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Summer Food for Children: An Overview of Federal Aid

Introduction

Since the late 1960s, the federal government has provided assistance for summer meals served to children through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), which provides funding for meals served by nonprofit organizations, school districts, and public agencies to children during the summer. The Seamless Summer Option (SSO), which was authorized in 2004, allows school districts to operate a modified version of the school meals programs (the National School Lunch Program [NSLP] and School Breakfast Program [SBP]) into the summer.

Traditionally, summer meals have been consumed on-site with other participants (referred to as *congregate feeding*). In December 2022, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328) enabled off-site consumption of summer meals for children living in rural areas. It also authorized a permanent, nationwide Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (Summer EBT) Program for Children to provide eligible households with benefits over the summer that can be redeemed for groceries. Summer EBT has operated as a demonstration project since 2011.

The summer meal and Summer EBT programs are administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).

Summer Meal Programs

The summer meal programs (SFSP and SSO) are authorized under Section 13 of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act. They provide federal reimbursement for meals served by participating institutions to children during summer vacation periods in May through September (except for schools with continuous calendars). They may also operate during unanticipated school closures between October and April. Federal funding is provided to state agencies, which oversee and distribute reimbursements to eligible institutions.

Eligible Institutions

In SFSP, eligible institutions (*sponsors*) are nonprofit organizations, school food authorities, and government agencies (including tribal governments) that provide a year-round service to the community.

In SSO, school food authorities (typically food service departments of school districts) that participate in NSLP and SBP during the school year are the only type of eligible sponsor. School food authorities have the option to participate in SFSP or SSO (or neither). School food authorities may find SSO easier to administer, but they receive larger reimbursements under SFSP. A 2018 study by USDA found that three-quarters of sponsors operated

SFSP and one-quarter operated SSO, many preferring SFSP’s nutrition standards and higher reimbursement rates.

In both programs, sponsors operate meal sites at various locations, including schools, recreation centers, and parks. As a result of P.L. 117-328, starting in summer 2023 sponsors are allowed to provide meals for off-site consumption (i.e., pick-up or delivery) to children living in rural areas without access to congregate meal sites. Other sponsors must serve meals on-site unless they obtain a waiver (e.g., for severe weather, such as excessive heat).

Eligible Sites

Sponsors may only operate SFSP/SSO when certain eligibility criteria are met. These criteria for the most common types of meal sites—open sites and closed enrolled sites—are as follows:

- **Open sites** (open to any child in the community on a first-come, first-serve basis) must be located in an area in which at least 50% of children qualify for free or reduced-price school meals (*area eligibility*). They serve free meals to all children and receive reimbursement for all meals served.
- **Closed enrolled sites** (open only to enrolled children) must establish, using area eligibility data or individual eligibility information for enrolled children, that at least 50% of such children qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. They serve free meals to all enrolled children and receive reimbursement for all meals served.

In contrast, any public or nonprofit *camp* (a residential or day camp that provides organized programs for enrolled children) may operate SFSP. However, camps are only required to serve free meals to children who qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and they receive reimbursement only for such meals.

Table 1. Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) Participation and Expenditures in July, 2018-2022

	Meal Sites (thousands)	Participation (millions)	Expenditures (\$ in millions)
July 2018	49.5	2.7	197.1
July 2019	47.5	2.7	204.9
July 2020	37.8	5.6	561.3
July 2021	48.9	5.1	484.4
July 2022	36.3	2.7	217.8

Source: CRS, using USDA FNS, “Keydata” for 2018-2022, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>.

Notes: Seamless Summer Option (SSO) data are not available. SFSP operations in summers 2020-2022 were affected by COVID-19 response policies.

Reimbursement

Both SFSP and SSO provide cash reimbursements for up to two meals (or one meal and one snack) per child daily, with exceptions for camps and sites serving migrant children, which may serve up to three meals (or two meals and one snack) per child daily. Sponsors may use reimbursements for allowable operational and administrative expenses.

In order to receive reimbursement, SFSP meals must meet SFSP nutritional requirements and SSO meals must meet NSLP/SBP nutritional requirements.

Summer EBT

Summer EBT provides electronic benefits that can be redeemed for groceries to households with eligible children over the summer months. Summer EBT operated as a demonstration project from summers 2011-2023 in selected states and tribal organizations, and was permanently authorized by P.L. 117-328, which allows for nationwide operation of the program beginning in summer 2024. Many states and territories already offered a similar benefit to households with children under the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program, which was available from approximately spring 2020 through summer 2023. (Authority to operate P-EBT over the summer was not available until 2021.)

P.L. 117-328 gives all states and territories, and some Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs), the option to operate Summer EBT starting in summer 2024. Eligible households in participating jurisdictions are to receive a \$40 per child, per month grocery benefit that they can redeem at Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)-authorized retailers. Children who receive free or reduced-price (F/RP) meals during the school year are to be automatically enrolled in the program (though families may opt out). States participating in the program must also establish an application process, using the same eligibility criteria as F/RP school meals, for other children.

P.L. 117-328 establishes separate program options for ITOs participating in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) (some of whom previously operated the Summer EBT demonstration through WIC); territories that do not operate SNAP (American Samoa, Puerto Rico, and the Northern Mariana Islands); and children who attend year-round schools.

Grantees must cover at least half of the administrative costs.

Summer Meal Demonstrations

The 2010 agriculture appropriations act (P.L. 111-80, §749(g)) authorized demonstration projects to test alternatives to traditional summer feeding methods. Using this authority and subsequent funding provided in appropriations acts, USDA carried out several demonstration projects, including Summer EBT.

One recent demonstration project, Summer Meals-to-You, mailed weekly meal boxes to children in rural communities. Households were eligible to receive the boxes if they attended a participating school district and had a child who qualified for F/RP school meals. USDA awarded funding to Baylor University's Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty to administer the program, which it operated in Texas in

summers 2019-2022 and Alaska and New Mexico in summers 2020-2022.

Funding

Funding for SFSP and SSO is open-ended, appropriated mandatory funding. Funding is provided as reimbursements that are calculated based on the number of meals served. Statute includes a per-meal reimbursement rate that is adjusted annually for inflation (a maximum rate of \$4.58 per lunch in SSO and \$4.95 per lunch/supper in SFSP in 2023). Because statute guarantees reimbursement but does not provide funding directly, it requires an appropriation. For FY2023, appropriators designated \$655.3 million for SFSP reimbursements considering USDA's forecast of summer 2023 needs. SSO data are not available. A smaller amount of appropriated mandatory funding is provided for USDA-purchased foods and state administrative costs.

Like SFSP and SSO, Summer EBT is an entitlement that requires an annual appropriation. For FY2024, USDA requested in the President's Budget a \$1.87 billion appropriation, including \$170 million in administrative costs, to serve an estimated 27 million children.

Recent Developments

Summer Meal Programs During COVID-19

In summers 2020-2022, USDA used pandemic authorities to allow SFSP and SSO operators to operate open and closed enrolled meal sites in any area. USDA also provided increased reimbursements, waived certain nutritional requirements, and allowed for parent pickup of meals, among other changes. In addition, USDA enabled school districts to operate SFSP in school year 2020-2021 and SSO in school years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 with similar flexibilities in place of the school meals programs. Waiver authorities were provided by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (P.L. 116-127) and supplemental funding was provided by the CARES Act (P.L. 116-136).

Federal Studies and Rulemaking

The USDA Summer Meals Study was published in 2021. Among other findings, it reported that 83% of households with school-age children did not use nearby meal sites in summer 2018, largely due to a lack of awareness. Prior to that, in 2018, GAO published a study of SFSP that found challenges with availability and awareness of meal sites, including a lack of sites in rural areas, and issues with state and local capacity to operate the program.

In September 2022, FNS finalized a rule (87 *Federal Register* 57304) that altered certain requirements in SFSP. Some of the changes reinstated policies that USDA rescinded following a 2018 Office of the Inspector General audit. For example, the rule allows closed sites to use area data to establish eligibility for SFSP (like open sites).

More Information

Further information on the summer meal programs can be found in CRS Report R46234, *School Meals and Other Child Nutrition Programs: Background and Funding*.

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