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Twilight Greenaway: You're listening to JUST FOOD, a podcast brought to you by the Berkeley Food Institute at the University of California Berkeley. I'm Twilight Greenaway.

Edmond Allmond: I'm Edmond Allmond.

T: This season we're exploring the complex web of people and places that provide us with our food. We're talking to the people who grow it, prepare it, and work hard to repair the broken parts of our food system.

In this episode, we're talking about an important federal benefit: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. It's what used to be called Food Stamps. It's a critical part of how families around the country access the food they need, and it's one of the most contested parts of the 2018 Farm Bill.

E: Here to help us understand more about the issue is Maria Echeveste. Maria is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and she's been an affiliate with the Berkeley Food Institute since its inception. Maria has also served the United States government at the highest levels as Deputy Chief of Staff for Bill Clinton, as the administrator of the Wage and Hour Division of the Department of Labor, and as the Director of Public Liaison at the White House.

Maria, please tell us why you're working with BFI.

Maria Echeveste: One of the reasons I'm involved with the Berkeley Food Institute is that my parents were farmworkers here in California. And so, I've always had an interest in the issues of workers. And over the years as I've learned more about the food systems, the important role of workers and also just how we really need to transform how we consume and produce food, considering its impact on the environment, our health, and on communities. It's a big issue.

E: So, let's talk about community. Let's talk about SNAP, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly called Food Stamps. Tell us a little bit of the history of SNAP.

M: For those folks who are over 60, they remember being on Food Stamps, which meant you got a big block of cheese and maybe a big container of peanut butter. Today, we have Electronic Benefits Transfer cards. And in a way, it makes the use of accessing a systems to provide food for yourself and your family less embarrassing. Because, face it, there are many many people who need help. They're working or maybe they're not able to work, but people need to eat. And one of the things our country decided to do was to create these programs to help people in times of need, to provide a helping hand. But, we keep debating in this country how much of a helping hand, who deserves the helping hand, how much we're willing to pay as tax payers to provide assistance, like basic food.



E: Okay, so let's get to the core of the discussion. There are plenty of eligible people who are not taking advantage of these programs, just because of political fears. Now, what have your research and observations shown you about what's changed recently?

M: There is a significant percentage of folks who do not apply for food assistance because of fears that it will affect them, for example, in applications for immigrations. Or that, you may become part of some government registry. Let's be very clear. You are not eligible for Food Stamps if you are undocumented. Now it is true, that US citizen children born to those undocumented, like any other US citizen child, is eligible for Food Stamps or Medicaid. But for many undocumented or even legal permanent residents, who do have authorization to live in our country legally, may feel that in this current environment that is so anti-immigrant, it's better to really keep a low profile, do not come to the attention of the government.

E: And from that perspective, things don't seem to be getting better, is this true?

M: Well, unfortunately, there is now a proposed rule by the Trump Administration. It hasn't become final, but what this proposed rule does is it says you will affect your ability to legalize, to become legal, if you apply on behalf of your US Citizen child or a legal permanent resident within your household for Food Stamps, for Medicaid, for women in Infant Children Assistance. The school lunch program is protected, but everything else is kind of on the table.

I really ask folks to consider, what would you do if your child was hungry? What would you be willing to do? And if there's a program that could help you, you're going to swallow your pride to help make sure your child eats. And yet, this proposed rule is going to put a lot of families and make a lot of children go hungry, go hungry at night.

E: Now, thankfully there are organizations out there to help people get these benefits. Christina Laird, a recent graduate of UC Berkeley, not only volunteered for one of these organizations, but was a SNAP recipient herself.

Christina Laird: I am a single mom. It's been my daughter and I since she was two and a half. She turns fifteen this month. And you know, it's been a process, going back to school, I studied Environmental Science at Berkeley and my minor was Global Poverty and Practice. For my minor, I volunteered at Spark Point and helped them with their food pantry and helped them develop their best practices with signing people up for CalFresh and signed up for it myself in the process.

Balancing parenthood, full-time school, work, there aren't enough hours in the day. And it really wasn't until I started volunteering that I thought, "Oh, okay, maybe I should apply for this and just see! See what happens, see if I get the benefits or not." It made a huge difference, just a huge difference. I could set aside budget towards other things and it kind of relieved a little bit of pressure.

There continues to be a stigma around Food Stamps aka CalFresh. If you tell people, "I'm receiving public assistance, I'm receiving assistance for food," it makes it sound as if your failing somehow,



that you can't provide. The people that I would see, they're people who are just trying to get a better life. Some people I saw were working two, three jobs, and then their spouses were working too. They're trying to work and they're just not able to make ends meet because of the cost of living. A lot of the clients that I would see through Spark Point, big Latino/Latina community, they're scared to apply now. Because there's a very real fear that, "Oh my gosh if I apply for this, ICE is going to get my information." And so, people don't, even though they could benefit. I think that people should be able to take advantage of what opportunities are out there, without having to worry about repercussions, because most people they just need a little leg up. They're struggling, but it doesn't have to be forever, and if we give them a little bit of help, they can pull themselves out. And that's better for everyone.

E: It sounds like Christina saw first-hand the ways stigma and fear can keep people from signing up from these benefits. Now, Maria, my understanding is that California has the lowest rate of participation than any other state. Is this true?

M: Pretty close to the bottom.

E: Okay, this is a federal program that doesn't cost the state any money, why aren't more people applying for it?

M: One is the way in which the state of California provides the intake for applications. It's county by county, so it's not a statewide system. So your county social work office, some of them, you have to go there, you have to apply, you might have to take two buses. Remember the folks who probably need this assistance, probably also have challenges in terms of getting off time from work, or transportation. So just the process, is a barrier.

The second is there is a stigma attached from many communities. There is this embarrassment. So how do you do the public outreach? How do you help people understand?

But there is also a third, and there's current research that I'm a part of, headed by Ron Strollick, who is really looking at gender issues. To what degree do male female roles affect the ability of a family to complete their application for food assistance, for SNAP or CalFresh, as we call it in California. A report by the Commission on Status of Women and Children, I think it was 2015, indicated that almost two-thirds of the women having children in the state of California had a high school education or less. Now, this is really important, because that means you're probably not working at a high-paying job. You're probably just in a low-wage work, you're going to need food assistance, right? You may not have the education or the cultural empowerment to believe your role as a woman in a partnership, in a marriage, gives you the right to challenge your partner's or husband's view about applying for food assistance. So, it's kind of hard to unravel all the reasons why we don't have more uptake, but I think the gender issue is one that needs to be explored.

E: The SNAP program can be a tough subject. It's touchy socially and it's touchy politically. And when it comes to politics, it seems that right now policies being made by making statements that



engender fear and inaction and lack of participation. Do you find that true? Am I seeing this correctly?

M: Yes, you're right that the current climate, starting from the White House, is making people who are immigrants in particular feel like they are under attack. But I think there's more going on. There is a chunk of our population who may not be immigrant, but who feel that their voice doesn't matter. And there has been this steady effort to create cynicism, to create disillusionment, alienation. If someone tells you over and over that you don't matter, that the system's rigged, that you just don't count, some portion of the population's just going to give up and they're not going to participate.

E: So, in this toxic environment that we're living, how are we supposed to respond to the possibility that US citizen children will go hungry because of policies made or the fear of policies potentially being made?

M: Well, I think, specifically with respect to this proposed public charge rule, it's not too late to have citizens carrying people who care about their neighbors to actually write comments, to let their legislative representatives, especially in the US House of Representatives and Congress, know that this is an important issue and that they want our leaders to go on record and to argue about this rule being final. It's estimated that 60-70% of the workforce in California in fruits and vegetables is undocumented. We can't eat without them. So, are we standing up for them, or are we just going let this toxicity cause such fear that people don't apply for basic human rights. And food is a basic human right.

E: Maria Echeveste, thank you so much for joining us.

M: Sure.

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E: You've been listening to JUST FOOD, a podcast from the Berkeley Food Institute created in collaboration with the Berkeley Advanced Media Institute at the University of California Berkeley. I'm Edmond Allmond.

T: I'm Twilight Greenaway.

E: This episode was produced by Kobe McDonald with reporting from Muna Danish and editing from Ben Manila. The music you heard in this episode is by Blue Dot Sessions. You can find JUST FOOD on Apple Podcast, PodBean, or wherever you listen to your podcasts. Lean more about the show and the Berkeley Food Institute at our website: food.berkeley.edu.

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