

Ensuring Young Children Have Healthy Meals During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Practically overnight, the coronavirus pandemic has dramatically altered the daily lives of our nation's children and families. While everyone—regardless of race, age, gender, or socioeconomic status—is experiencing the pandemic's effects, the long-term fallout won't affect all of us equally. Families with low incomes, communities of color, immigrant families, women, the elderly, and people with disabilities who have long been economically marginalized are already losing—or at great risk of losing—income, employment, and housing. We're seeing widespread closures of schools and early care and education programs at the same time families are facing increasing economic uncertainty. Many parents and caregivers are wondering how they'll be able to keep food on the table as a result.

Millions of children depend on school or child care for healthy meals during the day. In fiscal year 2019, roughly 4.5 million children in child care centers and family child care homes received healthy meals and snacks each day through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).¹ On an average day, more than 30 million children receive free or reduced price lunches through the National School Lunch program.²

Federal policymakers are working on a series of economic stimulus bills to mitigate the long-term health and economic harm of the coronavirus on families across the country. One of those bills—the Families First Coronavirus Response Act or "Families First"—became law on Wednesday, March 18.³ Families First includes several important provisions that will help parents and caregivers keep food on the table during this crisis:

Child care, pre-kindergarten, and Head Start programs that participate in CACFP can distribute "grab and go" meals to families during closures. Under normal conditions, programs and schools are required to serve meals through CACFP or other child nutrition programs on-site and in "congregate" (group) settings. Meals are also expected to be served at certain times of day. On March 20, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced that it was issuing nationwide waivers for these requirements for all child nutrition programs, including CACFP. USDA is also waiving the requirement that afterschool programs provide meals and snacks in a structured environment with an educational or enrichment activity. The "nationwide waiver" means that states can take advantage of these flexibilities without having to apply.⁴

States can waive the requirement for families to enroll in-person in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and request waivers for other administrative requirements. Families First included a \$500 million boost in WIC funding and allows states to [apply for a waiver](#) to enroll new families or recertify existing participants without an in-person appointment. States can also request to waive other administrative requirements that impede their ability to offer assistance to families in the current crisis.

States can request emergency benefit increases for all current SNAP recipients and flexibility on various administrative requirements. Families First allows states to request benefit increases for SNAP recipients up to the maximum allotment based on household size.⁵ The bill also gives USDA the authority to approve state requests to change how SNAP is administered to manage increased demand for benefits at the same time that state governments are trying to promote social distancing.⁶

Families with children who participate in the National School Lunch Program can receive emergency food assistance during K-12 school closures. Families First allows states to provide emergency Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) food assistance to families with school-age children who aren't receiving meals through the National School Lunch Program due to school closures.⁷ Children are eligible for additional benefits when their school has been closed for a minimum of five days. Unfortunately, this benefit is **not** available to families with young children who typically receive meals through CACFP.

Additional action is necessary

Regardless of how long the pandemic lasts, families need multiple pathways to obtain healthy foods, including meal distribution through schools and child care programs, food banks, and expanded access to nutrition assistance programs. What's more, the ability to get healthy meals shouldn't be contingent on the ages of your children, where your children go to school, or whether you have children at all. We must take action to ensure that everyone has the resources they need to weather this public health crisis.

Actions for federal policymakers:

- Prioritize a significant expansion of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the next coronavirus stimulus package, including additional funding, an increase in the minimum SNAP benefit, and a suspension of all administrative requirements that eliminate or weaken benefits. Access to expanded benefits should **not** be contingent on having children.
- Pass the Pandemic Assistance Disaster Act to expand the ability of the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide financial assistance—including Disaster SNAP, Disaster Unemployment Assistance, and other needs assistance to families during a pandemic.

Actions for state administrators of early childhood programs:

- Issue guidance to child care and early education programs who participate in CACFP and encourage them to provide breakfast and lunch to participating families during closures.
- Encourage agencies responsible for administering WIC and SNAP take full advantage of available flexibilities to expand access to nutrition assistance for families.⁸
- Coordinate public awareness activities about access to WIC and emergency food assistance with agencies administering nutrition assistance programs and ensure outreach activities and materials are available in multiple languages.

For children's advocates:

- Call your member of Congress and tell them ALL families—not just those with school-age children—need expanded access to nutrition benefits in the next stimulus bill.
- Make sure nutrition program administrators in your state take full advantage of available flexibilities to ensure families can keep food on the table.
- Inform early childhood and after school programs participating in CACFP that they're eligible to distribute meals when closed.
- Widely disseminate information about WIC, SNAP, and meal distribution sites in your community using resources in multiple languages.
- Identify what's helping and hurting WIC and SNAP participation in your state and encourage state administrators to apply for necessary waivers.

For child care and early education providers:

- If you participate in CACFP, provide breakfast and lunch to the families you serve during program closures. Our partners at the Food Resource & Action Center (FRAC) recommend offering families multiple meals at one time and having flexible pick-up hours.⁹
- If you can't disseminate meals through your program, most school districts are continuing to offer free "grab and go" breakfast and lunch while schools are closed. **In many cases, meals are available to all children under age 18 in the household, regardless of where they're enrolled in school.** Find out who is eligible to receive free meals in your community and let families know where they can find a local distribution site.
- Encourage eligible families to enroll in WIC and SNAP if they aren't already participating.
- Make sure families in your program know about changes to WIC enrollment and redetermination processes, as well as emergency food assistance for their school-age children.

CLASP is continuing to monitor state and federal actions in response to COVID-19. We are advocating for legislative and administrative actions that adequately meet the needs of families with low incomes and the systems that support them. Stay up to date with us at <https://www.clasp.org/clasp-responds-covid-19>.

Endnotes

¹ Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), Facts: The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), February 2020, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/cacfp-fact-sheet.pdf>.

² FRAC, "National School Lunch Program," <https://frac.org/programs/national-school-lunch-program>. Accessed March 20, 2020.

³ Families First Coronavirus Response Act (H.R. 6201). Enacted March 18, 2020. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6201/text>

⁴ See the following memos from USDA for additional information: Angela M. Kline, Memo to Regional Directors, Special Nutrition Programs, All Regions and State Directors, Child Nutrition Programs, All States, "Nationwide Waiver to Allow Meal Service Time Flexibility in the Child Nutrition Programs," March 20, 2020, USDA, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/resource/cn-covid-19-meal-times-nationwide-waiver>; Angela M. Kline, Memo to Regional Directors, Special Nutrition Programs, All Regions and State Directors, Child Nutrition Programs, All States, "Nationwide Waiver to Allow Non-Congregate Feeding in the Child Nutrition Programs," March 20, 2020, USDA, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/resource/cn-covid-19-meal-times-nationwide-waiver>; Memo to Regional Directors, Special Nutrition Programs, All Regions and State Directors, Child Nutrition Programs, All States, "Nationwide Waiver of the Activity Requirement in Afterschool Child Care Nutrition Programs," March 20, 2020, USDA, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/resource/cn-covid-19-meal-times-nationwide-waiver>.

⁵ See Jessica Shahin, Memo to SNAP State Agencies, issued March 20, 2020, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNAP-COVID-EmergencyAllotmentsGuidance.pdf>.

⁶ Note that the Act does not specifically lay out how SNAP operations and administrations may change. For specific recommendations, see Dorothy Rosenbaum, Ed Bolen, Zoe Neuberger, and Stacy Dean, *USDA, States Must Act Swiftly to Deliver Food Assistance Allowed by Families First Act*, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 20, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/3-20-20fa.pdf>.

⁷ See Jessica Shahin and Kristen Hyatt, Memo to SNAP State Agencies and Child Nutrition State Agencies, March 20, 2020, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/resource/state-guidance-coronavirus-pandemic-ebt-p-ebt>.

⁸ For recommendations for WIC administrators, see Zoë Neuberger, "Governors' Coronavirus Plans Must Protect Nutrition for Pregnant Women, Young Children," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 18, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/governors-coronavirus-plans-must-protect-nutrition-for-pregnant-women-young-children> and FRAC, *Maximizing WIC's Role in Supporting Health, Food Security, and Safety During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Opportunities for Action*, March 2020, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/wic-role-during-covid-19-pandemic.pdf>. For recommendations for SNAP administrators, see Parker Gilkesson, *CLASP's State Recommendations for SNAP COVID-19 Response*, March 2020, <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/clasp-s-state-recommendations-snap-covid-19-response> and Rosenbaum et al., *USDA, States Must Act Swiftly*.

⁹ FRAC, *Ensuring Access to the Child Nutrition Programs in the Event of School Closures*, March 2020, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/two-pager-child-nutrition-3-17-2020-PDF-compressed.pdf>.