

# Summer Nutrition Summit

January 12-13, 2026



# WELCOME!



**Marisa Kirk-Epstein**

Managing Director, Research, Policy,  
and Program, Share Our Strength



# Voices And Data From 2025

Lessons to Shape Summer 2026

Summer Nutrition Summit 2026



## Disclaimer

Our speakers represent their own experience with Summer EBT and non-congregate summer meal programs in their states and localities. Certain program models and implementation methods may be restricted in some states. Check with your local state agency before implementing any new meal service models or implementation methods.



# Agenda

- Welcome
- Summer EBT and Rural Non-congregate Caregiver Surveys
- Parent Vignette
- Rural Non-congregate Meal Service Survey Findings
- State agency vignette
- Summer EBT Outreach and Communication Pilot Project Insights
- Pilot project vignette



# Summer EBT & Rural Non-congregate Caregiver Surveys

Summer Nutrition Summit 2026



# Overview

- **This presentation highlights preliminary findings from caregiver surveys of Summer EBT (SEBT) and Rural Non-congregate (RNC) participants from Summer 2025.**
- **Results describe who participated, how families experienced the programs, and how SEBT and RNC meals supported households' food access and well-being during the summer.**
- **Findings reflect participant perspectives on access, ease of use, satisfaction, and perceived impacts, based on preliminary, unweighted survey data collected in Winter 2025–26.**



# Methodology

Mathematica and its partner, NORC, are conducting online surveys with representative samples of caregivers of SEBT and RNC participants from Summer 2025.

- **Survey field period:** December 2025 – January 2026
- **Languages:** English and Spanish
- **Preliminary sample sizes:** SEBT  $n = 268$ ; RNC  $n = 540$ .

**Sample sizes are based on preliminary data collected in December 2025 and January 2026.**

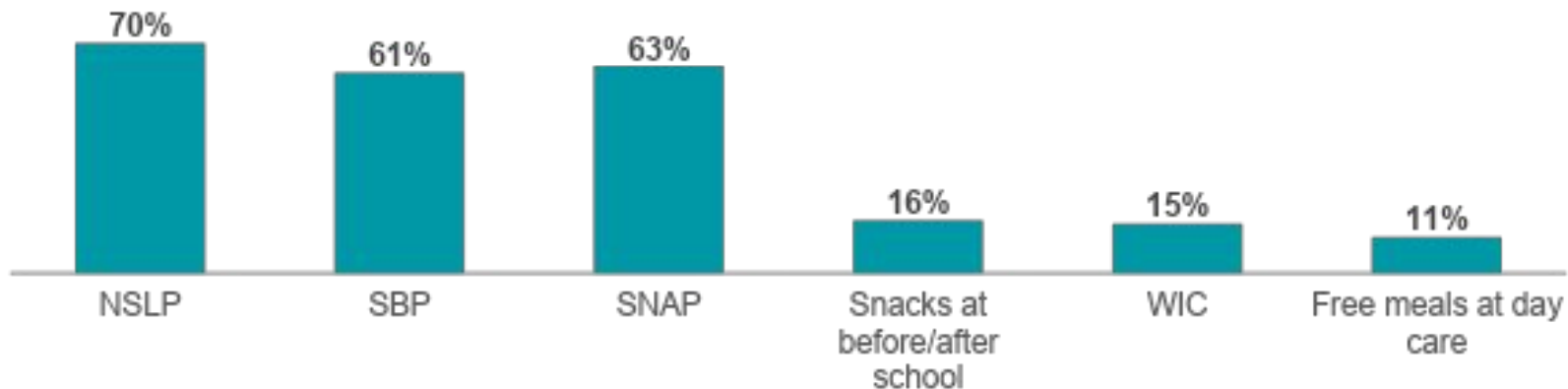
# Summer EBT Caregiver Survey Preliminary Results

**Caution:** Results are preliminary and based on unweighted data; data collection is ongoing. Results may change following completion of data collection and weighting.

## Sociodemographic Characteristics

- Over half of participants were single parents (54%).
- About two-thirds of participants were employed (68%).
- Participants were predominantly low income, with 84% living at or below 185% of the federal poverty level; 43% had income below 100% of the federal poverty level.
- Many participants relied on other food assistance programs, including school meals (70% NSLP; 61% SBP) and SNAP (63%).
- Four in 10 participants relied on emergency food sources.

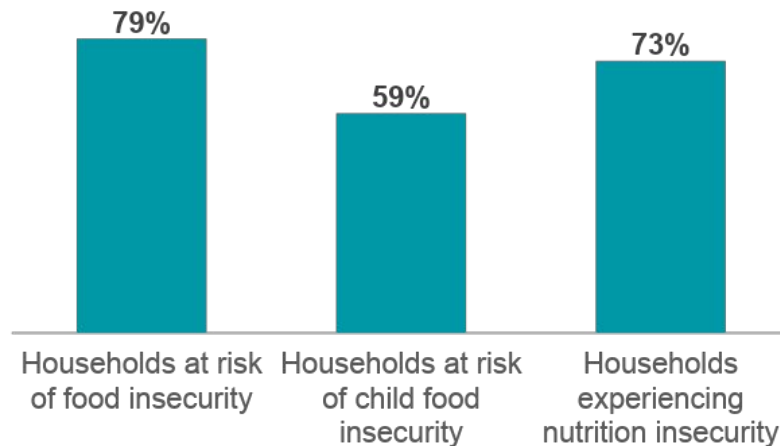
Households participating in federal food assistance programs





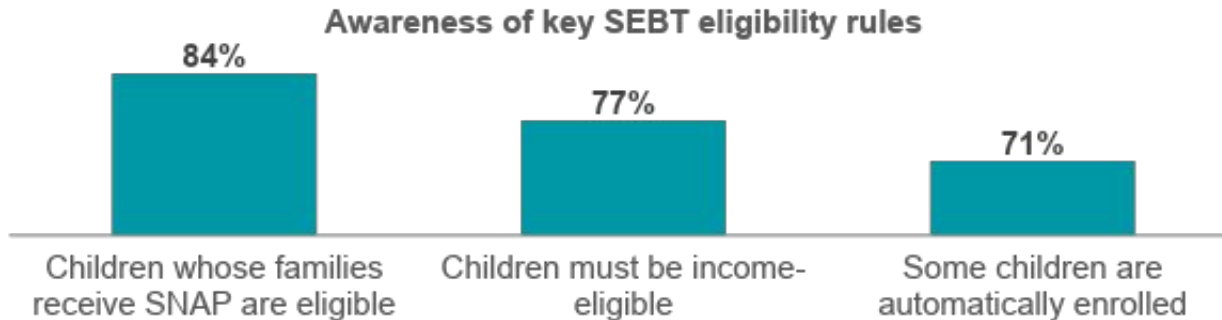
# Food Security and Nutrition Security

- Many participating households were at high risk of household food security (79%), child food insecurity (59%), and nutrition insecurity (73%), reflecting substantial unmet food and nutrition needs.
- Cost of purchasing healthy foods was the most commonly cited barrier to nutrition security (48%) among SEBT participants.



## Participant Experiences

- **Most participants had prior experience with the program**, with 77% also participating in Summer 2024.
- **Enrollment and use were straightforward for most families**, with 81% automatically enrolled, 88% spending their full benefit, and 70% of applicants reporting the process was easy.
- **Some communication gaps remain**, as 49% received a card or benefits without explanation.
- **Participants most often learned about SEBT from schools (37%) and government or social service offices (35%)**, followed by the SEBT website (26%) and friends or family (19%).
- **Awareness of key eligibility rules was generally high.**



# Impact

- **SEBT substantially improved households' ability to feed their children**, with 75% reporting the benefit enabled them to buy more of the food they needed or wanted, and nearly 90% rating the program as very or somewhat helpful.
- **The benefit eased financial pressure and stress for many households and improved well-being**, with 83% saying SEBT helped stretch their food budget, 76% reporting it helped alleviate stress, and 85% saying it helps families' well-being.
- **SEBT supported healthier and more adequate food choices**, including fresh produce (66%) and protein foods (57%), and most families reported they would need to cut back on food or other necessities without the benefit (only 20% said no adjustments would be needed).



## Participant Perspectives

*"The Sun Bucks program helps families feed their children during the summer on meals they would normally have covered at school through the free/reduced lunch program. Most of the families receiving this benefit are working parents still struggling to do what is best for their family, this makes sure feeding our kids isn't an additional stressor. Kids shouldn't suffer with hunger because parents are dealing with inflation." –SEBT participant*

*"It helps, but \$120 doesn't buy much food nowadays...that will help buy food for a couple days...not helpful for the whole summer." –SEBT participant*

## Looking to the Future

- **Interest in future participation was high**, with 94% of participants reporting they would like to receive SEBT in future summers.
- **Clear communication remains critical**, with 65% wanting information on eligibility, 60% on how to apply, and 46% on how to check on enrollment status.
- **Preferred communication channels included email (68%), mail (51%), and text messages (45%).**
- **Most families preferred receiving benefits on an existing EBT card (63%) and continuing to use the same card each summer (74%).**

# Rural Non-congregate Caregiver Survey Preliminary Results

**Caution:** Results are preliminary and based on unweighted data; data collection is ongoing. Results may change following completion of data collection and weighting.

# Sociodemographic Characteristics

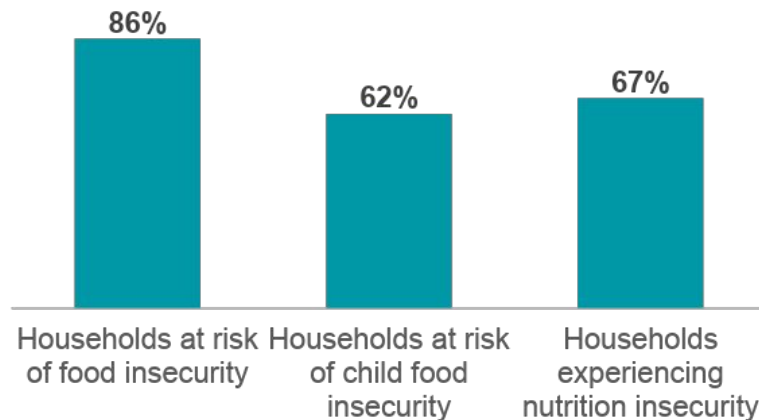
- Nearly two-thirds of RNC participants were single parents (64%).
- The majority of participants were employed (73%).
- 60% of participants had income at or below 185% of the federal poverty level; 29% had income below 100% of the federal poverty level.
- Many RNC participants relied on other food assistance programs, including school meals (68% NSLP; 54% SBP), SNAP (49%), and SEBT (49%).
- Nearly 1 in 4 participants relied on emergency food sources (39%).

Households participating in federal food assistance programs



# Food Security and Nutrition Security

- **High levels of risk for household and child food insecurity were observed among RNC participants**, with 86% of households at risk of food insecurity and 62% at risk of child food insecurity.
- **Nutrition insecurity was also common**, with 67% of households experiencing nutrition insecurity; **cost of purchasing healthy foods was the most commonly cited barrier (43%)**.



## Participant Experiences

- **Most meals were received through walk-up or curbside sites (62%),** with delivery (18%) and mobile routes (16%) serving smaller shares of families.
- **Access was generally convenient,** with about 80% traveling less than 20 minutes to meal sites (average 13 minutes); **70% primarily relied on a family car,** though some walked (16%) or relied on rides (11%).
- **Budget support, convenience, and meal quality drove participation,** with 60% citing budget support, 51% ease of feeding children, and 46% healthfulness of meals.

Commonly cited reasons for participation





## Participant Satisfaction

- **Most households were able to participate as much as they needed**, with 83% reporting sufficient participation in the program.
- Among families who could not participate as much as needed, **the most common challenges were schedule conflicts (34%) and learning about the program later in the summer (30%).**
- **Satisfaction was high across program features, particularly the convenience of food, with over 90% satisfied with food quality, quantity, convenience, pickup distance, and program communications.**
- **Few participants reported dissatisfaction across any aspect of the program (6% or less).**

Satisfaction by program feature



# Impact

- **Strong majorities viewed summer meals as financially and nutritionally beneficial**, with about 94% agreeing that the program helps families stretch food budgets and 93% agreeing that it helps children get enough to eat during the summer.
- **Support was especially strong in the context of rising food costs**, with about 93% agreeing that summer meals provide needed assistance during periods of higher food prices, including 69% who strongly agreed.
- **Among families participating in both RNC and SEBT (~50%), about 95% agreed the combined programs increased flexibility and helped meet children's food needs.**

## Looking to the Future

- **Most families plan to participate again**, with 75% intending to return next summer.
- **Families prioritized food quality and freshness**, with 77% supporting more fresh produce, 76% healthier meals, and 77% better taste or appearance.
- **Convenience and flexibility remained important**, with about 70% supporting easier-to-carry meals, larger food amounts, more pickup times, and additional locations.
- **Clearer communication could strengthen engagement**, with about 70% supporting sharing menus in advance, posting program details online, and providing preparation instructions.

## Key Takeaways

- **SEBT and RNC households have high levels of risk for food and nutrition insecurity**, indicating substantial unmet needs.
- **SEBT and RNC meals are reaching families with the greatest need**, particularly single-parent and economically disadvantaged households.
- **Families report strong benefits from SEBT**, including improved food purchasing power, reduced financial strain and stress, and support for children's well-being.

# **LeAnne Auginaush**

Indigenous Parent Leader

# What We Learned from the 2025 Rural Non-congregate Meal Service State and Sponsor Surveys

Summer Nutrition Summit 2026  
January 13, 2026  
Share Our Strength - Center for Best Practices



Summer Nutrition Summit 2026



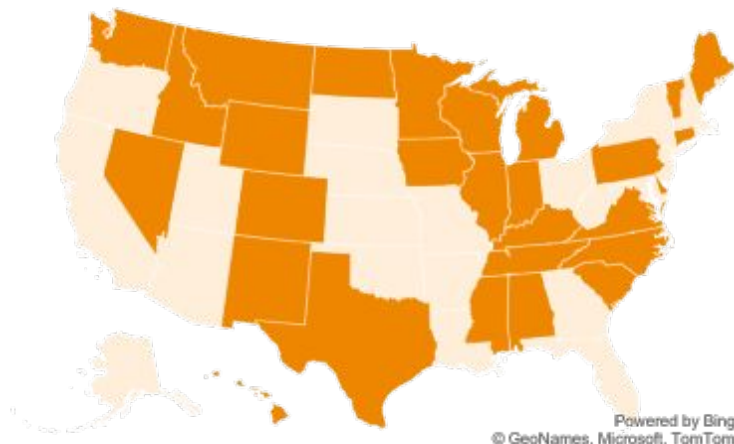


## SURVEY OVERVIEW

# State Agency Survey

**Respondents: 28 states**

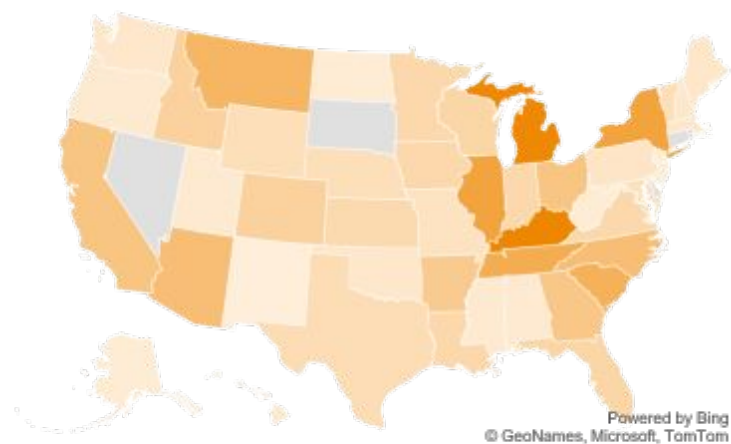
**Survey period: 8/25/25 – 10/23/25**



# Sponsor Survey

**Respondents:** 589 sponsors across 45 states and DC

**Survey period: 8/25/25 – 9/26/25**



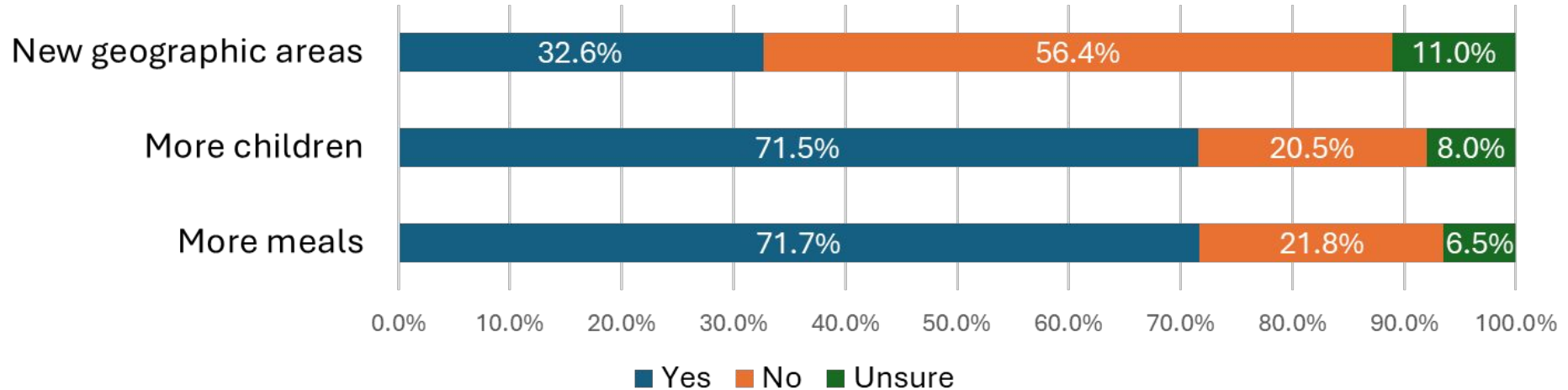
# of Sponsors

1

49

# INCREASES IN PROGRAM REACH

Comparing summer 2025 to the previous summer, did you serve...



# INNOVATION IN THE RURAL NON-CONGREGATE SERVICE



**71%** of sponsors reported implementing effective innovative strategies to enhance the rural non-congregate service



**New menu ideas** were the most commonly reported innovations (**40%** of sponsors)



**30%** of sponsors reported **new community engagement methods**

# TAILORING SERVICES TO MEET COMMUNITY NEEDS

**67%** of sponsors  
reported tailoring  
services and  
communications to  
meet community needs



Modifying pickup hours and locations



New meal distribution models



Linguistic accessibility



Culturally tailoring menus



Collaboration with trusted partners

# WHAT SPONSORS WANT

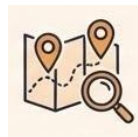


# STATE AGENCIES' SPONSOR SUPPORTS



89%

Provided one-on-one technical assistance



61%

Shared data or maps to identify high needs areas



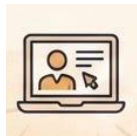
71%

Presented on RNC during sponsor meetings & trainings



50%

Used email blasts or newsletters to share RNC opportunities



64%

Offered webinars, cohorts, or workshops focused on RNC



11%

Provided planning or implementation funding/grants



61%

Conducted targeted outreach to sponsors in areas without prior service



# SPONSOR THOUGHTS ON SUSTAINABILITY

Reported challenges to  
**sustainability** or **expansion**

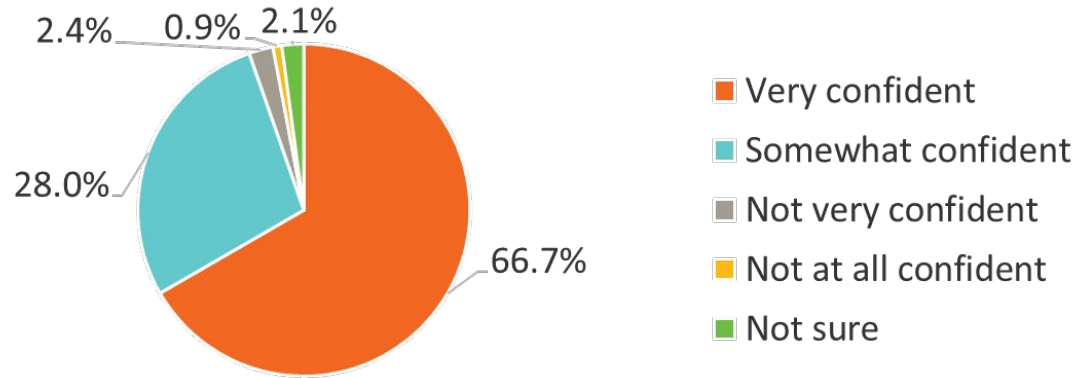
- Rising costs
- Funding concerns
- Staffing shortages
- Limited cold storage
- Unpredictable participation levels

# SPONSOR THOUGHTS ON SUSTAINABILITY

## Reported challenges to **sustainability** or **expansion**

- Rising costs
- Funding concerns
- Staffing shortages
- Limited cold storage
- Unpredictable participation levels

How confident are you that your organization can sustain non-congregate operations in future summers?

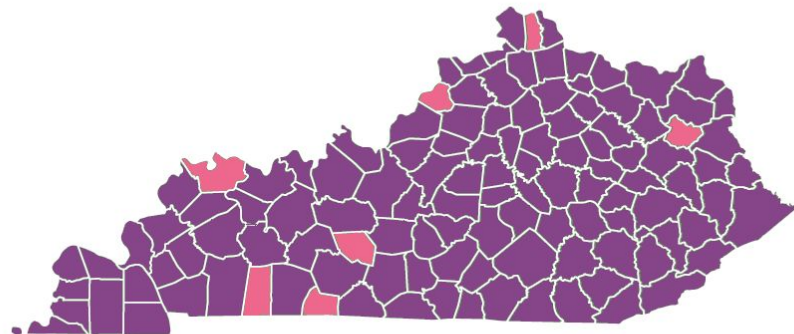


# What These Findings Mean for 2026



# KENTUCKY

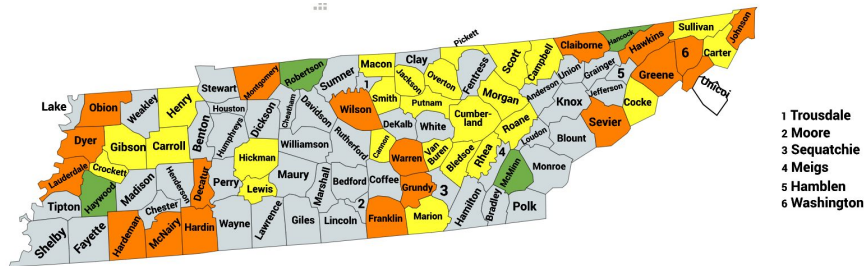
- Summer meals have steadily increased every summer since 2022 (**3.3 million**) through summer 2025 (**11 million**).
- A little over **9 million** non-congregate summer meals were served summer 2025.
- In 2025, **113 of Kentucky's 120 counties** had access to non-congregate meals. **All 120** counties had summer meal access for the first time!
- Between summer 2023 and 2024, an estimated 55% more children were reached through non-congregate.



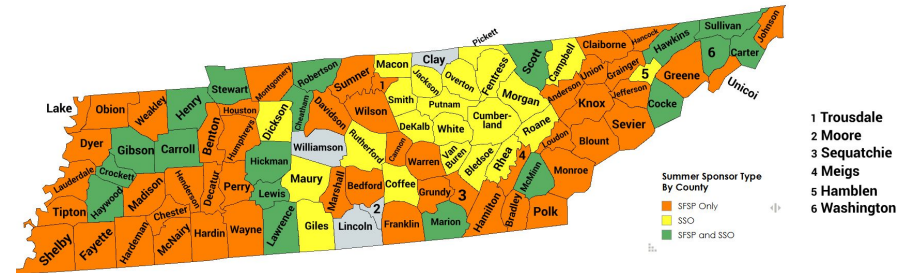
*Counties with Access to Rural, Non-Congregate Summer Meals Across Kentucky 2025*

# TENNESSEE

- Summer meals have seen a huge increase in the last year (~8 **million**) in summer 2024 to summer 2025 (~12 **million**).
- Our goal has been to have at least 1 non-congregate site in each of the 93 eligible counties and we are around 91 of the 93 eligible counties



Rural, Non-Congregate Summer  
Meals Across Tennessee 2023



Preliminary - Rural, Non-Congregate  
Summer Meals Across Tennessee 2025

Summer Nutrition Summit 2026



# Taking Success to Scale

- State Agency Support
- Collaboration Among Sponsors
- Partnerships in the Community
- Consistency from Year to Year
- Relationships and Trust
- Teamwork
- Transparency



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# Summer EBT Outreach and Communications Pilots: What Worked in 2025

## Data Insights from School Staff, Partners, and Families

Findings from the Parent Survey (n=1,322), School Staff Survey (n=74), and interviews/debriefs with State agencies, Campaign Partners, and School Staff



# Summer EBT Comms & Outreach Pilots 2025



- Clear, family-centered language
- Simplified calls to action, leaning on state-specific eligibility checker
- Paid social ads in targeted areas
- Leveraging schools as messengers

# What Worked in the 2025 Outreach & Communications Pilot

## Our Approach

We conducted a mixed-methods evaluation combining quantitative survey data from 74 school staff members, 1,322 parents, and in-depth qualitative interviews/debriefs from state agencies, campaign partners, and schools staff. This comprehensive approach focused specifically on outreach and communications strategies for Summer EBT/SUN Bucks.

## Three Clear Lessons

1

**SEBT requires earlier communication**

2

**Schools are willing partners when they have the right tools and support**

3

**High value in consistent messaging from multiple trusted sources**

# Lesson 1: SEBT requires earlier communication (Leverage the school calendar)

## Survey Insight

Outreach was **most effective** when materials were sent to families and staff before May while school staff are still available.

## What School Staff Told Us

"In order to better communicate with families, information is needed no later than May 1."

"Unless we get information earlier, we can't expand communication."

"SUN Bucks is a year-round program shoved into six months."

## KEY MESSAGES TO SHARE WITH FAMILIES THIS YEAR



### Spring Messaging AFTER YOUR SPRING BREAK

Sign up for \$120 in extra grocery support over the summer!  
Visit [summerebt.org/states/YOUR STATE](https://summerebt.org/states/YOUR STATE) to see if you're automatically enrolled or if you need to apply.



### End of School Messaging THE LAST MONTH OF SCHOOL

When school is out, Summer EBT is in!  
Summer EBT benefits are **loaded onto your existing card or mailed to your address**. If you haven't received Summer EBT, you can still apply.



### Over the Summer Messaging A MONTH BEFORE DEADLINE

Don't miss out on Summer EBT support!  
If you haven't received Summer EBT yet, there's still time! The deadline to apply is **DATE**.



### Back to School Messaging WHEN STUDENTS RETURN

Are your Summer EBT benefits still on the shelf?  
Be sure to use them before they expire after 4 months.

## Lesson 2: Schools are willing partners in Summer EBT outreach when they have the right tools and support

76%

Consider school communication very or extremely valuable

Staff strongly endorse their role in helping families access SEBT benefits

### School Staff as Trusted & Willing Partners

"As a school system, **we are your allies**. We are part of your tribe. The school is your safe place."

"**A teacher would be so honored**, 'here is a flyer with all the info, step by step.' And I will have this comfort that my kids are going to eat this summer. But **it has to be streamlined and turn-key**."

87%

Report moderate to high familiarity with SEBT

School staff are ready to support families

### How Districts Activated

In the pilots, districts made significant impacts by:

- Printing banners, flyers, and yard signs for high-visibility placement
- Adding SEBT information to newsletters, robocalls, and district websites
- Compensating staff, including registrars, family liaisons, and community coordinators, to lead outreach efforts

## Lesson 2: Schools are willing partners in Summer EBT outreach when they have the right tools and support

We asked School staff about their preferred resources for outreach, this is what they said:

90%

**Ready-to-use toolkits** including flyers, scripts, and social media posts that require no additional design work

59%

**Translated materials** to reach families in their home languages

41%

**Staff training** to answer common questions confidently

“

"We used all the stuff, the social media graphics having them ready was great, easy. We didn't have to recreate the wheel."

“

"The factsheet for school employees... this is so helpful."

”

”

- ❏ **Key Takeaway: Modest funding combined with ready-to-use resources leads to big increases in school engagement with relatively low burden on staff. When materials are ready to deploy, schools become powerful amplifiers of SEBT messaging.**

## Lesson 3: High Value in Consistent Messages from Multiple Trusted Partners

### Voices from the Field

“

"The more steps parents need to go through to find out what they need to do, the less likely they will do it. You want first person who talk to them to know where to send them"

”

”

“

"More ongoing communication led to a decrease in confusion."

”

”

“

"We want them to have this information beforehand, rather than after they get 25 questions."

”

”

“

"School staff don't want to give wrong information, they want to share what comes from a trusted, consistent source."

”

”

- ❑ **Key Takeaway:** Families receive clearer support when partners collaborate early, align on messaging, and reinforce the same simple instructions across schools, state agencies, and community partners. This coordination reduces the burden on families, schools and agencies, and builds trust in the Summer EBT/SUN Bucks program.

# Where to find the Summer EBT Outreach Playbook



[bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/programs/summer-ebt-outreach-playbook](https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/programs/summer-ebt-outreach-playbook)





# Arkansas Summer EBT Outreach

## Arkansas Department of Human Services Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance

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Division of County Operations - SNAP Policy Unit



[humanservices.arkansas.gov](https://humanservices.arkansas.gov)

# Summer EBT Outreach



Arkansas Department of Human Services has worked closely with Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance and Department of Education to ensure that families are aware of the Summer EBT program.



Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance has assisted the Department of Human Services by working closely with provisional school districts to determine children who are eligible for the SEBT benefit but would need to apply.



Department of Education assisted Department of Human Services by coordinating to identify students who qualify for automatic benefits without the need for an application.

# Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS) and Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance (AHRA)



- Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance (AHRA) started partnering with Arkansas DHS in 2024.
- DHS continued this partnership with AHRA to support outreach, targeting provisional school district students who would not be automatically eligible via direct eligibility.
- While DHS manages the program's administration and funding distribution, ARHA acts as a critical advocacy and support layer.

# Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS) and Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance (AHRA)

The partnership between Arkansas DHS and Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance focuses on four primary areas:

- ☐ Outreach and Public Awareness
  - AHRA serves as a primary outreach partner for DHS, working to get the word out about Summer EBT before the school year ends.
- ☐ Application and Technical Support
  - While DHS manages the official application and benefit issuance, AHRA provides direct support to families through it's SNAP-ARK Call Center.
- ☐ Program Coordination
  - AHRA works closely with state officials to coordinate "Summer Nutrition Kickoff" events, which highlight the multiple food assistance available.
- ☐ Addressing Food Insecurity
  - AHRA provides the advocacy and community data that supports the state's continued participation in federal programs like SEBT. This is critical given that Arkansas has historically faced high rates of food insecurity.



# Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance Outreach Activities



# We Care. We Act. We Change Lives.

[Amanda.Bunch@dhs.arkansas.gov](mailto:Amanda.Bunch@dhs.arkansas.gov)

[Pbarker@arhungeralliance.org](mailto:Pbarker@arhungeralliance.org)



[humanservices.arkansas.gov](http://humanservices.arkansas.gov)





**THANK YOU!**



We want to hear from you!  
Scan to take our survey:

Summer Nutrition Summit 2026 -  
Post Summit Feedback

