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Defunding SNAP-Ed - Local Perspectives on the Future of Nutrition & Physical Activity Programs

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Defunding SNAP-Ed:

Local Perspectives on the Future of Nutrition & Physical Activity Programs

Research Brief – July 2026

Background

For over three decades, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program- Education (SNAP-Ed) improved nutrition and physical activity (PA) behaviors among low-resource populations through the combination of education and policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) approaches in community-based settings.

In California, SNAP-Ed was known as CalFresh Healthy Living and was implemented through multiple agencies, including the California Department of Public Health (CDPH). CDPH disseminated SNAP-Ed funds among all 61 local health departments (LHDs), who partnered with community organizations to create jurisdiction-wide nutrition and PA programs.

In July 2025, the passage of H.R. 1 defunded the SNAP-Ed program.

What We Evaluated

To explore LHD and community partner organization perspectives about the future of nutrition and PA programming following the defunding of SNAP-Ed, Nutrition Policy Institute gathered information about the priorities and components of an ideal program, the resources required, and potential barriers to implementation.

Staff representing 28 LHDs participated in a semi-structured interview, and 118 community partners from across California completed open-ended questions in an online survey.

Perspectives Shared Between LHDs and Community Partners

Priorities for a new program were aligned with SNAP-Ed priorities

These included education and skill-building as essential components, integration of nutrition with PA, and a focus on improving access to healthy food and PA opportunities.

"Future programs should integrate nutrition access, education, and physical activity in ways that are practical, culturally responsive, and rooted in community settings. Pairing produce distribution with hands-on cooking education and encouraging low-barrier physical activity options from trusted [community members] could serve as a long-term commitment to improving diet and preventing diet-related conditions."

— Community partner (role unknown)

Desire to expand reach and engagement

LHDs and community partners would like to see fewer restrictions on program eligibility as well as integration of technology-based strategies to engage with more people in ways that are meaningful to them.

"The barriers... I would have to say that some of the areas in which we can work because it was census tract, it had to be low income. That could have been a barrier too because there's new development going up in really low-income areas that skews the data [i.e., makes it ineligible for programming]. So just realizing that nutrition is good for anyone..."

— LHD staff

"I think videography would be helpful for some fun YouTube videos that are easy to share with

schools, parent groups, and via social media.”
— Community partner (Executive Director)

Accessible, culturally responsive, and community-centered programming is a priority

Examples included improving community-level PA opportunities for all ages, and prioritizing trauma-informed and culturally responsive programming.

“Low-barrier physical activity opportunities, such as walking groups, chair-based fitness for seniors, family movement activities, and outdoor recreation programs that take advantage of local trails, parks, and community spaces.”

— Community partner (role unknown)

“So, we’ve identified some groups who do more indigenous farming and have more knowledge on indigenous food practices and preparedness and things of that nature. And just having that tie-in, I think, is really important for [our county]. Just because we have a large indigenous population, we have a lot of populations that have a language that’s not necessarily written down or people are not able to even maybe even read it.”

— LHD staff

Strong partnerships, coordination, and capacity are necessary

LHDs and community partners emphasized the importance of cross-sector partnerships, workforce and operational capacity, and sustainable funding to implement effective programming.

“Equally important is building strong partnerships with families, schools, and local organizations, so the impact extends beyond individual behavior to influence the broader

environment.”

— Community partner (Program Director)

“...we want to be flexible, and we want to hear what the community needs, but there also needs to be direction from the state on how to be more mindful of the PSEs that we’re implementing so we can have a broader reach when we share our stories.”

— LHD staff

Interventions should address health across the lifespan

Intergenerational programming is a way to strengthen community engagement.

“... serving the older adult population was needed, and so I think that I’d want to keep that around they have a garden program at the school not funded by CalFresh Healthy Living, and they have a garden program at the senior center, so I would really love to marry those two things, and then we could have a nutrition activity-- or a nutrition like curriculum that we do with both of our populations simultaneously, and we involve all of the community together...”

— LHD staff

Perspectives Unique to LHDs

PSE approaches should be paramount

“I think that it has to start there with policy... just like with the tobacco movement. Education can only get you so far, but it’s when you really focus on the policy and the environments and the systems...”

— LHD staff

“Number one [priority] would be increasing the physical activity opportunities for kids, which could be having more open gym times at schools throughout the county, especially

when it rains ... there's almost no trails or bike lanes and safe sidewalks for kids to move about in the county. And, you know, you go to a bigger city or even like to [larger city in county], and they have a lot of trails and things like that..."

— LHD staff

An effective program model is both flexible and responsive

At times, LHDs found SNAP-Ed to be unnecessarily restrictive.

"I'd love to see a program that's not as restrictive in terms of allowability and... curriculum requirements and all of that. I'd love a little bit more freedom... Rethink Your Drink [for example]... you know, promote water, decrease sugar-sweetened beverages - and we weren't allowed to purchase water for water tastings and it was not allowable. We can't buy water and we are in a rural community and some of the places we go to may not have accessible water and so we're bringing in jugs of water..."

— LHD staff

Perspectives Unique to Community Partners

A future program should prioritize community engagement and empowerment

"...we would train and support students to serve as community health workers who engage their own families and peers around nutrition and physical activity. These students would

receive leadership development and practical training in basic nutrition education, physical activity promotion, and communication skills. By empowering students to share information at home and in their communities, the program would strengthen learning beyond the classroom and build youth leadership."

— Community partner (role unknown)

Implications & Conclusions

Comparing perspectives across LHDs and community partners helped identify both shared priorities and unique viewpoints regarding the future of nutrition and physical activity programming.

Areas of convergence, such as the importance of building culturally responsive programs and supporting health across the lifespan, highlighted common goals that may serve as a foundation for future investments, while areas of divergence, like LHDs' desire for a flexible and responsive program design or community partners' emphasis on community engagement, provided insight into stakeholder-specific needs, implementation considerations, and opportunities to strengthen program relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability.

For More Information

Learn more about [NPI's CalFresh Healthy Living evaluation and access legacy resources](#)

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