

April 15, 2026

Senator Josh Becker
Chair, Senate Human Services Committee
1021 O Street, Suite 6520
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Opposition to SB 1134: SNAP to Thrive

Dear Chair Becker,

The undersigned organizations represent a diverse group of advocates and member organizations who are committed to ensuring equitable access to food and nutrition for all Californians. We are gravely concerned about and write in respectful opposition to SB 1134, which requires CDSS to request a waiver from USDA to restrict CalFresh food purchases in an attempt to promote “healthy eating”.

CalFresh, known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) federally, is the state’s largest anti-hunger and nutrition safety net, serving over 5 million Californians each month. However, California’s CalFresh participation rate has remained below the national average (88 percent), with an estimated 81 percent of eligible Californians participating in the program, based on the most recently available

data from 2022.[1] We believe that California must continue investing time and resources to support CalFresh participation and access while reducing administrative costs and burdens associated, especially in light of federal SNAP rule changes and California's ongoing budget crisis. Further, AB 553 (Caloza 2025, Chapter 38), recently enacted into state law stipulates that, "The State Department of Social Services shall maximize *all available* food choices for CalFresh recipients…" pursuant to federal law.

While we share the desire to support the health of Californians, we believe that any attempts to do so through restricting the use of CalFresh benefits are both impractical and counterproductive, for the reasons outlined below.

1. **Food restrictions are ineffective in promoting healthy eating.** Research shows that prohibiting certain food purchases does not lead to meaningfully improved dietary outcomes.[2] Instead, evidence-based approaches like incentivizing healthy foods through increasing benefit allotments, and programs such as produce vouchers and farmers market matches have proven successful in encouraging nutritious food choices without creating barriers or stigma. The USDA Food and Nutrition Service acknowledged and concluded this as well in a research report titled "Implications of Restricting the Use of Food Stamp Benefits" published in March 2007.[3] Additionally, research on SNAP has shown that participation in SNAP is associated with improved health outcomes compared to low-income non-participants by reducing the prevalence of food insecurity, giving participants the flexibility to access foods to help manage illnesses and thus reducing healthcare costs, and freeing up household budgets to be used for other necessities such as needed medical care or health-promoting activities.[4]

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[1] Cunnyngham, Karen. "Empirical Bayes Shrinkage Estimates of State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: Fiscal Year 2020 and Fiscal Year 2022." Prepared by Mathematica, Contract No. 12-3198-23-F-0047. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, February 2025.
[2] University of Michigan School of Public Health. (2025, April 4). Restriction vs. incentives: The complex reality of SNAP food policies. *University of Michigan School of Public Health News*. https://sph.umich.edu/news/2025posts/restrictions-incentives-snap-food-policies.html
[3] U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. (2007, March 1). *Implications of restricting the use of food stamp benefits*. https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/implication-restricting-use-food-stamp-benefits
[4] Carlson, S., & Llobrera, J. (2022, December 14). *SNAP Is Linked With Improved Health Outcomes and Lower Health Care Costs*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-is-linked-with-improved-health-outcomes-and-lower-health-care-costs

2. **Lack of clear definitions for "ultra-processed foods" creates implementation challenges**. There is no universally accepted definition of "ultra-processed foods" or "unhealthy foods",[5] making enforcement arbitrary and inconsistent. Similarly, for food items such as soda or candy, there are no clear or universal definitions. For example, "soda" may be defined as a carbonated beverage, which would ban unsweetened sparkling water while allowing high-sugar fruit juices. Alternatively, if defined as sweetened carbonated beverages, it could prohibit diet sodas while permitting fruit juices with more sugar content. Even while trying to find a definition that is not arbitrary and is inclusive, these definitions demonstrate that they are targeting categories of foods, rather than nutritional content, leaving healthy options barred. Similarly, barring candy but not baked goods, such as cookies, poses the same issue. The definitions of these food items would become either so lengthy and cumbersome that it would be difficult to craft, implement, and monitor, or would be highly arbitrary, drawing into question whether the waiver is truly about improving health outcomes, or is able to deliver on that goal. Demonstration waivers that don't meet the stated purpose are subject to challenge, which could be an additional resource drain and delay for the state.
3. **Food restrictions in CalFresh discriminate against low-income consumers.** Chronic disease disproportionately impacts low-income communities not due to individual food choices, but because of systemic barriers, including limited access to grocery stores in neighborhoods affected by historic disinvestment and redlining, prevalence of corner stores over full-service grocers, and targeted marketing of processed foods in low-income communities.[6] Research shows that low-income individuals consume processed foods at rates similar to the general population, yet only their purchasing decisions would face government scrutiny. This only furthers existing stigma and discrimination for SNAP participants by reinforcing the false narrative that low-income individuals lack the willpower to make healthy food choices. Also, "healthier" food items often come at a premium, with nearly half of low-income adults in the U.S. citing costs as a barrier to eating

[5] Gibney M. J. (2018). Ultra-Processed Foods: Definitions and Policy Issues. *Current developments in nutrition*, *3*(2), nzy077. https://doi.org/10.1093/cdn/nzy077

[6] Odoms-Young, A., Brown, A. G. M., Agurs-Collins, T., & Glanz, K. (2024). Food Insecurity, Neighborhood Food Environment, and Health Disparities: State of the Science, Research Gaps and Opportunities. *The American journal of clinical nutrition*, *119*(3), 850–861. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajcnut.2023.12.019

healthy, according to a 2025 Pew Survey.[7] By restricting lower-cost food options, participants are forced to buy less food with the same benefits, defeating the purpose of the program in helping families meet their nutritional needs, further demonstrating the need for healthy food incentives, rather than food restrictions.

4. **Monitoring and compliance with SNAP food restrictions will be overly burdensome for retailers and may also lead to retailer drop-outs.** Implementation would introduce substantial challenges for many of the 30,700 retailers who accept CalFresh in California, raising serious questions about fairness and feasibility.[8] Some of the questions that arise from these challenges include: Who is responsible for determining which food items should or should not be excluded from purchase via SNAP? Who and how will the changes be communicated to inform retail staff and customers about the changes? There are also concerns about the costs of reprogramming retailer operating systems, potential misclassification of foods by the stores when coding food that cannot be purchased with CalFresh or cashiers, retailers overly restricting foods available for purchase through SNAP, and the risk of retailer attrition if businesses fear non-compliance or trafficking accusations. Many smaller retailers, especially convenience stores or locally-owned markets, may find compliance too difficult and opt out of CalFresh entirely, reducing food access for those who rely on these retailers for everyday purchases. Anecdotally, we have heard from other advocates that this occurred in Ohio under WIC, where new rules resulted in retailer dropout, leading to “WIC desert” areas where participants had to travel over 20 miles to find a compliant retailer. In Iowa, we have heard that new SNAP restrictions are increasing administrative burden on the state, creating confusion and increased stigma for families using SNAP, while substantially increasing costs for retailers. In California, nearly half of SNAP retailers were convenience stores in 2019, and widespread dropout would drastically reduce access and availability of food, especially in rural and underserved communities.[9]

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[7] Pew Research Center, May 2025, “Americans on Healthy Food and Eating”. https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2025/05/07/americans-on-healthy-food-and-eating.

[8] Bader, Richard (2024). SNAP Restrictions Impact Analysis Report. https://www.fmi.org/docs/default-source/communications-uploads/snap-reform-impact-report-final.pdf

[9] Bolen, E., & Wolkomir, E. (2020, May 28). SNAP boosts retailers and local economies. *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*. https://www.cbpp.org/research/snap-boosts-retailers-and-local-economies

5. **Implementation would increase costs and program complexity during a budget crisis.** Restricting food purchases in CalFresh would require significant costs related to administrative staffing, including development of the waiver, retailer training and compliance monitoring, robust recipient noticing and educational outreach, increased customer service needs, and enforcement mechanisms. These costs would burden the state during a time when resources should be directed toward addressing the changes resulting from the federal H.R. 1 rule changes and increasing program access and participation.
6. **CalFresh food restrictions would face interoperability challenges.** CalFresh recipients living near state borders could simply cross into neighboring states like Nevada, Arizona, or Oregon to purchase restricted foods if those states maintain different policies. This creates an inequitable system where geography determines food access, undermining the policy's effectiveness for families seeking unrestricted food options. Furthermore, SNAP recipients from outside of California would be unfairly subject to food restrictions when shopping in California, creating confusion and discriminatory treatment based on their state of residence.
7. **Evaluating effectiveness would be nearly impossible.** The lack of clear food definitions makes it extremely difficult to evaluate whether restrictions actually improve health outcomes. Furthermore, even once the restricted foods have been defined, it will be difficult to evaluate the impact of the waiver because there is no control group, there is no way to evaluate food purchases made with cash, and furthermore, there is no way to evaluate sugar and additive consumption via other EBT purchases. Moreover, the numerous environmental factors that contribute to diet-related chronic disease in low-income communities, including food deserts, limited transportation, work schedules that prevent regular meal preparation, and stress from economic insecurity, would make it impossible to isolate the impact of purchasing restrictions from these broader social determinants of health.
8. **Food restrictions would adversely impact individuals facing certain health conditions and mental health.** Food restrictions can create challenges for individuals with certain health conditions, such as individuals managing eating disorders, hypoglycemia, diabetes, food allergies, breakthrough migraines, or other medical conditions, to choose appropriate low-cost foods for their specific health needs. For instance, people with diabetes often need access to beverages that contain sugar, like soda, during emergencies. Further, food restrictions in CalFresh could increase food anxiety and create shame and stigma around food choices. The psychological impact of being monitored and

judged for food purchases can create additional stress for families already facing economic hardship. Research has shown that increased perception of stigma is associated with eligible households forgoing participation in critical safety-net programs, especially SNAP.[10] Policies that restrict food items could have serious health consequences and cause harm that disproportionately impacts low-income Californians.

9. **The Food Restriction Waiver directly conflicts with the goals of the SNAP program under the federal Food Stamp Act and calls into question USDA FNS's statutory authority to grant this waiver.** In particular, demonstration projects are required to meet at least one of four evaluation goals, including whether a project can "improve program administration" and "increase the self-sufficiency of supplemental nutrition assistance program recipients".[11] Legal experts believe that USDA FNS lacks the authority to grant this waiver, and as a result, we anticipate that if California were to apply for food restrictions to the CalFresh program, that it would face legal challenges. California should not risk being involved in this legally questionable pilot that has a possibility of being reversed through litigation or administrative review. This would result in costly time and resources diverted from the CalFresh program.
10. Relatedly, **waiver approval is conditional and project delays will be burdensome on State resources.** For states with approved Food Restriction Waivers, their projects must meet extensive terms and conditions in full prior to beginning project implementation, or they will risk projects being delayed. Notably, these terms and conditions include the following:
    - The Project may not in any way impede inter-operability of SNAP program benefits, as detailed in 7 C.F.R. 274.8(b)(10).
    - The State will provide a finalized communications plan detailing tasks and timelines for engaging with and notifying SNAP-authorized retailers of the Project.
    - The State will provide a finalized communications plan detailing tasks and timelines for notifying and educating SNAP households of the Project.
    - The State will provide a finalized evaluation plan defining Project health outcomes and behaviors tracked throughout the Project.

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[10] Richard Pulvera, Kaitlyn Jackson, Wendi Gosliner, Rita Hamad, Lia C H Fernald, The association of safety-net program participation with government perceptions, welfare stigma, and discrimination, *Health Affairs Scholar*, Volume 2, Issue 1, January 2024, qxad084, https://doi.org/10.1093/haschl/qxad084

[11] 7 U.S.C. § 2026(b)(1)(A)

- The State will provide a finalized compliance and monitoring plan for SNAP-authorized retailers.

For many of the reasons we have previously stated, we believe some of the terms and conditions cannot be satisfied, and others will prove extremely difficult. The implementation of the Food Restriction Waiver will be incredibly costly and time-consuming, and run contrary to the goals of the CalFresh program to support low-income Californians in meeting their food and nutritional needs in a dignified manner.

Given all the concerns we have raised alongside the federal policy changes in H.R.1 to limit SNAP participation, which will restrict access to SNAP for hundreds of thousands of Californians, we urge the legislature to invest its time and resources in maintaining critical access to the CalFresh program. Millions of Californians are already facing hunger today, and many more will face economic hardship this year as a result of these harmful federal actions. Pursuing harmful and restrictive strategies that limit food choice will only make it harder for hungry Californians to put food on their tables.

For these reasons, we oppose SB 1134. Please contact Gabby Davidson at gabriela.davidson@cafoodbanks.org and Whitney Francis at wfrancis@wclp.org with any questions or to follow up.

Sincerely,



Gabriela Davidson
California Association of Food Banks



Whitney Francis
Western Center on Law & Poverty

Alchemist CDC
American Beverage Association
Asian Pacific Islander Forward Movement
California Federation of Labor Unions
California Food and Farming Network
California Fuels & Convenience Alliance
California Grocers Association
California Retailers Association
Californians for SSI Coalition
Can Manufacturers Institute
Ceres Community Project
Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations (CCWRO)
Community Action Partnership of Orange County (CAP OC)

County Welfare Directors Association of California
Courage California
End Child Poverty CA powered by GRACE
Farm2People
FEAST
First Mother Farms
FIND Regional Food Bank
Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano
Food for People, The Food Bank for Humboldt County
Food Share Ventura County
Fresh Approach
Fullwell
Glide Foundation
Golden State Opportunity
GRACE Social & Medical Services
HealthRIGHT 360
Hunger Action Los Angeles
Jewish Family Service of San Diego
John Burton Advocates for Youth
Justice in Aging
Los Angeles Food Policy Council
Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project (MICOP)
National Confectioners Association
Nourish California
Para Los Niños
Parent Voices California
San Diego Hunger Coalition
San Francisco-Marin Food Bank
San Francisco Senior and Disability Action
Saturated In His Love
Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County
Second Harvest of Silicon Valley
SEIU California
The Public Interest Law Project
UFCW Western State Council
Westside Food Bank
Yuba Sutter Food Bank

CC: Senator Tony Strickland
Senator Josh Becker, Chair, Senate Human Services Committee
Naima Ford Antal, Senate Human Services Committee
Bri-Ann Hernández, Assembly Human Services Committee
Kelsy Castillo, Speaker of the Assembly Robert Rivas
Mareva Brown, Senate Pro Tem Monique Limón
Assemblymember Jessica Caloza