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# **Food Over Fear: Overcoming Barriers to Connect Latinx Immigrant Families to Federal Nutrition and Food Programs**

December 2020



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## Acknowledgments

The Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) gratefully acknowledges Beacon IA's support for work to protect the nutrition and health of immigrant families.

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### Arkansas

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- Arkansas United

### California

- Western Center on Law and Poverty (WCLP)
- Dolores Huerta Foundation

### Colorado

- Hunger Free Colorado
- Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition (CIRC)

### Illinois

- Illinois Hunger Coalition (IHC); and
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## About FRAC

For 50 years, the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) has been the leading national organization working for more effective public and private policies to eradicate domestic hunger and undernutrition. For more information about FRAC, or to sign up for FRAC's *Weekly News Digest* and monthly newsletters, go to: [frac.org](https://www.frac.org).

## About the National Immigration Law Center

Established in 1979, the [National Immigration Law Center \(NILC\)](https://www.nilc.org) is one of the leading organizations in the U.S. exclusively dedicated to defending and advancing the rights of immigrants with low income. For more information about NILC and to sign up for email updates, go to: [www.nilc.org](https://www.nilc.org).



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY** ..... 4

**INTRODUCTION** ..... 6

**FINDINGS** ..... 8

- Immigrant families are forgoing federal nutrition and food programs that are essential to improving their food security, nutrition, health, and well-being..... 8
- A range of obstacles impede immigrant families’ access to the federal nutrition and food programs ..... 12

**WHAT FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS SAID** ..... 17

**RECOMMENDATIONS** ..... 18

- Provide accurate information on immigration-related issues that intersect with the ability to access federal nutrition and food programs ..... 18
- Enlist trusted messengers in crafting and disseminating information, including assisting with applications, to connect immigrant families to available federal nutrition and food programs..... 19
- Implement, publicize, and monitor existing policies that help immigrants feel safer when seeking federal nutrition and food program assistance..... 20
- Promote policies and procedures to improve access for immigrant families to federal nutrition and food programs..... 21
- Advocate for new policies and programs to help more immigrants address food insecurity ..... 22

**CONCLUSION** ..... 23

**APPENDIX**..... 24



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**his report sheds light on why many immigrant families are forgoing vital assistance from federal nutrition and food programs and lifts up recommendations aimed at ensuring that all families and individuals, regardless of immigration status, are nourished and healthy.

While the findings of this report are informed by a series of focus groups conducted from November 2019–January 2020 (prior to the onset of COVID-19), the need to connect immigrant families to nutrition programs is arguably of even greater importance given how COVID-19 is fueling unprecedented food insecurity and ravaging communities of color and immigrant communities at [disproportionately high rates due to unique barriers faced by families that include noncitizens](#).

The focus groups that were conducted by the Food Research & Action Center and the National Immigration Law Center, in partnership with state anti-hunger and immigrant rights groups, took place with 64 Spanish-speaking immigrant parents in mixed-status families and 41 nutrition service providers in four locations: Arkansas (Northwest), California (Central Valley), Colorado (Denver), and Illinois (Chicago). Participants were queried about opportunities and obstacles in accessing federal nutrition and food programs, with a focus on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), school meals, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and emergency food.

Data and findings presented in this report from the focus groups are not intended to be representative of the experience of all immigrants in the U.S. Instead, it presents information on the experiences, opinions, and recommendations reported by the focus group participants.

The focus groups were conducted, in part, to gauge the impact of the impending February 2020 implementation of the Trump administration’s change in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) public charge rule. The new rule makes it harder for certain immigrants to obtain Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR) status (i.e., a green card). In essence, the revised public charge rule imposes a wealth

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*“The culture of fear is a huge barrier.”*

— NUTRITION SERVICE PROVIDER, CENTRAL VALLEY CALIFORNIA

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test. For the first time ever, the new rule requires that DHS consider the use of non-cash benefits, such as SNAP by an individual, as a factor in a public charge determination.

The anticipation of the rule accelerated existing fear and confusion among focus group immigrant families regarding participation in federal nutrition and food programs. It also contributed to a “chilling effect” on participation in SNAP and other vital nutrition programs by eligible immigrants and their family members. This “chilling effect” extended far beyond the very limited number of noncitizens who are eligible for SNAP and subject to a DHS public charge determination. It also extended to participation in programs that are not included in public charge determinations, such as WIC and school meals.

One of the most significant findings revealed by the focus groups’ participants was that immigrant families are forgoing federal nutrition and food programs that are essential to improving their food security, nutrition, health, and well-being; SNAP is the most often avoided. Other findings are as follows:

- Three-quarters of the immigrant parents who participated in the focus groups screened positive for food insecurity.
- More than one-quarter of immigrant parents who were surveyed reported that they stopped using SNAP or other food programs in the last two years due to immigration-related concerns, and this pattern was echoed by nutrition service providers.
- Even when families are eligible for programs and face no public charge concerns, many forgo assistance from the federal nutrition and food programs.
- While immigrant families expressed more fear about accessing SNAP than other federal nutrition and food programs, there are still concerns about participating in such programs, e.g., school meals, WIC, or emergency food.

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- Immigrant parents were more willing to access SNAP and WIC for their children than apply for the adults in the family, and to sacrifice their own nutrition for their children's health.
  - Immigrant families are more likely to apply for Medicaid than SNAP.

Another major finding is that a range of obstacles impede immigrant families' access to federal nutrition and food programs. Other obstacles cited are as follows:

- Immigrant families are afraid to participate in federal nutrition and food programs due to multiple immigration-related concerns.
- Immigrant families are not always familiar with the term "public charge," despite expressing fears associated with the rule.
- Information that immigrant families receive about the public charge rule through some traditional and digital media outlets and immigration attorneys is often inaccurate. Immigrants also expressed low levels of trust of the accuracy of media reporting on public charge.
- Immigrant families often face language barriers and discrimination when accessing federal nutrition and food programs.
- Immigrant families worry that personal information they submit when applying for federal nutrition and food programs will be shared with immigration enforcement agencies.
- Immigrant families and nutrition service providers lack information about available federal nutrition and food programs, citing confusion about immigrant households' SNAP eligibility.
- Transportation barriers to access federal nutrition and food programs disproportionately affect immigrant families due to fears of being out in public and vulnerable to attacks by immigration enforcement agencies.

Based on analysis of data compiled from the immigrant parent and nutrition service provider focus groups, this report concludes with recommendations and opportunities to overcome challenges and to connect immigrant families

to federal nutrition and food programs. These insights are intended to provide organizations that support immigrant families with ideas and guidance on how to overcome barriers so that immigrant families can feel comfortable accessing vital nutrition programs. Their recommendations are as follows:

- provide accurate information on immigration-related issues that intersect with the ability to access federal nutrition and food programs;
- enlist trusted messengers to craft and disseminate information, as well as to assist with applications, in order to connect immigrant families to available federal nutrition and food programs;
- implement, publicize, and monitor existing policies that help immigrants feel safer when seeking federal nutrition and food program assistance;
- promote policies and procedures to improve access for immigrant families to SNAP and other federal nutrition and food programs; and
- advocate for new policies and programs to help more immigrants address food insecurity.

This report reinforces how a range of attacks on immigrant families — including the public charge rule — have created an environment of heightened fear and confusion that is impeding access to the very programs that can help immigrants thrive. In addition to hostile governmental actions, immigrants also face barriers, some are unique to immigrants while others are also faced by non-immigrants, that can make it more challenging to access programs. These barriers include a lack of information on the range of available nutrition programs, confusing rules regarding noncitizen eligibility, transportation issues, distrust of government agencies, and language access. Supporting immigrants' access to federal nutrition and food programs is essential to addressing food insecurity and boosting health, achievement, economic security, and opportunity for everyone, as we are all healthier and stronger when everyone in our communities has access to the food and nutrition they need. The recommendations derived from the focus groups data illustrate that we all have a role to play in ensuring that every low-income person and family can access these vital programs.

## INTRODUCTION

**B**efore the COVID-19 pandemic began, immigrant families — even families with U.S. citizen members — faced disproportionate obstacles to accessing federal nutrition and food programs that protect against food insecurity. Now with COVID-19 fueling unprecedented food insecurity and ravaging immigrant communities at disproportionate rates, the work to connect immigrant families to nutrition programs that keep them nourished and healthy is of utmost importance.

This report examines the unique barriers that immigrant families face in accessing federal nutrition and food programs and identifies possible solutions to ensure that all families and individuals, regardless of immigration status, are nourished and healthy during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

The Food Research & Action Center and the National Immigration Law Center, in partnership with state anti-

hunger and immigrant rights organizations, conducted a series of focus groups and surveys with immigrant parents and nutrition program service providers in Arkansas (Northwest), California (Central Valley), Colorado (Denver), and Illinois (Chicago) from November 2019–January 2020, to undertake the following:

- explore how immigrant-related concerns are affecting participation in federal nutrition and food programs, with a focus on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), school meals, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and emergency food;
- shed light on the unique obstacles that immigrant families face in order to access federal nutrition and food programs; and
- lift up the focus groups’ recommendations on opportunities to connect immigrant families to these critical programs.

### Research Notes

For purposes of this report, the term “immigrant” family refers to a household that includes at least one member born outside of the U.S. This report’s findings are based on focus groups with immigrants who were born in countries where Spanish is a central language, primarily Mexico; and nutrition service providers who work mostly with immigrant families that include Spanish-speaking members. The findings, while potentially applicable to a broader cross-section of immigrant families, are based on the experiences, opinions, and ideas of these focus group participants.

### Focus Groups

The Food Research & Action Center and the National Immigration Law Center facilitated a total of eight focus groups. Each state held two focus groups.

- **A focus group of immigrant parents in each of the four states:** In total, 64 non-U.S. citizen parents

who were born in a Spanish-speaking country and likely met the income criteria to be eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participated in the groups across the four states. Most had children who were U.S. citizens. Focus group sessions were facilitated in Spanish.

- **A focus group of nutrition service providers in each of the four states:** In total, 41 participants whose job responsibilities included familiarity with connecting immigrant families to SNAP and other federal nutrition or food programs participated in the groups across the four states.

Prior to the start of each of the 60–90-minute focus group discussions, most of the focus groups’ participants completed a written survey; however, not every participant completed each question. A few focus group participants arrived too late and did not complete the survey.

See Appendix for more details.

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*“For the government to say that we are a burden is a vile and vulgar lie. And I can say that and shout to the four winds. No one can tell me that I have been a burden on the United States. On the contrary, I have done work where no one has been able to do it. I have not been a burden.”*

— IMMIGRANT PARENT, NORTHWEST ARKANSAS

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Data and analysis presented in this report are not intended to be representative, but instead present information on the experiences, opinions, and recommendations reported by focus group participants.

The federal nutrition and food programs reach tens of millions of people, including millions of immigrants, each year. The programs play a critical role in reducing food insecurity and in improving the health and economic security of individuals, households, communities, and the entire nation.

Immigrants, especially children, are often eligible for and can benefit from many federal nutrition and food programs. Child nutrition programs (e.g., school meals, summer and afterschool meals, and WIC) and food bank-distributed

commodities are generally available to all categories of low-income people. SNAP has more restrictive and complicated requirements for noncitizens. Nonetheless, many members of immigrant households are eligible for SNAP, including U.S. citizen children, even if their parents are not themselves eligible; refugees; asylees; children who are Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs); and LPR adults who have been in the U.S. for at least five years.

While conducted prior to COVID-19, this research provides insights as to why too many immigrants were already forgoing crucial federal nutrition and food programs. Analysis of the data from research participants also provides recommendations for how to ensure that eligible immigrants can access nutrition programs that are critical to their health and well-being.

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*“I think that nutrition for children is very important because their brain is developing, and if they are not getting the necessary nutrients, they are not going to learn in school, they are not going to feel good. That’s my opinion.”*

— IMMIGRANT PARENT, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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# FINDINGS

## 1. Immigrant families are forgoing federal nutrition and food programs that are essential to improving their food security, nutrition, health, and well-being.

Three-quarters of the immigrant parents who participated in the focus groups screened positive for food insecurity.

A person screens positive for food insecurity if the response is “often true” or “sometimes true” to either or both of these statements: “Within the past 12 months, we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more;” and “Within the past 12 months, the food we bought just didn’t last and we didn’t have money to get more.” This finding is based on the validated [Hunger Vital Sign™ screening tool](#).

TABLE A\*

Immigrant Parent Survey	
Within the past 12 months, we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more	Percentage of total responses
Often true	21%
Sometimes true	59%
Never true	21%
Total number of respondents: 58	

79%

\*Due to rounding, totals in the table may not add up to 100 percent.

TABLE B

Immigrant Parent Survey	
Within the past 12 months, the food we bought just didn’t last and we didn’t have money to get more	Percentage of total responses
Often true	27%
Sometimes true	48%
Never true	25%
Total number of respondents: 60	

75%

More than one-quarter of immigrant parents who were surveyed reported that they stopped using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or other food programs in the last two years; this was due to immigration-related concerns, and was echoed by nutrition service providers.

Of the immigrant parents who were surveyed, 27 percent reported that they stopped using SNAP or other food programs in the last two years.



**TABLE C**

Immigrant Parent Survey	
Have you or your family stopped using SNAP or other food programs in the last two years because of immigration concerns?	Percentage of total responses
Yes	27%
No	58%
Unsure	15%
Total number of respondents: 55	

An immigrant parent in Colorado provided the following insight as to how immigration concerns caused their family to stop participating in SNAP: “As you said about stamps, I don’t receive it, don’t take it, because I’m afraid of my status, and just like me, there are many people who don’t use it. That’s why I stopped [taking] it, because I’m scared.”

Likewise, nutrition service providers shared examples of families disenrolling or not applying for federal nutrition and food programs because of immigration-related concerns. For instance, a provider in California stated, “Our partners are telling us scary stories of people who are forgoing benefits because they’re afraid. I think the frequency of these stories has increased and that’s what leads me to believe that there might be more [food insecurity].”

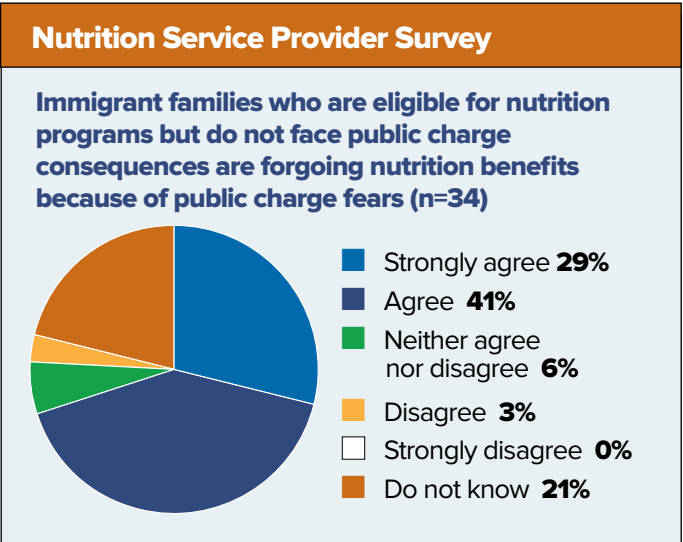
**Even when families are eligible for programs and face no public charge concerns, many forgo assistance from federal nutrition and food programs.**

Immigrant parents and nutrition service providers commented that the public charge rule was complex. Many of them also said that information about whether accessing a particular federal nutrition and food program benefit would carry public charge considerations was not clear. As a result, there were multiple reported instances of immigrant families not accessing SNAP, even when the public charge rule did not apply, as well as not accessing other federal nutrition and food programs, like school meals, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for

Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and emergency food, which carry no public charge considerations.

Of the nutrition service providers who were surveyed, 70 percent either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement: “Immigrant families who are eligible for federal nutrition programs but do not face public charge consequences are forgoing nutrition benefits because of public charge fears.”

**CHART 1**



Nutrition service providers repeatedly shared how even when immigrant families were eligible for programs, like SNAP, and faced no public charge concerns, many families would opt to forgo assistance. In Colorado, a provider stated, “... we’re seeing that chilling effect of fear trickle into people who might not be impacted by public charge whatsoever [e.g., people with asylum or Temporary Protected Status (TPS)].”

**While immigrant families expressed more fear about accessing SNAP than other federal nutrition and food programs, there are still concerns about participating in such programs, e.g., school meals, WIC, or emergency food.**

Immigrant families indicated a greater willingness to apply for WIC for themselves or their partners than for SNAP. Even so, for both programs, immigrant parents surveyed

indicated that they would not apply even when eligible: nearly 27 percent would not apply for SNAP, and a little more than 9 percent would not apply for WIC.

TABLE D

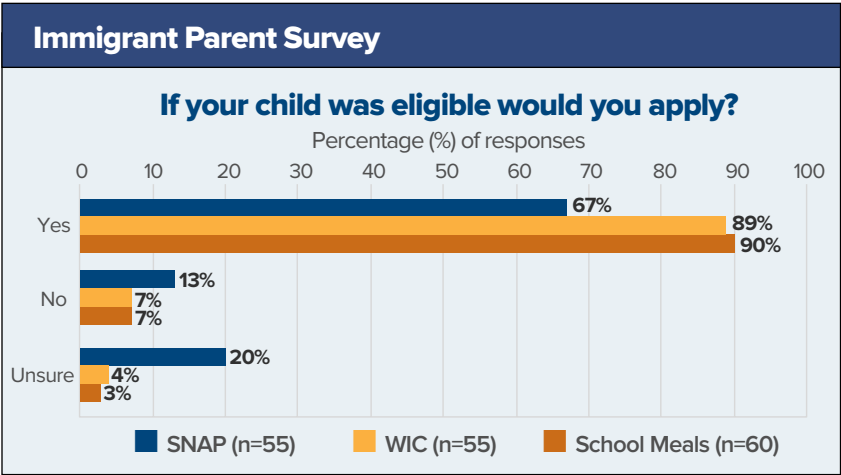
Immigrant Parent Survey	
If you were eligible for SNAP, would you apply?	Percentage of total responses
Yes	54%
No	27%
Unsure	19%
Total number of respondents: 52	

TABLE E

Immigrant Parent Survey	
If you or your partner were pregnant and eligible for WIC, would you apply?	Percentage of total responses
Yes	84%
No	9%
Unsure	7%
Total number of respondents: 55	

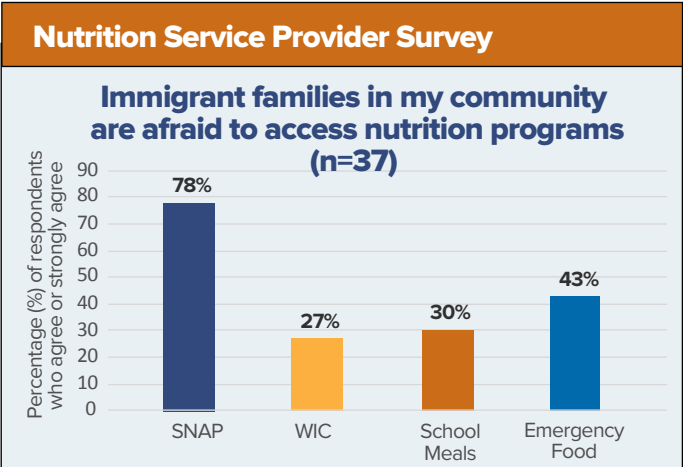
Even when it came to applying for children who were eligible for federal nutrition and food programs, immigrant parents reported that they would sometimes forgo assistance, with SNAP topping the list of nutrition programs they were least likely to apply for.

CHART 2



According to nutrition service providers, SNAP was the federal nutrition program that immigrant families were most afraid to access. Other nutrition programs, such as emergency food, school meals, and WIC, were also perceived as programs that immigrant families were afraid to access, though to a lesser extent. A WIC provider in Colorado shared how this fear affected participation in WIC: “We have seen a case-drop with our clients. I would say also they were very specific when they called in to have their case closed ... [They said] ‘I don’t want to be [a] public charge.’”

CHART 3



Focus group discussions among immigrant parents and nutrition service providers offered insights into why participants felt there was a greater risk applying for SNAP than other federal nutrition and food programs. Immigrants were likely to view emergency food as a church or community program, not as a federal program, so they felt safer accessing it in certain situations. However, immigrant parents did share examples of discomfort when completing the application or answering questions in order to access emergency food.

Many immigrants noted that WIC was viewed as a health program instead of a government program because it is administered by health clinics. Participants also lifted up how it was seen as a program that helps children. Participants generally were more comfortable with programs geared toward meeting children’s needs. An immigrant parent in

California described WIC as “very different because people say that everyone feels comfortable going to apply for WIC because it’s food for the kids, for their juice, milk. And people see it as a good thing.”

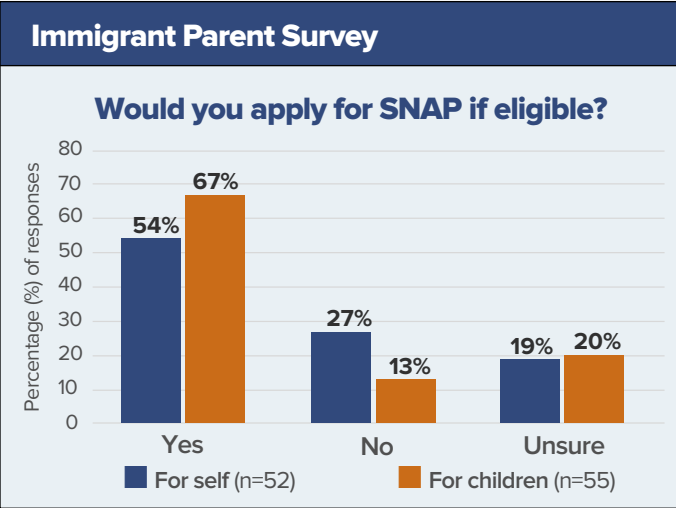
Likewise, school meals were typically viewed as a school program. In contrast, SNAP was often viewed as a government program that carried negative immigration consequences.

A key factor underlying the willingness of immigrant families to apply for other federal nutrition and food programs over SNAP is how applying for SNAP is perceived to be much more onerous than applying for WIC, school meals, or emergency food. An immigrant parent in California said that “WIC doesn’t ask you to report and report. I think once a year they ask you to present proof of income.”

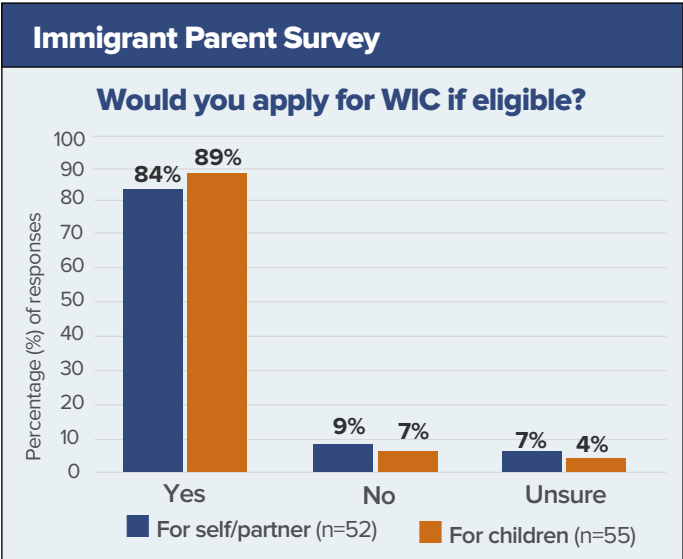
**Immigrant parents were more willing to access SNAP and WIC for their children than apply for the adults in the family, and to sacrifice their own nutrition for their children’s health.**

A theme echoed by immigrant families and nutrition service providers was the willingness of immigrant parents to sacrifice their own nutrition to protect their children from hunger and to overcome fears about program access if the programs were for their children. A Northwest Arkansas immigrant parent put it this way: “[A]s we said in WIC, the [food] stamps are for children. For adults I would not ask ...”

**CHART 4**



**CHART 5**



Immigrant parents shared actions they took to ensure that their children were able to get sufficient food, with many of the examples highlighting how parents would sacrifice their own nutrition for their children. Several mothers reported that they would make sure their children were fed before they would eat or that they would eat less healthy or consume less so that their children could eat more nutritious foods.

**Immigrant families are more likely to apply for Medicaid than SNAP.**

Nutrition service providers and immigrant families voiced fears related to accessing Medicaid, citing public charge and other immigration concerns as drivers; however, families and nutrition service providers indicated that eligible immigrants were more willing and likely to access Medicaid over SNAP. A common reason given was that health insurance was irreplaceable because it was the gateway to medical care. While a parent could apply coping strategies to put food on the table, such as eating less so a child could eat, restricting the variety of foods served, and stretching food dollars, there was no substitute for medical care, which was identified as a necessity.

A Colorado provider discussed frequently encountering families applying for Medicaid but not SNAP: “[T]hey want to sign up for Medicaid and not food stamps. That

is so common for me to hear. [They’ll say things like] ‘Oh no ... [not] food stamps. No, because I’ll get deported.’” When asked why they thought that the immigrant parents were more likely to apply for Medicaid over SNAP, the provider said, “I think the main thing that I’ve heard is cost. They feel like, for example, medical costs aren’t [like going to a fast-food restaurant where you can] buy something from the dollar menu.”

Several immigrant parents indicated that they had heard of people in the U.S. being required to have medical insurance, and that children needed to show proof of

health insurance to participate in extracurricular activities at school. Others opined that there was less stigma applying for Medicaid compared to SNAP, in part because you could apply at a health clinic.

A few immigrant participants shared that families might as well apply for SNAP if they are applying for Medicaid because much of the information required to apply for Medicaid overlaps with the information required to apply for SNAP. If the government already had your “personal” information for Medicaid, a participant reasoned that it made sense to apply for SNAP as well.

## 2. A range of obstacles impede immigrant families’ access to the federal nutrition and food programs.

### Immigrant families are afraid to participate in the federal nutrition and food programs due to multiple immigration-related concerns.

Immigrant parents and nutrition service providers described widespread concerns about immigration consequences of accessing food and nutrition programs. Of the 39 nutrition service providers surveyed, 97 percent either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement: “Immigrant families are concerned about immigration consequences of accessing federal nutrition programs.”

In terms of accessing federal nutrition and food programs, in many cases being deemed a public charge was not the only, or greatest, fear that was shared with providers. Concerns included myths about program participation that have long been circulating in some immigrant communities, including being deported (either of themselves or family members), losing custody of a child, being required to repay benefits (either by a parent, or when a child becomes an adult).

TABLE F

Nutrition Service Provider Survey	
Immigrants in my community have expressed concerns about the following consequences as a result of accessing federal nutrition programs (check all that apply)	Percentage of total responses
Inability to get a visa, green card, or change in immigration status	72%
Deportation of themselves or a family member	67%
Having personal information reported to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)	72%
ICE raids	54%
Losing custody of child	21%
Repayment of benefits by parent	39%
Repayment of benefits by child at adulthood	26%
Conscription of child into the military once he/she reaches adulthood	8%
Other	3%
Total number of respondents: 39	



Immigrant participants echoed similar concerns: a reluctance to use federal nutrition and food programs because of potential risks to immigration status, including a fear of deportation. In some cases, participants noted that they knew the information was false, such as repaying benefits or conscripting in the armed services, but their willingness to participate in programs often centered on whether the need for the program was enough to overcome the perceived risks.

**Immigrant families are not always familiar with the term public charge despite expressing fears about the rule.**

Many immigrant parents said they were not familiar with the term “public charge” when asked in a pre-focus group survey; however, during the focus groups, many of them expressed familiarity with the public charge rule once others began commenting on it. For example, when a reference to how the rule could impact getting a green card, more focus group participants identified the rule as something they were aware of, but had not recalled the specific name or more importantly, how the rule applied to public benefit access.

**TABLE G\***

Immigrant Parent Survey	
Are you familiar with the new “public charge” rule?	Percentage of total responses
Yes	30%
No	39%
Unsure	32%
Total number of respondents: 57	

*\*Due to rounding, totals in the table may not add up to 100 percent.*

An immigrant parent in Illinois stated, “I have heard a lot of rumors, and I have seen that people are afraid to apply for any benefits as they’ve heard that if you are a public charge, you will no longer be able to fix your papers.” Some participants were confused about the rule and expressed the need for accurate, reliable information if they were going to feel comfortable accessing federal nutrition and food programs.

**Information that immigrants receive about the public charge rule through some traditional and digital media outlets and immigration attorneys is often inaccurate.**

Immigrants and service providers alike frequently mentioned problematic media coverage of the rule. Some reported that inaccurate media coverage — especially by Spanish-language outlets — about the rule resulted in families lining up at public assistance offices to disenroll from programs or flooding nutrition program providers with calls soon after a media report. A Colorado provider recounted a recent instance: “There was a line of people lined up that day, and all of them were in for the same reason: They wanted to discontinue their benefits ... apparently there was a news story that had run on the Spanish media [channel] the night before that was talking about public charge, and there was some misinformation.”

In the survey, 62 percent of nutrition service providers strongly agree or agreed that information circulating about the public charge rule was inaccurate. While many factors contributed to this dynamic, service providers noted that underlying this confusion was the complexity of the rule itself, the need to assess a family’s unique circumstances, and the anti-immigrant climate in the nation.

**TABLE H\***

Nutrition Service Provider Survey	
The information about public charge rules that is circulating among immigrants in my community is inaccurate	Percentage of total responses
Strongly Agree	18%
Agree	44%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	21%
Disagree	6%
Strongly Disagree	0%
Do Not Know	12%
Total number of respondents: 34	

*\*Due to rounding, totals in the table may not add up to 100 percent.*

In the survey, 62 percent of nutrition service providers strongly agree or agreed that information circulating about the public charge rule was inaccurate.

Participants from the provider and immigrant family focus groups shared that misinformation about the rule sometimes resulted from messages being inaccurate, including information from immigration attorneys in many instances. A provider in California recounted, “They can get the wrong information, most likely from a family member that’s speaking out of fear or what they know is not clear and concise.” Participants from both types of focus groups also noted that information about the rule sometimes became distorted as it passed from person to person. A provider in Arkansas described it as “like the game telephone where one person tells you the facts, the other person shares the facts, but then they omit something or it gets slightly changed.”

### **Immigrant families often face language barriers and discrimination when accessing federal nutrition and food programs.**

Focus groups consisting of nutrition service providers and immigrants consistently stated that language challenges posed barriers to accessing federal nutrition and food programs, particularly for SNAP with its complicated application and periodic notices, including those received by mail. The language barriers were especially pronounced when an applicant was trying to understand if and how immigration issues affected program access.

Language-related obstacles came up when immigrants sought assistance from government SNAP agencies and community-based organizations. An Illinois provider described how lack of, or even the perception of the lack of, materials in a language that is easily understood by

immigrants could negatively impact families. “Since they don’t speak English, they’re afraid to even go to the local office. If they do have a [SNAP] center and they don’t know that we’re able to speak Spanish, they’re afraid of coming into the center because they still feel like they’re not going to [be able] to communicate.”

While materials were translated into Spanish, focus group participants commented that the translations were not always helpful or properly done. For instance, participants reported that the translated materials, especially SNAP notices, did not make sense, were complicated, were not always available in the proper dialect of a given language, and required too high of a literacy level. One bilingual nutrition service provider commented that she would have to refer to the version in English to be able to make sense of the Spanish translation of SNAP notices.

Lack of usable language resources and other materials fueled fear about accessing programs because, in part, immigrants felt that they were not able to fully understand the nuances of applying for programs. Immigrants commented on the importance of interfacing with staff at government and nonprofit offices who were bilingual and from the same immigrant community as themselves.

Some immigrants voiced concerns of being afraid to go to the SNAP office or food banks if they do not speak English. A few felt that workers looked down on immigrant families for needing assistance.

Some nutrition service providers and immigrant participants reported discriminatory treatment during encounters with county case workers and food banks. An immigrant parent in Illinois recounted a particularly discouraging scenario: “It’s like going to waste a whole day to hear a ‘no’ from people, [you] come back another day ... I’ve been [at the SNAP agency] at five in the morning to line up because if you don’t reach the number, they don’t give you the application; they treat you badly. They say, ‘Oh, well, go to work if you want to. Why do you come to ask for stamps? Go back to your country.’ That’s what they tell us. It’s a big problem for Hispanics to ask for that, and sometimes you say, ‘No, I’d better not come back.’ It’s quite a big problem.”

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Two themes were echoed by immigrant families and service providers: a lack of information on the range of federal nutrition and food programs that are available to immigrant families; and barriers facing mixed-status families related to SNAP participation.

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**Immigrants worry that personal information submitted when applying for federal nutrition and food programs will be shared with immigration enforcement agencies.**

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Immigrants and service providers reported apprehension on the part of immigrant families in terms of sharing personal information, especially when it came to applying for SNAP. A California nutrition service provider described numerous conversations with immigrant families: “[There’s] a lot of fear ... [They] ask me before they tell me anything. ‘[Y]ou’re not going to report me, right?’ I say ‘No,’ and that’s when they start asking ‘Where can I access food?’”

There also was a lack of clarity for immigrants about privacy rules governing the nutrition programs and, in some cases, concerns that the information needed to apply for nutrition programs would not be kept confidential.

Concerns were also raised, although to a lesser extent, when it came to applying for school meals.

In some instances, accessing emergency food resources posed a barrier for immigrant families because of privacy concerns. Families shared discomfort in having to provide personal information in order to get food from a food pantry. Others indicated that they did not have an identification document that was required by some sites to receive food.

In general, immigrants expressed fears about sharing their address. Some were scared that someone would come to their door or their children’s schools. There were fears that a parent would get identified by ICE by virtue of providing their child’s Social Security number. Some feared that sharing information about all members who live in the house or about an absent father could have immigration status consequences.

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**Immigrant families and nutrition service providers lack information on available federal nutrition and food programs, citing confusion about immigrant households’ SNAP eligibility.**

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Two themes were echoed by immigrant families and service providers: a lack of information on the range of federal nutrition and food programs that are available to immigrant families; and barriers facing mixed-status families related to SNAP participation.

Immigrant families and nutrition service providers expressed the need for a central information clearinghouse where providers and families could get accurate information on the range of nutrition programs, food resources, and culturally appropriate materials that are available. Focus group participants often were not familiar with the range of federal nutrition and food programs — as well as additional community food resources, such as free groceries, discount community supported agriculture (CSA) shares, and community gardens — available in their area.

Nutrition service providers and immigrant parents shared the difficulties that mixed-status families face when they apply for SNAP. Immigrants face many of the same obstacles as non-immigrant applicants when completing SNAP applications, including a complex application process, perceived stigma in asking for help, or the myth that one’s house would be used as collateral in order to qualify for SNAP. Many of the barriers, however, are unique to immigrant families. For example, nutrition service providers and immigrants reported struggles with assessing whether it was safe for a family to apply for SNAP in light of the new public charge rule, as well as concerns that the SNAP benefit amount would be too small to make the perceived risk related to immigration status worthwhile.

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One Arkansas provider explained it this way: “I know I feel uncomfortable promising something is going to be okay and then putting [a] family at risk, and I’m sure as long as I feel that way it’s going to come across to them too.” Some providers and participants were well-versed in the public charge rule, while others did not feel confident in their knowledge about how the rule intersects with participation in SNAP.

Some immigrants described fears that accepting SNAP would compromise their immigration status, resulting in deportation or an inability to become a U.S. citizen. Others expressed concerns resulting from long-standing myths in immigrant communities, such as the perception that their children would be required to repay the government when they become adults or would be required to perform military service if they accepted food assistance. Service providers expressed fears regarding how they were not immigration attorneys and did not feel sufficiently trained to provide guidance related to immigration issues. Some immigrant parents shared that they did not want to risk applying because of their perception that the SNAP benefit amount would be small.

Nutrition service providers and immigrant families lacked clarity about SNAP rules. In particular, there was uncertainty about how seasonal work impacts eligibility for SNAP; the process for a noncitizen parent to apply online on behalf of a U.S. citizen child; and how to verify housing costs when multiple households are sharing a single housing unit.

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**Transportation barriers to access federal nutrition and food programs can disproportionately affect immigrant families due to fears of being out in public and vulnerable to attacks by immigration enforcement agencies.**

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While lack of transportation and inconvenient locations of nutrition program service sites are often identified as an issue for all potential participants in federal nutrition and food programs, there are special obstacles that impact immigrant families. Barriers unique to immigrant families include fears about being out in public and vulnerable to targeted actions by ICE. One Illinois nutrition service provider listed some of the multiple barriers that immigrant

Immigrant families were reluctant to access food programs unless they had a trusted relationship with the organization and were hesitant about visiting government offices to submit benefits applications.

families face: “[G]oing to the local office is another barrier for them because the neighborhood is not safe. They have to use public transportation. They have to take their children. Another challenge for them is giving their information, [such as] their address. They’re iffy about sharing their address, thinking that someone’s going to come knocking at your door, someone’s going to go to their kid’s school.”

Immigrant parents and nutrition service providers expressed concerns about ICE raids that lead immigrant families to curtail public activities. Furthermore, immigrant families were reluctant to access food programs, unless they had a trusted relationship with the organization, and were hesitant about visiting government offices to submit benefits applications.

Providers and parents reported that immigrant families face barriers to SNAP access, such as the need to make multiple visits to a SNAP office before receiving benefits. The requirement of numerous visits to government offices to complete an application exerts a toll in terms of time, costs, and emotional burdens, such as the need to bring young children to the office, the perception that the office is in an unsafe location, lack of convenient public transportation to get to the office, cost of travel and parking, or the need to take off work to comply with the SNAP office’s business hours.

Service providers and families also commented that immigrant families face challenges in accessing transportation to emergency food sites, especially in rural areas with few sites.



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## What Focus Group Participants Said

### On the importance of connecting families to nutrition programs:

*“When I applied for the Link [the name for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, in Illinois] and was approved, it was very helpful because the rent and the other bills that you have ... For me, it was very good. And I buy what my daughters like. I like to cook at home, so, I prepare what they like, and I have used Link to meet the needs of my daughters.”*

— IMMIGRANT PARENT, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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### On the need for navigating the immigration consequences of federal nutrition and food program access:

*“So you kind of walk on eggshells in that conversation now. And I would love advice and teaching and best practices for how we can use that information to possibly get them more services, but not put them in a sacrificial situation where they will lose their services.”*

— NUTRITION SERVICE PROVIDER, NORTHWEST ARKANSAS

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### On the importance of trusted partners:

*“We have organizations where you can go to get help [with SNAP] and not wait there in the public aid office all day. There are organizations in our area that can help us.”*

— IMMIGRANT PARENT, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

*“They [immigrants] work well with our liaisons because they’re [referring to the liaisons] women of color and bilingual. So they really develop that trust level with them. But if we send them outside to organizations, there’s some fear.”*

— NUTRITION SERVICE PROVIDER, DENVER, COLORADO

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### On the need for policy changes:

*“That they take away the idea that you don’t become a public charge because we work well and beautifully.”*

— IMMIGRANT PARENT, CENTRAL VALLEY CALIFORNIA

*“This [SNAP] is a very important benefit, but unfortunately not everyone qualifies, because of the income. I work in the field; I’ve been more than 15 years in this country. I needed stamps once, and I wasn’t eligible. I never came back; I don’t know now how they measure the income. Unfortunately, I’ve never come back to receive that benefit, because I don’t think I’m going to qualify.”*

— IMMIGRANT PARENT, CENTRAL VALLEY CALIFORNIA

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Ideas From Focus Group Participants

Geared toward organizations that support immigrant families, the following recommendations reflect the ideas expressed from the immigrant parent and nutrition service provider focus groups about opportunities to connect immigrant families to federal nutrition and food programs and how to address food insecurity.

### Recommendation 1. Provide accurate information on immigration-related issues that intersect with the ability to access federal nutrition and food programs.

#### Key Actions and Strategies

##### Media

- Partner with traditional and digital media outlets to ensure accuracy when reporting on immigration and public benefits rules, especially when the subject matter is complex, in order to minimize confusion and harm. In particular, work with local ethnic and foreign-language media outlets, which are a major source of information for immigrant communities.
- Leverage partnerships with trusted elected officials and other community members who attract media interest to circulate accurate information in multiple languages, including dialects, in order to reach the communities that are impacted by new rule changes and existing immigration policies.
- Use earned media (e.g., op-eds, letters to the editor, interviews) to educate community members, build partnerships, and coalesce allies around advocacy actions.

##### Social Service Providers

- Identify social service providers (e.g., immigrant-serving organizations) that can take the lead to
  - create clear messaging on how the public charge rule does not attach to federal nutrition and food programs other than the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP);

- create client-facing materials on SNAP and public charge in terms that are understood by the specific community;
  - train trusted social service providers in the community on how a range of immigration-related issues may intersect with access to public benefit programs; and
  - partner and train immigration attorneys on public benefits programs and how they intersect with immigration-related issues.
- Identify and incorporate other key access points for sharing community-facing information on how immigration-related issues affect access to federal nutrition and food program benefits (e.g., social media, community organizations, places of worship).

##### Legal Service Providers

- Offer referrals to pro bono or low-cost immigration legal services if they are available in your area.
- Partner with immigration legal service providers to conduct trainings on public charge and immigration consequences of accessing public programs, and to hold screenings at locations where immigrants gather.

**Recommendation 2.** Enlist trusted messengers in crafting and disseminating information, including assisting with applications, to connect immigrant families to available federal nutrition and food programs.

## Key Actions and Strategies

### Develop Key Message Content

- Localize messaging to particular immigrant communities.
- Build on parents' willingness to apply for nutrition benefits for their children (e.g., healthier parents lead to healthier kids).
- Messages should reduce the stigma that some immigrants face when trying to access benefits (e.g., fear of government persecution).
- Evaluate terminology that may need to be reworded for clarity, especially by community members, e.g., "public charge."
- Ensure that translations are accurate and reflect common usage and local dialects. Instead of using a service, such as Google Translate, which often generates confusing messages riddled with errors, contract with a professional interpreting service or develop a community panel to review language and translations in materials.

### Trusted Messengers

- Invest in community-based organizations that have deep relationships with immigrant families, especially ones that
  - know what messaging resonates with the communities with which they work;
  - are aware of effective ways for providing accurate and culturally competent information to a community; and
  - can build on existing pipelines of partners and develop new allies.

- Train trusted messengers (e.g., promotores, immigrants rights organizations, health care workers that connect immigrant families to Medicaid) on the basics of federal nutrition and food programs, including program eligibility and the benefits of program participation.
- Partner with community organizations, social service providers, and public assistance agencies to ensure culturally appropriate messaging is used, and that trusted messengers are communicating with families about federal nutrition and food programs using accurate and easy-to-understand terms that are communicated in a language they are familiar with.
- Develop partnerships with trusted individuals, such as teachers and medical providers (doctors, nurses, etc.), whom immigrants often rely upon for accurate information and referrals to programs and services. Co-brand materials with organizations and government agencies (such as the state attorneys general offices) that immigrants trust.

### Dissemination Hubs

- Consolidate accurate information developed by trusted messengers in ways that other social service providers and families can access (e.g., create an online federal nutrition and food program information directory, fund a call line, hire dedicated staff to answer questions for non-English speakers based on the community's needs).
- Ensure that materials created by trusted messengers on federal nutrition and food programs are distributed to immigrant families via channels that immigrant families trust (e.g., schools, places of worship, health care offices, federal nutrition program offices, employers).

## **Recommendation 3.** Implement, publicize, and monitor existing policies that help immigrants feel safer when seeking federal nutrition and food program assistance.

### **Key Actions and Strategies**

#### **Privacy Protections**

- Promote existing privacy protections, which attach to the different federal nutrition and food programs, and actions that will shore up agency compliance with these protections.
- Review application and enrollment systems, reporting systems, and guidance for eligibility and enrollment workers for nutrition programs to ensure that they comply with privacy rules.
- Provide easy-to-understand information in multiple languages that will be able to notify community members about existing privacy protections.

#### **Sensitive Locations and Know Your Rights Trainings**

- Share existing information on sensitive location policies.
- Identify opportunities to improve these policies at federal, state, and local levels.
- Work with entities that are covered by existing protections (e.g., schools, churches, hospitals) on the role they can play to help immigrant families apply for federal nutrition and food programs, and where to participate in these programs (e.g., emergency food sites, summer meal sites).
- Partner with a local organization that conducts Know Your Rights (KYR) trainings for providers and immigrant families so they are familiar with their rights and best practices when interacting with law enforcement or immigration officials.

#### **Work to End Discrimination in Program Access**

- Alert state agencies when immigrant families or service providers report occurrences of discrimination that are related to accessing federal nutrition and food program benefits.

- Elicit feedback from immigrant families who use programs to identify what is or is not working well to foster increased and expanded program access.
- Require cultural competency training for staff that includes input from local immigrant community-based organizations.

#### **Ensure Effective Implementation of Language Access Requirements**

- Advocate for state agencies and nonprofits to hire people from the community where immigrant families are served who are fluent in the language of the immigrant community.
- Publicize language access rules for different programs.
- Ensure that applications are accurately translated into requisite languages, including on paper and online.
- Ensure that service centers and online resources are accessible to individuals with limited English proficiency.
- Monitor to check that notices and other important programmatic updates are written in an individual's preferred language and that translations are correct.
- Promote materials in multiple languages to individuals with limited English proficiency so that they can get service in their preferred language.
- Educate providers about how to ensure that immigrants can receive information and services in their preferred language. Often providers only ask if participants are fluent in English. Although many immigrants may be able to speak English proficiently to navigate their lives, they may be more comfortable receiving information in their native language.
- Ensure that help desks, application counters, and other hubs include visible signage in multiple languages and ensure that they are equipped to provide language assistance.



## **Recommendation 4. Promote policies and procedures to improve access for immigrant families to federal nutrition and food programs.**

### **Key Actions and Strategies**

#### **For All Programs**

- Streamline the application process and remove access barriers
  - Limit the collection of extraneous information that is not required for participation in federal nutrition and food programs.
  - Adopt and promote policies that help improve program access (e.g., ability to apply remotely, extended office hours for people who work traditional business hours).
  - Provide clear guidance, when appropriate, regarding the public charge rule and whether it applies.
  - Examine locations of offices where families apply for benefits or access nutrition programs to identify geographic gaps (e.g., lack of accessibility to public transportation, no free parking, or inconvenient locations).
  - Partner with immigrant-serving and community-based organizations to help people apply for benefits in order to eliminate the need to travel to the program office.

#### **SNAP**

- Adopt and promote existing policies that allow flexibility for how household members may prove their income (e.g., letter from an employer, self-attestation, or another means if needed).
- Provide guidance on how to apply for SNAP in light of special circumstances, including seasonal employment, unpredictable hours, and informal housing arrangements where obtaining verification is difficult in the absence of a formal rental agreement.

- Ensure that the SNAP application process does not ask for or collect information about a non-applicant's immigration status (i.e., someone who is not applying for benefits for themselves).

#### **School Meals**

- Ensure that schools have staff who can help families complete the school meals application, particularly if the application is online and families may not have access to computers.
- Explain how the forms are used, including who will receive the information, in order to assuage fears that families may have.
- Improve the quality and variety of school meals with input from families and students so that more immigrant families will want to participate.

#### **Food Banks**

- Ensure food bank staff are collecting only the information that is required for families to receive food.
- Offer healthier and more culturally appropriate foods that reflect the communities that the food bank serves.
- Use immigrant-serving organizations as food pantry sites.

#### **WIC**

- Adopt and promote policies that decrease the need for office visits.
- Employ bilingual staff, which may be possible by drawing from the community being served.

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## **Recommendation 5.** Advocate for new policies and programs to help more immigrants address food insecurity.

### **Key Actions and Strategies**

#### **For All Programs**

- Rescind the public charge rule.
- Address transportation issues.
- Change policies to eliminate questions about immigration status.
- Adopt broader local and state language access policies.
- Increase access to pro bono and low-cost immigration legal services that can advise participants on immigration consequences of accessing public programs.
- Invest in programs and policies that address the root causes of food insecurity among immigrant families. For example, affordable housing, fair wages, job training, and immigration reform.

#### **SNAP**

- Increase the [gross income test](#) so that more low-income workers can access much-needed benefits.
- Increase the SNAP benefit level.
- Allow all children, regardless of immigration status, to access SNAP.
- Create a state-funded SNAP-like benefit for immigrants who are not eligible for SNAP.

#### **School Meals**

- Make school meals free for all students.
- Schools should implement breakfast after the bell and other programs that promote participation in school meals.

#### **Food Banks**

- Eliminate the need for food banks to collect personal information before providing food.

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## CONCLUSION

**T**his report's findings underscore that attacks on immigrant families are frightening them away from accessing essential federal nutrition and food programs, especially the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The fact that many immigrant families are avoiding these programs out of immigration fears, which are often unwarranted, is resulting in a hungrier, sicker, and poorer nation.

The research in this report spans four states (Arkansas, California, Colorado, and Illinois) and is based on focus groups with 64 Spanish-speaking immigrant parents and 41 nutrition service providers. The findings reveal what immigrant families and nutrition service providers have experienced or learned when it comes to immigrants and federal nutrition and food program participation.

The focus groups' findings highlighted how SNAP was the federal nutrition program that triggered the most fear and uncertainty as to whether it was safe for immigrants to apply. In order to remove the barriers that immigrant families and children face when trying to access the food and nutrition they need to be healthier and stronger, we must address the widespread concerns about SNAP in particular.

The new and complex public charge rule that counts SNAP in a public charge determination has created a new wave of fear and confusion, even though the vast majority of immigrants eligible for SNAP are not subject to the public charge rule and the rule does not apply to any other federal

nutrition or food program. However, the public charge rule is not the only immigration-related barrier that impacts an immigrant parent's decision to apply for benefits for the family or for only their children. Immigrant communities need access to accurate information about rapidly changing immigration laws and policies in order to make informed decisions about how to protect the health and wellness of their families.

The research lifts up key ways to address food insecurity among immigrant families that will help them receive the nutrition assistance for which they are eligible. Two of the recommendations focus on messaging and messengers because all focus groups cited concerns about information that is accurate and trustworthy. The remaining three recommendations lift up existing policies and suggestions for new policies that can help immigrants feel safer accessing federal nutrition and food programs, improve program access, and, ultimately, address food insecurity. Together, these recommendations could help improve the status quo by increasing immigrants' access to federal nutrition and food programs, and expanding the reach, as well as the benefits, that these critical programs could have on immigrant communities nationwide.

The following words of an immigrant parent perfectly sum up the benefits of connecting immigrant families to federal nutrition and food programs and the importance of work moving forward:

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*“I would recommend it to them [immigrant families] and tell them that this benefit [SNAP] helped me a lot when I was in need, and I would tell them to not be scared, not to be afraid to go and ask for it, because we are immigrants. And I would tell them to go and ask for it, they shouldn't be afraid because the information is confidential, then I would encourage them to go if they were an immigrant, because the benefit is for the children and for us, too.”*

— IMMIGRANT PARENT, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

## APPENDIX

### Focus Group Background

The focus group research took place in four states. State selections were based on a number of factors, including Beacon IA's priority geographic areas, the size of the Latinx immigrant populations, and the strength of the Food Research & Action Center and the National Immigration Law Center's advocacy partners in those states. To the extent possible, a diversity of people being represented was pursued in the following areas: established and more recent immigrant destination states; conservative, progressive, and mixed political environments; and urban and rural areas. The hope was to generate models to be shared, replicated, and tailored to other similar areas of the country.

- Northwest Arkansas: November 2019, in partnership with Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance and Arkansas United
- Central Valley California: January 2020, in partnership with the Western Center on Law and Poverty (WCLP) and the Dolores Huerta Foundation
- Denver, Colorado: November 2019, in partnership with Hunger Free Colorado and the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition (CIRC)
- Chicago, Illinois: December 2019, in partnership with the Illinois Hunger Coalition (IHC) and the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR)

### Composition of Focus Groups

Nutrition Service Providers		
State	Focus Group, number of participants	Survey, number of participants
Arkansas	6	6
California	10	10
Colorado	18*	16
Illinois	7	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>39</b>

\*Two people joined late and did not complete the survey but were able to participate in the focus group discussion.

Immigrant Parents		
State	Focus Group, number of participants	Survey, number of participants
Arkansas	16	16
California	16	13
Colorado	14	14
Illinois	18*	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>61</b>

\*When the focus group started 15 people were present. An additional three people joined after the start of the focus group.

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