

Transition Age Youth Resource: **CalFresh Self-Advocacy Guide**

What is CalFresh?

CalFresh is a California food assistance program designed to help low-income individuals and families buy healthy, nutritious food. CalFresh is California's name for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), also called "food stamps". CalFresh provides monthly electronic benefits payments that can be used to purchase most foods at many grocery stores, food markets, and food delivery platforms (like Instacart or DoorDash).

For transition age youth (TAY) ages 14 through 26 who are current or former foster youth, participants in Extended Foster Care, or who are financially independent, understanding how to access and utilize these benefits is crucial for maintaining a healthy diet and ensuring you and your family have enough food.

Am I eligible for CalFresh?

CalFresh benefits are given to "households". Households can be a single person living alone or a group of people living together who buy food and make meals together. CalFresh household determines whose income to count and the amount of benefits the household receives. A person who lives with others can still be considered a separate household for eligibility and benefits so long as they typically buy and prepare food separate from the people they live with.

There is no age-requirement threshold to get benefits as your own CalFresh household. However, there are age-related requirements that can affect eligibility depending on household status, disability status, and financial independence.

Minors (Ages 14-17) Eligibility:

- **Living Independently:** Minors can apply for CalFresh if they are living independently from their parents or guardians and are responsible for their own care and management of their finances. This will be more typical for emancipated minors who are considered adults for the purposes of applying for benefits.
 - **Note:** Children under 18 who are currently placed in foster care under the care of caregivers or guardians in a private home of a relative or nonrelative may only participate in CalFresh at the request of the caregiver or guardians of that household.
- **Income Criteria:** The income of the independent minor applicant is considered to determine eligibility. Typically, the income threshold for a single-person household is used.
- **Household Composition:** The minor's household composition, such as whether you are living with siblings or other adults or youth, may affect eligibility. All members of the household need to be considered when determining the total household income.

Nonminor Dependents (Ages 18-21) Eligibility:

- **Extended Foster Care Participants:** Nonminor dependents (NMDs) participating in the Extended Foster Care program can apply for CalFresh benefits. This includes those living in Supervised Independent Living Placements (SILPs) or Transitional Housing Programs (THPs).
- **Income Considerations:** For NMDs, any portion of your foster care payment received directly by you is considered unearned income. However, if the payment is made directly to the housing provider or a third party, it is excluded from income calculations.
- **Household Composition:** The composition of the household, including roommates or other individuals living with the NMD, must be reported and may impact eligibility.
- **Adult Students in Higher Education:** Generally, students enrolled at least half-time in colleges and universities are not eligible for CalFresh unless they meet other criteria including any of the following:
 - Employed at least 20 hours a week;
 - Approved for student financial aid like Cal Grant A or B;
 - Have children, or
 - Enrolled in a program to increase employability for current and former foster youth.

General Eligibility Requirements for All Applicants:

- Residency: Applicants must live in California.
- Citizenship: Applicants must be U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents. Certain qualified non-citizens may also be eligible.
- Income Limits: CalFresh has specific income limits based on the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). The income limits vary depending on household size and other factors. These income limits are recalculated each year.
- Asset Limits: Generally, CalFresh does not consider assets for most households applying for benefits. This means that you might still be eligible even if you have a job and own your own car. However, there are exceptions for certain types of households.

Where can I get help to determine my eligibility for CalFresh?

- Social Worker or Probation Officer: Ask your social worker or probation officer for assistance in applying for CalFresh benefits. You may want to complete an application if you are not sure you are eligible for CalFresh benefits to help determine your eligibility.
- General Assistance: To get more information on general questions like eligibility criteria, including income and asset limits, you can call toll-free to talk to a program contact at 1-877-847-3663.
- Local CalFresh County Office: Representatives at your local CalFresh County Office can assist with understanding your eligibility and how to appeal CalFresh benefits denials. You can find your local CalFresh County Office and visit in person or call their office number for assistance. You can find your local office at the following website: <https://calfresh.dss.ca.gov/food/officelocator/>.
- Online Resources: You can learn more information about CalFresh and access an eligibility calculator specifically for your income, assets, and household size. Visit benefitscal.com for more information and resources.

How do I apply for CalFresh benefits?

- It is recommended you submit your CalFresh application for benefits (called the SAR 7 form) using the benefitscal.com website. DO NOT complete the SAR 7 through the getcalfresh.org link, which you may receive via email, as the county will not receive it.
- On the benefitscal.com website, click on "Apply For Benefits" and select "Apply Now".
 - Be ready to share about the money you earn and the things you pay for/own.
- You may also choose to mail in a paper copy of the SAR 7 or Recertification Report.

Application Process:

1) GATHER DOCUMENTS: The following documents are examples that may be helpful to you when you apply:

- **Proof of identity**
 - Birth certificate
 - Driver's license
 - State ID
 - Voter registration card
 - School ID
 - U.S. passport
 - Social Security card
- **Proof of residency**
 - Driver's license
 - State ID
 - Rent or mortgage receipt
 - Lease agreement
 - Utility bill
- **Proof of income**
 - Check stubs for the last 30 days
 - Statement from employer
 - Previous year's tax return
 - Foster care benefits checks
 - College financial aid statements
 - Alimony or child support receipts
- Any other documents requested by the county office

2) APPLY ONLINE OR IN-PERSON:

- **Online:** Visit benefitscal.com to start the application process. The website guides you through the application steps and helps ensure all necessary information is included.
- **In-Person:** Applications can also be submitted at local county social services offices. Speak with your social worker or probation officer for assistance and to understand specific county requirements. You can also find your local CalFresh County Office at <https://calfresh.dss.ca.gov/food/officelocator/>.

3) INTERVIEW: After submitting the application, you must complete an interview, either by phone or in person at the county office. Be prepared to discuss your household situation and financial status based on all the documents you submitted. You may be asked to provide more documentation to prove eligibility.

- **Online Purchases:** Some retailers, including Amazon and Walmart, accept EBT for online grocery purchases. Check if this option is available in your area. EBT cannot be used to pay for delivery fees for delivery food services like Instacart or DoorDash.
- **To Get Cash:** Some banks may charge you each time you withdraw cash benefits using your California Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card. Fees can range from \$1.00 to \$4.00 per transaction. If you do not want to pay a service fee, look for a free ATM with the MoneyPass sign.
 - For more information on free ATM locations, cash-back locations, fees, and withdrawal limits, please visit www.ebt.ca.gov and consult this [directory](#) of surcharge-free ATM networks in California.

How do I make sure I continue receiving CalFresh benefits?

You must report to the county with your income, assets, and household every six months. You will be required to report the income increase if you start making more money than your Income Reporting Threshold, which is a limit the county sets each year. You must report your recertification within 30 days, or you risk being considered late. Submitting late reports can result in your benefits being stopped. If you have a social worker or probation officer, they may be able to help you understand your reporting or recertification deadlines. You can also contact the CalFresh County Office to request updates or ask about your eligibility and obligations.

It is important to make sure your contact information, including your email address, cell phone number, and mailing address, is correct so you receive any communications from CalFresh. Also, it is important to open and respond to any email or letters you receive to avoid interruptions in CalFresh benefits.

What do I do if the county denies my CalFresh application?

There are many reasons the county might say you cannot get CalFresh benefits. Some reasons could be that your income is too high or you did not submit the required documents when requested.

The county must give you a written notice telling you that the county thinks you are not eligible to receive CalFresh and why you are not eligible. If you think the county is wrong, you can appeal and have your case heard before an independent hearing officer. You have 90 days from the date of the written notice to appeal. If you have a very good reason for appealing late, you can appeal up to 180 days after the date of the written notice. If your notice does not meet the legal requirements, such as not giving a reason or not in your primary language, you can appeal after 90 days.

If the county does not let you apply or does not give you benefits but does not give you written notice, you can still appeal. If your county has denied your CalFresh application, discontinued your case, or reduced your CalFresh benefits and you disagree with the decision, you can submit an appeal online at [Public Appeal Request](#). Before filing an appeal, you are strongly encouraged to contact your county and see if you can work out the problem.

Once you appeal, a hearing will be scheduled to give you a chance to explain why you think you are eligible and for the hearing officer to decide if the county is right or wrong. If the hearing officer decides you are right, the hearing officer can order the county to pay you benefits or to consider your application for CalFresh again.

You can learn more about your rights at Legal Services of Northern California online guide at <https://calfresh.guide>.

Tips for Accessing and Maximizing CalFresh Benefits

1. **Keep Your Information Updated:** Ensure that your contact information, income details, and household composition are always current to avoid interruptions in benefits.
2. **Plan Your Meals:** Create a shopping list based on your meal plans to make efficient use of your CalFresh benefits.
3. **Check Balances Regularly:** Monitor your EBT card balance to keep track of your available funds.
4. **Ask for Help:** If you encounter any issues or have questions about your eligibility, the application process, retaining your benefits, or appealing a benefits denial, your social worker, probation officer, or local CalFresh office can help.

Sources:

- U.S. Department of Agriculture – CalFresh (<https://www.benefits.gov/benefit/1228>);
- California Department of Social Services (<https://BenefitsCal.com>);
- LSNC Guide to CalFresh Benefits (<https://calfresh.guide>);
- California Legislative Information ([WIC Section 18900 et seq.](#))