

2003 State Legislative Agenda

Reduce Government Waste: End Finger Imaging

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► Issue

California spends \$11 million each year on a statewide system that requires all adult household members to give their fingerprint and photo in order to get food stamp benefits or CalWORKs cash assistance. The only purpose of this system is to prevent “multiple-aid fraud” – a situation in which someone gets benefits in two counties at the same time. Fraud within the food stamp and CalWORKs programs doesn’t happen very often, and multiple-aid fraud is especially rare. In a given month, less than 100 households are even *suspected* of multiple-aid fraud. That’s miniscule compared to the 660,000 households that receive food stamps and the \$11 million California spends on finger imaging.

► Need

In addition to wasting taxpayer dollars, California’s finger imaging system deters far too many hungry, eligible Californians from receiving food stamps. UCLA researchers recently found that among adults who are likely to be eligible *and* who experience the actual pains of hunger, only 20 percent receive food stamps. Overall, less than half of all eligible people in California are getting food stamp benefits.

Finger imaging is one major barrier to participation, as many people feel stigmatized or fear that the fingerprint will be shared with other government agencies—or both. This is especially true for legal immigrants, who are eligible for food stamps but may be fearful that their fingerprint will be used to influence their immigration status. And for every household that needs help putting food on the table, the finger-imaging system adds one more layer of bureaucracy to an already complex and burdensome application process. At a time when more working families are struggling to make ends meet, finger imaging prevents these families from getting the help they need.

► Request

Eliminate California’s Finger Imaging Requirement

A saving of \$11 million

Ending finger imaging will save the state a significant amount of money. Instead, the state should use less costly, less intrusive methods of preventing multiple-aid fraud, such as Social Security Number matches.

► History

The finger-imaging requirement was legislated before welfare reform, but the system didn’t go into effect until 2000. The threat of multiple-aid fraud has changed considerably since the Wilson era. Under welfare reform, stringent work requirements for CalWORKs and Food Stamps act as a natural deterrent to seeking aid in multiple counties. A person receiving aid in two counties would almost certainly be unable to meet the work requirements required to receive benefits in both counties. In addition, anti-fraud efforts in California have been vastly improved with the recent move to a secure credit-card-type system for issuing benefits called Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT).

► Outcomes

Ending finger imaging will save the state \$11 million at a time of tremendous budget deficits. In doing so, it will also remove one of the most difficult barriers to food stamp participation, especially for legal, eligible immigrants. It will also save time and money for county food stamp workers by streamlining the application process.