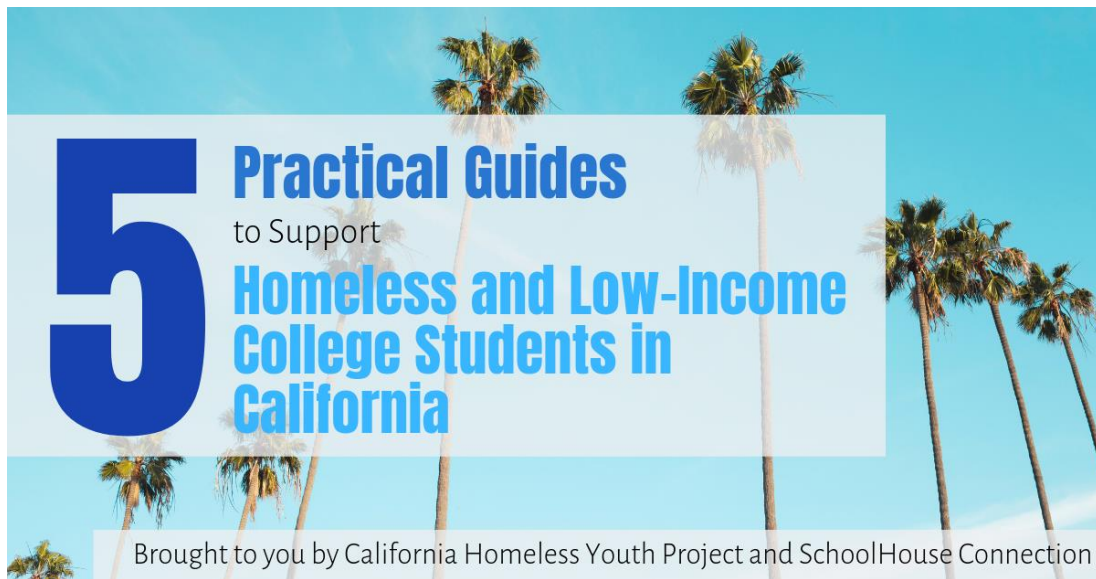# Supporting California's Homeless & Low-Income College Students: A Practical Guide

Higher education professionals at California public colleges and universities identified connections to housing resources, CalFresh application assistance, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion assistance, mental health services, and access to supportive services outside of the school setting as the greatest needs of the students experiencing homelessness. This collection of briefs provides timely, concise overviews on each of these issues as it relates to homeless and low-income students at California Community Colleges, California State Universities, and Universities of California. It also highlights existing resources and methods to support the academic success of at-risk student groups. This toolkit is targeted to Homeless and Foster Youth Liaisons and other higher education professionals who work directly with these students. This series was co-authored by the California Homeless Youth Project, a project of the California State Library, and by Schoolhouse Connection.

- Housing Brief
- FAFSA Brief
- CalFresh Brief
- Mental Health Brief
- Supportive Services Brief

About the California Homeless Youth Project

The California Homeless Youth Project (CHYP) is a multi-year research and policy initiative of the California Research Bureau and the California State Library. The CHYP highlights issues and solutions for youth ages twelve to twenty-four who are living "on the edge" of homelessness or are currently homeless in California. In particular, the CHYP engages these youth directly in research and policy discussions, giving voice to their experiences and recommendations as well as those of researchers, practitioners and policy experts. The CHYP is supported by funding from The California Wellness Foundation and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation.

About SchoolHouse Connection

SchoolHouse Connection is a national organization working to overcome homelessness through education. SchoolHouse Connection provides strategic advocacy and technical assistance in partnership with early childhood programs, schools, institutions of higher education, service providers, families, and youth. Believing that education is the only permanent solution to homelessness, SchoolHouse Connection aims to give children and youth experiencing homelessness full access to quality learning, birth through higher education, so they will never be homeless as adults, and the next generation will never be homeless.

Basic Needs Unmet: Understanding California's College Students

California's public higher education institutions provide significant opportunities for economic and social mobility. About half of California Community College (CCC) and California State University (CSU) students and about 40% of University of California (UC) students are low-income.[†,1] In 2017, 42% of CCC students were the first in their families to attend college.[2] First-generation students, meaning neither of their parents had Bachelor's Degrees, make up about 33% of all CSU freshman and about 45% of all UC freshmen.[3,4] The state's public colleges and universities also educate one of the most racially and ethnically diverse student bodies in the world. More than half of enrolled CSU students are students of color.[5] Similarly, 62% of non-international UC undergraduates admitted in 2017 were students of color.[6]

At the same time, many of California's college students experience barriers to academic success. On top of the typical educational challenges of college, students who identify as underrepresented minorities, first-generation, former foster youth, and/or LGBTQ are more likely to struggle to meet their basic needs.

Students experiencing homelessness in California's colleges are not a monolithic population; some communities are disproportionately represented. Compared to 11% of all CSU students experiencing homelessness at least once in the past year, 18% of students who identify as Black and first generation and 13% of students who identify as White and first-generation reported experiencing homelessness.[7] One in twenty (5%) UC students reported experiencing homelessness in the past year.[8] These rates are higher for underrepresented minority students (6%) compared to Asian and White students (3–4%).[9] At the UCs, LGBTQ students are twice as likely as non-LGBTQ students to experience homelessness.[10] This aligns with the national finding that LGBTQ college students are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness.[11] Former foster youth at California's colleges and

universities also experience significantly higher rates of homelessness.[12,13]

The majority of youth experiencing homelessness in California say they initially became homeless due to system failure and family conflict, including abuse and/or neglect.[14] During the transition to adulthood, 11–36% of former foster youth experience homelessness.[15] Many youth experiencing homelessness also come directly from juvenile detention centers, lacking the supports to pursue long-term sustainability and independence.[16] Systemic problems like poverty, a lack of affordable housing, and unemployment can result in homelessness.[17] Research also shows that 17–25% of unaccompanied homeless youth were sexually abused in their homes and 40–60% were physically abused.[18] Family conflicts leading to youth homelessness commonly stem from parental drug use, a lack of support of a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity, or a youth pregnancy.[19-21]

Similarly, food insecurity at California's public higher education institutions impacts certain student groups more than others. While 21% of all CSU students experience food insecurity, student groups who had higher rates included Black first-generation students (66%), former foster youth (63%), and parents.[22] About 60% of Hispanic/Latino students and Black students experienced food insecurity in the UC system, compared to 42% of all UC students.[23] According to a national study, LGBTQ students are also at greater risk of experiencing food insecurity.[24] Details on the estimated 67% of CCC students experiencing food insecurity are not yet known.[25]

A college education prepares people to thrive in a shifting economy. Over 95% of the jobs created since 2010 have gone to college–educated workers, and by 2020, 65% of all jobs will require education beyond high school.[26,27] Higher education resulting in skill building and meaningful college credentials creates the opportunity to break cyclical poverty. By

increasing awareness of the challenges that California's students face as well as the resources available to them, we hope this series of briefs leads to policies and practices that help people of all backgrounds succeed in postsecondary education.

THIS ISSUE BRIEF WAS WRITTEN BY THE CALIFORNIA HOMELESS YOUTH PROJECT AND SCHOOLHOUSE CONNECTION.

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Housing Supports for College Students: What You Need to Know

While investing in their futures, many college students across California struggle to find a place to call home. Homelessness—lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence—can take many forms including doubling up with other people, living in a vehicle, staying in a shelter, or sleeping on the streets.[1] Los Angeles Community College District found that 19% of their students experienced homelessness in the past year, compared to 14% of students in community colleges nationwide.[2,3] Peralta Community College District in Alameda County had even higher rates, at 30%.[4] According to recent studies, 11% of California State University (CSU) students and 5% of University of California (UC) students self-reported experiencing homelessness at least once in the past year.[5,6]

A variety of factors contribute to student homelessness. California has the most expensive rents in the nation.[7] Federal housing programs provide minimal support due to restrictions for college students and shortages in subsidized housing.[8,9] Student housing offers some reprieve; however, it is not necessarily less expensive than off-campus options.[10,11] Even when student housing is cheaper, the supply of student housing may not be meeting demand. Only 11 of the 114 California Community Colleges (CCCs) offer student housing, which house a small fraction of the total CCC student body.[12] All of the CSUs and UCs offer student housing, but they house only about 11% and 34% of their total student bodies, respectively.[13,14] In addition, some students experience homelessness because of family dynamics, domestic violence, or histories of abuse, neglect, and/or foster care.[15-19]

Balancing work and academics, students attending California's public institutions have little financial leverage to compete in expensive, crowded rental markets. They are also burdened by rising tuition, fees, and living costs that have outpaced increases in financial aid.[20-22] Calculations for financial aid rarely take into account the true costs of attending college,

including housing costs.[23] Often, these young adults cannot find work or work entry-level jobs for low wages.[24,25] An unexpected expense, an argument with a roommate, or a landlord seeking a higher paying renter may be all that it takes for college students to lose their housing and have nowhere else to go.

Students experiencing homelessness face many barriers to academic success. These students lack consistent access to a safe place to rest, cook, study, and live. A nationwide study found that nearly all of the homeless community college students surveyed lacked access to adequate, nutritious food.[26] Homelessness also impacts mental health and is associated with higher rates of depression and anxiety.[27] CSU students experiencing homelessness reported having poorer mental and physical health, lower GPAs, and more academic concerns compared to their housed peers.[28]

Services provided by campuses, nonprofits, and public agencies could help college students secure short-term and long-term housing. Yet a CSU survey found that the greatest barrier to students accessing on-campus food and housing services was a lack of awareness.[29] When a sample of California's higher education professionals who serve students experiencing homelessness were asked what their students needed most but they were unable to provide, 82% said housing was the biggest unmet need.[30] This may point to a lack of housing resources in general and also to a lack of staff capacity to find existing resources available to their students.

Which California Laws Apply?

AB 1228 (2015): Public postsecondary education: campus housing: priority for homeless youth
AB 1228 requires CSUs and requests that CCCs and UCs to give former foster youth and current/former homeless youth priority access to student housing, especially student housing that is available year-round (at no additional cost). The law also requests that each campus create

a housing plan for these student groups to ensure they can access housing all year, even during academic breaks.[31]

AB 801 (2016): Success for Homeless Youth in Higher Education Act

AB 801 requires CSUs and CCCs to give priority class enrollment to verified current and former homeless youth and to former foster youth. It also requires CSUs and CCCs to designate at least one liaison on each campus for these students. The liaison is tasked with identifying resources available to students experiencing homelessness and foster youth, informing students about these resources, and helping with application processes. The UCs are requested to do both of these things as well.

Additionally, the law allows current and former homeless youth to automatically be eligible for a California College Promise Grant fee waiver at the CCCs, waiving college tuition for the duration of the student's enrollment (so long as they maintain eligibility).[32]

What Can I Do?

- Form partnerships with local nonprofits in order to establish immediate and long-term housing resources for students experiencing homelessness.
- Create a list of local resources available to students experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, and/or financial challenges. Include campus, nonprofit, and government resources that students may qualify for.
- Establish a student emergency fund to provide students experiencing short-term financial hardships with grants or loans.
- Establish an emergency housing program that provides temporary student housing to individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Create a multi-discipline homeless task force on your campus consisting of staff who can assist students experiencing homelessness (e.g. Financial Aid, EOPS, Health Services, Admissions, Social Work, Academic Counseling, Disabled Student Services). This will facilitate referrals between staff on campus and streamline service coordination.

How Are Campuses Taking Action?

San Diego State University (SDSU)

San Diego State University has an Economic Crisis Response Team that helps students facing immediate crises, including food insecurity, housing insecurity, and a lack of transportation. Students experiencing homelessness may also qualify for the Guardian Scholars Program. In 2015, SDSU collaborated with the San Diego Housing Commission and used federal funding as a pilot program to secure year-round housing for Guardian Scholars over the next three years.

Sacramento State University

In 2017, Sacramento State debuted their Emergency Housing Program which provides short-term housing assistance and meal plans to students for up to 30 days in the residence halls. This time period allows students and the crisis manager to plan and arrange for long-term housing.

Connections with community members are also expanding student access to food and housing. The campus's Host a Hornet Program matches interested alumni with a food-insecure student, whom they invite into their home for dinner twice a month. In addition, members of local churches close to the campus have opened up their homes to students in need.[33]

Stakeholder Spotlight

Staff perspective

"*The students aren't doing anything wrong. It's just that they're living in a city that's hard to afford. When it starts to impact their college plans is when we feel responsibility as a university to help them manage.*" Danielle Muñoz, California State University Sacramento Case Manager[34]

Student Perspective

Young people experiencing a housing crisis do not want to be homeless. When the California Research Bureau interviewed over 200 of these youth across the state, close to 90% said that they were trying to improve their housing situation.[35]

Top Takeaways

1. Homelessness affects students at all three of the state's public higher education systems, impacting physical and mental health as well as academic performance.

2. A lack of housing resources in general, combined with the lack of awareness of existing resources by student and staff, pose barriers to students receiving the help they need.

3. Campus, nonprofit, and government housing resources can play an important role in helping students meet their immediate and long-term housing needs.

Additional Resources

Federal Housing Programs for Students (pg. 6)
College Housing Resources for Foster Youth
SchoolHouse Connection: Higher Education
CCC Basic Needs Resources / Campus Housing
CSU Student Well-Being & Basic Needs
UC Student Housing Initiative

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FAFSA & Student Homelessness: What You Need to Know

Many of California's college students experience financial hardships resulting in homelessness, hunger, the inability to afford textbooks, and other challenges that make it more difficult for them to graduate. To support their academic success, prospective and current students can apply for need-based and merit-based financial aid each year using the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).[1]

Information collected by the FAFSA is used to determine student eligibility for sizable amounts of federal, state, and institutional aid in the form of grants, loans, work-study, and scholarships.[2] For example, nearly half a million California Community College (CCC) students receive federal Pell Grants, which have an annual maximum award of $6,095.[3,4] In the 2016–17 academic year, the State of California awarded undergraduates $1.9 billion in Cal Grants.[5] Combining multiple sources of aid, in-state University of California students with annual family incomes less than $80,000 could pay $0 towards tuition and fees.[6] Similarly, 75% of California State University (CSU) students who received financial aid had their tuition fully covered during the 2014–15 academic year.[7]

Unfortunately, many students who could benefit from financial aid do not complete the FAFSA. California's high school graduation rate in 2016 was 83%, but only 59% of high school seniors turned in a FAFSA.[8,9] One national study found that about 30% of students failed to file a FAFSA and that one third of those students would have been eligible to receive federal Pell Grants.[10] Students who do not complete the FAFSA can end up paying out of pocket for all of their college expenses.

Multiple studies confirm the relationship between greater financial aid and higher rates of student enrollment, persistence, and graduation.[11-13] First-year, full-time college students across the nation who filed a FAFSA have 72% higher odds of staying enrolled the second semester than their peers who did not file, and the odds are even greater for lower-income students who filed.[14]

One study found that of the CCC students with no financial resources to pay for college, 49% of students who received $7,501 or more in financial aid graduated or transferred within six years compared to only 17% of students who received $1,001–$2,000 in aid.[15]

Barriers to Completing the FAFSA

Largely, students do not complete the FAFSA because they thought they had no financial needs, didn't think they would qualify for aid, didn't want to take on student debt, and had trouble filling out the forms.[16,17] Students and their families can have difficulty understanding the FAFSA's many purposes. For example, the FAFSA is used to determine eligibility for loans (not how much a student must borrow) and for merit-based as well as need-based financial aid. Many students also find the FAFSA to be lengthy, confusing, and difficult to complete.[18]

Unaccompanied homeless youth, who are not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian, can encounter even more challenges when completing the FAFSA. In order to be considered financially independent and omit their parents' financial information from the FAFSA, these students must obtain a determination that they were homeless and financially on their own in the school year in which they are submitting the application.[19] Verification that an unaccompanied youth is experiencing homelessness or at risk of experiencing it can be provided by a school district homeless liaison or by certain homeless service providers.[20] If a student cannot obtain verification from those parties, a college financial aid administrator must make this determination for the student.[21,22] During the 2015–16 FAFSA application cycle, 150,612 applicants indicated that they were homeless or were financially self-supporting and at risk of being homeless on or after July 1, 2014.[23]

Maintaining Access to Financial Aid

To continue receiving financial aid—including grants, loans, scholarships, and work-

study—students must meet Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) requirements each year. SAP requirements vary from campus to campus.[24] Generally, they include having a GPA above a certain limit, passing a certain percentage of classes attempted, and making timely progress towards degree completion.[25,26] Students who do not meet their institution's SAP requirements during their annual evaluation become ineligible for financial aid, unless they successfully appeal and are placed on probation.[27] For students who depend on financial aid to help cover their college costs and/or living expenses, the sudden loss of income can cause financial hardship and put them at risk for experiencing homelessness.

Which California Laws Apply?

AB 801 (2016): Success for Homeless Youth in Higher Education Act

AB 801 requires CSUs and CCCs to give priority class enrollment to current and former homeless youth and to former foster youth. It also requires CSUs and CCCs to designate at least one liaison on each campus for these students. The liaison is tasked with identifying resources available to students experiencing homelessness and former foster youth, informing students about these resources, and helping with application processes. The UCs are requested to do both of these things as well.[28]

Additionally, AB 801 allows current and former homeless youth to be automatically eligible for a California College Promise Grant fee waiver at the CCCs, waiving college tuition for the duration of the student's enrollment (so long as they maintain eligibility).[29] Students can apply for this the FAFSA or a separate grant form.[30]

HR 2669 (2007): College Cost Reduction and Access Act

HR 2669 allows a youth who is 23 or younger to be considered independent on the FAFSA (meaning they do not have to include their parents' financial information) if the student was or is: an orphan, an emancipated minor, in foster care, in legal guardianship, a ward of the court, or verified as an unaccompanied youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness.[31,32]

What Can I Do?

- Offer one-on-one assistance to students completing the FAFSA, especially to prospective and current students experiencing homelessness.
- Understand how to verify (through a homeless service provider and independently) that a student is experiencing homelessness or is at risk of experiencing homelessness for financial aid purposes. Have a sample verification letter ready to complete for students.
- Create a volunteer base that allows college seniors, alumni, and/or others in the community who have completed the FAFSA to support incoming and current college students with their FAFSA completion.
- Use signage, tabling, articles in the campus newspaper, social media, emails, and/or texts to address common FAFSA myths and remind students about filing deadlines.
- Help prospective students and their families access the FAFSA4caster to help them see the potential benefits of FAFSA completion.
- Work with students to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress. Develop clear, consistent, accessible appeals processes on your campus to ensure that students can access financial supports and meet their basic needs.

How Are Campuses Taking Action?

East Los Angeles College
East Los Angeles College's Financial Wellness Office has a computer lab where students can fill out the FAFSA, check on the status of their application, and get financial aid help from campus staff. The campus also provides direct outreach through CalWorks, Extended Opportunity Program and Services, Puente Program, and other student programs to remind students about deadlines with financial aid and provide financial coaching.

Victor Valley Community College
Victor Valley Community College has two liaisons on their campus: a homeless liaison who is also a financial aid administrator and a foster youth liaison who is also an Extended Opportunity Programs and Services counselor. Intentionally locating the liaisons in their departments means that they can provide a

variety of services to help students who are struggling to meet their basic needs.

Stakeholder Spotlight

Staff Perspective
A sample of public higher education staff and administrators across California identified FAFSA completion as one of the top five needs of the students experiencing homelessness that they serve. FAFSA completion was also one of the top supports that these higher education professionals were able to directly provide.[33]

Student Perspective
According to a 2016 survey of 12,000 CCC students, nearly a quarter of the financial aid recipients who responded said they had difficulty completing the FAFSA.[34]

Top Takeaways

1. Prospective and current students can apply for sizable amounts of federal, state, and institutional financial aid each year using the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

2. Students who don't complete the FAFSA may end up paying out of pocket for all of their educational expenses, experience financial hardships, and struggle to complete college.

3. Unaccompanied homeless youth can complete the FAFSA without providing parental signatures or income information.

4. Maintaining student eligibility for financial aid is a key strategy to empowering their academic success and helping them meet their basic needs.

Additional Resources

CCC Financial Aid Homepage
CCC Homeless Youth Liaisons Directory
CSU Financial Aid Homepage
UC Financial Aid Homepage
SchoolHouse Connection Webinar: Understanding Federal Student Aid Policy & Practice for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth
Federal Student Aid: Homeless Youth Q&A

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CalFresh and Student Hunger: What You Need to Know

Food insecurity—a lack of access to adequate and nutritious food—challenges the efforts and aspirations of many college students across California. Two district-level studies found that 61–73% of their California Community College (CCC) students struggle with food insecurity, which aligns with the national community college rate of 67%.[1-3] At California's public universities, food insecurity impacts 42% of University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) students.[4,5]

As a coping strategy, students experiencing food insecurity may eat less during each meal, skip meals entirely, or eat more affordable meals that lack sufficient amounts of vitamins and nutrients. Food insecurity impacts physical and mental health and is linked to higher rates of obesity, depression, and anxiety.[6-8] It can also hinder students' ability to focus, which in turn can affect their academic performance.[9]

A variety of issues contribute to food insecurity on college campuses. Many students are expected to fund their room, board, and educational expenses on their own while taking classes. Focusing more on academics requires working fewer hours, which may lead to financial challenges. In addition, students are burdened by rising tuition and fees that have outpaced increases in financial aid.[10,11] Food is a flexible living expense compared to set costs like rent, so students may spend less on food as a strategy to manage their limited budgets. College students experiencing homelessness may also experience food insecurity due to a lack of places to store and prepare food.

CalFresh, California's version of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, can provide significant long-term support to college students experiencing food insecurity. This program gives eligible low-income households monthly financial assistance to buy the food they need. Yet, 3 in 10 people who were eligible for CalFresh in 2015 were not enrolled, and California ranked 48 out 51 (counting the 50

states and Washington, D.C.) in CalFresh participation.[12] Similarly, California's college students are under-enrolled. For example, a study found that an estimated 27% of CSU students were eligible to receive CalFresh benefits, yet only 5% reported being enrolled.[13]

A lack of awareness and challenges in the application process prevent students from fully utilizing CalFresh. A recent study found that about 40% of all surveyed CSU students had never heard of CalFresh or believed it was not offered on their campus.[14] Confusing eligibility criteria also present barriers to enrollment. College students must meet numerous requirements based on their household income, the number of people in their household, the federal work rule, and work exemptions, and student status.[15] CalFresh outreach and enrollment efforts on campuses play an important role in helping students meet their nutritional needs.

Which California Laws Apply?

AB 1747 (2016): College Student Hunger Relief Act of 2016
AB 1747 increases the likelihood that on-campus restaurants and cafeterias participate in the Restaurant Meals Program, which allows students to buy prepared food with their CalFresh dollars.[16] This particularly benefits students experiencing homelessness who may not have a place to store food and cook meals. This law established a funding account to support collaborations between on-campus food pantries and CDSS-contracting food banks. AB 1747 also improves access to funds for CalFresh outreach at California's public campuses.[17]

AB 214 (2017)
In an effort to increase CalFresh enrollment, the California Student Aid Commission now notifies Cal Grant recipients who meet eligibility requirements under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program about their potential eligibility for CalFresh.[18]

A college student who is enrolled at least half-time must also work at least 20 hours per week or qualify for a work exemption in order to be eligible for CalFresh. AB 214 requires the Department of Social Services to create and maintain a list of college programs that allow students to be exempt from the CalFresh work requirement.[19] This builds on AB 1930 (2014) which allows certain college programs to count as "employment training programs"—increasing the likelihood of students receiving work exemptions and being eligible for CalFresh.[20]

What Can I Do?

- Help students access immediate assistance by referring them to a local food bank.
- Conduct CalFresh outreach in partnership with campus programs that serve low-income students, current and former foster youth, and/or youth experiencing homelessness. Frame CalFresh as a form of financial aid, reducing stigma.
- Collaborate with college and state programs (e.g. work-study, Educational Opportunity Program, Extended Foster Care) that allow participants to be exempt from the CalFresh work requirement in order to reach potentially eligible student groups.
- Partner with your local County Social Services Agency to boost CalFresh outreach and enrollment efforts on campus.
- Pursue funding for CalFresh student outreach efforts. Contact Colleen Ganley at the CCC Chancellor's Office or Araceli Esparza at the CSU Office of the Chancellor for details.
- Pursue collaborations with local food banks and/or with your local CDSS CalFresh Outreach prime contractor to support a campus food bank.

How Are Campuses Taking Action?

Ventura Community College
During the first two weeks of school, Ventura College has a back-to-school event where they table with other campus offices to distribute information about CalFresh and giveaways. Outreach efforts continue throughout the year via emails, texts, and calls to eligible students. Using a simple checklist, Ventura College makes it easy for students to apply.

Los Angeles Trade Technical College
Once a week, students at Los Angeles Trade Tech can receive fresh fruits and vegetables at an outdoor food pantry on campus. The pantry is managed by St. Francis Center Los Angeles, a participant in the City of Los Angeles' recycLA program. In addition, pantry volunteers help students create long-term stability by providing case management and emergency shelter assistance.

Check out other higher education best practices: Student Food Access & Security Toolkit

Stakeholder Spotlight

Staff Perspective
In a 2018 survey of higher education professionals at California's public colleges and universities, a little less than half of the 59 respondents said that they were notifying Cal Grant recipients about their potential eligibility for CalFresh.[21]

Student Perspective
"*Often times it feels like I have to decide to pay for bills or groceries or books. I do not rely solely on financial aid for my school expenses and often times I end up having to pay out of pocket. But I also do not have the funds to support myself and pay for school at the same time without living on the streets. I do not want to choose between buying a $150 book or eating for a week.*" Female, 27, part-time CCC student[22]

Top Takeaways

1. Food insecurity affects students in all three of the state's public higher education systems, impacting physical and mental health as well as academic performance.

2. Lack of awareness and confusing eligibility criteria prevent eligible students from taking advantage of the financial assistance that CalFresh provides.

3. CalFresh outreach and enrollment efforts on college campuses play an important role in helping students meet their nutritional needs.

Additional Resources

CalFresh Resources
CCC Basic Needs Resources
CSU CalFresh Outreach Programs
UC Student Food Access Security & Basic Needs
UC CalFresh Nutrition Education Program
CDSS CalFresh Outreach Toolkit
JBAY CalFresh Tools & Resources

Determining Student Eligibility for CalFresh
Eligibility Basics & Student Eligibility
CalFresh Handbook 63-4.5: Student Eligibility
CalFresh Student Work Exemptions
California Food Bank Directory

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Student Mental Health: What You Need to Know

Many of California's college students struggle with anxiety, stress, depression, and other mental health needs that impact their academic success and quality of life.[1,2] For some students, their mental health needs predated college; others are facing these challenges for the first time in the midst of new relationships and responsibilities. Multiple studies found that about 20% of California's public college and university students experienced serious psychological distress in the past 30 days.[3,4]

Students experiencing homelessness while attending college may have greater mental health needs than their peers. Nationally, these youth have higher rates of trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-injurious behaviors, and suicide.[5] Mental health challenges can often be traced back to family abuse, conflict, and neglect as well as the trauma of surviving without a stable place to live.[6-8] At the intersection of homelessness and higher education, California State University (CSU) students experiencing homelessness unanimously spoke about how their lack of housing increased their stress and impacted their mental well-being as they struggled to meet basic needs, maintain relationships, and succeed in school.[9]

Without sufficient care, college students' mental health needs generally persist and can lead to lower academic achievement, graduation rates, and workforce participation.[10] These college students may also experience higher rates of alcohol and substance use.[11,12] Conversely, the benefits of receiving mental health services include greater academic performance, student retention, campus safety, and student resilience as well as reduced rates of suicide.[13,14]

Mental Health Resources on Campuses

Campus mental health clinics can offer students a variety of mental health services for free, with the costs already paid for by a student health fee at the start of the academic term. The availability, services, and impacts of campus

clinics vary by public higher education system. All of the University of California (UC) and CSU campuses have mental health clinics.[15] Baseline services at CSU clinics include short-term counselling, services for students with suicidal or violent behaviors, mental health outreach, and referrals.[16] CSU clinics can charge students for additional services.[17] All of the UC campuses provide similar baseline services, plus psychiatric services, to their students.[18-26] Due to financial limitations, only 95 of the 114 California Community Colleges (CCCs) have mental health clinics, and baseline services vary from campus to campus.[27,28]

Campus mental health clinics often do not fully meet the needs of students due to a lack of staff capacity and funding. Students increasingly utilize counseling services at California's public campuses, following national trends.[29,30] The UC system aims to keep up with demand by hiring more counselors. Compared to the best practice of having no more than 1,500 college students per one full-time counselor per campus, the UC, CSU, and CCC systems have ratios of 1:1,156, 1:2,176, and 1: 7,667, respectively.[31] Low counselor to student ratios can result in students waiting weeks for initial and follow-up appointments and reaching limits on their number of free appointments before being referred to an off-campus provider—who they would have to pay through insurance or out-of-pocket.[32,33] During the wait, students may give up pursuing help or experience the negative impacts of their mental health needs before receiving sufficient support.[34] Furthermore, students might not pursue needed services due to a lack of awareness of their mental health needs, a lack of awareness of campus resources, and fear of stigma.

Students with disabilities may have access to additional mental health services. California's public universities provide academic accommodations (e.g. interpreters, notetakers, readers) and disability-related advising.[35,36] By law, California's community colleges provide

similar resources as well as assessments for learning disabilities.[37,38]

Off-Campus Mental Health Resources

A recent study found that 20% of California's public college and university students used mental health services; of these, half used off-campus resources.[39] Off-campus resources include private mental health service providers, wellness centers, community clinics, and hotlines. Some wellness centers and community clinics provide their services for free or at a reduced cost. However, they cannot be expected to fully meet the mental health needs of California's college students. While campuses in rural areas may have minimal local resources, campuses in urban areas may have numerous yet overburdened local resources. Hotlines provide free services like mental health screenings, preliminary counseling, and referrals, but they are not a long-term solution for college students in need of mental health services.[40]

Health Insurance Options for Students

Health insurance improves college students' access to mental health services, independent of what their campuses and local communities can provide. Students can obtain health insurance through parents' coverage, campus-based plans, or plans available at California's health insurance market.

By law, all insurance plans that offer dependent child coverage must make the coverage available until the person turns 26.[41] However, if students move far from home to attend college, they may be outside of their plan's provider network. Also, strained or nonexistent family ties may limit students' access to this form of support, especially for college students experiencing homelessness.[42,43]

Concerning campus-based plans, all UC students are automatically enrolled in a systemwide student health insurance plan called UC SHIP which includes mental and physical health services, dental, vision, and referrals to specialists in an outside network.[44] The CSU and CCC systems do not offer comparable student health insurance plans.[45,46]

Students can also buy a private health plan or sign up for a government-provided health plan through Covered California, California's health insurance marketplace. Students purchasing private insurance plans may qualify for tax credits that offset the costs. To receive the tax credit, students must have an annual income between 138–400% of the federal poverty level ($16,754–48,240 in 2018) and file their taxes the year that they qualified for the credit.[47,48] Students with annual incomes less than 138% of the federal poverty level ($16,754 in 2018) qualify for Medi-Cal, California's version of the federal-state Medicaid program, which provides healthcare services to low-income individuals for low to no cost.[49,50]

Which California Laws Apply?

Prop. 63 (2004): Mental Health Services Act
Proposition 63 funds projects relating to mental health in California, including the Statewide Student Mental Health Initiative. This initiative gives funds to the UC, CSU, and CCC systems (although not necessarily to every campus), which uses them in customized ways to support student mental health. Projects include campaigns to reduce stigma, trainings for the campus community on mental health literacy and ways to provide support, and teaching students skills for coping with stress.[51,52]

What Can I Do?

- Harness the power of peer support groups by encouraging students to form campus chapters of mental health organizations like Active Minds. Support existing mental health clubs by promoting student awareness.
- Form relationships with local wellness centers and community clinics to promote warm referrals on behalf of students seeking mental health services.
- Send information on Medi-Cal and health insurance options to all entering and graduating students, who will likely need to reassess their coverage.
- Track bills in the legislature that will impact students' access to mental health services. Bills include SB 918, which may lead to additional funding for mental health services for homeless youth, and SB 968, which will provide funding to increase the number of

mental health counselors on California's public campuses.

How Are Campuses Taking Action?

California Community College System
In 2017, the California Community College system began a partnership with the Crisis Text Line to offer students a free, 24/7 way to get help during mental health emergencies. After a little more than a year, almost 2,800 students used the anonymous texting service to engage in 4,500 conversations.[53]

UC San Diego
UC San Diego uses peer-to-peer learning to educate students about mental health and wellness. Through workshops and presentations, Wellness Peer Educators help reduce stigma, increase mental health literacy, and teach healthy behaviors.

CSU Long Beach
CSU Long Beach's Counseling and Psychological Services have crisis counselors available for phone consultation at all hours through their main phone line. They also offer a free Self Care Mobile App ranging in topics from academic skills, stress, anxiety, depression and more. Both of these resources allow students to access mental health services and information anytime and anywhere they might need them.

Stakeholder Spotlight

Staff Perspective
According to a survey of faculty and staff at California's public higher education institutions, less than half of the respondents felt that they were aware of the warning signs of mental health distress; felt they had the necessary skills to discuss mental health issues with students; or were confident in their ability to help students address their mental health issues.[54]

Student Perspective
A 2013 survey of 836 students attending three CSUs found that, of the uninsured students, 79% said their lack of insurance was because they could not afford it. Only 9% said that they didn't have health insurance because they did not want it or didn't think they would need it.[55]

Top Takeaways

1. Many of California's college students struggle with mental health needs including anxiety, stress, and depression. Students experiencing homelessness are at even greater risk of having mental health needs.

2. Campus mental health clinics can provide accessible emergency and short-term services for free. However, the availability, services, and impacts of these clinics vary greatly between higher education systems and individual campuses.

3. Obtaining health insurance improves college students' access to mental health services, independent of what their campuses and local communities can provide.

Additional Resources

CSU Mental Health Resources
UC Student Mental Health Resources
CCC Student Mental Health Program
CCC Mental Health Directory
California Youth Crisis Line
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
ULifeline: Self Evaluator Online Screening

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Supportive Services Within & Beyond the University: What You Need to Know

Campus-based resources like emergency student housing, food pantries, and mental health clinics provide direct support to California's low-income and homeless college students. However, several challenges limit the effectiveness of campus-based resources: 1) students might not be aware of these resources or know how to access them; 2) students might choose not to use needed resources due to stigma; 3) students leave college and lose access to these resources; and 4) campuses may lack the financial capacity to fully meet their students' needs. Outreach and enrollment efforts combined with multi-sector partnerships help students get the supports they need to thrive in college and beyond.

California's students need help discovering and accessing resources. According to a recent survey of California State University (CSU) students, the top reason that students didn't use campus services was because they had never heard of them.[1] Despite all of the CSUs and Universities of California (UCs) offering mental health services, 45% of California's public university students said that they did not know where to go on campus if they needed help.[2,3] Furthermore, about 40% of all surveyed CSU students had never heard of CalFresh or believed it was not offered on their campus.[4] Confusion about enrollment processes and eligibility also prevent students from accessing key supports like financial aid and public assistance programs.[5-7]

Stigma associated with homelessness, hunger, mental health needs, and other challenges may cause students to hide their needs instead of seeking support.[8-10] To reduce stigma and make resources more accessible, services can be provided in a way that honors students' dignity. Word usage can make it easier for students to receive needed services without having to identify with negative labels. For example, higher education homeless liaisons can be called housing counselors, CalFresh can be called a

financial aid program, and mental health needs (rather than illnesses) can be met with mental health supports (rather than treatments). In addition, campuses can provide private spaces where students can meet with caseworkers to discuss their individual needs and access supports. Students can also organize to reduce sigma in their campus culture.[11]

When students do access a program or service on campus, it presents an opportunity to connect them with additional resources. For example, students visiting a campus health clinic could receive a screening for Medi-Cal eligibility and information about low-cost community clinics in the area. Likewise, students visiting a campus food pantry could receive a screening for CalFresh eligibility, a list of local food resources, and a list of campus resources that may benefit low-income students generally (e.g. Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, FAFSA assistance, budgeting workshops). Connecting students to off-campus resources also helps ensure that they receive needed supports even after graduation.

Partnerships leverage campuses' capacities to support student success. For example, local food banks make strong partners for creating and sustaining campus food banks. A 2015 survey of California Community College (CCC) staff, faculty, and administrators found that nearly half of college food banks received funding from community-based food banks.[12] Similarly, campuses can partner with local county agencies to increase student enrollment in public assistance programs; local homelessness Continuums of Care can help determine students' housing needs and connect them with resources; and local nonprofits can help meet a wide variety of student needs.[13,14]

What Can I Do?

- Partner with your local [County Social Services Agency](#) to boost student enrollment in CalFresh and Medi-Cal.
- Pursue collaborations with [local food banks](#) and/or with your local [CDSS CalFresh Outreach prime contractor](#) to support a campus food bank.
- Collaborate with your [local Continuum of Care](#) to streamline student access to housing resources.
- Form relationships with nonprofit service providers to promote warm referrals on behalf of students seeking services.

Did You Know?

When hiring for internships and student assistant positions, state agencies are required to give preference to homeless and formerly incarcerated youth up to age 26. [AB 1840](#) builds on existing state law which requires state agencies to give former foster youth hiring preference for these positions. These are paid positions and include medical benefits.

How Are Campuses Taking Action?

CSU San Bernardino & San Bernardino County

In addition to receiving free mental health services at the Health Center, Cal State San Bernardino students can meet with a county caseworker to learn about and access off-campus mental health programs. This is the result of a partnership between San Bernardino County and Cal State San Bernardino.[15]

UC Davis & Yolo County

Thanks to a partnership between Yolo County Health and Human Services and UC Davis, an employee from Yolo County's CalFresh program is regularly available on the campus for drop-in meetings with students. In addition to helping eligible students enroll in CalFresh, students are provided information about local food resources. This program has no direct costs; UC Davis does outreach to increase awareness of this resource while Yolo County contributes staff time and marketing materials.[16]

LA Community Colleges & Jovenes

Jovenes works with several community colleges throughout Los Angeles County to provide homeless students with rental subsidies and case management services. Peer Navigators who are formerly homeless community college students conduct campus outreach, assess students' needs, and connect them with supports. With a stable home and the support of Jovenes, students who previously experienced homelessness are able to succeed in their academics.[15,16]

Stakeholder Spotlight

Staff Perspective
"[We need] policies that can join many members of a community to help the homeless population in a few ways ... financially, academically, and humanely, carrying out help where it is needed."
CCC Homeless Liaison/Financial Aid Advisor

Top Takeaways

1. Students need help understanding what resources are available to them within and beyond their campus and how to access these resources.

2. When students access a program or service on campus, it is an opportunity to connect them with additional resources that may benefit them.

3. Helping students access off-campus resources helps ensure that they receive needed supports even after they leave college.

4. Partnerships with nonprofits, local agencies, coalitions, and others leverage the limited capacities of California's public colleges and universities in order to further support student success.

Additional Resources

Hotlines for Emergency Services & Referrals
[2-1-1 Referral Service](#)
[California Youth Crisis Line](#)
[National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)

Preventing Student Food Insecurity
[California Food Bank Directory](#)
[Student Food Access & Security Toolkit](#)

Preventing Student Homelessness
[California Continuum of Care Key Contacts](#)

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SUPPORTING CALIFORNIA'S HOMELESS & LOW-INCOME COLLEGE STUDENTS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

THIS ISSUE BRIEF WAS WRITTEN BY THE CALIFORNIA HOMELESS YOUTH PROJECT AND SCHOOLHOUSE CONNECTION.

Contact Information

California Homeless Youth Project: HYPinfo@library.ca.gov
SchoolHouse Connection: info@schoolhouseconnection.org

Resources

Link to infographics, video, and the tip sheets:
http://cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov/PUBLICATIONS.HTML