

Monday, July 1, 2019

The Honorable Scott Wiener
Senator, 11th Senate District
State Capitol, Room 5100
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Support for SB 285 (Wiener) – CalFresh Connect

Dear Senator Wiener,

I am Teda Arunrut, M.D., writing in support of SB 285 (Wiener), which would ensure that all low-income Californians have efficient and equitable access to CalFresh—by phone, online, and in person—in a dignified way that supports their health and well-being by setting ambitious goals and expectations that make CalFresh a central part of an integrated social safety net.

Despite California's wealth and agricultural riches, more than 4.1 million low-income households are food insecure. CalFresh, our largest nutrition and anti-poverty program, has the greatest poverty reduction impact among social service programs. However, three in ten eligible households don't gain access to CalFresh. While California has been slowly and steadily improving, we are still among the lowest-performing states at connecting struggling households to federal food assistance. We must do better to realize the full potential of CalFresh to alleviate poverty and hunger.

This year's expansion of CalFresh eligibility to low-income Californians receiving Social Security Income (SSI) is a pivotal opportunity to improve CalFresh enrollment, as nearly 500,000 SSI clients (seniors & people with disabilities) will become CalFresh-eligible for the first time. We must maximize the opportunity to provide long-sought food assistance to our state's most vulnerable.

I support SB 285 because it will help the children and families I serve in my community-based health clinic in the San Fernando and Pacoima areas of Los Angeles County. In addition:

- **Access to CalFresh varies significantly across the state**, leading to major inequities. Enrollment processes are often burdensome, especially for seniors, non-English speakers, and the working poor. Regardless of where they live or their individual circumstances, all eligible Californians should have equitable access to vital food assistance needed to live healthy, productive lives.
- **California's success in Medi-Cal expansion can be replicated in CalFresh**. Many Medi-Cal recipients are eligible for CalFresh but not enrolled, even though the same departments administer both programs. This disparity undermines the health of low-income Californians and shortchanges the potential of the safety net. An integrated safety net as envisioned in SB 285 gives people a chance to break the cycle of poverty, hunger, and poor health.
- **California has persistently lagged behind the rest of the nation when it comes to connecting low-income seniors with CalFresh**. Only 20 percent of eligible low-income seniors participate in CalFresh—the worst SNAP participation rate of any state. This low rate of access does not include the SSI population that has been ineligible for CalFresh—it is a measure of our reach among seniors who are currently eligible. In order to maximize the timely and pressing opportunity to enroll SSI recipients into CalFresh starting in June 2019, and to reduce stigma and improve access among all low-income seniors, it is critical that we simplify senior access to CalFresh concurrent with the reversal of SSI 'cashout' policy.
- **CalFresh helps our communities thrive**. Over 1.7 million Californians miss out on the nutrition benefits of CalFresh. If all those eligible were enrolled, the state would garner nearly \$2 billion more in federal dollars annually, generating over \$3 billion in economic activity annually.

No one should go hungry in the great state of California, and it our collective responsibility to remove long-standing barriers to CalFresh, the most powerful anti-poverty tool at our disposal.

For these reasons, I strongly support SB 285 and thank you for your leadership to improve access to CalFresh. I deeply appreciate your consideration of my support.

Sincerely,

Teda Arunrut, M.D., Pediatrician
Community-Based Federally Qualified Health Center, Los Angeles County

cc: Assemblymember Gomez Reyes, Chair, Assembly Human Services Committee
Members of Assembly Human Services Committee
Tracey Patterson, California Food Policy Advocates (sponsor)
Meg Davidson, San Francisco-Marin Food Bank (co-sponsor)
Blanca E. Castro-Paszinski, AARP California (co-sponsor)
Andrew Cheyne, California Association of Food Banks (co-sponsor)