Introduction
The federal government shutdown from December 22, 2018 – January 25, 2019, the longest in U.S. history, created an unprecedented disruption in issuance of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.¹ While most Americans realize the shutdown affected the employment of thousands of federal workers, fewer may recognize the impact it had on millions of Americans participating in SNAP.

Participants received February SNAP benefits early, by January 20, leaving a munch-longer-than-usual gap between benefit receipt for February and March. This caused households whose budgets already are extremely tight to face heightened difficulties affording food. The fact that participants received benefits despite the shutdown, is a tremendous success. However, it is critical the SNAP disruption affected the food security, health, and quality of life of SNAP participants.

Why SNAP Matters?
• In 2018, SNAP lifted 3.2 million people out of poverty.²
• More than 67% of SNAP participants are families with children and almost 34% live in households with members who are elderly or have disabilities.³ More than 43% of participants are in working families.⁴
• While SNAP reduces the overall prevalence of food insecurity by as much as 30%, more than 37 million Americans, including more than half of households participating in SNAP, still live in households that struggle with food insecurity.⁵,⁶,⁷
• The current COVID-19 pandemic is highlighting the importance of safety net programs, particularly the urgency to feed people during a health crisis.⁸,⁹

Project Goals
The aim of this study was to capture the ways in which the SNAP disruption affected the food security, health, and wellbeing of California’s SNAP participants. Although the monthly cycle of food insecurity among SNAP participants is well-documented, this study is believed to be the first to capture the short- and potential long-term effects a disruption of SNAP benefits had on households.

Methods
Researchers collaborated with community partners to host 4 focus groups, three in English and one in Spanish, with 26 low-income adults in four counties in California from February 28, 2019 to May 15, 2019. Counties were selected to include urban (Los Angeles, San Francisco), suburban (San Mateo), and rural areas (Tuolumne).

Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Focus Group Participants</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>11 (42)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>10 (38)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2 (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lost income, lost work, and lost SNAP benefits due to the government shutdown caused participants anxiety, stress, and confusion. When participants received benefits early they experienced initial relief, followed by hardship. Having what felt like extra money in January led some participants to feel a sense of relief that they wouldn’t go hungry in January. Some participants shared stories of doing things that many Americans likely take for granted: treating themselves or their children or eating the whole, healthy foods that enable them to feel well.

“SNAP participants reported negative experiences and that the shutdown shook their faith in the gov’t. The disruption resulted in many participants feeling more insecure about their SNAP benefits. They experienced confusion, fear, anxiety, and stress due to real uncertainty about whether they would receive future SNAP benefits.

Participants reported that the high costs of living, inadequate or low-wage employment and/or employment/disability status meant that they routinely faced food insecurity. While gratitude was expressed for SNAP, the sentiment expressed most frequently was that SNAP benefit levels are inadequate to meet participants’ food needs.

You know, with our incomes, and especially with the rent is so high and our bills… it gets really stressful trying to be like, ‘Okay, where’s my next meal gonna come from? How am I going to feed my kids…’

You don’t even think about it, [suddenly having extra money to buy food] is just a big stress relief…

The disruption highlighted challenges in communications with SNAP offices. Few participants reported being informed about the disruption in a timely manner, if at all.

Capturing Participants’ Experiences of the 2019 SNAP Food Assistance Benefit Disruption to Inform Future Policy
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SNAP Participant Recommendations
Participant recommendations focused on three main issues in which the SNAP program could be improved to better meet their needs and support their families:

1. Increase benefit levels.
2. Better address cost-of-living and working by modifying eligibility determinations and benefit calculations.
3. Improve customer service.

Conclusions
The government shutdown leading to a disruption in timing of SNAP benefits caused harm to participants who are routinely struggling to feed themselves and their families. Taking care of people who rely on the safety net is a key responsibility of government. It is critical that the federal government freedoms as intended and continues providing SNAP benefits on time.

Policy Goals
• Establish policies to protect funding for social safety net programs like SNAP if future shutdowns occur.
• Implement participants’ recommendations for SNAP.
• If we can continue to share voices and experiences of SNAP participants to all stakeholders involved in making SNAP policy decisions and those serving SNAP participants, this may encourage further research and drive policy change.

Acknowledgments
This study was funded by an Opportunity Grant from the University of California, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources. The GFI Fellowship was funded by the University of California Office of the President and the Nutrition Policy Institute.

References
³. Nutrition Policy Institute (NPI), University of California, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources. The GFI Fellowship was funded by the University of California Office of the President and the Nutrition Policy Institute.
⁷. Austin, W., & Barrios, J. (2019). Hunger in California’s SNAP Participants. University of California, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources.
¹⁰. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.