

As part of its responsibility to handle all federal feeding programs at the state level, the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' Food Distribution division delivers food to low-income elderly people across the state through the Commodity Supplemental Food Program.

The program is about filling a need in the lives of seniors, said Melissa Ayscue, NCDA&CS Household Programs Administrator. While CSFP does not provide all of the food that a participant will need, the goal is to help seniors not have to make a choice between buying food and paying other expenses.

“What happens is that a lot of seniors have just enough money to pay their bills, and sometimes they end up not buying the medicines they need because they’re paying for groceries,” Ayscue said. “So this is just an additional way to help supplement what they have to hopefully take some of that burden off.”

That bit of extra help can have a ripple effect on seniors' overall health, Ayscue said. By helping seniors afford healthy food, CSFP allows them to focus on handling other parts of their lives.

The CSFP was created by Congress in 1969 to address hunger while also promoting agriculture policy. The program initially included women, infants and children, but was narrowed to only include people at least 60 years old or older through the Agricultural Act of 2014. To qualify, participants must have an income of 130 percent of the federal poverty level or lower.

This image has an empty alt attribute; its file name is CSFP_1-1024x768.jpg CSFP foods are boxed up for delivery.

Photo courtesy of the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina.

Participants in the program receive a variety of food items designed to give them healthy options. A senior gets four cans of vegetables, two 64-ounce cans of juice, two cans of fruit, either peanut butter or dry beans, canned meat, two containers of shelf-stable milk, cheese, cereal and either pasta or rice.

The program had humble beginnings in North Carolina. The state was one of the first to adopt CSFP, but the program was piloted only in Halifax County until as recently as 2016. Since then, CSFP has spread to half the state, said Gary Gay, Food Distribution Division director.

“It was just one county in 2016, and now it’s in 50 counties,” he said. “It’s been a huge increase, and it’s been something we’ve tried to promote.”

The increase in counties has greatly increased the number of people served by CSFP. USDA assigns each state's caseload annually, and that number has jumped substantially — from 1,237 people in 2016 to 11,031 in 2019.

Participating seniors get their food from local organizations such as food banks. The largest among them is the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, which will distribute CSFP food to 5,631 seniors in 21 counties by the end of 2019.

The increase in North Carolina has mirrored nationwide growth for CSFP. In 1999, North Carolina was among 17 states and two Indian Tribal Organizations to adopt the program. In the years that followed, states from Florida to Washington took on CSFP. Just this year, the state of Alabama joined the program, the last of the 50 states to do so. The program also extends to Puerto Rico, and is in place in the Oglala Sioux, Red Lake Nation, Seminole Nation, Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe and Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians.

The Food Distribution Division will continue to submit requests to USDA for additional CSFP caseload slots in hopes of expanding distributions to all 100 counties, Gay said.

As a self-declared program, participants are not required to show any proof of income to take part in the CSFP. To find an organization covering CSFP in your area, visit www.ncagr.gov/fooddist/RA/RADirectory and click on "CSF" for a list of participating groups.

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