

How States Can Ensure Children Have Access to Food During COVID-19

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The outbreak of COVID-19 is a public health crisis that has altered almost every aspect of our lives in just a matter of weeks. With schools and child care centers closed in response, millions of food insecure students that rely on meals served at school and at enrichment programs have lost a sure source of food. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) and Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act provide additional funding for critical nutrition programs that serve children, and gives the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) the authority to grant states with more [administrative flexibility](#). As local agencies and community partners navigate this changing landscape, there are changes among federal programs that can be leveraged at the state level to increase access to nutrition services for children and their families.

Meals through School-Based Programs – For students in grades K-12, school districts have the option to provide meals for students during COVID-19 through the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, or through the Summer Food Service Program. For early childhood education providers, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) can be used at these sites to serve meals and snacks to children that would otherwise receive them during the day. In fiscal year (FY) 2018, the National School Lunch Program and CACFP served meals to [34.2 million](#) children.

Given the immediate and dire circumstances of the pandemic, the CARES Act provided [\\$8.8 billion](#) to ensure that children can receive meals while school is no longer in session. In addition, the USDA has started to evoke some of the flexibilities provided in the FFCRA for schools and child care providers to serve meals using [nationwide waivers](#), such as waivers for meal times, education and enrichment activities, and congregate meal requirements to allow for “grab-and-go” meals and home deliveries.

- Child care providers that are closed, particularly smaller centers and family child care homes, may have difficulty making meals available through CACFP. The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) has a [guide](#) with best practices for communities to serve meals during closures.
- In order to implement the waiver that allows parents and guardians to pick up meals without having their child present, states must submit a plan that ensures accountability. The USDA has provided [guidance](#) to state agencies that outlines what they should include in the plan.
- To accommodate for disruptions in the supply chain caused by COVID-19, the FFCRA waived meal pattern requirements for all child nutrition programs. However, program sponsors must submit requests to their state agency for approval prior to serving meals that do not meet the nutritional standards.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) – SNAP

provides nearly [39.7 million](#) families, [44 percent](#) of which are families with children, with food assistance each year through loading benefits on EBT cards. The P-EBT program temporarily extends those benefits to families with children who are eligible to receive free or reduced priced lunch by distributing benefits equal to the cost of school meals for the period in which school is cancelled.

The CARES Act provided an additional \$15.8 billion for expected SNAP caseload increases. In addition to this, [many states](#) have already taken advantage of the flexibilities granted in the FFCRA that temporarily waive interviews for new SNAP applications and recertifications, further adjust interview requirements, and extend certification periods.

- For the nearly [60 percent](#) of SNAP recipients that receive less than the maximum benefit, states can opt to use emergency supplemental benefits to provide households with the maximum benefit allotment for their household size for two months. For a family of four, this could provide households with up to \$646 in SNAP [benefits](#), nearly \$180 more than an average household of that size would normally receive.
- For states to provide P-EBT benefits to eligible families, they must first submit a plan to the USDA that addresses how they will operate and administer P-EBT benefits. The USDA has provided [guidance](#) on what states must include in the plans and information on which state plans have been approved.
- The 2014 Farm Bill created a [pilot program](#) that would allow SNAP recipients to make online grocery purchases at certain retailers using their EBT cards. Some states are [submitting requests](#) to the USDA to expand this demonstration in the wake of COVID-19, so that people who rely on food assistance but are immunocompromised can avoid putting themselves at risk by reducing the need to leave their homes or come into contact with large groups.

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) – WIC provides grants to states

for supplemental food, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women, and for infants and children up to age five. In [FY 2019](#), the program served more than 1.07 million pregnant and breastfeeding women, 449,000 postpartum women, 1.6 million infants, and nearly 3.3 million children overall, on average each month.

In addition to the [\\$500 million](#) in funding provided for increases in program participation, the FFCRA permits state WIC agencies to submit waivers to alter regulations that would make it more difficult for women and children to access their benefits while following social distancing guidelines. Because there are no nationwide waivers for the WIC program, it is even more imperative that state leaders be proactive in utilizing all available [administrative flexibilities](#).

- Unlike SNAP, many requirements for WIC must be completed in person, including applications and benefit issuance. However, states can request a waiver for the physical presence requirement so they can allow participants to receive their paper coupons or reload EBT cards remotely.
- If a state indicates limited availability of items included in the food package due to disruptions in the food supply chain, the state can request a waiver to substitute types and amounts of certain items. These [substitutions and approvals](#) vary based on geographic location and WIC agency.

During the COVID-19 crisis, all of us must ensure that children have the food they need to grow and thrive. While Congress needs to do more to improve nutrition programs and reduce food insecurity, states must do their part to ensure families with low incomes can access nutrition assistance through the additional funding and waiver flexibilities already provided to reduce child hunger in this pandemic.