

# COVID-19 Best Practice Information: Food Assistance Programs for Low-Income Households with School-Age Children

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## Background

- Many children from low-income households rely on no-cost or low-cost school breakfasts, lunches, and other child nutrition programs to meet their nutritional requirements. On a daily basis, one in seven U.S. households with children are affected by a lack of access to food, or food insecurity.<sup>1</sup> The majority of these children depend on meals received at school from the School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program. More than 30 million children benefit from the National School Lunch Program, a federally assisted meal program traditionally provided on school days.<sup>2</sup>
- The following is a list of key findings and considerations for jurisdictions and communities regarding the ongoing coronavirus pandemic disease (COVID-19) operations across the country. These are best practices for consideration and do not constitute and should not be considered as guidance in any way.<sup>3</sup>

## Key Considerations

- States, territories, and tribes are already using their existing flexibility under federal nutrition programs to provide meals to children.
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has provided waivers that allow program operators to offer families grab-and-go nutritious meals at designated locations or via delivery if their school is closed due to COVID-19. Any state may elect to use these waivers that apply to all child nutrition programs.

## Lessons Learned Related to COVID-19 and Food Assistance Programs for Low-Income Households with School-Aged Children

### Schools provide students free meals while closed

- **Potential Best Practice:** Officials in many school districts are making an early shift to their summertime

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<sup>1</sup> 2020 The Hill, What Coronavirus Means for Food Insecurity, <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/488055-what-coronavirus-means-for-food-insecurity>

<sup>2</sup> 2020 The Today Show, Want to help feed kids who depend on school meals? Here are ways to give, <https://www.today.com/parents/donate-kids-left-hungry-school-coronavirus-closures-t176066>

<sup>3</sup> This document contains references and links to non-federal resources and organizations. This information is meant solely for informational purposes and is not intended to be an endorsement of any non-federal entity by FEMA, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, or the U.S. government.



approach for meal service by providing grab-and-go meals distributed at select sites. These bagged or boxed meals (e.g., sandwiches, milk, and nonperishables) may be provided for the entire week and may include lunch, breakfast, snacks and supper.<sup>4,5</sup>

- School districts across the country are using buses to deliver free meals to children. This ensures that children have access to meals while staying with vulnerable family members who are self-isolating, or for those whose parents must continue to work and are unable to drive to a location to pick up meals. Other districts are providing take-away meals through curbside pick-up operations.<sup>6, 7</sup>
  - **Important Note:** USDA has waived a number of school meal policies while schools are closed due to pandemic. Children no longer have to be present for meal pick-up or delivery and multiple meals may be picked-up, up to one week of meals. USDA has created an online tool to find meals at over 40,000 sites nationwide.<sup>8</sup>
- The City of Cambridge, Massachusetts partnered with an anti-hunger organization to deliver food to neighborhoods with families who rely on school lunches.<sup>9</sup>
- **Potential Best Practice:** The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services activated their Summer BreakSpot website, where families can find free meals for children under 18 during COVID-19 school closures. Floridians can visit the website, enter their address, and search up to 50 miles to find participating free meal locations near them.<sup>10</sup>
- **Potential Best Practice:** Seattle-area food bank volunteers are assembling weekend food bags for pickup at school sites to ensure students have access to food on weekends when school lunch programs are not available. These bags contain non-perishable food items (e.g., canned goods, snacks, and juice) for families in need. Numerous foodbanks across the country are conducting similar practices, some of which provide up to three meals per day.<sup>11</sup>
- **Potential Best Practice:** Meals to You is USDA's innovative partnership with the Baylor University Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, McLane Global, and PepsiCo, to feed low-income kids in rural areas. The initiative will serve nearly 5 million meals per week to rural children impacted by COVID-19-related school closures – meals are shipped directly to the children's homes.<sup>12</sup>

## USDA launches new pandemic electronic benefits program to feed kids.

- **Strength:** As of May 29, 38 states have been approved to operate Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (PEBT), a new program authorized by the Families First Coronavirus Act (FFCRA). The program helps families with children eligible for free or reduced-price meals during school closures. As a supplemental food

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<sup>4</sup> 2020 USDA, Child Nutrition Program Meal Service during Novel Coronavirus Outbreaks: Questions and Answers #3, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SP14-2020s-a.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> 2020 USDA, USDA Extends Flexibilities, Paves the Way for Meals for Kids to Continue through Summer, <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2020/05/15/usda-extends-flexibilities-paves-way-meals-kids-continue-through>

<sup>6</sup> 2020 Pensacola News Journal, Escambia County School District Updates List of Sites Offering Free Meals, <https://www.pnj.com/story/news/2020/04/06/coronavirus-escambia-county-schools-updated-list-sites-meals/2954144001/>

<sup>7</sup> 2020 National Public Radio, Schools Race to Feed Students Amid Coronavirus Closures, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/20/818300504/schools-race-to-feed-students-amid-coronavirus-closures>

<sup>8</sup> 2020 USDA, Find Meals for Kids When Schools are Closed, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/meals4kids>

<sup>9</sup> 2020 National Public Radio, Schools Race to Feed Students Amid Coronavirus Closures, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/20/818300504/schools-race-to-feed-students-amid-coronavirus-closures>

<sup>10</sup> 2020 Summer BreakSpot, <https://summerbreakspot.freshfromflorida.com/>

<sup>11</sup> 2020 Seattle Public Schools, Student Meals, [https://seattleschools.org/district/calendars/news/what\\_s\\_new/coronavirus\\_update/resources/student\\_meals](https://seattleschools.org/district/calendars/news/what_s_new/coronavirus_update/resources/student_meals)

<sup>12</sup> 2020 USDA, Meals to You to Serve 5 Million Meals a Week to Rural Children, <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2020/05/05/meals-you-serve-5-million-meals-week-rural-children>

purchasing benefit for current Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients as well as a new EBT benefit for other eligible households, Pandemic EBT will offset the cost of meals that would have otherwise been consumed at school.<sup>13</sup>

This complements other flexibilities for child nutrition programs that:

- Allow parents and guardians to pick up meals to bring home to their children;
- Temporarily waives meal service time requirements to allow serving meals outside of standard meal times and make it easier to pick up food for multiple days at once;
- Allow meals to be served in non-congregate settings to support social distancing; and
- Minimize the exposure to COVID-19 by waiving the requirement that after school meals and snacks served through certain programs be accompanied by educational activities.<sup>14</sup>

Topics for the “Best Practices” series are generated from crowd-sourced suggestions. Have an idea? Let us research it! Organizations and individuals can e-mail best practices or lessons learned to [fema-cipsupport@fema.dhs.gov](mailto:fema-cipsupport@fema.dhs.gov).

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<sup>13</sup> 2020 Food Research & Action Center, Pandemic EBT (P-EBT): An Update on State Plans, <https://frac.org/blog/p-ebt-an-update-on-state-plans>

<sup>14</sup> 2020 USDA, State Guidance on Coronavirus Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-guidance-coronavirus-pandemic-ebt-pebt>