

Campus & community, Campus news

One-of-a-kind Basic Needs Center a new hub for student help

By [Gretchen Kell](#)



Chancellor Carol Christ and Vice Chancellor for Equity and Inclusion Oscar Dubon did the honors at the new center's private ribbon-cutting ceremony on Friday, Feb. 22. (UC Berkeley photo by Keegan Houser)

February 22, 2019



Six years in the making, UC Berkeley's new Basic Needs Center, a one-stop shop for students with food, housing and financial insecurity, opens Monday, Feb. 25, on the lower level of the Martin Luther King Jr. Student Union. The novel, nearly 3,000-square-foot facility is considered the first of its kind in the UC system and nationwide.

Many colleges and universities, including four other UC campuses, have a basic needs center with a food pantry, nutrition workshops, aid for homeless students and referrals to off-campus social services.

But Berkeley's center will feature a "community office," where representatives from local agencies, such as the Berkeley Rent Stabilization Board, will hold hours to assist students with everything from housing woes to accessing [CalFresh](#) federal nutrition benefits.

The center also will provide case management by a licensed clinical social worker—with help next fall from two Berkeley Master of Social Welfare students—for students needing a wide spectrum of specialized support.

In the new community kitchen, students can prepare food pantry items or meals brought from home. The center also has ample room for healing circles, training events and community development. In the [food pantry](#), students—and Berkeley staff, a new population being welcomed there—can for the first time take what they need; previously, there were limits.



In the Basic Needs Center, a section of a mural by street culture artist and muralist Victor "Marka27" Quiñonez depicts an elder from Oaxaca. (UC Berkeley photo by Hulda Nelson)

And two expansive murals—one by [Ashley Lukashevsky](#), a visual illustrator and artist, [the other](#) by Victor "Marka27" Quiñonez, a street culture artist and muralist—brighten large sections of the space.

Years of dogged networking and conversation between students, staff and off-campus social service agencies have culminated in the center—a growing “village” with a \$1.2 million budget created by strong on- and off-campus partnerships devoted to supporting students in need, says Ruben E. Canedo, chair of Berkeley’s Basic Needs Committee. He estimates that the center will serve 5,000 to 6,000 students this academic year.

“We had to become a larger community, to activate public assistance for our students, to tap into resources for college students that had never been explored before,” he says. “It had to be centered in a village approach. It can’t be us versus them.”

“We couldn’t and can’t accept that services at hand are the only ones available,” adds [Kiyoko Thomas](#), the center’s case/operations manager. “We’re making sure no student goes unserved.”

Following a private ribbon-cutting ceremony today with Chancellor Carol Christ, a [five-day community celebration](#) begins next Monday and runs through Friday, March 1. It will include an open house and one or more receptions each day for specific populations, including undergraduates, graduate and professional degree students, faculty, administrators, staff, alumni, retirees and community members. An [RSVP](#) is required for the receptions, as space is limited.



Food from the pantry at the Basic Needs Center can be prepared by students in the center’s new community kitchen. (UC Berkeley photo by Megan Lee)

No more “resource-seeking exhaustion”

Eliminating “resource-seeking exhaustion” is a major goal of the center, says Canedo, adding that students historically have become discouraged when handed referrals on campus to multiple off-campus social service agencies.

“Students have so little free time outside of being students, and it’s exhausting to go out and find resources for housing, CalFresh, health care and wellness,” explains Berkeley student Vikremjeet Padda, Berkeley’s CalFresh coordinator. “Now, resources are being brought to campus so we don’t have to go so far to get help.”

Even on-campus units are joining the mix. One of them is Berkeley’s [Financial Aid and Scholarships](#) office, where a representative will hold drop-in hours at the center on Tuesdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Much of the activity in the Basic Needs Center will be connected to CalFresh. There are an estimated 10,000 CalFresh-eligible students at Berkeley; individuals can [apply](#) to receive up to \$193 in federal food benefits a month. According to the most recent [UC-wide statistics](#), 48 percent of undergraduates and 25 percent of graduate students in the 10-campus system are food insecure, meaning they can’t access adequate food due to a lack of money and other resources.

Each Friday, the center will host [CalFresh application sessions](#) facilitated by the [Alameda County Community Food Bank](#). Food bank representatives also will hold [CalFresh Recruitment and Outreach Sessions](#) at the center this semester from March 4-8 and April 1-5. Six paid student CalFresh ambassadors will run [ambassador hours](#) Monday through Thursday evenings to help their peers apply for benefits; the food bank’s multilingual CalFresh outreach workers will handle applications with more complex dynamics, as well as eligibility renewals.



A CalFresh student ambassador helps a fellow student sign up for federal nutrition benefits at the Basic Needs Center. (UC Berkeley photo by Megan Lee)

A [CalFresh Appeals Clinic](#) , hosted by the Berkeley Law Food Justice Project, will be held twice this semester at the Basic Needs Center for students whose CalFresh benefits were denied or are delayed.

“We are on pace to submit over 1,500 applications for CalFresh this academic year,” says Canedo, adding that at least 9,000 undergraduates and 1,000 graduate students meet the criteria for CalFresh, and that “10,000 is a conservative figure.”

A phone or in-person interview is required for those who apply for CalFresh, and eligibility workers from Alameda County Social Services already come to Berkeley three times a semester to conduct [CalFresh application and interview sessions](#) .

“But most students,” explains Thomas, “have to either schedule an off-campus appointment or a phone interview with them, which can be logistically challenging,” if a student is in classes all day and can’t easily travel off campus. She says a goal is to increase Alameda County Social Services’ capacity now that the new center is opening.

There’s a benefit to face-to-face, on-campus CalFresh interviews: Students interviewed at Berkeley by eligibility workers “have the highest application approval rates for CalFresh—over 90 percent,” says Canedo. The national average for approvals of CalFresh/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) applications is 50 percent.

Agency representatives benefit, too, from in-person visits with college students, says Thomas. “They establish relationships with the students,” she says, “so that they understand what’s going on in their lives.”



Chancellor Carol Christ and Vice Chancellor for Equity and Inclusion Oscar Dubon did the honors at the new center’s private ribbon-cutting ceremony on Friday, Feb. 22. (UC Berkeley photo by Keegan Houser)

Specialized support for students in distress

Thomas, a licensed social worker, will provide case management for students who self-identify as being homeless or otherwise in need of major assistance. Case management is a process to plan, seek, advocate for and monitor a range of social and health care services on behalf of a client.

“Students can [pre-schedule a meeting](#) with me on our new website, and I’ll also have drop-in hours,” she says. “There will be sensitivity to where students are in life, if they’re in high stress and distress. The goal is to get them to the safest, healthiest place.”

Members of the campus community can submit a care report about a student through the campus’s [Center for Support and Intervention](#). “Any care report that identifies a basic needs concern will be sent directly to me,” says Thomas. “It’s important not only to connect students to resources, but to provide them with specialized support.”

“If students don’t want case management,” she adds, “they can still come and see what’s available for them at the Basic Needs Center.”

Starting in Fall 2019, Thomas will supervise two Master of Social Welfare students who also will do one-on-one case management. “My vision has always been to expand the hours and the times that these services are available,” she says.





Los Angeles visual illustrator and artist Ashley Lukashevsky created a multi-wall mural for this large room in the new Basic Needs Center. In the second photo, student Vikrem Padda, the center's CalFresh coordinator, chats with Kiyoko Thomas, case/operations manager. (Top UC Berkeley photo by Keegan Houser, bottom UC Berkeley photo by Megan Lee)

Padda says it's common for students with basic needs insecurity to "be facing more than one insecurity crisis. Oftentimes, students who sign up for CalFresh also have problems with housing, health care and economic security."

"Students don't have experience navigating these (external social services) systems and can feel like deer in the headlights," adds Alexis Aceves, a senior and CalFresh student ambassador. "They also can be reluctant to apply for resources, feeling they'll be rejected or feeling stigma about getting help from publicly-funded programs."

Fortunately, says Padda, students "have become more open about talking about their struggles and are more willing to come visit us to see what services and programs we supply. The continued outreach we do is important, too, in getting students to shift from being silent about food and housing insecurity to having open and inclusive discussions about what they're actually experiencing."

Thomas says it's hard to predict how many students will need case management, but that "if only 2 percent of all students who experience food and housing insecurity have needs that require intensive intervention, that's 355 students."



Friday's festivities included a series of congratulatory remarks. (UC Berkeley photo by Keegan Houser)

New space, new funding

The Basic Needs Center is arriving at a critical time at Berkeley, when basic needs security is “rampant on our campus,” says Padda. “The food pantry, for example, sees exponential growth every year, as we are serving more students every semester.”

In academic year 2017-2018, for example, 6,769 unique students came to the pantry, which had 22,690 total visits. In Fall 2018 alone, 3,893 students visited the pantry, which experienced a total of 13,487 visits.

In the past two years, however, “we’ve been able to increase the number of CalFresh applications submitted by nearly 1,000,” adds Padda, “and keep a high approval rating.”

The annual building fee — rent, plus the cost of utilities, janitorial staffing and other expenses — for the center’s physical space is \$68,000. The center is opening this year because of funds from the state’s Hunger Free College Campuses initiative.



The food pantry prides itself on offering items that are high in nutrition. Fresh produce and bread are regularly on the shelves. Nearly 4,000 students came to the food pantry during fall semester, and the total number of visits was 13,487. (UC Berkeley photo by Megan Lee)

After that, the center will rely upon funding from a mix of student fees, public and private partnerships, the UC Office of the President, the state fiscal budget and philanthropy to cover the building fee and the center's full operating cost.

Students are pitching in by working through the ASUC on a basic needs referendum for the April 2019 ballot. If passed, new student fees would help expand food assistance efforts and support for homeless students.

A group of residents living near campus also is helping the center as volunteer gleaners, regularly collecting leftover crops to add to the food pantry shelves.

Aceves says this village model is one that will help her fellow students in need to thrive and feel embraced, not stigmatized.

"Now, there's a place, a space, that will help shift the culture, help end the negative stigma" that many students feel when they need help, she says of the center. "Here, they'll find people, including a specific group of students, who understand the need on this campus, which is more common than people know."

To help with basic needs efforts at Berkeley, give to the [Berkeley Student Basic Needs Fund](#) .



About

[About Berkeley News](#)

[Find an expert](#)

[Media training](#)

[Contact Berkeley News](#)

Browse news

[Changemakers](#)

[Climate Change](#)

[Democracy in Distress](#)

Connect

[Berkeleyan newsletter](#)

[E-mail alerts](#)

[Media inquiries](#)

Campus resources

[Libraries](#)

[Equity, Inclusion & Diversity](#)

[Communications & Public Affairs](#)

[Berkeley Brand](#)

Berkeley

[Visit](#)

[Events](#)

[Jobs](#)

[Give](#)

[Accreditation](#)

[HEERF Report](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Websites A-Z](#)

[Directory](#)

[Map](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Nondiscrimination](#)

[Privacy](#)



Copyright © 2024 UC Regents; all rights reserved