

September 6, 2023

Caroline Smith
 Director, Office of Economic Development and Government Affairs
 County Administration Center
 1600 Pacific Highway, Room #298
 San Diego, CA 92101

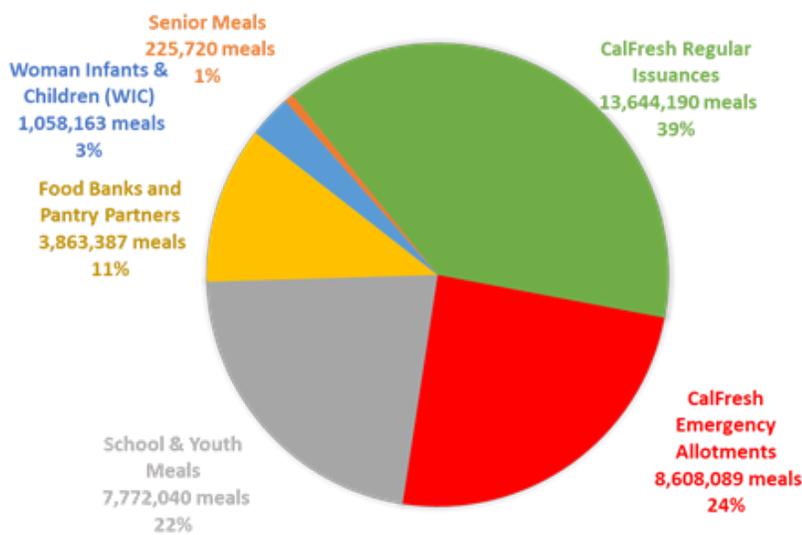
RE: San Diego Hunger Coalition Recommendations for 2024 County Legislative Program

Dear Ms. Smith,

2023 has brought tremendous upheaval to the food assistance network in San Diego County. Legislation passed during the COVID-19 Pandemic that issued *Emergency Allotments*, an increase in monthly benefits to every CalFresh recipient, expired and were last issued in March of this year. Our research indicates that this will result in a loss of nearly 8.6 million meals per month. In March 2023, 24% of the total amount of food assistance meals provided by the hunger relief network in San Diego County came from these emergency allotments. Thanks to this pandemic aid, our sector almost closed the meal gap in March 2023. However, since this integral buttress against nutrition insecurity has been removed, the households relying on this support have turned to other food assistance resources to replace their lost meals, resulting in more strain different sectors of the food assistance network, such as food banks, that have reported an increase of need.

In March 2023, the hunger relief sector in San Diego County provided over 35 million meals across all programs.

Figure 1). Food Assistance Meals Provided by Type in San Diego County, March 2023



As you can see from Figure 1, CalFresh emergency allotments comprised 24% of all food assistance, providing nearly twice as much food as was supplied by food banks and pantries in the same month. This federal pandemic aid expired in March, leaving the rest of San Diego County's food assistance programs to increase output

In April, San Diego Hunger Coalition hosted a Legislative Forum to highlight the legislative solutions to hunger moving through the state legislature. This coincided with the first month that CalFresh recipients did not receive emergency allotments. At this meeting, the Direct Services Manager for the San Diego Food Bank, Ernesto Guardian, shared testimony from clients most directly impacted—seniors and persons with low income—who were asked how they would cope without the extra CalFresh benefits each month, one senior citizen answered: *“That’s simple, I just need to eat less food.”* Additionally, Ernesto shared how senior clients have told him how they are now forced to choose between paying for food or paying for medication.

In a Hunger Free San Diego, anyone who experiences nutrition insecurity can readily access healthy, equitable, and culturally appropriate food assistance that is sufficient to see them safely through their time of need. This requires clearing obstacles and driving government policies to make food assistance programs work better for everyone. During the pandemic, we have seen how the County of San Diego can quickly adapt, scale, and administer innovative solutions offered through the programmatic flexibility and increased benefits allowed by the federal government.

Now that we are in the middle of the process to reauthorize and update the Farm Bill, we are at a critical juncture to make sustainable, structural, and significant change to build upon the innovative solutions employed by County of San Diego during the pandemic.

The County of San Diego is an essential partner in helping the Hunger Coalition and our partners achieve our vision of a Hunger Free San Diego. In a recently commissioned report, unanimously accepted by the Board of Supervisors, focusing on the County’s administration of its benefits program, the study team encouraged HHSA and the Board of Supervisors “to embrace the County’s deserved leadership role by advocating for meaningful program improvements at the State and Federal level that will enable local systems improvements.” We believe these recommendations follow that call to action, and we respectfully submit to you the following recommendations for your consideration:

- 1. 2024 Legislative Program’s Priority Issues section: Create a new section specific for “Nutrition Security”.**
- 2. 2024 Legislative Program’s Policy Guidelines section: Expand on the Nutrition section in the to include a statement on child nutrition programs.**

We believe these actions will help the County illustrate to its residents that it recognizes nutrition insecurity is a problem, and that it will use all the tools at its disposal to advocate for state and federal legislative solutions and ensure the long-term health and wellbeing of its residents.

Nutrition Insecurity in San Diego County

Figure 2). Nutrition Insecurity Rate by Population, March 2023

Nutrition Insecurity Rate by Population March 2023			
San Diego County	Children	Older Adults (60+)	Population with Disabilities
23% <i>+0%</i>	28% <i>+0%</i>	22% <i>+0%</i>	34% <i>-1%</i>
Nearly 1 in 4 ~ 743,000 people	More than 1 in 4 ~ 199,000 children	Nearly 1 in 4 ~ 151,000 older adults	More than 1 in 3 ~ 113,000 people

Our research is conducted with input and guidance from the Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board, a collaborative, cross-sector initiative led by San Diego Hunger Coalition, comprised of 25+ community stakeholders including leaders from San Diego Food Bank, Feeding San Diego, San Diego Food System Alliance, UCSD Center for Community Health, Meals on Wheels and other organizations, community members and researchers. Our latest data estimates that, as of March 2023, nearly three quarter of a million San Diego County residents (23%) are nutrition insecure meaning they are part of a household without sufficient income to purchase three healthy meals per day. Broken down by population, more than 1 in 4 children (28%), nearly 1 in 4 older adults (22%), and more than 1 in 3 persons with disabilities (34%) experience nutrition insecurity in San Diego County.

Despite the record high enrollment in CalFresh and other hunger relief programs in San Diego County, individuals and families throughout our region continued to struggle due to multiple economic pressures such as inflation and the impact of interest rates on credit card debt and mortgage rates. For example, San Diego County continues to see sharp increases in prices continue into 2023. The Consumer Price Index reported another 5% increase in overall prices in March 2023 compared to a year prior, and March 2022 prices were already 8% higher than March 2021, resulting in an overall 13% rise in prices over the past 2 years in San Diego County.ⁱ As the cost of living rises and wages don't keep up, families everywhere are forced to take on a considerable additional amount of debt, and with interest rates continuing to rise, families will continue to have a harder time paying off that debt, leading to more strain on families experiencing nutrition insecurity or are close to it.

San Diego Hunger Coalition and the Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board identify the population in San Diego County with household income below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL) as nutrition insecure, which comes out to \$60k of income for a family of four in 2023. Consumer spending data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that households below 200% FPL do not have sufficient income to purchase three healthy meals per day as defined by the USDA’s Moderate Food Plan Cost. Of note, CalFresh benefits are calculated by the much lower Thrifty Food Plan.

As of 2021, the latest data we have available from the 2021 American Community Survey, we can see that nutrition insecurity continues to disproportionately impact people of color in San Diego County, perpetuating racial inequities. **This data indicates that nutrition insecurity disproportionately impacts those who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).** Prior to the pandemic, 44% of people who identify as Black, 43% of people who identify as Hispanic/Latinx, 37% of people who identify as Indigenous or Native, and 44% of people who identify as a race/ethnicity other than Black, Hispanic, Native or Asian fell under 200% FPL— compared to 29% of the White population. Below is a figure of nutrition insecurity broken down by race.

Figure 3). Nutrition Insecurity Rate by Race/Ethnicity

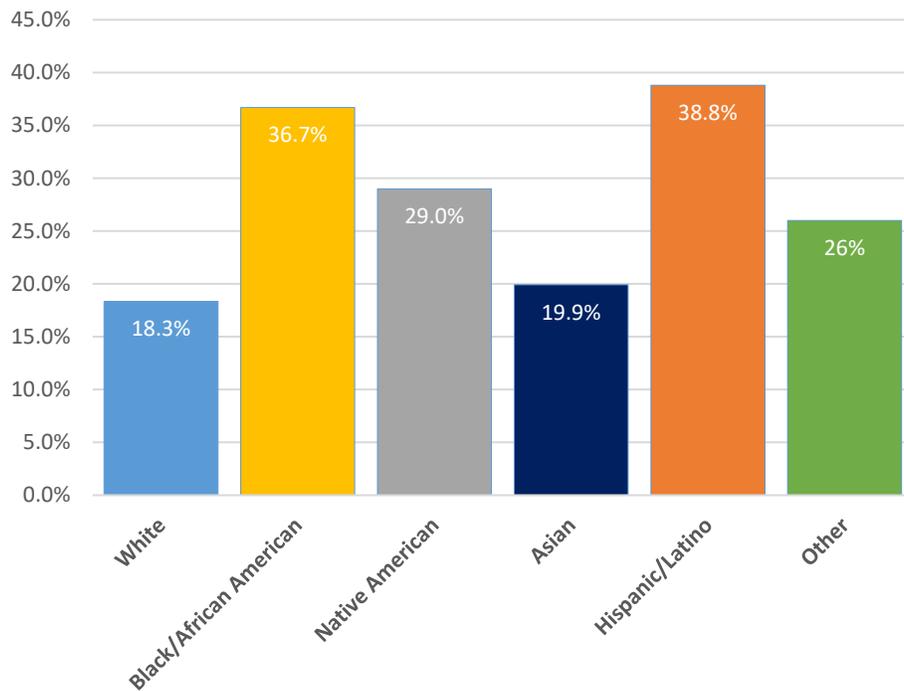
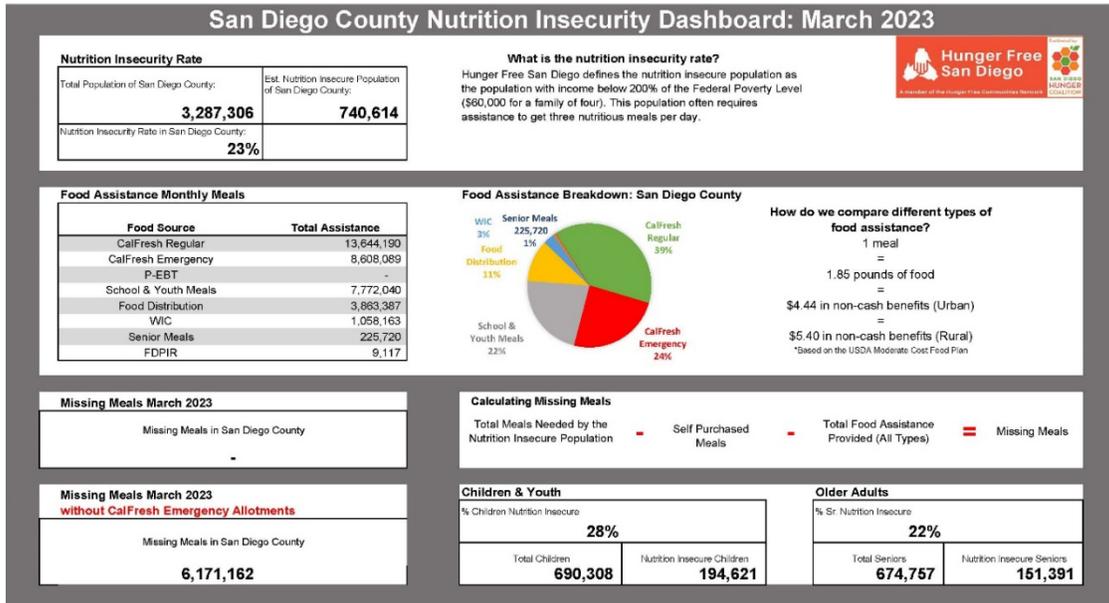


Figure 4 below is the latest product from the Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board. This Data Dashboard collates and represents all the critical data points used to track hunger in San Diego County, including CalFresh and Senior CalFresh participation rate.

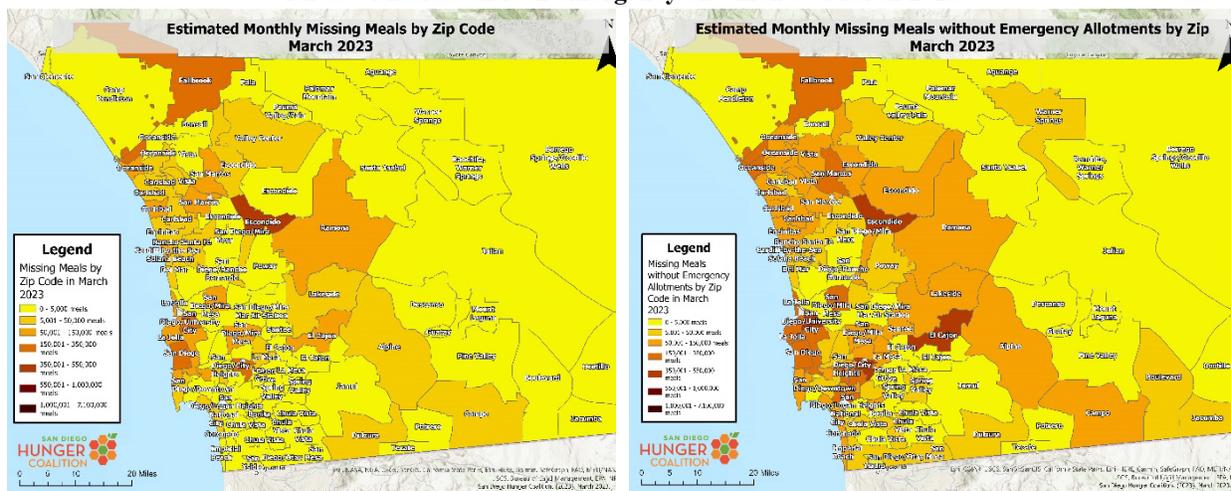
Figure 4). Data Dashboard San Diego County, March 2023



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Please cite this report as: San Diego Hunger Coalition. March 2023 Nutrition Insecurity Dashboards. San Diego, CA; August 2023.
For additional information, including methodology, maps, and data tables, please visit sdhunger.org/research.

The maps below outline where hunger is prevalent in San Diego.

Figure 5). Estimated Meal Gap by Zip in San Diego County with & without CalFresh emergency allotments: March 2023



Moving Forward: Recommendations

CalFresh is our nation's most powerful, effective, and equitable solution to nutrition insecurity. Providing households with monthly monetary support, beneficiaries can purchase the food that is most appropriate for the cultural and dietary needs of their household at grocery stores and farmers markets that are convenient for them. The charts above illustrate how important CalFresh is locally, and how food banks and other charitable organizations cannot do it alone.

The 2018 Farm Bill, an omnibus, multiyear law that governs an array of agricultural and food programs, including SNAP/CalFresh expires this year and will need to be re-authorized. The opportunity to influence how to determine and expand eligibility, identify and remove barriers, and create equitable food assistance is here. We believe the two recommendations below will place the County in a position to meet this moment and create a Farm Bill that works for all.

Recommendation #1: Create a new section specific to “Nutrition Security” in the Legislative Program’s Priority Issues section

As shown above, despite the herculean and unprecedented effort by local hunger relief organizations, hundreds of thousands of residents in San Diego remain nutrition insecure. Creating a Hunger Free San Diego will require large scale system changes. Below are examples of the changes and actions the County can advocate for that are necessary to make enrollment to CalFresh easier and work better for everyone:

- Make permanent the Public Health Emergency SNAP/CalFresh waivers that created a more efficient application process for individuals.
- Eliminate the time limit on SNAP/CalFresh for Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents, many of whom have undiagnosed barriers to employment, including mental health and housing barriers.
- Increase SNAP/CalFresh benefits to appropriately meet the need of individuals and families to provide healthy and nutritious meals by using a different food plan instead of the Thrifty Food Plan.
- Expand SNAP/CalFresh benefits by increasing the eligibility level for SNAP/CalFresh.
- Support further investment in transition programs that provide veterans with proactive on-going support to learn about and enroll in food assistance programs like SNAP/CalFresh that can provide critical nutrition and build bridges to self-sufficiency post active-duty service.
- Increase federal funding for SNAP/CalFresh outreach grants to community-based organizations that are positioned to provide on-going support and client advocacy.
- Strengthen the delivery of school meals and incentivize school districts to use every tool at their disposal to feed more students with nutritious meals (after school supper, applying for the community eligibility provision, etc.).
- Eliminate the outdated SNAP/CalFresh restrictions for college students.

- Eliminate the five-year bar that denies people who are lawfully present, and their families, access to SNAP.

By elevating nutrition security to a Priority Issue for the County, we believe, will help the County better advocate for the available federal and state legislative solutions to end hunger in San Diego. Below is an example of suggested language for your consideration:

The County recognizes the critical role that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Child Nutrition Programs, Women Infants and Children Program (WIC), and Meals for Older Adults play in reducing nutrition insecurity across San Diego County and will actively advocate for stronger federal and state policies to ensure equitable access to these programs.

Recommendation #2: Expand on the Nutrition section in the Legislative Program’s Policy Guidelines section to include a statement on Child Nutrition policies.

Our research shows that more than 1 in 4 children in San Diego live in households that cannot provide consistent access to enough healthy food for an active lifestyle. Although the County of San Diego has little jurisdiction over schools, we believe that it is nonetheless essential that it use its legislative resources to advocate on behalf of the thousands of nutrition insecure children.

A statement on Child Nutrition in its policy guidelines section under “Nutrition” will allow the county to advocate for the critical resources needed to end childhood hunger.

In conclusion, while the San Diego Hunger Coalition strives to meet the needs of today, ending hunger in San Diego County, and across the country, can only be accomplished by large-scale, systems change. While the pandemic helped raise awareness of hunger in our communities, we know that nutrition insecurity was a day-to-day reality for far too many families before the pandemic. Returning to normal should not be our goal. It is our hope that our local leaders will use this critical juncture to apply the lessons learned over the past few years and advocate for sweeping legislation to help us build a Hunger Free San Diego.

Sincerely,



Anahid Brakke,
President & CEO

¹ Data obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index. Series ID: ENU0607340010.