

# HUNGER FREE COMMUNITY REPORT

*Food Insecurity at UCI: Addressing Student Hunger and Developing Sustainable Solutions for Students*



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## THANKS TO UCI BASIC NEEDS CENTER & CONGRESSIONAL HUNGER CENTER

I would like to give my sincere gratitude to the University of California, Irvine (UCI) Basic Needs Center and Congressional Hunger Center for their invaluable support of my education on food insecurity. Their expertise and guidance have provided me with a deep understanding of the issue and the tools necessary to make a meaningful impact on my community. I am truly thankful for the opportunity they have given me to make a difference in the lives of those in need. Thank you for your unwavering dedication to this important cause.

## INTRODUCTION

This report is focused on the issue of food insecurity and hunger among college students at the University of California, Irvine, which is a significant and often overlooked problem that affects many students' physical and mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. This report aims to raise awareness about the prevalence and consequences of food insecurity among college students and to propose solutions for addressing this issue. Through this report, I hope to make a contribution to the goal of creating a hunger free community for all.



## WHY IS FOOD INSECURITY A CONCERN AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS?

Food insecurity – the lack of consistent access to fresh and nutritious food – is common among colleges and universities, and its impact can make it virtually impossible for students to learn and grow.

A staggering 1 in 3 college students face food insecurity.<sup>1</sup> This has been particularly true for students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, and students identifying as African American compared to the overall student population.<sup>2</sup> And it's hard to do well in the classroom with an inadequate supply of food and energy, especially when you're worried about when or where you will get your next meal.

There is a clear relationship between hunger and reduced academic performance. Findings suggest that students who struggle with food insecurity often experience a negative impact on their academic performance. Specifically, undergraduate students who reported that their basic needs were not being met had lower GPAs, on average, compared to those who did not have the same struggles.<sup>3</sup> This is likely due to the negative impact that food insecurity has on both mental and physical well-being, which ultimately affects academic outcome.

The UCI Basic Needs Center recognizes the importance of addressing food insecurity and has taken steps to tackle the challenge head-on. The Center's mission is to work towards finding solutions to food insecurity and other basic needs issues in order to make a more equitable and supportive environment for students.

## FOOD INSECURITY AT UCI AND KEY TERMS

The University of California, like many other colleges and universities, is not immune to the problem of food insecurity. A system-wide study conducted in 2017 revealed that 44% of undergraduate students and 25% of graduate students at the University of California reported experiencing food insecurity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Hunger on Campus: The Challenge of Food Insecurity for College Students," <https://studentsagainsthunger.org/hunger-on-campus>

<sup>2</sup> "Global Food Initiative: Food and Housing Security at the University of California," [https://www.ucop.edu/global-food-initiative/\\_files/food-housing-security.pdf](https://www.ucop.edu/global-food-initiative/_files/food-housing-security.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> "Global Food Initiative: Food and Housing Security at the University of California," [https://www.ucop.edu/global-food-initiative/\\_files/food-housing-security.pdf](https://www.ucop.edu/global-food-initiative/_files/food-housing-security.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> "Global Food Initiative: Food and Housing Security at the University of California,"

The UCI Basic Needs Center is at the forefront in the fight against food insecurity on campus, recognizing that access to nutritious food is a fundamental component of a basic needs secure community. The Center has implemented a variety of programs and initiatives designed to support students experiencing food insecurity, from providing assistance with the CalFresh application process to operating the FRESH pantry that provides fresh, nutritious food to all students. These initiatives, and more, are designed to reach all students and address their diverse needs. This section will provide an overview of the biggest initiatives that the UCI Basic Needs Center has implemented to address food insecurity on campus, and this report will highlight the ways in which the CalFresh Application Assistance program has helped to support students and create a hunger free community.

1. CalFresh Application Assistance – A program that helps students navigate the application process for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as CalFresh, in order to provide financial assistance to eligible students to purchase nutritious food.
2. CalFresh Advocates – Student staff who give support by answering questions and helping students apply for CalFresh through one-on-one appointments or tabling events.
3. FRESH pantry – A campus-based food pantry that provides students with access to fresh, nutritious food. The pantry is open to all students, regardless of their socio-economic status, and accepts donations of food from community partners.

## UCI COMMUNITY INPUT AND LIVED EXPERIENCES

To gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and gaps in current efforts to address food insecurity at UC Irvine, a series of interviews were conducted with CalFresh Staff at the UCI Basic Needs Center. These interviews aimed to gather personal perspectives and experiences of the individuals involved with the Center on the barriers and gaps in current outreach programs, as well as the useful strategies and suggestions they have for improving these efforts.

In the Fall Quarter of 2022, the UCI Basic Needs Center assisted an average of 20 students per week in applying for CalFresh through one-on-one in-person or virtual appointments. These appointments, which typically take around an hour, are carried out

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[https://www.ucop.edu/global-food-initiative/\\_files/food-housing-security.pdf](https://www.ucop.edu/global-food-initiative/_files/food-housing-security.pdf)

by CalFresh Advocates and staff, to help students apply for benefits, complete required SAR-7 or Recertification forms, and answer questions students may have about the nutrition assistance program. The appointments begin with a presentation that explains what CalFresh is and how it works, followed by assistance in applying through [getcalfresh.org](http://getcalfresh.org)

It is important to note that individuals' perspective and experiences at the UCI Basic Needs Center, for some who have faced food insecurity themselves, offer valuable insight into the challenges and opportunities of working with college students facing food insecurity and finding ways to increase engagement and support for CalFresh at the UCI Basic Needs Center.

### **CHERRY, CALFRESH ADVOCATE**

Cherry, a CalFresh Advocate at the UCI Basic Needs Center, found out about the organization during their freshman year through friends who were utilizing the FRESH pantry. Then became more involved after facing food insecurity themselves and wanting to assist other students in similar situations.

They shared that one of the main barriers that students face when applying for CalFresh is “getting in contact with the county, as many students have busy schedules and are not always available for the required phone interview for the initial application or recertification.” This is a common issue raised by many university students, and it is unfortunate that it can lead to students either becoming delayed in receiving their benefits or completely losing their benefits to purchase groceries and maintain adequate nutritional levels.

To address this issue, the Basic Needs Center could work with the Orange County Social Services Agency (OCSSA) to provide a dedicated caseworker to the center to help students navigate the process and ensure they are able to schedule the mandatory phone interview at times that are convenient for the student's schedule. While the need for a dedicated caseworker for CalFresh is important and necessary, the responsibility for providing such a caseworker ultimately falls on the OCSSA rather than the Basic Needs Center.

Additionally, the Basic Needs Center could explore alternative methods of communication with the OCSSA, such as online or email communication to make the process more accessible for students with busy schedules.

Additionally, Cherry highlighted the stigma attached to applying for CalFresh or utilizing it, which prevents students from applying for it. The following are some examples of the stigma and fear that students have shared with applying for CalFresh benefits:

- Doubt about personal eligibility for benefits and concerns about whether others may need or deserve them more.
- Reluctance to disclose required household information, particularly for households with mixed citizenship or immigration statuses, due to fear that enrolling may affect non-citizen family or friends.
- Worry that participating in CalFresh may become public knowledge and negatively affect future career prospects.

These fears and stigmas are significant barriers that can prevent eligible students from accessing the benefits they need to support their basic needs. To address this issue, Cherry emphasizes the importance of raising awareness and breaking down the stigma surrounding the nutrition assistance program and food insecurity for university students to “[becoming] comfortable with talking about food or financial insecurity especially because the issues are very prevalent [at UC Irvine].”

### **JANE, CALFRESH ADVOCATE**

Jane applied to be a CalFresh Advocate because they wanted to make a difference for their student community. And during their time as a student staff member at the Center, they gained a lot of knowledge about the food insecurity struggles faced by university students.

Jane’s experience with the UCI Basic Needs Center has been largely positive, but one potential barrier they have encountered and observed while working here is the difficulty students face in completing the SAR-7 and Recertification forms.

The SAR-7 and Recertification forms are essential components of the CalFresh program and serve as a means of verifying eligibility and maintaining the integrity of the program, according to the California Department of Social Services. Completing these forms accurately and on time is necessary for individuals to continue receiving CalFresh benefits and meet their basic food needs.

To tackle this problem, the UCI Basic Needs Center is sending notifications to students via email to remind them to fill out their SAR-7 and Recertification form. Additionally, the



UCI Basic Needs Center can provide a recorded video tutorial to help students complete the SAR-7 and Recertification forms for CalFresh. This video can walk students through the application process step-by-step and provide helpful tips and resources to ensure the forms are filled out correctly. Providing this video can be a valuable tool in overcoming the barrier of difficulty students face when completing these forms, and can help make sure that more students receive and maintain their benefits. In this way, the Center can continue to play an important role in supporting equitable access to basic needs for all students at UC Irvine.

### **ANNELYZ, CALFRESH COORDINATOR**

Annelyz is dedicated to addressing food insecurity among college students. From volunteering to becoming a CalFresh Coordinator, they have gained a deep understanding of the weighty challenges students face, like stigma, fear and complex eligibility requirements intertwined with the CalFresh application process.

Annelyz has listened to many first-generation students share the real fear they have that applying for assistance could negatively impact their immigration status for mixed-status households, feel ashamed or embarrassed when using the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card, or feel hesitant to apply due to a belief that they are not eligible.

To address these barriers, Annelyz suggested that targeted outreach is necessary, particularly for first-generation college students, since these students are often the most vulnerable to food insecurity as they may not have the same resources and support systems as those from families with a history of higher education.

This outreach can be accomplished by hosting a “CalFresh 101 Open House” event to be held at the Basic Needs Center and can involve a presentation, where knowledgeable staff and students can provide detailed information on the CalFresh program, its eligibility requirements, the application process, and its benefits. The presentation can be followed by a Q&A session, where students can ask any questions they may have and resolve any doubts they may have about the program. Additionally, the open house can be advertised through flyers, posters, and social media to ensure that as many students as possible are made aware of the event and can attend. Through this, the Basic Needs Center can help all students, like students from low-income backgrounds, members of the BIPOC community, and members of the LBTQ+ community, who are the most susceptible to food insecurity—navigate the CalFresh program with ease, and provide them with the support they need to access their benefits.

## IDENTIFICATION OF CHALLENGES AND GAPS OF ADDRESSING HUNGER AT UCI

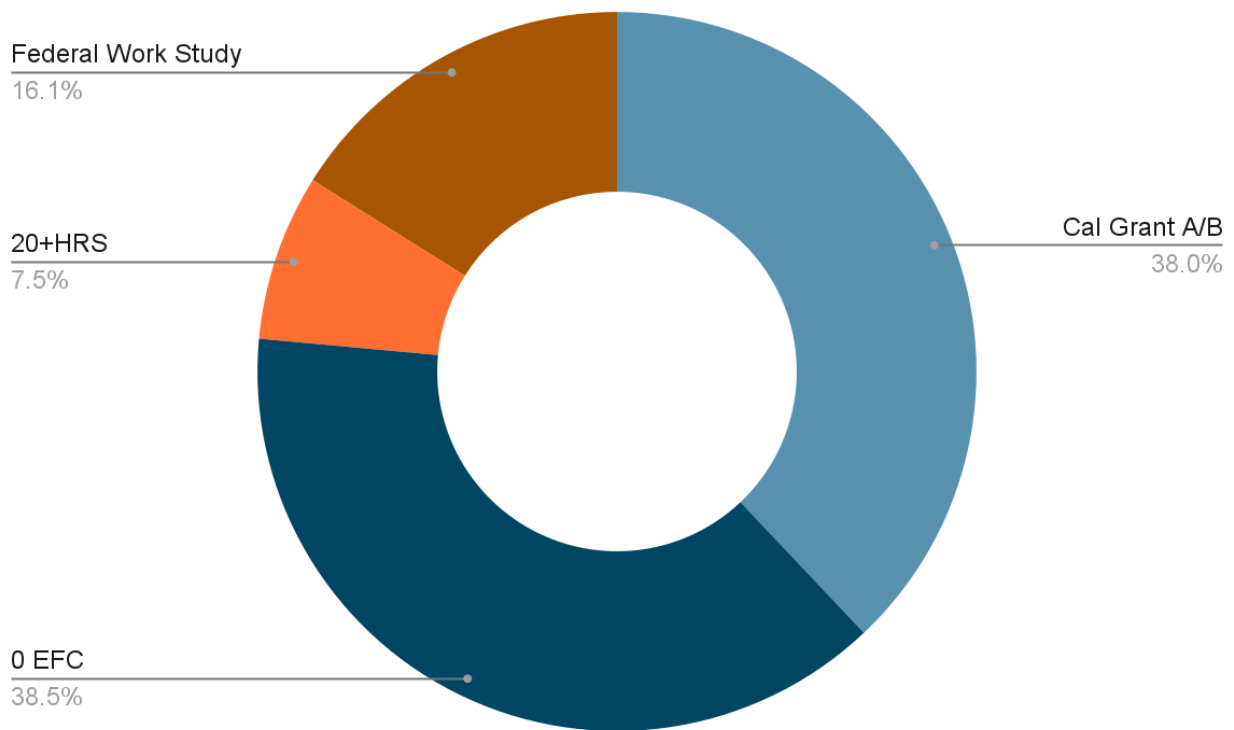
### CALFRESH ELIGIBILITY: APPLICATIONS AND EFFORTS TO INCREASE ELIGIBILITY

At UC Irvine, CalFresh can be a lifesaver for students who are struggling to avoid going hungry. And there are many exemptions that students can apply for to qualify for CalFresh, including:

- Cal Grant A/B (TANF-Funded), which is for students from households that have received or are currently receiving benefits funded by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.
- 0 EFC (Expected Family Contribution), which is for students from families with a total income of \$27,000 or less.
- Federal Work Study (FWS), which is aimed at providing part-time jobs for eligible undergraduate and graduate students with financial need to help cover their educational costs.
- Working 20+ hours per week, which is for students who are working.

For the Fall Quarter of 2022 at UC Irvine, a total of 264 applications were completed and submitted via [getcalfresh.org](https://getcalfresh.org). Out of these applications, 137 students reported receiving Cal Grant A/B (TANF-Funded) exemption, 139 had 0 EFC, 58 students had Federal Work Study, and 27 students were working 20+ hours per week.





At the UCI Basic Needs Center, there are efforts to increase access to CalFresh for students by expanding the types of exemptions that students can use to apply. This includes making more programs eligible through the Local Program that Increases Employability (LPIE). In order for programs to become part of the LPIE exemption at UC Irvine, they must be reviewed and approved by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). To be approved for this student eligibility, programs must help students to increase their employability and financial stability while they are in school, by providing them with job training, employment opportunities, and support services.

At UCI, over ninety academic programs such as the Environmental Engineering B.S. and professional programs like CalTeach have been approved for the LPIE exemption by the CDSS. The Basic Needs Center continues to work towards adding more programs throughout the academic year as these efforts will help more students be able to qualify for CalFresh and break down barriers and increase access to this important resource for those in need.

## **CALFRESH ELIGIBILITY: A BARRIER TO STUDENT ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD**

The eligibility requirements for CalFresh is determined by a variety of factors, including income, household size, and assets. And for college students, there is an additional student eligibility requirement that makes it unnecessarily difficult for students to know if they qualify for CalFresh.<sup>5</sup>

The sad truth is that sometimes, the biggest barrier to accessing basic needs benefits is the very system that is supposed to provide them. Whether it's a lack of staffing or an inability to keep up with demand, the reality is that many individuals, like students, and families are left struggling to make ends meet. This can make it challenging to make sure that everyone has access to the support they need to thrive.

I have heard students express confusion and frustration over the difficulty meeting the exemptions from the student eligibility requirements and the documentation required to prove their student eligibility. For example, students find it difficult to meet the OEFC student eligibility because it assumes that all students have access to other financial resources, which is often not the case for many low-income and first-generation students. This requirement can leave these students struggling to make ends meet and access the basic resources they need to succeed in their academic and personal lives.

### **TAKING ACTION: SIMPLIFYING CALFRESH ELIGIBILITY**

The UCI Basic Needs Center is collaborating with student groups and organizations to create a manual process for identifying and informing students of their CalFresh student exemption eligibility, which includes:

1. Outreach and follow-up efforts, such as conducting targeted outreach to identify eligible students, visiting classes and other campus events, and following up with students who have shown interest in the program.
2. Holding workshops and information sessions where students can learn more about the program and receive assistance with the applications process, such as helping students to gather necessary documentation, as well providing support and guidance about the application process.

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<sup>5</sup> “Addressing the barriers college students face when accessing CalFresh food benefit,” <https://www.capolicylab.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Addressing-barriers-college-students-face-when-accessing-CalFresh.pdf>

3. Creating and maintaining a database of student groups, which could be used to increase the visibility of CalFresh and the number of applications applying for CalFresh. Additionally, this would make it easier to follow up with organizations and make sure that they are receiving the support they need.

The UCI Basic Needs Center has demonstrated a commitment to identifying and informing students of their CalFresh student exemptions. For the Fall Quarter of 2022, they have outreached to 148 professors and 64 student organizations, translating into greater visibility for the program. These efforts have resulted in a significant increase in the number of students applying for CalFresh benefits. The Center's proactive approach and partnership with student groups and professors has allowed them to provide more support to students in need.

### **TAKING ACTION: AN APPLICATION OF RACIAL EQUITY PART 1**

To further promote awareness and accessibility, the Center plans to collaborate with more student groups and professors to carry out outreach efforts, as well as hold workshops and information sessions. Additionally, the Center continues to explore ways to improve the process and make it more efficient, to make sure that eligible students are able to access the benefits they need.

For example;

1. **Snack Rack** – This program offers students a chance to grab a snack and raise awareness about the Center. Students scan a QR code to provide important data on usage at participating centers like the Center for Black Cultures, Resources, and Research, the Womxn's Center for Success, and the UCI DREAM Center. During the Fall Quarter of 2022, over 400 students used the free service, helping the Center understand the program's impact and make sure that it continues to meet the needs of all UCI students.
2. **CalFresh Campaign** – This is a comprehensive effort aimed at raising awareness and improving accessibility of the CalFresh program. It involves collaborating with various UCI departments, libraries, honor societies, student associations and student groups to promote the UCI Basic Needs Center and its services. The goal is to reach a wider audience of UCI students and inform them about their eligibility for the CalFresh program.

Although the CalFresh Application Assistance program continues to increase awareness and accessibility by engaging in community outreach and engagement activities to reach underrepresented student populations, there is currently a limitation in gathering critical demographic information on program participants. Applying a racial equity lens to the CalFresh Application Assistance program will help to reduce food insecurity and systemic barriers and understand the impact of the programs reach at UC Irvine.

Here are a few examples of how the program may gather demographic data:

1. Surveys: Incorporating volunteer questions about participant demographics into program feedback surveys, such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and first-generation status.
2. Program Enrollment Forms: Adding volunteer demographic questions to program enrollment forms to gather information about participants.

Addressing these disparities helps to make sure that the CalFresh Application Assistance program is equitable and provides equal opportunities for all students to access the resources they need to meet their basic needs. Once the data is collected and analyzed, it can be used to inform program improvements and work toward improving food security.

## **IN-PERSON CALFRESH OUTREACH: MEASURING THE IMPACT**

### **WEEK 0 OUTREACH**

UCI hosts an annual Welcome Week, also known as Week 0, filled with a variety of social events and activities to learn about on-campus organizations and student-centered programs.

These events during Week 0 prove to be a critical time for reaching out to students and providing them with the help they need with food security by advancing student services, resources, and support available for them. The UCI Basic Needs Center tabled several of these events intentionally incorporating CalFresh education and outreach as part of its services to increase food security at UC Irvine.

This Fall, the Center pre-screened 242 and 99 of those pre-screened eligible for CalFresh during Week 0. We also had 56 students that used the GetCalFresh UCI referral link to submit and complete the CalFresh application throughout this week.

The Anteater Involvement Fair (AIF) was able to reach the highest student turnout of any CalFresh outreach effort for the Fall Quarter of 2022. When asked what they thought was the most helpful for increasing and improving student engagement about CalFresh, a few CalFresh Advocates shared the importance of meeting students where they are to assist with navigating the complex parts of the application in order to receive their benefits. The UCI Basic Needs Center may want to consider the importance of setting up an extra table to take walk-in applications on the day of AIF, to allow students to receive immediate assistance with their application and increase the likelihood of students successfully completing and submitting the application.

**RING ROAD OUTREACH**

Ring Road circles Aldrich Park that is at the center of campus, and serves as the main thoroughfare for almost every student to easily get around UC Irvine. Many student organizations and college centers, including the UCI Basic Needs Center, table at Ring Road on a weekly basis to outreach.

From Week 1 to Week 8, the Basic Needs Center student volunteers and CalFresh tabled at Ring Road at the same location from 10:00 AM to 3:00 PM, except for the weeks that were canceled marked as “N/A” on the corresponding graph. A total of 55 students checked-in for CalFresh at Ring Road. Additionally, many students who did stop by to ask questions on their way to class didn’t check-in; therefore, the total number of students checked-in reflects only a fraction of the number of students outreached.

WEEK NUMBER	DATE	CHECK-IN	PRE-SCREENED
1	9/28/22	2	0
2	10/5/22	19	0
3	10/12/22	N/A	N/A
4	10/19/22	11	31
5	10/26/22	9	0

6	11/2/22	N/A	N/A
7	11/9/22	12	0
8	11/16/22	2	0

One CalFresh Advocate stated that while tabling at Ring Road may not be the most effective method for student engagement, it has been beneficial for students who are already familiar with CalFresh and are seeking additional information or assistance with the application process. They also mentioned that CalFresh promotional materials, such as stickers, have been well-received by students, who often visit the UCI Basic Needs Center table to obtain them.

To increase student engagement and interest in CalFresh, the UCI Basic Needs Center could consider creating new, unique stickers to release on a quarterly basis. This could attract students’ attention and create word-of-mouth promotion, potentially drawing in students who have not yet visited our tabling event.

**HOUSING COMMUNITY OUTREACH**

Outreaching to on-campus housing at UCI is a valuable opportunity to interact with students who may not be aware of the Basic Needs center services, particularly Freshmen and Sophomores who make up the majority of on-campus residents. And though many of these students are ineligible for CalFresh as they are required to sign up for a meal plan, it still makes an impact in increasing the visibility of the Basic Needs Center and the other services provided to help students with food insecurity, like the FRESH food pantry.

Additionally, many students express interest in applying for CalFresh as soon as possible and express their gratitude for the Basic Needs Center for helping them find out how and where to get the assistance and resources they need. Therefore, the Basic Needs Center should continue to outreach at student housing to raise awareness about the center and its services, and also to support students transitioning from living on-campus to off-campus.

**ENROLLMENT PARTY OUTREACH**

The UCI Basic Needs Center, in partnership with Orange County Social Services (OCSSA), organized two-day Enrollment Party events where students can receive assistance in submitting their CalFresh application on the first day. The following day, students have the opportunity to go through an expedited interview process with a caseworker from the OCSSA and potentially be approved for CalFresh.

The goal of these events is to make the process of applying for CalFresh as easy and accessible as possible for students, and to ensure that they have the support they need to successfully apply. These events take place at UC Irvine and are open to all students interested in applying to CalFresh. One of the key benefits of attending an Enrollment Party is that it significantly reduces the amount of time it takes to receive the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card from 30 days to just 3 days. These events happen at least once or twice per quarter and help at least 40-45 students per event.

These Enrollment Party events play a critical role in boosting the visibility of CalFresh and encouraging more students to apply. On the second day, the campus area occupied by caseworkers creates a noticeable presence that nearly every student on campus that day is likely to encounter. This serves as a great opportunity for students to learn about the UCI Basic Needs Center and its various services, including the CalFresh Application Assistance Program. Also, students who have already submitted an application on their own can speak with a county representative to clarify any questions they may have about their application.

Overall, the Enrollment Party events held during the Fall Quarter of 2022 have proved to be highly successful in assisting students with their CalFresh applications. Through these events, 80 students were able to submit their applications, 87 were interviewed by OCSSA, and 78 were approved for CalFresh benefits.

DATE	STUDENT SUBMITTED APP	STUDENT INTERVIEWED BY OCSSA	STUDENT APPROVED FOR CALFRESH
10/10 & 10/12	40	45	44
11/1 & 11/3	40	42	34
Outreach Total	80	87	78



## TAKING ACTION: AN APPLICATION OF RACIAL EQUITY PART 2

The UCI Basic Needs Center works with a multitude of student centers, organizations, and affinity groups to reach a wider audience of students from diverse racial backgrounds. In addition to these efforts, there are many other types of outreach strategies that the Center may utilize to promote racial equity and inclusivity. Here are a few examples:

1. **Hosting workshops and events:** The Basic Needs Center can host workshops and events in collaboration with other centers, organizations, and affinity groups that focus on issues related to racial equity, such as food insecurity among BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities. These events can help raise awareness about these issues and provide students with tools and resources to take action.
2. **Conducting outreach through social media:** The Basic Needs Center can use social media platforms to reach a wider audience of students and promote their services and resources. They can also use social media to share stories and testimonials from BIPOC students who have used their services, to demonstrate the impact of their work and build trust with their audience.

Another important consideration for promoting racial equity in outreach efforts is to have a formal process for honoring the lived experiences of people of color, and to initiate opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to participate in outreach design and implementation. This can help to make sure that the voices of all students are heard and that outreach efforts are designed in a way that meets their needs and perspectives.

Achieving racial equity involves actively seeking and including the voices of students utilizing the CalFresh Application Assistance program in the decision-making process. It is important to keep in mind that real-life experiences shared by BIPOC individuals must be compensated for their time, expertise, and emotional labor.

## CONCLUSION

The UCI Basic Needs Center is working tirelessly to help all students access CalFresh benefits. This includes a range of outreach and advocacy, from providing information about CalFresh eligibility and application processes during orientation and other campus events, to providing one-on-one assistance to students interested in applying for CalFresh.

The Center helps hundreds of students navigate complex eligibility requirements and connects them with basic needs resources if they're ineligible. However, the Center may want to consider expanding their number of students applying for CalFresh and its visibility by:

1. **Surveys:** The Center could create and distribute surveys to students to gather feedback on their services, identify areas of improvement, and understand the impact of their work on students' well-being.
2. **Student Advocacy Workshops:** These student-led workshops can provide information on the importance of CalFresh and include a question and answer portion about the application process and eligibility requirements. In addition to including workshops on food insecurity and basic needs resources available to students on campus or in the community.
3. **Student Database:** It is important to know the impact of the CalFresh Application Assistance program on students of various races and ethnicities in order to capture all the information needed to create an effective program.

It is important to note that students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, and students identifying as African American are more likely to face food insecurity compared to the overall student population. Therefore, it is imperative that all components of the CalFresh Application Assistance program, including outreach, incorporate the specific needs and challenges of these students in order to know how and for whom the program works, and what can be done for those students who are excluded.