

ALLIANCE for CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

NOVEMBER 2026

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

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 benefit payments that can be used to purchase most foods at many grocery stores, food markets, and from food delivery platforms (like Instacart or DoorDash). 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.

A CalFresh household determines whose income is counted 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 separately from the people they live with.

Beginning June 1, 2026, some adults will be required to meet new work requirements to keep their CalFresh benefits; this now includes former foster youth (see below for detailed information about work requirements). This also affects unhoused individuals and veterans who previously had automatic exemptions. These groups must now meet the work requirements or qualify for another exemption listed below.
Beginning June 1, 2026, some lawfully present immigrants may no longer qualify for CalFresh under new rules. It is recommended that you contact the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) or a trusted benefits navigator to ask about your specific situation.

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.

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 the youth is considered unearned income. SILP payments received by an NMD, as well as the Infant Supplement if the NMD is parenting, are counted as unearned income when determining CalFresh benefits. However, if the payment is made directly to the housing provider or a third party, it is excluded from income calculations.
- Student Loans: Loan funds may be considered when determining CalFresh eligibility depending on how the funds are received and used. Youth should report student loans to DPSS and provide documentation showing the type and amount of financial aid received.
- Household Composition: The composition of the household, including roommates or other individuals living with the NMD, must be reported and may impact eligibility. However, 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.
- 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,
- Are enrolled in a program to increase employability for current and former foster youth.

What Does "ABAWD" Mean?

CalFresh uses the term Able-Bodied Adult Without Dependents (ABAWD) to describe adults the program considers able to work who don't have a young child at home. You may be considered an ABAWD if ALL of the following apply to you:

- You are between the ages of 18 and 64,
- You are considered physically and mentally able to work,
- You do not have a child under age 14 in your CalFresh household, and,
- You are not currently a student attending school more than half-time.
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However, certain situations may exempt you from CalFresh work requirements.

How do I know if I'm exempt from work requirements?

You may not have to meet the new work requirements if:

- You are pregnant,
- You are under 18 or over 64,
- A doctor has certified that you are physically or mentally unable to work,
- You have a dependent child under the age of 14 in your CalFresh household,
- You are caring for a child under age six or for someone with a disability (they don't have to live with you),
- You are enrolled more than half-time in school, college, or a job training program,
- You are working at least 30 hours per week or earning at least $217.50 per week before taxes,
- You are receiving or applying for unemployment or disability benefits,
- You are in a drug or alcohol treatment program,
- You are meeting work rules through another program, like CalWORKs,
- You are an American Indian or Alaska Native covered under the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, or
- You are participating in an Office of Refugee Resettlement Training Program.

To document an exemption, you may need to provide a doctor's note, proof of school or training enrollment, or a statement of pregnancy, depending on your situation.

What if I do not qualify for an exemption?

If the ABAWD rules apply to you, you'll need to meet at least one of the following each month to maintain your benefits:

- Work at least 20 hours per week or 80 hours per month,
- Participate in a job training or employment program, or
- Complete approved volunteer or community service hours.
- In Los Angeles County, that means you can participate in LA County DPSS Workfare.

What proof do I need to provide?

You may be asked to show:

- Proof of work hours,
- Pay stubs or work schedule,
- School or training enrollment,
- Volunteer or community service hours,
- Workfare participation paperwork,
- Updated contact information.,
- Documents showing you qualify for an exemption (see above), or
- Immigration-related verification if the county asks for it.

If you are not sure what to provide, ask DPSS or a trusted support person for help before your benefits are affected.

What Is Workfare?

- Workfare lets you work a set number of hours through an approved DPSS program in exchange for your CalFresh benefits.
- The number of hours is based on your benefit amount, and it may actually require fewer hours than the standard 80-hour monthly requirement.
- Ask DPSS whether Workfare applies to your situation.

For more information about meeting work or volunteer hours, see the DPSS website:
CalFresh and Medi-Cal Work Requirements. (Medi-Cal work requirements do not apply to current and former foster youth.)

What if I don't meet the work requirements?
If the ABAWD rules apply to you and you receive a full month of CalFresh without meeting the work requirement or qualifying for an exemption, that month may count toward your time limit. In California, you are given a three month limit (within a 36-month period) to receive CalFresh benefits without meeting work requirements. If you reach three countable months, your CalFresh benefits may stop. To get them back, you will need to meet the work requirements or qualify for an exemption — and then reapply. The bottom line: don't ignore letters from DPSS and reach out for help before your benefits stop — not after!

How do I apply for CalFresh benefits?

- It is recommended that you submit your CalFresh application for benefits using the benefitscal.com website.
- On the benefitscal.com website, click on "Apply For Benefits" and select "Apply Now".
- Be prepared to share information about the money you earn and the things you pay for/own.

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 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 in 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.

4. **Receive Benefits:** After the interview, the county will review your CalFresh application.

- Approval: If approved, you will receive an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card, which functions like a debit card for purchasing food.
- Denial: If your household does not qualify for CalFresh benefits, the notice will explain why.
- 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 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.

How do I make sure I continue receiving CalFresh benefits?

You must report your income, assets, and household information to the county every six months. You are required to report an 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 reporting obligations.

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 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 where you can 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.

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.