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Advocates push Congress to act to curb child hunger

Millions of kids were facing hunger over the summer. Advocates say the federal government needs to ensure all kids can get free school meals.



A school bus driver hands out school meals at an apartment complex distribution site in Dallas in April.

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With millions of children going hungry, advocates are warning that Congress and federal officials need to step up their response to ensure kids have access to nutritious food during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Agriculture Department last week announced it would extend a food program providing free meals to children into the fall, a move that lawmakers and hunger advocates praised.

But advocates argue the program needs to be available for the rest of the academic calendar going into 2021. They're also calling on Congress to continue a pandemic food-benefit program and to boost food-stamp benefits.

Over the summer, nearly 14 million children were not getting enough to eat, according to an [analysis](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/09/about-14-million-children-in-the-us-are-not-getting-enough-to-eat/) (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/09/about-14-million-children-in-the-us-are-not-getting-enough-to-eat/>) in July by the Brookings Institution.

To help ensure kids could maintain access to food when schools closed in the spring, the USDA allowed states to use two summer meal programs—the Summer Food Service Program and Seamless Summer Option—to provide free meals during the pandemic. Typically, the programs run through the summer when schools are closed.

By allowing schools to use the summertime meal programs into the fall, rather than switching to the National School Lunch Program, many families and kids can continue accessing food, because the summer programs are serving all

children, not just those who meet certain eligibility requirements, said Diane Pratt-Heavner, spokeswoman for the School Nutrition Association.

“I have been on the phone with our members from across the country who are just taking a deep breath after this,” Pratt-Heavner said after the USDA’s announcement last week.

She said that for schools that already reopened remotely, trying to provide curbside meals through the National School Lunch Program created a “nightmare of bureaucratic challenges.”

Staff had to verify a child’s enrollment in the school and then the child’s eligibility for a free or reduced-price meal through the program, and the schools were no longer serving meals to all children who showed up to a meal site, she said.

This means the families that were relying on these meal sites for food during the pandemic could now find themselves turned away, she added.

“Switching from summer meals to the National School Lunch Program in the midst of this pandemic when families have so heavily come to depend on these meals over the last several months was a huge problem,” said Pratt-Heavner, whose organization represents and advocates for school nutrition professionals.

“Suddenly, families could no longer go to a feeding site and just receive a meal for every child in their family,” she said. “Under the summer meals program, these programs can serve any child under the age of 19, so they were serving younger siblings who showed up; they were also serving students in the community who might not be enrolled in their own district.”

Pratt-Heavner, along with several other advocates, wants the USDA to extend the summer meal programs for the duration of the school year.

“We remain hopeful that these waivers would be extended through the rest of the year because we think there’s still going to be a lot of need for flexibility after December 31, 2020,” said Crystal FitzSimons, director of school and out-of-school time programs at the Food Research and Action Center.

Both Senate Agriculture Committee ranking member Debbie Stabenow and House Education and Labor Chairman Bobby Scott pressed USDA to further extend these waivers until the end of the school year.

“As the new school year begins with many schools in hybrid or fully remote instruction, continuing the operation of summer meal programs is essential to make school meals available to struggling families,” Scott said in a statement. “However, this remains a temporary solution that will expire long before the child hunger crisis ends.”

Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue pushed back on the idea of extending the waiver for the entire school year, saying Congress did not appropriate enough money for that.

“Well-meaning people have asked USDA to fund this program through the entire [2020-2021] school year,” Perdue said during his announcement last week in the cafeteria of Bonaire Elementary School in Georgia. “We’re an administrative agency, not an [appropriating] agency. ... Congress to this date has not appropriated additional funding to extend these waivers through the whole school year.”

The USDA Food and Nutrition Service said in an email to *National Journal* that it is “maxing out” its budget authority with the extensions of the summer meal programs. The agency said it does not have authority to spend beyond budgetary limits and that if funding is depleted and Congress does not authorize more money, the programs would have to be cut off.

The USDA did not provide exact funding figures for the programs but said it estimates that the programs can run through December. Child nutrition programs, which include the summer meal programs, received an \$8.8 billion boost from Congress in March.

Even with the summer meal programs, some children will miss out on meals, said Joel Berg, CEO of Hunger Free America. He told *National Journal* that with schools closed, there's a higher chance kids will lose access to food.

"As a hunger advocate and as a citizen, I'm really torn on this," Berg said. "The longer they don't go back, the longer kids are going to go hungry. But if they get sick, or they make their parents sick or their teachers sick, it's worse than them skipping a few meals, so it's really a devil's dilemma."

He said other tools are needed to help address food insecurity, including an extension of the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program. This program was established by Congress in March to provide food benefits to families whose children would have received free or reduced-priced meals if schools had remained open. Money is put onto an EBT card that families can use to buy food. But the measure was temporary, and it's slated to expire at the end of September.

Advocates at the Food Research and Action Center want the program not only extended but also expanded to include more families and to allow Puerto Rico, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa to participate.

"We are hopeful that Congress will extend it, and also make some changes to it to ease the administration of it, but then to also ensure that benefits can be provided given the unique structure that we have happening across the country—so providing benefits to kids who are only in school half-time, providing

benefits to kids who are fully remote learners even in districts that are not going remote, expanding it to include little kids who rely on the Child and Adult Care Food Program,” FitzSimons said.

Hunger and nutrition advocates are also pressuring Congress to increase benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. House Democrats passed a package in May that would boost the maximum benefit for SNAP by 15 percent. Senate Republicans didn’t include any increase to the program’s benefits in their proposals for another relief package.

“SNAP is literally a lifeline for families with children,” said Lisa Davis, senior vice president of the Share Our Strength No Kid Hungry Campaign. “The benefits are really, really low. They average only about \$1.40 per person per meal, which isn’t very much. And this year we have seen really rapid and large increases in food prices; a number of food banks have reported food shortages.”

Davis said that between the summer meal programs, an extended P-EBT program, and beefed-up SNAP benefits, “we can weave a net tight enough that no child falls through.”