



Opportunities for Schools to Assist in Disasters Through the Child Nutrition Programs

In the aftermath of a disaster, school districts can provide critical support to students and their families by providing nutritious meals to students through the child nutrition programs.

School districts can work closely with the state child nutrition agency and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to respond to situations resulting from damage or disruptions due to natural or man-made disasters, or other exceptional emergency situations. These include, but are not limited to, hurricanes, tornadoes and floods. School districts can apply for waivers to program requirements that would otherwise limit students' access to meals.

Ensuring Access to School Breakfast and Lunch

In the past, USDA has allowed the state child nutrition agency to approve the provision of free meals in hard-hit areas to all students, regardless of income, and has done so for Houston during Hurricane Harvey.¹ It also granted this option to New York City after Hurricane Sandy in 2012 displaced around 40,000 of the city's families.² USDA also waived meal pattern requirements, allowing schools to serve meals that ordinarily would not meet federal nutritional guidelines because certain items, such as milk, were unavailable after the disaster.

After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, USDA allowed school districts to count displaced children as homeless, making them automatically eligible for free meals. Moreover, pursuant to current policy for homeless children, school officials were able to keep lists documenting eligibility for free meals in lieu of individual applications. In addition, children in households receiving Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP) benefits are categorically eligible for free school meals and can be directly certified through the SNAP agency or through a school meal application.

¹ HISD. (2017). "All HISD students to receive three free meals per day this school year." Available at: <http://blogs.houstonisd.org/news/2017/08/30/all-hisd-students-to-receive-three-free-meals-per-day-this-school-year/>. Accessed on August 31, 2017.

² Patch. (2012). *USDA Will Fund Free Meals for NYC Schools Post-Sandy*. Available at: <https://patch.com/new-york/windsorterrace/amp/13558120/usda-will-fund-free-meals-for-nyc-schools-post-sandy>. Accessed on July 20, 2017.

How School Districts Can Ensure School Meals Eligibility and Access in Disaster Situations

Children Experiencing Homelessness

Under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, children living in, or evacuated from, disaster areas can be defined as homeless, and thus categorically eligible to receive free meals from the School Nutrition Programs. School districts can certify children they know to be homeless. See the [USDA Eligibility Manual for School Meals](#) for more information on this option.

Children in Households Participating in D-SNAP

Children in households receiving D-SNAP are categorically eligible for free meals in the Child Nutrition Programs. It is important to note that children certified for free or reduced-price school meals because of a disaster situation, including eligibility based on homelessness or receipt of D-SNAP benefits, remain eligible for the entire school year and up to 30 days in the next school year. Households are not required to report changes in income or household size that occur during the school year.

Meal Component and Meal Service

To ensure meals are served, school districts can be granted flexibilities, including time of meal service, use of offer versus serve, and meal component requirements.

Ensuring Access to Meals Through the Summer Nutrition Programs

School districts may be able to operate the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the Seamless Summer Option when schools or child care facilities must be closed due to disasters. School districts should work with the child nutrition agency to get pre-approval of a plan to serve meals in the event of a disaster to accelerate a response. Approval of sites can be expedited during an emergency.

Site Eligibility During Disasters

Based on community needs, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service may waive requirements that school districts document each site is located in a poor economic area if existing eligible summer meal sites are damaged and need to be relocated to areas that are not eligible, based on school or census data. School districts also can work with the child nutrition state agencies to waive the requirement that SFSP sites may not be located at school sites during an unanticipated school closure.

For more information, see [USDA's policy guidance on disasters and the child nutrition programs](#) and the [waivers approved for Hurricane Harvey](#).