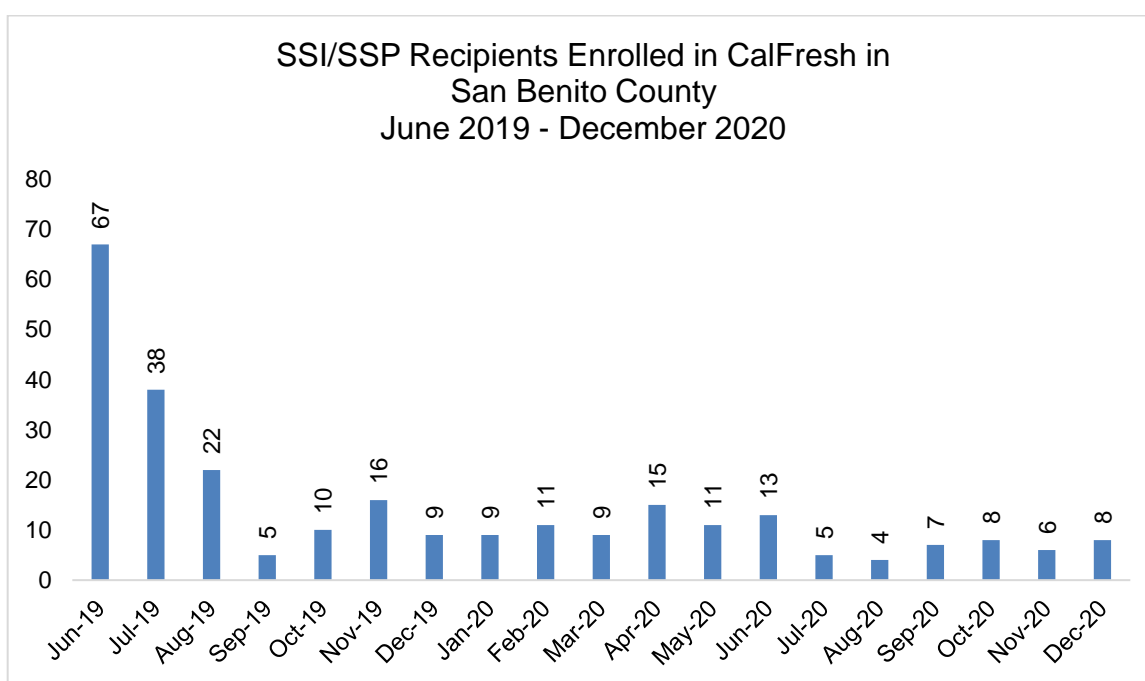
The SBCHHSA continued to use the strategies mentioned above, but also incorporated new strategies such as the “Call, Click, Come In” model. The county prepared for the CalFresh expansion by upgrading their voice response system and training staff on the changes. The county hired new staff for the increase in CalFresh application volume (CDSS, 2019d).

Eligibility specialists were cross trained in various programs, which allowed them to screen for CalFresh and other programs at the same time (R. Garcia, personal communication, Feb. 22, 2022). The SBCHHSA increased awareness through flyers and informational material (R. Garcia, personal communication, Feb. 22, 2022). Out in the community, SBCHHSA established new community partnerships with IHSS and CBOs to provide outreach assistance to the elderly and disabled population.

After the SSI/SSP expansion and outreach efforts were put in place, senior CalFresh participation increased. In 2020, SBCHHSA administered CalFresh to 273 newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients in the first 18 months after the expansion from June 2019 through December 2020 as shown in Figure 5. (CDSS, 2022). Figure 6 compares the annual senior CalFresh participation rates from 2017-2020 demonstrating an increase in participation after the SSI/SSP expansion.

Figure 5

SSI/SSP Recipients Enrolled in CalFresh in San Benito County June 2019 - December 2020



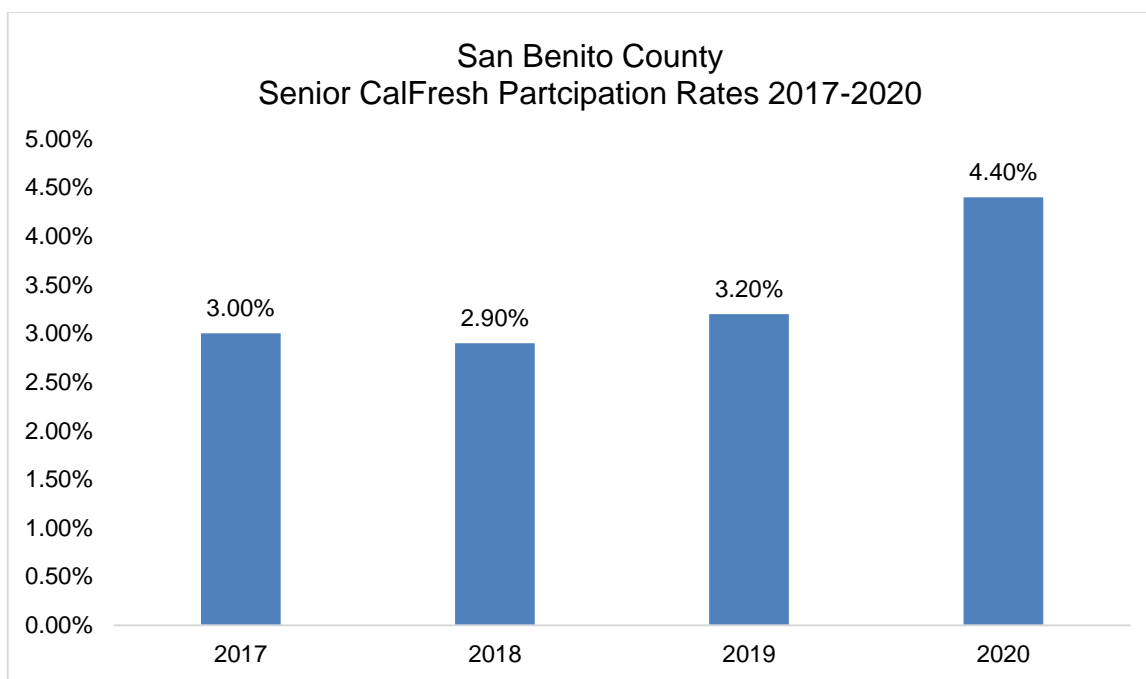
Note: San Benito County information adapted from CalFresh Data Dashboard

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Figure 6

San Benito County Senior CalFresh Participation Rates 2017-2020



Note: San Benito County information adapted from CalFresh Data Dashboard

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However, in March 2020, outreach efforts were put on pause after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. Seniors were encouraged to apply over the phone or online. The SBCHHSA experienced an increase in CalFresh applications due to COVID-19 (R. Garcia, personal communication, Feb. 22, 2022). Seniors who were receiving the minimum of \$16 in benefits, received up to \$246 in emergency benefits. The increase in benefits incentivized seniors to apply because the effort to get benefits was seen as “worth the effort” (R. Garcia, personal communication, Feb. 22, 2022). When permitted by the state, the SBCHHSA and CBOs will reboot their outreach efforts to continue the increase of senior CalFresh participation in San Benito County.

Monterey County

Monterey County is located on the Pacific Coast of California, south of Santa Cruz County. The county has 12 incorporated cities and 16 unincorporated areas. The county is home to 441,290 residents as of 2020, and the county projects the population to reach 458,000 inhabitants by the end of 2024 (County of Monterey, 2021). It is estimated that seniors over the age of 60 made up 20% of the county's population (U.S Census Bureau, 2021d). The population in Monterey County is 59% Hispanic or Latino, 30% White, 5% Asian, 3% Black or African American, 2% Multi-racial and 1% Other (U.S Census Bureau, 2021d; County of Monterey, 2021). Nearly 30% of the population is foreign born (U.S Census, 2021d).

The City of Salinas represents the largest city in Monterey County with over 162,222 residents (County of Monterey, 2021). The city is well known for its agriculturally rich Salinas Valley also known as the "Salad Bowl of the World". The county's economy relies heavily on agriculture, and according to the Employment Development Department's Labor Market Division, farming constituted 18% of all employment in 2020, the highest of all occupations (County of Monterey, 2021). Farm labor employees are paid minimum wage and because their work is seasonal, typically do not have a continuous income (County of Monterey, 2021). The Monterey County's Department of Social Services (MCDSS), is responsible for administering CalFresh to eligible individuals. Reports from the CFPA show that Monterey County ranked 38th out of the 58 counties in CalFresh participation (CFPA, 2018). According to data, only 4% of seniors received CalFresh benefits in 2018 (Statistical Atlas, 2018d). Some common barriers for seniors in the county include:

- Stigma associated with receiving free benefit "handouts"

- Low benefit amounts that make the application process not worthwhile (L. Lopez, personal communication, March 10, 2022).

The MCDSS has used several strategies to counter some of the barriers and increase senior CalFresh participation. These strategies include:

- Increase Access to the CalFresh application through in person, online, over the phone, and at home visits
- Cross-train county employees in CalFresh
- Tailor outreach strategies such as messaging and flyers
- Use of technology for electronic verification and social media
- Collaborate with CBOs and other county departments (L. Lopez, personal communication, March 10, 2022).

In June 2019, CalFresh was expanded to include SSI/SSP recipients. The MCDSS estimated that 3,311 SSI/SSP recipients would be eligible for CalFresh under the expansion (CDSS, 2019d). As part of the expansion, the MCDSS submitted their county plan that outlined how it would expand CalFresh access and participation to newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients.

The MCDSS continued to use the strategies mentioned above, but also incorporated new strategies. The MCDSS used the state's "Call, Click, Come In" model. The MCDSS partnered with the SSA staff that were trained in CalFresh and were able to assist with the application process and referrals. The MCDSS hired more staff for the call center and provided accommodations such as phone interviews and at home visits (CDSS, 2019d). The county collaborated with CBOs and FBOs (CDSS, 2019d). Eligibility specialists in the county were cross trained in CalFresh and Medi-Cal; some were trained in CalFresh, Medi-Cal and CalWorks (L. Lopez, personal communication, March 10, 2022). All specialists were bilingual in Spanish

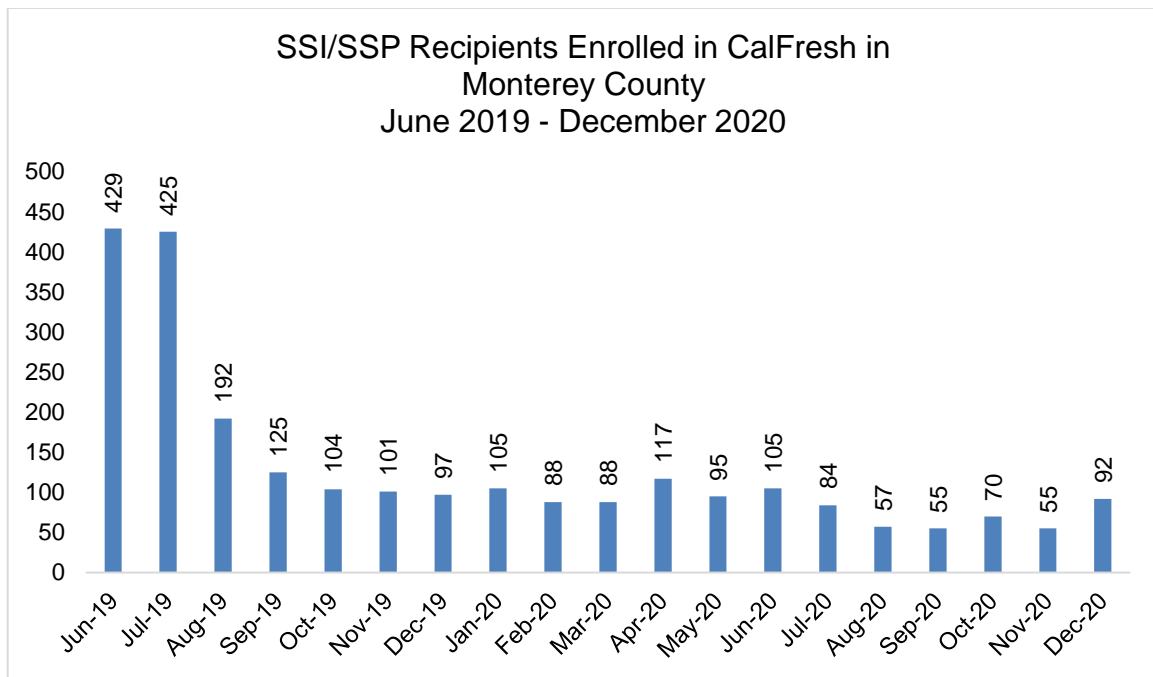
and English and had access to the language line when needed (L. Lopez, personal communication, March 10, 2022).

The MCDSS has a CalFresh Outreach Team that goes out to the community to events and locations such as farmers markets and Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) offices where individuals can sign up people for CalFresh using their laptops and tablets. The Outreach Team carries a portable scanner to scan and submit documents to have the ability to complete applications while out in the community. Another outreach method that MCDSS uses is the MCDSS website, social media, and texts for those that opt in for text messages (L. Lopez, personal communication, March 10, 2022).

Reports from the CalFresh Data Dashboard (2022) indicate that the number of seniors receiving CalFresh increased after the expansion. In the first 18 months, June 2019 through December 2020, 2,484 newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients received CalFresh, as shown in Figure 7 (CDSS, 2022). Figure 8 compares the annual senior CalFresh participation rates from 2017-2020 demonstrating an increase in participation after the SSI/SSP expansion.

Figure 7

SSI/SSP Recipients Enrolled in CalFresh in Monterey County June 2019 - December 2020



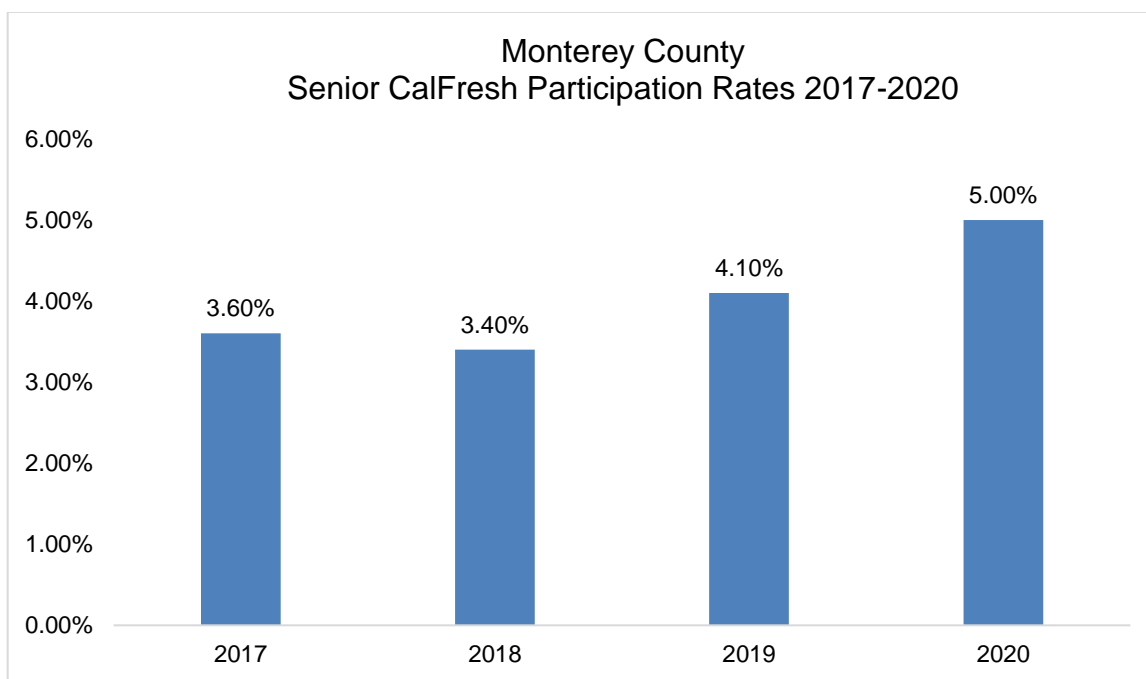
Note: Monterey County information adapted from CalFresh Data Dashboard

<https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/data-portal/research-and-data/calfresh-data-dashboard>

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Figure 8

Monterey County Senior CalFresh Participation Rates 2017-2020



Note: Monterey County information adapted from CalFresh Data Dashboard

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However, in March 2020, outreach efforts ended abruptly after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. To prevent the spread of the virus many county employees began working from home, and seniors were encouraged to apply for CalFresh over the phone or online. Most seniors chose to apply over the phone due limited computer literacy (L. Lopez, personal communication, March 10, 2022). Some seniors requested to have an application mailed to their homes because they found it easier than the phone or online options (L. Lopez, personal communication, March 10, 2022). As of March 2022, outreach efforts continue to be limited due to the ongoing Omicron variant. The MCDSS expects to expand their outreach efforts, including

in-person strategies as restrictions are lifted. In the meantime, MCDSS will continue outreach through phone, mail, and online efforts, with the help of their community partners.

San Luis Obispo County

San Luis Obispo County is located on the Central Coast of California south of Monterey County. The county includes seven cities, the largest city being the City of San Luis Obispo (County of San Luis Obispo, 2021). The county was home to a total of 276,251 inhabitants as of the year 2020, a decrease from 2017 when the county had 280,822 residents (CDSS, 2022). It is estimated that seniors over the age of 60 made up 29% of the total county population in 2020 (CDSS, 2022). The population of the county is 68% White, 23% Hispanic or Latino, 4% Asia, 2% Black or African American, and 3% Other (U.S Census Bureau, 2021e). The foreign-born population in the county as of 2019 was 10% (U.S Census Bureau, 2021e).

The county's economy relies on educational services, health care, and social assistance services; it also relies on entertainment, food, and agriculture. The top valued agricultural crops in 2019 were strawberries, grapes, broccoli, and avocados (Settevendemie, 2019). The median household income in San Luis Obispo County was \$77,948 (U.S Census Bureau, 2019e). For agricultural workers, the median household income was \$28,200 which is nearly 65% less than the county's median household income (Statistical Atlas, 2018e). Furthermore, agricultural workers work seasonally and rely on government assistance during their off season to make up for lost income.

Reports from CFPA (2018) show that San Luis Obispo County ranked 56th out of the 58 counties in CalFresh participation, and only 39% of eligible CalFresh residents participated in CalFresh. For seniors, reports show that only 4% of senior households received CalFresh benefits (Statistical Atlas, 2018e). The San Luis Obispo County Department of Social Services

(SLOCDSS) provides CalFresh to eligible individuals in the county. The SLOCDSS has tried to improve senior CalFresh participation but has experienced some barriers. These barriers include:

- Lack of technical skills and access to computers,
- Lack of in-person assisters
- Lack of transportation to travel to the SLOCDSS office
- Perception that they are taking money away from people who may need it more
- Perception that they will only get the minimal amount in benefits

(Keisler, A, personal communication, March 15, 2022).

The SLOCDSS has used several strategies to counter some of the barriers and increase senior CalFresh participation. These strategies include:

- Increase access to the CalFresh application through in-person, online and over the phone
- Cross-train county employees in CalFresh
- Tailor outreach strategies such as messaging and flyers
- Use technology for electronic verification
- Collaborate with CBOs and other county departments

(Keisler, A, personal communication, March 15, 2022).

In June 2019, CalFresh was expanded to include SSI/SSP recipients. The SLOCDSS estimated that 1,316 SSI/SSP recipients would be eligible for CalFresh under the expansion (CDSS, 2019d). The SLOCDSS submitted their county plan to the state, which outlined how SLOCDSS planned to expand CalFresh to newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients. The SLOCDSS continued to use the strategies mentioned above, but also incorporated new strategies like the “Call, Click, Come In” model. The SLOCDSS trained eligibility specialists within the department and the staff members of IHSS and CBOs; staff was prepared to be reassigned to

other areas as needed to assist applicants (CDSS, 2019d). The SLOCSSD also continued to offer same day appointments to CalFresh applicants who applied inside the offices. The SLOCSSD sent out outreach material through mail to mixed households with an active CalFresh CalWORKs case and IHSS recipients who were receiving SSI/SSP (CDSS, 2019d). CalFresh expansion information was also posted on the county website and on social media.

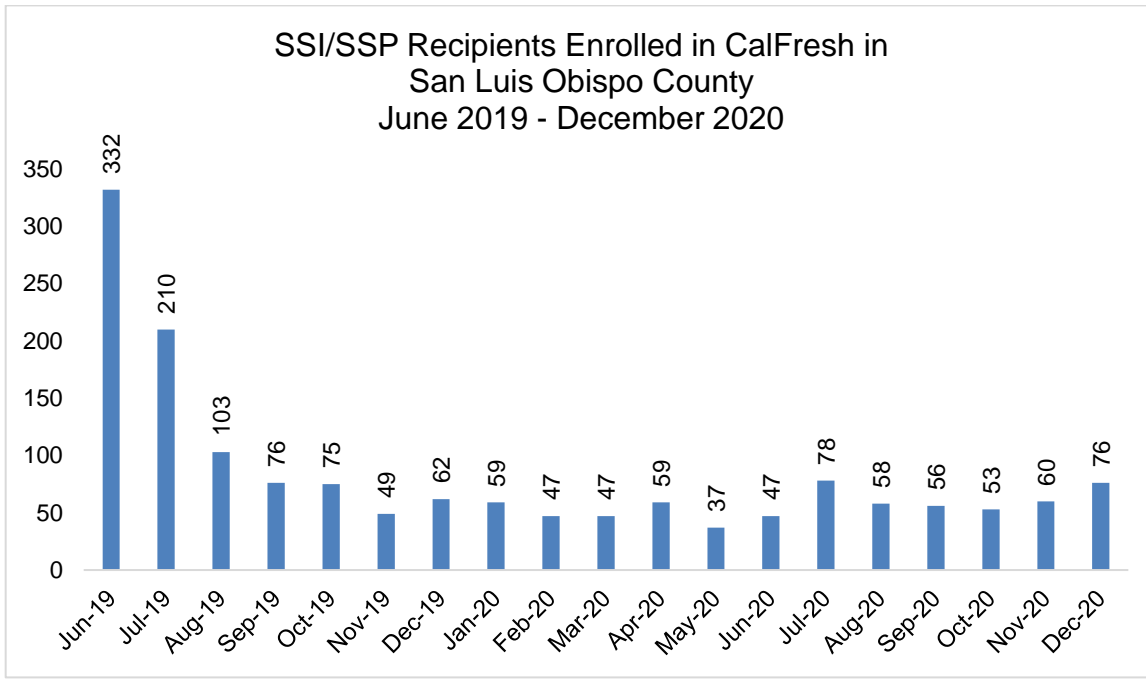
“Out in the community, outreach staff from the San Luis Obispo Food Bank set up meetings at low-income senior housing complexes to talk to seniors about CalFresh. After the meetings, the outreach staff would meet with individual residents who wanted to apply. Staff would carry a computer and a portable scanner and printer to make the application process as easy as possible” (Keisler, A., personal communication, Mar 15, 2022). At food distribution centers, printed information about CalFresh were placed in bags of food going out to residents, either through the Senior Home Delivery Program or Senior Farmers Market Program (Keisler, A., personal communication, Mar 15, 2022). The SSI/SSP expansion efforts were to become incorporated as a long-term effort to assist seniors.

After the SSI/SSP expansion, CalFresh participation among seniors and people living with access and functional needs increased. During the first 18 months, June 2019 through December 2020, 1,584 newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients received CalFresh, as shown in Figure 9 (CDSS, 2022). Figure 10 compares the annual senior CalFresh participation rates from 2017-2020 demonstrating an increase in participation after the SSI/SSP expansion.

Figure 9

SSI/SSP Recipients Enrolled in CalFresh in San Luis Obispo County

June 2019 - December 2020



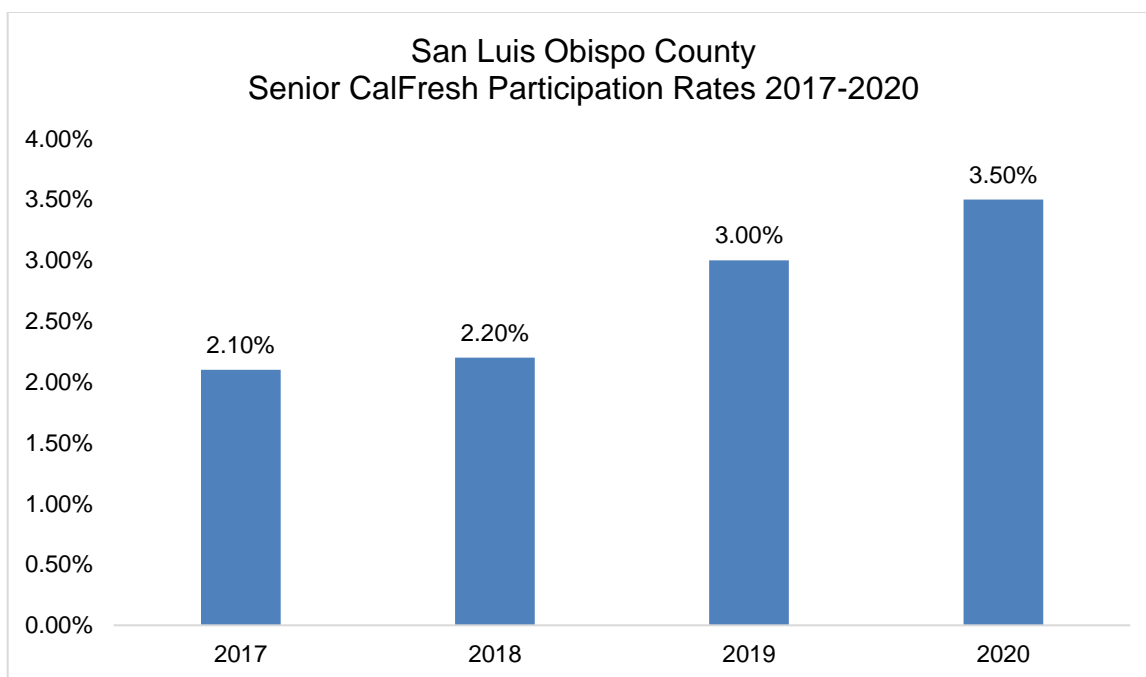
Note: San Luis Obispo County information adapted from CalFresh Data Dashboard

<https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/data-portal/research-and-data/calfresh-data-dashboard>

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Figure 10

San Luis Obispo County Senior CalFresh Participation Rates 2017-2020



Note: San Luis Obispo County information adapted from CalFresh Data Dashboard

(<https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/data-portal/research-and-data/calfresh-data-dashboard>)

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However, in March 2020, SLOCDSS stopped their outreach efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The SLOCDSS encouraged seniors and all individuals living with access and functional needs to apply for CalFresh either online or through the phone. There are no statistics that illustrate what happened with seniors and CalFresh during the pandemic, but what is known is that the enhanced benefits helped everyone who was already signed up or signed up for the program during the pandemic (Keisler, A., personal communication, Mar 15, 2022). As of March 2022, outreach efforts continue to be limited due to the ongoing Omicron variant. The SLOCSSD expects outreach efforts to resume as restrictions are lifted.

Santa Barbara County

Santa Barbara County is located on the Central Coast in Southern California, south of San Luis Obispo County. The county has eight incorporated cities, the largest being the City of Santa Maria, CA. The population in the county as of the year 2020 was 451,329 inhabitants, a decrease from the previous year (CDSS, 2022). It is estimated that seniors over the age of 60 made up 22% of the county's population in 2020 (CDSS, 2022). County demographic data shows that 46% of the population was Hispanic or Latino, 44% was Caucasian, 5% was Asian, 2% was Black or African American, and 3% was other (County of Santa Barbara, 2018). The county's foreign-born population was 23% (U.S Census, 2019f).

Some of the top economic sectors that Santa Barbara County depends on are educational services, administration, government, transportation, and farming (County of Santa Barbara, 2018). The median household income in the county was \$74,624 nearly equal to California's median household income of \$75,235 (U.S Census Bureau, 2021f). However, the median household income for residents working in agriculture was \$22,000, the lowest of all occupations in the county (Statistical Atlas, 2018f). Agricultural workers often rely on assistance from the government during their off season to make up for their lost income (Statistical Atlas, 2018f).

The Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services (SBCDSS) administers CalFresh to eligible individuals. Reports from the CFPA (2018) show that Santa Barbara County ranked 52nd out of the 58 counties in CalFresh participation. Data on senior participation shows that only 4% of seniors over the age of 60 received CalFresh in the county (Statistical Atlas, 2018f). The SBCDSS has been trying to increase senior CalFresh participation but has noted some barriers that keep seniors from applying. These barriers include:

- Difficulty applying

- Thinking they are not eligible due to income
- Thinking they will get minimal benefits if they apply (E. Anguillen, personal communication, March 05, 2022).

The SBCDSS has used several strategies to counter some of the barriers and increase senior CalFresh participation. These strategies include:

- Increase Access to CalFresh application, through in person, online and over the phone accessibility
- Cross-train county employees in CalFresh
- Tailor outreach strategies such as messaging and flyers
- Use technology for electronic verification
- Collaborate with CBOs and other county departments

(E. Anguillen, personal communication, March 05, 2022).

In June 2019, CalFresh was expanded to include SSI/SSP recipients. The SBCDSS estimated that 3,381 SSI/SSP recipients would be eligible for CalFresh under the new expansion (CDSS, 2019d). As part of the expansion, the SBCDSS submitted their county plan that outlined how it planned to expand CalFresh access and participation to newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients.

The SBCDSS continued to use the strategies mentioned above, but also incorporated new strategies, including the state's "Call, Click, Come in" model. The SBCDSS conducted training for various departments within the county and with CBOs. For example, county eligibility specialists cross trained in various programs and had the ability to screen applicants for more than one program at a time. This process facilitated the application process for phone applicants, online applicants, and in person applicants. IHSS "also assisted by taking CalFresh applications

to IHSS recipients who were not currently enrolled during annual home visits” (E. Aguillon, personal communication, March 7, 2022).

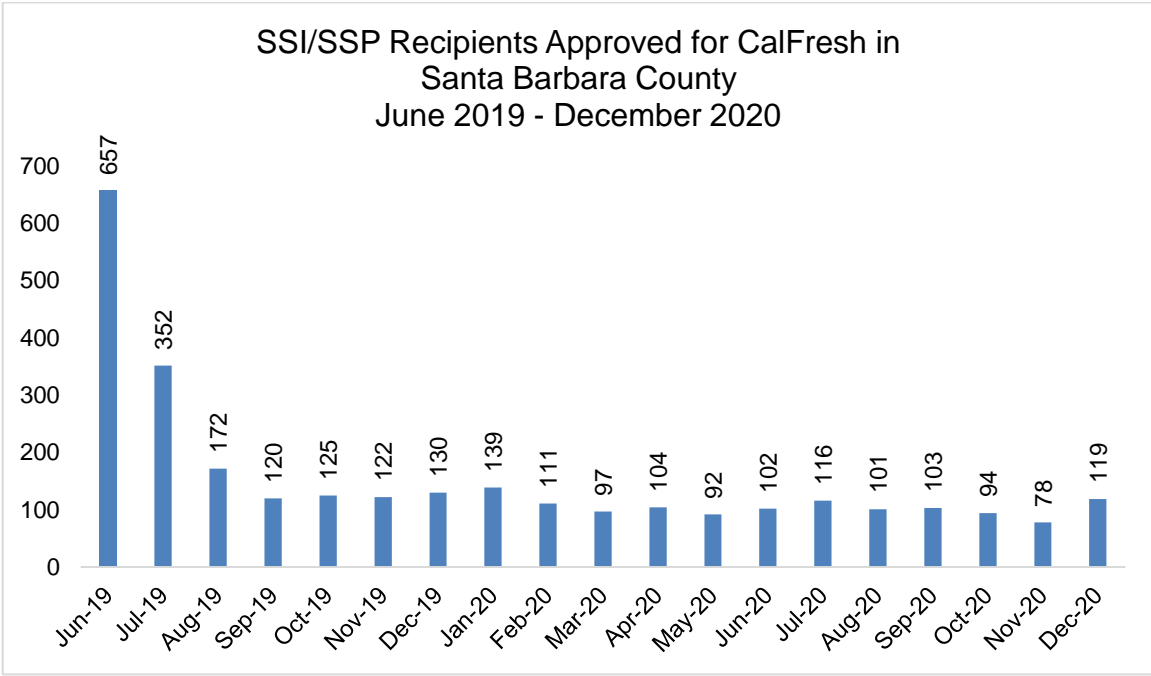
The SBCDSS used their voice response system for incoming calls, which gave applicants the option to request a call back if they were unable to wait without losing their place in the queue (CDSS, 2019d). The county also planned to explore the possibility of designing a window just for SSI/SSP recipients (CDSS, 2019d). Santa Barbara County collaborated with CBOs that included medical providers, senior housing centers, homeless shelters and other agencies advocating for the disadvantaged in the community (CDSS, 2019d).

Reports indicate that after the expansion, the number of seniors receiving CalFresh increased. During the first 18 months, June 2019 through December 2020, 2,934 SSI/SSP recipients received CalFresh benefits as shown in Figure 11 (CDSS, 2022). Figure 12 compares the annual senior CalFresh participation rates from 2017-2020 demonstrating an increase in participation after the SSI/SSP expansion.

Figure 11

SSI/SSP Recipients Approved for CalFresh in Santa Barbara County

June 2019 - December 2020



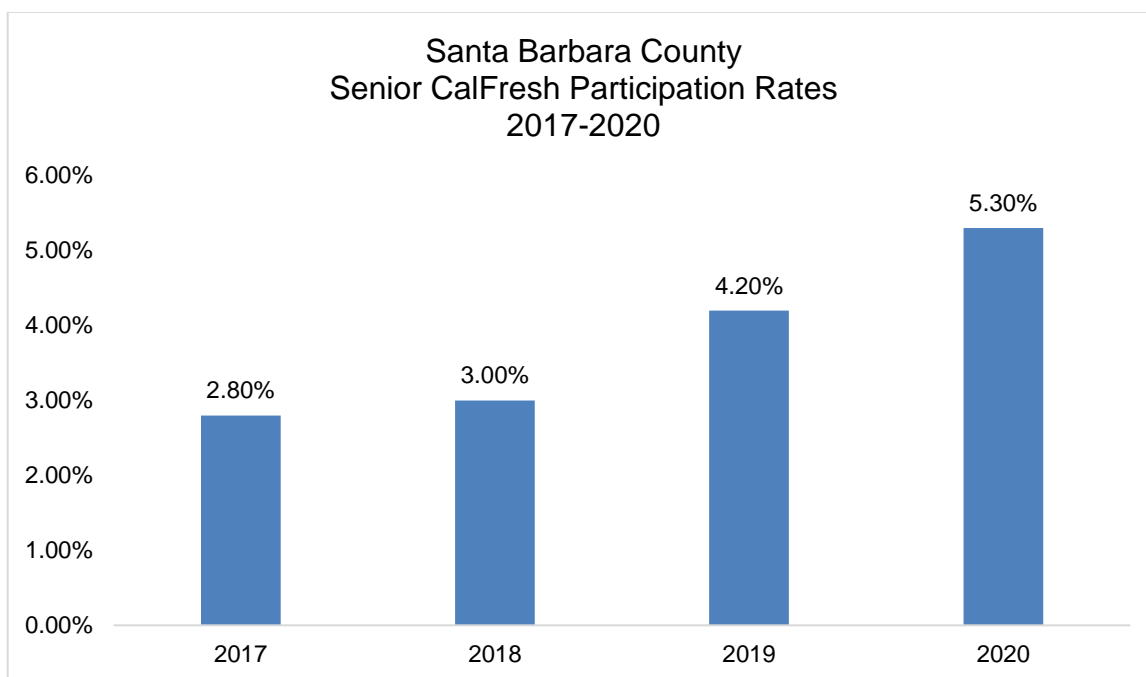
Note: Santa Barbara County information adapted from CalFresh Data Dashboard

<https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/data-portal/research-and-data/calfresh-data-dashboard>

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Figure 12

Santa Barbara County Senior CalFresh Participation Rates 2017-2020



Note: Santa Barbara County information adapted from CalFresh Data Dashboard

<https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/data-portal/research-and-data/calfresh-data-dashboard>

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Unfortunately, less than a year after the expansion, outreach efforts were paused after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. Social distancing and shelter in place orders were put in place to prevent the spread of the virus, and seniors were encouraged to apply online or through the phone. “The pandemic did not have a negative impact on senior citizens. Since the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, there was a 35% increase in senior citizen recipients and the number continues to increase” (E. Aguillon, personal communication, March 05, 2016).

Additionally, seniors with no earned income qualify under Elderly Simplified Application Project to recertify every 36 months rather than every 12 months. This is expected to keep seniors and individuals with disabilities on CalFresh for a longer period of time (E. Aguillon,

personal communication, March 05, 2016). Due to the Omicron variant, many outreach efforts are still on hold, however, they will resume as restrictions are lifted by the state.

ANALYSIS

This analysis compares the selected coastal agricultural counties in California and the strategies each county and CBOs used to increase CalFresh access and participation rates among seniors as shown in Table 4. The analysis also assesses whether AB 1811 increased participation among seniors by comparing senior CalFresh participation rates from the years 2017-2020 as shown in Figure 13. Additionally, the analysis looks at the different barriers that the counties experienced and provides recommendations, if any, as shown in Table 5. Lastly, this analysis answers the research question regarding whether Santa Cruz County had the highest senior CalFresh participation rates when compared to the selected counties, as shown in Figure 13, and whether the strategies the county used potentially played a role.

The counties in this study shared various evaluation factors, including having a significant Latino population and an agriculturally based economy. The comparisons will be benchmarked against Santa Cruz County to determine the best practices to increase senior CalFresh rates. This may lead to enabling Santa Cruz County to incorporate new strategies to help increase and/or maintain senior CalFresh participation rates.

Table 4*Strategies to Increase CalFresh Among Seniors*

| | Santa Cruz | San Mateo | San Benito | Monterey | San Luis Obispo | Santa Barbara |
|-----------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|----------|-----------------|---------------|
| Call, Click, Come in | | | | | | |
| Telephonic signatures | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Telephone interviews | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| GetCalFresh.org | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| In-person | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Streamline | | | | | | |
| Electronic verification | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Access | | | | | | |
| Bilingual staff | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Cross-train staff | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| At-home visits | X | | X | X | | |
| Collaborate | | | | | | |
| Intergovernmental | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| CBOs | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| CBOs ongoing training | X | | | | | |
| Outreach | | | | | | |
| Flyers | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Community events | X | X | | X | X | |
| Social media | X | X | | X | | |

Note: Information obtained through “Expanding CalFresh to SSI/SSP Recipients: County Readiness Plans,” (<https://www.cdss.ca.gov/Portals/9/CalFresh%20SSI%20Cash-Out/All%20County%20Readiness%20Plans-4.12.19.pdf?ver=2019-04-15-110413-780>).

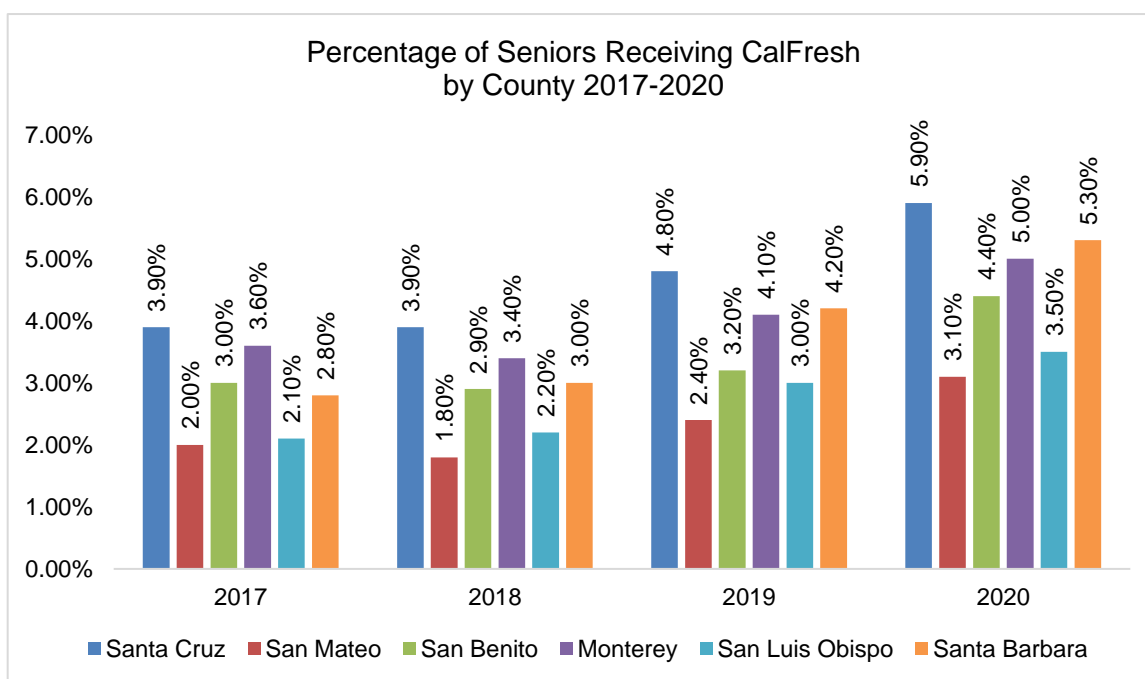
Copyright 2019, by CDSS. Phone interviews: County of Santa Cruz, G. Davidson, personal communication, March 4, 2022, R. Ortiz, personal communication, Feb 24, 2022, L. Rocha, personal communication, Feb. 21, 2022. County of San Mateo, M. Huerta, personal communication, March 3, 2022. County of San Benito R. Garcia, personal communication, Feb.

22, 2022. County of Monterey, L. Lopez, personal communication, March 10, 2022. County of San Luis Obispo, Keisler, A., personal communication, Mar 15, 2022. County of Santa Barbara E. Anguillen, personal communication, March 05, 2022.

Table 4 shows the different strategies that the selected counties used to increase their senior CalFresh participation rates. Santa Cruz County used various strategies that the other counties did not use. These strategies were, providing at home visits, providing ongoing training for CBOs, proving outreach through community events, and using social media as an outreach and marketing tool. Santa Cruz County had a partnership with SHFB who conducted the county's CalFresh outreach. SHFB was active in the community and went out to seniors housing complexes and to farms in rural parts of the county. these strategies have been helping Santa Cruz County increase senior CalFresh participation rates as shown in Figure 13.

Figure 13

Percentage of Seniors Receiving CalFresh in the Selected Counties 2017-2020



Source: CDSS, CalFresh Data Dashboard, Santa Cruz County, San Mateo County, San Benito County, Monterey County, San Luis Obispo County, Santa Barbara County, 2022

San Mateo County & Santa Cruz County

San Mateo County has the highest median household income within the selected counties which may explain the county's low CalFresh participation rate. However, like Santa Cruz County, San Mateo County's economy also relies on agriculture. Agricultural cities and towns in both counties have a lower median household income than the county's average (Statistical Atlas, 2018). Additionally, both counties share similar demographics and have a large Latino population.

San Mateo County and Santa Cruz County share similar strategies to increase senior CalFresh participation rates. Some of the strategies include outreach, the "Call, Click, Come In" model, and cross training county employees in CalFresh. Staff in both counties are bilingual and use social media as a marketing tool. Some of the differences between the counties are that Santa Cruz County partners with SHFB and provides ongoing training for them. San Mateo County collaborates with SHFB and other CBOs and sends them updates rather than providing them with ongoing training. Furthermore, San Mateo County does not provide at-home visits like Santa Cruz County. San Mateo County does, however, have a CalFresh Mobile Outreach Van that goes out to different locations and events. Individuals that apply can submit documents, and if they are approved, they can receive their EBT card on site.

During the first 18 months after the SSI/SSP expansion began, San Mateo County enrolled 2,877 seniors and people with access and functional needs in CalFresh (CDSS, 2022). That is 69% of the expected eligible SSI/SSP recipients enrolled in the program (CDSS, 2022). In comparison, Santa Cruz County enrolled 98% of eligible SSI/SSP recipients (CDSS, 2022).

Senior CalFresh participation rates show that San Mateo County ranks 6th within the selected counties in overall senior CalFresh participation while Santa Cruz County ranks 1st. A smart practice for San Mateo County to increase senior CalFresh participation is to provide ongoing training to CBOs and offer at home visits to seniors.

San Benito County & Santa Cruz County

San Benito County is the smallest county within the selected group; however, they have a large Latino population and an agriculturally based economy similar to Santa Cruz County. San Benito County and Santa Cruz County share similar strategies to increase senior CalFresh participation. Some of these strategies include outreach; access to the CalFresh application through the phone, online, and in person; and cross training county employees in CalFresh. Both counties have bilingual staff and offer at-home visits in special circumstances. Some of the differences between the counties are that Santa Cruz County partners with SHFB and provides ongoing training for them. On the other hand, the San Benito County collaborates with various CBOs, and sends them updates rather than provide them with ongoing training. Furthermore, San Benito County does not use social media platforms as a CalFresh outreach tool.

During the SSI/SSP expansion, San Benito County enrolled 273 seniors and people with access and functional needs in CalFresh (CDSS, 2022). That is 77% of the expected eligible SSI/SSP recipients enrolled in the program (CDSS, 2022). In comparison, Santa Cruz County enrolled 98% of the expected newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients (CDSS, 2022). Senior CalFresh participation rates show that San Benito County ranks 4th in overall senior CalFresh participation within the selected counties and Santa Cruz County ranks 1st. Smart practices for the county to increase senior CalFresh participation are to incorporate ongoing training for CBOs and use social media as a marketing tool for CalFresh.

Monterey County & Santa Cruz County

Monterey County like Santa Cruz County has a predominantly Latino population, and an agriculturally based economy. Data shows that Monterey County has the lowest median household income within the selected counties (U.S Census Bureau, 2021d). This can be in part due agricultural jobs constituting the top employment in Monterey County. Agricultural jobs tend to be seasonal and pay low wages.

Monterey County and Santa Cruz County share similar strategies to increase senior CalFresh participation rates. Some of the strategies include outreach, the “Call, Click, Come In” model, and cross training county employees in CalFresh. Staff in both counties are bilingual and use social media as a marketing tool. Some of the differences between the counties are that Santa Cruz County partners with SHFB and provides ongoing training for them and other CBOs. On the other hand, Monterey County collaborates with SHFB and other CBOs and sends them updates rather than provide them with ongoing training. Furthermore, Monterey County does not provide at-home visits like Santa Cruz County. Monterey County does, however, travel to the WIC office in Watsonville to sign up people for CalFresh that live in the Las Lomas/ Pajaro area.

During the SSI/SSP expansion, Monterey County enrolled 2,484 of newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients in CalFresh in the first 18 months (CDSS, 2022). That is 75% of the expected eligible seniors and individuals with access and functional needs enrolled in the program (CDSS, 2022). In comparison, Santa Cruz County enrolled 98% of the expected newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients (CDSS, 2022). Senior CalFresh participation rates show that Monterey County ranks 3rd in overall senior CalFresh participation within the selected counties while Santa Cruz County ranks 1st. A smart practice for Monterey County to increase senior CalFresh participation is to provide ongoing training for CBOs.

San Luis Obispo County & Santa Cruz County

San Luis Obispo County has the highest senior population, and the second lowest median household income within the selected counties (U.S Census Bureau, 2021e). San Luis Obispo County like Santa Cruz County has a large Latino population and an economy that relies on agriculture. San Luis Obispo County and Santa Cruz County share similar strategies to increase senior CalFresh participation rates. Some of the strategies include outreach, the “Call, Click, Come In” model, and cross training county employees in CalFresh. Staff in both counties are bilingual and use technology for electronic verification. Some of the differences between both counties are that Santa Cruz County partners with SHFB and provides ongoing training for them and other CBOs. On the other hand, San Luis Obispo County collaborates with SHFB and other CBOs and sends them updates rather than provide them with ongoing training. Furthermore, San Luis Obispo County does not provide at-home visits like Santa Cruz County. However, San Luis Obispo County did create an alliance with various CBOs known as the SLO County CalFresh Alliance. Their purpose is to reduce hunger and increase CalFresh rates in the county. Currently, San Luis Obispo County does not utilize social media as a marketing tool for CalFresh information.

During the SSI/SSP expansion, San Luis Obispo County enrolled 1,584 eligible SSI/SSP recipients in CalFresh in the first 18 months (CDSS, 2022). That is 120% of the expected eligible seniors and individuals with access and functional needs enrolled in the program (CDSS, 2022). This increase is the highest senior CalFresh increase within the selected counties. Senior CalFresh participation rates show that the San Luis Obispo County ranks 5th in overall senior CalFresh participation within the selected counties. Possible reasons as to why the county enrolled more SSI/SSP recipients than expected can be that the county experienced an increase in

SSI/SSP recipients, the county's expansion estimates were too low, or the county used new strategies during the expansion. San Luis Obispo County ranks 5th in overall senior CalFresh participation and Santa Cruz County ranks 1st. A smart practice for San Luis Obispo County to increase senior CalFresh participation is to provide ongoing training for CBOs and utilize social media as a CalFresh marketing tool.

Santa Barbara County & Santa Cruz County

Santa Barbara County is the 2nd largest county and has the 4th highest senior population within the selected counties. Santa Barbara County like Santa Cruz County has a large Latino population and an agriculturally based economy. Agricultural cities in the county have a lower income than the county average and rely on CalFresh services (Statistical Atlas, 2018f).

Santa Barbara County and Santa Cruz County share similar strategies to increase senior CalFresh participation rates. Some of the strategies include outreach, the "Call, Click, Come In" model, and cross training county employees in CalFresh. Staff in both counties are bilingual and use technology for electronic verification purposes. Some of the differences between the counties are that Santa Cruz County partners with SHFB and provides ongoing training for them and other CBOs. On the other hand, Santa Barbara County collaborates with SHFB and other CBOs and sends them updates rather than providing them with ongoing training. Furthermore, Santa Barbara County does not currently use social media as a marketing tool for CalFresh. Santa Barbara County does, however, offer CalFresh when IHSS case workers visit IHSS recipients for their annual recertification visit.

During the SSI/SSP expansion, the Santa Barbara County enrolled 2,934 eligible SSI/SSP recipients in CalFresh in the first 18 months (CDSS, 2022). That is 87% of the expected eligible SSI/SSP recipients approved for CalFresh (CDSS, 2022). In comparison, Santa Cruz County

enrolled 98% of the expected newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients (CDSS, 2022). Senior CalFresh participation rates show that Santa Barbara County ranks 2nd in overall senior CalFresh participation within the selected counties. A smart practice for Santa Barbara County to increase senior CalFresh participation is to provide ongoing training for CBOs and utilize social media as a marketing tool for CalFresh.

Barriers That Affect Senior CalFresh Participation

All of the counties in this study experienced barriers that affect senior CalFresh participation. Table 5 shows the eight most common barriers identified by the counties.

Table 5*Barriers to CalFresh That Affect Seniors*

| | Santa Cruz | San Mateo | San Benito | Monterey | San Luis Obispo | Santa Barbara |
|---|------------|-----------|------------|----------|-----------------|---------------|
| Misinformation | X | X | | | X | X |
| Stigma | X | X | | X | | |
| Application process and requirements | X | X | X | | | X |
| Low benefit amounts | X | | | X | X | X |
| Technology | X | | | | X | |
| Lack of trust in government | | X | | | | |
| Language barriers | | X | X | | | |
| Transportation | | | | | X | |

Note: Phone interviews: County of Santa Cruz, G. Davidson, personal communication, March 4, 2022, R. Ortiz, personal communication, Feb 24, 2022, L. Rocha, personal communication, Feb. 21, 2022. County of San Mateo, M. Huerta, personal communication, March 3, 2022. County of San Benito R. Garcia, personal communication, Feb. 22, 2022. County of Monterey, L. Lopez, personal communication, March 10, 2022. County of San Luis Obispo, Keisler, A., personal communication, Mar 15, 2022. County of Santa Barbara E. Anguillen, personal communication, March 05, 2022.

The most common barriers experienced include CalFresh misinformation, stigma, application process/requirements, and low benefit amounts. To combat misinformation and stigma, counties can focus on educating communities on the CalFresh program. This can be done via outreach including creating informational flyers tailored for seniors, using social media, and working together with CBOs. Literature shows that CBOs play a vital role in providing information on government programs to the community because these organizations have established trust within their communities that exceeds the level of trust with government agencies (Hammonds et al., 2019). It is important for CBOs involved in CalFresh outreach to receive ongoing training to ensure that the information that they are distributing is accurate, to maintain community trust. The less common barriers, however, should still be addressed, especially technology as a barrier that both Santa Cruz County and San Luis Obispo reported. Counties are becoming more reliant on technology because it is a reliable method and saves time, however, many seniors do not understand how to use technology. Counties can combat this barrier by continuing to provide in person assistance and creating a senior phone line staffed with trained eligibility specialists.

Counties are limited on what they can change when it comes to the application process, requirements, and benefit amounts; these changes need to be made by California and/or the Federal government. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the State of California approved CalFresh emergency allotments to assist during the Delta surge and the ongoing Omicron variant. Individuals receiving CalFresh were guaranteed at least \$95 a month in emergency allotments resulting in an increase in senior CalFresh applications (USDA, 2021). It is important to note, however, that emergency allotments are not permanent, and seniors will go back to their original benefit amounts when the emergency comes to an end. This can discourage

seniors from applying or reapplying if their benefits are seen as “not worth the effort” anymore (M. Huerta, personal communication, March. 3, 2022).

To continue senior engagement and participation in CalFresh, the Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP) went into effect in March 2022. The project will waive the semi-annual Eligibility Status Report for up to 36 months for elderly and/or disabled households with no earned income. This is groundbreaking, and counties in California will need to prepare for these upcoming changes and potential increase in senior CalFresh participation rates.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

California has the lowest senior CalFresh participation rates when compared to all other states. This thesis-quality project compared the different strategies used by the selected coastal agricultural counties and determined best practices to increase senior CalFresh participation rates. The findings of this study show that when compared to the other selected counties, Santa Cruz County had the highest senior CalFresh participation rates from 2017-2020. This can be attributed, in part, to strategies that Santa Cruz County implemented that were not used by other counties, such as partnering rather than collaborating with CBOs like SHFB. The county also provided CBOs that assisted with CalFresh ongoing training to ensure that they had the necessary tools to provide efficient and effective application assistance to community members. Furthermore, Santa Cruz County conducted outreach on farms residing in rural parts of the county to reach agricultural communities, made up of predominantly Latino individuals, and conducted at-home visits.

During the SSI/SSP expansion, Santa Cruz County continued to use the same strategies, but also incorporated new strategies focused on the SSI/SSP expansion. Results from this study indicate that Santa Cruz County enrolled 98% of expected newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients in the first 18 months. The County of San Luis Obispo however enrolled 120% of newly eligible SSI/SSP recipients. Possible reasons as to why the county enrolled more SSI/SSP recipients than expected can be that the county experienced an increase in SSI/SSP recipients, or the county's expansion estimates were low.

It is recommended that counties use some of the strategies that Santa Cruz County uses to increase senior CalFresh participation rates such as, providing at home visits, CBOs training, community events and outreach, and social media. A recommendation for Santa Cruz County to

increase their senior CalFresh rates is to consider using mobile outreach as a strategy. San Mateo County currently uses a CalFresh mobile office van for CalFresh outreach. The San Mateo County outreach team is fully equipped with the technology needed and if individuals applying get approved, individuals can receive their EBT card on the spot. This strategy can increase CalFresh access for seniors who do not have transportation or who need in person application assistance. Funding would be needed for a CalFresh mobile office van, however, if funding is not available for a van, the county can opt for scheduled CalFresh pop-up events in select locations. Eligibility Specialists from the county and CBO's can lead the events and take turns hosting the pop-ups. Portable laptops and scanners would be needed along with funding to advertise the new CalFresh pop up services. Flyers tailored for seniors with the CalFresh pop- up schedule can be passed out in places where there is a high senior population. Incorporating this strategy along with the continued support from CBO's can increase access to CalFresh for seniors in hopes of further increasing senior CalFresh participation rates in Santa Cruz County.

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APPENDIX A

County and CBO Phone Survey

Hello, my name is Mayra Rocha and I am a graduate student at San Jose State University in the Master of Public Administration Program. I am currently working on my thesis which is focused on senior CalFresh participation in coastal agricultural counties from San Mateo County down to Santa Barbara County. My goal is to find the best practices for increasing CalFresh participation among seniors. Some of the questions that I have are the following,

1. What are common barriers that seniors experience when applying for CalFresh benefits?
2. What outreach efforts/ strategies are currently being used that have proved to be effective?
3. Can you tell me more about the expansion of SSI/SSP? What efforts were taken to enroll SSI/SSP recipients in CalFresh?
4. What role did the pandemic play on senior CalFresh participation rates in the county? Did the volume of senior CalFresh applications during the pandemic change?
5. Moving forward, how can we utilize the resources we have (ex. technology, telephonic service, outreach efforts) to further increase senior participation?