Supporting Schools, Communities, and Nutrition Programs
During the COVID-19 Pandemic
Recommended State Policy Actions

Among the critical challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity is one of the most widespread and solvable. With millions of students forced to stay home due to school closures and families struggling financially, the indispensable role the federal child nutrition programs play in the lives of Americans has never been more evident. School meals offered for free or a reduced-price have enabled families to stretch their food budgets during the school year while freeing up resources to meet other basic needs. This document lists some options available to state policymakers to unlock the potential of federal and state food and nutrition programs and ensure that families and children have the support they need throughout this unprecedented crisis and beyond.

Leverage Federal Waivers, Resources and Programs

Implement and Strengthen Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT)
- Urge state agencies to promptly implement and enroll children to the maximum extent possible in the P-EBT program. This is a vital federal program available for school-age children who have lost access to free and reduced-price meals at school. View list of approved states here: https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-guidance-coronavirus-pandemic-ebt-pebt
- Enact a law providing state funds to supplement the federal P-EBT and SNAP programs in order to lift benefit levels further.
  - SNAP benefits are not adequate to meet the emergency need especially when factoring for food cost variation by geography and overall family income disruption. Studies have shown that the maximum SNAP benefit does not fully cover the cost of a meal in 99 percent of US continental counties and the District of Columbia.

Enlist Waivers and USDA Authorized Flexibilities to Strengthen the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Urge state agencies to proactively develop and submit plans to effectively and fully implement the SNAP waivers and flexibilities authorized by Congress including:
  - Use of SNAP EBT cards for online food purchase at approved retailers.
  - Extend certification periods for households
  - Adjust interview requirements for enrollment
  - Institute telephonic signatures to promote social distancing (https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/pandemic/covid-19/snap-waivers-flexibilities)
• Urge state agencies to develop and submit plans to effectively and fully implement the school nutrition programs waivers and flexibilities authorized to the US Department of Agriculture by Congress.
  o Extend the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) application deadline to ensure as many organizations can participate and adequately prepare for summer meal programs
  o Offer meals to children seven days a week
  o Evaluate area eligibility and meal pattern requests to ensure providers have the flexibility needed to operate programs. ([https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/pandemic/covid-19/cn-waivers-flexibilities](https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/pandemic/covid-19/cn-waivers-flexibilities))

**Draw Down Federal Emergency Relief Funds**

• **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Public Assistance funds** can be used to reimburse eligible costs related to the purchase and distribution of food in response to COVID-19. Eligible costs include those associated with purchasing, packaging, and/or delivering food commodities, fresh foods, shelf-stable food products, and prepared meals. State and local governments should leverage these funds to increase access to food for low-income families and children.

• The CARES Act established two emergency education relief funds.
  o **The Governor’s Emergency Relief Fund (GEERF),** provides a total of $3 billion to Governors to support school districts impacted by the pandemic and their efforts to maintain core functionality and ongoing essential and emergency educational services including funding any other services that Governors deem critical for students.
  o **The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSERF),** appropriates $13.5 billion to support Local Educational Agencies’ effort to provide a range of services and activities to meet the unique needs of low-income children and schools such as funding for planning and coordination of essential services like meal delivery.

  Governors should allocate a portion of the GEERF and ESSERF funds to boost nutrition budgets and ensure the health and economic well-being of schools and students.

**Opportunities for State Leadership**

**Ensure Racial Equity in Responding to the Impact of COVID-19**

• Establish a comprehensive and publicly available data system to track the demographic composition of residents tested, infected, admitted, recovered, and deceased due to COVID-19 to better understand the impacts and challenges of the pandemic on racial and ethnic minorities.
This is particularly important in the distribution of federal, state and local resources both during and in post-COVID-19 recovery stages. Emerging evidence from Johns Hopkins University and many other credible entities indicate that the rate of serious illness and fatalities from COVID-19 is very high in African American, Hispanic, and American Indian populations even though they constitute a small share of the total population in many states.

- Establish a statewide task force or council dedicated to study and develop data-driven and evidence-based policy recommendations and strategies to address underlying causes of health outcome disparities including the short-term and long-term negative consequences of COVID-19 on racial and ethnic minorities in the United States.
  - The task force or council should be inclusive, representing members from different racial and ethnic groups, government agencies from state to local levels, community-based organizations, schools and district representatives, non-profits, businesses, healthcare professionals and other community members.

Support School Food Service Workers
- Provide funding to ensure that school food service workers, bus drivers, volunteers, and other school employees have access to personal protective equipment (PPE) for safe preparation, handling and sustainable distribution of meals to students or their parents/guardians.
- Provide funding to subsidize the cost of child care services or extend existing child care benefits for front-line essential staff to school food service workers who are on the frontlines serving children who have lost access to free and reduced-price meals at schools due to pandemic-induced school closure.
- Recognize school food service and supporting staff serving on the front-line by declaring a day of honor and thanking them for providing meals to children and families during school closure.

Support Schools and School District Budgets and Enhance the Capacity of School Nutrition Departments to Meet Ongoing Need
- Provide additional financial resources for schools and districts to cover meal delivery transportation costs.
- Provide relief payments to school nutrition departments to support staff employment.
- Provide school food nutrition departments and other program operators with the resources and flexibility they need in the procurement and acquisition of food and other produce from local and regional farmers and producers to address potential food supply chain disruptions. The USDA allows for simplified procurement procedures during emergencies, but state agencies and child nutrition program
operators may need flexibility and guidance from the state on allowable emergency procurement procedures and standards.

- Ensure that calculations for state education aid to schools and districts are not skewed by the pandemic triggered school closures by suspending regulatory requirements that direct state education funding formulas for at least the 2020-2021 school year.
- Encourage school districts to continue providing meal service through the summer months and support continued service with available resources and flexibilities, like extending the state application deadline for participation in the summer meals program.
- Provide flexibility to state education agencies and schools in the implementation of attendance and other education requirements.

**Establish Emergency Response Funds**

- Establish an emergency grant fund to offset any unexpected funding shortfalls by state and local agencies in responding to the pandemic.
- Provide additional resources to food banks and pantries to meet the unprecedented surge in demand for immediate food services by vulnerable families.
  - Provide Emergency Food Providers (EFPs) with additional funding to support organizations’ increased costs for personnel, local food purchasing and PPE for staff and volunteers.
  - Provide guidance to EFPs for safe distribution and service of food during this crisis.

**Support Restaurants and Culinary Workers**

- Establish an emergency “Community Meals Fund” in partnership with local small businesses and community stakeholders to leverage the untapped capacity available through local restaurants to provide nutritious food for vulnerable families and children affected by pandemic declarations.
- Provide state financial support to help restaurants continue to pay their workers despite the financial hardship induced by COVID-19.

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