Mitigating Food Insecurity Amid Policy Change: Solano County's Response to ABAWD Work Requirements

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Executive Summary

Solano County is confronting an urgent and time-sensitive challenge. Beginning in June 2026, an estimated 4,000 to 6,000 county residents stand to lose their CalFresh food assistance benefits unless they can demonstrate compliance with new federal work-participation requirements. Federal policy changes under H.R. 1, combined with the upcoming June 2026 expiration of California's Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) Time Limit waiver, threaten to remove CalFresh food assistance benefits from thousands of county residents within the next year. Under these new requirements, adults aged 18 to 64 who cannot demonstrate compliance with federal work-participation requirements risk losing food assistance after just three months—a prospect that stands to deepen an already precarious food insecurity crisis across the county.

This report recommends that Solano County formally adopt and institutionalize the Quarterly Job Fair Initiative as a standing component of its workforce services delivery model. The Initiative represents a cost-neutral, collaborative approach to connecting Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs) and Welfare-to-Work (WTW) populations with employment opportunities through the strategic deployment of existing staff and existing workflows—without requiring new contractual obligations, additional programmatic funding, or expanded administrative infrastructure. Drawing on lessons from San Francisco's JobsNOW! program, a well-documented and replicable model of integrated workforce services, this recommendation outlines how Solano County has already begun adapting that vision to its own resource environment and why formalizing that effort represents a sound, evidence-informed investment in the county's long-term workforce and public benefits strategy.

Background: The Policy Landscape and Local Constraints

The ABAWD work requirement is not a new policy concept, but its scheduled reimposition in Solano County arrives at a particularly difficult moment. For several years, California's statewide waiver shielded most ABAWD-eligible residents from the three-month time limit on CalFresh benefits. That protection expires in June 2026. Beginning that month, adults aged 18 to 64 without dependents must meet a minimum of 80 hours per month of qualifying work, job training, or community service activity (also known as work and community engagement requirements)—or face the loss of their food assistance (California Department of Social Services, 2026).

Solano County's constrained contracting environment—characterized by limited active agreements with external workforce development providers for fiscal year 2025–2026—presents a structural barrier to connecting ABAWDs with the qualifying community engagement activities necessary for continued eligibility. Without a robust network of contracted nonprofit or community-based partners to absorb referrals, the burden of facilitating ABAWD compliance falls directly on county eligibility and social services staff, who must simultaneously manage caseloads across CalFresh, Medi-Cal, and CalWORKs programs.

The stakes are especially high because Solano County lacks the workforce infrastructure required to absorb this sudden surge in demand. Unlike larger, better-resourced jurisdictions such as San Francisco, Solano County operates with limited General Fund support, no dedicated expansion budget for its CalFresh Employment and Training Program (CFET), and limited formal contracts with community-based organizations (CBOs) for job training or placement services. At the same time, the local labor market offers little structural support: Solano County's economy is dominated by small businesses with constrained hiring capacity, and recent closures of major employers such as Anheuser-Busch, Harbinger Homes, Mare Island Dry Docks and Valero Refinery have further narrowed employment prospects for entry-level and transitional workers.

Taken together, these factors define the county's predicament: a hard federal deadline, an under-resourced service system, and a constrained labor market. The question facing Solano County is not whether to act, but how to act effectively within these limits.

A Reference Point: San Francisco's JobsNOW! Program

To identify solutions, Solano County examined the record of San Francisco's JobsNOW! program, a subsidized employment initiative that has become one of the more thoroughly documented examples of effective integrated workforce services in California. The factors that contribute to

the success of JobsNOW!—and recognizing where those conditions differ from Solano County's environment—is important when evaluating Solano County's own approach.

JobsNOW! was designed to address a persistent failure mode in traditional workforce programs and the fragmentation of service delivery. In most systems, individuals seeking help must navigate multiple agencies, intake processes, and eligibility determinations independently, often losing momentum or falling out of the process entirely before reaching the services they need. JobsNOW! counters this by integrating employment services directly with existing public assistance programs—including CalFresh, CalWORKs, and County Adult Assistance Programs—so that clients encounter workforce support at the same point of contact where they receive benefits.

The program's core design is built around these interconnected elements.

- Subsidized employment reduces the risk employers face in hiring workers with limited recent work history, which accelerates placements that might otherwise stall.
- Strong employer partnerships and onsite hiring events create a reliable pipeline of opportunities rather than leaving job seekers to search independently.
- Coordination with public assistance programs minimizes administrative friction during the critical transition from benefits to employment.
- Dedicated liaisons through the Public Sector Trainee (PST) program maintain contact with participants throughout their placements, providing the kind of retention support that helps workers stay employed past the initial placement.

San Francisco's ability to sustain this model depends on substantial and consistent investment. The city-county allocates between $1.5 million and $2 million annually to JobsNOW! through its General Fund, maintains 40 to 50 active contracts with community-based organizations, and coordinates services across 22 divisions with dedicated specialized staffing. Its consolidated city-county structure allows it to draw from multiple funding streams simultaneously, enabling a scale and responsiveness that smaller, single-purpose county departments struggle to replicate.

While San Francisco's JobsNOW! provides a promising roadmap for developing a workforce development program, the resource and infrastructure environments in San Francisco and Solano county differ significantly. Table 1 summarizes the structural gap between San Francisco's workforce infrastructure and Solano County's current capacity:

Table 1. Comparison Between San Francisco and Solano County Resources & Infrastructure

Resource or Infrastructure	San Francisco	Solano County
Annual Workforce Funding	$1.5–$2M General Fund (JobsNOW!)	No General Funds received
CBO Partnerships	40–50 active contracts	Limited number of contracts
Service Infrastructure	22 divisions; dedicated specialized staffing	Internal staff only; limited capacity
Workforce Programs	Community Jobs Program, PST with liaisons	Workforce Development Board (focuses individuals who are job ready), CFET (voluntary, under-resourced)
Labor Market	Large, diverse economy; strong employer base	Small-business dominated; recent major closures

The lessons that Solano County can draw from this comparison is not discouraging. JobsNOW! succeeds because it integrates services, maintains participant engagement, and develops strong employer partnerships—principles that do not necessarily require large budgets to implement, even if scaling them more broadly requires greater investment.

The Quarterly Job Fair Initiative: Design and Rationale

In alignment with JobsNOW!'s central vision—collaboration to enhance access to essential resources, foster self-sufficiency, and create pathways to lasting economic mobility—Solano County is developing the Quarterly Job Fair Initiative. The model relies entirely on existing staff in established positions, with coordination driven through refined business processes rather than the creation of new organizational structure.

The initiative unfolds across four sequential phases that move a client from first awareness of ABAWD requirements through a job fair and into employment. Rather than functioning as isolated bureaucratic stages, the phases are designed to build upon one another, with each phase strengthening both the work that follows and the relationships developed throughout the process.

Phase 1: Outreach and Enrollment

The initiative begins at the point where clients are already required to interact with the county. Eligibility Benefit Specialists (EBS) inform clients about upcoming job fairs during intake and recertification interviews—conversations that already occur as part of the mandatory ABAWD informing requirement. When a client expresses interest, the specialist enrolls them on the spot. This design choice eliminates a separate sign-up step and ensures that clients are captured at their moment of highest engagement, rather than being handed a flyer and asked to follow up later. The target population is broad, encompassing Welfare-to-Work clients, CalFresh recipients subject to ABAWD requirements, and Medi-Cal and CalWORKs recipients seeking employment. This structure allows the initiative to support participants across multiple public assistance programs simultaneously.

Phase 2: Sustained Engagement

Enrollment alone is insufficient. Research and experience consistently show that interest expressed at intake does not reliably translate into attendance at a future event, especially when clients face barriers such as transportation, childcare, anxiety about job searching, or simply the demands of daily life. Solano County's introduction of the Navigator job classification in 2024 represented a structural response to precisely this challenge. Solano County operates as a super agency, consolidating its Health and Social Services functions under a single administrative structure that spans programs including CalFresh, Medi-Cal, CalWORKs, Behavioral Health, and Public Health, among others. This integrated organizational structure creates a uniquely supportive environment for the Navigator role. Designed to assist clients with significant challenges to navigate a complicated health and social services program spectrum, navigators occupy a distinct role within the service delivery continuum—one expressly oriented toward connecting clients with resources and providing wrap-around supportive services across the full breadth of the Health and Social Services Department. Unlike counties where siloed departmental structures limit cross-program coordination, Solano County's super agency model allows Navigators to draw on the complete spectrum of county services when assessing and addressing client needs, without navigating inter-departmental referral barriers that would otherwise slow or impede service access. This classification did not emerge in isolation; it reflects a broader recognition within the county that sustainable client engagement requires a dedicated point of human contact capable of bridging the administrative and social dimensions of service delivery at scale.

Within the context of the Quarterly Job Fair Initiative, Navigators assume primary responsibility for sustained client engagement from the point of enrollment through the date of the job fair. These touchpoints are not perfunctory reminders. They are structured opportunities to assess

what barriers a client is currently facing, connect them to the appropriate resources across the Health and Social Services Department, if needed, and maintain the kind of ongoing relationship that reduces the social friction of showing up to a new and unfamiliar setting. For clients contending with transportation limitations, childcare responsibilities, or the psychological weight of job searching after a period of unemployment, this consistent human contact serves a function that no automated reminder system can replicate. This sustained engagement model is directly drawn from the retention support philosophy that underpins San Francisco's JobsNOW! program—the recognition that consistent human contact is one of the most effective tools available for keeping participants moving toward employment, and that the interval between enrollment and participation is itself a critical intervention window that must be actively managed rather than left to chance.

Phase 3: Pre-Event Preparation

Four to six weeks before each job fair, Employment Resource Specialists (ERS) host workshops that address the practical skills most job seekers need. The curriculum covers resume building, interview skills, job search strategies, and workplace expectations. These sessions serve a dual purpose. For participants, they transform an abstract future event into a concrete preparation process, building confidence and ensuring that clients arrive at the job fair with a polished resume and a clearer sense of what to expect. For employers, they mean a more prepared and professional candidate pool—an outcome that matters for sustaining employer participation over multiple job fairs and building the reputation of the initiative as a useful hiring resource.

Phase 4: Job Fair Execution

ERSs facilitate the quarterly job fairs themselves, coordinating employer participation and supporting onsite hiring conversations. Employer recruitment for each fair is coordinated through existing relationships maintained by ERS staff with the Solano County business community, supplemented by outreach through the Workforce Development Board and the Solano Economic Development Corporation. Participating employers are offered a streamlined hiring pipeline—pre-screened, workshop-prepared candidates—as the primary value proposition. Each employer who participates is surveyed following the event, and that feedback directly shapes recruitment outreach for subsequent fairs, creating a continuous improvement loop that strengthens employer engagement over time. A critical feature of the execution phase is the coding of ERS staff time to Welfare-to-Work (WTW) activity codes, which enables federal reimbursement for that time and keeps the initiative cost-neutral. This is not a minor administrative detail—it is the mechanism that makes the entire model financially sustainable without requiring an additional budget allocation. By working within existing federal

reimbursement structures, Solano County can run quarterly events that serve hundreds of clients at no net cost to the General Fund.

Why This Approach Is Suited to Solano County's Circumstances

The Quarterly Job Fair Initiative is not intended to replicate JobsNOW! on a smaller scale. Instead, it reflects a distinct approach tailored to Solano County's operational structure, staffing capacity, and available resources. The initiative is designed to provide a more targeted and sustainable strategy for employer engagement and workforce connection while aligning with the county's existing service delivery model and program priorities.

The initiative's first strength is its reach. By embedding outreach in EBS eligibility workflows rather than relying on clients to seek out workforce services on their own, the model captures ABAWD-affected residents at their first point of contact with the county. This is the same logic that makes JobsNOW! effective but applied at a scale feasible to Solano County. Clients who might never have engaged with CFET voluntarily are enrolled as a natural part of the benefits process.

The initiative's second strength is its financial sustainability. Because no new funding is required at implementation and because federal reimbursement mechanisms cover staff time during job fair activities, the county can begin operating the program immediately and prove its value before asking for additional resources. This sequencing—implement now, demonstrate results, then request investment—is a realistic path for a county operating under fiscal constraints. It is also a more persuasive argument for future funding than a proposal built entirely on projected outcomes.

The third strength is the quality of engagement it produces. Monthly Navigator contact is not logistically complicated, but it represents a meaningful commitment to each client's individual pathway. The relationship built between a Navigator and a client over several months of contact is qualitatively different from a single referral or a one-time workshop. It has the potential to create accountability, reduces isolation, and addresses barriers before they become reasons to stop participating. The pre-event workshops reinforce this by ensuring that participants feel prepared rather than exposed when they walk into a job fair.

Finally, the model is scalable in a way that matters for the long term. Each successful job fair generates data: enrollment numbers, attendance rates, placement outcomes, employer feedback, and benefit retention figures. That data is the foundation for future funding requests, for expanding CBO partnerships, and eventually for developing more intensive programs

modeled on JobsNOW!'s subsidized employment components. The Quarterly Job Fair Initiative is, in this sense, not just a response to an immediate crisis—it is the beginning of a workforce infrastructure that Solano County currently lacks.

Implementation Timeline and Performance Measurement

The initiative is designed for rapid deployment. Workflow finalization and staff training for EBSs, Navigators, and ERSs are scheduled for completion by May 2026, with the first client enrollments beginning in June 2026—the same month the ABAWD waiver expires. The inaugural job fair is planned for August 2026, with an outcome review and process refinement in September 2026. A second job fair, with expanded employer partnerships, is targeted for November 2026.

Performance will be tracked across seven key performance indicators:

- Number of clients enrolled through EBS outreach;
- Monthly engagement rate as measured by Navigator contacts completed;
- Workshop attendance;
- Job fair attendance relative to enrollment;
- Job placements resulting from job fair participation;
- CalFresh benefit retention among participants;
- Employer satisfaction; and
- Employer repeat participation.

Together, these metrics capture both the reach of the initiative and the quality of its outcomes. Preliminary targets for Year One include:

- Enrolling a minimum of 200 ABAWD-affected clients through EBS outreach by September 2026;
- Achieving 60 percent or greater job fair attendance among enrolled clients; and
- Securing employment placements for at least 30 percent of job fair participants within 90 days. AndA CalFresh benefit retention rate of 70 percent or higher among participants at the six-month mark would constitute a strong indicator of compliance success.

These baselines will be revisited after the inaugural event and adjusted in light of actual capacity and labor market conditions. Early results will inform adjustments to the program design and will support future requests for expanded funding or CBO contracts.

Conclusion

Solano County is operating under real and pressing constraints. The workforce infrastructure is smaller than what circumstances demand, its labor market offers fewer opportunities than neighboring counties, and the federal deadline leaves little time for deliberation. San Francisco's JobsNOW! program demonstrates what is possible when sustained investment in partnerships, staffing, and integrated services is available—but that level of investment is not currently available to Solano County.

What the Quarterly Job Fair Initiative demonstrates is something equally important: that meaningful action does not require waiting for ideal conditions. By applying the integrative logic of JobsNOW! to the resources already on hand—existing staff, existing workflows, existing federal reimbursement mechanisms—Solano County has the ability to construct a response that is cost-neutral to launch, broad in its reach, and grounded in a coherent theory of what helps people move from public assistance into sustained employment.

The initiative will not solve every problem. It cannot replace the CBO partnerships the county lacks, fully compensate for a constrained labor market, or guarantee placements for every participant. What it will do is protect thousands of residents from the immediate loss of food assistance, establish the employer relationships and staff capacity that more ambitious programs will require, and produce the outcome data that makes a compelling case for deeper investment. Solano County has the staff, the structure, and now the strategy to act. Formalizing the Quarterly Job Fair Initiative represents a strategically sound and operationally achievable next step for Solano County.

References

California Department of Social Services. (2026). CalFresh Work and Community Engagement Requirements. https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/calfresh/abawd

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