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LA County Agrees to Stop Delaying Food Assistance to Neediest Applicants

Court injunction will require County to process all emergency CalFresh applications in three days

Los Angeles, CA -- In a major victory in the fight against hunger, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted today to enter into a permanent injunction for a case filed in Los Angeles Superior Court, *Hunger Action Los Angeles, et al. v. County of Los Angeles, et al.*, requiring the county to process and approve emergency CalFresh applications in a timely manner. The injunction will impact thousands of vulnerable families experiencing dangerous food insecurity in Los Angeles County each month.

“We wouldn’t tolerate it if the fire department took a day to respond to a fire, and we shouldn’t waste time when people are hungry,” said Frank Tamborello of Hunger Action Los Angeles, one of the organizational plaintiffs in the lawsuit. “The county has the resources, provided by the federal government, to respond immediately.”

The State of California requires counties to expedite food assistance applications for people with extremely low incomes who are homeless or whose housing costs exceed their resources or monthly income. But for more than a year, LA County consistently failed to process emergency applications for CalFresh—formerly known as food stamps—in under three days as required by law.

“We are heartened the county, in entering this agreement, acknowledges that hunger cannot wait,” said Lena Silver, an attorney with Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County (NLSLA). “These are applications for emergency assistance, and the county must treat them with an appropriate level of urgency.”

Two organizations fighting hunger in Los Angeles—Hunger Action Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Community Action Network—along with an applicant affected by the delays, sued the county in November, demanding that it comply with its obligation to grant expedited access to critical food benefits.

“The county’s blatant disregard for people living in extreme poverty, who tend to be Black and Brown, was exacerbating racial inequities in disadvantaged communities like Skid Row and South Los Angeles,” said Todd Cunningham of the Los Angeles Community Action Network. “We sued to force the county to follow the law.”

Represented by NLSLA, Western Center on Law and Poverty, Public Interest Law Project, and pro bono counsel from Sidley Austin LLP, the groups presented the court with data showing the county had violated both state and federal law for months leading up to the lawsuit. In one month alone, the county failed to meet the state’s three-day timeline in 53 percent of eligible applications, leaving 7,600 individuals and families who qualify for expedited benefits without access to CalFresh. Some applicants had to wait more than a month to receive emergency food assistance.

“Following the filing of the lawsuit, the county’s processing of applications has improved – but not nearly enough,” said Lauren Hansen of Public Interest Law Project. “Each and every one of these emergency applications must be processed immediately.”

Peter, a CalFresh applicant named in the lawsuit, was 17 years old when his father suffered a severe stroke that left him partially paralyzed and unable to continue his work as a day laborer. Peter should have received access to CalFresh in three days. Instead, the family heard nothing from the county for 17 days, at which time someone called and left a message. When Peter’s father tried to return the call, he got a “high call-volume” message and was disconnected. Then he received a letter stating Peter’s application had been denied.

A November 2021 report from the county Department of Public Health warned of the “devastating consequences” of food insecurity, which significantly increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and psychological distress or depression. In childhood, food insecurity is associated with delayed development, diminished academic performance, anxiety and depression, and early-onset obesity.

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[Hunger Action LA](#) (HALA) works to end hunger and promote healthy eating through advocacy, direct service, and organizing.

[The Los Angeles Community Action Network](#) (LA CAN) consists of extremely low-income and homeless people, primarily those living in Downtown LA and South Central LA. LA CAN recruits organizational members and builds indigenous leadership within this constituency to promote human rights and address multiple forms of oppression faced by extremely low-income, predominately African-American and Latino, residents. LA CAN focuses on issues related to civil rights and preventing the criminalization of poverty, women's rights, the human right to housing, and healthy food access. LA CAN also has projects focused on economic development, civic participation and voter engagement, and community media.

[Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County \(NLSLA\)](#) is a steadfast advocate for individuals, families, and communities throughout Los Angeles County. Each year NLSLA provides free assistance to more than 100,000 people through innovative projects that address the most critical needs of people living in poverty. Through a combination of individual representation, high impact litigation and public policy advocacy, NLSLA combats the immediate and long-lasting effects of poverty and expands access to health, opportunity, and justice in Los Angeles' diverse neighborhoods.

[Public Interest Law Project \(PILP\)](#) advances justice for low-income people and communities by building the capacity of legal services organizations through impact litigation, trainings, and publications, and by advocating for low-income community groups and individuals.

[Sidley Austin LLP](#) is a premier law firm with a practice highly attuned to the ever-changing international landscape. The firm has built a reputation for being an adviser for global business, with more than 2,000 lawyers worldwide. Sidley maintains a commitment to providing quality legal services and to offering advice in litigation, transactional, and regulatory matters spanning virtually every area of law. The firm's lawyers have wide-reaching legal backgrounds and are dedicated to teamwork, collaboration, and superior client service.

[Western Center on Law & Poverty](#) fights in courts, cities, counties, and in the Capitol to secure housing, health care and a strong safety net for Californians with low incomes, through the lens of economic and racial justice.