

EPISODE 2: WE'RE HERE. WE'RE TALKING. | A Day in The Life of CalFresh & The ASI Cougar Pantry

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McKenna: Hey, everyone. Welcome to Amplify. We're here. We're talking. I'm your host, McKenna, and I've worked with the Cougar Pantry for four years. And I'm your host today alongside my co-host, Noemi.

Noemi: Hi, everyone. I'm Noemi. I'm the ASI CalFresh specialist. I'm now going on my second year working for ASI, and I'm glad to be here.

McKenna: If you don't know, CP is short for Cougar Pantry. We have a free food pantry for all students. We also offer CalFresh enrollment assistance.

Noemi: Yeah, CalFresh is basically free money for groceries. If you are eligible, we encourage you to apply. So it's a really easy resource, and it's easy as swiping a debit card.

McKenna: Yeah, so we have a lot of really great resources, and we're here today to make sure all of our students know about them, so that we can support you the best that we can. We've seen a decline in numbers since the start of the semester that we've had coming to us because of our virtual format, so we're hoping that this will help reach some students, and let them know that we are here for them.

Noemi: Definitely. CalFresh has also moved on to an online format, so we're holding virtual Zoom appointments. Also, I can help you out over the phone if Zoom is just not your choice of communication. But just seen a decline in appointments, but we want students to know that CalFresh assistance is still here, and you can still book an appointment. And if you have any questions related to CalFresh, either being just what is the program, I need to renew my application -- I can help you out with that.

McKenna: And it is awesome. So we're here, and we are talking. So first, let's start off with what food insecurity actually is, because we've seen a lot of students don't actually know. Food insecurity is a lot more than just not having food. There's different levels of food insecurity, and we want to share that with you today, so that you are informed. And you might not even know that you're impacted by this. Food insecurity is basically not knowing where your next nutritious meal is coming from. So we did a survey -- well, the whole CSU system did a survey, and we found that 21% to 24% of students are affected by food insecurity. In 2016, CSUSM conducted their own survey, and found that 50% were affected by food insecurity. The Bite Out Hunger campaign was created to educate the campus community about how food insecurity -- and with 600 donations, the Cougar Pantry was started. So, Noemi, how has your time in ASI affected what you know about food insecurity?

Noemi: Well, it definitely broadened, like, the definition of food insecurity. Like you said, I first thought food insecurity meant having no access to food, but what was really interesting and ties into CalFresh is that food insecurity means no access to nutritious food. So a student may be eating, like, Ramen every day. That's not necessarily nutritious food. So I think the pantry does a really good job of providing produce, which is, like, a variety of food, versus just eating the same thing every day. And CalFresh's goal is to encourage people to live a nutritious, healthy lifestyle. So that's what is really -- one thing that was really interesting that I've learned so far in ASI about food insecurity.

McKenna: Yeah, it's -- it was definitely interesting. So I started working with ASI my freshman year, and funny story -- I actually didn't even know this was a job I was signing up for. I just thought it was a volunteer position, to learn more about this and see, like, what was affecting students. And I was shocked how much I learned about how college students specifically have these unique needs that really aren't being addressed. So I was really, really excited to start working with the Cougar Pantry, and see how we could help. And like you said, I think that the Cougar Pantry has done a really good job of bringing in all that fresh produce, bringing in nutritious food, serving

different needs, and I know -- I personally know a lot of people who it's kind of helped them afford new groceries. And like you said, CalFresh that we now offer is such a helpful thing to help students stretch their food budget.

Noemi: Yeah, definitely. Like, one thing that's -- I think the Pantry's, like, kind of a nice transition. Like me, and like similar students, I was on, like, free reduced lunch, so that was kind of like a secure way of getting lunch every day, but now in college, that's not a thing at college. But having the Pantry there, and offering this free resource -- that's really neat, and I think it really helps transition from going to high school, going to college. That's -- I think that's really awesome.

McKenna: Yeah, I think it's -- one of the reasons that a lot of college students struggle with food insecurity is it's kind of your first time on your own, away from home. So like you said, in high school, like, you had free reduced lunch, and you had your parents, and you had a lot of resources to kind of help you out. And for a lot of students -- I would say probably most students -- college is their first time that they're really on their own. So it's nice that we have the pantry to help them out.

Noemi: Definitely. And, like, CalFresh is also kind of, a thing, to help students be a little bit more independent. It's this funds that's given to you for free. You don't have to pay this back. So students are kind of, like, now getting their first job, having their first experience at college. They can have this extra side, like, source of funds that helps them buy the nutritious groceries they need. So it's kind of like the whole theme of, like, you're kind of transitioning to your -- to be on your own now. But these are these -- there are these resources that can definitely help you transition to being on your own, and being more independent in this college life.

McKenna: Yeah, absolutely, and just in case anyone doesn't know, something really cool is you can visit the Cougar Pantry and get CalFresh. So a lot of people, they're able to go to the Cougar Pantry, get the things that we have in stock. And if there's things that we might not have in stock that they need for a recipe, or different things that they need to build their nutritious diet, if you get CalFresh, which is essentially free money for groceries, you can kind of supplement what you get at the pantry. And I think it's possible to have almost a free meal or free groceries, free food, if you use both of those resources.

Noemi: Definitely. The max amount for CalFresh benefits for one person is \$204, so \$204 a month is -- that's a lot of money for groceries. So you can really max it out for, like, the entire month, and that can definitely help you, like, focus on school versus having to worry about do I have extra money for groceries.

McKenna: Yeah, the Cougar Pantry and CalFresh -- it helps you stretch that budget, and you can use both of them to supplement each other. And it's really awesome. Like you said, \$204 -- that's a lot of money for groceries, especially if you're getting some staples from the pantry. You can do a lot with that.

Noemi: Definitely. And, like, the pantry -- now that I've been kind of helping out, it has a great variety of, like, food. There's, like, a lot of produce that you get, and, like, dairy products. It's really neat. You could make a meal with all of the things that you get from the pantry.

McKenna: Yeah, and that's actually great that you brought that up, because we just posted on our Instagram a real -- one of our students making a meal with just food that they got from the pantry. So you guys should all definitely check that out, and just so you know, we'll go through kind of some of the things that the Cougar Pantry usually has in stock. So we have canned goods. We have dry goods. Basically, shelf-stable things is kind of what we keep in there. We also have hygiene items. We're trying to provide those again. It's been a little bit difficult with COVID-19, but we are working to do everything that we can to support all of our students. We also are becoming a registered diaper bank, so that will be really awesome. And currently, like I said, COVID kind of threw a wrench in our process. Normally, we have a space in the USU that students could come and visit whenever is convenient for them throughout the week, but to make it safer with COVID, we have three different distribution options for you all now. We have our Wednesday distributions. We have Thursday pick-ups, and we also have Fresh Market Mondays. So now, with COVID, you can come any of those days. They're completely safe. All of our staff is

wearing masks. They are social distancing, and you can even come, and they'll just put a bag of groceries in your car, which is really, really great.

Noemi: Yeah, it's that easy. They're even -- we are even starting to give out, like, first aid kits, and, like, disposable masks, so that you can, like, have those in your car as well. So it's kind of just a variety of, like, a non-stop shop for, like, things that you need, really.

McKenna: I think it's really, really awesome that we were able to kind of pivot as quickly as we could. So back in March, we went from a normal day to essentially, like, quote unquote, a COVID day within, like, 48 hours, and that was crazy. Both Noemi and I were there for that, and it was very difficult. But I would say that we've been doing a pretty good job, and I think it's great that we can still serve students in a safe way.

Noemi: Yeah, we make sure to help out students, those who are able to drive to the mobile distributions, and those students who are living in housing -- they can come and walk up to the distributions as well. So we're trying to adapt to all student situations, and make sure that we are able to serve students.

McKenna: Yeah, and just in case you missed it, we have those three distribution options for you. We have every single Wednesday. You can come from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. to come get some groceries. Our staff will just put them in the trunk of your car if you drive, or you can walk up.

We also have our Thursday appointments. So for our students out there who might not be able to make it to our Wednesday distributions, do not fret. Just come on Thursday. You can make an appointment online, and that can be found on our ASI website. That's from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m., and you can also get some groceries. That's another great opportunity for you. And lastly, we have our Fresh Market Mondays, where you can get some delicious fresh produce from the San Diego Food Bank from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m, and that is the first Monday of every month. So the Wednesday and Thursday distributions are every week, and the Fresh Market Monday is the first Monday of each month. And all three of those distribution opportunities take place at Campus Way Circle, and they can all be found on our website as well.

Noemi: And they all pretty much follow a similar model. Like, mobile distribution -- kind of drive up your car, and we'll put a bag of groceries in your car. And they're a good variety of food, and you can also let us know if you're -- like, any food restrictions you may have. So, like, if you want to let us know if you're vegan, vegetarian, or you want a gluten-free bag, we will accommodate that for you.

McKenna: Yeah, they're doing a super good job of making sure every student's needs are met, between basic needs, between dietary needs. Basically, whatever you have, just communicate with our staff, and they will help you out the best that they can, even if they don't have those specific items you have there today. They can direct you to another resource. They're very open to whatever students need, and I think that is great.

Noemi: All right. Let me go into a little bit about CalFresh, what -- how that's like. So due to COVID, we used to have to change how we do appointments. Before, they were in-person appointments, where I would meet with students, and go over the requirements, or help them out with their application itself. Now, it's over Zoom, over a phone call. It's just kind of going over in detail what to expect throughout the process of the CalFresh application. One really neat thing about the CalFresh application recently with, like, all the COVID updates, is that we have the interview. So let me break down what the process is like. So first, you usually would meet with me, and I would tell you what the requirements are, what documents you would need to apply, and then we would start the application, right?

McKenna: Yeah, and it's helpful, I think, for students when they have someone who's really knowledgeable and informed about it, that can help them throughout the process, so they don't feel like they're doing it all on their own. So that's some feedback I've gotten. And I think, Noemi, it's really great how you can help them through the entire process, like start to finish.

Noemi: Yeah, definitely. I -- with all, like, the regulations and all that, it can be a little taunting, but I definitely want to be here and let students know. Let's take this one step at a time, and we'll get you through the process, right? So after the application has been submitted, students would usually have an interview with the county folk, right? And it tells you more -- they do want to ask more information about your application, get more details about the living situation. Who do you prep meals with at home? They may ask if they need additional documents you need to submit, or if you're a college student, they'll ask, "Are you part of this program," and those type of questions. So recently, they waived that interview. So as long as you submit a complete application and the complete documents, they will not need to call you, or meet with you over the phone, which is really neat. Because it kind of speeds up the process. So instead of having to schedule that specific time to meet with the county folk, you kind of just go straight into them trying to approve your application, and then you should know sooner versus the 30 days that it usually takes to approve an application if you have qualified for CalFresh.

McKenna: Yeah, and I think it makes the process less daunting. That's part of what we try to do with Cougar Pantry and CalFresh, is just make it less scary of a thing for students to come to. So I think, especially with COVID -- and we know students are going through a lot -- the fact that they've taken out even just one requirement or one step -- that's really helpful. Have students given you good feedback about that, or what do you think, Noemi?

Noemi: I think definitely, if I say, like, "Oh, you might have to take -- be interviewed for the application," it's a little halt. In other words like, oh, okay, they understand it's part of the process, but when I let them know it's waived, they're like, okay, thank you [laughter]. Like, good. I'm glad that it was waived, or glad I don't have to talk to someone over the phone, because I know that can be, like, a little nerve-wracking, having to talk to someone about, like, your living situation at home. And they have, like, kind of a script of questions, and you're just, like, a little nervous. So I'm glad that was waived, and it makes it a lot easier for students to go along with this process.

McKenna: Yes. So if anyone out there is interested in applying, that's one less thing you've got to do. So one less - one more thing to make it easier for you to get CalFresh benefits if you are eligible.

>> **Noemi:** Definitely. If you're eligible, go ahead and apply. But that's kind of, like, the day in a life of CalFresh.

>> **McKenna:** Yeah. And then, in the Cougar Pantry -- so I've been working there for four years now. This year's a very different one. So, typically, when we have our space in the USU, students can come once a week, and just whenever's convenient for them. Students typically will come after class, super nice and easy. With COVID, like I said, we've moved into those three mobile distributions. So it's a little bit different, but we're still working on making it accessible, making it easy. Noemi, how has your role changed since we've moved virtually?

Noemi: Well, good question, McKenna. At first, I was just the CalFresh -- ASI CalFresh specialist, so I kind of just started at that position, but then I started to help out with days at Cougar Pantry as well. Especially since I'm in the area, I went on board in helping out with the mobile distributions. It's kind of a lot more of physical work versus kind of just online work, right? But it's -- I would say it's really enjoyable work. I like what I do, and I like that -- the outcome of what we do at the Cougar Pantry, especially at the mobile distributions.

Noemi: -- go ahead.

McKenna: So I was going to say, we've -- Noemi's been awesome. We've kind of thrown her in, full force, just to do all the different things that we need. So I -- speaking from my position, I'm glad that you've been so flexible and so awesome, because it's, like, all hands on deck right now.

Noemi: Definitely. But I'm glad also that you kind of were flexible as well. You have been with the pantry for four years. You've been there from the beginning, so it's really awesome to be able to work with someone that's already been there from, like, day one, and seeing how the pantry has transitioned, especially to adapt itself to students' needs. It's really great to see that transition along that, like, four years.

McKenna: Yeah, and we've already grown a lot, and we have a lot of awesome future steps coming up for the pantry. So when I started working here four years ago, we didn't even have a space. We literally set up tables outside of the USU, and, like, chucked food on them, and students would come after class. And it was so hard. So,

since then, we've moved to a space inside the USU, and if you've been there -- if you haven't been there, it looks basically like a small closet. It's teensy-tiny, and we're very excited, because we will soon be moving to a much larger space, where we can store more food, get a greater variety of food, get more refrigerated items. So that's going to be coming soon, and we are very excited to share that with you all when we're able to get back on campus. For now, we'll be doing the mobile distributions, but we have a lot of awesome steps coming up. And one of the things that we have to help us with that is Giving Day. So, Noemi, last year was your first Giving Day with us. Can you tell us, like, a little bit about how that was for you?

Noemi: Yeah, it was really neat. It was, like, my first year with ASI, so I was like, "Giving Day? What's Giving Day?" So it's, like, a great time for, like, donors, alumni, staff. Even students can donate to a specific aspect that ASI focuses on every year. So last year was the student emergency fund. So that was the main goal to raise money for. This year's going to be the ASI Cougar Pantry. So all that we raise that day will be going to the operations and the general of what -- provide for the ASI Cougar Pantry. So that's going to be this year's focus, which is really cool.

McKenna: Yeah. So if you're unfamiliar with what Giving Day is, it's essentially -- it'll be December 1st this year. It's the day after Black Friday, and the idea of it is kind of, after you've gotten all of your amazing Black Friday steals and deals, you can come, and you can give back to your community, to your campus, to essentially your peers. Because that's what we do, is we help students -- ASI's run by students, for students. So all of your money is going to help your peers, which I think is really awesome. So you can donate to a variety of different funds on campus on Giving Day. For ASI, ours will be going to the Cougar Pantry. So if you do have it in your heart to donate, we're going to be adding a way to reach students who aren't in the geographic location to be able to get to our distributions, because we know that is a lot of students right now.

So we're going to be adding some sort of delivery message, or delivery method, to reach those students. So if you are far away, we're hoping to be able to help you all as well.

Noemi: Definitely. So please donate. That's the end of message, but if you want any updates about the Cougar Pantry and CalFresh -- because they are intertwined. They work together. You can follow our Instagram. That's where we have all our updates about when are distributions, any information related to food insecurity, related to CalFresh updates. You can follow the Instagram at @ASI. CSUSM for all of those related updates.

McKenna: Yeah, and if you like these podcasts, we will be doing more. So keep an eye out for that to check it out. We're going to have lots of different topics. So I hope that you all listen, check out our Instagram, and stay up to date with the things that we are doing.

Noemi: Definitely. Stop by the Cougar Pantry mobile distributions, and feel free to make an appointment for CalFresh application assistance.

McKenna: Yes, and we hope you all have a great day. Thank you.

Noemi: Thank you.

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