

CalFresh Enrollment Surges Among People Age 60+

By Carol Harrison

A year ago, Mary Ella Anderson had never heard of CalFresh.

Today, she's the featured player in a local CalFresh television advertising campaign aimed at boosting senior enrollment. The series of three TV ads first aired in November, repeated for three weeks starting late February and will air again in May.

"I'm not a TV watcher, but people say they like the ads," she said.

Anderson is one of 225 seniors to enroll in CalFresh in 2013, part of a 40.5 percent enrollment increase year-over-year. The TV spots show the Arcata resident exercising, gardening and using her CalFresh electronic benefit card to shop at farmers markets with a bonus match, buy seed starts and purchase healthy food items at local grocery stores.

"I am one of those low income seniors," she said. "I was quickly spending down my meager savings account just to eat. Even with my Social Security, I had a need."

She learned about CalFresh from an article by Area 1 Agency on Aging and turned to A1AA to get help with her application.

"It's not a lot of money, and you need strategies for how to spend it, but that \$94 a month absolutely makes a difference," she said.

Michael Quintana, CalFresh outreach and application assistor with Food for People, saw the TV spot's impact when he made his monthly visit to the senior dining site at Humboldt Senior Resource Center on Feb. 25.

"I had more people showing interest, asking questions and making appointments," he said. "They all mentioned the commercial they saw on TV about CalFresh."

The spots are the result of a partnership between Area 1 Agency on Aging and the Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services. The partners seek to raise awareness, improve access and alter attitudes around CalFresh, the state name for the federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

"The ad's working," said Deborah Waxman, director of programs at Food for People. "There's a lot of misinformation about CalFresh and seniors are an especially hard-to-reach population. When you find something that speaks to them in a way that finally gets a response, go with it."

Sixty-eight Humboldt County seniors joined CalFresh in the final three months of 2013, bringing local enrollment in the federally funded nutrition program to 799 at the end of January, DHHS reported.

The 68-person surge eclipsed the previous quarterly high of 52 new enrollees set in the first quarter of 2013.

"Enrollment certainly has increased, and it has increased substantially," DHHS CalFresh outreach coordinator Barbara O'Neal said. "This probably is the highest number of community seniors we've ever had enrolled, definitely the highest this century."

"We're getting the word out to people that this is something that can help them and will help them in a lot of ways," said Maggie Kraft, executive director of Area 1 Agency on Aging. "Talking to people about the misperceptions and how

CalFresh is an important part of their health care has helped. Thinking about and addressing the other barriers that keep people from signing up also helped.”

Anderson came on board in late summer.

“I didn’t know anything about CalFresh, but then I read an article about it from Area 1 Agency on Aging and they helped me apply,” she said. “I spend \$10 at the farmers market and they give me an extra \$5. It’s the best deal in town.”

Anderson said people who recognize her from the TV spots express concern about the paperwork involved. She called the paperwork “somewhat onerous” but “doable.”

“I don’t think it is unreasonable to expect to have to verify that you are on Social Security, what the award is and what your expenses are,” Anderson said. “It was well worth it in the long run as it’s really helped me improve my diet.”

Seniors, people with disabilities and those living on tribal lands may also find it easier to stay in the program as they only have to re-certify every two years.

“If you aren’t used to keeping records or you gather things and then can’t find where they are, it can be more daunting,” Anderson said. “Most aging people have some cognitive changes that make it more difficult. But having the assistance I got at A1AA and then from the social worker was really helpful. It’s easier for older people to have someone to explain to them what kind of paperwork is needed and how to collect it and remember to bring it.”

Anderson said she didn’t have to be fingerprinted, as was the case under the old food stamps program.

“This is a different program,” she said. “I encourage people to just grit your teeth and do it because you will appreciate it after.”

“We know there are a lot of people out there who are qualified for CalFresh but may not know it,” O’Neal said. “We just can’t get it out there enough: if you think you may qualify, apply.”

In many cases the value of property, vehicles, savings and retirement accounts does not prevent CalFresh eligibility.

Currently, the CalFresh income limit is \$1,681 for a household of two and \$1,245 for a one-person household, but O’Neal said those gross income limits don’t apply to seniors, many of whom have health care expenses and other adjustments considered.

The one-year partnership with DHHS and A1AA ends March 31, but Kraft hopes to continue the joint effort.

“It’s getting harder and harder for seniors,” Kraft said. “By choosing CalFresh, they are choosing to improve their health, reduce Medicare expenses, and stretch their dollars.”

Those who are receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) are ineligible for CalFresh.

For more information or to request a paper application, call the DHHS Call Center at 1-877-410-8809 and follow the prompts to reach a live voice. For additional assistance, contact A1AA’s Information & Assistance staff at 442-3763.



Caption: Mary Ella Anderson volunteers twice a week at Potawot Community Garden. The bounty from her own garden, and her strategies to stretch CalFresh dollars, have "absolutely made a difference" in her ability to stretch her income and eat better. Photo by Carol Harrison



Wooden Coin caption: CalFresh recipients get \$1 for every \$2 spent at most farmers markets. "It's the best deal in town," Cal fresh recipient and California Senior Legislature member Mary Ella Anderson said.