

USDA Issues Pandemic Flexibilities for Schools and Day Care Facilities through June 2022 to Support Safe Reopening and Healthy, Nutritious Meals

Nutrition standards return with options and resources to support safety and social distancing

Press Release

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WASHINGTON, April 20, 2021 – The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) today issued a broad range of flexibilities to allow school meal programs and childcare institutions across the country to return to serving healthy meals in fall 2021 as part of the Biden-Harris Administration’s commitment to reopen schools safely. Several meal service flexibilities that enable social distancing are now extended through June 30, 2022. The waivers continue the Administration’s commitment to provide safe, healthy meals free of charge to children as the pandemic continues to threaten the food and nutrition security of our most vulnerable.

“USDA will remain relentless in ensuring our nation’s children get the critical nutrition they need,” said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. “States and districts wanted waivers extended to plan for safe reopening in the fall. USDA answered the call to help America’s schools and childcare institutions serve high quality meals while being responsive to their local needs as children safely return to their regular routines. This action also increases the reimbursement rate to school meal operators so they can serve healthy foods to our kids. It’s a win-win for kids, parents and schools.”

[A recent study from Tufts University](#) found that in 2018, schools were the single healthiest source of U.S. food consumed across a sample of children and adults. The 2018 study found that diet quality for foods from schools improved significantly from a similar study conducted in 2003-2004.

Schools nationwide will be allowed to serve meals through USDA’s National School Lunch Program Seamless Summer Option (SSO), which is typically only available during the summer months. This option maintains the nutrition standards of the standard school meal programs – including a strong emphasis on providing fruits and vegetables, fluid milk, whole grains, and sensible calorie levels, while allowing schools to serve free meals to all children. In addition, schools that choose this option will receive higher-than-normal meal reimbursements for every meal they serve, which will support them in serving the most nutritious meals possible while managing increased costs associated with pandemic-related operational and supply chain challenges. This option also affords schools the financial flexibility to further customize their meal service design to fit their local needs.

“Students’ success in the classroom goes hand in hand with their ability to access basic needs like healthy and nutritious meals,” said Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona. “It’s critical that our efforts to reopen schools quickly and safely include programs that provide access to free, healthy meals for our most vulnerable students, particularly those whose communities have been hardest hit by the pandemic. This program will ensure more students, regardless of their educational setting, can access free, healthy meals as more schools reopen their doors for in-person learning.”

USDA will continue to offer targeted meal pattern flexibility and technical assistance as needed. In addition, schools and both child and adult care institutions can continue providing breakfasts, lunches, and after school snacks in non-group settings at flexible meal times. Parents or guardians can also pick up meals for their

children when programs are not operating normally, all while maintaining social distancing consistent with federal recommendations.

Up to 12 million children are currently living in households where they may not always have enough to eat during the pandemic. During the past year, America's schools and childcare centers have provided a nutrition lifeline for children across the country, many of whom depend on USDA's child nutrition programs for the nourishment they need to grow and thrive. Some kids rely on these programs for as many as three meals a day, underscoring how essential it is for USDA to empower schools and childcare centers to continue their dedicated efforts to serve healthy meals, safely.

Earlier this month, the Department of Education released [Volume 2 of its COVID-19 Handbook](#) (PDF, 5 MB), "Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students' Needs," which includes initial recommendations and resources for schools and communities to support our nation's most vulnerable students during the pandemic, including those facing food insecurity. The Handbook includes strategies to increase student and family access to meal programs during the school year and over the summer, including specific strategies for underserved students such as students experiencing homelessness and English learners, and how federal funding can support these efforts.

The announcement today comes in addition to a variety of actions taken recently by USDA to strengthen food security, drive down hunger, and put a greater emphasis on the importance of nutrition. Just recently, USDA maximized economic relief for struggling families by taking administrative action on SNAP emergency allotments by targeting an additional \$1 billion per month to roughly 25 million people. The Biden-Harris Administration's American Rescue Plan Act provides over \$12 billion in new nutrition assistance to address hardship caused by the pandemic, including:

- Extending a 15 percent increase in SNAP benefits— providing over \$1.1 billion per month in additional benefits for about 41 million participants—through September 2021;
- Adding \$1.1 billion in new funding for territories that operate nutrition assistance block grants—home to nearly 3 million Americans—to support those hard-hit by the pandemic;
- Extending and expanding P-EBT—a program that served over 8.4 million families with children at its peak last year—through the duration of the public health emergency;
- Funding meals for young adults experiencing homelessness through Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) emergency shelters;
- Providing nearly \$900 million for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), including a temporary increase in fruit and vegetable vouchers to \$35 per month and an historic investment in innovation and outreach to better serve more than 6.2 million people that use WIC to support a healthy start for infants and young children.

For a complete list of the waiver actions announced today, visit FNS's COVID Response page at www.fns.usda.gov/coronavirus.

USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. In the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is transforming America's food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, fairer markets for all producers, ensuring access to safe, healthy and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices, making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America, and committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America. To learn more, visit www.usda.gov. USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.