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South Bay tech hub struggling with hunger under SNAP uncertainty

The demand for food banks serves as a precursor for looming SNAP cuts



A man with bags of donated food drives by cars lined up for food at Sunnyvale Community Services in Sunnyvale, Calif., on Wednesday, Nov. 12, 2025. (Shae Hammond/Bay Area News Group)

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Scores of cars snaked around the block near Sunnyvale Community Services Wednesday, stretching towards the main road as a steady flow of people sought food throughout the morning.

Amid continuing confusion over SNAP benefits, the nonprofit is seeing demand for its food bank peak to the highest levels since the end of COVID aid. Even when the government shutdown comes to an end, food banks say the increased need highlights hidden financial struggles even in wealthy communities and is a precursor of what is to come as more restrictions on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, benefits roll out.



“We’ve never seen this kind of cutting of benefits,” said Marie Bernard, Executive Director of Sunnyvale Community Services. “It’s heartbreaking the cruelty that we’re seeing – there’s just no other word for it.”

Over the past week, the state of SNAP – called CalFresh in California and commonly referred to as “food stamps” – has been caught in an intense bureaucratic tug of war during the government shutdown, with President Donald Trump’s administration warning that SNAP benefits would not be funded during the shutdown, a court order stipulating that funds be released and then federal officials ordering states to undo spending.

Last week, California officials began releasing funds to CalFresh recipients in the state, but uncertainty remains as to whether the move will face federal backlash and if the funds for December will come on time.

“It’s rough out here... (Trump is) making everybody suffer, even the Democrats, they’re not doing nothing,” said Russell Rickard of San Jose while picking up food from Sunnyvale Community Services. “Food is going up again and people are having trouble. I hope it works out.”



Even as CalFresh recipients begin to benefit from the funds, the payouts were largely delayed. Relatively short setbacks in aid can strain a household, and can result in missed utility or rent payments and lead to further instability, Bernard noted.

“Food is the canary in the coal mine,” Bernard said. “We’re going to see a very fast impact on not being able to afford rent.”

The uncertainty surrounding SNAP has seen demand for aid reaching the highest point since last year, when the wave of government aid meant to sustain residents throughout the COVID-19 pandemic lapsed and the food bank fed over 1,500 households. This week, the nonprofit expects to feed 1,450 households. Last week, it fed 1,364 households.

The surge in demand is not unique to Sunnyvale. But in a city better known as a tech hub whose top employers are Apple and Google and whose median income tops \$180,000, the level of need is striking.



According to Second Harvest, which provides food to food banks across San Mateo and Santa Clara county – including 75% of the food to Sunnyvale Community Services, they feed one in six residents of San Mateo and Santa Clara County every month. The statistic underlines just how ubiquitous food insecurity is in Silicon Valley, said Leslie Bacho, CEO of Second Harvest.

“It’s so easy to forget how great the need is because hunger is very hidden,” said Bacho. “In these affluent communities due to high cost of living ... you could still be working full time or multiple jobs and still not making enough to be able to pay your rent, pay the bills and afford food for your family.”

Even when SNAP returns, many who provide food aid worry that the surge in need now will serve as a precursor to a more permanent rise in food insecurity brought on by Trump’s big tax and spending law.

The legislation – passed in Congress this summer – brought with it a slate of restrictions to SNAP benefits. These include expanding work requirements to include adults up to 64 – up from 54 – and limiting work exemptions for groups such as veterans, those who are homeless and those aging out of foster care. The law also changed exemptions for caretakers, so that those caring for children up to 14 years old are eligible, down from 18.



Those work requirements could affect people like Rickard, who works part time and is looking for work. He expressed confusion of how to prove that when he doesn’t have a paystub, and like many, receives pay directly to his bank account. Though many nonprofits like Sunnyvale Community Services offer guidance on how to navigate the tightening bureaucracy, many nonprofits and analysts expect that those who can’t figure out the system will lose SNAP benefits even if they are working.

While these restrictions technically went into effect on the first of November, Bacho expects that households will start seeing the change early next year.

“We do know that there is a direct correlation between changes in SNAP and seeing more people in need,” said Bacho. “The system is really strained, and this will put more pressure on it.”