



Supporting Schools, Communities, and Nutrition Programs During the COVID-19 Pandemic Recommended State Policy Actions *Updated August 24, 2020*

Among the critical challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity is one of the most widespread and solvable. As millions of students face uncertainty about school operation and families continuing to struggle financially, the indispensable role the federal child nutrition programs play in the lives of Americans has never been more evident. At the same time, the pandemic creates significant challenges for these programs to feed kids, whether at home, at school, or elsewhere in their community.

State policy makers face critical decisions on the best ways to support their constituents. This document outlines recommended policy actions to leverage federal programs and stimulus funds to support child nutrition programs and ensure that students' families, nutrition program staff and volunteers, and community restaurants and their workers are able to meet their needs during this unprecedented crisis.

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Leverage Federal Funding & Support Programs Through State & Local Budgets

Allocate CARES Act Funds to Support Food Access

- The federal CARES Act allocated billions of dollars in emergency relief funds to cover costs associated with COVID-19. Three major streams of this funding are potentially available to support nutrition programs working to feed vulnerable children and families: the Governors Emergency Education Relief (GEER) Fund, the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, and the Coronavirus Relief Fund.
 - [Governors Emergency Education Relief \(GEER\) Fund](#) – approximately \$3 billion in CARES Act funds provided to Governors that can 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.
 - [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief \(ESSER\) Fund](#) - \$13.5 billion in CARES Act funds provided to state education agencies to support schools' 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. At least 90% of ESSER funds need to be allocated directly to local education agencies based on Title I funding formulas.
 - [Coronavirus Relief Fund](#) - \$150 billion in CARES Act funds funding provided through the U.S. Treasury to state, local, and tribal governments to broadly cover expenditures incurred due to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

Support school nutrition programs experiencing financial strain

- Many states are using CARES Act funds to cover costs that school nutrition programs incurred in providing emergency meals to students and families in schools closed during the 2019-2020 school year and over the summer.
 - **Example:** In **Virginia**, the Governor allocated \$3 million of the state's \$66.8 million GEER fund to cover unfunded costs for the continuation of school-based meal programs while schools were closed due to COVID-19, including hazard pay for school nutrition staff.
 - **Example:** In **California**, the state legislature and Governor allocated \$112.2 million in ESSER funds for emergency school meals in the state's 2020-21 budget. The funding will go to provide additional reimbursements of up to 75 cents for each meal served during school closures and summer break.
 - **Example:** In **North Carolina**, the state adopted HB 1043, the 2020 COVID-19 Recovery Act, which allocated \$75 million of the state's Coronavirus Relief Funds to cover nutrition services provided by schools in response to COVID-19.
 - Review our supplemental resource, [The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security \(CARES\) Act: An Overview of Federal Funding That Can Be Used For School Nutrition](#), for more information about how your state can support nutrition programs using these funds.

Bolster or establish community programs to improve food access

- The CARES Act's Coronavirus Relief Fund can broadly support pandemic response efforts by state, local, and tribal governments, including emergency food programs.
 - **Example:** In **Vermont**, the state adopted H. 966 which appropriated \$5 million from the Coronavirus Relief Fund to establish community nutrition hubs where local restaurants are engaged to provide free meals in their community
 - **Example:** In **Leon County, Florida**, the county allocated more than \$3 million in Coronavirus Relief Funds to support the local food bank serving families with low-income.

Use FEMA Public Assistance Funds

- The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has made Public Assistance Funds available to reimburse state, local, and tribal governments for eligible costs for the purchase and distribution of food in response to COVID-19. Eligible costs include those associated with purchasing, packaging, and/or delivering fresh foods, shelf-stable food products, and prepared meals. Please see our supplemental resource—[FEMA Public Assistance Grants: Leveraging Funds to Provide Meals to Vulnerable Families and Children During Covid-19](#)—for more information about using these grants to meet nutritional needs in your community.
 - **Example:** **California** established the Great Plates Delivered program, which uses FEMA funds to prepare meals for home-bound seniors.

Implement and Strengthen Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT)

- Provide the necessary resources and support to state agencies and partners to effectively implement the P-EBT program and maximize its impact in reducing child hunger by developing robust outreaching strategies and enrollment of all eligible children to the maximum extent possible. This is a vital federal program available for school-age children who have temporarily lost access to free and reduced-price meals at school. All the 50 states are approved. View the list of states and implementation guidance 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 enhance 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 even in good economic times 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.

Extend and expand the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) [waivers and flexibilities](#) as authorized by Congress to strengthen program reach and effectiveness.

- Urge state agencies to proactively develop and submit plans to effectively and fully implement all the SNAP waivers and flexibilities authorized by Congress including:
 - Implement use of SNAP EBT cards for online food purchase at approved retailers.
 - Extend certification and recertification periods for households
 - Adjust interview requirements for enrollment
 - Institute telephonic signatures to promote social distancing
 - Extend SNAP Quality Control interviews

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.

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

Develop systems and resources to support communities of color

- 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 indicates that the rate of serious illness and fatalities from COVID-19 are very high in African American, Hispanic, and American Indian populations despite constituting a small share of the total population in many states.
- Establish a statewide task force or council through legislation or executive order dedicated to addressing underlying causes of health outcome disparities resulting from 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.
 - The task force should be provided with the necessary funding and other resources to carry out its core mission, such as: identifying best practices and developing data-driven

and evidence-based interventions to address the unique short-term and long-term needs of communities of color disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

- Establish or expand a statewide culturally suitable and adequate language translation infrastructure ensuring that immigrants and communities of color have access to trusted and effective language translation services when applying for social services established in response to the pandemic and other services for which they are eligible, and to disseminate urgent information that is vital to public health and safety.

Support School & Child Nutrition Workers & Programs for School Year 2020-2021

Support School and Child Nutrition Program Workers

- Provide additional financial resources for schools and districts to cover meal delivery transportation and distribution costs.
- Provide relief payments to school nutrition departments to support staff employment.
- 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 essential workers to school and child nutrition program staff who are on the frontlines serving children.
- Recognize school and child nutrition staff serving on the frontline by declaring a day of honor and thanking them for providing meals to children and families throughout the pandemic.

Enhance the Capacity of School and Child Nutrition Programs to Meet Ongoing Need

- Provide school nutrition departments and other child nutrition program operators with the resources and flexibility they need in the procurement and acquisition of food from local and regional farmers and producers to address potential 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.
- Urge the state agency in charge of child nutrition programs to adopt and effectively implement all of the [nationwide child nutrition program waivers and flexibilities](#) made available by the US Department of Agriculture.
 - Schools and Child and Adult Care Food Program operators may serve meals for off-site consumption, provide multiple meals at one time, and distribute meals to parents or guardians on behalf of their children.
 - State agencies may offer flexibility on meeting meal pattern requirements if supply chain disruptions occur.
- Encourage the state agency in charge of child nutrition programs to submit additional waiver requests to secure [additional flexibilities](#) needed to successfully implement child nutrition programs in the coming year. These include:
 - Waiving the enrichment activity requirement for afterschool meal and snack programs.
 - Flexibility for schools that elected to adopt Provision 2 last school year.
 - Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program flexibilities like utilizing alternative sites.

Help Ensure that Schools Reach as Many Students as Possible

- Encourage eligible districts and schools to adopt the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and serve meals at no cost to students while streamlining administration and service. USDA has extended the national deadline for enrollment to August 31, 2020, allowing for more schools and school districts to adopt this option.
- Direct schools to make plans to equitably serve meals to all students, whether the students are attending school in-person or virtually.
 - **Example: California** recently adopted legislation that expanded the state's requirement that all public and classroom-based charter schools provide free and reduced-price school meals to all eligible students to include those students participating in distant learning during the 2020-21 school year.
- Require that all schools or schools in communities experiencing high poverty participate in the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program.
 - **Example: Michigan** law requires all public K-12 schools to operate a lunch program. All public schools with 20 percent or more students eligible for free and reduced-price meals must also operate a breakfast program.
- Increase accessibility free and reduced-price school meal applications by creating a statewide online application process and making applications available in all languages commonly used in the jurisdiction.
- Directly promote availability free and reduced-price school meals to increase awareness among newly-eligible families. Encourage schools and school districts to do the same.

Support Restaurants and Culinary Workers

Provide financial supports to reinforce restaurants and their workforce

- 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.
- Provide restaurants and vendors extension of the deadline in filing state business income taxes and payments including any administrative relief they would be eligible for to help accommodate the significant financial losses endured, meet immediate operational costs, and help effective business recovery.
- Establish a Restaurant Industry Stabilization Fund by providing low-interest or zero-interest loans to mitigate the severe financial losses of the restaurant industry and help ensure a smooth recovery from the pandemic-induced business disruptions.

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