



# Monterey County

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## Board Report

Legistar File Number: 18-1049

October 18, 2018

**Introduced:** 10/11/2018

**Version:** 1

**Current Status:** Agenda Ready

**Matter Type:** General Agenda Item

Receive an oral report from the Department of Social Services on outreach efforts to increase enrollment of potentially eligible individuals and families in the declining CalFresh and Medi-Cal public assistance programs, which have experienced a steady decline in enrollments since 2016.

### RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the Health and Human Services (HHS) Committee receive an oral report from the Department of Social Services (DSS) on outreach efforts to increase enrollment of potentially eligible individuals and families in the CalFresh and Medi-Cal public assistance programs, which have experienced a steady decline in enrollments since 2016.

### SUMMARY/DISCUSSION:

Applications for the CalFresh and Medi-Cal public assistance programs have steadily declined over the last few years. Eligibility staff has also experienced an unprecedented number of customers requesting withdrawal of their application, requesting termination of benefits, or failing to renew their CalFresh benefits which contributed to a CalFresh caseload decline of approximately 4.84% since March 2017 with June 2018 having the highest number of voluntary discontinuance requests (259 cases) as compared to the prior two years (83 for June 2017 and 63 for June 2016).

DSS is tracking data on the number of applicants, including non-citizens, that are requesting termination of benefits. The charts and statistics (see Attachment #1) provide the percent of caseload for citizen and non-citizen families that have voluntarily requested discontinuance of CalFresh and Medi-Cal programs for 2016, 2017, and 2018. The data shows that there has been an increase in customers requesting discontinuance of their CalFresh benefits beginning in March 2017 (40 CalFresh) with the highest number of discontinuance requests in June 2018 (259 CalFresh). This is consistent with an overall trend of decreasing CalFresh applications in 2018 when compared to prior years.

Although the reasons that customers have exited the CalFresh program has varied, it may be that the recent developments related to immigration and proposed changes to what constitutes a "Public Charge" is a contributing factor to families or individuals not wanting to apply for and/or continue receiving benefits. Public charge is a term used in immigration law to describe individuals who cannot support themselves through employment, assets, or the help of family and depend on government benefits and assistance programs. Proposed rule changes would broaden the types of government assistance programs that are considered as part of the public charge determination, going beyond the long-standing inclusion of only cash-based income support programs such as CalWORKs and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) to include programs such as CalFresh, Medi-Cal and federal

rental assistance programs.

While there is a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) that was posted on the Federal Register on October 10, 2018, current laws, rules, and regulations for our government assistance programs have not changed. State and Federal laws are still in effect that entitle individuals and families to health care coverage and food assistance that they are eligible to receive. Monterey County DSS continues to protect personal information when processing applications, renewals, and providing public assistance benefits. DSS staff are informing applicants and recipients accordingly and providing contact information for immigration advocacy organizations, but many non-citizens state they have been advised to withdraw their application or request discontinuance of their benefits by third parties, such as their attorney.

DSS continues its outreach efforts to inform potential CalFresh and Medi-Cal applicants about the availability and benefits of these programs. The Department's Monterey County Children's Health Outreach for Insurance, Care and Enrollment (MC-CHOICE) unit leads these outreach efforts. The unit visits multiple sites throughout the County daily answering general questions about programs and services offered by DSS and taking electronic applications from those who wish to apply for benefits; a total of 840 site visits were made last year. Cities served include; Big Sur, Carmel, Castroville, Greenfield, Gonzales, King City, Monterey, Pajaro, Salinas, Sand City, Seaside, Soledad, and Watsonville. In the last 12 months, MC-CHOICE also participated in eighteen large scale community events within the county held in the evenings and/or on weekends. During the last 12 months, the outreach staff have assisted with the submission of 2,101 CalFresh and Medi-Cal applications.

DSS has also continued its strong partnership with Code for America to encourage the use of their GetCalFresh.org website and mobile phone application for individuals to use to begin their CalFresh application. The GetCalFresh.org sites offer application assistance by providing basic CalFresh questions that, once answered, are sent to an interface with the DSS's computer system. Eligibility Workers then follow-up with the applicant to gather needed documentation to determine eligibility for CalFresh benefits. In the first year of partnership with Code for America from May 2017-May 2018, an additional 3,125 electronic CalFresh applications were generated.

DSS is also in the process of obtaining final State approval to implement the Restaurant Meals Program (RMP), which will allow eligible homeless, elderly, and disabled CalFresh households to use their Electronic Benefits Card at restaurant facilities approved by the USDA. The RMP's goal is to provide low cost meals and offer healthy meal options to participants who do not have a place to store or cook food, are not able to prepare food, or lack access to a grocery store. This population would have the opportunity to eat nutritious and affordable meals, and participating restaurants will see an increase in revenue by increasing the variety of patrons they serve.

In summary, the Department of Social Services continues its outreach efforts to educate the public about the programs available, provide referral information for immigration advocacy organizations/services and to offer application services both in-person and electronically. Efforts are also under way to offer meal options to homeless, elderly and disabled CalFresh recipients through the RMP program. DSS will continue to closely monitor potential rule changes that may impact which government assistance programs are considered a public charge and will continue to inform its staff

and the public as more information becomes available. Caseload trends will also continue to be closely monitored.

OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT:

No other agency was involved in development of this report.

FINANCING:

There is no impact to the County General Fund from this report.

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Attachment: Discontinuance Statistics